

# Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

9th Meeting, 2023 (Session 6), Wednesday  
31 May 2023

## PE2014: Revert to the appeals system used in 2022 for SQA exams

<b>Petitioner</b>	Elliott Hepburn on behalf of Moffat Academy students
<b>Petition summary</b>	Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to implement a revised SQA appeals process which takes into account evidence of the pupil's academic performance throughout the year, particularly prelim results.
<b>Webpage</b>	<a href="https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2014">https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2014</a>

### Introduction

1. This is a new petition that was lodged on 3 April 2023.
2. A full summary of this petition and its aims can be found at **Annexe A**.
3. A SPICe briefing has been prepared to inform the Committee's consideration of the petition and can be found at **Annexe B**.
4. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 573 signatures have been received on this petition.
5. The Committee seeks views from the Scottish Government on all new petitions before they are formally considered. A response has been received from the Scottish Government and is included at **Annexe C** of this paper.
6. A submission has been provided by the petitioner. This is included at **Annexe D**.

### Action

The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take on this petition.

**Clerk to the Committee**

## Annexe A

### PE2014: Revert to the appeals system used in 2022 for SQA exams

#### Petitioner

Elliott Hepburn on behalf of Moffat Academy students

#### Date Lodged:

03/04/23

#### Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to implement a revised SQA appeals process which takes into account evidence of the pupil's academic performance throughout the year, particularly prelim results.

#### Previous action

I have contacted my local MSP Oliver Mundell to highlight the concerns of school pupils about changes to the appeal system.

#### Background information

Because of the continued effects of the pandemic on teacher and pupil attendance as well as the difficulties we continue to face as a consequence of the break in our education in 2020 and 2021, it is incredibly unjust to take away the support mechanism of appeals as they were carried out in 2022. The strike action being taken by teachers also means more lost days in our education.

A feature of Scotland's education system is equity, yet the changes to the appeals process in 2023 will lead to very unequal outcomes. Any pupil who is going through tough times will be judged on one day rather than the work completed across the year.

Also, because of the withdrawal of assignments in many subjects, we will be the only generation judged solely on our performance on one day. This would appear to go against the principles of an education system that purports to value the whole child.

## Annexe B

The logo for SPICe, featuring the text 'SPICe' in a white, sans-serif font on a dark purple background.

The Information Centre  
An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh

# Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on petition [PE2014](#): Revert to the appeals system used in 2022 for SQA exams, lodged by Elliott Hepburn on behalf of Moffat Academy students

## Introduction

The petition is concerned with the SQA's appeals service. Between 2020 and 2022 there were a variety of approaches to certification. These approaches were developed in response to the pandemic. The appeals processes also varied from year to year.

## The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)

The SQA is a statutory body and an NDPB. Its functions are set out in the [Education \(Scotland\) Act 1996](#), which are broadly speaking developing and awarding qualifications and accrediting other bodies' qualifications. The SQA operates at arm's length from the Scottish Government. However, Ministers have the power to direct the SQA under section 6 of the 1996 Act.

The Government intends to replace the SQA and it is expected that a Bill will be introduced later this year for this purpose.

## 2022 Appeals process and review

Last year the appeals service allowed learners and schools to have a review of their grade by the SQA. This would include a review of "alternative assessment evidence" if the grade achieved in the SQA assessments was lower than the grade estimated by their school.

The kind of evidence the SQA would have considered in this review must have been generated through planned assessment prior to SQA's exam and would have been used to inform the estimates which were submitted to SQA.

After the appeal, the candidate was awarded the higher of two grades, based on either:

- a clerical check of their SQA assessments — exam script and/or coursework, or
- a review by SQA senior appointees of the assessment evidence submitted by their centre, taking into account their performance in any required coursework

The SQA described the appeals process in 2022 as “an emergency response for a single year, recognising that learners were sitting exams for the first time following several years of COVID-19 disruption”.

