



Ashbrook
RESEARCH & CONSULTANCY

**FINAL REPORT
RESEARCH AMONGST HEIs, COLLEGES AND
EMPLOYERS**

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PREPARED FOR: Scottish Qualifications Authority

Research Amongst HEIs, Colleges and Employers

Ashbrook Research & Consultancy Ltd

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

This report details findings from research undertaken on behalf of SQA by Ashbrook Research & Consultancy Ltd.

This research involved the derivation of information from HEIs, Colleges and Employers and organisations which represent each of these three audiences. In particular, video conference depth interviews were undertaken on the following basis:

- HEIs: 11 interviews with HEIs and 1 with an organisation that represents HEIs
- Colleges: 4 interviews with Colleges and 2 interviews with organisations that represent Colleges
- Employers: 8 interviews with large Employers and 4 interviews with organisations that represent Employers

The interviews were undertaken between 20 January and 5 February 2021.

During the course of the interviews, the following issues were covered:

- Use made of SQA qualifications
- Importance of SQA qualifications
- 2021 exams diet priorities
- Assessing learners
- Appeals

2.0 USE MADE OF SQA QUALIFICATIONS

HEIs make use of SQA qualifications in a number of ways and, in particular:

- As a proxy for the desired outcome of an applicant being successful – and being able to cope with – the rigors of university
- To ensure that applicants meet minimum entry requirements and, in particular, requirements of specific courses (in terms of grade and/or subjects)

It was also stressed by a number of the HEIs interviewed that, as well as SQA qualifications, they take into account a range of other factors when considering applications (for example, personal statements and interviews, and also the skills, knowledge and experience of mature applicants).

Finally, it is of interest to note that those working at HEIs which had a particular focus on widening access tended to place lesser importance on grades than those which didn't have a particular focus in this area.

For **Colleges**, their principal use of SQA qualifications focused around:

- (As with HEIs) That applicants met minimum entry requirements for courses and particular requirements for specific courses (in terms of grade and/or subject)
- The delivery of SQA qualifications (including National Qualifications)

In addition, a number of the Colleges interviewed made reference to making use of SQA qualifications for the professional development of their teaching and other staff.

Finally, **Employers** stated that they made use of SQA qualifications in a number of ways, including:

- When recruiting staff (i.e. as an important part of CVs), particularly those who are coming into the workplace from school or college
- To upskill their staff (through, for example, staff working towards SVQs or Modern Apprenticeships)
- As a means of demonstrating competence in practical subjects

In addition, a number of the organisations interviewed that **represented Employers** stated that they use SQA qualifications:

- In delivering them to their members (for example, in the bakery sector)
- In acting as a joint awarding body with SQA
- In order to fulfil their regulatory role

3.0 IMPORTANCE OF SQA QUALIFICATIONS

When those participating in the research were asked what was important to them about SQA qualifications – and why these aspects were of importance to their organisation – **all three audiences** (HEIs, Colleges and Employers) stated that it was important that SQA qualifications can demonstrate the same standard for all learners within a cohort.

For **HEIs** and **Colleges**, this allowed them to make confident comparisons between learners when applications are being made, whilst in a similar vein, for **Employers**, this allowed them to make accurate comparisons between job applicants.

In addition, **all three audiences** stated that it was important that SQA qualifications accurately represent the knowledge, skills and abilities of learners.

Colleges and **Employers** also made reference to the need for SQA qualifications to:

- Reflect the needs of Employers. For **Colleges**, this related to their desire to produce effective learners, thereby enhancing the perceived credibility of their College, whilst for **Employers**, this focused around their desire for learners to have skills and knowledge which reflected *current* circumstances
- Be well known and respected by learners, parents and employers. For **Colleges**, this related to a desire to give credence to what they do and to provide reassurance to Employers that learners are entering and leaving College with well-recognised and credible qualifications. For **Employers**, this related to a desire for them to be provided with reassurance that learners they employ after leaving school or college have relevant and recognised qualifications

It is also of interest to note that **HEIs** placed significant priority upon SQA qualifications demonstrating the skillset and range of knowledge for those applying for particular subjects (such as Medicine and Engineering). In addition, however, HEIs made reference to the need for SQA qualifications to promote meta-skills in order to facilitate success in Higher Education.

