

Education, Children and Young People Committee

21st Meeting, 2022 (Session 6), Wednesday 7 September 2022

Scottish Qualifications Authority

Introduction

The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) is the national accreditation and awarding body for Scotland.

At its meeting today, the Committee will be taking evidence on a range of issues including the 2022 exam diet and reform.

The Committee will take evidence from—

- Fiona Robertson, Chief Executive and Chief Examining Officer;
- Michael Baxter, Director of Finance & Corporate Services; and
- Robert Quinn, Head of English, Languages & Business.

Supporting information

SPICe has provided a briefing, which is included in **Annexe A**. The SQA has also provided a submission ahead of today's meeting. This is included at **Annexe B**

Education, Children and Young People's Committee clerks

2 September 2022



Education, Children and Young People Committee

Scottish Qualifications Authority

7 September 2022

Introduction

The Committee will be taking evidence from the SQA. This session is planned to cover two broad areas:

- The 2022 diet
- Reform

2022 Exam Diet

The SQA published results of a wide range of qualifications from the 2022 diet on Tuesday 9 August. The SQA offers a range of types, levels and sizes of qualifications – this includes courses typically taken in colleges, or other training providers, as well as schools. The focus of this paper is mainly on those qualifications normally taken in schools.

2022 saw the return of externally moderated exams for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications. The Chief Examining Officer’s report stated—

“There is no doubt that the disruption caused by the global pandemic over the last two years continued to affect learners in 2022. The education system has taken steps to ensure the continuity of learning and teaching. SQA developed an assessment and awarding approach that has helped to address disruption to learning, but it has not been a normal year.”

The return of exams makes the methodology closer to that used to certificate these courses prior to the pandemic, albeit there are differences in approach. In each of the previous four years the methodology and approach has been different due to the responses to the pandemic between 2020 and 2022.

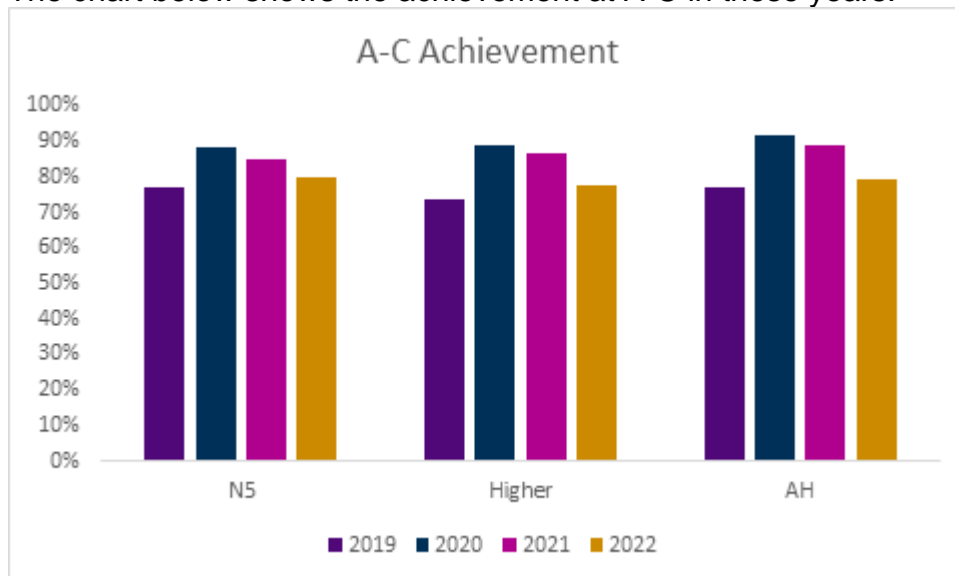
- 2019: Business as usual, exams, coursework etc.
- 2020: No exams, certification based on teacher judgment using evidence retrospectively
- 2021: No exams, certification based on teacher judgement with planned evidence gathering, amendments to coverage of courses
- 2022: Exams and coursework but amendments to the coverage of courses and exams. Additional support to candidates prior to exams and sometimes “generous” grade boundaries.

These differences have led to differences in the distribution of grades at the national level over these years.

