



National Qualifications 2024

Awarding — Methodology report

Publication date: August 2024

Published by the Scottish Qualifications Authority

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www.sqa.org.uk

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1 Introduction

This report outlines SQA's approach to awarding National Qualifications in 2024. The approach this year follows a range of measures to support learners following the COVID-19 pandemic, and the return to external examinations in 2022.

Full course assessment was re-introduced this year, which included SQA-assessed coursework for many subjects and levels for the first time since 2019. SQA's approach to awarding was designed to take account of this change.

2 Context

The return of the national diet of exams in Scotland in 2022 following the global pandemic included a range of measures to support learners. Some course assessments were modified in recognition that teaching and learning had been disrupted, including the removal of coursework from courses. Many of these modifications continued into the 2023 diet in recognition of continued disruption to teaching and learning.

In both 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.

In 2022, 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 have returned to established awarding. However, given the return to full course assessment, we took particular account of any impact on learners.

Further detail on the outcomes of awarding in these two years can be found in the [2022 Chief Examining Officer's Report](#) and the [2023 Chief Examining Officer's Report](#).

This methodology report follows those published in [2022](#) and [2023](#). It outlines the approach that SQA used in 2024 for awarding and setting grade boundaries. It provides a public record of SQA's approach, laying out the objectives, principles and methods used.

3 Roles and responsibilities

SQA has a statutory duty and responsibility to individual learners and the wider community to ensure that the standard of our qualifications is maintained. Standards are vital in

ensuring the credibility and long-term integrity of qualifications, for those who take them and for end users of qualifications. Essentially, maintaining standards ensures the credibility and value of qualifications over time for all who hold the qualifications.

Setting and maintaining assessment and qualifications standards is a critical part of any education system, but it sits within a wider system of learning and teaching and curriculum choices at a local and centre level.

Awarding is a crucial part of the standard-setting process and is just one of several stages of quality assurance for National Qualifications. The key aim is to ensure that the standards of our qualifications are maintained through the grade boundary decisions made at awarding meetings. These meetings are held after each SQA exam diet and follow a set of established and rigorous procedures, using a vast array of qualitative and quantitative data. Every year, during June and early July, SQA runs over 140 awarding meetings at which the performance of our assessments is scrutinised in comparison to national standards and grade boundaries are set. In 2024, this process was carried out for over 129,000 learners from over 500 centres.

4 Developing our approach

SQA worked with a variety of stakeholders in the development of the 2024 approach to awarding. We sought feedback from learners, practitioners and appointees on the awarding process through SQA's [Evaluation of Diet 2023](#).

The high-level approach to awarding was presented to the SQA Board of Management, National Qualifications 2024 Strategic Group, and the National Qualifications Partner Communications Group. Representatives from the following stakeholders are within these groups:

- ◆ Scottish Youth Parliament
- ◆ Educational Institute of Scotland
- ◆ Colleges Scotland
- ◆ National Parent Forum of Scotland
- ◆ Scottish Government
- ◆ Education Scotland
- ◆ School Leaders Scotland
- ◆ Scottish Council of Independent Schools
- ◆ Association of Directors of Education in Scotland
- ◆ Universities Scotland
- ◆ Student Participation in Quality Scotland
- ◆ Scottish Secondary Teachers' Association (SSTA)
- ◆ National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT)

The overall policy position and approach, as set out in this report, was discussed and approved by SQA's Qualifications Committee and by the SQA Board of Management.

5 Overview of approach to awarding

Every year, SQA's role is to evaluate the performance of assessments in an equitable and fair way, while ensuring standards are maintained so that qualifications remain credible — and this year was no different. Learners' demonstrated attainment — evidence of a learner's knowledge and skills in a course measured against the required national standard — is at the core of our approach.

SQA made modifications to National Qualification course assessments — such as removing elements of coursework — at the height of the pandemic and extended them until the 2022–23 session. While these temporary arrangements were well-received by the education community, they did suggest that, if retained for longer than necessary, the modifications could have a detrimental impact on consolidation of learning, and learners' progression to their next stage of education, employment or training. Following discussions with learners, teachers, lecturers, parents, carers and others, this year saw a return to full course assessment, as detailed in section 6 of this report.

