

## Education, Children and Young People Committee

**22<sup>nd</sup> Meeting, 2023 (Session 6), Wednesday 13  
September 2023**

### Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)

#### Committee meeting

1. At this meeting, the Committee will take evidence from–
  - Fiona Robertson, Chief Executive and Scotland's Chief Examining Officer for SQA;
  - Martyn Ware, SQA Director of Policy, Analysis & Standards; and
  - Dr Gill Stewart, SQA Director of Qualifications Development.
2. A briefing from SPICe is attached in **Annexe A**.
3. The Committee received a letter from SQA on results day and has received a written submission from the same for the purpose of this session. These can be found in **Annexe B**.
4. The SQA also provided a copy of its [National Qualifications 2023 Awarding – Methodology Report](#) and its [Chief Examining Officer's 2023 National Qualifications and Awards Report](#) as part of its submission.

**ECYP Committee Clerks  
8 September 2023**

## Annexe A

The logo for SPICe is a purple rounded rectangle with a gradient. The text 'SPICe' is written in white, bold, sans-serif font.

**The Information Centre**  
An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh

## **Education, Children and Young People Committee**

### **Scottish Qualifications Authority**

### **13 September 2023**

#### **Introduction**

This paper is intended to support Members during the Committee's evidence session with the SQA.

This is an opportunity for the Committee to explore the administration of the 2023 exam diet and certification of learning in schools. The first part of this paper sets out some of the results from the diet. The focus is mainly on school exam-based courses.

Since the disruption of learning and exams in 2020, there have been a number of approaches to certification and this coming year will see most courses returning to full assessment practices. The method of appeals has also been changing.

In addition, the SQA is expected to be abolished and a new qualifications agency established. And at the same time the review of qualifications has suggested a radical change to certification.

#### **2023 Exam Diet**

The SQA published results of a wide range of qualifications from the 2023 diet on 8 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 state and independent schools.

The focus of this paper is on those qualifications normally taken in schools. Across the UK, Qualifications authorities are “continuing a journey back to pre-pandemic awarding”. Results this year in Scotland reflect this process as pass rates and the proportion of pupils getting the highest grades has returned to pre-pandemic

trends. The approach to 2023 was similar to 2022. However, between 2019 and 2022 the methodology and approach has changed due to the responses to the pandemic.

- 2019: Business as usual, exams, coursework, etc.
- 2020: No exams, certification based on teachers' judgement using evidence retrospectively
- 2021: No exams, certification based on teachers' judgement with planned evidence gathering, amendments to the 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.
- 2023: Similar to 2022 with a change of language, from "generous" to "sensitive grading".

The changing practice in certification makes comparisons over the period since 2020 challenging. As we will see below, the different approaches led to different patterns of results.

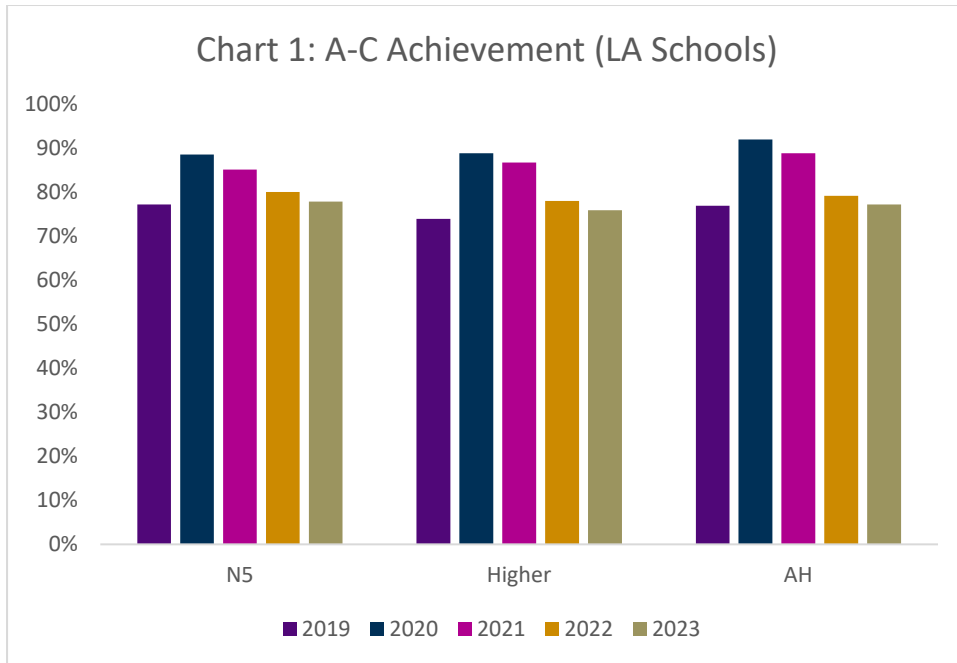
The [2023 Chief Examining Officer's Report](#) said that the approach of the SQA in 2022-23 was developed with a recognition that "while the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic may have been less severe than in previous years, things have not yet returned to normal". The SQA aimed to ensure that its approach was fair to learners while maintaining standards.

The Chief Examining Officer once again this year described these as a "strong set of results".

### ***National 4-Advanced Higher in Local Authority centres***

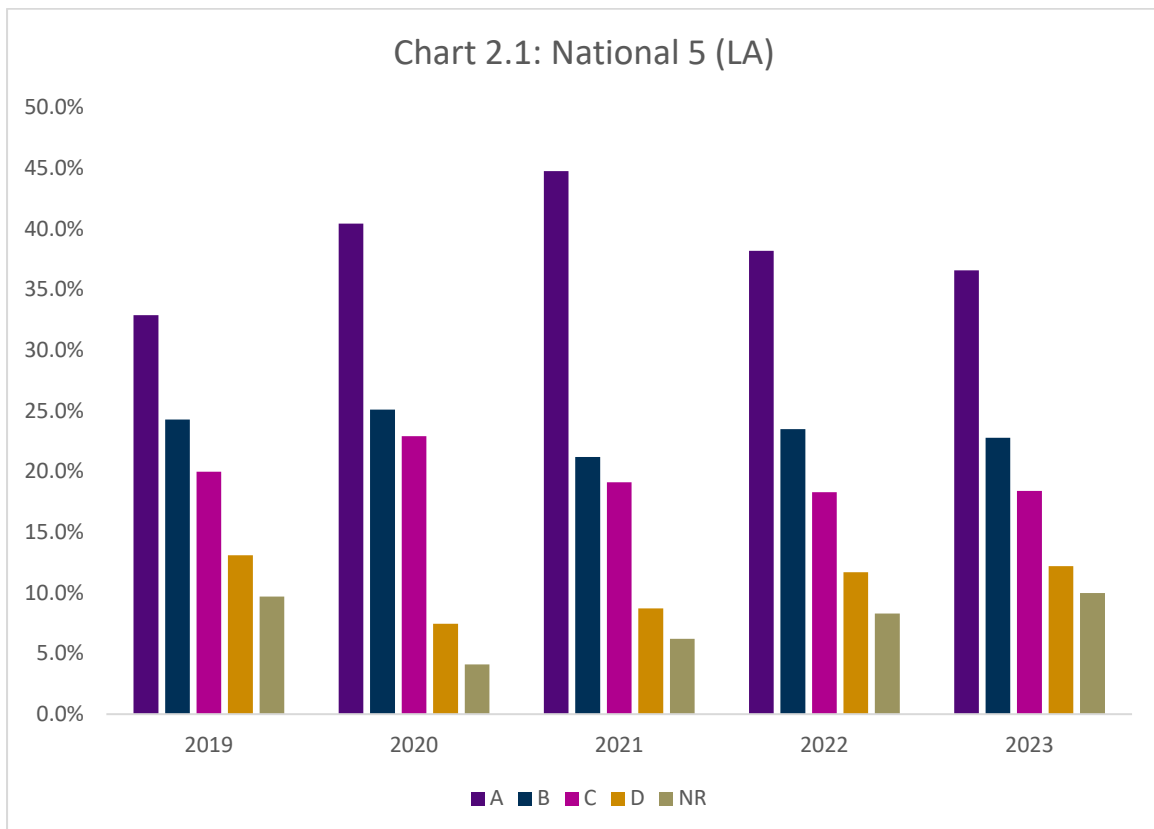
In August, the data released is on Provisional Attainment. It is provisional because these are the results prior to the appeals process. Year-on-year comparisons are also against the provisional statistics from previous year.