Achievement

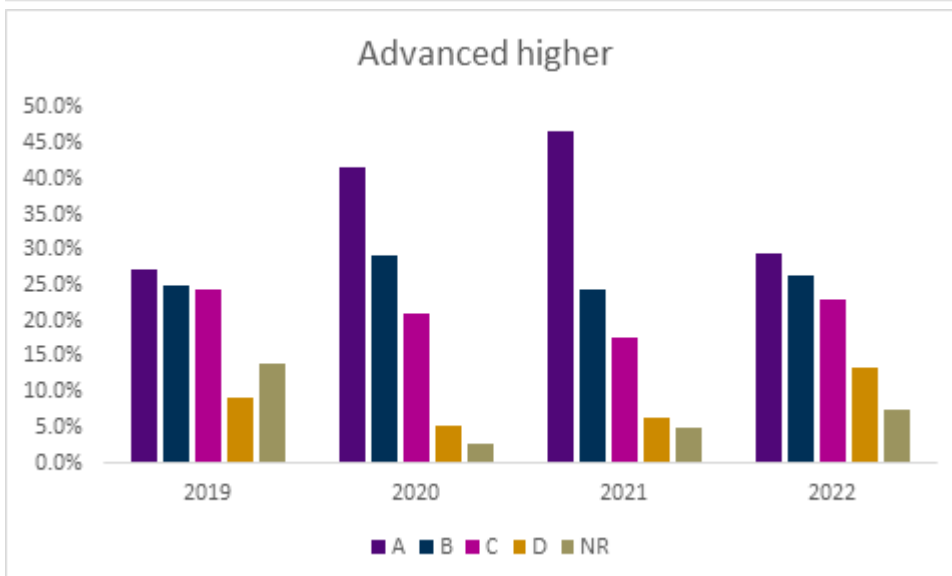
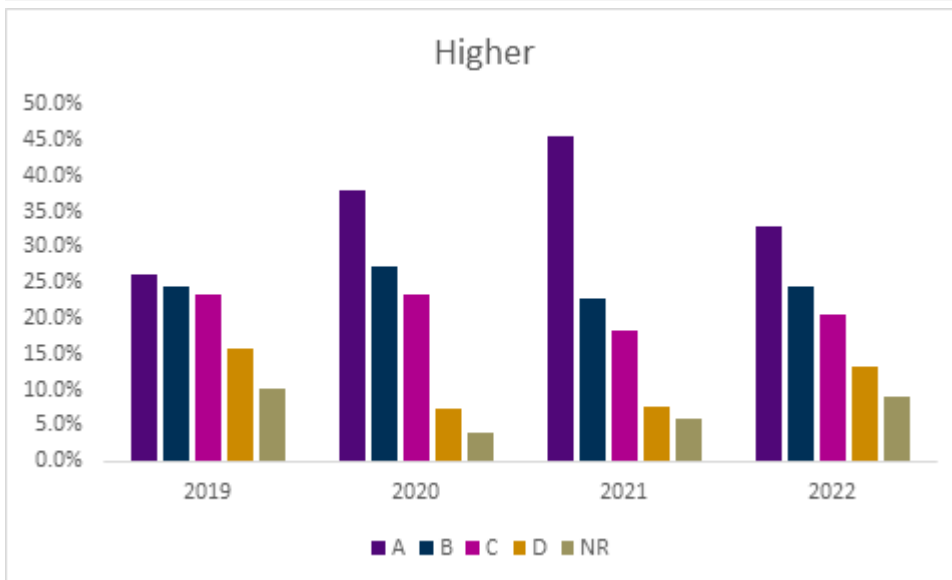
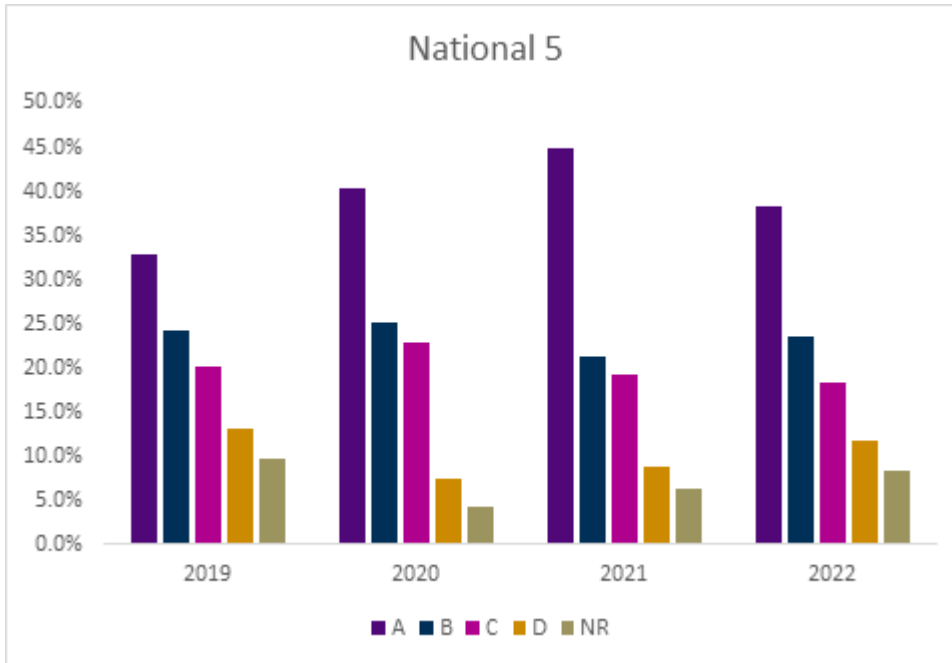
The following data is on achievement in **Education Authority schools** over the past 4 years.

The chart below shows the achievement at A-C in these years.



For every qualification, the rate of A-C passes increased markedly between 2019 and 2020 and reduced in 2021 and 2022. The A-C rates remain a little higher in 2022 than in 2019.

Breaking it down to individual grades shows a more complex picture. The following three charts show the percentage of entries attaining individual grades and no result (“NR”).



Here we see a similar pattern changes across the three years at each qualification. The percentage of A's awarded increased substantially between 2019 and 2020, but then increased again in 2021 before dropping in 2022 to a level lower than 2020 and 2021 but higher than 2019. One would expect to see some variation between cohorts, but the size of the shifts and the consistent changes across the different qualifications suggests that the approach and model may be a significant factor in the patterns we see.

