



# Higher History Review 2024

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## Executive summary

This report summarises the findings of SQA's review of concerns expressed about the standard applied in the marking in this year's Higher History examinations.

These concerns were raised initially on social media and in print media and subsequently directly with SQA.

The review was carried out by SQA's Head of Standards. Subsequently the Director of Policy, Analysis and Standards was asked to provide overview and further scrutiny. Neither were involved in the marking or awarding process for Higher History in 2024.

The review considered evidence from a range of sources. These included published SQA documents that provide teachers with information on the standard set by Higher History courses and assessments; material designed to help teachers understand and apply the standard, including example question papers and marking instructions; the examination question papers set for 2024 and their associated marking instructions and a random sample of the responses provided by candidates for question paper (QP) 2. The investigation also gathered evidence through interviews with staff and appointees involved in supporting SQA's Higher History qualifications, including the development of the qualifications and assessments, management of the marking process and determining the grade boundary in 2024.

The report sets out the context for exploration of the specific concerns raised by explaining SQA's approach to setting standards for National Qualifications (NQ). It also sets out some of the challenges recognised in research and practice of standard setting in subjects such as History that involve subjective judgements.

While the focus of the concerns raised was on the standard of marking applied, the report outlines how in practice this is one stage in a process of standard setting. It explains how SQA sets standards for NQs, provides information and support to help teachers understand and apply them, and ensures that these standards are applied accurately and consistently in the setting and marking of assessments and in the decisions made on grade boundaries each year.

Against this background, the report reviews the approach to setting and marking this year's Higher History examinations. In relation to the concerns expressed, it concludes that:

1. All stages of SQA's normal processes were followed rigorously and robustly and in accordance with SQA's established processes and procedures. The Higher History exam team acted with integrity throughout this process.
2. The standard set in the Higher History assessments, including QP 2, Scottish history, was not higher than that set in previous years that this examination has run.
3. All of the questions asked across both question papers were valid based on the course specification.

4. The 2024 marking instructions were developed in parallel with the question papers as is normal practice. They were intentionally more detailed than in 2023 to help ensure consistency of marking across all questions in the paper. This approach is supported by academic research and is normal practice for SQA and other awarding bodies for the marking of extended responses, such as essays.
5. Teachers were not aware of the more detailed marking instructions for 2024 as they were developed in parallel with the question papers and only finalised following the exam as is normal practice. The 2024 marking instructions have been shared with teachers together with this year's question papers in line with the normal timing of their annual release. Centres were informed through SQA News on 5 September 2024.
6. Candidates were not expected to be more specific when answering in order to gain marks than in previous years. There is evidence that following the markers' meeting, some markers were not clear about the standard to be applied in marking QP 2. There is no evidence that these concerns were raised strongly enough for the principal assessor (PA) to judge that further clarification of the marking instructions was required following the meeting. Further, the PA was not asked to provide clarification at any stage during the marking process, as a result of the quality assurance of marking undertaken by the exam team.
7. Markers' observations and feedback on any aspect of their experience of marking in 2024 could be raised at the markers' meeting, directly with team leaders during the marking process and/or in the reports submitted by markers on completion of their marking. The PA felt that the markers' meeting had run as expected with an appropriate level of discussion and challenge; team leaders did not note concerns from markers about the standard they were being asked to apply.
8. Feedback from markers, who are all teachers, provided in their reports to SQA was overwhelmingly focused on the poor standard of responses provided by learners in this year's examinations. A greater number of markers provided this feedback on QP 2 than on QP 1. As a consequence, discussion at the awarding meeting considered a wide range of factors related to the demand of the assessment and the performance of learners. It focused on the poor standard of performance demonstrated by learners. It also included a professional, wide-ranging and robust discussion of the standard of the assessment.
9. The marks from both Higher History question papers this year confirmed feedback from markers on the poor standard of performance. The marks across all components, including QP 1 and the assignment (where no concerns have been raised about the standard set), were the lowest since 2019, when QP 2 was introduced. A number of factors may have contributed to the weaker performance of learners this year, specifically in QP 2.
10. Recruitment of markers for Higher History is challenging in any year. This year it was particularly challenging, as the return of the assignment for the first time since 2019 meant that more markers were required. SQA was able to recruit sufficient markers to ensure that all scripts were marked and quality assured in line with its established processes.

11. SQA's processes for the management and quality assurance of marking, detailed in this report, are designed in part to ensure any variations in the standard applied in marking are identified and controlled before final awards are made. These processes were followed fully and rigorously for Higher History this year.

# 1 Introduction

The integrity of national examinations and their marking, and the confidence of teachers, learners and the wider public, is of critical importance to SQA and the wider education system.

Following publication of the outcomes of this year's NQs on 6 August, concerns were raised about the standards applied in the marking of examinations in Higher History. These concerns were raised initially on social media and print media and subsequently directly with SQA. Those concerns raised directly with SQA have come from teachers, parents, carers and from Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) on behalf of their constituents.

The concerns centre on a perception that the standards applied in marking Higher History in 2024 were more demanding than in previous years, in particular for the 'Empire and Migration' section of question paper (QP) 2, Scottish history.

Questions that have been raised in correspondence, on social media and by the print media are:

- ◆ Were the 2024 marking instructions changed? Specifically, why was there so much more detail in the 2024 marking instructions than in 2023?
- ◆ Did candidates have to be much more specific when answering questions in order to get mark(s) than had been the case in previous years? Were marks allocated without candidates having to provide this level of detail in 2023?
- ◆ Did the questions/marketing instructions ask for detail that had not been included in course specifications (for example, it is claimed that one question which asked about Scots' reactions towards immigrants was not specified in the course specification)?
- ◆ Were teachers made aware of the more detailed marking instructions in 2024? Why were the changes not mentioned on the SQA website Higher History pages, on the Understanding Standards website or at Understanding Standards events?
- ◆ Were markers concerns 'dismissed'? Was there a culture which did not tolerate questions or challenge?
- ◆ Was there an increase in markers dropping out/returning papers unmarked in 2024?

In light of these concerns and to provide a definitive response, SQA's chief examiner commissioned SQA's Head of Standards to review the marking of Higher History with a particular focus on QP 2. Subsequently the Director of Policy, Analysis and Standards was asked to provide overview and further scrutiny.

The specific purpose of the review is to examine the evidence available on the standard applied in marking Higher History in 2024. This report sets out the detailed findings of the review and direct responses to the specific questions set out above. It also includes a number of wider reflections based on its findings and conclusions.

## Scope of the review

While the review was initially asked to consider the standard of marking for Higher History in 2024, it was widened to include the entire end-to-end awarding process, from development of the assessments through to appeals. Marking is not a standalone process, but an integral part of the overall awarding process; therefore, reviewing the entire process from start to finish was considered necessary to allow full consideration of the concerns raised, to demonstrate openness and transparency, and for confidence in the rigour and robustness of the review.

Reflecting the focus of the concerns expressed, much of the review centres on the Scottish history question paper and specifically the 'Migration and Empire' section. Where appropriate, reference is also made to the separate British, European and world history question paper. The standards applied to the marking of the assignment that forms the third component of the assessment of Higher History were not considered as part of this review as no concerns were raised about them.

## Methodology

The review was initiated on Wednesday 11 September 2024 and concluded with the publication of this report on 6 November 2024.

The review consisted of a combination of desk research, followed up with a series of interviews with relevant SQA staff and appointees. A list of the key sources of evidence considered is provided below.

As noted above, marking any assessment is only one part of standard setting. Therefore, to address all of the questions highlighted above and set them in context and in the interests of full transparency, the full end-to-end process was considered, from question paper and marking instruction development, through marking and post exam procedures, to grade boundary decision making and appeals. This included examination of how the standard of Higher History was communicated to teachers in 2023–24 through SQA's course reports and Understanding Standards activity. The content of this report reflects the review's consideration of each of these areas.

## Sources of evidence

The following sources of evidence were considered as part of the review:

- ◆ The current SQA Higher History course specification (version 4.0, published in May 2023) available on SQA's website
- ◆ Higher History question papers and marking instructions from 2019–24
- ◆ Higher History course reports for 2022 and 2023
- ◆ Higher History Understanding Standards materials issued in 2023 to exemplify the standard in 2024
- ◆ A random sample of candidate responses from Scottish history question paper 2024 Higher History examination
- ◆ Information and data on a range of aspects of the management of the post-examination procedures for this year's Higher History examinations, including the quality assurance of question papers and marking instructions, management of

appointee recruitment, and the operational logistics of the procedures surrounding marking and its quality assurance in 2024

- ◆ Qualitative and quantitative information that supported the 2024 grade boundary process, including marker reports for 2023 and 2024; this included data on attainment rates in Higher History overall and the assessment components that together make up the final grade from 2015–24
- ◆ Correspondence from markers, sent in response to an email from the Director of Qualifications Development, who had requested feedback from markers directly after the concerns were raised on social media
- ◆ Interviews with a range of SQA staff, including those staff within the Qualifications Development Directorate with specific responsibilities for Higher History (Director, Head of Service and Qualifications Manager) and with senior appointees associated with Higher History, including the principal assessor.

As part of the quality assurance process for this report, an expert in standard setting in the context of national examinations elsewhere in the UK provided independent, external scrutiny and challenge of the review, including the conclusions and wider reflections.

## **Structure of the report**

The report is set out so that it follows the flow of the process of course and assessment development from the setting and understanding of the assessment standard through to the post exam quality assurance procedures, with the latter set out in chronological order.

## **2 Setting standards for National Qualifications**

Clarity about the standard set in any qualification system is critical to confidence in its outcomes. It is particularly critical to teachers who are preparing learners for assessment and to learners themselves, who need to know they are being assessed fairly and robustly.

For SQA's NQs, while the process of marking learners' scripts is the ultimate expression of the standard, that standard is set, explained and exemplified in a number of different ways.

The core standard is defined in course specifications, specimen question papers and annual question papers with their associated marking instructions, all taken together. Each of these is published on SQA's website.

The standard is exemplified through SQA's Understanding Standards website and at associated events and activities. Further guidance is provided through our annual course reports that provide feedback on learner performance in each year's assessments to help inform teaching and learning for future years.

It is critical to the integrity of and confidence in the outcomes of each year's NQs that the standard set and applied through the annual assessments and the marking of them is consistent with the standard set in the course specification, specimen question paper



and associated marking instructions, and exemplified through SQA's Understanding Standards materials. Any change to this standard must be clearly articulated and communicated to teachers to allow them to prepare learners appropriately for their assessment.

Setting and maintaining the standard and ensuring a shared understanding of this standard amongst all teachers for any assessment is a complex task and can only be fully achieved over a period of years. Doing so for subjects where there is a high degree of subjectivity is recognised as being particularly challenging. Within any group of teachers of a particular subject, in Scotland or elsewhere, there will be a range of views about what the standard should be. In Scotland, SQA's role is to set and maintain the standard for all of its assessments drawing on this range of views and on other sources of information, such as standards set for comparable qualifications in other jurisdictions.

## **The challenge of setting standards for disciplines with subjective content**

Within the assessment community, both practitioner and academic, it is recognised that setting standards for and marking humanities subjects, such as history, English, or philosophy, can be challenging due to the subjective nature of these disciplines. The nature of these challenges and how they can be addressed is the subject of academic research and literature.

This literature highlights that unlike subjects with more objective criteria, such as mathematics or science, the assessment of humanities subjects often requires markers to make judgements based on their own interpretation and understanding. The range of topics that can be covered in humanities subjects presents a further challenge as markers must be able to understand and evaluate the full range of topics accurately. This has been recognised for many years; ten years ago, in 2014, research undertaken by England's qualifications regulator indicated that teachers and markers felt that multi-topic GCSE and A-level subjects like psychology, history, and sociology were particularly susceptible to marking errors because markers might not be as familiar with certain topics or time periods, even among highly experienced and knowledgeable markers (1).