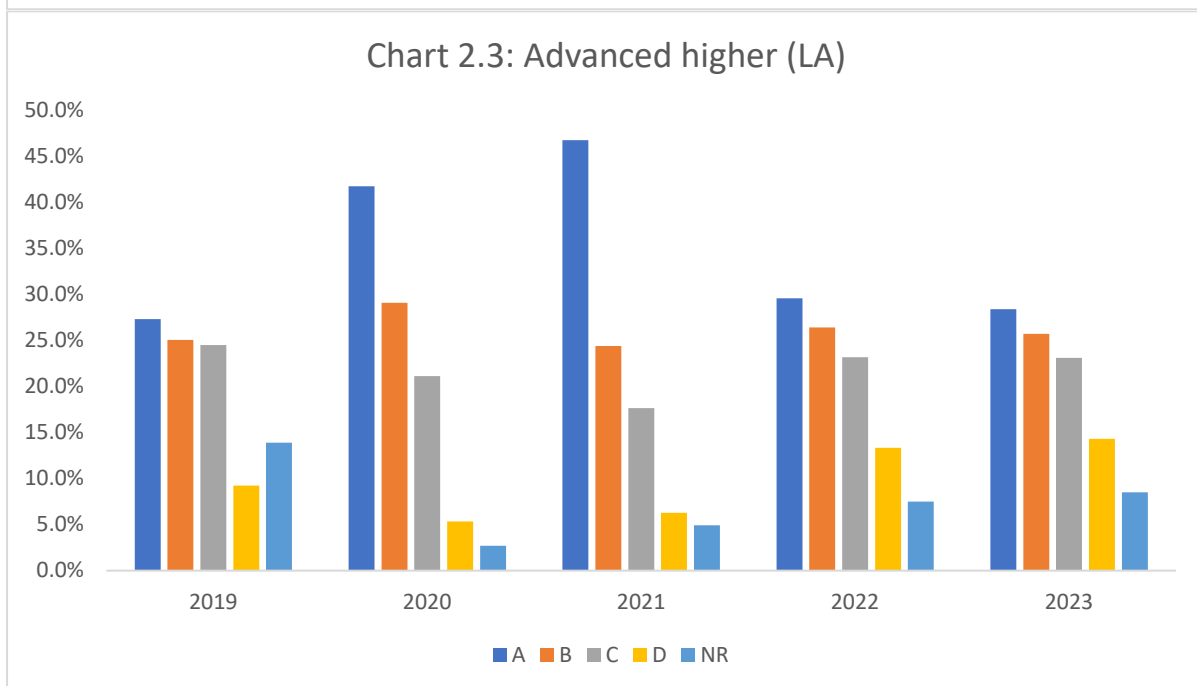
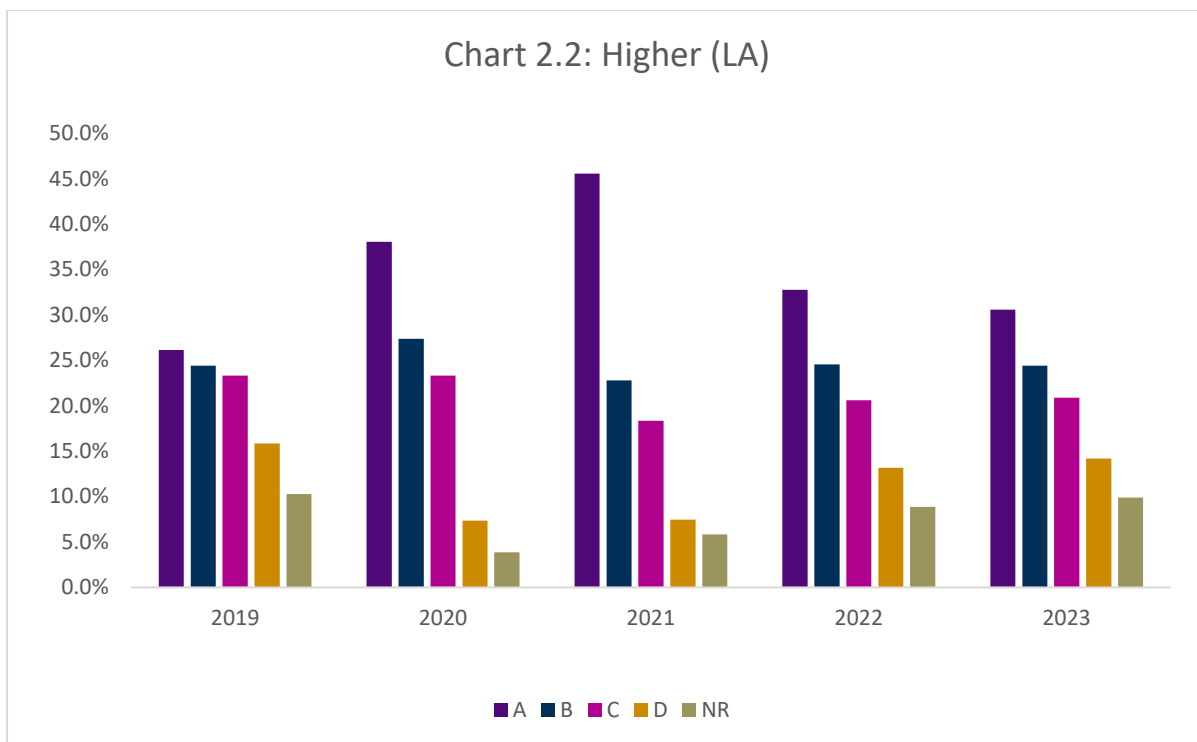
The SQA provides data on the overall results as well as separately for local authority schools, independent schools, colleges, and other centres. The following charts focus on the achievement of pupils who took the exams or courses at local authority schools.



The chart above shows that overall rates of candidates achieving A-C in 2023 is returning to 2019 levels, although they remain a little higher. The peak of the rate of A-C passes was in 2020.

The following charts show the distribution of grades over the past five years. NR is short for “no result”.





For all three of these qualifications, the peak of the rate of A grades awarded in local authority schools was in 2021 and has reduced every year since. For the National 5 and Higher courses, the rate in 2023 (N5: 36.6% and H: 30.6%) remains notably higher than in 2019 (N5: 32.9% and H: 26.1%). At Advanced Higher, the rate of A awards in 2023 (28.4%) is similar to 2019 (27.3%).

The next table below shows the entries from local authority schools for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications.

**Table 1: Entries**

	<b>National 5</b>	<b>Higher</b>	<b>AH</b>
2019	266,485	164,830	19,320
2020	278,525	166,655	19,085
2021	276,330	175,740	22,245
2022	288,785	170,020	23,430
2023	299,710	173,520	22,810

The number of entries varies from year to year. To some degree the number of entries will depend on school rolls which vary over time.

The table below shows the entries to National 4 courses and the percentage of those entries that gained that qualification.

**Table 2: National 4**

	<b>% award</b>	<b>Entries</b>
2019	88.6%	102,790
2020	91.2%	101,525
2021	86.2%	102,270
2022	86.2%	122,140
2023	88.2%	136,720

There was a significant jump in entries between 2021 and 2022 and again this year. This might be explained by an increase in dual entries to both National 4 and National 5. The Chief Examining Officer’s report stated—

“Over the last few years, we have seen significant increases in the numbers of dual entries at National 4 and National 5. In 2023, dual entries at National 4 and National 5 were 30,530, or 9.5% of total entries at National 5. This is a significant increase on pre-pandemic levels, at 13,595 (4.7%) in 2019 and this fell to below 10,000 in 2020 and 2021.”