Given the changes in methodology across the previous 4 years, making direct comparisons or drawing conclusions about underlying changes in teaching and learning, at cohort levels, from data during this period is not possible.

National 4s candidates are not graded A-D, rather a candidate can pass the course or not. The table below shows the number of entries and percentage of entries which resulted in an award.

National 4	% award	Entries
2019	88.6%	102,790
2020	91.2%	101,525
2021	86.2%	102,270
2022	86.2%	122,140

The number of entries to N4 increased by around 20% in 2022. In part, the increase may be explained by increasing rolls in S4. However taking that into account, the number of entries per S4 pupil fell from 2.0 in 2019 to 1.9 in 2020 and 2021 and then rose to 2.2 in 2022.

Taking entries in National 4, National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher (in Education Authority schools) as a whole, the number of entries per pupil in a given year has been at around 4.4 for each of the past four years.

In addition to national qualifications, schools may offer a number of other SQA awards, units and certificates. Like national qualifications, awards can be taken at a variety of SCQF levels. However, the size of the courses of awards can differ; size is measured in SCQF points which equate to around 10 hours of learning time (both tuition and self-directed). Skills For Work courses are the same size as a national course of the same SCQF level. That is, 18 points at level 3 and 24 points at levels 4-6.

The table below shows the entries and percentage of those entries that resulted in gaining the award in Education Authority schools.

Level	2022		2021		2020		2019	
	Awarded %age	Entries	Awarded %age	Entries 2021	Awarded %age	Entries 2020	Awarded %age	Entries 2019
SCQF3	100.0%	5	100.0%	5	*	*	-	-
SCQF4	73.4%	1,410	76.8%	1,350	83.8%	1,305	76.2%	1,150
SCQF5	82.1%	8,605	81.9%	8,070	90.0%	7,275	85.1%	5,510
SCQF6	78.9%	20	100.0%	45	-	-	-	-

* Disclosive, - N/A

Entries to these courses has been increasing. The most popular courses, by number of entries in 2022 were level 5 courses in Travel and Tourism, Early Learning and Childcare, and Sport and Recreation.

The SQA also groups and reports on “Awards” and “National Progression Awards”. Awards covers a wide variety of courses from SCQF level 1 to 6 and differing sizes. NPAs are aimed at assessing a defined set of skills and knowledge in specialist vocational areas. Again the levels and sizes of NPAs varies. The table below shows the number of awards for Education Authority school pupils in these two categories for the past four years.

	Awards	NPA
2019	20,515	4,455
2020	25,900	7,825
2021	22,275	9,480
2022	25,385	11,110

Taken together, there is an increase in the number of awards attained. The differing sizes of these awards makes interpretation of these data complicated. Broadly considered, the increase in the number of awards of all categories could be considered evidence of the increased options for young people in Senior Phase.

Equalities

The [SQA published an Equalities Monitoring Report](#) on the awarding of National Qualifications. This highlighted the EQIAs undertaken in relation to a range of decisions that were made in the course of the 2022 diet.

The Equalities Monitoring Report’s Appendix sets out the entries and outcomes and provides commentary on National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher certification across a variety of protected characteristics. To develop some of these data, it was matched with data held by the Scottish Government on education authority school pupils. This paper provides a summary of the SQA’s analysis. Not covered in this paper is the analysis of attainment by urban/rural classification, Members can find that analysis from page 41 of the report.

Sex

Females out-perform males in terms of both the rate of A-C grades and A grades in Nat 5, Higher and Advanced Highers. The table below shows the percentage point difference between the A-C achievement rate of Male and Female candidates between 2018 to 2022. The SQA collects data on sex and these data covers all entries.

	National 5	Higher	AH
2018	5.6%	6.1%	6.8%
2019	4.2%	4.6%	4.6%
2020	2.8%	3.7%	3.0%
2021	2.9%	4.6%	4.6%
2022	3.3%	4.7%	5.8%

SIMD

The SQA presented data on education authority pupils with addresses in all five SIMD quintiles. Normally the poverty-related attainment gap is measured as the gap between the achievement of pupils in the first quintile (ie those living in the 20% most deprived areas by SIMD) and the fifth quintile (ie those living in the 20% least deprived areas). However, there is a positive relationship between the percentage of those gaining A-C and A grades and the SIMD quintile; that is the results for pupils living in the fifth quintile are better than the fourth quintile, which are better than the third and so on.

The table below shows the percentage point gap between entries of candidates from SIMD 1 and SIMD 5 households for the past four years.

Attainment		2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
National 5	A	26.7	27.7	25.6	25.2	27.1
	A-C	16.3	17.1	7.9	9.1	14.6
Higher	A	20.8	22.0	20.4	22.0	23.2
	A-C	15.6	16.9	6.6	7.8	15.0
AH	A	17.7	15.6	16.7	21.2	20.5
	A-C	11.2	13.6	3.3	5.5	13.2

ASN and Disability

In terms of pupils with ASN, the report stated—

“The difference in A attainment rates between those with Additional Support Needs and those without ASN increased in 2021 compared to each year in the period 2018 to 2020 for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher. In 2022, this difference has returned to within the historic range seen in 2018-2020. For example, the difference for National 5 in 2021 was 15.4 percentage points compared to a range of 12.3–13.6 percentage points (2017-2020). In 2022, this has returned to within the historic range at 12.9 percentage points.”

