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## Must Do Better

Teacher assessments have continued the grade inflation that undermines confidence in education. It is time to reform exams and regain trust

“A strong set of results, achieved under extraordinary circumstances.” So Shirley-Anne Somerville, Scotland’s education secretary, describes this year’s remarkable pass rate for Higher exams and the equally remarkable set of A grades won by almost 50 per cent of pupils. The implication is that Scottish pupils, as assessed by their teachers in place of normal exams, have made commendable progress in challenging conditions. Yet there is no reliable evidence to back that assertion.

A jump from the 75-78 per cent pass rate that was normal in pre-pandemic years to 87.3 per cent this year is hard to credit; when 47.6 per cent of Higher candidates achieve an A, compared with 28.3 per cent in 2019, then serious questions have to be asked about the reliability of those results. That is not to blame the teachers, who have seen their pupils at first hand, noted their progress and are proud of what they have managed to achieve in the most difficult of circumstances. Inevitably, however, the assessment system leaves them open to the charge of marking their own homework and the outcome is simply too good to be true.

Grade inflation at this level undermines confidence in the system and stores up future problems for universities offering places, for employers offering jobs, and for those they interview. An

A-grade candidate was once considered to have achieved an educational gold standard and was judged by that benchmark. But if almost half of pupils are judged to have won gold, then the very currency is undermined; the employer has no means of judging the strength of the qualification, and the successful candidate may go on to find the job beyond them.

For all that the previous exam system has been open to criticism, the assessment process that succeeded it is equally fallible. Even those who came through it with impressive results have been voicing doubts. “I would hope it will be proper exams again because it’s easier, it’s fairer on all ... everyone is doing them at the same time all over the country and everybody has a fair opportunity,” an Aberdeenshire pupil said. It is hard to disagree.

There is no doubt that this year’s assessment process is an improvement on last year’s algorithm debacle. That is, however, to set the bar low. Em-

ployers who lined up yesterday to say they would respect the results, know full well they will have to treat them with extreme caution; and when Somerville claims the awards are “fair, consistent and credible”, she is doing no more than masking the contradictions at the heart of the system.

At the same time opinion appears to be hardening against exams as they once existed. Last June the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported on Scotland’s curriculum for excellence and criticised the exams system for older pupils. The OECD said there was a lack of robust data for assessing school performance; teachers spent too long teaching for exams and not enough time developing lessons. It opened the issue of whether traditional exams should be kept as the principal way of assessing a pupil’s progress. The argument has been made that some bright pupils may be poor at taking exams — “we are using a 19th-century system for a 21st-century generation,” was one complaint.

A fairer way might see exams combined with background information supplied by teachers. With the abolition of the Scottish Qualifications Authority, and the ending of Education Scotland’s inspections, there is an argument for change.

Whatever system is proposed, there has to be a reliable and objective means of measuring a pupil’s progress, for the sake of future employers and future job candidates. Sheltering behind bromides that claim a 20 per cent jump in A grades in just two years is “consistent and credible” is to do a disservice to both. The new system, whatever it turns out to be, has to win the trust of the nation.

# SQA boss faces fresh calls to resign amid accusations of exams shambles

By **CONOR MATCHETT**

The boss of the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) should quit her post following another year of exam shambles, the Scottish Liberal Democrats have said.

Results released by the SQA earlier yesterday showed another year in which the attainment gap between the most and least deprived pupils had widened.

They also show an overall drop in pass rate across National 5s, Highers and Advanced Highers, as well as one of the highest rates of A grade passes recorded.

The figures come after a year of controversy and scrutiny around the SQA and the Scottish Government's approach to qualifications, with concerns raised about pupils sitting exams "in all but name" and an appeals service labelled not fit for purpose.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats said the figures showing a widening of the attainment gap made a "mockery" of SNP promises. The party's education spokesperson Beatrice Wishart said it was time for chief execu-

tive of the SQA, Fiona Robertson, to step aside to allow the planned reform of the quango to go ahead.

She said: "Pupils were forced into exams in all but name, sitting as many as 16 assessments in a week, crammed in with little notice.

"The SQA shifted workloads on to teachers and gave them precious little leeway to recognise that some of their students had missed months of education due to repeated stints in isolation or disruption at home.

"The fact that the gap between the richest and the poorest has increased again make a mockery of SNP promises to close the attainment gap. The blame for this sits firmly with the government and its education quangos.

"After years of putting their fingers in their ears, the Scottish Government eventually conceded that the SQA isn't fit for purpose, but only after

Parliament backed the Scottish Liberal Democrats in a vote that piled pressure on ministers.

"With this year's process drawing to a close, and still repeatedly refusing to apologise for last year's debacle, Fiona Robertson should step aside and allow that reform to take place."

Scottish Labour said the system for 2021 had failed the poorest pupils, blaming a "total lack of leadership" in Scottish education.

Last year, thousands of grades were downgraded by the SQA, forcing an embarrassing U-turn from then-education secretary John Swinney following an agreement with the Scottish Greens on the eve of a no-confidence vote in the minister.

Exams for National 5s were cancelled in October, with Highers and Advanced Highers cancelled in December 2020.

Mr Swinney was later sacked from his role and replaced by Shirley-Anne Somerville after the election, with the new Cabinet secretary sticking to the plans laid out by her predecessor.

Michael Marra, Labour's education spokesperson, said students and teachers had per-

formed “nothing short of miracles” in a disrupted year.

He said: “Scottish education has suffered from a total lack of leadership this year. We see this in everything from the late cancellation of exams, to the shambolic roll out of the ‘alternative certification model’ [ACM], to the appeals system which took none of this year’s extraordinary circumstances into account.

“This system has widened the educational attainment gap in Scotland, meaning that poorest pupils have been impacted the worst by the SQA and Scottish Government mismanagement.

“The result is that there are many young people, particularly in our poorest communities, who have not achieved the grades they had hoped or deserved.

“The government should implement a ‘re-sit guarantee’ without delay, and offer a further education place to any young person impacted by the disruption of the pandemic who wishes to re-take their subjects.”

The Scottish Greens said the moderation system in place in which councils and schools were asked to compare results to previous years was the reason behind the widening of the attainment gap.

Ross Greer, the party’s education spokesperson, said: “Just like last year’s postcode-based moderation system before it was reversed, this year’s grades were adjusted against previous results at each school. It’s therefore not a surprise that the attainment gap has widened.

“After all, the restored grades from last year, when the attainment gap dramati-

cally narrowed, were excluded from this moderation system. This intense suspicion of working-class young people who achieve just as much as their middle-class colleagues shames Scotland.

“The purpose of education is to enable every young person to reach their full potential, not to sort the world into haves and have-nots based on where they live. The SQA’s leadership have again failed to understand this basic idea.”

Larry Flanagan, general secretary of Scotland’s largest teaching union the EIS, said lessons would be learned around the implementation of the alternative certification model, but praised teachers and pupils. David Lott, the deputy director of Universities Scotland, said the results had the confidence of its institutions.

A SQA spokesperson said: “Today is not about SQA or any individual. It is about celebrating the achievements of learners right across Scotland.

“There is a review underway looking at the replacement of SQA and a debate to be had about the future of assessment, but today let’s recognise the hard work of 137,000 learners who have received their certificates.”

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## Nigerian Scot’s Cambridge offer

A pupil who moved from Nigeria to Glasgow has said he is “ecstatic and shocked” after scoring a place at the University of Cambridge to study medicine.

Ayo Lambe, 17, studied for his Advanced Highers at Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) - achieving four band one A grades in Physics, Chemistry, Biology and Maths.