Entries into National 2 and 3 courses are set out in the table below.

	<b>National 2</b>		<b>National 3</b>	
	<b>% award</b>	<b>Entries</b>	<b>% award</b>	<b>Entries</b>
2019	76.4%	1,935	87.9%	18,690
2020	74.6%	1,865	91.6%	21,060
2021	68.5%	2,030	86.2%	20,270
2022	71.5%	2,180	84.9%	19,665
2023	69.1%	2,865	84.8%	21,815

## *Grade Boundaries*

The “sensitive approach” to marking is perhaps illustrated through the approach to setting grade boundaries.

Adjusting grade boundaries happens every year to ensure that standards of

qualifications are set appropriately and maintained over time and across courses. The [SQA describes this approach](#) as “attainment referenced” with the intention to “maintain performance standards by using expert judgement of assessment performance through the use of qualitative evidence, supported by statistics”. This is similar to Ofqual’s approach; [it explains](#)—

“We say that exam standards have been maintained when equivalent grade boundary marks across adjacent exams correspond to equivalent levels of attainment. We call this principle Attainment-Referencing.”

Notional grade boundaries are used to help design qualifications and are the starting point for discussing the final grade boundaries for most courses in any year. Notional grade boundaries are set at A (70%), upper A (85%) and C (50%). Other grade boundaries are set in relation to these. The [SQA’s Awarding methodology report](#) stated—

“In 2022, there was an explicit policy intention to achieve an intermediary position between 2019 and 2021 at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher levels. However, there was no explicit policy intention this year around outcomes. There was, though, an expectation that 2023 awarding would represent a step towards Scotland’s journey back to pre-pandemic standards through less significant adjustments to grade boundaries than in 2022. Principal Assessors were asked to indicate whether they thought intended grade boundaries would be at notional, previous year or moving towards notional.”

The impact of different approaches in 2022 and 2023 can be seen in the grade boundaries. The table below shows the average percentage for the lower boundaries of Upper A, A, and C grades at National 5 in 2023, 2022 and 2019.

**Table 4: Average lower grade boundaries for National 5**

	Upper A	A	C
2023	84.5%	69.4%	47.6%
2022	84.0%	68.5%	46.1%
2019	85.1%	70.5%	50.1%

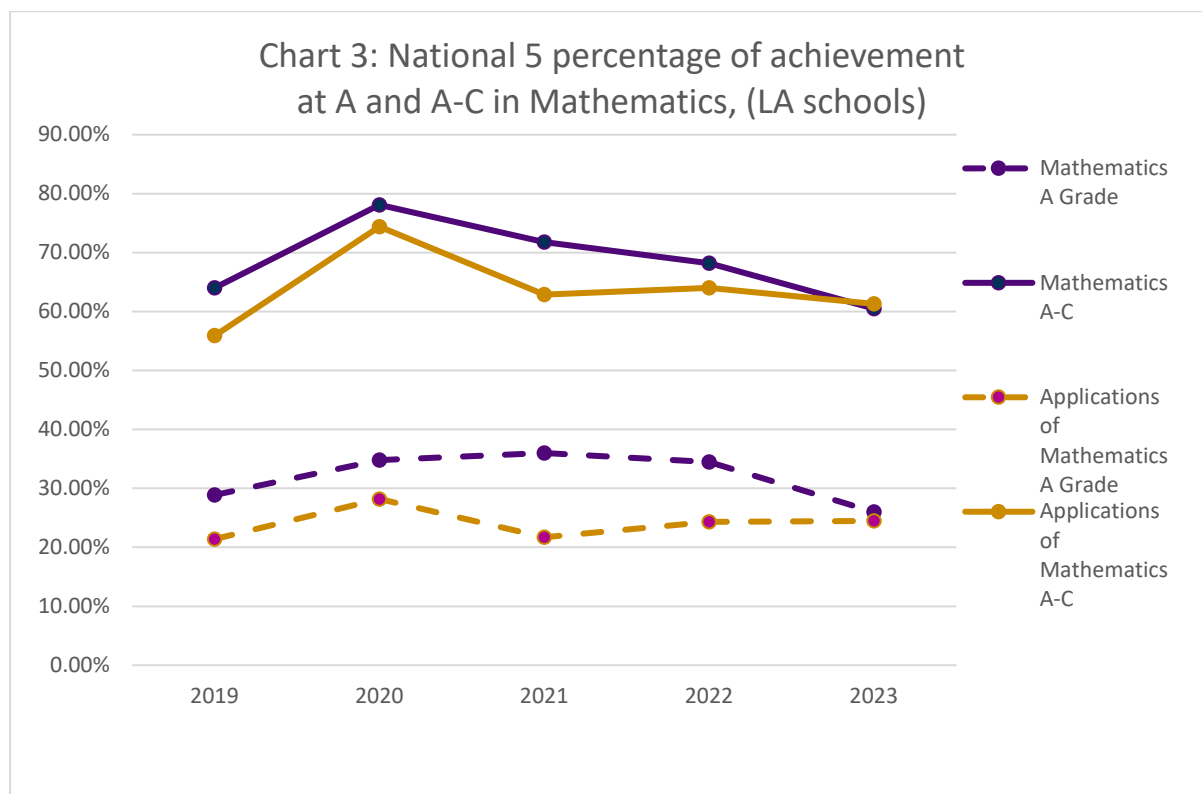
The SQA’s submission to this Committee stated—

“Our sensitive approach carefully considered whether the assessment performed as intended. We then considered the impact of the course assessment modifications that were in place and then we looked at the legacy impact of the pandemic upon learning and teaching.”

## *Subjects*

So far, we have just looked at the overall results. In her Chief Examining Officer’s report, Ms Robertson noted that A-C achievement in National 5 Mathematics was below pre-pandemic levels. There are two Mathematics courses in English a pupil

can take at National 5, Mathematics and Applications of Mathematics. The chart below shows the percentage of entries that achieved an A and A-C in these subjects over the past five years.



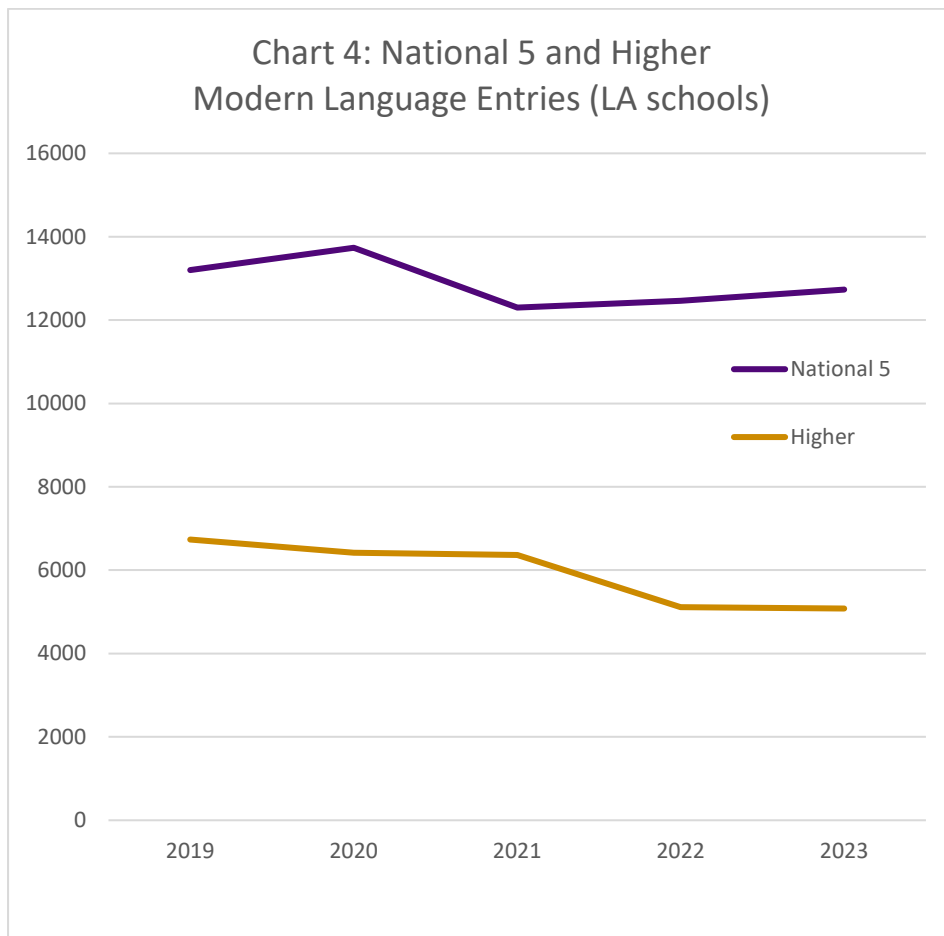
The percentage of pupils that achieved grades A-C in Mathematics (solid purple line) this year is 61.3%; in 2019 this was 64.0%. The percentage of pupils gaining an A grade in Mathematics (broken purple line) is also lower than in 2019. The number of local authority centre entries in 2019 for Mathematics and Applications of Mathematics were 38,075 and 3,955 respectively. In 2023 the equivalent numbers were 34,585 and 18,450. While the entries in Mathematics are lower this year compared to 2019, taken together, the number of entries in both Mathematics and Applications of Mathematics in 2023 was up 25% on 2019; this is more than twice the growth in the number of pupils in Senior Phase. Some of this may reflect students being entered into more than one qualification.