As explained later in this report, SQA's Higher History is assessed through questions that require an essay or extended response on the part of candidates (2,3). This type of written question has comparatively few restrictions on the content and form of the response. Continuous prose is normally expected, but there may be limits imposed on the length and/or the time allocated. The content can be as open-ended as the assessor wishes (2).

The marking of essay and other extended response questions is more subjective than the marking of other more objective question types such as multiple-choice questions. When marking extended response questions, markers must make subjective decisions about a student's performance, guided by marking instructions (4). This can introduce more variability as the interpretation of texts, arguments, and evidence can vary widely among markers (1).

To reduce this variability, research highlights, for extended response questions and essays where there may be a wide range of acceptable solutions, the importance of considering carefully what is accepted as evidence and how this will be marked. (4).

Any marking scheme cannot cover all possible answers, so markers need to be guided on how to distinguish between different levels of student performance. Research indicates that making changes to the structure, content, and wording of mark schemes can significantly improve marking reliability (5).

Key aspects of these research findings inform and are reflected in SQA's approach to the assessment of subjects where these issues are likely to occur. For example, careful consideration is given to the content of marking instructions each year and to the level of detail they contain, including in light of responses provided by candidates to the exam questions; markers are given training in the application of the marking instructions, which includes practice at marking learners' exam scripts; there is a marker check process built into the marking process to identify markers who are not applying the marking instructions to an acceptable standard; and there is a final check of selected learner exam scripts before certification. Following the exam, if a learner is unhappy with their award, there is the opportunity to request a marking review (known as an appeal) as the final check on the marking standard. Each of these stages is explained further in Section 9.

Furthermore, SQA's Higher History marking instructions are intentionally detailed to improve the reliability of the marking.

### **3 Approach to the assessment of Higher History (2015 to present)**

SQA's course specification states that the Higher History course:

*..... consists of three areas of study: British, European and world, and Scottish history. There is considerable flexibility in the contexts and themes which can be studied to allow for personalisation and choice.*

Options within the course cover topics from Medieval, Early Modern and Late Modern periods and include elements from political, social, economic and cultural history. The course specification provides the following broad overview of the subject skills, knowledge and understanding developed in the course:

- ◆ developing and applying skills, knowledge and understanding across contexts from British, European and world, and Scottish history
- ◆ evaluating the origin, purpose, content and context of historical sources
- ◆ evaluating the impact of historical developments and synthesising information in a well-structured manner
- ◆ evaluating the factors contributing towards historical developments, and drawing well-reasoned conclusions supported by evidence
- ◆ researching and analysing historical information
- ◆ developing a detailed and accurate knowledge and understanding of complex historical issues in British, European and world, and Scottish contexts

From 2015–18, Higher History consisted of three internally assessed units and two externally assessed components:

- ◆ a combined question paper with source evaluation, source contextualisation and source comparison questions; and
- ◆ coursework in the form of an assignment.

Following the decision to remove units from National Courses at National 5 to Advanced Higher in 2017, some course assessments were enhanced to ensure all aspects of the skills, knowledge and understanding continued to be assessed.

For Higher History, the Scottish history element was removed from the original combined question paper and a separate question paper on Scottish history was introduced. Since this time, full assessment for the course has consisted of three externally marked assessments:

- ◆ **Question paper 1, consisting of essay-type questions on British, European and world history (44 marks):**

This QP comprises two sections with learners attempting one question on British history (from a choice of five different topics) and one essay question from the section on European and world history (from a choice of nine different topics).

- ◆ **Question paper 2, consisting of source-based questions and a knowledge question on Scottish history (36 marks):**

Learners choose to answer one of five options. Each option is assessed by four questions known as the ‘Evaluate the usefulness’ question, the ‘Interpret’ question, the ‘How fully’ question?’ and the ‘Explain’ question.

- ◆ **Coursework in the form of an assignment (30 marks):**

The assignment consists of a ‘research’ stage and a ‘production of evidence’ stage, both of which are undertaken in school or college under the supervision and control of teachers or lecturers. The final product is sent to SQA for marking. The skills developed in the assignment are similar to those used in QP 1, so undertaking the assignment is beneficial to learners when they sit QP 1.

The final grade awarded to a candidate is based on addition of the marks gained from each of the three components.

While undertaking this review, several interviewees commented on the perceived predictability to Higher History question papers, as the format of both papers is the same year on year, though the topics change. For example, in the Migration and Empire section of the Scottish history question paper, teachers and lecturers know that the key topics will always be assessed and so they can prepare learners to recall knowledge. Depending on which question is asked, in any year’s exam, it may be possible to provide the same recall knowledge in response to more than one question and to gain marks for both.

The first examination for certification of Higher History in this revised format, including the separate Scottish history question paper, was in 2019. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, external national exams were cancelled in 2020 and 2021.

As part of a package of support to learners to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, SQA made modifications to the assessment of most National Courses.

Modifications for Higher History saw the removal of the coursework assignment component and an optional question introduced in the British, European and world history question paper. This change was intended to provide more time for teaching and learning, as instead of the teaching and learning of a minimum of four topics out of six, this was reduced to a minimum of three topics. No modifications were made to the Scottish history question paper. These modifications remained in place until the end of academic year 2022–23.

For all SQA NQ courses, full course assessment returned in academic year 2023–24 as intended. For Higher History, the optional question in the British, European and world history question paper was removed, and the coursework assignment reintroduced. 2024 was, therefore, the first time since 2019 that candidates had completed all three assessments. It was expected that reintroduction of the coursework assignment would benefit learners, especially in their preparation for the British, European and world history question paper, as the skills applied are similar.

This report will return to the relatively recent introduction of the separate Scottish history question paper, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on this introduction, the consequences of this for setting and understanding of the standard it represents, and the different approaches to awarding in 2022 and 2023. This ongoing change has meant there has been no stability for Higher History since 2018, as reflected in the attainment rates over this time period.

## **4 Communication of the standard to teachers and lecturers**

Communication of the standard for SQA's NQs to teachers and lecturers includes publication of the annual course report and a range of Understanding Standards resources and events, including recorded webinars and in-person events. This section reviews key points of this activity in 2023.

### **Higher History course report 2023**

Course reports are produced annually for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses following the awarding process. The course reports are published on the NQ subject specific pages of SQA's main website and on SQA's Understanding Standards website.

SQA's website explains that course reports:

*... provide teachers and lecturers with a summary of how learners have performed in their exams and coursework for each subject at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher level over the past year.*

*Course reports – written by principal assessors and principal verifiers – are published with the intention of giving an insight of how learners performed*

*detailing which areas of the course assessment where learners performed well, and which areas proved to be more demanding.*

*The reports also contain advice for teachers, lecturers, and training practitioners on preparing learners for the coming year's assessments, as well as statistical data relating to grade boundaries.*

Each course report advises that the report should be read in conjunction with published assessment documents and marking instructions, which are also available on the subject specific pages of SQA's website.

The 2023 Higher History course report highlights areas where learners performed well and areas that learners found demanding in both the British, European and world history question paper and the Scottish history question paper.

Section 3 of the course report provides clear guidance on preparing candidates for future assessment, with emphasis on the key areas which candidates found demanding previously highlighted in the report.

## **Understanding Standards**

SQA's Understanding Standards website contains a wide range of subject specific materials for teachers, lecturers and training practitioners delivering SQA qualifications, along with information on the annual programme of webinars. Understanding Standards materials explain the national standards required in SQA assessments with examples to help teachers and lecturers prepare their learners for assessment.

The focus of Understanding Standards for Higher History in 2023 was the reintroduction of the assignment. However, other Understanding Standards materials available for Higher History in 2023 included examples of candidate assessment evidence from 2022, with written commentaries from the PA at that time together with question papers, marking instructions and course reports for 2023, 2022 and 2019.

Also available on the Understanding Standards website to support Higher History is a recorded webinar from 2021 relating to QP 2. It highlights a range of areas to support practitioners in preparing candidates, including the requirement for full quotes, that detailed explanation is expected at the Higher level, and that generic statements are not good answers for the evaluation question. The PA emphasises the requirement for candidates to demonstrate in their explanations that they fully understand the source points and their intended meaning.

## **Updated course specification and specimen question paper**

In 2023, following feedback from teachers and lecturers gathered through a national survey, the course specification for Higher History was updated to clarify the description of content for each of the key issues in the options of the Scottish history section and in particular to ensure consistency and parity across the five areas of study. This updated version was published in May 2023 for implementation in session 2023–24.

The QM confirmed to this review that there was no change to content and therefore no impact on teaching and learning.

A specimen question paper and marking instructions were published in September 2023 to reflect the updated course specification and to exemplify the standard. This provided an additional resource to help teachers and learners prepare for the 2024 examination.

This was communicated to centres in SQA News on 7 September 2023. The communication explained that the description of content informed the question stems for the 'evaluate the usefulness' question and the 'interpret' question in the Scottish history question paper.

## 5 The role of SQA's exam teams

The assessment process for each of SQA's NQ courses is overseen by a team of appointees, led by a PA. The PA is an experienced teacher or lecturer who has normally successfully completed a number of other roles within the exam team before taking on the role of PA.

SQA's website describes the role of the PA as follows:

*....A Principal Assessor is responsible for ensuring all duties and tasks associated with externally set/assessed Course assessments are undertaken within the conditions, timeframes and arrangements set by SQA.*

*Their primary role is to lead, support and work (as appropriate to subject and level) with teams of SQA appointees, including interaction with different groups to ensure consistent application of national standards and to ensure the subject specific integrity of their teams' decision-making in relation to the externally set/assessed Course assessment arrangements.*

The PA is contracted to undertake specific duties and this contract is underpinned by terms and conditions which include a set of behaviours based on SQA values. In addition, there are a set of key performance measures that the PA must meet. The PA does not work in isolation and there are inbuilt safeguards in place through feedback, advice and guidance from a variety of different people that the PA interacts with when carrying out their duties. These include the question paper checkers, reviewers and validator when the question papers are being developed, the exam team they work closely with during marking and undertaking quality assurance procedures, and through close partnership working with SQA staff, including qualifications and operational staff. The PA makes decisions informed by feedback and advice from both their exam teams and the QM.

The PA is supported by a number of other roles, all normally performed by practising teachers or lecturers. These roles can include depute PA, senior team leaders and team leaders. The PA works very closely with the QM, who has responsibility for overseeing and managing the work of the PA and their team.

For Higher History in 2024, a new PA from within the existing team had taken over from the previous PA in late autumn 2023 after the 2024 question papers and marking instructions had been developed and reviewed. The PA is a practising senior teacher; although new to the PA role, they have extensive examining experience, having been a team leader from 2015, a senior team leader, and the depute PA in 2023. In 2024, the PA was supported by four senior team leaders, one of whom has experience of being a PA; across both question papers, there were 17 team leaders, who are practising and experienced teachers.

The QM for Higher History is highly experienced both in this role and their former role as a history teacher. QMs are responsible for the development, review and maintenance of all qualifications and associated assessments within their given portfolio.

Through the review, some members of the Higher History senior exam team spoke positively of team culture and supportive relationships within the team.

## **Development of question papers and associated marking instructions for National Qualifications**

For each of SQA's NQ courses, the PA and their team develop question papers and associated marking instructions. This development activity takes place within a robust quality assurance process to ensure all assessments are valid, reliable, fair and accessible. Question papers and their associated marking instructions are developed together every year as they are both critical in setting the standard against which candidates will be judged.

The development and quality assurance process includes a number of specific appointee roles, each with responsibility, individually or together, for a specific aspect of the process. All of these roles are normally performed by practising teachers.