The teenager, who said he wanted to study medicine after caring for his younger brother, went on: “I am very grateful to everyone who contributed to my journey and am happy I have been able to make them proud.”

The university runs an “advanced higher hub” to study subjects not on their schools’ curriculum, with Ayo not offered the subjects at St Margaret Mary’s Secondary

School, said GCU.

GCU said Ayo moved from Nigeria to England when he was three, moving back to Nigeria when he was 10, then moving to Glasgow when he was in fourth year at school, typically when pupils are aged 14-15.

He said: “Though the UK had previously been my home, it was still a big culture change. I vaguely remember not being able to grasp the Glaswegian accent and still laugh at that.

“But what they say is true, Glasgow has the kindest people.

“I have a younger brother with Down’s Syndrome, who I credit with being my main motivation for wanting to study medicine.

“Helping my mum take care of him is something I enjoy doing.”

**Clockwise from main: Ayo Lambe who moved from Nigeria to Glasgow has said he is ‘ecstatic and shocked’ after scoring a place at the University of Cambridge to study medicine; Under-fire SQU chief executive, Fiona Robertson; John Swinney faced a vote of no-confidence after last years exams**



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# Exams likely to stay, minister hints as grades hit new high

**Mark McLaughlin**  
Scottish Education Correspondent

Scotland's education secretary has given her clearest signal yet that she will resist pressure to scrap exams permanently after teachers handed out a record number of stellar grades in the absence of formal assessment.

Shirley-Anne Somerville said she "can't see a point where we get rid of exams entirely", ending months of speculation that she was preparing to bow to demands from unions, academics and Green MSPs.

An unprecedented number of A grades were handed out by teachers using their "professional judgment" under an emergency system implemented when exams were scrapped for the second year in a row because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Nearly half of pupils in Scotland were awarded As at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher compared with less than a third in 2017 to 2019, when pupils were graded using formal exams.

A grades were even higher than in 2020, the first year exams were scrapped, and there was no attempt to moderate them based on schools' past performance.

Last year a computer algorithm was used to align grades with previous trends but the moderated grades were abandoned after a backlash when it emerged that poorer pupils were marked down more harshly than their more affluent peers.

The unmoderated alternative certification narrowed the persistent gap between rich and poor at a stroke. Only 65 per cent of deprived pupils gained a Higher in 2019, the last year of exams, compared with 82 per cent of advan-

taged pupils. This year 83 per cent of deprived pupils and 91 per cent of affluent pupils attained a Higher.

Fiona Robertson, chief executive of the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), admitted the absence of external assessment and the flexibility given to teachers "may have impacted on attainment this year".

She said at a press briefing: "This year we are seeing more movement in attainment than we would see in a normal year ... I would absolutely acknowledge that A grades are up. Teachers have worked really hard applying the national standards and there has been quality assurance."

Fewer than 4,000 pupils have appealed about their grade compared with 12,000 a year before 2020.

Somerville will outline her plans for assessment in 2022 this week, before pupils go back to school next week, but confirmed it would not be a return to business as usual because of the lingering impact of the pandemic.

This month the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, a Paris-based body that compares learning around the world, will publish recommendations

for the future of Scottish qualifications after it found the country's education system was too focused on "high-stakes exams".

Somerville told *Newsdrive* on BBC Radio Scotland: "There is a degree of

debate in the education community about whether we have more continuous assessment as well as exams. I can't see a point where we get rid of exams entirely ... but do we have to look at other models?"

Somerville has already told opposition parties to get used to the idea of a hybrid model of assessment, with fewer exams and more continuous coursework.

Oliver Mundell, the Scottish Conservative education spokesman, said his party would resist any move to roll back formal exams.

He told the BBC: "I think we could have held exams this year. The attainment gap is not caused by exams. What exams do is shine a light on other failings that have taken place in Scottish education. Trying to move the goalposts or massage the figures doesn't take away the fundamental issue that some young people leave school less able than their peers."

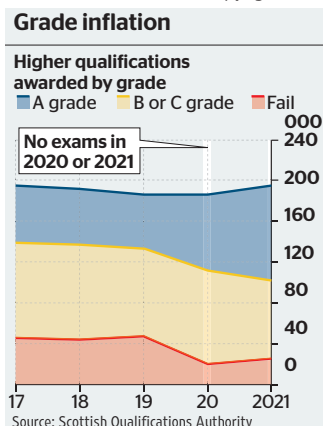
Jim Thewliss, general secretary of School Leaders Scotland which represents head teachers, said this year's alternative certification model "worked well" but was unlikely to sound the death knell for exams. On BBC Radio Scotland's *Good Morning Scotland*, he said: "I don't think that is something that is going to come along in the very near future."

He said exams may be here to stay for the present generation as pupils starting P1 were already locked into a system where they were "working towards an examination at the end of S5 and S6".

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Reform exams and  
regain trust, leading  
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**Shirley-Anne Somerville will resist union pressure**

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Jumping for joy Mason Smith, Beth Adam, Katie Wilson, Charlotte Alexander and

Katie Brennan, all students at Lochgelly High School in Fife, celebrate their grades as A-level results are unveiled yesterday



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**STURGEON'S BAD REPORT CARD**

# Poorest pupils pay the price for 'shambolic' SNP schools regime

By **Tom Martin**  
Scottish Political Editor

SNP MINISTERS' "shambolic" stewardship of schools was condemned yesterday as qualification pass rates for Scotland's poorest pupils plummeted despite a surge in top grades for teenagers.

Opponents branded Nicola Sturgeon's record a disgrace after her government again failed to keep her promise to close the attainment gap between rich and poor.

Results for National 5s, Highers and Advanced Highers published yesterday show a record proportion of pupils got As after exams were axed for the second year in a row.

Overall pass rates were down slightly on 2020, when grades were eventually based on teacher estimates after the scrapping of an algorithm which discriminated against pupils from poorer areas.

However, the proportion of teenagers awarded top grades has

soared again this year, under a system where awards were again based on teacher judgments.

In Advanced Highers, the toughest qualification, more than half – 51 per cent – of entrants got an A.

This compares with 46 per cent last year and 32 per cent in 2019, the last year of traditional exams.

Rampant grade inflation saw 48 per cent of Highers awarded at A, compared to 28 per cent in 2019.

But Fiona Robertson, head of exams quango the Scottish Qualifications Agency (SQA), insisted employers and universities could have "full confidence" in this year's results.

She said: "We are seeing more movements in attainment than in a normal year when exams are held."

But she added: "I'm confident that teachers and lecturers have worked hard to apply the national standards

this year."

SNP Education Secretary Shirley-Anne Somerville boasted that "a strong set of results" had been delivered "under

extraordinary circumstances". She said: "Learners can be confident that their awards are fair, consistent and credible. Indeed, industry representatives have made it clear how much they value this year's qualifications."

Overall pass rates were down slightly on last year, with 86 per cent of National 5 entries awarded an A-C grade, compared to 89 per cent last year.

The overall Higher pass rate fell by two points to 87 per cent while the Advanced Higher pass rate fell by three to 90.

The attainment gap widened further. Pupils from the most deprived areas were twice as likely

to see their grades drop at Higher and Advanced Higher than those from the most affluent backgrounds. worst by the SQA and Scottish Government mismanagement.”

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At Higher, the pass rate for the most disadvantaged pupils fell by 2.5 per cent year-on-year, compared to a 1.1 per cent fall for their affluent peers.

The difference between the proportion of pupils from the wealthiest and poorest areas getting As at Higher was 22.1 percentage points, the highest

since before 2017. The gap in the Higher pass rate also increased on last year, from 6.5 points to 7.9, while the difference in the National 5 pass rate rose from 7.9 points last year to 9.