In English, the percentage of pupils from local authority schools gaining National 5 A-C in 2019 was 85.6% and in 2023 the figure was the same. As with mathematics, this is out of line with the overall results where A-C achievement was higher than in 2019. The rate of A grades was, however, up this year, 37.7%, compared to 2019, 33.0%.

One of the concerns raised during the Session 5 Committee’s work on the senior phase was the narrowing of choice in S4 and the impact this had on certain subjects. One set of subjects that saw a reduction in take-up was modern languages. The chart below shows the entries to modern language<sup>1</sup> National 5 and Higher courses.

<sup>1</sup> Cantonese, French, Gaelic (Learners), German, Italian, Latin, Mandarin (Simplified), Mandarin (Traditional), Spanish, and Urdu.





The SQA offers a number of National qualifications that support Gaelic medium education and the learning of Gaelic. Take-up of these courses is low as the table below sets out.

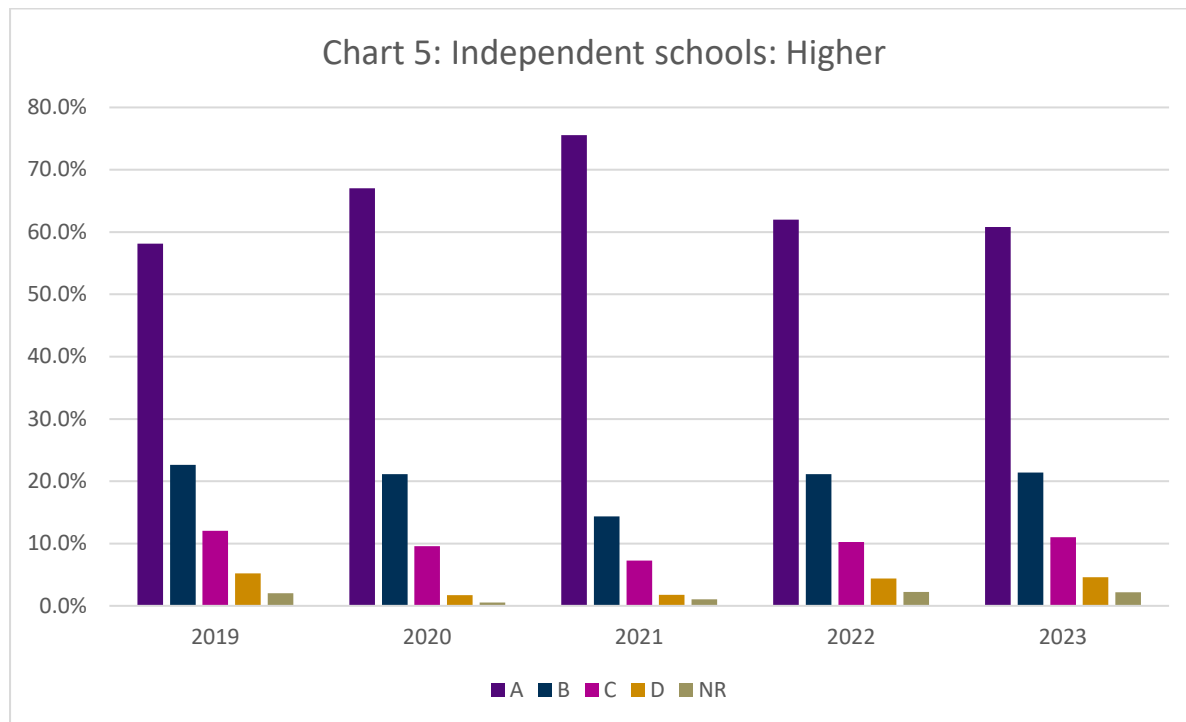
**Table 5: Entries in 2023 from LA Schools**

Course	National 5	Higher	Advanced Higher
Cruinn-eòlas (Geography)	20	[c]	-
Eachdraidh (History)	30	[c]	-
Gàidhlig	225	120	20
Matamataig (Mathematics)	60	40	-
Nuadh-eòlas (Modern Studies)	25	-	-
Gaelic (Learners)	85	40	5

[c] is where the value is suppressed to protect against the risk of disclosure of personal information, "-" means that course is not listed in the data at that level.

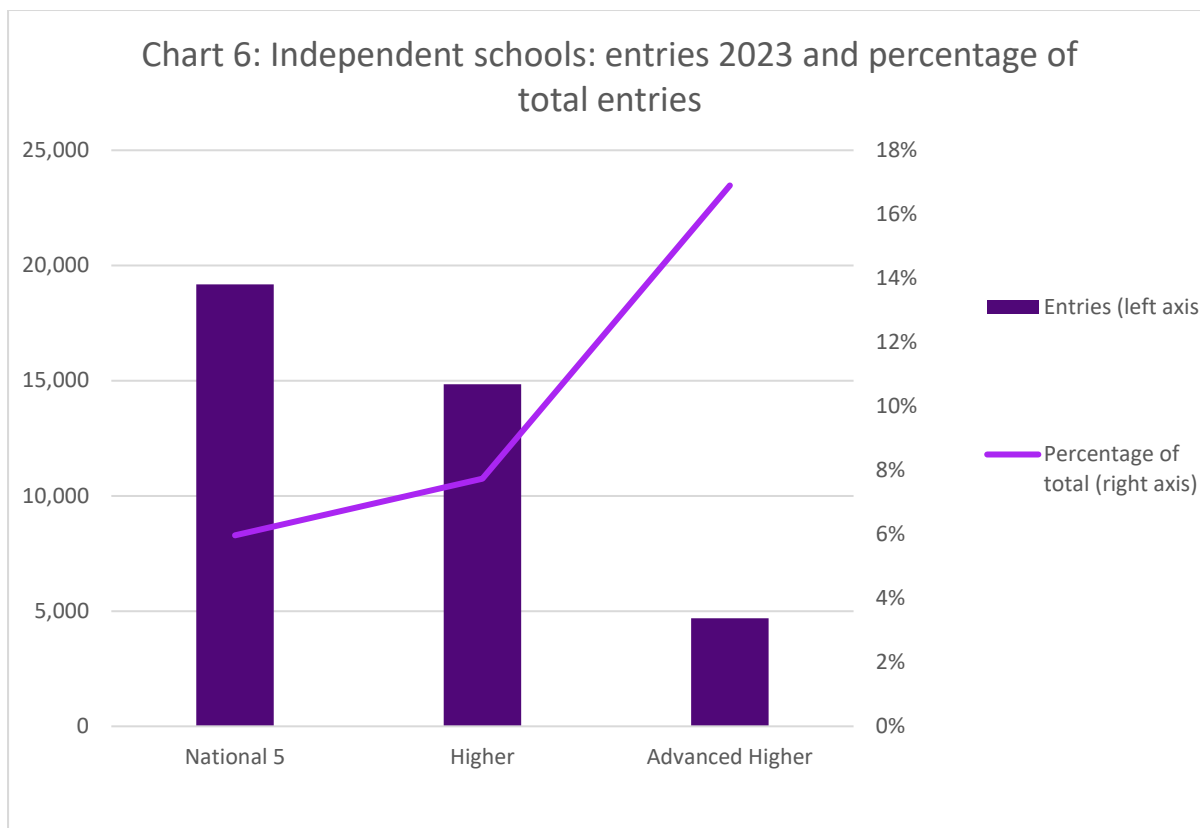
## Independent schools

The SQA also reports data for the independent sector. This paper will not go into too much detail on this sector. Just looking at Higher results, the chart below shows the distribution of grades at higher entries for pupils from independent schools.