The PA oversees the processes to ensure the quality of the assessments and associated marking instructions and the integrity of the marking process. The QM and their Head of Service have final responsibility.

The other roles within the process of question paper development include:

- ◆ Item writer — responsible for writing items or questions for specific aspects of the assessment. Item writers work as a collaborative team.
- ◆ Item checker — responsible for checking the quality of the items prepared by the item writers.
- ◆ Assessment reviewer (AR) — responsible for reviewing the external assessment and supporting marking instructions under the direction of the PA.
- ◆ Assessment validator (AV) — responsible for carrying out a final independent subject-specialist check to ensure the course assessment is of the correct standard and fit for purpose.

The normal process for the development and quality assurance of question papers and their associated marking instructions involves:

- ◆ item (question) writing
- ◆ item checking
- ◆ question paper creation
- ◆ question paper review
- ◆ question paper validation
- ◆ final check

Item writers are provided with an item specification, which lays out how the item (that is, question), as the key building block of the question paper, and its marking instructions are to be developed. The item specification reflects the course specification. Throughout the process, the key principles of validity, reliability, fairness, accessibility, equality and inclusion are applied. Item writers follow these key principles when developing their items and marking instructions.

Item checkers carry out the first of several quality assurance steps, ensuring validity and reliability.

Following the item checking process, the PA selects quality assured items and compiles them into a cohesive question paper with the associated marking instructions. At this stage, the PA, along with the QM, considers any relevant information from the previous year's awarding processes. For example, if there were issues identified or feedback from the previous year on question paper items, options, or marking instructions, they are taken into account in setting the new assessment.

Further quality assurance is carried out by assessment reviewers, who review the draft question paper and supporting marking instructions to ensure subject specific integrity and consistent application of the national standards. An assessment review meeting is attended by the assessment reviewers, PA and relevant SQA Qualifications Development staff for content approval and sampling of final assessment and marking instructions.

A final independent check of the assessment is carried out by the AV to ensure the assessment is of the correct standard and fit for purpose.

The marking instructions are developed uniquely each year at the same time as the question paper and go through the same quality assurance checks in parallel. Everyone involved in the checking and review process for the question paper contributes to the marking instructions. While they are initially developed by the item writer, they are further strengthened and refined by checkers and reviewers through the iterative process of item checking and question paper review. The key purpose of this activity is to ensure that the question paper and marking instructions remain tightly aligned.



## 6 Development of Higher History question papers and marking instructions 2024

The Higher History question papers and associated marking instructions were developed following SQA's normal processes outlined above to meet the timescales required for printing of question papers for distribution to centres in spring 2024.

The QM has confirmed that all members of the exam team who were involved in the development of the 2024 question papers and marking instructions agreed that they were developed in line with the updated course specification referred to above. There were no substantive issues from 2023 to be addressed.

During and after the review of the question papers and marking instructions in autumn 2023, the draft marking instructions contained detailed content and exemplification. Following the review, the QM confirmed some further work was carried out on the marking instructions, including for Q15 (*Explain the reasons why Scots had an impact on the empire*), with similar key points being grouped together and other relevant key points added (keeping to 12 key points, which is broadly consistent with other options and therefore ensures parity across the options). More examples were also included as possible explanations for each key point. This is an expansive topic with the possibility of a wide range of responses from learners, so this level of exemplification is needed to support markers. This reflects the application of key aspects of the research in marking disciplines with subjective content referred to in Section 2 above. The PA was involved in reviewing the refinements to the marking instructions.

There is evidence that the 2024 question papers were judged to be on standard by the validator, and that feedback was considered and acted upon by the PA and QM where appropriate.

The final question papers and draft detailed marking instructions were signed off in January 2024 by the QM in line with SQA's normal process. There is no evidence that any concerns were raised at this stage.

## 7 Feedback on the Higher History question papers following the examinations

Every year SQA receives and welcomes feedback on its question papers from teachers, learners and other stakeholders. We routinely monitor social media for reaction following exams and regularly receive feedback directly. Following the Higher History examinations on 21 May, SQA received feedback directly from two learners, five individual teachers, and two local authority teacher groups about the standard of the Higher History exam. On the Scottish history question paper:

- ◆ Two comments noted that the paper was fair.
- ◆ Three suggested improvements to the wording of Q13, Q14 and Q15.
- ◆ Three commented on Q14 (*How much do Sources B and C reveal about differing interpretations of the reactions of Scots to Irish immigrants*), noting that they had not taught the content or thought it should not have been asked, as the reaction of

Scots is not included in the updated course specification in the 'Description of content', having been specifically referred to in the previous course specification.

The specimen question paper and associated marking instructions were published in September 2023 to exemplify the updated course specification. There was no change to course content and key issue 2 in Migration and Empire remained as 'The experience of immigrants in Scotland'. The marking instructions include examples of Scots' reactions to immigrants, which is part of the experience of immigrants, illustrating that this topic remains part of the course and should be taught. Therefore, its inclusion in the exam is valid.

Furthermore, the QM confirmed there had been some discussion about Q14 at the review meeting in autumn 2023 when the question paper was being developed. This discussion confirmed agreement from the review team and PA that its inclusion was appropriate, given the context of the sources and that it asked about the biggest immigrant group, making it accessible to learners.

In addition to the feedback from learners and teachers, SQA's markers submit a report at the end of their marking and can include comment on the question papers in their marker reports, though not all choose to do so.

A more thorough review of marker feedback is provided in Section 10, but their comments about the fairness of the question papers are included here for context.

The markers' comments included below are representative of their feedback on the fairness of the question papers. For the British, European and World question paper, the majority of markers who commented thought it was fair, for example:

*The assessment was fair – well prepared candidates performed well. No issues with wording of questions, candidates generally understood what they were being asked.*

*It was an excellent paper with questions that gave candidates the opportunity to shine. Not enough took that opportunity.*

*I thought the exam was fair and standards applied are in line with previous years.*

For the Scottish history paper, 22 markers specifically commented they thought the paper was fair, for example:

*I feel that the questions this year are fair and for the sections which I marked, I feel there is an equity across these.*

*The assessment paper was fair, accessible and provided challenge that a good Higher paper requires.*

*It was a fair assessment where pupils could access the questions if they had studied.*

## 8 Comparison of question papers and marking instructions (2019–24)

### General background

As noted in Section 2 of this report, the marking of extended responses such as essays for history and of many other subjects can be subjective. There is published research that detailed marking instructions can improve the reliability of marking for such courses (see for example '*A review of literature on marking reliability research*' by Tisi, J et al, June 2013).

Detailed examples are not included in the course specification as this could be seen as introducing prescription and risk reducing both the broad nature of the course and the opportunity for teachers and lecturers to bring relevance, personalisation and choice in using local historical examples. Through the review, several interviewees commented that the inclusion of further exemplification in marking instructions has often been at the request of the history teaching profession to assist them in broadening their teaching.

As explained in Section 4 above, question papers and their associated marking instructions are developed in parallel. Questions are constructed so that there can be differentiation between learners based on the responses they provide. As a general principle, a learner attaining the standard of an A grade does so through gaining marks by providing detailed, well-thought-out and well-constructed responses to most questions; whereas a learner attaining a C grade will have answered fewer questions and provided responses which are less detailed, and so gain fewer marks as a result.

Also as a general principle, marking instructions provide detail and exemplify the content standard of response expected to each question in an assessment. Marking instructions provide possible model answers and it is for markers — following training in the markers' meeting — to use their professional judgement to decide if a learner's response has met the minimum requirements needed to demonstrate attainment and, if so, how many marks they should be awarded. It is for this reason that marking instructions include a wide variety of examples to help markers make that judgement consistently and reliably. Marking instructions cannot cover every possible answer provided by candidates.

Comparison of the Higher History marking instructions from 2019–24 shows the general marking principles, layout, the number of marks available for each question type, and instruction on how to award marks have not changed over this time, so there is no evidence of a change in the general marking approach.

Every year since its introduction in 2019, the marking instructions for QP 2, Scottish history, have evolved to include more exemplification of the standard. The primary reason for providing more points of detail and exemplification — which applies to both QP 1 and QP 2 — is to ensure consistency between markers who have to mark all options when they may not have taught the option themselves.

This is a normal part of the process following the introduction of a new separate assessment component: the core statements in the course specification defining the standard are supplemented over time by an increasing number of examples in the marking instructions drawn from experience of learner responses. Through this process, the standard becomes fully understood and embedded over a period of time. In this context, it is important to highlight that, as noted earlier in this report, 2024 represented only the fourth time that the separate Scottish history question paper had been set and assessed, and only the third consecutive year following the adoption of alternative approaches to assessment and awarding in 2020 and 2021. It is therefore reasonable to expect that understanding amongst teachers of the standard set in the assessment is continuing to develop.

The course specification for Higher History makes it clear that the Scottish history question paper requires learners to demonstrate ‘a detailed and accurate knowledge and understanding of complex historical issues in Scottish contexts’. As noted earlier, the Higher History course reports, published annually on the SQA subject webpages, and Understanding Standards materials have consistently advised that generic responses will not be awarded marks in this question paper.

Further advice to teachers and lecturers is available on SQA’s Higher History subject webpage ‘Guidance on creating assessment for Higher History’ published in 2022, which is to help teachers produce assessments such as prelims. It states that marking instructions must contain ‘relevant and specific Scottish historical knowledge’.

There is some advice in the Understanding Standards webinar recorded in 2021 on the Scottish history paper (referred to previously in Section 4) — when there had only been one exam in 2019 — the previous PA, who delivered the webinar, advised that for the learner response provided as an example for the ‘Explain’ question (on the impact of immigrants on Scotland), the learner could have provided a specific named example, but it was not necessary for the awarding of the mark.

## **The standard of Scottish history question paper**

This part of the review focuses on the marking of the Scottish history question paper and specifically on the ‘Migration and Empire’ option. Concerns have been expressed about a change in the standard of the marking compared to previous years in that the responses required more specific detail in order to be given a mark, for example, specific names of Scots in the ‘Explain’ question. These concerns are outlined in Section 1: Introduction.

Analysis of the question papers and marking instructions since the introduction of the separate Scottish history question paper in 2019 shows that in every year before 2024, the context of the ‘Explain’ question has been on the impact on Scotland or the experiences of people in Scotland. The ‘Explain’ questions in 2022 and 2023, and the specimen question paper in 2023, are similar in that they are on the experience of immigrants in Scotland. The 2024 question was different in context, focusing on the impact of Scots on the empire.

Year	'Explain' question
2019	<i>'Explain reasons why migration and empire had an impact on Scotland'</i>
2021	There was no external exam but this was published as an assessment resource:  <i>'Explain the reasons for the migration of Scots'</i>
2022	<i>'Explain the reasons why the experience of immigrants in Scotland was varied'</i>
2023	<i>'Explain the reasons why immigrants in Scotland had varied experiences'</i>
2023	This was the specimen question paper to reflect updates to the course specification (published autumn 2023):  <i>'Explain the reasons for immigrant groups having varied experiences'</i>
2024	<i>'Explain the reasons why the Scots had an impact on the empire'</i>

This was the first time the impact of Scots on the empire topic had been assessed as the 'Explain' question in the separate Scottish history question paper.

As noted above, this is a valid question as it is contained within the course specification. It is one of the four key issues in the Migration and Empire (1830–1939) option — 'The impact of Scots on the empire' — with the description of content specifically naming Canada, Australia, New Zealand and India.

It is not the first time that the impact of Scots on the empire has been assessed in the separate Scottish history question paper. Analysis of the 2019–24 question papers and marking instructions shows that this knowledge has been required to answer a variety of questions over the years with the marking instructions providing numerous specific examples of Scots' impact on the empire. It is notable that the same specific examples have been provided on many occasions. The examples shown in Appendix 1 are a small selection. Many of these examples were included in the 2024 marking instructions for the 'Explain' question.