In 2021, the percentage of entries attaining an A grade increased for both pupils with and without an identified ASN, although the increase was greater for those without an identified ASN.

Looking at the A-C achievement, the report stated—

“The difference in A to C rates between those with and without ASN has increased on 2020 and 2021 but generally remains lower than 2018 and 2019 levels for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher. For example, the difference for National 5 in 2022 is 8.4 percentage points compared to 5.7 and 7.0 percentage points in 2020 and 2021 respectively. The difference was 10 percentage points and 9.2 percentage points in 2018 and 2019 respectively.”

For those declared or assessed as disabled, the report stated—

“As in previous years, the A to C rate is greater for those not declared/assessed disabled compared to those declared/assessed disabled for all levels ... In 2022, this

is also the case for the A rate at National 5 and Higher but at Advanced Higher the rate is about the same.”

Ethnicity

The report stated—

“In general, where one group had higher attainment than another group historically, this remained the case in 2022. For example in 2022, as in several previous years, the A rate and A to C rate was greater for Asian-Chinese compared to other ethnicity groupings.”

Appeals Process

The results published in August are provisional and prior to any appeals having been considered. Candidates can seek to appeal either through their school or college or directly to the SQA. The deadline for individuals to appeal was 30 August and for schools or colleges, on behalf of candidates, the deadline was 2 September. The deadline for priority appeals for those with conditional offers for future education or employment was 16 August and 19 August for individuals or centres respectively.

The following criteria were required for appeals to be made.

- The school, college or training provider must have submitted an estimate to SQA.
- The estimate must be higher than the grade shown on the certificate.
- The candidate must have taken and/or submitted all SQA coursework and formal assessments, including exams.
- The course must include at least one assessment that is marked by SQA.

The appeal can include a clerical check of the exam script and a review of alternative assessment evidence and SQA coursework. Grades could increase, stay the same or go down as a result of this process. The grade would only be lowered if the clerical check showed a result lower than originally certificated and the alternative assessment evidence supported a lower grade.

Last year was the first time that individuals could appeal directly to the SQA. In 2021, the grounds for appeal were different which reflected the different basis on which grades were awarded that year. 3,483 appeal requests submitted in 2021, of which around [60¹ were reported to](#) have led to a change in grade.

The SQA’s submission to the Committee stated—

“As of 24 August, SQA has received 1,414 priority appeals across a broad range of subjects. The review of priority appeals is underway and results are due to be

¹ At the point of publication of the SQA’s report on the appeals in 2021 44 results were upgraded and 13 downgraded. 15 were unresolved.

reported to higher education institutions via UCAS in line with all other UK awarding bodies.”

The appeals process in 2022 may be affected by industrial action of SQA staff which was announced by [Unite on 25 August](#).

Approach 2021-22

In developing the approach to the 2022 Diet, the SQA worked with a National Qualifications Group of national stakeholders including the Scottish Youth Parliament and National Parent Forum Scotland. At the outset of the school year, the SQA set out three scenarios. This approach reflected the uncertainty over the level of continuing disruption to learning. The scenarios were:

- Scenario 1: Exams with modified course assessments
- Scenario 2: Exams with modified course assessments and additional support for learners
- Scenario 3: Exams cancelled with awards based on teacher-determined provisional results

Scenario 2 that was eventually adopted. The SQA’s submission to the Committee sets out the additional support that was put in place; this included:

- course assessment modifications, that either removed or reduced elements of an exam and/or coursework, provided more choice in an assessment or removed a topic from an exam
- revision support to help learners prepare for their exams – including advance notice of exam content and study guides
- an Exam Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service that included Covid-19 cover for learners who had to self-isolate or stay at home on the day of the exam
- a more generous approach to grading than in a normal exam year, to help ensure fairness for this year’s learners while maintaining standards
- the free appeals service, including the option for learners to directly appeal to SQA.

At the cohort level, the different approaches of the past four years have resulted in different patterns of achievement, the number of pupils getting A-Cs and the number of pupils getting A grades. Changes in patterns of grades will also have impacted on the measured attainment gap.

The SQA’s equalities monitoring report stated—

“[The] overall approach to awarding and grading sought, where possible, to provide a more generous position in relation to outcomes in 2019, while retaining the credibility and integrity of qualifications through maintaining performance standards where

possible. This approach was informed by engagement with SQA's own stakeholders and by an awareness of the planned approach elsewhere in the UK."

National qualifications are intended to be criteria-referenced tests. That is, the test is against a set of defined criteria. There will be variation from one cohort to the next, but the intention in most years is that two students with equivalent skills, knowledge, and preparation would attain the same grade from one year to the next. This is one dimension of the reliability of the assessment (the other being consistency within each year).