But the disparity remained significantly less stark than in 2019, when pupils sat traditional exams.

Scottish Tory education spokesman Oliver Mundell said pupils had been judged more harshly than last year in terms of overall pass rates and claimed the system was “just as flawed and unfair as the shambles pupils suffered last year”.

He added: “Most damning of all, pupils from poorer backgrounds have been marked down the most.

“That is nothing short of a disgrace. It is apparent that once again, young people have been judged because of where they come from and where they go to school.”

Scottish Labour education spokesman Michael Marra said: “Scottish education has suffered a total lack of leadership this year.

“We see this in everything from the late cancellation of exams, to the shambolic rollout of the alternative certification model, to the appeals system which took none of this year’s extraordinary circumstances into account.

“This system has widened the attainment gap, meaning that poorest pupils have been impacted the



**Ms Sturgeon failed over gap**



**‘Pupils from poorer backgrounds are marked down most’**

Tory spokesman Oliver Mundell



**‘This system has widened the attainment gap’**

Michael Marra of Scottish Labour

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# Analysis: Another year, another failure to tackle the attainment gap

By **CONOR MATCHETT**

This year's exam results have shown the SNP has still failed to get serious when it comes to narrowing the attainment gap.

Figures released by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) show when compared to 2020 the attainment gap has widened, albeit to a much smaller gap than pre-Covid.

However, at a briefing the qualifications authority was at pains to state that comparing this year with previous required significant caveats, essentially saying it was incomparable.

Fiona Robertson, the quango's chief executive, also blamed the attainment gap on the disruption to schooling by Covid-19, something the Scot-

tish government established had disproportionately affected the poorest students.

As many opposition politicians and activists pointed out, the "alternative certification model" was designed in a way that made a drop in overall attainment inevitable, given estimated results were being compared with pre-Covid years for "quality assurance".

The rationale behind the inclusion of 'demonstrated attainment', which in reality resulted in pupils sitting exams in all but name, suggests the SNP is wedded to traditional assessment techniques.

Results prior to Covid-19 indicate one of two possibilities. Either teachers and schools have been failing to adequately prepare Scotland's most deprived pupils for standardised exams for years, or the education system

in Scotland is stacked against those from the poorest parts of the country.

Both 2020 and 2021, ostensibly years in which the attainment gap has been at its narrowest, has seen a focus on teacher judgement.

Last year this change in emphasis proved too much for the SQA and John Swinney, and blanket moderation was applied to 'retain credibility'.

In 2021, the requirement for assessments shifted the goalposts closer to normal exams, and with it the attainment gap widened. Next year students will likely see a return to traditional exams and a wider attainment gap, all in the desire to preserve credibility in the system.

The question for Shirley-Anne Somerville as education secretary is whether she prefers preservation or progression.

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# STURGEON FAILS TEST YET AGAIN

As exam results reveal growing gap between rich and poor students...

By **Michael Blackley**  
Scottish Political Editor

**THE chasm between Scotland's richest and poorest pupils has widened, despite a promise by SNP ministers to slash the attainment gap.**

Almost 137,000 youngsters received their final grades yesterday after exams were scrapped for a second year in a row due to the coronavirus pandemic.

There was a slump in pass rates overall, with the proportion of pupils gaining A-C passes falling across National 5s, Highers and Advanced Highers compared to last year.

The difference in performance between schools in the wealthiest and most deprived areas grew despite Nicola Sturgeon's pledge to make it her government's 'mission' to close the poverty-related attainment gap.

The latest results show the grades of pupils in the most deprived schools fell by twice as much as those in the wealthiest areas.

It follows last year's exams fiasco when 124,000 pupils initially saw their results downgraded because of their school's past performance. Ministers later caved in to pressure and reverted

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# Another year, another SNP 'shambles' over exams

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to teacher assessments. Despite the fall in overall pass rates, the number of pupils getting a grade A soared in all three main qualifications, with nearly half of children getting top marks in Highers, compared to just over a quarter when traditional exams last went ahead two years ago.

But the Scottish Government and the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) were last night accused of overseeing another 'shambolic and unjust' marking system.

Scottish Tory education spokesman Oliver Mundell said: 'Compared to last year, grades are down across the

board. The attainment gap is up. That should set alarm bells ringing that this year's system is just as flawed and unfair as the shambles pupils suffered last year.

'But most damning of all, pupils from poorer backgrounds have been marked down the most from 2020 to 2021. They're twice as likely to see their grades fall at Higher and Advanced Higher than children from the most affluent areas, year on year. That's nothing short of a disgrace.'

He added: 'The SNP should

apologise for creating this shambolic, deeply unjust system that is marred by more of the same mistakes. They have misled and failed pupils on multiple fronts.'

The results yesterday showed, overall, 85.8 per cent of pupils achieved a grade A-C pass at National 5, compared to 89 per cent last year.

At Higher level, 87.3 per cent of pupils were awarded an A-C pass, a two percentage point fall compared to last year, while 90.2 per cent of Advanced Higher pupils received an A-C pass, down from 93.1 per cent.

Despite this, the proportion of pupils given A grades soared. In National 5s, 46.7 per cent of pupils gained an A, compared to 42.3 per cent last year and 35.1 per cent in 2019.

For Highers, this leapt from 28.3 per cent in 2019 to 40 per cent last year and 47.6 per cent this year.

In Advanced Highers, 51 per cent were awarded an A, up from 46.3 per cent last year and 31.8 per cent in 2019.

SQA data also set out the differing performance between

pupils in the most and least deprived areas. For Highers, attainment at A-C level was 7.9 percentage points higher in the least deprived areas compared to the poorest, growing from 6.5 last year.

Attainment at grade A was 22.1 percentage points higher in the least deprived areas compared to the most deprived, the biggest gap in five years. The gap at A-C level also widened in National 5s, from 7.9 percentage points to 9, and at Advanced Higher, from 3 percentage points to 5.5. Scottish Labour education spokesman Michael Marra said: 'Scottish education has suffered from a total lack of leadership this year.'

'We see this in everything from the late cancellation of exams, to the shambolic roll-out of the alternative certification model, to the appeals system which took none of

this year's extraordinary circumstances into account.

'This system has widened the educational attainment gap in Scotland, meaning that poorest pupils have been

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impacted the worst by the SQA and Scottish Government mismanagement.'

Education Secretary Shirley-Anne Somerville said: 'This is a strong set of results, achieved under extraordinary circumstances.'

But she admitted they 'highlight some areas to focus attention' and said closing the attainment gap remains 'central to our work'.

Keir Bloomer, chairman of the Commission on School Reform, said: 'Teacher judgment last year sent pass rates rocketing. In-school exams this year have brought them down somewhat.'

'That merely confirms what we know from experience and research about the optimism of teacher judgment.'

## **Fury of schools**

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**'Poorest pupils  
impacted worst'**

**'Nothing short of  
a disgrace'**

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# Scottish qualifications 'devalued' by two years of grade inflation

Experts warn that exams are losing credibility as SNP refuses to learn from mistakes made in 2020

By Daniel Sanderson  
SCOTTISH CORRESPONDENT

THE credibility of qualifications obtained by Scottish teenagers has been fatally undermined by "massive grade inflation" meaning that top-performing pupils have effectively seen their results downgraded, experts have warned.

The proportion of A grades in yesterday's National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher results increased drastically for the second year in a row, after the cancellation of exams because of the pandemic.