This review has identified examples of responses that were awarded high marks without naming specific individuals (and thus shows that the suggestion that this could not be achieved is incorrect). There are many examples of the impact of Scots on the empire which provide specific detail and make clear that marks can be awarded without reference to specific named individuals.

For example, of the 36 bullet points listed in the marking instructions for 2023 — which provide examples of the responses which might be expected for the 'Explain' question in 2024 — there are at least 20 which provide specific knowledge without the need for naming a specific individual. Similarly, the 2024 marking instructions include examples

of specific knowledge for which marks can be awarded without the requirement to name individuals.

Therefore, while the 'Explain' question in 2024 was the first time the impact of Scots on the empire had been assessed in this context, the standard for this topic has been exemplified extensively since 2019.

It is challenging to compare the standard of response required for the 'Explain' questions in previous years with those required this year because a different topic and aspect of Migration and Empire has been assessed in the past, which may have resulted in perceived predictability in the question paper. Previously the topic has been on the experience of immigrant groups in Scotland where there is less emphasis on individuals within those groups. Also, in any subject, learners may find some topics to be more accessible than others, especially when they can relate it to their own experiences and local historical knowledge.

As mentioned in Section 3, depending on which question is asked, in any year's exam, it may be possible to provide the same recall knowledge in response to more than one question and to gain marks for both. Due to the questions asked this year, there was less opportunity to gain marks for the same recalled knowledge.

In Higher History, there has been a notable increase in the proportion of candidates opting to take the Migration and Empire option in QP 2 and a corresponding decrease in the proportion opting for the alternative Wars of Independence and Impact of the Great War sections. This trend is illustrated in Section 11. Between 2023 and 2024 alone, the proportion opting for the Migration and Empire section increased from 62% to 72%. The reasons for the increase in numbers opting for the Migration and Empire option are not clear.

Some of the feedback provided to SQA about the marking of this question mentioned perceived inconsistency in marking instructions, with some responses requiring a specific named individual and some not.

To investigate this concern, as part of this review, the Head of Standards, who also has extensive experience as a PA and QM for SQA, reviewed a small random sample of around 100 learner responses from 2024 for the 'Explain' question for the Migration and Empire option. This review indicated that some responses were very specific, detailed and included named individuals and were awarded a mark; other responses contained specific knowledge without a named individual and were awarded a mark; and some responses were vague and contained poor historical knowledge where no mark was awarded. There were examples where learners provided a response with either a named individual or a detailed response but did not explain the impact — the purpose of the question — so were not awarded the mark. The senior exam team confirmed this small sample of learner exam scripts was representative of what that they had observed in their own marking and when undertaking other examining duties.

A further review of a different small, randomly selected sample of learner scripts showed that marks had been awarded when the response did not have an individual named, as specified in the marking instructions, but had sufficient detail to be awarded a mark.

Based on the analysis set out above and given the similar detail and examples in the 2024 marking instructions compared to previous years for this topic, the marking standard set in the Higher History assessments, including the Scottish history question paper, was not higher than that set in previous years that this examination has run.

Feedback from some teachers indicated a lack of clarity in relation to one question (the reaction of Scots to immigrants), resulting from changes to the course specification made by SQA in 2023. However, all of the questions asked across both question papers were valid based on the course specification.

The 2024 marking instructions were developed in parallel with the question papers as is normal practice. They were intentionally more detailed than in 2023 to help ensure parity across all options and consistency of marking across all questions in the paper. This is normal practice for SQA and other awarding bodies for the marking of subjects that require markers to make subjective judgements.

Teachers were not made aware of the more detailed marking instructions for 2024 as they were developed in parallel with the question papers and only finalised following the exam as is normal practice. The 2024 marking instructions have been shared with teachers together with this year's question papers in line with the normal timing of their annual release.

Candidates were not expected to be more specific when answering in order to gain marks than in previous years. Specifically, there is evidence that a learner could be awarded a mark without naming a specific individual as in previous years, providing there was relevant detailed content and there was an explanation of the impact as required by the question.

Following this detailed analysis of the question papers and marking instructions, the following section of this report reviews the approach to marking, including quality assurance of the marking process.

## **9 Management and quality assurance of the marking process for SQA examinations**

### **The recruitment of the marking team**

Markers are practising teachers and SQA is dependent on them to mark over 1.3 million graded National Course exam scripts and assignments every year. The national examination system relies on teachers volunteering to mark either in their own time or in time provided by their centre leader.

The critical importance of ensuring enough markers are in place to mark all candidates' scripts in the limited time available means that management of the recruitment of markers is one of SQA's key functions in relation to the annual diet of examinations. It is led by a dedicated team that follows well-established processes and procedures. Progress with recruitment of markers for each course every year is monitored very closely by a group chaired by SQA's Director of Operations.

For a range of reasons that are outside the scope of this review, recruitment and retention of sufficient markers has become increasingly challenging over recent years. In common with some other courses (for example, Art and Design and Physical Education) and as in previous years, recruitment of sufficient markers for Higher History in 2024 was particularly challenging. This was in part because the reintroduction of coursework increased the overall number of markers required.

For each question paper, SQA seeks to recruit sufficient markers so that each marker is allocated a number of scripts, below the maximum number deemed manageable to be marked in the allocated time period. This is to ensure there is contingency if a marker cannot complete their allocation and their scripts need to be reallocated to another marker.

Some markers accept their invitation to mark, then for a variety of possible reasons, are unable to mark some or all of their allocation and return scripts to SQA unmarked. Markers are not obliged to provide a reason why they did not mark or why they have not completed their allocation. Some voluntarily provide a reason, while others do not. Management of the resulting process to ensure that any scripts not marked as expected are allocated to another marker and marked in the limited time available is complex and challenging. It is very closely monitored by SQA.

For Higher History in 2024, some markers accepted an invitation to mark the two question papers and the coursework assignment; some accepted an invitation to mark two components (both question papers or a question paper and the assignment); and some accepted an invitation to mark one component only (either one of the question papers or the assignment).

For both question papers, sufficient markers attended the marker meetings.

Markers cannot be recruited after the markers' meeting as all markers must be trained and confirmed as marking to the acceptable standard before they can mark scripts.

## **Preparation for and management and quality assurance of marking**

The senior exam team is responsible for undertaking a range of duties following the exam and leading up to the certification process. Specifically in relation to marking, these duties include:

- ◆ finalisation of the draft detailed marking instructions,
- ◆ developing marker training materials in readiness for the standardisation of markers at the markers' meeting(s),
- ◆ providing briefings and supporting markers at the markers' meeting(s),
- ◆ marking their own allocation of learners' question paper scripts,
- ◆ providing guidance and help to markers during the marking process,
- ◆ undertaking marker check to ensure all markers have applied the marking instructions accurately and consistently,
- ◆ undertaking additional marking where markers have not been able to complete their agreed allocation, and



- ◆ undertaking a final review of selected learner scripts before certification in a process known as finalisation (a full description of the process is included later in this section).

The next sections of this report describe each of these activities in general and specifically for Higher History in 2024.

## **Standardisation**

Standardisation is a procedure led by the PA and supported by the senior team leaders and team leaders.

Its main purpose is to allow the PA to finalise the draft detailed marking instructions based on a review of a sample of responses from learners who have sat the question papers. This is a critical stage in ensuring that the question paper has performed as intended and that the marking instructions are appropriate before they are used as the basis of the markers' meeting.

It allows an opportunity for amendments to be made to the marking instructions if, for example, many candidates have responded to one or more questions in a way that had not been anticipated and/or have provided responses that are appropriate but were not included in the original marking instructions.

Standardisation is also where examples of learner question paper scripts are selected and marked for the training of markers at the markers' meeting.

Comparison of the signed off draft marking instructions for the 2024 Scottish history question paper, which, as outlined earlier, had been developed and reviewed at the same time as the question papers, and the finalised marking instructions showed there were minor changes made at standardisation in light of learner responses in line with the purpose of this process outlined above. These changes included removal of some responses in option E ('Impact of the Great War') and small changes to wording to make the examples clearer in option D ('Migration and Empire').

## **Markers' meetings**

Before they can mark for SQA, any marker who has accepted their invitation must attend a markers' meeting. The key purpose of this meeting is to ensure a clear understanding of the approach to marking and of the specific marking instructions that apply to the assessment being marked. This is achieved through an explanation by the PA of the marking instructions with reference to a small number of example candidate scripts selected by the PA at standardisation.

The key purpose of the meeting is to allow markers to explore and debate the standard they are being asked to apply. This debate is critical to a clear understanding of the standard and so to markers' ability to apply it accurately and consistently in their marking. Further adjustments to the marking instructions can be agreed at the markers' meeting in response to discussion of issues raised. In recent years, there has been no need for further changes at the markers' meeting.

The markers' meeting for QP 1, British, European and world history, was delivered virtually on 4 June.

The markers' meeting for QP 2, Scottish history, was delivered face to face on 31 May.

Markers were in groups of 12 with a dedicated team leader. The PA and senior team leaders were available to answer questions to the groups of markers or individual markers. This provides opportunities to ask questions and seek clarification and enables collective understanding of the standard to be applied to the marking, while allowing markers the opportunity to access individual support if required.

For the Scottish history question paper, selected learner scripts were used for briefing on the three most common options selected by learners. One of the exam team talked through the marking of the example script using the marking instructions to exemplify the standard to be applied. Following each briefing, markers were provided with a practice script which they marked and input their marks online. All markers were provided with another practice script to take home to mark.

Finally, markers were given six qualification scripts to mark at home. Markers input their marks online, allowing team leaders to check that their marking was on standard and to provide further advice and support if it was not. A small marking tolerance, set separately for each paper, is allowed. This reflects the fact that there will always be some variance in how different markers apply the marking instructions. Markers must mark four of these qualification scripts within tolerance before they can begin their marking. Qualification scripts are selected to show a broad range of learner responses.

Markers' meetings can be challenging and include robust discussion while markers confirm their understanding of the standard. This is a key part of the process of ensuring a shared understanding of the standard to be applied in marking.

The PA, senior team leader and the senior SQA staff who attended the meeting said there was a lot of robust discussion at the meeting, including the opportunity for markers to seek clarification on any aspect of marking before they left the meeting. The PA confirmed that one of the senior team leaders discussed concerns raised by one marker on an individual basis with them, also that another senior team leader provided additional support to a team leader where markers were asking more challenging questions.

The PA confirmed the team leaders reported at the end of the markers' meeting that they were content with the meeting and felt it had been successful. The PA shared this view.

Given that feedback on social and print media has included questions around the level of specific detail required especially to answer Q15, the 'Explain' question in Migration and Empire, this review has looked at materials available at the markers' meeting and the comments from markers when they completed their marking.

The presentation to markers at the meeting includes commentary on why marks have been awarded for the learner exam script selected as the briefing script for Migration

and Empire. It stated that marks had not been awarded to the learner as they had not provided the name of a specific Scot as part of their explanation.

However, other scripts selected for marker training materials included some learner responses where specific names had not been provided and marks were awarded as the explanation was sufficient without the name.

When asked about this, the senior exam team said that responses need to be detailed and contain specific information pertaining to Scots. The impact needs to be fully explained and while not needed, a name, if appropriate to the topic, adds weight to show understanding of the impact.

Markers have an opportunity to provide feedback on their experience of the markers' meeting through their marker reports submitted after they have completed their marking. These reports are used by the PA and SQA staff to help gain an overall understanding of the standard of performance seen by each marker and to gather their feedback on any aspect of the assessment process. A more detailed review of marker reports is provided in Section 10. As this section of the report is about the markers' meetings, feedback on it from the marker reports have been included here.