In addition, HEIs stated that it was important from their point of view that SQA qualifications:

- Demonstrate the same standard across time in order to maintain consistency and assist universities to maintain their standards (Indeed, in this regard, there were concerns that grade inflation in 2020 had meant that this had not been the case for all school leavers, which resulted in some gaining access to university who would not normally have done so) which, as will be discussed later, had notable impacts for universities
- Produce learners who are motivated to learn and enjoy learning (on the basis of a belief that such learners are more likely to succeed at university)

Colleges placed particular emphasis on SQA qualifications, recognising the wide range of learner circumstances, abilities and requirements.

In addition, Colleges placed significant importance on SQA qualifications:

- Having integrity (as this would attract learners to come to College to study for SQA qualifications and would give confidence to Employers when taking on those who had studied at College)
- Allowing for progression into the workplace or into further learning (both in Further Education and Higher Education) as this allows Colleges to effectively meet student needs and aspirations

Finally, **Employers** placed a particular emphasis upon SQA qualifications producing learners who had up-to-date skills for the workplace as this would allow them to be productive members of staff and would not require a significant investment in terms of time and training (which was particularly important for micro and small businesses).

In addition, Employers placed emphasis here upon SQA qualifications:

- Being nationally recognised (again, on the basis of this giving confidence to Employers that learners are developing relevant and credible skills and knowledge)
- Adding to the profile and credibility of companies that encourage staff to work towards SQA qualifications (thereby making their company more attractive to applicants)
- Being easily accessible and, in particular, being delivered on-site or online (as this is less disruptive for businesses)

Finally, it should be noted that **those representing Employers** stated that they believed it was important for SQA qualifications:

- To be recognised and viewed as credible across a sector (on the basis that this would help to contribute to the success of a sector and, indeed, the economy in general)
- To help to produce a competent workforce from a regulatory perspective

4.0 2021 EXAMS DIET PRIORITIES

There was a consensus across **all three audiences** that it is critically important for SQA to ensure that results and grades in 2021 are a fair reflection of a candidate's knowledge, skills and abilities, and are based on the fair assessment of learners.

For **HEIs** and **Colleges**, there was a belief that, if this was not the case, this would lead to a lack of confidence in offers being made (with HEIs having particular concerns here about the oversubscription of courses which would have financial implications for them due to funding caps).

For **Employers**, their concerns were that, if this was not the case, then learners would enter the workplace who would require investment in terms of upskilling and training which had implications both in terms of time and cost (particularly for micro and small businesses).

In addition, **all three audiences** stated that, in the event that results and grades in 2021 are not a fair reflection of a candidate's knowledge, skills and abilities, there is a significant potential for them to have a negative learning experience at University or College.

It is also of interest to note that **all three audiences** noted a desire to ensure that there is sufficient flexibility in assessment guidelines, on the basis that, if this was not the case, candidates may be assessed inappropriately and, thereby, receive unrepresentative or unfair grades.

Both **HEIs** and **Colleges** also made noted reference to their belief that it was important that:

- The 2021 exams diet is understood by a range of audiences – learners, parents, teachers, colleges, universities and employers – and that these audiences have confidence that the processes put in place are rigorous, will be effective and will be credible. It was felt

that the principal implications if this wasn't the case would be for SQA itself, but that HEIs and Colleges would lack confidence when making offers

- SQA communicates effectively with Universities and Colleges regarding the processes that are put in place for the 2021 exams diet (and, in particular, to do so as soon as possible), on the basis that, if this is not done, this would place greater pressure on Universities and Colleges to meet deadlines (and this being linked to a desire for SQA to limit or eliminate any changes in processes after Universities and Colleges had been informed about them)

Further comments here tended to be **specific to particular audiences**.

HEIs had a particular desire for SQA to ensure that the 2021 exams diet minimised the potential for grade inflation, on the basis that, if this was not the case, it would have significant potential implications for universities (i.e. due to candidates who would not normally secure a place at university doing so based on grades which would be lower than had they been awarded under normal circumstances – leading to concerns about retention and support requirements).