Similar to local authority schools, the rate of A passes peaked in 2021 and has returned to a little higher than the rate in 2019. However, the rate of A grades awarded every year is significantly higher than local authority schools – the difference is around 30 percentage points every year. However, from a much higher level, the relative increase in the rate of As awarded in independent schools between 2019 and 2021 was significantly less than in local authority schools.

The number of pupils in independent schools who are taking SQA qualifications is not publicly available. Pupils in some independent schools may take GCSEs, A Levels or International Baccalaureates. It is therefore impossible to compare entries directly between the independent sector and publicly funded schools and colleges. The chart below shows the entries (represented by the columns) from independent schools into National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher in 2023; and this represented as a percentage of the total entries (the line).



Independent school pupils accounted for 17% of all Advanced Higher entries in 2023. For National 5 and Highers, this figure was 6% and 8% respectively.

### Other courses

The Senior Phase is intended to be flexible and provide a wide variety of pathways for learners these include an increasing number of vocational opportunities including modern apprenticeships, additional courses taken in colleges, or courses taken within school.

The SQA has a number of vocational National qualifications as well as other awards. The number of entries to these other qualifications has been increasing.

Skills for Work awards focus on generic employability skills needed for the workplace, and there are courses in a range of areas such as hospitality, hairdressing, Early Learning and Childcare. These courses can range from SCQF level 3 to 6, but level 5 is the most popular. The number of entries into SCQF level 5 Skills for Work awards for pupils at local authority schools in 2019 was 5,510; this year it was 10,295.

Another vocational award the SQA offers is the National Progression Award. NPAs are aimed at assessing a defined set of skills and knowledge in specialist vocational areas. They also link to National Occupational Standards, which are the basis of SVQs. NPAs are available in a variety of sectors, from Construction and Childcare to areas such as Digital Literacy and Social Software. Again, there has been a large increase in take up since 2019. The combined entries across SCQF levels 3-6 in

2019 was 4,455 and in 2023 was 15,635.

The SQA lists the achievement of a range of other awards of varying sizes and again, taken as a whole, the uptake in local authority schools has significantly increased since 2019.

## Equalities

Alongside the annual results, the SQA now publishes [an equalities monitoring report](#).

The SQA holds limited personal data on candidates – the candidates' dates of birth, sex and postcode. The Scottish Government holds more data on pupil characteristics attending local authority schools and some of the analysis in the equalities monitoring report is undertaken by the Scottish Government. This means that the analysis based on the data that the SQA holds covers all candidates, the analysis based on the data held by the Scottish Government is for local authority pupils only.

The equalities monitoring report provides data on the entries an attainment based on:

- Age;
- Sex;
- SIMD Quintile;
- Additional Support Needs;
- Declared or Assessed as disabled;
- Urban/Rural Classification; and
- Ethnicity

The focus of this paper will be the data presented on SIMD Quintile, both in terms of the number of entries and the results.

SIMD (the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation) is a locality-based measure – in other words it measures the relative deprivation of where people live – not their own family's material circumstances. The [Scottish Government states](#)—

“SIMD is the Scottish Government's standard approach to identify areas of multiple deprivation in Scotland. It can help improve understanding about the outcomes and circumstances of people living in the most deprived areas in Scotland. It can also allow effective targeting of policies and funding where the aim is to wholly or partly tackle or take account of area concentrations of multiple deprivation.”

In rural areas, the datazones used by SIMD can cover a large land area and reflect a

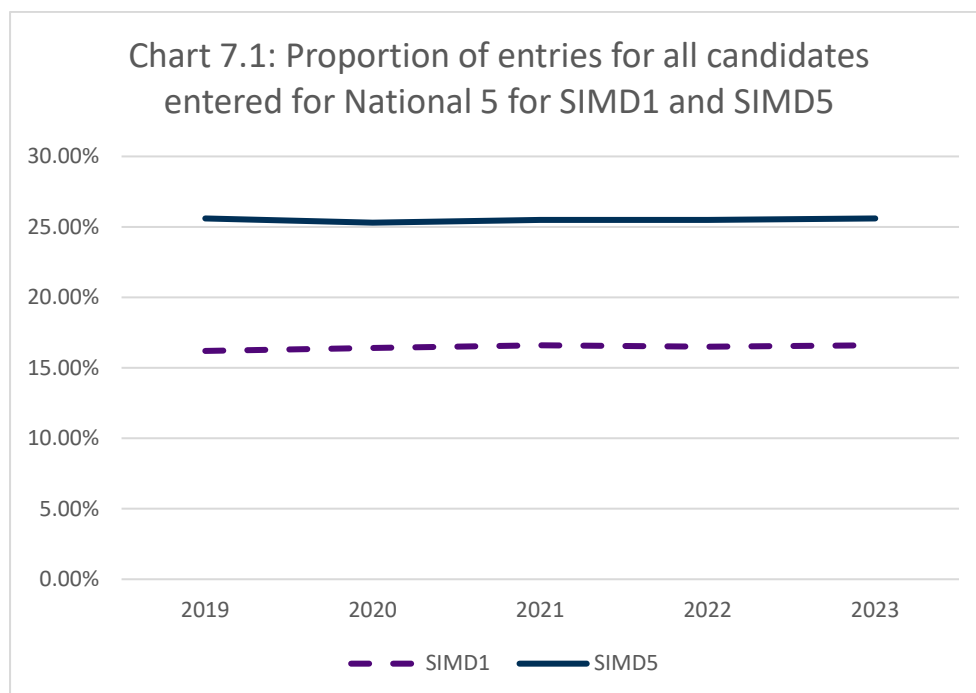
more mixed picture of people experiencing different levels of deprivation. This can make SIMD less useful at identifying the smaller pockets of deprivation found in more rural areas.