Of the 69 markers who submitted a marker report for the Scottish history question paper, there were about 40 comments specifically about the markers' meeting. The majority of these were positive comments about the meeting being face to face, allowing for discussion about the standard. Some markers mentioned how helpful it was to have the PA and senior team available at the meeting to answer questions. There were comments about the meeting being informative and some said they left the meeting feeling confident.

A representative selection of the responses is provided below:

*The marker meeting and training was excellent.*

*Markers meeting was very good. I thought a good tone was set and I left confident in what was expected and required. All of the resources required were provided.*

*Marker meeting was good, interacting with people one on one and as a team allowed for natural conversations to take place and to give opportunities to help each other.*

There were about five comments where markers were less positive about the markers' meeting. They commented on what they felt to be mixed messages at the meeting and felt there was lack of clarity, for example:

*There were very mixed messages at the marker's meeting. The advice from the main presentation was different to the advice and discussion in the small groups. This led to confusion and a lack of clarity this year.*

There is evidence that following the markers' meeting, some markers were not clear about the standard to be applied in marking QP 2. There is no evidence that these

concerns were raised by a sufficient number of markers or sufficiently strongly for the PA to judge that further clarification of the marking instructions was required following the meeting. There is also no evidence that the PA judged such clarification to be required as a result of the quality assurance of marking undertaken by the exam team at any stage during the marking process.

## **Marking process**

Evidence for SQA's external assessments for NQs can be marked in one of three main ways:

- ◆ using a scanned digital image of the question paper script (known as 'marking from image' — MFI)
- ◆ using the original paper version of the question paper (known as 'marking from paper' — MFP)
- ◆ traditional marking of non-question paper evidence created for subjects such as Art and Design and Photography

In recent years, SQA has been overseeing a migration of marking so that as much as possible is undertaken using MFI.

In MFI and MFP, marks are entered and submitted electronically by markers to SQA using our e-marking system. This provides SQA with data on the rate at which the question papers are being marked to help with monitoring the marking process, It also provides data on the number of marks being assigned for each question and automatically totals the marks gained in a question paper by each learner.

As in previous years, the two question papers and the assignment for Higher History were all MFP in 2024. This means learners' scripts were posted out to markers. Compared to MFI, this is more labour and time intensive, requiring markers to arrange to receive their allocation of scripts and send the scripts back to SQA. As noted above, SQA undertakes close and detailed monitoring of progress with marking for every course to ensure that every script is marked within the limited time window available for this activity. We have a number of contingency measures that can be deployed where this is judged necessary.

The total length of time required for marking is determined by data such as the pre-determined length of time taken by a marker to mark the question paper, the number of entries and the number of markers recruited. The learners' scripts must be marked in time for the grade boundary meeting and, for MFP question papers, time is also required for quality assurance to ensure each marker has marked to standard, in a separate event known as marker check. For MFI question papers, quality assurance to ensure markers are marking to standard is ongoing, so a separate discrete event is not required.

In 2024, sufficient time was allocated for the marking of Higher History and in accordance with SQA's business rules.

In 2024 at the time marking took place, Higher History had entries of 10,006 learners. SQA tracking logs show that the following number of scripts were reallocated after the initial script allocation date due to markers being unable to mark all or a proportion of their allocation:

- ◆ 732 British, European and world history question papers
- ◆ 610 Scottish history question papers
- ◆ 1,251 assignments

In comparison, Higher Modern Studies, which had 9,600 entries, had 1,637 question papers and 1,882 assignments to be reallocated.

There are no figures available for 2023 for comparison as this data is not retained from year to year.

SQA manages unallocated scripts through well-established and closely monitored contingency processes. For example, unmarked scripts may be reallocated to nominated experienced markers who have indicated that they would be willing to mark additional scripts; a separate marking event may be set up or unmarked scripts may be sent to the marker check event or the finalisation event (described below) for the exam team to mark.

For Higher History in 2024, of the 1,342 unmarked question paper scripts, there was sufficient time for 826 to be reallocated to markers. It was recognised that marking might not be completed on time if the remaining 516 scripts had to be reallocated to other markers and posted out again. In response, a new marking event was scheduled to run on SQA premises over six days, to be attended by eight team leaders and four experienced markers and running at the same time as marker check. While, on the day, one marker was unable to attend, all scripts were marked, either by the experienced markers or by the exam team. The management of the unmarked scripts was handled through SQA's normal monitoring arrangements. Arrangements of this sort are not unusual and, as noted above, fall within SQA's established contingencies.

Contingency measures such as posting out scripts to markers or setting up additional marking events are not required when exams are MFI. It is intended that the Higher Scottish history question paper will be MFI in 2025.

During the live marking process, Higher History markers can receive support from their designated team leader. If markers report issues with the application of the marking instructions, team leaders are expected to relay this to the PA. Further advice on marking can then be provided to all markers from the senior team leaders and the PA, for example, a change to or clarification of the way a particular question is being marked. It was confirmed to this review that no issues were reported during live marking that required the PA to consider issuing further clarification of the marking instructions. It was also reported that the most common feedback which markers were reporting to team leaders was the weak performance of candidates in the exams.

## Marker check

A key element of SQA's quality assurance for MFP involves sampling of marking from individual markers by the exam team. In this process, a sample of marked exam scripts is randomly selected from each marker and reviewed by a member of the exam team to ensure they have applied the marking instructions as agreed at the markers' meeting and that this has been done consistently.

From these randomly selected scripts, markers are checked on a minimum of six by a member of the exam team. If all six are within tolerance, the marker is considered to be marking to the accepted standard. If any of the initial six scripts are marked outwith tolerance, then further scripts are checked until a consistent pattern is observed (for example, if the marker is consistently severe, consistently lenient, or in some cases inconsistent showing both severity and leniency in their marking).

Before undertaking this check, the exam team themselves are first marker checked to ensure that they have marked to standard and within agreed tolerance. In 2024, the exam team at the marker check for Higher History included the PA, four senior team leaders and nine team leaders. There is evidence that the exam team involved in marker check all marked to the accepted standard.

Any marker who has marked outwith the agreed tolerance is identified and, if marking is considerably outwith tolerance, then their marking allocation is remarked. There were no remarks for either the British, European and world history or the Scottish history question papers in 2024.

Analysis of the records from the marker check for the Scottish History question paper shows that 67% of markers marked to the accepted standard and the remainder marked slightly outwith the agreed tolerance.

As part of this review, a sample of scripts which had been marker checked were made available. Analysis of these showed that the majority of scripts selected were from option D (Migration and Empire), which was the highest uptake option, chosen by 73% of learners. Scripts from the other two highest uptake options (Wars of Independence and Impact of the Great War) had also been selected. Within the sample of marker checked scripts, markers who had been checked against Wars of Independence and The Great War had also been marker checked for Migration and Empire.

To inform this review, a sample of approximately 100 scripts which had been marker checked was scrutinised. This confirmed that marks had been adjusted upwards where the marker had not awarded a mark for an acceptable answer in line with the marking scheme, and downwards where a marker had awarded a mark for an unacceptable answer. This was observed for all questions. It demonstrates that the marker check process operated as intended.

All markers are graded following their marking, reflecting their ability to consistently mark to the standard reflected in the marking instructions. Markers are graded 'A' when they mark within accepted tolerances. All 'A' marker scripts are considered accepted. Markers are graded 'B' when they mark slightly outwith the accepted tolerances, and this can be either slightly severe, lenient or inconsistent. Markers are graded 'C' when

they have shown significant severity, leniency or inconsistency, such that their allocation of scripts is remarked or partially remarked.

In 2024, for the British, European and world history question paper, the number of 'A' and 'B' markers was similar to that in 2023. For the Scottish history question paper, grading for markers changed slightly this year, with the number of 'A' markers decreasing from 78% in 2023 to 67% in 2024; correspondingly the number of 'B' markers increased from 22% in 2023 to 33% in 2024. There were no markers graded 'C' at the marker check. It is usual to observe slight variations in marker gradings year on year.

There was no concern expressed by either the QM or PA about the standard of marking this year.

## **Finalisation**

Finalisation is a final review of selected scripts before certification. Its purpose is to seek to ensure that any variability in marking, even that which falls within specified tolerances noted above, does not have an impact on the final grade awarded.

This final review is carried out by the senior exam team who have been involved in marker check.

Marked exam scripts are identified and prioritised before the event based on a number of variables, including a candidate's proximity to a grade boundary and whether the script has been marked by a 'B' or 'C' marker identified as 'unacceptable' at marker check (that is, severe, lenient or inconsistent). The priority is increased if the centre estimate would support a change of grade. Any amended marks are recorded and processed before certification. For Higher History in 2024, a total of 1,307 marked exam scripts and assignments were reviewed at finalisation. This meant that 934 learners had at least one component reviewed before their grade was finalised.

This final step in the quality assurance of marking provides reassurance that grades awarded to learners are correct.

In addition, as part of the established processes already described for managing unmarked scripts, 50 unmarked scripts were marked by the exam team at finalisation. There is no evidence this impacted on the finalisation event.

Recruitment of markers for Higher History is challenging in any year. This year it was particularly challenging, as the return of the assignment for the first time since 2019 meant that more markers were required. Despite this, SQA was able to recruit sufficient markers to ensure that all scripts were marked and quality assured in line with its established processes. As a result of a small number of markers not marking their full allocation of scripts, some contingencies that form part of these established processes were invoked.

SQA's processes for the management and quality assurance of marking, detailed in this report, are designed in part to ensure any variations in the standard applied in

marking are identified and controlled for before final awards are made. These processes were followed fully and rigorously for Higher History this year.

## **Appeals**

Appeals is the final stage in SQA's awarding process after certification. This is a free service available to learners, who can request an appeal directly from SQA or through their centre if they are unhappy about the grade they have received. The service consists of a review of the marking of the marked exam scripts to ensure it has been marked to the national standard. This review is carried out by the senior exam team who has been involved in marker check and finalisation.

Following a review of the marking, the learners' grade can be unchanged, upgraded or downgraded.

SQA offers two categories of appeal: priority for candidates for whom the appeal outcome is required to confirm a place at university, college or in employment; and standard appeals for all other requests.

For Higher History in 2024, there were 35 priority appeals. Of these, 86% were unchanged and 14% were upgraded. There were 1,603 standard appeals; 86% were unchanged and 14% were upgraded.

In 2023, there were 38 priority appeals, of which 78% were unchanged and 22% were upgraded. There were 936 standard appeals, of which 76% were unchanged and 24% were upgraded.

As described in Section 2: Setting standards for National Qualifications, it is recognised that marking of humanities subjects such as history can be challenging due to the subjective nature of these disciplines. Therefore, it is expected that changes will be made when the marking is reviewed at the appeals stage.

The fact that the proportion of changes made at appeals this year was lower than that in 2023 is evidence that the reliability of marking in 2024 has improved.

## **10 Feedback from markers**

As noted earlier, markers submit a report to SQA at the end of the marking period. This provides an opportunity for them to provide feedback, based on their marking experience, on the performance of the learners compared to previous years. Submitting a marker report is one of the key performance indicators for markers.

Markers provide valuable qualitative information, which plays an important part in the grade boundary discussions and decision-making process.

In 2024, at the time of the grade boundary meeting, 82 markers had completed a marker report for the British, European and world history question paper (compared to 83 in 2023) and 69 had completed a marker report for the Scottish history question paper (compared to 84 in 2023).



Information extracted from the reports is anonymised when it is made available to panel members as part of the grade boundary decision process.

