



2021 National Qualifications and Awards Results

This report reflects my observations, as Chief Examining Officer for Scotland, of the delivery of National Qualifications and Awards in 2021, a very challenging year for everyone living in Scotland and especially for learners.

In the 2020–21 session, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) has:

- ◆ worked closely and collaboratively with all members of the National Qualifications 2021 Group and the Higher National and Vocational Qualifications 2021 Group to develop and deliver an alternative way of awarding all qualifications in this very challenging year, ensuring that learners get the results they deserve and have the knowledge and skills they need to progress to further learning or work
- ◆ been flexible in responding to the changing circumstances of the pandemic, while still maintaining the credibility of the qualifications
- ◆ supported teachers and lecturers to make grading decisions based on their learners' assessment evidence — with subject support, understanding standards materials and national quality assurance feedback and advice

On 10 August 2021, SQA published the [Attainment Statistics Report \(August\) 2021](#) for the National Courses and Awards. As a result of the impact of the COVID-19 public health emergency in 2021, assessment for many qualifications was interrupted or adopted a different approach relative to previous years.

The [Attainment Statistics Report \(August\) 2021](#) contains attainment information across the National Courses (National 2 to National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher, and the Scottish Baccalaureate), together with Awards, Skills for Work courses, National Progression Awards, and National Certificates.

The different approaches taken for the different qualification types for which statistics are reported in the [Attainment Statistics Report \(August\) 2021](#), are summarised below:

National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher

Schools, colleges and training providers submitted graded results based on demonstrated attainment and teacher/lecturer professional judgement, as part of the alternative certification model developed by the National Qualifications 2021 Group. Further information on the approach is available in the [National Qualifications 2021 Alternative Certification Model \(ACM\) Methodology Report](#).

National 2, National 3, and National 4 Courses, Scottish Baccalaureate, Interdisciplinary Project, and free-standing units at SCQF levels 5, 6 and 7

Schools, colleges and training providers submitted unit results based on evidence from completed assessments, and evidence of learners' progress and achievements.

Learners did not need to complete the additional assessment for the added value unit in National 4 courses. This was agreed with the National Qualifications 2021 Group to help free up more time for learning and teaching and for assessing other units in these courses.

We also extended the deadline date for schools, colleges and training providers to submit changes to their National Course entry data.

National Certificates, National Progression Awards, Skills for Work courses and Awards

Working as part of the Higher National and Vocational Qualifications 2021 Group, we developed alternative assessment approaches and provided subject-specific guidance for some of these qualifications for the 2020–21 session. All results are based on a holistic assessment decision-making process. [Find out more](#) here.

Further supporting information is available across a suite of documents, published at 09:30 on Tuesday 10 August, including:

[*Attainment Statistics \(August\) 2021*](#)

[*Attainment Statistics \(August\) 2021 Sex*](#)

[*Attainment Statistics \(August\) 2021 Summary*](#)

[*National Qualifications 2021 Alternative Certification Model \(ACM\) — Methodology Report*](#)
[*2021 Alternative Certification Model: Equalities Monitoring Report*](#)

Context

In August 2020, SQA undertook a national consultation to reduce the assessment requirements of courses. This was undertaken in recognition of the disruption to learning in 2020 and anticipated disruption in 2021. The purpose of modifications was to free up teaching and learning time, whilst maintaining the validity, credibility and standard of the qualifications. The consultation received over 23,000 responses from learners, parents, carers, teachers, lecturers, representative organisations and professional associations. Overall, feedback on the consultation was that proposed modifications were practical given the challenges, and full details are available [here](#). To support teachers and lecturers, we published a total of 148 course modifications across National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher on Wednesday 7 October. Following the cancellation of exams, we published 116 subject-specific guidance documents and 134 individual assessment resources for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses, from November to February.

Given the rapidly changing circumstances of the pandemic, we acted as quickly as possible to further adapt our assessment approach, in particular the delivery of practical and performance subjects, such as Music, Drama, Dance and PE, throughout the year and in consultation with subject specialists and colleagues in Education Scotland.

In response to the continued disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic on society, the Deputy First Minister announced the cancellation of National 5 exams on Wednesday 7 October 2020 and the cancellation of Higher and Advanced Higher exams on Tuesday 8 December 2020.

I established the National Qualifications 2021 Group in October 2020 to provide advice on the development of the alternative certification model (ACM) for National Qualifications in 2021. Given the disruption caused by the pandemic, it was vital that the education system work together to ensure an appropriate balance between learning, teaching, and assessment. A system-wide collaborative approach was also a recommendation of the *Rapid Review of National Qualifications Experience 2020* by Professor Mark Priestley. Regular reports on progress were provided to Scottish Ministers and the Education Recovery Group, chaired by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills.