Amongst HEIs, there was also a belief that it was important that the 2021 exams diet:

- Was based on the provision of clear information to Universities (and if this was not the case, then it would be difficult for Universities to make decisions)
- Ensuring that the core elements of subjects are covered. If this is not the case, this would lead to uncertainty in terms of the knowledge, skills and abilities of candidates
- Ensures that teacher assessed grades are largely evidence based and that, as such, reduce the amount of professional judgement required when estimating grades. In relation to this, it was believed that this would lead to:

- Grades awarded representing a fair reflection of a candidate's knowledge, skills and abilities
- A reduction in the number of appeals submitted to SQA

It should be noted that the terms *teacher estimates* and *professional judgement* were specifically used by a number of respondents in HEIs.

Amongst **Colleges**, there were desires:

- To ensure that the 2021 exams diet makes allowances for those whose learning has been disrupted by COVID-19 (ranging from those having to work from home – and potentially suffering issues pertaining to digital poverty – to those who have had to self-isolate or, indeed, have contracted COVID-19)
- For SQA to communicate to a range of audiences that estimated grades in 2021 will be credible due to the robustness of processes put in place by SQA and, in particular, the quality assurance processes implemented

Again, it should be noted that the term *estimated grades* was specifically used by a number of those interviewed in Colleges.

Amongst **organisations representing Colleges**, there was a desire for the 2021 exams diet to take into account that for some Colleges – particularly those in rural areas – a significant amount of their delivery relates to National Qualifications and, accordingly, there is a need to ensure that communications with all Colleges – and, in particular, those which fall into this category – are as regular and effective as communications with Schools.

Finally, it should be noted that **Employers** noted a significant desire for SQA to ensure that the exams diet in 2021 minimises the potential for the learning cohorts in the 2020/21 academic year being *tainted*, on the basis of the potential impact that this may have on their future learning

and career prospects. Indeed, this was a concern noted – although to a lesser extent – by both HEIs and Colleges.

5.0 ASSESSING LEARNERS

5.1 What Constitutes Fairness When Assessing Learners

When those participating in the research were asked what they believed constitutes fairness, in its broadest context, when assessing learners, the **primary responses** focused around:

- That assessment should produce a fair reflection of a candidate's knowledge, skills and abilities (with this being cited by **all three audiences**)
- Ensuring equal access to assessment (irrespective of a learner's personal circumstances or academic abilities) – with this being cited by **all three audiences**
- Ensuring consistency in assessment (which it was believed may more difficult when grades are estimated (which was a term used by **all three audiences**)
- Ensuring that there are a range of assessment methods available to reflect the circumstances and abilities of candidates (with this, once again, being cited by **all three audiences**)
- That there should be standardisation in assessment and, in particular, **under normal circumstances** (i.e. non-COVID circumstances), that all learners should be assessed in the same way, at the same time, using the same paper and in the same circumstances, with this primarily being cited by **HEIs** and **Colleges** (albeit that it was also recognised that this has inherent unfairness in relation to, for example, *good or poor exam sitters*)

It is also of interest to note that both **HEIs** and **Colleges** stated that personal circumstances should not disadvantage a learner when being assessed (for example, those who require additional support needs and those who have been disadvantaged as a result of COVID-19), although for most respondents, this belief was not predicated on whether or not the adjustments made by SQA are sufficient.

In addition, it is interesting that **Colleges** and **Employers** both made reference here to fairness being constituted by having assessment systems which are easy to understand.

HEIs made specific note of what they believed constitutes fairness when assessing learners, primarily in terms of:

- All learners having the opportunity to develop their skills and knowledge in order to allow them to be assessed fairly
- Ensuring that assessment rewards investment of time in learning

Thereafter, HEIs made specific reference here to fairness in assessing learners by constituted means of:

- Being candid and honest with learners who are being assessed (including teachers being honest with candidates as to why they were awarded a lower grade than they had expected)
- Setting clear learning objectives and assessing in line with these objectives
- Having robust quality assurance processes associated with assessment
- Avoiding teacher bias when estimating grades
- Giving learners adequate time to prepare for assessment
- Treating individuals fairly in comparison with others

Once again, most of the comments made here by **Employers** and **those who represent them** tended to be included in comments made by the other two audiences (as noted earlier). However, it is of interest to note that Employers made specific reference here to fairness being constituted by assessments incorporating an appeals process if learners believe that they have been treated unfairly, whilst **those representing Employers** believed that it was fair to ensure that candidates have the opportunity to have all aspects of their course assessed where this is deemed necessary at the beginning of a course (with this specifically

relating to the circumstances faced by those undertaking courses with notable practical elements that require to be assessed).