When markers completed their report this year, they were asked to provide information on learner performance compared to 2023 and to 2019 in the component(s) they marked. Using a drop-down menu, they could choose one of five options, ranging from 'much lower standard' to 'much higher standard'. All markers who submitted a marker report provided this information.

Markers also had the opportunity to provide feedback in the form of free text, based on the allocation of scripts they had marked, on overall performance of the learners, on specific areas where learners had shown strong or weak performance, and to offer feedback on other aspects of the assessments and marking instructions. Not all markers provided this additional feedback and some provided feedback in some areas only.

Some of the feedback from the marker reports about the question papers and markers' meeting have already been shared in this report and can be found in Section 7 and Section 9.

## **Summary of 2024 marker reports**

The strongest theme of marker reports for 2024 was that the performance of learners and the standard of their responses had lowered significantly compared to both 2019 and 2023 across both question papers.

For the British, European and World question paper in 2024:

- ◆ 52% of markers felt that the performance standard was lower or much lower than in 2023.
- ◆ 66% felt that the performance standard was lower or much lower than in 2019.

For the Scottish history question paper in 2024:

- ◆ 81% felt that the performance standard was lower or much lower than in 2023.
- ◆ 90% felt that the performance standard was lower or much lower than in 2019.

The comments below (given in italics) are a small representative sample of those submitted by markers on learner performance.

For the British, European and world history question paper:

*Many candidates being presented that are not of Higher level.*

*Candidates across the board seems to perform at a much lower standard than in previous years.*

*Overall, the standard of essays was lower than that of previous years.*

For the Scottish history question paper:

*I am concerned at candidates that are being presented for Higher who clearly find it too challenging.*

*Overall performance of candidates this year was very poor. A large portion of responses lacked any depth of specific historical detail and answer structure.*

*The paper was not particularly hard but the standard of candidate seems to have dropped.*

While markers submit reports, not all respondents choose to provide feedback comments in addition to responding to the question about learner performance compared to 2023 and 2019.

Of those who did provide comment, the key themes from those who did comment on the **British, European and world history question paper** are shown below:

<b>Key theme</b>	<b>Representative marker comments</b>
Strong essay introductions and knowledge and analysis sections	<i>Candidate introductions were strong. Good range of knowledge introduced throughout essays, lots of detail provided. Generally analysis was done well.</i>
Weak or poor evaluation and conclusion sections	<i>Evaluation and conclusions were the weakest areas. Candidates generally summarised points well in the conclusion but found make judgement challenging. Evaluation was generally just a repeat of earlier points so marks were rarely awarded for this. Where evaluation marks were awarded this was generally for isolated evaluative comments.</i>
The high number of incomplete papers submitted	<i>Too many candidates had not prepared for the exam thoroughly, they were unable to complete two, and in some cases one essay.</i>
Marking instructions  ◆ Feedback on marking instructions was mixed, with some positive, some critical and some suggesting improvements.	<i>Marking instructions are very detailed which is very welcome for topics that I've never taught.</i>  <i>The conclusions were also poor and the goalposts seemed to have been moved on marking these. We are making History so much harder than other subjects.</i>  <i>Marking instructions would be improved if they clarified conclusions, and distinguished better between knowledge and analysis for topics which markers are less familiar with.</i>

For the **Scottish history question paper**, 69 marker reports were submitted, although not all provided written comments. The key themes for this paper are shown below:

Key theme	Representative marker comments
Candidates below level of previous years and displaying National 5 level ability	<p><i>This year the quality of answer appeared weaker than in previous years. In many instances candidates made vague recall points that were not specifically relevant to their topic.</i></p> <p><i>the overall performance was probably the worst that I have seen marking Paper 2.</i></p> <p><i>Many candidates seemed at best very weak nat. 5 rather than higher. Many candidates seemed to have little if any idea how to answer higher questions and were basically using Nat. 5 structures.</i></p> <p><i>Candidates struggled most with the ‘evaluate the usefulness’ source questions.</i></p> <p><i>The Evaluate the Usefulness question continues to be a poorly answered question. Candidates struggled to correctly address the provenance of the source, lacking in a correct structure or link to the particular source referenced in the question.</i></p>
Candidates were strongest on the ‘Explain’ questions (though a few markers said this was not the case for the Migration and Empire option)	<p><i>The ‘Explain’ questions for many candidates have also been successful. Candidates have clearly understood the structure well and many are able to give very clear, relevant and detailed points and explanations linking to the question and also Scotland.</i></p>
<p>Application of marking instructions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ There were mixed comments about the marking instructions, with some being critical of them, especially around the marking of the ‘Explain’ question.</li> <li>◆ Other comments were positive about the marking instructions.</li> </ul>	<p><i>The marking standard was much higher than previous years. The need for specific people in the explain question is not reflected in the course specification.</i></p> <p><i>I thought the overall performance was lower this year than the previous 2 years. This could be because the standard appeared to be much stricter this year for certain topics i.e. the explain question for Migration and Empire needing a name to get a mark – this</i></p>

Key theme	Representative marker comments
	<p><i>is not the same as previous years. I think SQA need to lower the standard of what they are expecting candidates to write for this.</i></p> <p><i>The marking was so harsh this year, particularly in the explain question. It felt like the goal posts were moved after the exam. Pupils should not need to name individuals relating to an issue if the historical knowledge is excellent and links effectively to the question.</i></p> <p><i>Marking instructions are very clear and well laid out which is a great support and point of reference.</i></p> <p><i>It was a fair assessment where pupils could access the questions if they had studied. Marking instructions were excellent as usual.</i></p> <p><i>The MIs are robust and fit for purpose.</i></p>

Marker reports are a valuable source of qualitative information as they give insight into the marking process from the lens of a marker. It is important to note that markers base their comments on their individual marking experience of the exam scripts they have marked; for Higher History, each marker marks about 1% of the total number of marked exam scripts. It must also be highlighted that most markers may not be fully familiar with the post-marking quality assurance processes outlined earlier in this report and the way they operate to address any inconsistencies or other issues in marking to ensure that final awards accurately reflect the standard. Markers are familiar with their contribution to marking but may not be familiar with later processes unless they are a member of the senior exam team.

The PA and senior exam team have wider exposure to marked exam scripts, through their own marking and through their experiences of the quality assurance procedures such as standardisation and marker check. It is this wider knowledge of the marking end-to-end process, combined with the feedback from markers, which the PA brings to the grade boundary meeting.

As noted above, markers' observations and feedback on any aspect of their experience of marking in 2024 could be raised at the markers' meeting, directly with team leaders during the marking process and/or in the reports submitted by markers on completion of their marking.

The PA felt that the markers' meeting had run as expected with an appropriate level of discussion and challenge; team leaders did not note concerns from markers about the

standard they were being asked to apply. There is no evidence that these concerns were raised strongly enough for the PA to judge that further clarification of the marking instructions was required following the meeting. Further, the PA was not asked to provide clarification at any stage during the marking process, as a result of the quality assurance of marking undertaken by the exam team.

The QM has confirmed that they and the PA reviewed the feedback provided by markers in their reports in preparation for the awarding meeting.

## 11 Analysis of statistical information

### Learner entries

At the time of marking and awarding in 2024, Higher History had 10,006 entries. This figure has been relatively stable over recent years. There has also been little change in the number of centres who deliver it year on year. This is illustrated by the following entry data for 2019–24:

Year	Entries	Centres
2019	9,801	381
2022	9,626	376
2023	9,972	379
2024	10,006	375

Note: 2020 and 2021 are excluded from these figures as years when alternative certification approaches were in place as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As noted earlier QP 2, Scottish history, includes five options, with learners selecting one. The most popular options, accounting for over 90% of all entries, are Migration and Empire, Wars of Independence and Impact of the Great War (1914–1928).

Year	Migration and Empire	Wars of Independence	Impact of the Great War
2019	45%	25%	24%
2022	58%	22%	14%
2023	62%	20%	13%
2024	72%	14%	8%

As the table above shows and as it was noted earlier in this report, over the past three years, there has been a marked increase in the proportion of candidate selecting the Migration and Empire option. Between 2023 and 2024 alone, 10%, or approximately 1,000, more candidates answered questions on this option.

## Outcomes 2015–24

As with most subjects, the A–C attainment for Higher History has shown variability in recent years, though it markedly decreased in 2024 compared to the previous year. Attainment from 2015–24 is shown in the table below:

Year	A-C attainment (%)
2015	85
2016	87
2017	83
2018	83
2019	73
2022	78
2023	78
2024	66

As mentioned in Section 3: Approach to assessment of Higher History (2015 to present), there has been little stability for Higher History since 2019 due to the removal of internally assessed units, introduction of the separate Scottish history question paper, absence of external assessments in 2020 and 2021, introduction of modifications and different approaches to awarding in 2022 and 2023 to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the return of full course assessment in 2024.

This table of attainment shows that attainment decreased in 2019, the year of the introduction of the Scottish history question paper. Attainment in 2022 and 2023 were impacted by the generous and sensitive approach to awarding in those years. In both years, grade boundaries were lowered as it was considered that the absence of the assignment had a negative impact, as the skills developed through the assignment were the same ones required to write the essays in the British, European and world history question paper.

As noted earlier, 2024 is the first year of return to full course assessment following the COVID-19 pandemic, where the awarding approach was to use well-established procedures, while considering any impact of this return. For Higher History, this included the return of the coursework assignment for the first time since 2019.

The table below illustrates the average component marks from 2019–24.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Component (QP) 1 British, European and world history (44 marks)</b>	<b>Component (QP) 2 Scottish history (36 marks)</b>	<b>Component 3 Assignment (30 marks)</b>
2019	23.8 (54.0%)	18.7 (51.9%)	22.1 (73.7%)
2022	25.8 (58.6%)	18.9 (52.5%)	N/A*
2023	27.5 (62.5%)	20.5 (56.9%)	N/A*
2024	22.6 (51.4%)	15.1 (41.9%)	21.2 (70.7%)

\*As noted earlier in this report, the assignment was not in place in 2022 or 2023 through modifications to course assessment in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This data shows that all three components for Higher History in 2024 had lower average marks compared to previous years. The lower overall outcomes in 2024, therefore, cannot be attributed solely to lower attainment in any one component. As noted earlier in this report, no concerns were expressed about the standard applied in QP 1, British, European and world history or in the assignment, despite the lower outcomes in both of these components.

Analysis of this data shows outcomes in 2024 to be closer to those in 2019, when all three components were last assessed together, than to 2022 or 2023. As noted earlier, 2019 saw the introduction of the separate Scottish history question paper. It is not unusual to see changes in attainment as the standard is embedded in the teaching, learning and assessment process. However, it is not possible to determine what those changes would have been as external exams were cancelled in 2020 and 2021. Modifications were in place in 2022 and 2023 when the assignment was removed, so more teaching and learning time could be spent on preparing learners for the two question papers.