The approach to awarding was announced in [March 2024](#) and said that any impact on learners completing coursework for the first time, as part of their SQA assessments, would be considered in our grading decisions and incorporated into our well-established grading processes. This provides fairness and safeguards for learners and helps to provide assurances across the wider education community as we return to established awarding.

Our approach to awarding is broadly aligned to that in other nations of the UK that have returned to normal pre-pandemic grading arrangements.

SQA's Examination Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service (EECCS) and Appeals Service remained in place this year, as detailed in sections 7 and 8. This year, learners will also have the opportunity to access their marked exam papers from their school or college in five subjects, as part of a trial service, which can help learners decide whether to appeal their results. Details of the service can be found in section 9.

6 SQA's approach to awarding

Setting and maintaining qualification and assessment standards is complex and technical. Across the world, including within the UK, slightly different concepts of standards and approaches to awarding are used.

SQA uses a principle of standard setting known as 'attainment referencing'. This means the intention is to maintain performance standards by using expert judgement of assessment performance using qualitative evidence, supported by statistics. This is different from 'norm-referenced' approaches (which seek to maintain the same overall outcomes regardless of individual performance) or 'criterion-referenced' approaches (which seek to prioritise performance standards through consideration of performance against specified criteria).

SQA's approach to standard setting achieves its goal by using a well-established process called 'awarding'. Further details about the awarding process can be found in the [Guide to Setting Grade Boundaries](#), which outlines how the process works — an approach that has been retained this year.

In the previous two years, we adopted an approach to standard setting that retained key features of our established awarding procedures but also sought to provide an extra layer of protection to ensure learners were not unfairly disadvantaged.

This year, we used our well-established procedures to evaluate the performance of the course assessment and, where appropriate, considered the impact of changes to assessment brought about by the return to full course assessment for many courses. These changes to assessment included the removal of optionality in some question papers and the re-introduction of:

- ◆ coursework components (projects, assignments, dissertations)
- ◆ optional content in question papers
- ◆ course content examined in question papers
- ◆ an exam component

Not all courses had changes to assessment. For some courses, the modifications were made permanent where there was evidence of positive impact on the validity of the approach to assessment, while allowing learners to demonstrate their skills, knowledge and understanding.

We were aware that the return to full course assessment, and the re-introduction of coursework, could potentially impact on outcomes this year. Some learners experienced coursework assessment for the first time. The re-introduction of additional, non-exam based approaches to assessment, for example, allowed learners to evidence their knowledge and skills more appropriately. However we recognised that this may not produce positive outcomes in all cases, particularly if there had been impact on skills development due to prior learning experiences.

As part of well-established procedures, awarding decisions were underpinned by a thorough evaluation of a wide range of qualitative and quantitative evidence. As in any year, qualitative feedback from markers was used to inform senior appointees as they evaluated the performance of the assessments. Principal assessors provided information about the development of the course assessment to aid discussion.

Notional grade boundaries are set at 50% of total marks for the full course assessment for C, 70% for A, and 85% for upper A. SQA's assessments are developed with these notional or near notional grade boundaries in mind. They are therefore the starting point for discussing the final grade boundaries for most courses in any year. Any adjustments are made from this starting point.

This year, the outcomes from 2019, 2022 and 2023 were available as key benchmark indicators and comparators, as were those from a selection of years prior to the pandemic from 2014 through to 2018.

The focus of awarding meetings was on maintaining standards. Several key issues guided discussions and decision-making, including:

- a) whether the course assessment functioned as intended
- b) changes made to the course assessment this year
- c) what we knew about learners in comparison to previous years
- d) how learner performance in assessment in 2024 compared to 2019, particularly where assessment components had been re-introduced
- e) whether learner performance in assessment had improved in comparison with 2023

As part of awarding procedures, the performance of the 2024 cohort in each course was compared to that of the 2023 cohort. As a further key reference point for decision-making, it was also compared to the 2019 cohort, especially where there was a return to full course assessment, such as the re-introduction of a coursework component that had last been assessed in 2019. Any robust evidence that a return to full course assessment had impacted negatively on learner performance was considered when making an adjustment to the grade boundary, particularly at Higher and Advanced Higher.