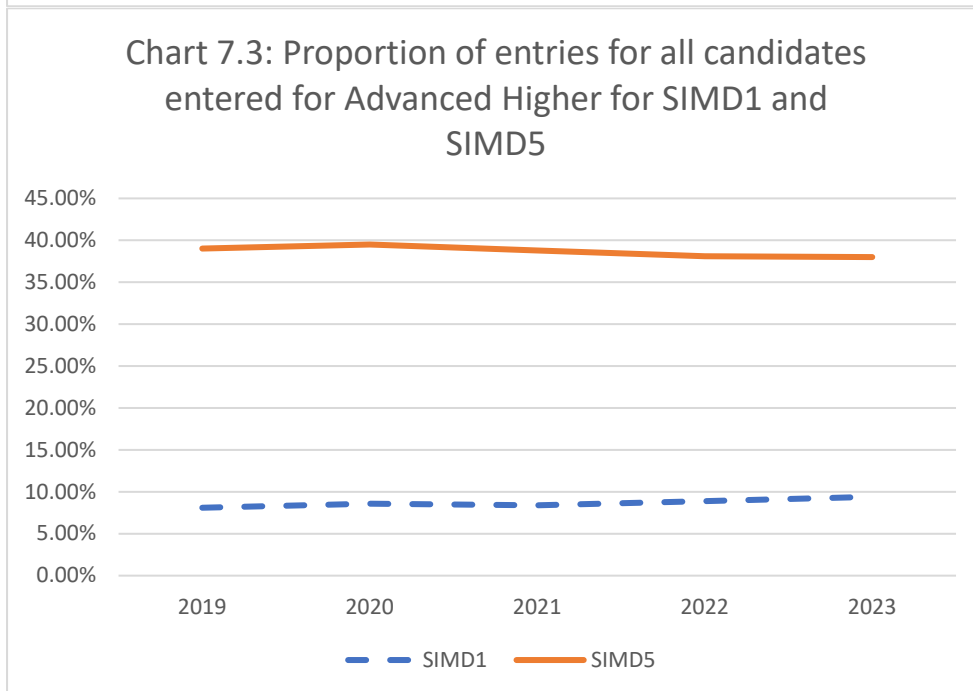
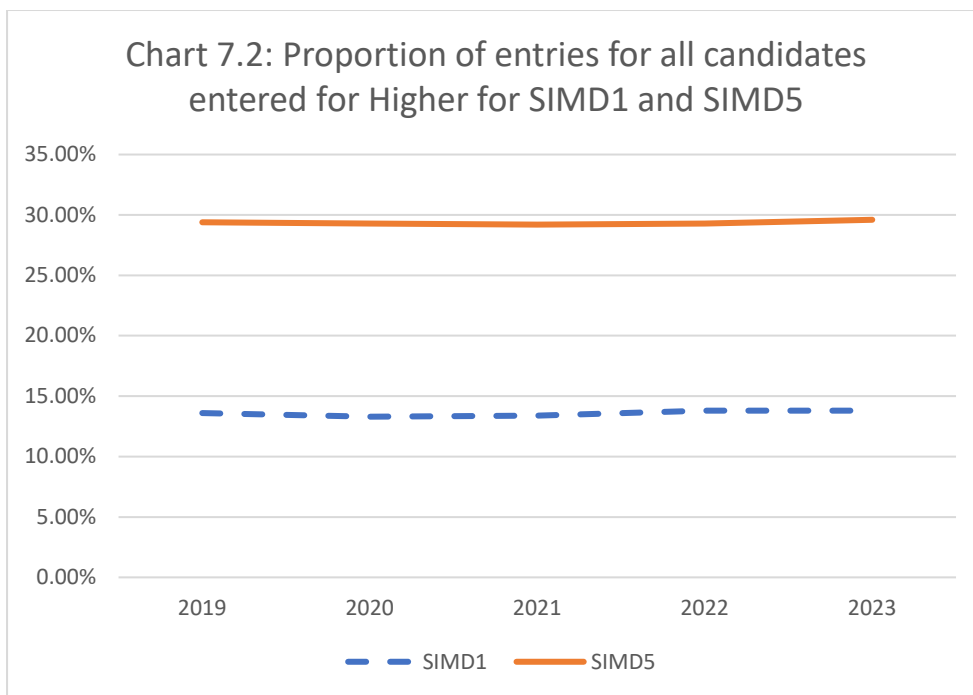
When using SIMD to analyse data, generally comparisons are made between deciles or quintiles. Deciles are groups of 10 percent of the data (i.e., 0%-10%, 10%-20% and so on), and quintiles are groups of 20% of the data. The poverty related attainment gap can be measured as the gap between people living in the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods (datazones) in SIMD and the 20% least deprived neighbourhoods. It is worth noting that the SIMD quintiles are split into five even numbers of datazones, not pupils. The 2022 pupils census showed that 21.5% of local authority school secondary pupils live in SIMD1 (the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods) and 19.9% live in SIMD5 (the 20% least deprived neighbourhoods).

As SIMD is based on postcodes, and this is data that the SQA holds, the population we are looking at here is all candidates, including pupils from local authority and independent schools.

### ***SIMD Entries***

The first difference we see between pupils living in SIMD1 areas and SIMD5 areas is in the presentation of qualifications. The three charts below show the proportion of all entries for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher which are from candidates from postcodes in SIMD1 and SIMD5 neighbourhoods.





The charts show that in each of the three qualifications, there is a gap between the proportion of entries coming from pupils from Scotland’s most deprived areas compared to those from the least deprived areas. As the level of the qualification increases, this gap increases; in 2023 the gap at National 5 there was 9.0 percentages points (“ppts”), at Higher it was 15.8ppts and at Advanced Higher it was 28.6ppts. At National 5 and Advanced Higher, this gap has decreased in 2023 compared to 2019 and 2023; the gap at Higher is the same.

The data above relates to the proportion of the total entries, not the proportion of candidates. The gaps may be explained by candidates from less deprived areas being more likely to be presented for these qualifications or that they are more likely

to be presented for more of these qualifications or both.

A 2018 paper by Dr Marina Shapira and Professor Mark Priestley, [Narrowing the Curriculum? Contemporary trends in provision and attainment in the Scottish Curriculum](#), said—

“In Scotland, the selection of school subjects within the secondary system has been always socially patterned; there are differences in the subject uptake by parental social class, and the social inequalities in subject choice in S3/S4 are also reproduced in S5/S6. While students from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds rely on their family resources and receive informed advice on the choice of subjects that facilitate their transitions and admission into prestigious universities, students from disadvantaged social origins often lack this kind of support and may opt for (or be actively steered towards by schools/teachers) more ‘easy’ (e.g. vocational) subjects.”

As discussed above, there has been an increase in the uptake of non-national subjects. This reflects a policy aim of ensuring that there are a variety of routes for learners in the Senior Phase and these awards can have the same value under the SCQF as national qualifications. The distribution of the entries those awards across different SIMD quintiles is not set out in the equalities monitoring report.

## ***SIMD Results***

The SQA presents attainment data at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher split by SIMD quintile.