The National Qualifications 2021 Group, made up of representatives from the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES), Colleges Scotland, Education Scotland, the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), School Leaders Scotland (SLS), the Scottish Council of Independent Schools (SCIS), Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), the Scottish Government, National Parent Forum of Scotland, and the Scottish Youth Parliament, met weekly from the autumn to consider alternative certification arrangements for National Qualifications in the 2020–21 session. It was supported by a National Qualifications 2021 Working Group, which also met weekly.

I also established the Higher National and Vocational Qualifications 2021 Group in January 2021 to develop advice and guidance to support assessment for Higher National and vocational qualifications in 2020–21, as well as develop and deliver timely and informative communications. The group is made up of representatives from the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES), Colleges Scotland, the College Vice Principal Forum, Developing the Young Workforce (DYW), Educational Institute of Scotland – Further Education Lecturers' Association (EIS-FELA), the National Union of Students (NUS), the Scottish Funding Council, the Scottish Government, the Scottish Training Federation (STF), Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), Skills Development Scotland (SDS), and Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland (SPARQs). This was also supported by a working group.

SQA is committed to engaging with learners and their parents and carers. We established a Learner Panel last year to ensure the views of young people are fully heard. We continued to engage and share messages with learner agencies and their members, such as Young Scot, the Scottish Youth Parliament, and the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland. We have continued to engage and share messages with the National Parent Forum Scotland (NPFSS), Connect and the Scottish Government's parental engagement network to make sure information reaches parents and carers.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to everyone who played a part in the development of the approach to certification in 2021. The education system worked collaboratively, with clear [roles and responsibilities](#), to deliver for learners.

Developing the approach to certification

The ACM for National 5 was published on Tuesday 8 December 2020, and the same approach was adopted for Higher and Advanced Higher following the Deputy First Minister's announcement. Revisions to the approach were published on Tuesday 16 February 2021, following the move to remote learning in early January.

All partners involved in the National Qualifications 2021 Group agreed that at the heart of the ACM was demonstrated attainment — evidence of learning and skills. Based on that evidence, teachers and lecturers exercised their professional judgement to determine provisional grades for learners.

Having evidence of a learner's skills and knowledge so that they can be awarded a qualification is important and is the cornerstone of our qualifications system's credibility. We know that colleges, universities and employers want to see that. It is also important for learners to have confidence in their qualifications, now and over time.

Teachers and lecturers know their learners and their individual circumstances best and so the ACM gave schools, colleges and training providers flexibility around the timing and nature of assessment to ensure that, as far as possible, there was maximum opportunity for learners to undertake the required learning and be given the best chance to succeed in any course assessments.

The ACM included support and flexibility to help address the disruption to learning caused by the pandemic, including:

- ◆ as highlighted above, reducing the assessment requirements of courses in ways that teachers and lecturers thought were practical given the disruption to learning, while ensuring the qualifications remained valid and credible
- ◆ providing generic and specific course assessment guidance — by Thursday 19 November for National 5 and throughout January 2021 for Higher and Advanced Higher. Assessment resources for every course, based on the unused 2020 exam papers, were also provided
- ◆ following the move to remote learning in January, extending the timeline for submission of provisional results to Friday 25 June, providing as much time as possible to schools, colleges, training providers and learners for learning and teaching, enabling assessment to be delayed until learners were ready
- ◆ supporting teacher and lecturer assessment judgements with local and national quality assurance checks, to ensure provisional results were based on national standards (see below)
- ◆ introducing a contingency for later certification for those young people who, through no fault of their own, were unable to provide completed evidence before Friday 25 June, as a result of experiencing particularly significant disruption

Teachers and lecturers, with the support of the system and SQA, have worked hard to deliver the right results to learners, first time. However, a direct right of appeal is available, and the appeals service is the final essential part of the model.

This year, for the first time, learners can appeal directly to SQA for free and have been able to register that they want to appeal since Friday 25 June. Appeals will be processed with the support of schools, colleges and training providers after learners have received their certificates on Tuesday 10 August. Further details on the appeals service are available [here](#).

Quality assurance

Quality assurance at local and national level is a feature of internally assessed qualifications in Scotland and was a key feature of the ACM in 2021. Quality assurance aims to strengthen teachers' and lecturers' understanding of how to consistently apply the national standard and make accurate assessment judgements. This helps to ensure that the standard of an A grade awarded in the north of Scotland is the same as the standard of an A in the south of Scotland and everywhere in between.