Even if performance of assessment components was stronger than that of previous years, this did not necessarily translate to higher attainment outcomes as it allowed us to set grade boundaries closer to notional or expected boundaries.

Full details of the outcomes of the awarding process for the 2023–24 session can be found on [SQA's statistics webpage](#). Our website also includes details of how we met our statutory duty to consider the equalities impacts of its awarding activities in 2024. This includes the [Equality Impact Assessment \(EgIA\)](#) and [Children's Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment \(CRWIA\)](#) of this year's approach to awarding and an [Equalities Monitoring Report](#).

The [Chief Examining Officer's Report](#) provides further detail on some of the themes that emerged from awarding in 2024. Further details of themes at course level will be available in the course reports produced for each NQ subject, published from September 2024 on [SQA's website](#).

7 Examination Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service (EECCS)

The EECCS is a long-standing SQA pre-certification service which is unique to Scotland. It provides support to individual learners who experience disruption at the time of the exam — those who are unable to sit an exam or who are affected by an exceptional circumstance that impacts their ability to perform on the day of the exam. Non-question paper components are not eligible for this service.

Through the EECCS, schools, colleges and training providers can submit alternative evidence on behalf of their learners. Learners are eligible for EECCS consideration if:

- ◆ they have experienced a valid exceptional circumstance
- ◆ they have completed all the compulsory non-question paper components

- ◆ an estimate has been submitted for them
- ◆ alternative evidence for the impacted exam components is available

Learners who believe they are eligible for this service can contact their school, college or training provider, who then submit requests on their behalf — requests submitted directly from learners, parents or carers cannot be accepted.

Guidance is issued to centres, reminding them that the alternative assessment evidence they submit must be valid and reliable, covering important aspects of the specific skills, knowledge and understanding requirements of the course. All academic evidence submitted in support of EECCS requests must have been generated **before** the date of the timetabled exam.

The EECCS involves senior SQA appointees — practising teachers and lecturers — who are provided with the learner’s estimate, alternative assessment evidence, any relevant non-question paper component candidate materials (for example, a folio or project), and any attempted question papers (in cases where a learner had started but been unable to complete an exam) related to the request. The senior appointees review all the available assessment evidence and determine a result.

Full details of the [EECCS](#) are available on SQA’s website.

8 Appeals

The 2024 Appeals Service provides learners and centres with the opportunity to request a review of the learners’ SQA-marked assessment components. Appeals 2024 is free of charge and opens on Tuesday 6 August 2024 at 9 am for learners or their representatives to request a review directly to SQA, or through their school, college or training provider (centre).

If a grade is appealed, a senior appointee will carry out a marking review of the SQA-marked assessments. This is not a re-mark. A marking review checks that:

- ◆ all parts of the SQA assessments have been marked
- ◆ the marking is in line with national standards
- ◆ the marks given for each answer have been totalled correctly; and
- ◆ the correct result has been entered on the SQA system.

Appeals can be prioritised if the learner has a conditional place at university or college, or for training or employment that depends on their grade. Grades can go up, stay the same or go down. Therefore, the learner’s consent must be provided before any requests are submitted by a centre or learner representative.

Further information about [Appeals 2024](#) has been provided on SQA’s website and in information sent directly to every learner this year.

9 Access to marked exam papers

This year, SQA is running a trial for schools and colleges to download copies of marked exam papers in five subjects.

A marked exam paper shows a learner's written answers along with the marker's notes and can be used to support Appeals Service discussions.

This trial is available for learners who sat National Qualifications exams in the following subjects and levels:

- ◆ Geography — National 5 and Higher
- ◆ Graphic Communication — National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher
- ◆ Media — National 5
- ◆ Music — National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher
- ◆ Statistics — Advanced Higher

The trial opens on Tuesday 6 August, and closes on 27 September 2024. Learners will need to speak to their school or college to request a copy of their marked exam paper.

Once the trial has closed, all schools and colleges will be contacted for feedback to gather information on how this service might be expanded in future.

Full details of the [access to marked exam papers trial](#) are available on SQA's website.