At Higher and Advanced Higher, seen as Scotland's "gold standard" qualifications by employers and universities, about half of entries were awarded A grades, compared with less than a third in 2019, the last year in which pupils sat traditional tests.

Exams chiefs and SNP ministers yesterday insisted the results, awarded based on teachers' judgments, were fair and credible, and denied that an A grade had been devalued.

However, Jim Scott, honorary professor of education at the University of Dundee, described the results as "pure mince" because it would now be impossible to distinguish the cleverest pupils from average or good performers by their results.

Lindsay Paterson, professor of education policy at the University of Edinburgh, claimed the system put in place by the beleaguered Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) had inflicted "dismaying damage" on the reputation of once highly regarded qualifications.

Overall, pass rates were down slightly compared with last year, when an

algorithm designed to prevent widespread grade inflation was scrapped after it emerged that it had discriminated against pupils from poorer backgrounds.

However, the proportion of A grades given out rose significantly, with 51 per cent of entries at Advanced Higher – the toughest qualification on offer in Scottish schools – receiving the top award. This compared with 46 per cent last year and 32 per cent when pupils last sat normal exams.

At Higher, 48 per cent of entries were given an A, compared with 40 per cent last year and 28 per cent before the pandemic. The proportion of As at National 5 rose to 47 per cent, a 12 point rise compared with two years ago.

SNP ministers also came under fire after it emerged that the attainment gap between rich and poor, which Nicola Sturgeon promised to eliminate, had risen from last year with almost 60 per cent of entries from students from the wealthiest families being awarded As.

Prof Scott said that the "well-intentioned but exceptionally poor" qualifications processes put in place over the past two years had put the futures of pupils in "unprecedented jeopardy".

He also accused the SNP and SQA of failing to learn from last summer's "disaster".

"[Grade inflation] would be good if it was accurate, but it almost certainly isn't," he said.

"The larger problem, however, is that qualifications [are used] to discriminate between candidates' abilities, whether for job selection or university application. If almost every

committed learner has an A then it is impossible to discriminate among the average, the able and the outstanding, except by other means."

Prof Scott added: "One can only feel for the very able, who have effectively been brought down to a lower level, and for the average to good, who have almost certainly been over-graded against what would have been their performance. In simple terms, the 2020 and 2021 results might best be described in Scottish as 'pure mince'. Learners deserve better."

Widespread grade inflation was also seen in A-level results, with 44.8 per cent of pupils getting A or A\* grades, after traditional exams were also scrapped elsewhere in the UK.

While SNP ministers defended the Scottish results, it emerged that A-level grades could be reformed and replaced with a numerical system under UK government plans, amid fears that grade inflation had rendered the results "meaningless".

This year's process in Scotland was widely criticised after schools were ordered to submit evidence to back up teachers' grades, but different

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MARK F GIBSON/GETTY IMAGES

Pupils in East Renfrewshire celebrate their results. Left to right, Ailsa Finlay, 18; Ryan Bruce, 18; Danyaal Butt, 16; Fraser Hyde, 17; and Katie Little, 18



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## Scottish exams body blamed for chaotic results as chief urged to quit

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processes were put in place across the country. This led to claims pupils were being forced to sit multiple assessments that were “exams in all but name”.

Meanwhile, as the assessments took place at different times across the country, there were cases of pupils sharing questions on social media.

Prof Paterson said the detail of quality-assurance processes put in place by the SQA, which is being scrapped by the SNP after it was blamed for last year’s shambles, had been unconvincing.

“The massive grade inflation cannot be due to teachers’ leniency, because they were merely following the SQA’s instructions,” he said.

“It cannot be due to improvements in students’ learning, because learning never improves so greatly in just two years. Only the SQA is responsible for this dismaying damage to the reputation of Scotland’s system of qualifications.”

Fiona Robertson, head of the SQA, was yesterday urged to quit after presiding over a second year of confusion, which saw details of an appeals process not released to pupils until June.

The SNP announced earlier in the summer that the quango was to be replaced and that there would be a wider shake-up of Scottish exams in the coming years.

Beatrice Wishart, education spokesman for the Scottish Liberal Democrats, said: “Pupils were forced into exams in all but name, sitting as many as 16 assessments in a week, crammed in with little notice.”

“The SQA shifted workloads on to teachers and gave them precious little leeway to recognise that some of their students had missed months of educa-

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tion due to repeated stints in isolation or disruption at home.

“With this year’s process drawing to a close, and still repeatedly refusing to apologise for last year’s debacle, Fiona Robertson should step aside and allow reform to take place.”

In a briefing with journalists, Ms Robertson denied that Scottish A grades now had a credibility problem.

“We are seeing more movements in attainment than we would in a normal year when exams are held,” she said.

“But I think it’s important that learners have full confidence in these results, as well as parents, carers, employers, universities, colleges.

“I’m confident that teachers and lecturers have worked hard to apply the national standards this year.”

Exams chiefs insisted that employers and universities can have “full confidence” in this year’s results despite the number of top marks.

Scotland’s universities are understood to be relaxed about the increase in A grades, largely because an end to free tuition fees for European students, due to Brexit, means applications from the Continent have plummeted.

This means they will be able to accommodate more Scottish students in the next academic year, with a record number – 31,070 – yesterday securing a place at one of the country’s higher education institutions.

Shirley-Anne Somerville, the Education Secretary, claimed that “a strong set of results” had been delivered “under extraordinary circumstances”.

“It’s been one of the toughest academic years we’ve ever known, with the pandemic throwing significant challenges at our young people,” she said.

“So to have this many learners receiving certificates and for the number of passes to be so high is incredible.

“Learners can be confident that their awards are fair, consistent and credible. Indeed, industry representatives have made it clear how much they value this year’s qualifications.”

*‘The SQA shifted workloads on to teachers and gave them precious little leeway to recognise that some students had missed months of education’*

## SQA boss told to 'step aside' amid anger over gap between rich and poor

By Alistair Grant

THE chief executive of Scotland's qualifications authority has been urged to quit amid opposition anger over the attainment gap between rich and poor pupils.

Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) results show those in the fifth most deprived areas achieved A to C grades at a lower rate than those in the fifth least deprived areas.

Ministers said the poverty-related attainment gap was narrower than in 2019, although slightly wider than last year.

For Higher results, the gap between richest and poorest went from 6.5 per cent in 2020 to 7.9 per cent in 2021.

Both were down considerably from the 16.9 per cent gap pre-pandemic in 2019.

The gap between the proportion of pupils from the wealthiest and poorest areas getting A grades at Higher increased to 22.1 per cent, its highest point since before 2017.

The SQA said the different assessment models used in the wake of coronavirus made it difficult to compare figures on a year-to-year basis, while the increase in 2021 was unlikely to be statistically significant.

Traditional exams were scrapped for the second year in a row due to the pandemic, with a teacher-led "alternative certification model" taking place this year.

Discussing the attainment gap during a briefing with journalists on Tuesday, SQA chief executive Fiona Robertson said pupils had faced "disruption to learning and teaching this year".

She said: "We've modified approaches to assessment to address disruption to learning, providing additional flexibility to deal with exceptional circumstances of this year."

Ms Robertson said there had been movements in the attainment gap each year, while the overall gap had narrowed since 2017.

LibDem education spokeswoman Beatrice Wishart said pupils "were forced into exams in all but name, sitting as many as 16 assessments in a week, crammed in with little notice".

She added: "The fact that the gap between the richest and the poorest has increased again make a mockery of SNP promises to close the attainment gap."

"The blame for this sits firmly with the government and its education quangos."

She added: "With this year's process drawing to a close, and still repeatedly refusing to apologise for last year's debacle, Fiona Robertson should step aside and allow that reform to take place."