5.2 Assessing in the Context of COVID-19

Amongst **all Universities**, and the **vast majority of Colleges and Employers** and **all of the organisations representing each of these three audiences**, there was a belief that it was more important that SQA ensures that no learners are disadvantaged as a result of COVID-19, rather than it being more important that SQA is fair to all learners in that they are all assessed on the same basis.

This was due to a belief that – in the vast majority of circumstances – a learner’s disadvantaging as a result of COVID-19 was not the fault of themselves and, as such, represented reasonable mitigating circumstances.

In addition, a number of **other reasons** were cited here for this belief being held, including:

- A belief (across **all three audiences**) that learners should not be disadvantaged as a result of COVID-19 due to the fact that they could be *tainted* with respect to their future learning and employment prospects
- That the principle of learners not being disadvantaged due to reasonable mitigating circumstances is well established (for example, those who have additional support needs), with this view being particularly apparent amongst **Colleges**
- That those who are disadvantaged may be equally able as those who have not been disadvantaged (with this being noted most prominently by **Employers**)

In the context of the outcomes noted above, a number of **observations** are worthy of note and, in particular, that there was a belief that – in

order to avoid the disadvantaging of learners due to COVID-19 – there was a need for SQA to find more flexible and different ways to assess learners (to reflect the different extent to which – and ways in which – learners are being disadvantaged), with this observation being cited **across all three audiences**.

Again, it should be noted that the views expressed in this section of the report to this point are not predicated on whether or not the adjustments made by SQA are sufficient.

In addition, a number of **other observations** are worthy of note here, including:

- A belief – **across all audiences** – that avoiding or, indeed, minimising the disadvantaging of learners due to COVID-19 will be extremely difficult to achieve in practice (and, indeed, that it is likely that there will be at a level of inconsistency in this regard)
- A belief amongst **HEIs** that minimising the disadvantaging of learners due to COVID-19 was *simply pushing disadvantaging down the line* (with reference here to a desire to ensure that a distinction is drawn between those who have been disadvantaged and are able versus those who have been disadvantaged but are less able. This related to a concern amongst many HEIs about some learners gaining entry to university based on grades which they would not otherwise have achieved under normal circumstances)
- A desire – again primarily amongst **HEIs** – to ensure that the core elements of courses are completed, as had been noted would be the case by the Deputy First Minister (together with details as to how this will be achieved and managed)
- A desire, again primarily amongst **HEIs**, to be satisfied as to the rigour of the processes that are put in place to address the disadvantaging of learners

It should also be noted that both **HEIs** and **Colleges** expressed their belief that SQA – and, indeed, themselves – should be sympathetic towards those who have been disadvantaged as a result of COVID-19, on the basis that being disadvantaged often goes beyond learning and into other areas of their day-to-day and future lives (including their mental well-being).

Finally, although there was a strong consensus that it was more important that SQA ensures that no learners are disadvantaged as a result of COVID-19 than it was, that SQA is fair to all learners in that they are all assessed in the same way, some of those interviewed – particularly **some Employers** – believed that the latter should be the case, on the basis of a belief that it is of critical importance to ensure that there is consistency and credibility in qualifications and grades awarded, otherwise they would be meaningless, or at least devalued.

6.0 APPEALS

6.1 Allowing Appeals

It was a majority view – **across all audiences** – that SQA should allow appeals as a point of principle and, in particular, due to the fact that an appeals process should be part of any fair, consistent and transparent assessment process.

In particular, across all three audiences, there was a strong consensus that SQA should allow learners to appeal against a teacher assessed grade in three circumstances, namely:

- If they believed that there has been bias – conscious or unconscious – against them by their teacher (although it was noted that this would be difficult to prove)
- If they believed that their teacher had assessed evidence gathered during ongoing assessment inappropriately or inaccurately
- If there are reasonable mitigating circumstances and, in particular:
 - Illness or bereavement
 - The impact of COVID-19

In particular, in relation to the last of these three points, there was a view that *recent mitigating circumstances* should be taken into account (on the basis that longer-term mitigating circumstances should have been incorporated into teacher assessed grades).

In addition, there were concerns here about COVID-19 being the basis of an appeal based on mitigating circumstances. This was due to a belief that the vast majority of learners will have been impacted by COVID-19 and it would be difficult to determine the extent and nature of this impact in some cases (thereby making it difficult to justify an appeal).