Focusing on QP 2, as noted in Section 3, each optional part comprises four questions, all assessing the application of skills, with learners drawing on relevant knowledge. The questions are referred to as:

1. Evaluate the usefulness of sources
2. Differing interpretation of sources
3. Explain the reasons
4. 'How fully' do sources explain the topic

The average mark for each of these questions for the three high uptake options for the years 2019–24 is shown below:

### Migration and Empire

Question (marks)	2019	2022	2023	2024
Evaluate (8)	3.7	3	3.5	3
Interpret (10)	6	4.2	5.6	4.7
Explain (8)	3.6	5.5	5.9	3.6
How fully (10)	6.7	6.8	5.9	3.5
<b>Total (36)</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>19.5</b>	<b>20.9</b>	<b>14.8</b>
% change on 2019	N/A	-2.5	+4.5	-26

### Wars of Independence

Question (marks)	2019	2022	2023	2024
Evaluate (8)	4	2.5	3.1	3
Interpret (10)	4	3.4	4.7	3.6
Explain (8)	3.9	5.3	5.7	3.7
How fully (10)	6	6.6	5.7	4.6
<b>Total (36)</b>	<b>17.9</b>	<b>17.8</b>	<b>19.2</b>	<b>14.9</b>
% change on 2019	N/A	-0.6	+7.3	-16.8

### The Great War

Question (marks)	2019	2022	2023	2024
Evaluate (8)	2.8	3.1	3.1	2.7
Interpret (10)	5.8	3	5.2	4.7
Explain (8)	3	4.8	5.1	4.2
How fully (10)	4.6	5.4	5.8	3.5
<b>Total (36)</b>	<b>16.2</b>	<b>16.3</b>	<b>19.2</b>	<b>15.1</b>
% change on 2019	N/A	+0.6	+18.5	-6.8



This data shows that between 2019 and 2023, there were marked differences in the average marks gained for each of the three high uptake options, with the Migration and Empire option consistently being two or three marks higher than the other two high uptake options. The data for 2024 shows that this year, there has been greater consistency between the average mark achieved for all three options and that marks for each of the three high uptake options are lower than in any previous year. Also, this decrease in marks is not attributable to any one question. This is evidence that the weaker performance reported by markers was not just observed in the Migration and Empire option.

2024 is the first year all three high uptake options are comparable in terms of their average mark.

There were some comments from markers around poor performance in the Migration and Empire 'How fully' question, both around the source and detail of learner response. The question asked in the 2024 question paper is identical to that asked in the 2023 specimen question paper, although with different historical sources. However, there are seven recall knowledge marks available for the points omitted from the sources and the marking instructions are almost identical. Therefore, it could reasonably be expected that learners using the specimen question paper as a resource for exam preparation — as is common practice — would have benefited from this and could have gained these recall marks. However, the average mark was lower than that in 2023, adding further weight to the markers' feedback that the 2024 cohort was weaker than that in 2023.

## 12 SQA's approach to grade boundaries: overview

Grade boundaries set the minimum marks needed to get an A, B, C, or D grade or a 'No Award' result. Every SQA assessment includes questions and tasks that provide opportunities for all learners to demonstrate their skills, knowledge and understanding, if they are presented at the correct Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) level. Our assessments are also designed to differentiate between different levels of performance. Grade boundaries help ensure assessments have worked as planned and that standards are consistent from one year to the next. Every year we review how each course assessment has performed in order to set grade boundaries fairly.

The grade boundaries for each SQA course are set at a grade boundary or awarding meeting. SQA's overall approach is described in '[A Guide to Setting Grade Boundaries](#)', available on our website. This document sets out the purpose of the meetings, the roles of those involved, the preparation for, and conduct of the meeting. The document states that decisions at grade boundary meetings '*... are based primarily on the principal assessor's professional judgement and direct experience, and supported by the statistical and quantitative information generated by SQA.*'

As a principle, the document is explicit that '*Grade boundaries are set in line with the intended demand of the assessment. If the assessment did not function as intended, the grade boundaries are adjusted appropriately.*' A further important principle is that under normal awarding, grade boundaries are not adjusted to take account of variability in the strength of each year's cohort of candidates; that is, grade boundaries are not

raised in response to evidence of a strong cohort and reduced in response to evidence of a weaker one. Any movement away from a starting point of 'notional' grade boundaries must be fully justified by information provided to the panel.

In 2022, following the return of national examinations after the COVID-19 pandemic, SQA adopted a generous approach to grading, recognising the impact of disruption to teaching and learning, and the fact that most learners were sitting exams in challenging circumstances for the first time since the pandemic. This generous approach meant that more significant adjustments to grade boundaries were made, where required, than in a normal exam diet.

In 2023, SQA adopted a sensitive approach to grading in recognition of the continued, though lessening, impact of the pandemic, and some learner support from 2022 was removed. While some grade boundary adjustments remained larger than in a normal year, overall the adjustments were smaller than those in 2022, reflecting recovery within the education system.

In 2024, we continued to use our established awarding procedures. We returned to established awarding. However, given the return to full course assessment, we took particular account of any impact on learners.

In all three years, our approach to standard setting retained key features of our established awarding procedures, but also sought to provide an extra layer of protection to ensure fairness to learners in a disrupted environment that had remained uncertain for learners and teachers or lecturers.

'A Guide to Setting Grade Boundaries' sets out the following roles for each awarding meeting:

- ◆ **Chair:** The role of the chair is to ensure that the correct procedure is followed, all evidence is taken into account, and all necessary decisions are signed off. The chair should also ensure that the decision-making process is consistent across all subject areas and over time.
- ◆ **Advisor to chair:** The advisor's role is to examine all available evidence and scrutinise the arguments put forward by the principal assessor and qualifications manager, to enable a decision on appropriate grade boundaries to be made.
- ◆ **Principal assessor:** The role of the principal assessor is to propose and justify grade boundaries for the course assessment based on qualitative and quantitative information. Their professional judgement of the principal assessor is central to the process.
- ◆ **Principal verifier:** The role of the principal verifier at the awarding meeting is to support the principal assessor by providing intelligence on how internally assessed coursework has performed, where applicable.
- ◆ **Qualifications manager:** The qualification manager's role is to lead, advise and support the principal assessor in preparing for the awarding meeting.
- ◆ **Statistician:** The SQA statistician provides statistical support at the awarding meeting, ensures logical decision making, and records grade boundary decisions. The statistician is responsible for the provision of reliable statistical information and explaining which conclusions can be drawn from it.

'A Guide to Setting Grade Boundaries' sets out the following set structure for each awarding meeting. This structure was at the heart of our approach in 2022, 2023 and 2024, with a further stage introduced in each year to consider the specific circumstances that applied in line with the approaches outlined above.

- ◆ **Welcome and introductions** — The chair begins the meeting by introducing all panel members.
- ◆ **Check subject/level and maximum marks** — The statistician will formally confirm the subject and level being discussed within the meeting and also check the maximum marks and component structure of the course assessment.
- ◆ **Understanding the intended demand of the assessment** — At this stage in the meeting, the advisor leads the discussion. The principal assessor describes how this year's assessment instrument was set to the intended demand, and any changes to marking or assessment content that would be relevant for decision making. Where applicable, discussion will begin with a review of the previous year's assessment and in particular any actions that were recorded on that year's Decision-Making Record. It is crucial to understand how any previous assessment issues have been dealt with, and how these may or may not affect the assessment undertaken this year.
- ◆ **Analysing how the assessment functioned** — The standard of the assessment is then discussed by the panel. This will involve the advisor summarising the qualitative and quantitative information presented. In doing so, the principal assessor may be asked for further details or explanations on the assessment, and panel members will be given the opportunity to challenge any inconsistencies or anomalies within the qualitative and quantitative information sources.
- ◆ **Agree grade boundaries** — Once all the information has been tabled and scrutinised, the principal assessor will be asked by the advisor for their proposed grade boundaries. The reasons for these boundaries should reflect this earlier review of information. If further discussion, clarification or grade boundary adjustment is required, the advisor will lead this discussion.
- ◆ **Confirm decisions and complete paperwork** — Once the chair has confirmed that all panel members are content that the grade boundaries reflect the demand of the assessment and are justifiable given the information presented, the grade boundary decisions are set by the statistician.

The volume of qualitative and quantitative information available to each awarding meeting means that judgement needs to be exercised by all participants on those pieces that are most relevant to the grade boundary decision. In the case of the PA, this judgement is heavily informed by their oversight of all of the stages of setting and marking the assessments as described in earlier sections of this report, and by the insights and understanding this has given them about the performance of the assessments and of the candidates who completed them.

To help ensure consistency in decision making, a daily preparation meeting is held, at which statisticians, chairs and advisors review the meetings held on the previous day and discuss the meetings scheduled for that day. The focus at this meeting is on ensuring that there is a shared understanding of the key issues with respect to the performance of the assessment and candidates for each meeting, and therefore of the broad outcome; that is, whether any adjustment to the grade boundary is likely to be required and if so, whether it is likely to be up or down.

Before each awarding meeting, the PA meets with the QM to review the range of evidence available and to agree on those parts they believe are most relevant to the grade boundary decision.

The advisor also meets with the PA and QM before each awarding meeting to ensure there is a shared understanding of the likely broad outcome of the meeting (either that the grade boundary can be set as notional or that an adjustment up or down will be necessary) and of the key pieces of evidence that point to this outcome.

The PA's views on the key points that are relevant to the discussion at any meeting are set out in the Assessment Performance Form (APF), completed following the completion of marking. PAs are informed that the purpose of the APF is to:

*... gather information on any issues relating to the performance of externally assessed components (e.g. Question papers and/or coursework components) in practice. It is part of the information pack used at the Awarding Meeting to help inform grade boundary decisions.*

## **Safeguarding measures**

There are safeguarding measures embedded throughout the end-to-end awarding process. These include ensuring that decisions made throughout the process are informed and transparent.

It should be noted here that, outwith the responsibilities and interactions associated with grade boundary meetings, the advisor, in their role as Head of Service for a Qualifications Development team, and QM are in regular contact throughout the entire end-to-end annual awarding process (from question paper development through to appeals) and so can ensure any issues that may affect the quality and integrity of the assessment and awarding process are addressed. Therefore, the advisor to the panel is well informed about the qualification and has awareness of any issue that may have arisen during the process.

As mentioned in Section 5, the PA does not work in isolation. When the question papers and marking instructions are being developed, they work closely with and are guided by the item writers, item checkers and reviewers. During the quality assurance procedures after the exams, they get feedback and advice from the senior exam team. Similarly, the QM and PA work closely together in partnership throughout the entire end-to-end process. The QM provides advice and guidance on SQA standards and policy and ensures that the PA is making informed decisions. This way of working ensures there are inbuilt safeguards on all aspects of the work undertaken by the PA. Through this review there was no evidence that these safeguards had not been effective.

## 13 The Higher History 2024 grade boundary meeting

The Higher History grade boundary meeting in 2024 followed the structure outlined above and involved each of the roles listed with the exception of the principal verifier, as this role is not required for Higher History.

The QM and advisor confirmed that in line with SQA's normal processes, they had early sight of the item level data, which is produced as marks are entered onto the online system, in advance of the grade boundary meeting. Given the return to full course assessment and the return of the Higher History assignment, it was noted that the assignment marks were slightly lower than those from 2019 (the last time it had been assessed). The QM noted that the British, European and world history question paper essay marks were lower across all options compared to 2023. Also, that the marks were comparable for the three high uptake options in the Scottish history question paper, although lower than those in 2023. Given there had been some feedback from teachers on the Migration and Empire question on the reaction of Scots to Irish immigrants following the exam, the QM noted that the marks for this question were comparable to others. There was no indication in this early data that candidates performed significantly differently in any one question.

The QM and PA have confirmed that, again in line with SQA's normal processes, they met with the panel advisor before the awarding meeting on Thursday 6 July for a pre-discussion about the standard of the assessments, the performance of the cohort, along with considering how and whether the quantitative information supported what had been observed during the post exam procedures.

The usual supporting quantitative and qualitative information was available to all attending the meeting. This consisted of a wide range of information about the cohort and performance of the assessment.

The panel for Higher History was chaired by a senior and experienced SQA Director.

All panel members have confirmed to this review that their recollection was of professional, rigorous and wide-ranging discussion at the meeting in the context of a marked drop in outcomes compared with previous years. As is normal at awarding meetings, the discussion centred around the standard and marking of the question papers and assignment and the performance of the learners. All confirmed that there was thorough and robust discussion of the standard of the assessments and marking instructions. On the basis of this discussion, the panel concluded that the assessment was on standard and that there had not been a different approach to marking this year.