The Scottish Conservatives highlighted the pass rate for pupils from the most deprived areas had fallen at a faster rate than those from the least deprived.

The party's education spokesman Oliver Mundell said: "Compared to last year, grades are down across the

board. The attainment gap is up.

"That should set alarm bells ringing that this year's system is just as flawed and unfair as the shambles pupils suffered last year.

"But most damning of all, pupils from poorer backgrounds have been marked down the most from 2020 to 2021.

"They are twice as likely to see their grades fall at Higher and Advanced Higher than children from the most affluent areas, year-on-year.

"That is nothing short of a disgrace."

Scottish Labour's education spokesman, Michael Marra, accused the education authorities of a "total lack of leadership".

He said: "This system has widened the educational attainment gap in Scotland, meaning that poorest pupils have been impacted the worst by the SQA and Scottish Government mismanagement.

"The result is that there are many young people, particularly in our

poorest communities, who have not achieved the grades they had hoped, or deserved."

He called for a re-sit guarantee and the offer of a college place to anyone hit by the pandemic who wants to re-take their subjects.

Scottish Greens education spokesman Ross Greer said it was not a surprise that the attainment gap had widened.

He added: "This intense suspicion of working class young people who achieve just as much as their middle class colleagues shames Scotland."

SNP Education Secretary Shirley-Anne Somerville said: "Closing the poverty-related attainment gap and ensuring every young person has the chance to fulfil their potential remains central to our work.

"We know that the challenges presented by the pandemic mean our efforts to deliver equity in education are more vital than ever, so we are investing a further £1 billion over the course of this parliament to help close the gap."

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MINISTERS URGED TO APOLOGISE FOR FAILING OUR KIDS  
**WILL THEY EVER LEARN?**



**Calls for SQA boss to quit after results gap between rich and poor pupils grows again despite SNP promises**

BY **VIVIENNE AITKEN**  
Education Editor

**THE boss of Scotland's under-fire exams authority was urged to quit last night after results showed the gap between rich and poor pupils was growing.**

Schoolkids from poorer areas suffered the biggest exam failures as passes plunged across the country.

The pass rate for National 5s dropped by 3.2 per cent, Highers by two per cent and Advanced Highers by 2.9 per cent since last year's exams fiasco.

But the Scottish Government failed on the attainment gap, with the divide between the passes of the most and least deprived areas widening.

In 2020, the pass rate gap between the two groups for Advanced Highers was just 2.9 per cent. This year it has spiked to 5.5 per cent. Highers saw a 1.4 per cent rise to a 7.9 per cent gap and there was a one per cent widening in Nat 5s to 8.9 per cent.

Politicians branded the exams system a "disgrace" as analysis showed pupils from the most deprived areas were twice as likely to see their grades drop at Higher and Advanced Higher as young people from the most affluent backgrounds.

Lib Dem education spokeswoman Beatrice Wishart called for Fiona Robertson, chief executive of the Scottish Qualifications Authority, to go.

Wishart said: "The fact that the gap

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between the richest and the poorest has increased again makes a mockery of SNP promises to close the attainment gap. The blame for this sits firmly with the Government and its education quangos. "After years of putting their fingers in their ears, the Scottish Government eventually conceded that the SQA isn't fit for purpose – but only after Parliament backed the Scottish Lib Dems in a vote that piled pressure on ministers.

"With this year's process drawing to a close, and still repeatedly refusing to apologise for last year's debacle, Fiona Robertson should step aside and allow that reform to take place."

But Robertson refused to quit, saying: "My focus is absolutely clearly on leading the SQA and delivering for learners. We are seeking to ensure learners get the qualifications they deserve.

"Today's not about me, it is about focusing our attention on the achievements of Scotland's learners after a very difficult year."

Last year the poorest pupils saw their exam results downgraded due to the historical performance of their schools. Teacher assessments had been brought in as an emergency measure as exams could not go ahead due to Covid.

Pupils marched in protest before the Scottish Government overturned the downgrades and awarded pupils the grades they earned.

This year almost 137,000 pupils passed exams as grades were again based on teacher judgment.

But the increase in the attainment gap sparked fury. Labour education spokesman Michael Marra said: "Scottish education has suffered from a total lack of leadership this year. We see this in everything from the late cancellation of exams, to the shambolic roll-out of the Alternative Certification Model, to the appeals system which took none of this year's extraordinary circumstances into account.

"This system has widened the educational attainment gap in Scotland, meaning the poorest pupils have been impacted the worst by the SQA and Scottish Government mismanagement."

**He called for the Government to implement a resit guarantee and offer further education places to all those wishing to retake exams.**

Green education spokesman Ross Greer claimed: "Just like last year's postcode-based moderation system before it was reversed, this year's grades were adjusted against previous results at each school.

"It's therefore not a surprise that the attainment gap has widened. This intense suspicion of working-class young people

who achieve just as much as their middle-class colleagues shames Scotland."

Tory education spokesman Oliver Mundell said: "Congratulations to Scotland's school pupils, who deserve a huge amount of praise for battling through another incredibly difficult year.

"Despite the disruption they faced, the SNP's system has judged them more harshly than last year's pupils, as we warned was the case. Compared to last year, grades are down across the board.

"The attainment gap is up. That should set alarm bells ringing that this year's system is just as flawed and unfair as the

shambles pupils suffered last year. But most damning of all, pupils from poorer backgrounds have been marked down the most from 2020 to 2021. That is nothing short of a disgrace.

"Pupils struggling the most – young people from poorer backgrounds who are just trying to pass, never mind get an A grade – have been hit the hardest.

"The SNP should apologise for creating this shambolic, deeply unjust system that is marred by more of the same mistakes. They have misled and failed pupils on multiple fronts."

But Education Secretary Shirley-Anne Somerville insisted that the results were "strong" and had been achieved under "extraordinary circumstances".

She said: "To have this many learners receiving certificates and for the number of passes at Higher and Advanced Higher to

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be so high is incredible.”  
And she added: “Closing the poverty-related attainment gap and ensuring every young person has the chance to fulfil their potential remains central to our work.”



**UNDER PRESSURE** Fiona Robertson

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**WAY TO GO, AYO** The teenager got top grades

**SMART CALL**  
Lochgelly High pupils  
check their results

**AIMING FOR  
THE TOP**  
Two-time  
British  
taekwondo  
champ Danyaal

**HIGH FIVE** Mason Smith, Beth Adam, Katie  
Wilson, Charlotte Alexander and Katie Brennan  
celebrate their results at Fife's Lochgelly High

**HOTSHOT** Keen golfer  
Jennifer Lynagh of St  
Luke's in Barrhead  
gained five Higher As

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# Grade inflation claims as half get an 'A' in Highers

Exams body under fire over results from system to cope with Covid

By John-Paul Holden and Alistair Grant

SCOTLAND'S exams body has been accused of presiding over "massive grade inflation" after record-breaking figures revealed the proportion of "A" passes handed out at Higher and Advanced Higher level soared by nearly 20 per cent compared with the pre-pandemic period.

Newly published statistics show nearly half of 2021 Higher entries – 47.6% – received an A. This compares with 40% in 2020. In 2019 – the last year in which a conventional exams diet was held – the rate was 28.3%.

A similar increase was recorded for Advanced Highers, with 51% getting the top result – up from 31.8% in 2019 and 46.3% last year. At National 5 level, the 2019-21 figures for A grades were 35.1%, 42.3% and 46.7%, respectively.

Overall, the 2021 National 5, Higher and Advanced pass rates, based on attainment at grades A to C, were 85.8%, 87.3% and 90.2%, respectively. In 2020, the figures were 89%, 89.3% and 93.1%.