A number of those in all three audiences believed that – **under normal examination circumstances** – pupils should be able to appeal if the grade they achieved in examination was far poorer than they had achieved throughout the year (including in prelims), on the basis that final examinations may not have been an accurate reflection of their true abilities.

In addition, it should be noted that a number of those interviewed in **HEIs** and **those representing HEIs** believed that, in principle, an appeal should be allowed but only if a significant proportion of a candidate's work had been completed, i.e. on the basis that this would ensure that teacher assessed grades are very largely based on assessment rather than *professional judgement* (a term used by a number of those interviewed in HEIs).

With respect to the references to those believing that they had been impacted notably by COVID-19 in terms of their estimated grade and the earlier reference to *recent mitigating circumstances*, it should be noted that there was a widespread consensus that, in such circumstances, processes should have been put in place by schools for this to be addressed before an appeal is necessary (e.g. referral to a member of staff who could judge whether or not a teacher assessed grade was, indeed, a fair reflection of a candidate's abilities).

Many of those interviewed – **across all three audiences** – believed that if such processes – and, in particular, rigorous processes – are put in place, a relatively limited number of appeals would be submitted in 2021 (although a number of those interviewed in all three audiences believed that – if learners and parents were not aware of or did not believe in the rigour of processes associated with teacher assessed grades – then the opposite could be the case).

Indeed, it was believed by many of those interviewed that the number of appeals in 2021 would be limited on the basis that learners should be

aware of the level they are working at during discussions with their teachers before a grade is awarded and, therefore, their grade *should come as no surprise to them*.

Finally, it should be noted that, in general, **Employers** felt less able to comment during this part of the interview.

6.2 Circumstances Where a Candidate Should be Allowed to Appeal a Grade Without Demonstrating all the Skills/Knowledge Required for that Grade

There was a general consensus across **all three audiences** – particularly **HEIs** – that there were no or minimal circumstances where a candidate should be allowed to appeal a grade without the candidate demonstrating all the skills and knowledge required to attain that grade.

This was primarily a function of a belief that any mitigating circumstances should have been taken into account when a grade is being considered by a teacher. In addition, this was a function of a belief that the robust nature of teacher assessed grades in 2021 will result in grades which are a fair reflection of a candidate's skills, knowledge and abilities and, as such, should not result in circumstances where a candidate should be allowed to appeal a grade without demonstrating all of the skills and knowledge required to do so.

It should be stressed that, whilst this general consensus – and the reasons for it being held – were initially noted by a number of respondents, there then followed the citing of circumstances by a number of those interviewed where a candidate *should* be allowed to appeal a grade without demonstrating all of the skills/knowledge required to achieve that grade.

For example, a number of those interviewed – including some of those falling into the group noted above – believed that there *may* be the

potential for *significant recent mitigating circumstances* to allow an appeal to be submitted without a candidate demonstrating all of the skills and knowledge required to attain their estimated grade (again, a term used frequently by respondents), but only where these can be evidenced and where the vast majority of learning and assessment had been completed by a candidate, particularly where SQA had refined its standards to allow fairness and flexibility in teaching and assessment. However, it was believed that this would not extend to a situation where a *significant* amount of learning had been lost for any reason, as this would not allow a sufficient demonstration of the skills and knowledge required for a grade awarded to be appealed.

In addition, a number of **Colleges** and **Employers** believed that circumstances here would be if:

- Learners had been affected to a significant extent by COVID-19 or another long-term illness
- A candidate or school – excluding the teacher involved in the award process for a grade – can provide strong evidence that the grade awarded had been too low

Furthermore, a number of **Employers** made reference here to their belief that it would be acceptable for a candidate to be allowed to appeal a grade without the candidate demonstrating all of the skills and knowledge required to attain that grade if it could be proven that they had been treated unfairly by their teacher, for example, on the basis of disliking them or having a bias against them (although it was, again, recognised by these Employers that this would be difficult to prove in practice).