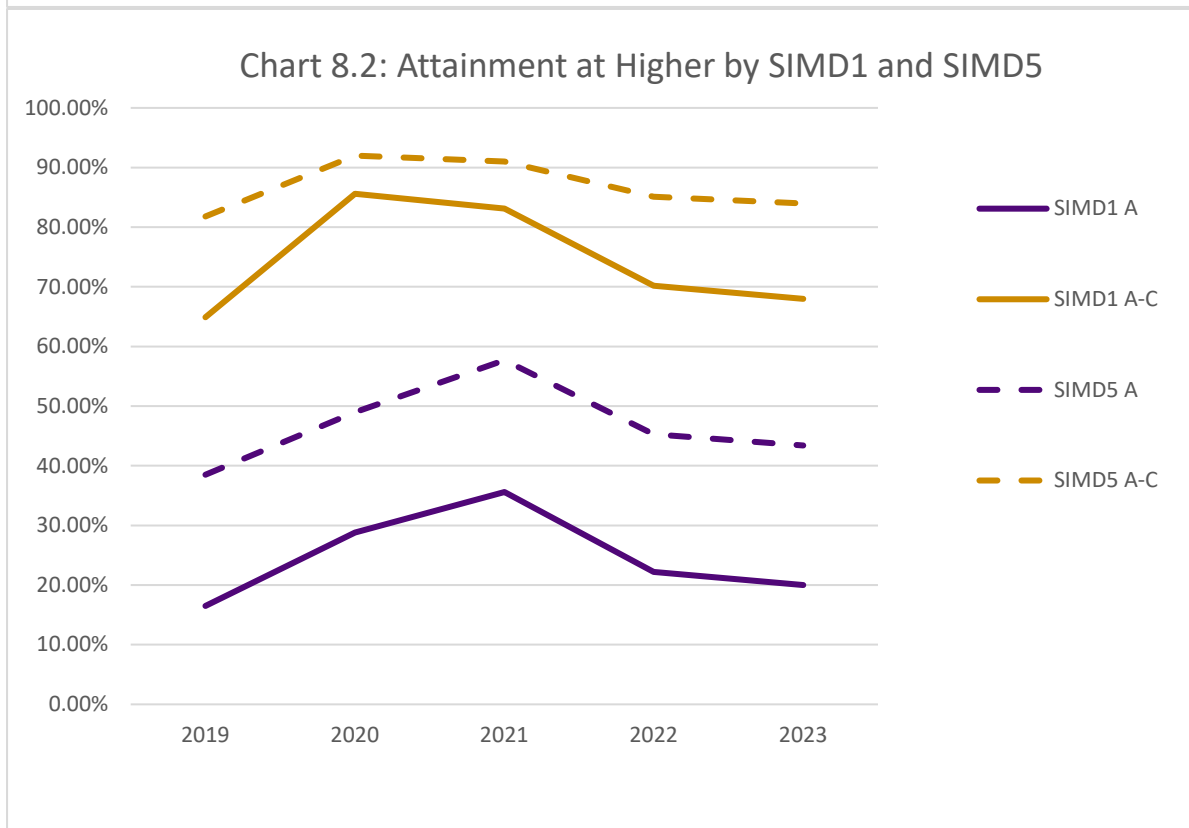
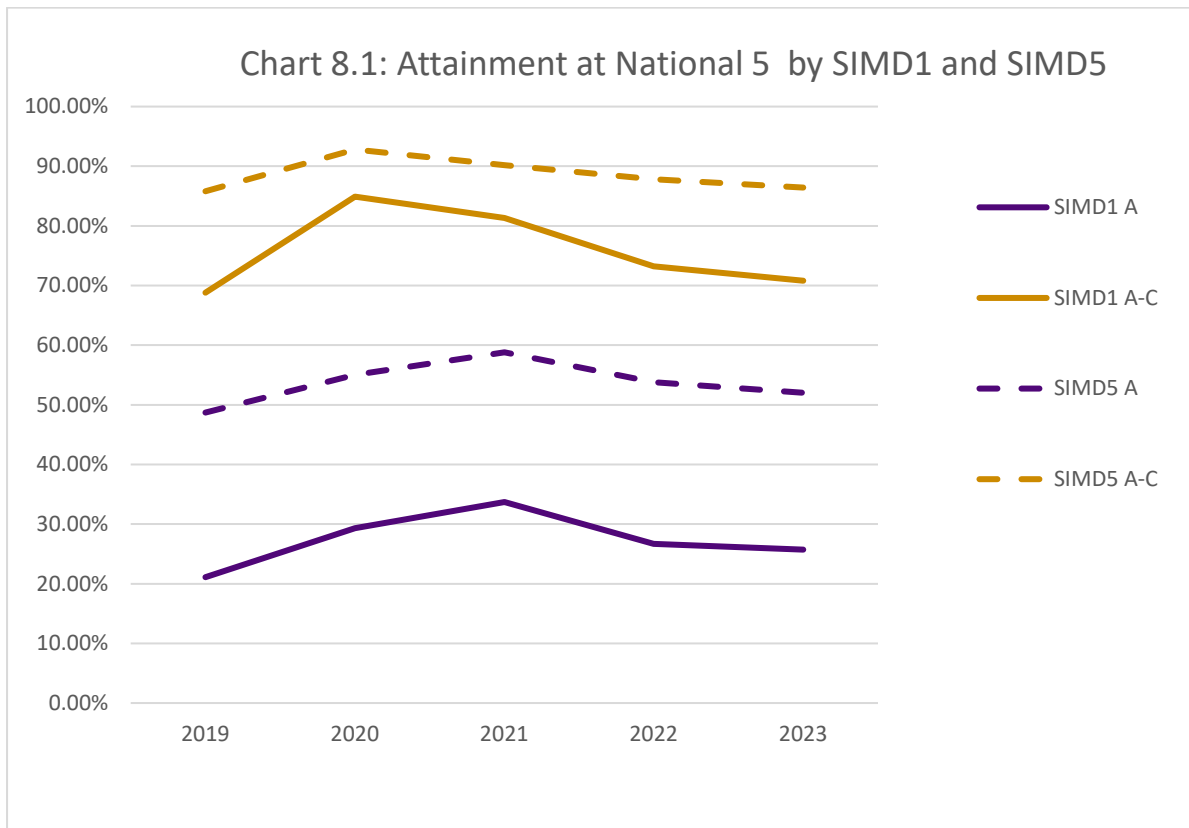
Closing the poverty related attainment gap is a key policy goal of the Scottish Government. The Government uses a variety of data to measure progress against this aim which are listed in the National Improvement Framework. SQA data is used to produce data on leavers’ achievement but is not a measure on its own. Leavers data shows the percentage of school leavers who have achieved a certain number of qualifications at a certain SCQF level. The three measures of progress in the NIF which use this data are the percentage of leavers achieving at least 1 qualification at SCQF levels 4, 5 and 6.

Leavers’ data differs from the data presented here in a number of ways. Leavers’ data is: limited to pupils attending publicly funded mainstream schools; based on the achievement of the pupil once the pupil has left school; the measure is a pass (generally an A-C or ungraded pass); based on post-appeals data. The SQA data we look at here is based on: all candidates (including independent schools and colleges), entries not individuals; and on this year’s results prior to any appeals. In short, while this is useful data, it is not the data on which the attainment gap is measured.

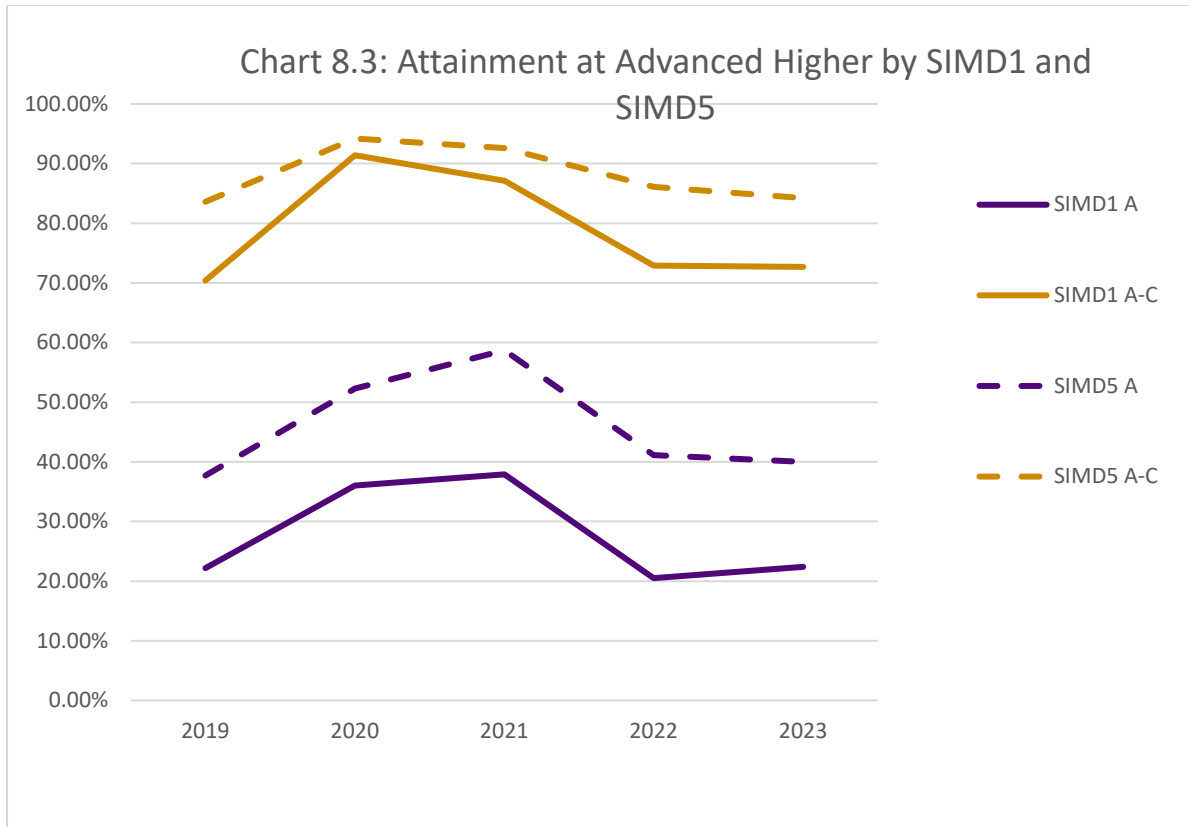
Again, this paper looks at the data for pupils from the most and least deprived SIMD quintiles. Members will be aware that the levels of attainment increase as deprivation decreases – the attainment gap is perhaps better understood as two ends of an attainment curve.