However, the 2021 totals are still well up on 2019, when rates of 78.2%, 74.8% and 79.4%, respectively, were recorded.

Publication of the latest national results comes after the Scottish

Government cancelled formal exams because of Covid and moved to a process in which results were decided on the basis of teacher judgment supported by evidence of demonstrated attainment.

The arrangement – known formally as the Alternative

Certification Model (ACM) – was the source of controversy, with young people subjected to gruelling schedules of assessments, often in exam-like conditions, as teachers scrambled to gather evidence necessary for provisional grades.

Paying tribute to learners, Fiona

Robertson, SQA chief executive and Scotland's chief examining officer, told The Herald they could have "full confidence" in their results and cautioned against direct comparisons between this year's figures and pre-pandemic data.

She said everyone in the education system had worked together to "apply the national standard" and that grading was determined "on the basis of learner evidence".

But Lindsay Paterson, Professor

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East Renfrewshire pupils Ailsa Finlay, 18, Ryan Bruce, 18, Danyaal Butt, 16, Fraser Hyde, 17, and Katie Little, 18, celebrate their results  
Picture: Mark Gibson

# Exams body comes under fire over 'grade inflation' in Highers

Continued from Page 1

of Education Policy at Edinburgh University, said: "The large rise in A grades was seen across the board – rich and poor, male and female, rural and urban, all ethnic groups.

"This suggests that the explanation does not lie in teachers' marking, but rather in the instructions about marking that they received from the SQA.

"Massive grade inflation in such a short period of time cannot be due to better teachers or better students.

"The only explanation is a failure of the SQA's processes of quality assurance. Only the SQA is responsible for this damage to the credibility of Scotland's qualifications."

His remarks come after the Commission on School Reform, an independent group of education experts set up by the think tank Reform Scotland, published a paper warning against scrapping exams and relying purely on teacher judgment.

Keir Bloomer, Commission Chair, said previously: "Examinations are not good at everything. Course-work can assess skills and understanding that examinations cannot.

"However the experience of exam cancellations over the last couple of years tells us all we need to know about the important role that exams play in ensuring quality, consistent marking, and equity across the social divide."

He added: "Anonymous marking is effectively insurance against the sort of rapid grade inflation that ultimately only ends when every pupil returns straight As, which would do no favours to either individual pupils or the

country as a whole.

"If Scotland were to scrap exams altogether, as some wish, it would put us out of step with the rest of the world, which increasingly relies on a hybrid model of coursework and exams."

Opposition parties focused much of their criticism on signs of growth in the attainment gap.

The latest statistics show differences between results obtained by the most and least deprived pupils widened slightly compared with last year. However, they remained lower than pre-pandemic levels.

SQA bosses also said the different models of assessment used in the wake of coronavirus made it difficult to compare figures on a year-to-year basis, adding that the increase in 2021 was unlikely to be statistically significant. But Scottish Conservative Oliver Mundell, Shadow Education Secretary, branded the increase a "disgrace".

Ms Robertson strongly rejected suggestions that the latest national results had damaged the credibility of the qualifications system.

"I want learners to have full confidence in the results that they've formally received today," she told The Herald.

"I think we've been clear that learners, teachers and lecturers have worked really hard to apply the national standard and there's been support from local authorities and within schools, and from the SQA, around national standards, and [to ensure] that grading has been made on the basis of learner evidence.

"Some variation in attainment, and the composition of attainment, you

would expect to see – in any year, actually. There are changes every year. And it can be influenced by a range of things – presentation decisions, the cohort size – so a range of things.

"And, of course, this year we've seen changes to the way in which we've arrived at grades and we've undertaken modifications to the assessment approach.

"So some courses have had some assessments taken out and, for public health reasons, in some cases we've had to take out coursework, or we've had to take out assignments."

She added: "I would acknowledge, and I've said it in my report, that we are seeing more movements in attainment this year than we would see in a normal year when exams were held, because there's been a number of moving parts around the changes that have been made to the approach for certification. But I think [I would offer] assurance around the way in which we've collaborated with the system to deliver [and] the way in which the system has worked hard to make sure that we've got it right.

"There is an appeals process there if learners have concerns about a result."

Ms Robertson said just under 4,000 registrations had been received for the SQA's new appeals service but stressed this figure was likely to change.

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She also said applications had been filed for just under 300 young people to enable provisional grades to be submitted by noon on September 3 under the incomplete evidence arrangement.

Education Secretary Shirley-Anne Somerville said: "These results are testament to the hard work, resilience and determination of learners – and to the dedication of their endlessly supportive teachers and lecturers, who have been with them every step of the way, going above and beyond to make sure pupils got the grades they deserve.

"Learners can be confident that their awards are fair, consistent and credible. Indeed, industry representatives have made it clear how much they value this year's qualifications."



**Massive grade  
inflation  
cannot be due  
to better  
teachers or  
better students**

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Ayo Lambe, who has said he is 'ecstatic and shocked' after scoring a place at the University of Cambridge to study medicine, following his move from Nigeria to Glasgow. The 17-year-old studied for his Advanced Highers at Glasgow Caledonian University. See story, left Picture: Peter Devlin/PA Wire

# Big rise in A grades across board casts doubt on process

## Commentary



By Lindsay Paterson

Two facts have hit the headlines about the Scottish school assessment results that were released yesterday. One is the big increase in the proportion of students who were awarded the top A grade. The other is a widening of inequality. The first fact by far outweighs the second, casting doubt on the fairness of the whole process.

The facts are indeed stark. At Higher level, the proportion getting an A grade leapt from about 28 per cent in the pre-Covid years to 48 per cent today. At National 5, the jump was from about 35 per cent to 47 per cent. In the normal course of events, such sharp increases in the space of a few years would bring into question the consistency of teachers' marking.

Inequality changed, but by very much less. Students in the least deprived areas were 20 points ahead of deprived students at Higher level in 2017. The gap was 22 points in 2021. But that gap was almost the same as in the pre-Covid 2019. So, despite what the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) said yesterday, the increased inequality cannot have anything to do with Covid. The gap actually fell at National 5.

So what to make of this? The rise in A grades was across the board – deprived and non-deprived, male and

female, rural and urban, Asian, white, and black. Slight changes of inequality are insignificant compared to this.

The changes everywhere suggest also that the explanation does not lie in what teachers were doing. Teachers

had to estimate a grade in each subject for each student. If teachers had been doing this in eccentric ways, then we'd expect much more variation in the rise of awards than we've seen.

A nationally uniform pattern is most likely to have a national explanation. That can only mean the SQA itself.

In truth, its quality-assurance procedures were not convincing. The details were released only yesterday, and they come across as what might charitably be called impressionistic. The gold standard of quality assurance of assessment standards is random sampling. You have to randomly sample schools, courses, markers and, if possible, students.

Yet the SQA yesterday actually boasted of not using random sampling. This would be as if the Covid vaccines had been judged by the whim of their designers in selecting their own evidence rather than by the rigours of science.

The SQA doesn't tell us how it actually did its sampling. But what we do know is that it then issued instructions to all schools about how

to do the marking. So when the marking has resulted in a large increase in A grades, the explanation lies solely with the SQA. The increase cannot be due to teachers' leniency, because they had to follow these SQA rules. The increase cannot be due to actual improvements in learning. The SQA cannot claim that students in 2019 were so much worse than students today.

So the only plausible conclusion is that the SQA's chaotic management of the marking instructions and the quality control has led to massive grade inflation.