It should also be noted that a number of **HEIs** and **Colleges** believed that acceptable circumstances here would include:

- Long-term IT issues affecting candidates (such as lack of access to the Internet or inadequate hardware) meaning that candidates could not have been taught or assessed effectively on an ongoing basis
- Ongoing household circumstances which made it difficult for candidates to learn and be assessed
- If teacher absenteeism had led to significant negative impact on the quality of a candidate's learning

In addition, it should be noted that a number of observations were made by **HEIs** which are worthy of note here pertaining to beliefs that:

- Any mitigating circumstances used as the basis to allow a candidate to appeal a grade without demonstrating all of the skills and knowledge required to attain that grade must be accompanied by rigorous evidence
- Learners and teachers must be aware of the evidence required to allow a candidate to be awarded a grade in these circumstances
- These mitigating circumstances should not extend to those where a significant amount of learning had been lost by a candidate (and, therefore, there is a lack of sufficient assessed evidence)

Finally, it should be stressed that the outcomes noted in this section of the report should be placed in the context that none of those interviewed suggested a viable model or approach whereby a candidate should be allowed to appeal a grade without demonstrating all of the skills/knowledge required for that grade.

6.3 Certification on the Basis of More than Just Attainment

The vast majority of those interviewed in **all three audiences** believed that there were certain circumstances where they would be supportive of certification on the basis of more than just attainment, namely:

- Under exceptional mitigating circumstances which are supported by a degree of assessment evidence (with this particularly being noted by **HEIs**)
- If supporting evidence was provided through the teacher reference contained within a UCAS application or letter directly from a teacher, school or clinical professional (with this, again, being most commonly cited by **HEIs**)
- In the event that witness testimonials could be provided (with this being particularly cited by **Colleges**)
- Where enough of a learner's teaching and assessment had been completed to allow confidence in certification on the basis of more than just attainment (with this being noted most prominently by **HEIs** and **organisations that represent Employers**)
- If considerations of prior learning and other relevant factors can be taken into account (with this being noted by **all three audiences**)

It should also be noted that a number of those interviewed – particularly in **HEIs** – stated that the extent to which they had trust in grades awarded by teachers would drive the extent to which their identification of circumstances which would allow them to be supportive of certification on the basis of more than just attainment.

It should be noted that the support of relevant circumstances in relation to certification on the basis of more than just attainment should be placed in the context of **two observations**, namely:

- Recognition of acceptable circumstances being a function of a desire amongst a number of the audiences – particularly **Colleges** – for a more holistic approach to be taken when considering circumstances surrounding supporting certification on the basis of more than just attainment
- That many **HEIs** stated that they have well-established contextual admissions policies which support the admissions of candidates on the basis of evidence beyond the certification of their attainment

In contrast to the majority of views noted above, a number of those interviewed stated that they did not believe there were **any** circumstances where they would be supportive of certification on the basis of more than just attainment, principally due to beliefs that:

- This would lead to a lack of consistency to allow Universities to have confidence in certification (particularly in the context of the awarding of grades on *an estimated basis* – a term specifically used by a number of those interviewed), with this view being most commonly held by **HEIs**
- This would not be justifiable as certification on this basis would not be as credible as certification based purely on attainment, with this view being most commonly cited by **Employers**

7.0 KEY MESSAGES

Use of SQA Qualifications

HEIs, Colleges and Employers make significant use of SQA qualifications in a wide range of ways.

There are a wide range of aspects of SQA qualifications which are important to all three audiences participating in the research.

HEIs principally use SQA qualifications as a proxy for the desired outcome of an applicant being successful at University and to ensure that applicants meet minimum and specific subject entry requirements.

Colleges also make use of SQA qualifications as a means of ensuring that applicants meet minimum and course-specific subject entry requirements and, in addition, make use of SQA qualifications in terms of delivering them (including National Qualifications).

For Employers, their main use of SQA qualifications is when recruiting staff, in the upskilling of their staff and as a means of a candidate demonstrating competence in practical subjects.

Importance of SQA Qualifications

All three audiences believed that it was important that SQA qualifications can demonstrate the same standard for all learners within a cohort. This allows HEIs and Colleges to make comparisons between learners when applications are being made and, similarly, this allows Employers to make accurate comparisons between job applicants.

For all three audiences, it is important that SQA qualifications accurately represent the knowledge, skills and abilities of learners.

A wide range of other aspects of SQA qualifications are also important to HEIs, Colleges and Employers.

2021 Exams Diet Priorities

HEIs, Colleges and Employers noted a range of their priorities relating to the 2021 exams diet.