The SQA undertook a [review of the 2022 certification and appeals processes](#), which included a consultation with more than 3,500 learners, teachers, lecturers, parents and carers. This found—

- The appeals service increased workload substantially for many teachers and lecturers, owing to the need to gather and submit alternative evidence to SQA. There was also some evidence that the alternative evidence approach led to an increase in the overall amount of assessment for learners.
- The system used led to perceptions of unfairness, as it was not clear to practitioners or learners why evidence submitted to SQA did not lead to an improved grade. Similarly, only learners who had received an estimate higher than their certificated grade were eligible to appeal.
- The timing and clarity of communications around the process and evidence requirements further added to concerns around fairness.
- When asked about the appeals approach for 2023, there were mixed views about the preferred approach among stakeholder groups.
- Stakeholders and participants in the evaluation suggested the previous post-results service could be ‘enhanced’ to address some of the concerns raised in the past about access, by making it free

and giving learners direct access. Participants highlighted that the exceptional circumstances service could continue to provide an alternative evidence route for learners facing extenuating circumstances who require that option.

## 2023 Appeals process

Following the review, the SQA set out its Appeals process for 2023. A key difference is that alternative assessment evidence will not be considered. After an appeal is made, a senior marker will carry out a marking review of the marked assessments. A marking review checks that:

- all parts of the 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 our system.

It is not a re-mark of the assessment. This is similar to the approach prior to the pandemic. The service is free and an individual can seek an appeal directly with the SQA – these features were not in place pre-pandemic.

## Examination Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service

Appeals are a separate process to the Examination Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service.

The EECSS, will involve a review of alternative evidence for candidates with exceptional circumstances. The [SQA set out the types of exceptional](#) circumstances that could be covered—

“The service will be available to learners who are unable to attend an exam and widened to include those whose performance in the examination may have been affected by a personal circumstance, or an unplanned incident on the day, which is beyond their control. This could be a medical condition (including Covid-19 related absence) or bereavement, or disruption on the day of the exam as reported by the Chief Invigilator.”

**Continuing effects of the pandemic and industrial action**  
Certification of National Qualifications this year will be on a similar basis to last year with modifications made to courses. For example, there are

reductions in coursework and, in some cases, a reduction in the examined content. Modifications are on a course-by-course basis.

This year has also seen industrial action by teachers which has led to several days being lost. Addressing this issue and the response from the SQA the then [Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, Shirley-Anne Somerville MSP](#), told Parliament on 14 March:

“The modifications to courses that are already in place this year will help to mitigate some of the impact of the industrial action. In addition, prior to the industrial action, the Scottish Qualifications Agency confirmed that a sensitive and evidence-based approach to grading is planned for this year.”

SPICE sought clarification from the SQA on what a sensitive and evidence-based approach will entail. The SQA said—

“SQA announced its approach to National Qualifications in 2023 on 16 November 2022. We said “..we recognise that the impact of the pandemic is still being felt by learners and practitioners. Our approach to setting standards and grading in 2023 will therefore continue to be sensitive to the extent of this ongoing impact. The approach will be grounded in evidence and take into consideration the significant modifications made to National Course assessments.”

“This approach was established prior to industrial action in schools but where the nationally aggregated effect of any and all factors that have had an impact on learners’ performance – including industrial action – shows through in the data then the sensitive approach for 2023 will be applied.

“A fuller description of the process of setting grade boundaries is available in our [Guide to Setting Grade Boundaries](#) document. The sensitive approach we are taking in 2023 is very similar to the approach taken in 2022. Section 7 of the [2022 Methodology Report](#) describes how we applied that approach in 2022.

“Note: applying sensitivity in terms of grading can be misinterpreted as sensitivity in marking. As in 2022, all assessment evidence will be marked in line with marking schemes designed to ensure national standards are applied. Sensitivity will be applied when deciding grade boundaries.”