The Chief Examiner's report set out the rationale and impact of a more generous approach to setting grade boundaries. This said—

"Typically, fewer than half of all grade boundaries are adjusted (up or down) from expected or notional boundaries and on average boundaries are notional. In 2022 consideration was given to the impact on grade boundaries of course assessment modifications (for example, the removal or reduction of coursework) and revision support. The impact of disruption on this year's learners, specifically how this has impacted acquisition of skills and knowledge, was also considered. Taking all of this into account, grade boundaries were adjusted. In many cases, where appropriate, these adjustments were on average more significant than in a normal exam year but only in so far as the credibility of qualifications was maintained. The median adjustment is usually around zero but in 2022 was -4 percentage points at grade C and -2 percentage points at A."

Narrowing the course content and providing advanced notice of topics in exams, along with "generous" marking would, on the face of it, be changing the criteria in relation to what constitutes success. The balance of maintaining "credibility and integrity" of qualifications while recognising the exceptional circumstances facing all pupils since March 2020 has been a challenge for all exam boards.

The [EIS argued that](#), in the context of the pressures on teachers and students, the return to external exams "was needlessly rushed, arguably a backward step, and has been an additional stressor to teachers and students alike". [Universities Scotland](#) stated that it supported the approach taken by the SQA this year.

In England, the intention has been to gradually unwind the higher grades seen during the period when grades were based on teacher judgement and a return to more historically normal patterns of achievement. A [recent blog by Ofcom](#) stated—

"The approach exam boards take to grading will reflect a midpoint between summer 2019 and 2021. Results will look different to summer 2021, because the nature of the assessment is different. ... Results in summer 2022 will be higher than when summer exams were last sat, but lower than in 2021, when grades were awarded by teacher assessment. Schools' and colleges' results are highly likely to be lower than in 2021 when exams did not go ahead. Very few schools or colleges, if any, will get higher results than in 2021."

The SQA's submission indicated that similar approaches were taken in Wales and Northern Ireland. The situation in Scotland is complicated by forthcoming structural reform and the potential for reform of assessment in Senior Phase, which is looked at in more detail later in this paper.

For the coming year, the SQA's submission stated—

"After careful consideration, and reflecting on the feedback we received, we confirmed in April that for each course we will keep the current types of modifications to assessment in full for the coming session. Carrying the assessment modifications forward will help to provide some certainty for learners, teachers and lecturers and help free up more time for learning and teaching of the course content, while maintaining the integrity and credibility of their qualifications."

Outcomes

While results might be considered a measure of the outcome for a particular course or phase of education, often school qualifications are a stepping stone to the next stage in the young person's life in employment, training or education.

An OECD paper in 2012² stated that a key purpose of a qualification is to provide evidence of knowledge and skills gained. This is particularly useful to provide evidence to another educational establishment or employer. One way of considering the value of a qualification (as distinct to the learning that leads to it) could be the extent to which the qualification clearly and accurately communicates students' achievements and is trusted to do so by others. A trusted qualification would or could allow the individual to access further employment or learning opportunities and employers and educational establishments would wish that the qualification provides a reliable and valid measure of skills and knowledge.

Another function identified by the OECD in relation to qualifications specifically with a final exam could be to motivate learners to higher achievement; although this is somewhat contested in academic literature³. Lastly, exam results can be used to measure system or local performance.

On results day, an [open letter from a range of Scotland's employer representative groups](#) and others was published. This said—

"As employers we recognise the challenges you have faced over the last two years and take great confidence in the ingenuity and resilience shown to overcome them.

"We want to reassure you that we recognise and value your qualifications as much as any other year and that the skills you have developed, and will continue to develop, will play a crucial role in ensuring a bright future for businesses in Scotland and our economy."

The destinations of school leavers is published annually. The table below sets out the last four years of data from the follow-up survey which is taken around 9 months after the end of the academic year.

² [Assessment for Qualification and Certification in Upper Secondary Education: A Review of Country Practices and Research Evidence \(pp13-15\)](#)

³ [Harlen and Crick \(2002\)](#), for example found mixed evidence for summative assessments motivating learning. Should Members want more information, please contact SPICe directly.

Destination Category	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Higher Education	39.0	38.4	42.9	40.3
Further Education	22.6	23.3	23.6	18.3
Training	1.6	2.3	3.2	2.3
Employment	28.3	28.0	21.3	31.5
Voluntary Work	0.6	0.5	0.3	0.4
Activity Agreement	0.9	-	-	-
Personal Skills Development	0.3	0.4	0.8	0.4
All Positive Destinations	93.3	92.9	92.2	93.2

In the past two years, the percentage of school leavers entering HE (which includes HNC and HND courses) was a little above the figure pre-pandemic. The percentage going into employment fell for the pupils who left school in 2019/20 but bounced to a level higher than pre-pandemic last year; employment includes apprenticeships.

UCAS, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, published university entries following SQA results day (9 August 2022). All figures specific to Scotland are compared against SQA Results Day 2021 and 2019, however these figures may have increased as additional students are accepted through the clearing process.

On SQA results day 30,490 Scottish applicants had gained a place at a university, this was lower than in 2021 when 32,580 applicants were accepted to study, but higher than 28,750 in 2019 and any earlier year. The number of Scottish students gaining a place at a Scottish university was 29,630 an increase of 1,740 on pre-pandemic 2019.⁴

60.1% of applicants had a place at their first-choice university, up from 57.5% on SQA results day in 2019.