As was noted in relation to what was important about SQA qualifications, it was also felt to be important that the 2021 exams diet produces results and grades that are a fair reflection of a candidate's knowledge, skills and abilities.

All three audiences also want the 2021 exams diet to be sufficiently flexible in terms of its assessment guidelines in order to avoid candidates receiving unrepresentative or unfair grades.

Assessing Learners

Those participating in the research identified a wide range of factors which they believed constituted fairness, in its broadest context, when assessing learners, primarily in terms of *that assessment should produce a fair reflection of a candidate's knowledge, skills and abilities, ensuring equal access to assessment, ensuring consistency in assessment, ensuring that there are a range of assessment methods available to reflect the circumstances and abilities of candidates, that there should be standardisation in assessment* and, in particular, under normal circumstances *that all learners should be assessed in the same way, at the same time, using the same paper and in the same circumstances.*

All three audiences – either individually or collectively – also identified a range of other factors which they believed constituted fairness when assessing learners.

Amongst all HEIs and the vast majority of Colleges, Employers and all of the organisations representing each of these three audiences, there was a belief that it was more important that SQA ensures that no learners are disadvantaged as a result of COVID-19 rather than it being more important that SQA is fair to all learners in that they are assessed on the same basis.

This was due to a belief that – in the vast majority of circumstances – a learner’s disadvantaging as a result of COVID-19 was not their fault and, as such, represented reasonable mitigating circumstances.

During discussions regarding the assessment of learners, many respondents used the terms *estimated grades* and *professional judgements* rather than referring to *academic judgements based on evidence*. Accordingly, in its communications with HEIs, Colleges, Employers and organisations that represent these three audiences, it is of critical importance that SQA makes it clear that the assessment of learners in 2021 will be on the basis of academic judgement based on evidence.

Appeals

Across all three audiences, there was a majority view that SQA should allow appeals as a point of principle and, in particular, due to the fact that an appeals process should be part of any fair, consistent and transparent assessment process.

Across all three audiences, it was believed that SQA should allow learners to appeal against a teacher assessed grade if they believe that there has been bias against them by their teacher, if they believe that their teacher had assessed evidence gathered during ongoing assessment inappropriately or inaccurately and where there were certain mitigating circumstances.

There was a general consensus across all three audiences – particularly amongst HEIs – that there were no or minimal circumstances where a candidate should be allowed to appeal a grade without the candidate demonstrating the skills and knowledge required to obtain that grade.

This was primarily a function of a belief that any mitigating circumstances should be taken into account by a teacher when considering a grade and a belief that the robust nature of teacher assessed grades 2021 will result in grades which are a fair reflection of a candidate's knowledge, skills and abilities (and, as such, should not result in circumstances where a candidate should be allowed to appeal a grade without demonstrating all of the skills and knowledge required to do so).

None of those interviewed suggested viable models or approaches whereby a candidate should be allowed to appeal a grade without demonstrating all of the skills/knowledge required for that grade.

However, whilst this general consensus – and the reasons for it being held – were initially noted by a number of respondents, there then followed the citing of circumstances by a number of those interviewed where a candidate *should* be allowed to appeal a grade without demonstrating all of the skills/knowledge required to achieve that grade which would include, for example, *significant recent mitigating circumstances*, but only where these can be evidenced and where the vast majority of learning assessment had been completed by a candidate (particularly where SQA had refined its standards to allow fairness and flexibility in teaching and assessment).

Amongst all three audiences, there was a belief that there would be certain circumstances where they would be supportive of certification on the basis of more than just attainment, namely *under exceptional mitigating circumstances which are supported by a degree of assessment evidence, if supporting evidence was provided through a*

teacher reference contained within a UCAS application or letter directly from a teacher, school or clinical professional, in the event that witness testimonials could be provided where enough of a learner's teaching and assessment had been completed to allow confidence in certification on the basis of more than just attainment and if consideration of prior learning and other relevant factors could be evidenced and taken into account.

During the discussions regarding appeals and circumstances where those interviewed would be supportive of certification of more than just attainment, again, many respondents used the term *estimated grades* rather than referring to *academic judgements based on evidence*. Accordingly, in its communications in these regards with HEIs, Colleges, Employers and organisations that represent these three audiences, it is again of critical importance that SQA makes it clear that grades will be on the basis of academic judgement based on evidence.