Quality assurance comprised a number of elements:

- ◆ SQA provided teachers and lecturers with a significant programme of understanding standards materials and events across all subjects. These included guidance on making grading decisions, a SQA Academy online course, webinars, and audio presentations and supported teachers and lecturers with making their assessment judgements.
- ◆ Schools, colleges and training providers conducted their own internal quality assurance in line with the ACM's defined roles and responsibilities as well as their own procedures and those of their local authority.
- ◆ SQA also undertook a national quality assurance exercise, to look at how schools, colleges and training providers were applying the national standards. This was designed to be supportive and provided schools, colleges and training providers with feedback and advice. **It did not involve the marking or moderation of individual candidate assessments by SQA.** Teacher judgement, based on learners' demonstrated attainment, was the final arbiter of grades awarded.

Every school, college and training provider in Scotland delivering National Qualifications was subject to national quality assurance. They were selected for one or more subjects, at one level only, depending on the number of courses they delivered.

Teachers and lecturers sent SQA examples of marked learner assessment evidence along with the assessment instrument and marking instructions. Where possible, the assessment evidence was spread over a range of attainment levels and across the teaching staff delivering at that level. The candidates' assessments were already marked and internally quality assured.

The evidence could be partial or incomplete and did not need to be the full or final evidence base for each learner, as SQA was making a judgement about how the school, college or training provider had applied national standards. SQA subject specialists reviewed the assessment evidence and provided supportive centre-specific feedback as well as general

guidance on key themes for 109 courses taken from the findings from across all schools, colleges and training providers.

Schools, colleges and training providers used a variety of assessment resources. SQA resources, where used, were normally used in combination with other assessment resources. There was a range of evidence submitted and reported on, including question papers, assignments, projects and practical activities (photo, video).

There were some instances of lenient or severe marking or inconsistent application of marking instructions. These were highlighted in the centre-specific and key message reports for schools, colleges and training providers to consider and act on. There was also evidence of thorough and effective centre and local quality assurance — including inter-school, local authority, Regional Improvement Collaboratives and subject networks. Further information is available in the [National Qualifications 2021 Alternative Certification Model \(ACM\) Methodology Report](#).

The Deputy First Minister requested that HM Inspectors of Education undertake a review of local authority approaches to quality assurance. The report — [National review of local authority approaches to quality assurance as part of the alternative certification model](#) — provided an independent view about what was working well and areas of improvement so that these could be addressed before provisional results were submitted to SQA.

Provisional results

Provisional results for 519,429 National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses were submitted to SQA by Friday 25 June. This is the highest number of entries in the past seven years. The provisional grades were not altered by SQA unless, in a very small number of cases, an administrative error was identified, in collaboration with the school, college or training provider. Learners were informed of their grades before submission to SQA for resulting.

The overall entries for all National Qualifications (National 2 to Advanced Higher, including Skills for Work) in 2021 are 660,661. This is an increase of 8,201 on 2020 and is the highest number of entries in the past five years.

Entries at National 5 have decreased by 2,666 to 297,973. Entries at Higher have increased by 8,447 to 194,661 and Advanced Higher has increased by 3,225 to 26,795.

Attainment

The distribution of 2021 attainment by grade is summarised below. Further statistical information about 2021 results is available on [SQA's statistics page](#).

Table 1: 2021 August attainment rates

Award level	Candidates awarded						Total
	A	B	C	A to C	D	No Award	
National 5	139,133	61,704	54,680	255,517	24,686	17,770	297,973
Higher	92,753	43,113	34,123	169,989	13,666	11,006	194,661
Advanced Higher	13,654	6,234	4,274	24,162	1,482	1,151	26,795

Award level	Grade awarded					
	A	B	C	A to C	D	No Award
National 5	46.7%	20.7%	18.4%	85.8%	8.3%	6.0%
Higher	47.6%	22.1%	17.5%	87.3%	7.0%	5.7%
Advanced Higher	51.0%	23.3%	16.0%	90.2%	5.5%	4.3%

A to C attainment in 2021 at National 5 is 255,517 or 85.8% (267,558 or 89.0% in 2020). At Higher it is 169,989 or 87.3% (166,208 or 89.3% in 2020). At Advanced Higher it is 24,162 or 90.2% (21,935 or 93.1% in 2020).

The biggest change is at A grade. Attainment at A grade in 2021 at National 5 is 46.7% (42.3% in 2020), at Higher 47.6% (40.0% in 2020) and 51.0% at Advanced Higher (46.3% in 2020).