The number of 18 year olds gaining a place from SIMD20 postcodes was 14.6% on SQA results day which is the same number as in 2021. This figure has since increased and as of 1st September 2022 was 16.4%, a slight drop from 16.5% in 2021, but an increase from 14.5% in 2020. The number of applicants under 19 years old from SIMD20 areas was 2,110 young people, an increase of 25% from 2019 (at the same point in the cycle).

This year also saw a significant closing of the gender progression gap for young people in Scotland (19 and under). In 2019, 50% more females progressed to higher education than males, however in 2022 that has narrowed to 39% (from 47% last year).

In Scotland, there is a substantial section of higher education that is not included in UCAS' figures. This is mostly full-time higher education provided in colleges, which represents around one third of young full-time undergraduate study in Scotland. The Scottish Funding Council will not report on 2022 figures until January 2023.

⁴ In 2020 the Scottish Government made funding available for universities to provide additional student places following the decision to rely solely on [teacher estimates in the 2020 exam diet](#). As a result of this, SFC funded an additional 1,297 FTE student places in 2020-21. For 2021-22, [SFC also provided funding for a further 2,500](#) school leavers. Both cohorts will be funded for the duration of their degree programmes.

Reform

Structural reform

The Government has committed to replacing the SQA and Education Scotland with new agencies. The SQA has two main functions: Awarding, which is the development and delivery of qualifications and awarding certificates; and Accreditation, which is the regulation and quality assurance of qualifications offered in Scotland by approving awarding bodies and accrediting their qualifications. SQA Accreditation accredits the qualifications the SQA delivers under its awarding function.

Professor Muir's report [Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education](#) was published in March 2022. Structurally, the report recommended that a new awarding body taking on the awarding function of the SQA be established. His report recommended—

“A new body, Qualifications Scotland, should be established. This new body should be an executive Non Departmental Public Body (NDPB). It should take on board SQA's current awarding functions, chiefly the responsibility for the design and delivering of qualifications, the operation and certification of examinations, and the awarding of certificates. ... The governance structure of the proposed Qualifications Scotland body should be revised to include more representation from, and accountability to all learners, teachers, practitioners and the stakeholders with whom it engages.”

The [Government's response](#) fully accepted these recommendations and stated—

“The breadth of awarding functions will be retained, recognising the importance of both national and vocational qualifications and acknowledging the opportunity to extend these services and reach beyond Scotland where appropriate and beneficial.”

Professor Muir recommended that the SQA's accreditation functions be taken on by the new national agency for Scottish education. The Scottish Government's response stated—

“[The Scottish Government agrees] with Professor Muir that the SQA's Accreditation and Regulation functions should be independent from the awarding body. However careful further consideration is required in relation to the scope of these functions and where these functions should sit in future, in particular ensuring that the independence of these regulatory functions is appropriately secured. Further focused work on this aspect, drawing on the knowledge and expertise which exists within SQA and taking into account the views of stakeholders will take place over the next few months.”

Professor Muir also recommended that the SCQF Partnership be brought into the proposed national agency for Scottish education “in order that its Framework and staff can play an enhanced role in planning learner journeys and providing greater parity of esteem.” The Scottish Government's response indicated that the Government would not take this recommendation forward because it wishes to maintain “the SCQF Partnership's independent and non-sectoral status which is central to its ability to broker a holistic

approach across the learner journey”. The Government said that it would explore how to strengthen the impact of the Framework within the education system.

Professor Muir made recommendations in relation to the transition period. He recommended—

“Scottish Government should establish a Transition Programme Team to oversee the changes and reforms envisaged in this report. The transition programme should be taken forward in partnership with the bodies subject to reform and all those that are impacted by its outcomes.

“Those staff that are affected by my recommendations must be kept well engaged and informed of progress during the transitional period over which my recommendations are progressed. In my view all staff should also be treated in accordance with the Scottish Government’s Fair Work Policy.”

The Government agreed to these recommendations in principle. It said—

“We agree that the transitional period and programme of work should be overseen by experts. We will take this forward utilising the vast amounts of experience, knowledge and skills that exist within the current organisations affected by this reform, augmenting this where necessary and building on the ongoing work of their change teams. We have already begun this process to embed transformational change, discussing a framework to guide the transition with the bodies affected.

“We are fully committed to continuous and meaningful engagement and communication with all staff affected by the reform plans, and will be establishing arrangements between Scottish Government, SQA and Education Scotland and their trade unions to ensure staff are involved throughout the process. We recognise that there are different implications for each organisation, and the leadership teams in each organisation will remain accountable to the existing governance and accountability frameworks until new organisations are established. We will continue to protect job security and have provided assurances there will be no mandatory redundancies, and continue to ensure TUPE, CoSOP and our Fair Work policies are respected.”

The Cabinet Secretary gave a statement to Parliament with an update on [Education Reform on 14 June 2022](#). She said that the design and deliver of the new bodies would be “informed by engagement with a broad spectrum of those with a stake in their success and underpinned by a determination to bring in external views and innovative ideas that test, challenge and embed new approaches, cultures, governance, accountabilities and ways of working.” She also stated that she would establish and then chair a stakeholder reference group to support the process. The SQA’s submission noted that the work associated with the creation of the new qualifications body is being overseen by a Delivery Board with “membership drawn from Scotland’s education community”.