All panel members were aware that the course specification had been updated in 2023, and as there was no change to course content — the update was to bring parity across the options in the Scottish history section — and as there had been only very limited feedback from teachers on this point, it was not discussed as an issue at the grade boundary meeting.

Participants have confirmed that the panel was provided with specific detail about each of the course assessments and how the standard of the question papers had been set in the same way as in previous years by a team that was largely stable, based on the

current course specification, following the same format as previously and using sources of a similar standard. There was discussion that questions were accessible. The question papers appeared to have been well received after the exam and there had been relatively little feedback from centres.

For the British, European and world history question paper, the panel noted that the optional modification (introduced for 2022 and 2023) had been removed, meaning learners had to learn a minimum of four topics out of six, compared to three out of six in 2022 and 2023. However, essay questions were of a similar format and structure to those in previous years. For the Scottish history question paper, there had been no modifications in 2022 and 2023, and the format and structure of the question paper were the same as previously.

The assignment was discussed as it had been reintroduced this year for the first time since 2019. In 2022 and 2023, grade boundaries had been adjusted downward to compensate for the removal of the assignment. The reasoning behind this was the skills developed while undertaking the assignment are similar to those required for responding to the essay questions, so undertaking the assignment helps writing of the essays.

To support understanding of the performance of learners, the panel was provided with many examples where poorer performance had been observed during the marking process and during other post exam procedures than in previous years. These included learners not reading questions, misinterpreting sources, offering poor evaluation, providing vague responses, and some learners completing one essay rather than two.

The panel heard feedback from markers and team leaders that the performance of learners was poor and some responses were at N5 standard. There was also discussion about the overall poorer literacy level of the learners, and it was discussed this had been observed in other courses during the awarding process in 2024. Furthermore, the average mark for the assignment was slightly poorer than that in 2019, and there was no corresponding increase in the marks for the essays in the British, European and world history question paper as expected. Taken together, this was considered evidence that the cohort performed poorer than in previous years.

Those attending the meeting confirmed that consideration of the statistical data was thorough and in detail. Individual item level marks (that is, marks for individual questions) were scrutinised, including checking that the full range of marks was accessed. This was confirmed by the chair of the panel. The statistician who formed part of the panel has confirmed that any questions they had based on the assessment data were considered and addressed.

In the view of the panel, lower marks were not attributable to any specific question or component. Marks were lower for questions in all three components — the British, European and world history question paper, the Scottish history question paper and the assignment — than previously.

It was confirmed by the panel members that marking of the course assessments was discussed at the meeting and that as part of the discussion, it was confirmed there had been no change to marking. It was discussed that team leaders had provided feedback

to the PA during the marking process that marks were lower due to the poor quality of the responses. Team leaders were not providing feedback on issues with or concerns about the application of the marking instructions. The chair of the panel also confirmed that part of the discussion on marking was to explore whether markers not completing their allocations had posed a challenge. The panel was provided with reassurance that this had been dealt with through the usual process.

The chair, advisor and PA confirmed beyond the discussion noted above that there was no specific discussion at the meeting of any concerns that individual markers, provided as feedback in the marker reports, may have had about marking of the assessments. All noted that feedback from markers in their reports to SQA was overwhelmingly of the poor standard of responses provided by learners this year and much of the discussion at the meeting focused on this.

At the close of the meeting, there was agreement that there would be no change to the grade boundaries as the assessments had been on standard.

Following the daily pre-awarding meeting on Friday 7 July and after reflection on the process and decisions made, it was agreed that there had not been sufficient discussion of the impact of return to full course assessment for Higher History in line with the awarding approach for 2024. Therefore, the grade boundary meeting was re-convened on Monday 10 July with a different chair (due to a prior commitment of the original chair). All other members of the panel were consistent with the 6 July meeting. A further discussion around the impact of full course assessment took place, resulting in the decision taken to adjust the grade boundary as it was felt that reintroduction of the assignment impacted negatively on the development of critical analysis skills needed for the Scottish history question paper. All grade boundaries were adjusted down by 2 marks, meaning higher attainment for more learners.

It has been confirmed by the chair of this second panel that the focus of this meeting was on the impact of return of full course assessment and there was no further discussion on the standard of the assessment, as this had been fully discussed at the first meeting.

## **Feedback from teachers directly to SQA**

Following critical feedback in the press and social media, the Director of Qualifications wrote to all markers and invited them to contact her with their concerns. Four markers provided feedback, which was mixed. There was no additional information provided that had not already been given. One of the markers requested more detail in the course specification and another requested more detail in the marking instructions.

# 14 Conclusions

Standard setting for SQA's NQs is a complex activity with a number of elements and supporting activities, all of which are inextricably linked. These elements and supporting activities have been set out in detail in this report.

More widely, it is recognised in the assessment community that setting standards for disciplines that involve largely subjective judgements presents particular challenges.

For this year's Higher History examinations, the report concludes that:

The standard set in the Higher History assessments, including QP 2, Scottish history, was not higher than that set in previous years that this examination has run.

This conclusion is based on the following facts:

- ◆ This year's assessments were set and marked by an experienced and established exam team. While the PA was new to the role this year, they had been promoted from within the team, having previously served in a number of other roles in the Higher History team over a number of years. The QM, who was previously a history teacher, and their Head of Service are also highly experienced.
- ◆ While the course specification was updated in 2023, this was done to ensure parity across the options in the Scottish history section and did not impact on course content or the standard of the assessment.
- ◆ The team took no action to change the standard of marking this year.
- ◆ Marking instructions included more points of detail and exemplification in 2024 than in previous years; this was to ensure better consistency of marking. Learners were not required to provide more detailed responses compared to previous years. SQA's marker check procedure ensured that all marking was on standard.
- ◆ For the Scottish history question paper, it was perceived that there was less predictability in the Migration and Empire option and less opportunity for gaining marks for the same recalled knowledge than in previous years. This was balanced by the inclusion of a question similar to that asked in the specimen question paper that should, therefore, have been familiar to learners.
- ◆ The marks from both Higher History question papers and the assignment this year confirmed the feedback from markers on the poor standard of performance. While some markers provided feedback on the standard they were asked to apply in the marking of QP 2, the overwhelming feedback was of the poor standard of performance. The marks across all components, including the British, European and world history question paper and the assignment, where no concerns have been raised about the standard set, were the lowest since 2019 when the current assessment arrangements were introduced.
- ◆ All stages of SQA's normal processes were followed rigorously and robustly and in accordance with SQA's established processes and procedures, including



embedded safeguards. The Higher History exam team acted with integrity throughout this process.

- ◆ The grade boundary meeting was conducted in accordance with SQA's prescribed procedures. The meeting considered a wide range of qualitative and quantitative information before making its decision. As is often the case, this information was not all consistent in where it indicated the grade boundary should be set.

Through thorough scrutiny of the concerns raised with SQA about this year's Higher History examinations, the review has identified possible reasons why these concerns have arisen and considered what action could be taken to mitigate the risk of them occurring in future. These actions are set out below.

## 15 Wider reflections

While beyond the immediate scope of the review, some wider reflections have emerged during the review process. There are areas for continuous improvement which could strengthen the way the education community works together during the assessment and awarding process and which could also support learning and teaching.

1. SQA should review the way feedback is provided by markers, how this feedback is considered and used appropriately, effectively and consistently as part of the awarding process, and how markers are informed about the actions taken to address any concerns they have raised. This should help to mitigate concerns that issues markers have experienced during marking have not been addressed at later stages of the quality assurance process before final awards are made.
2. As part of the reflection above, SQA should consider seeking formal, written feedback from markers immediately following every markers' meeting instead of waiting until the end of the marking period. This would allow the PA and their team to be clear about any issues that markers believe may impact the quality of marking and that may need to be addressed by further advice to markers or action during the quality assurance process. Consideration should be given to how information on any issues raised by this feedback and actions taken to address them is provided to the relevant awarding meeting.
3. SQA should ensure, when making changes to course specifications, that the intended consequences for teaching and learning and assessment of such changes are made clear to and clearly understood by teachers.
4. SQA should undertake a review of the layout and presentation of marking instructions to ensure clarity. It should also ensure clear alignment between examples used for exemplification of the standard at markers' meeting and the associated marking instructions.
5. SQA should review the process for creating and approving Assessment Performance Forms as a key input to awarding meetings in order to ensure a consistently high standard.

6. SQA should supplement the current agenda for awarding meetings with a further checklist to ensure that all key sources of evidence have been discussed at the meeting and any implications are considered before a final decision is made.
7. SQA should continue and accelerate, where possible, its ongoing work to ensure all marking of paper exam scripts for NQs is migrated to MFI. As highlighted in this report, this offers a number of practical and technical benefits, including the quality assurance of marking, which is critical given the focus of this report.
8. SQA should consider its approach to the assessment of Higher History and potentially of other humanities subjects. The optional nature of the question papers for Higher History is a contributory factor to some of the challenges set out in this review. While, given the nature of the subject, retaining some form of optionality is probably inevitable and desirable, consideration should be given to reducing the number of options in consultation with teachers, learners and other stakeholders in a way that minimises any impact on the choices available to learners while strengthening the operation of our assessments.
9. As part of its ongoing improvement of communications and engagement with teachers and learners, as it prepares to transition to Qualifications Scotland, SQA should help build a stronger understanding across the education community of the end-to-end operation of the national examinations system and of the roles and processes that underpin it.

# Appendix 1: Specific examples of Scots' impact on the empire taken from previous marking instructions

**2019 Q15** (the responses required were points of omission from the source of the impact of Scots in Canada):

*Scots also influenced educational development in Canada, for example the world-famous McGill University was established with money from the estate of James McGill, a Glasgow emigrant*

*Scots had an impact on politics in Canada, for example John A. MacDonald became first Prime Minister of Canada*

**2021 Q15** (the responses were points of omission of impact of Scots emigrants in Canada):

*Scots also transferred their enthusiasm for education and reading resulting in the development of universities such as McGill University*

*the greatest influence was that of John A Macdonald who emigrated from Scotland as a boy and rose to become Canada's first Prime Minister shaping Canada and contributing immeasurably to its character*

**2022 Q15** (responses were points of omission from the source on Scots in India):

*Scottish missionaries played an important role in the development of education in India, e.g., Reverend Alexander Duff from Perthshire was linked to the founding of the University of Calcutta in 1857 as well as the establishment of the first medical school in the country*

*James Dalhousie used his time as Governor-General of India (1848–1856) to ban the practice of suttee (human sacrifice) and the practice of thuggee (ritual murder.) The outlaw of such practices was not welcomed by some Indian people*

*James Dalhousie improved transport links and created the post office and telegraph system*

*in 1857, Scottish soldiers played an important role in crushing the Indian Mutiny. Sir Colin Campbell played a key role*

**2023 Q15** (responses were points of omission from the sources on the impact of Scots on the empire):

*Scots also influenced educational development in Canada, for example, the world-famous McGill University was established with money from the estate of James McGill, a Glasgow emigrant*

*Scots had an impact on politics in Canada, for example John A. MacDonald became first Prime Minister of Canada*

*Scottish missionaries such as Reverend Alexander Duff from Perthshire were linked to the founding of the University of Calcutta in 1857 as well as the establishment of the first medical school in the country*

*James Dalhousie used his time as Governor General of India (1848-1856) to ban practices of suttee (human sacrifice) and thuggee (ritual murder). The outlaw of such practices was not welcomed by some Indian people*

**2023 Specimen QP Q15** (responses were required for points of omission from the source about impact of Scots in Australia):

*Andrew Paterson was composer of the Australian song Waltzing Matilda, his father was a Scottish immigrant from Lanarkshire*

*Andrew Fisher of Ayrshire became Australian Prime Minister three times between 1908 and 1915*

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