## The future of certification

As well as the expected reform to national education bodies, such as the SQA, certification of learning in the Senior Phase is also being reviewed. An [interim report was published on 3 March](#) and consultation work continues.

**Ned Sharratt**  
**Senior Researcher**  
25/04/2023

The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at [spice@parliament.scot](mailto:spice@parliament.scot)

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in petition briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

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## Annexe C

### Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills submission of 3 April 2023

#### PE2014/A: Revert to the appeals system used in 2022 for SQA exams

Thank you for your e-mail of 4 April 2023 on behalf of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee regarding Petition PE2014 seeking to “Revert to the appeals system used in 2022 for SQA exams”. I am replying as this guidance falls within my portfolio of responsibilities.

The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) is the awarding body for Scotland, as set out under the Education (Scotland) Act 1996. SQA is an executive Non-Departmental Public Body and as such operates at an arm’s length to Ministers. It follows that SQA is responsible for its own operational decisions around qualifications, which includes decisions on the appeals process for 2023.

I understand that studying toward qualifications can be stressful at the best of times and that the last few years have been extremely challenging for learners, parents, teachers, and others across our education system. Decisions are being taken with the best interests of learners at the centre.

The alternative approaches adopted in 2020, 2021 and 2022 were temporary, emergency measures, which were introduced in response to the pandemic and the specific circumstances in each of those years. A package of support remains in place this year but has rightly evolved to reflect the latest circumstances, and the approach to appeals is part of that evolution.

SQA carried out an extensive evaluation of the 2022 arrangements, engaging with over 3,500 learners, practitioners, parents and carers, including on appeals, which has helped to inform the approach for 2023. The 2023 approach seeks to ensure fairness to all learners while maintaining the integrity and credibility of the qualifications system.



In 2023, all learners will have the right to have a marker review of their exam paper or coursework, irrespective of their estimated grade - appeals in 2022 were only for those whose teacher estimates were above their certificated grades. Unlike prior to the pandemic – and unlike the rest of the UK - the service will be free and learners will have direct access to it.

Alternative evidence will not be needed for the Appeals service this year. This should have reduced the time spent on assessment during the year, freeing up time for teaching and learning, which should be the priority, particularly in the context of COVID recovery.

An Exam Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service (EECCS) is also available in 2023 for learners who are unable to attend their exam - for example, through illness or bereavement – or whose performance in the examination may have been affected by personal circumstances. SQA recognises that there are times when learners cannot sit an exam for reasons outside of their control, and it is important that the use of alternative evidence remains available for those learners who really need it. Scotland is the only country in the UK to offer such a service.

SQA has already confirmed that a sensitive, evidence-based approach to grading will be continued in 2023 and that existing modifications to the National Qualifications from 2022 are being continued in the 2023 academic session. These modifications vary by subject and level and may include removing or reducing elements of an exam or coursework, providing more choice or time during an assessment, or removing a topic from the exam. Whilst implemented to acknowledge the ongoing impacts of the pandemic, these measures will also help to mitigate disruption arising from teacher industrial action.

The former Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills issued an [open letter to learners](#) on 21 February setting out support available to learners during the industrial action. This support remains in place.

Support includes the National E-Learning Offer (NeLO) which continues to provide learners with thousands of live, recorded and online resources that support study and revision in preparation for this year's examinations and which can be accessed independently by learners at a time that suits them. The NeLO webpage offers learners a searchable database of nearly 25,000 senior phase resources across hundreds of courses which are updated regularly. This includes over 3,000 recorded lessons created by Scottish teachers which learners from all 32 local

authorities are accessing regularly. Furthermore, as part of NeLO, all learners have been able to sign up for “live” and interactive evening study support webinars led by subject specialist teachers throughout the year, as well as interactive study support sessions held over the Easter break. In addition, many local authorities, schools and Regional Improvement Collaboratives, often with partners, have been putting in place support for learners preparing for their exams.

I hope the Committee finds this letter helpful.

**Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, Jenny Gilruth MSP**