In this statement, the Cabinet Secretary also updated Parliament on plans to develop a renewed and shared vision for education in Scotland. To this end, she told Parliament that the Scottish Government and COSLA would “co-convene [a] national discussion” and that two members of the Government’s International Council of Education Advisers, Professor Carol Campbell and Dr Alma Harris would co-facilitate the discussion.

Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment

The Cabinet Secretary also provided an update on the work of the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment which is chaired by Professor Louise Hayward.

The terms of reference for the review were published at the beginning of June 2022. The review will focus on qualifications taken in schools and will make recommendations to the Cabinet Secretary on “the purpose and principles which should underpin any reform of national qualifications and assessment in the ‘senior phase’.”

The remit stated:

“It is anticipated that the IRG will explore issues such as:

- the purposes and uses of a qualification/exams system, including recognition of learning, accreditation, selection and accountability
- consider the approaches to assessment in vocational and technical subjects and lessons that could be learned from these approaches
- fairness, equity and the impact of different approaches to assessment for qualifications
- from ideas to practice – the process of change and learning from our past
- wider National and International approaches to the future of assessment and qualifications”

The review is intended to take the OECD review and [Professor Stobart’s comparative paper on upper-secondary education student assessment](#) as a starting point.

Professor Stobart’s paper had three “major themes”. These were:

- external assessments could be more innovative to capture a wider range of student capabilities;
- the role of teacher assessment could be reconsidered; and
- the academic and vocational strands could be better integrated with the assessment system to offer a broader range of curriculum options.

Professor Stobart’s review also raised questions around the function of an exam diet for 15-16 year-olds when most pupils will remain in education beyond this age. Professor Stobart’s conclusion stated that—

“In jurisdictions where upper-secondary assessments have high-stakes selective and accountability functions, national examinations have often inhibited changes to teaching and learning. This is partly because the examination syllabus becomes the de facto curriculum and teachers switch to narrower test preparation methods with secondary years students. ...

“Better alignment between curriculum and examinations may result from further technical innovation, particularly online interactive approaches and resources which allow for a wider range of question types and answer formats. A more decentralised approach, in which schools share more assessment responsibilities, may also align better with the curriculum and 21st century pedagogy.”

Professor Hayward’s review is expected to work in conjunction with the forthcoming national discussion on education and ensure relevant findings from the discussion are taken into account in preparing a final report. The review is expected to produce an interim report by the end of this year and make final recommendations by the end March 2023.

Ned Sharratt, Senior Researcher (Education, Culture), SPICe Research

31 August 2022

Note: Committee briefing papers are provided by SPICe for the use of Scottish Parliament committees and clerking staff. They provide focused information or respond to specific questions or areas of interest to committees and are not intended to offer comprehensive coverage of a subject area.

The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP www.parliament.scot

Annexe B

EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE SUBMISSION FROM SCOTTISH QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY 2021-22 NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

1. Introduction

The Education, Children and Young People Committee has asked the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) to discuss National Qualifications in 2022, the development of future qualifications and education reform. This paper provides some summary information in advance of the evidence session with SQA, to be held on 7 September 2022.

2. National Qualifications Results in 2022

Background

While 2021-22 marked a return to formal SQA assessments (exams and coursework), it was not a return to 'normal'. With ongoing Covid-19 disruption to learning and teaching now impacting on a third academic year, and most learners having had no prior experience of formal assessments, SQA put in place a wide-ranging package of support for learners.

SQA worked with partners across the education sector, including teachers, lecturers, learners, parents and carers, to agree the right package of support that would help learners demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and skills despite the disruption.

The support included:

- course assessment modifications, that either removed or reduced elements of an exam and/or coursework, provided more choice in an assessment or removed a topic from an exam
- revision support to help learners prepare for their exams – including advance notice of exam content that will and study guides
- an Exam Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service that included Covid-19 cover for learners who had to self-isolate or stay at home on the day of the exam
- a more generous approach to grading (see below) than in a normal exam year, to help ensure fairness for this year's learners while maintaining standards
- a free appeals service (see below) including the option for learners to directly appeal to SQA.

In addition to the SQA package, there was support from others in the education system, including online advice from Education Scotland, local authorities, schools and colleges.

A more generous approach to grading

Teachers and teacher judgement are at the heart of the awarding process every year. Thousands of practising teachers and lecturers play an integral role in the setting, marking

and grading of assessments. This includes the involvement of Principal Assessors (subject specialists and practicing teachers/lecturers) in grade boundary meetings.

SQA announced in February 2022 that, where necessary, it would adopt a more generous approach to grading than it would do in a normal exam year to help ensure fairness for learners while maintaining standards.

Grade boundaries are set every exam year. They are not pre-determined and are adjusted every year as needed. Grade boundary meetings follow a set process, taking into account a range of information including marker feedback and teacher estimates. This year additional factors, such as the impact of disruption and the effect of course assessment modifications and revision support, were taken into consideration.

Attainment

Overall, attainment rates in 2022 across National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher were between 2019, when exams last took place, and 2021, when alternative awarding was in place. This is a strong set of results.