Some variation in attainment and the composition of attainment is to be expected between courses and over time. This year, we are seeing more movements in attainment than we would see in a normal year when exams are held. Learners across Scotland experienced disruption to learning and teaching and periods of remote learning. Modifications to assessment, the absence of external assessment and the flexibility in how and when courses were assessed by teachers and lecturers, which was required due to the levels of disruption, may also have impacted on attainment.

Given the exceptional circumstances in which National Courses were awarded in both 2020 and 2021, it is not possible to draw definitive conclusions on any changes in education performance across these two years, or in comparison to 2019.

Equalities considerations

Throughout the development of the model, we have had equalities at the heart of our thinking and have developed and published equality impact assessments and child rights and wellbeing impact assessments to inform our approaches and decisions, as well as to demonstrate our compliance with our statutory obligations. In developing the ACM, we have had due regard to the potential equalities impacts of our decisions and processes and have sought to ensure that our guidance to centres on equalities in the provisional results process assisted them in fulfilling their equalities responsibilities. We have also ensured that the arrangements we have for appeals are also designed to address any cases of discrimination by centres.

Statistical analysis for 2021 shows that, relative to each year in the period 2017 to 2019, the A and A–C attainment rates are up for all groups at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher.

Relative to 2020, attainment at grade A is up for all characteristics: Sex, Disability, SIMD, Additional Support Needs and Ethnic group at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher.

A–C attainment has seen moderate decreases for most groups relative to 2020 across all qualifications, with some exceptions. In Advanced Higher, one ethnic group — Black–Caribbean — the attainment rate has remained the same as 2020; and two ethnic groups — entries from learners classed together as ‘Other’ and learners classed as ‘Mixed or multiple ethnic groups’ — have seen a small increase in the A to C attainment rate. However, due to the small number of entries for some ethnic groups, caution should be exercised when interpreting these changes.

When focusing on SIMD and the most deprived and least deprived groups, in 2021, the attainment gap is generally smaller than in 2019 and before, but very similar or slightly wider than in 2020.

Full tables and analysis are available in the [2021 Alternative Certification Model: Equalities Monitoring Report](#).

Wider issues

Foundation Apprenticeships

SQA qualifications are also being taken as part of Foundation Apprenticeships, in a range of subjects including engineering, financial services, information technology, and social services.

SQA and Skills Development Scotland agreed new arrangements for Foundation Apprenticeship frameworks for 2020–21, following extensive engagement with stakeholders. The new arrangements include the introduction of customised units as options alongside SVQ and Diploma units, and the pilot of a Work-based Challenge Unit in five frameworks.

Customised units were developed using a broader definition of ‘the workplace’ to offer more flexibility of delivery and assessment. The customised units are based on the National Occupational Standards of the related SVQ or Diploma units currently in the Foundation Apprenticeship frameworks. As an alternative to attending the workplace, learners have engaged in practice-based activity, involving employers, that is aligned to the same knowledge and understanding outcomes of the original frameworks. Learners have engaged with employers in various ways to support their learning throughout.

This year has seen 1,019 Foundation Apprenticeships achieved.

Wider achievement

In addition to the Nationals, Highers and Advanced Highers, SQA provides a suite of qualifications that meet a wider range of learners’ interests and abilities, including awards in

areas such as leadership, employability, and personal finance, as well as a range of Skills for Work courses, Awards, National Certificates and National Progression Awards. These are part of a broadening of the curriculum and support the Developing the Young Workforce programme.

SQA worked together with the Higher National and Vocational Qualifications 2021 Group, to develop alternative assessment approaches and provided subject-specific guidance for these qualifications. A number of these qualifications contain a high proportion of practical skills and given the extended period of remote learning it has not been possible for as many learners to complete the learning and assessment this year in time for August certification. Amongst these qualifications, some of them may be deferred into the next academic session. Learners can be certificated for vocational qualifications throughout the year, once assessment is complete.

This wide range of qualifications will help young people reach their full potential as they progress from their broad general education through to college, university, apprenticeships, other learning, training and employment.

Final remarks

This has been a very challenging year for everyone involved in Scottish education. I am very grateful, as Scotland's Chief Examining Officer, to all Scotland's thousands of teachers and lecturers, SQA staff, SQA co-ordinators, school and college support staff, local authorities, professional associations and national organisations who have supported the design and delivery of the alternative certification model during this very difficult time.

Most importantly, I wish to record my admiration for Scotland's learners, their parents and carers. Learners have shown great resilience and worked exceptionally hard to achieve their best. The results they receive today reflect their achievements and should allow them to progress to further study or employment.

Fiona Robertson

Scotland's Chief Examining Officer

10 August 2021