That's a sad indictment of a body charged with the nation's educational reputation.

*'The SQA's chaotic management of the marking instructions and the quality control has led to massive grade inflation'*

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# Alarm as Scotland's academic attainment gap widens again

● Lowest proportion of poorer students set to go on to university for five years

By **CONOR MATCHETT**

Universities will receive the lowest proportion of students from Scotland's most deprived backgrounds for five years, in a blow to Nicola Sturgeon's pledge to narrow the education attainment gap.

Figures published by UCAS yesterday show just 14.4 per cent of Scottish first year undergraduates will come from the poorest areas of the country – the lowest that figure has been since 2016.

This is in comparison to students from the least deprived areas of the country who make up more than a quarter (28.8 per cent).

The gap between the two figures is at its widest since 2018 at 14.4 percentage points, meaning proportionately fewer of Scotland's poorest teenagers will receive a university place in 2021.

The statistics also raise questions as to whether this year's exams system disadvantaged poorer students more after results showed the widening of the attainment gap compared to 2020.

And further doubts were raised over the exams last night when one of

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Students at Lochgelly High School in Lochgelly, Fife, check their results on a smart phone as high school pupils across Scotland find out their exam results



# Lowest proportion of poorest Scots going to university for five years

## FROM PAGE ONE

Scotland's leading education experts questioned the credibility of results because of sharp rise in A grades.

The proportion of top grades given to Scottish pupils increased by an average of 16.7 per cent since a new model has been brought in as a result of the pandemic.

Professor Lindsay Paterson of Edinburgh University said the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) had questions to answer over "grade inflation".

Opposition parties were damning on the SNP government's record, with Scottish Labour stating the figures "lay bare" the party's failure to tackle educational inequality.

The Scottish Conservatives also labelled them "damning" and "nothing short of a disgrace".

While the overall number of students from the most deprived parts of Scotland continues to rise year-on-year, the proportion of students from these areas is at its low-

est level for five years.

In total, 14.43 per cent of all students in 2021 will be from the poorest areas of Scotland, a figure that has dropped year-on-year for the first time since 2014 and is at its lowest since 2016 when it sat at 13.36 per cent.

Since 2012, representation of the richest pupils in universities has declined. However, it rose for the first time since 2018 to 28.82 per cent this year, higher than the 2020 figure of 28.65 per cent, but lower than in 2019 when it was 29.05 per cent.

The number of pupils from Scotland's most well-off areas getting a place at university has also risen at twice the rate as those from the most deprived parts of the country in 2021, the figures show.

It is the first time since 2016 that the number of Scotland's poorest children going to university has risen at a slower rate than the number of those from the richest background.

Statistics released by UCAS

show a year-on-year rise of 6.82 per cent in the number of university places going to those from the most deprived areas of Scotland.

However, places offered to those from the richest areas of Scotland have risen at twice that rate with a rise of 13.13 per cent when compared to 2020.

An analysis of the figures released by UCAS also shows of the 3,500 new places given to pupils on results day, almost a third (30 per cent) have gone to the richest in Scotland, with just 8.4 per cent being handed to the most deprived. This is equal to a rise of 300 university places for those in the poorest parts of Scotland, compared with a rise of 1,090 in the least deprived areas.

More than half (55.2 per cent) of all of the new places have been taken by those considered to be within the 40 per cent of Scotland that is least deprived.

The figures are pre-clearing, meaning thousands more pupils will receive university places, but have been

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compared with equivalent results day figures from previous years. They also exclude pupils who sat A levels or who are moving on to further education colleges.

Scottish Labour's education spokesperson Michael Marra said the figures showed further evidence the "defining mission" of the SNP to reduce the attainment gap was being bungled.

He said: "These damning figures lay bare the SNP's failure to tackle the scandal of educational inequality.

"Education was supposed to be their defining mission, but the evidence is piling up that things are getting worse instead of better on far too many counts. This is the result of a complete lack of leadership from the government, both during the pandemic and over the last 14 years."

The Scottish Conservatives' higher and further education spokesperson Pam Gosal repeated calls for an apology to Scottish pupils.

She said: "The SNP have failed miserably to close the attainment gap. Ministers have described it as their defining mission, but these statistics are absolutely damning.

"Even prior to the pandemic, the SNP had not done enough to tackle the widening gap between pupils from rich and poor backgrounds in our schools.

"They had limited subject choice, slashed teachers from our classrooms and failed to focus on addressing long-standing inequalities."

Beatrice Wishart, the edu-

cation spokesperson for the Scottish Liberal Democrats, said: "There can now be no doubt that the pandemic has hit pupils in the poorest areas much harder than their wealthier counterparts.

"The Scottish Government and their education quangos are responsible for a scandal that will see bright pupils from tougher backgrounds thwarted in their desire to go to university."

Several thousand appeals are also with the SQA, the quango's chief executive said yesterday, with a further 300 individuals taking advantage of the incomplete evidence service, allowing them to submit their estimated grades later than others.

An SQA spokesperson said: "Given the disruption to learning and teaching, and the very different approaches to assessment and grading over the last two years, comparisons need to be treated with caution."

A Scottish Government spokesperson said: "Today's university places' statistics figures confirm that university acceptances from SIMD20 [Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation] areas to UK universities are at a record high, and the poverty-related attainment gap in SQA Results is narrower than in 2019 – all achieved by Scotland's young people in one of the toughest academic years we've ever known."

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## Eleven deaths and 1,032 new cases

Scotland recorded 1,032 new coronavirus cases and 11 deaths in the previous 24 hours, according to the latest figures yesterday.

The figures came the day after Scotland moved beyond Level 0, ending most coronavirus restrictions.

It means the death toll under the daily measure – of people who first tested positive for the virus within the previous 28 days – is now 8,003.

The daily test positivity rate is 7.8 per cent, up from 6.7 per cent the previous day.

A total of 352 people were in hospital on Monday with recently confirmed Covid-19, down four in 24 hours, with 40 patients in intensive care, down two.

So far, 4,029,479 people have received the first dose of a Covid-19 vaccination and 3,357,803 have received their second dose.



↑ The number of poorer children going to university is dropping

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↑ Scottish Education Secretary Shirley-Anne Somerville, third

right, meets staff and students during a visit to Lochgelly High School in Lochgelly, Fife

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## Scotland Pass rate dips but pupils achieve record A grades

**Libby Brooks**  
*Scotland correspondent*

Scottish pupils have achieved record A grades alongside a slight fall in the overall pass rate, but the attainment gap has widened despite a new grading process this year intended to address inequalities.

Opposition politicians described the SNP government's record on education as "shambolic" and called for the head of the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) to stand aside as data revealed pupils from the most deprived areas were more than twice as likely to have their grades fall at Higher and Advanced Higher than young people from the most affluent backgrounds.

As 137,000 Scottish pupils received formal confirmation of their results yesterday, a national picture emerged of grade A attainment rates of about one in every two entries at all levels: 46.7% for National 5, 47.6% for Higher and 51.0% for Advanced Higher, all up on the previous five years.

The proportion of pupils achieving A to C grades in their Highers fell from 89.3% in 2020 to 87.3% in 2021, although the total remains well above the 75% pass rate from 2019, and the results show the largest number of Higher passes since at least 1999.

A total of 90.2% of Advanced Higher candidates achieved a pass, down from 93.1%, while National 5 scores dropped from 89% to 85.8%.