2022 headline results

National 5	Higher	Advanced Higher
310,170 entries	188,220 entries	28,220 entries
A-C attainment rate 80.8%	A-C attainment rate 78.9%	A-C attainment rate 81.3%
A attainment rate 40.3%	A attainment rate 34.8%	A attainment rate 33.7%

2022 results in context

	National 5 A-C	Higher A-C	Advanced Higher A-C
2019	78.2%	74.8%	79.4%
2022	80.8%	78.9%	81.3%
2021	85.8%	87.3%	90.2%

The alternative awarding arrangements in place in 2021, and the significantly different circumstances in which exams took place in 2019 and the years before, mean that comparisons of attainment between years should be treated with significant caution and do not allow for any conclusions to be drawn on changes in education performance.

The Attainment Gap

As part of its equalities duties, SQA carries out an analysis of attainment across different equalities characteristics. Generally speaking, in line with overall attainment, attainment across the different characteristics is between 2019 and 2021. Again, comparisons of attainment between years should be treated with significant caution and do not allow for any conclusions to be drawn on changes in education performance. When focusing on attainment in the most deprived and least deprived groups, the attainment gap is narrower than 2019 and wider than 2021.

	National 5	Higher	Advanced Higher
	Percentage point difference between A-C attainment in least and most deprived areas		
2019	17.1	16.9	13.6
2022	14.6	15	13.2
2021	9.1	7.8	5.5

Appeals

One of the features of this year's package of support is the appeals service. Learners whose final grades were lower than their teacher estimates are able to appeal, free of charge, either directly or via their school/college. Priority is given to those whose appeals relate to a place at university or college, a training placement or employment. A booklet with full information has been sent to every learner's home.

As of 24 August, SQA has received 1,414 priority appeals across a broad range of subjects. The review of priority appeals is underway and results are due to be reported to higher education institutions via UCAS in line with all other UK awarding bodies.

The service for standard (non-priority) appeals closed to learners on 30 August and is due to close to centres on 2 September.

More information on Results 2022

The [Chief Examining Officer's Report](#) and the [Awarding Methodology Report](#) can be found on our website and provide further detail on the approach to assessment and awarding this year.

Full details of attainment rates, grade boundaries and equalities monitoring are available on the [SQA's statistics pages](#).

3. Assessing National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher in 2023

We recognise that the disruption to teaching and learning caused by COVID-19 will have an impact on learners for some time to come, and this is being considered carefully as we consider arrangements for National Qualifications in 2023.

It is important to us that the views of teaching professionals and learners inform our decision making. Earlier this year, we sought the views of learners, teachers, lecturers, parents and carers, as well as SQA's Advisory Council, on whether the current modifications to assessment should remain in place for the session 2022-23.

These significant modifications to assessment were introduced to reduce the volume of assessment and ease the workload of learners, teachers and lecturers, and formed part of the wide-ranging package of support outlined above in Section 2. We are grateful to everyone who shared their feedback.

After careful consideration, and reflecting on the feedback we received, we confirmed in April that for each course we will keep the current types of modifications to assessment in full for the coming session. Carrying the assessment modifications forward will help to provide some certainty for learners, teachers and lecturers and help free up more time for learning and teaching of the course content, while maintaining the integrity and credibility of their qualifications.

We also confirmed that the current alternative assessment approaches to our Higher National and Vocational Qualifications (HNVQ) will continue for 2022-23.

We are continuing to work with partners on the National Qualifications Steering Group, which includes representatives from across the education system, on detailed arrangements for assessing and grading National Qualifications next session and whether further support, beyond the modifications already announced, is needed. The first meeting of the NQ 2023 Steering Group will take place on 6 September. We will also continue to engage with teachers, lecturers, learners, parents and carers throughout the year.

4. Education reform

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills has initiated a wide-ranging programme of reform of Scottish education in response to the recommendations in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's independent review of Curriculum for Excellence (June 2021), and Professor Ken Muir's report, Putting Learners at the Centre (March 2022).

The programme includes Professor Louise Hayward's independent review of the future of qualifications and assessment, and the forthcoming national discussion on the future of education.

The outcomes of these important pieces of work will help to inform the work to create a new qualifications body, independent inspectorate, and national education agency.

We are working closely with Professor Hayward and her team to contribute to the discussion and evidence base regarding what mix of assessment types Scotland wants to see in the future. Similarly, SQA welcomes and will contribute to the national discussion on the future of education in Scotland. The overall reform programme is being overseen by the Scottish Government-led Strategic Programme Board, which includes a wide range of external stakeholders. The work of the Board will also be informed by a Key Stakeholder Advisory Group.

The work associated with the creation of the new qualifications body is being overseen by a Delivery Board. This Board has membership drawn from Scotland's education community to provide insight, advice and challenge, as well as representatives from SQA, our Trade Unions and the Scottish Government.

While work on education reform progresses, we remain fully committed to working in partnership with Scotland's education community to deliver for Scotland's learners. This includes delivery of exams and other assessments to schools, colleges and training providers in 2023, which learners can have pride in, and which universities, colleges and employers can have confidence in.

Scottish Qualifications Authority
September 2022