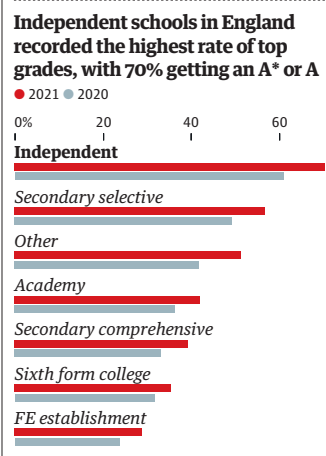
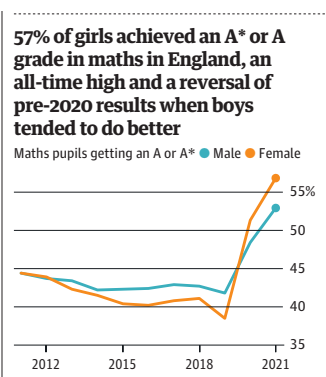
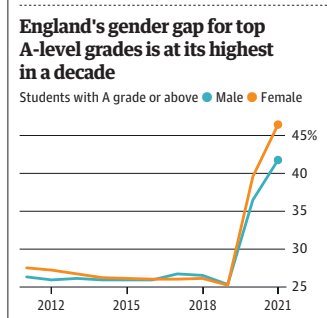
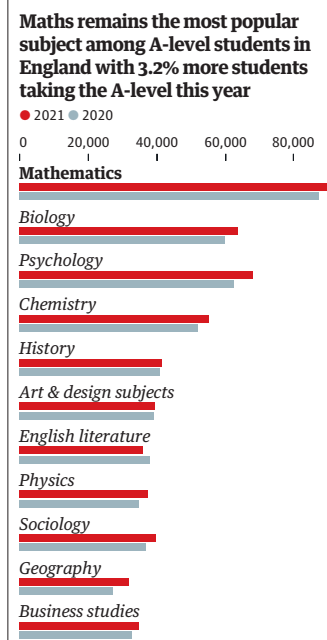
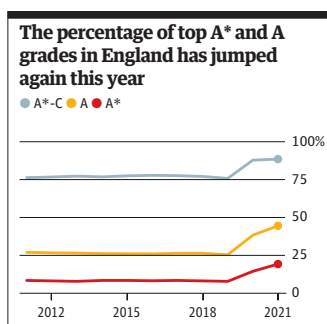
With exams cancelled for the second year because of the pandemic, results were based on an alternative model of school assessments and teacher judgment, with the SQA sampling work from different schools for "quality assurance".

This process drew heavy criticism over so-called "ghost exams" - where pupils faced high-stakes testing up to three times a day with none of the usual support - amid concerns from parents that Covid disruption made it impossible to ensure consistency of learning, in particular for pupils from less advantaged backgrounds.

SQA officials accepted that the overall attainment gap had widened slightly since last year, but pointed out it was narrower than in 2019. The difference in attainment between those from the most deprived and most affluent backgrounds at Higher level increased by 1.9% for an A grade and 1.2% for A to C grades.

The overall Higher pass rate for the wealthiest pupils was down by 1.1%; the drop among the most disadvantaged was 2.5%.

Fiona Robertson, the chief executive of the SQA, said it had worked hard to "ensure equality is at the heart of our approach". She acknowledged the "slight widening" in the attainment gap but said this should be seen in the context of previous years when the gap had narrowed.



Source for charts 1-4: Joint Council for Qualifications. Base: English A-level students. Chart 5: Ofqual, England only. Excludes school types with <50 centres

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# Top grades rise but pass rate drops

- » Increase in number of Scottish pupils getting A grades after nation adopts teacher-led grading model following cancellation of exams due to pandemic
- » On average, number of students given an A this year is 16.7 per cent higher than in 2018-19 but SQA chief remains 'confident' teachers applied national standard
- » Overall pass rate drops compared to last year but still higher than 2019 results as pupils are praised for achieving 'strong' results under 'extraordinary circumstances'
- » Attainment gap widens between most and least deprived pupils but is still lower than pre-pandemic levels
- » Results show those in the fifth most deprived areas achieved A to C grades at a lower rate than those in the fifth least

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# Twice as many As but deprivation gap widens

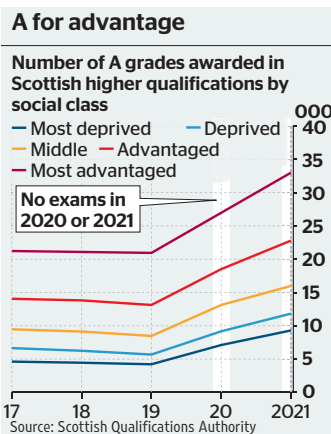
Mark McLaughlin

Deprived pupils in Scotland have achieved twice as many As under the teacher-led grading model compared with results before the pandemic.

More than 21,000 A grades were awarded to deprived pupils by teachers using their “professional judgment” after exams were scrapped for the second year in row, compared with fewer than 10,000 in 2019.

Shirley-Anne Somerville, the education secretary, said the grades were “very fair and credible” and claimed the increase in stellar qualifications in deprived areas was “because of the money that the Scottish government has put in” to close the attainment gap.

Opposition parties pointed out that the attainment gap had actually wid-



ened after affluent pupils were given an even greater boost.

The gap between the most deprived and least deprived pupils getting an A grade has widened from 20.3 per cent in 2020 to 22.1 per cent in 2021.

Somerville told *Newsdrive* on BBC Radio Scotland: “In a historical context we are making very good progress and that is because of the money that the Scottish government has put in and will continue to do with another £1 billion expenditure coming in.”

Oliver Mundell, the Scottish Conservative education spokesman, said: “The harsh reality is that pupils struggling the most — young people from poorer backgrounds who are just trying to pass their exams, never mind get an A grade — have been hit the hardest. How is that fair?”

“The SNP should apologise for creating this shambolic, deeply unjust system.”

Ross Greer, education spokesman for the Scottish Greens, who are in negotiations to form a coalition government with the SNP, said the lingering attainment gap “shames Scotland”.

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### Analysis

This year's unprecedented grade inflation will be a wake-up call for ministers and education reformers pondering the future of Scottish qualifications (Mark McLaughlin writes).

Unions and academics say teachers know best and their judgment should not be undermined by examiners counting the number of pupils that can regurgitate facts under exam conditions.

However, a system that awards the gold-standard A grade to nearly half of pupils is practically meaningless for universities and

employers sifting through CVs seeking the strongest candidates. This was evidenced by Edinburgh University's admission that it only accepted "outstanding" candidates this year leaving many other "well qualified applicants with great potential" out in the cold.

Leading business bodies have pledged to respect this year's grades. It is debatable whether this aspiration will filter down to time-pressed employers faced with a stack of CVs. With a pile of straight-A pupils from 2021 and a selection of straight-A pupils from 2019, employers may take the path of least resistance.

Competition for jobs will be fierce when the

economy finally gets back into gear, and many of these 2019 graduates will still be dormant after 18 months on furlough.

Their cause will not be helped by an acceptance from Shirley-Anne Somerville, the education secretary, that exams will return after the pandemic has passed, a tacit admission that the experiment with teacher judgment has not lived up to her standards.

The shift to remote working will put even greater pressure on these young people, as more experienced staff shun the office in favour of the comforts of home.

Once again, it will be the deprived who lose out, those living in bedsits without a home

office or access to a reliable computer and internet connection.

Somerville is walking an even narrower tightrope than John Swinney, her predecessor, who barely held on to his job when the Greens threatened to topple him after deprived pupils were marked down by an algorithm last year.

The Greens are presently in negotiation with the SNP to form a coalition government. The Greens want exams scrapped permanently. Somerville said no.

Nicola Sturgeon said education would be the defining priority of her premiership. This priority may be put to the test in the months and years ahead.