The charts below show the attainment at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher for

SIMD1 and SIMD5 quintiles.

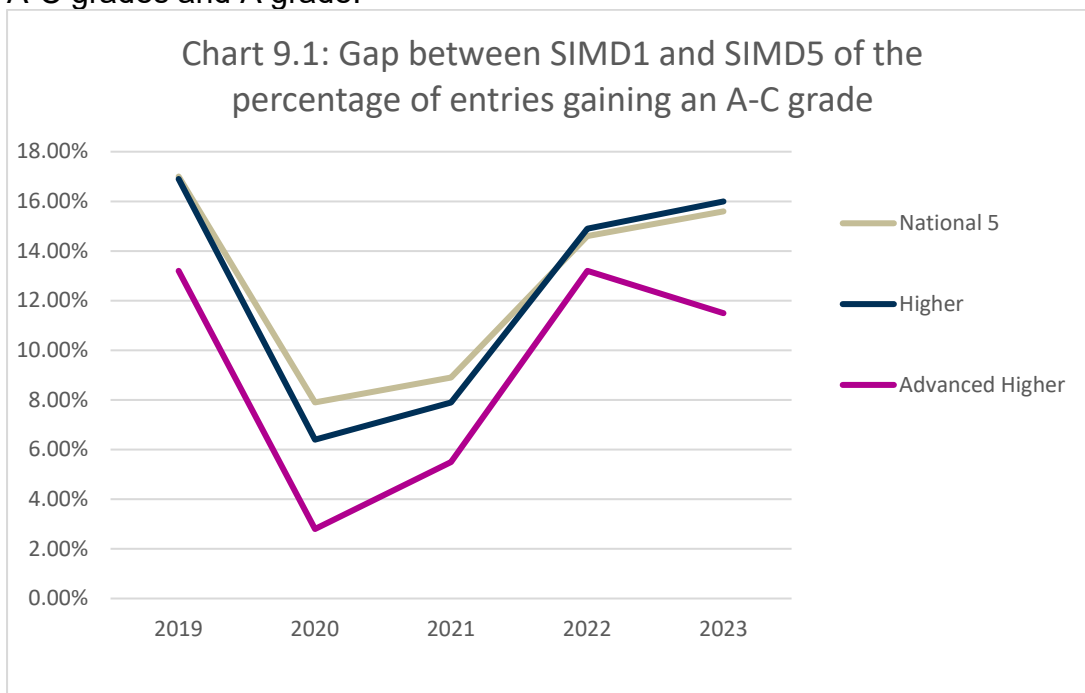


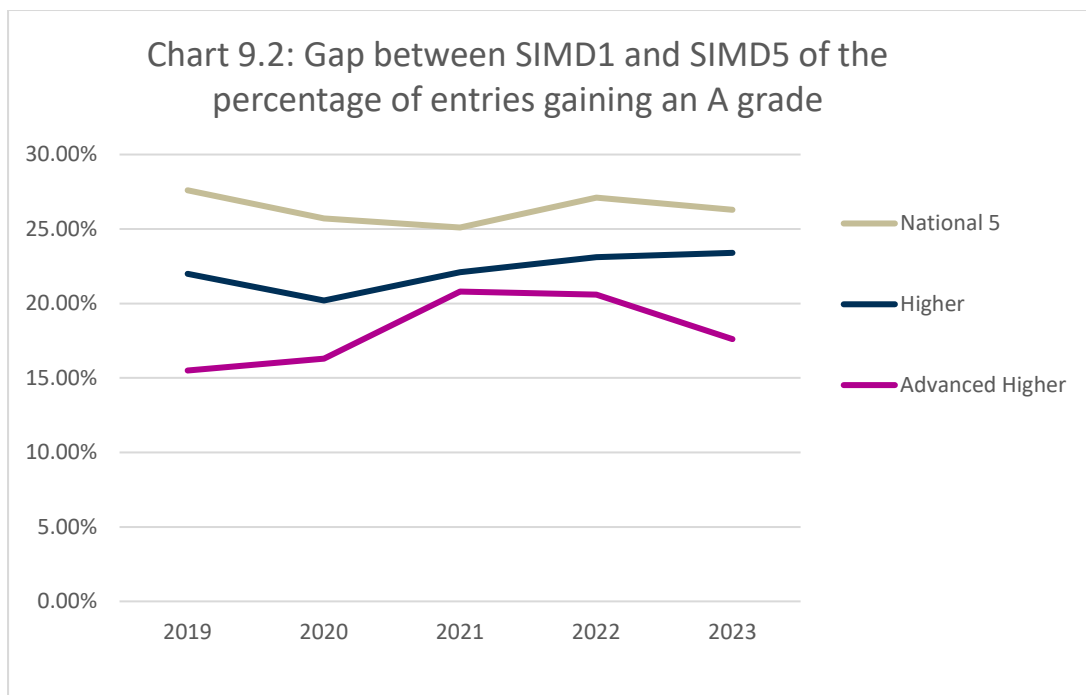




In these charts, the gold lines represent the percentage of entries which gained an A-C mark and the purple lines represent the percentage which gained A grades. Solid lines are for entries from pupils who live in a SIMD1 neighbourhood while broken lines represent the achievement for pupils who live in a SIMD5 neighbourhood.

The two charts below show the attainment gap over the past five years for the level of A-C grades and A grade.





In most cases over the past five years, the higher the level of qualification the smaller the gaps in attainment. The gap in A-C attainment fell significantly in 2020 when the attainment at A-C level was at its highest. The peak in A grades was in 2021, while the gap between the percentage of A grades attained narrowed for National 5 that year, the gap increased at Higher and Advanced Higher. Comparing 2023 to 2022, there has been a mix of results – attainment gaps at Advanced Higher have narrowed, at Higher they have widened, and at National 5 the gap of attaining an A has narrowed while the gap at attaining A-C has widened.

## Appeals Process

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.

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. Following the review, the SQA set out its Appeals process for 2023. A key difference is that alternative assessment evidence will not be considered in 2023. 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.

Alongside the appeals process is the [Examination Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service](#) (EECCS), which was also available in 2022. This is to support learners who were unable to attend the exam or whose performance in an exam has been affected by a personal circumstance, or an unplanned incident on the day. An application to this service must be made by the examination centre (e.g. the school); learners are not able to apply directly. Alternative evidence would be used to support certification through the EECCS.

The approach to [appeals this year is the topic of a live public petition](#).

Last year, 11.0% of certificated grades for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher were appealed. Of these, around 30% resulted in an upgrade and fewer than five appeals resulted in a downgrade. The table below shows the small but significant impact of the appeals service in 2022 on some of the headline figures for local authority schools.

**Table 6: Comparison of 2022 Results before and after appeals (local authority schools)**

	Percentage of A grades		Percentage of A-C grades	
	August	December	August	December
National 5	38.2%	39.0%	80.0%	80.8%
Higher	32.8%	34.5%	78.0%	79.4%
Advanced Higher	29.6%	30.7%	79.2%	80.5%

## Approach 2023-24

The [approach to assessment this coming year will be](#), for most courses, the same as in 2019. The key change to 2022-23 for many courses will be the reintroduction of coursework and/or the exam could cover more topics. Modifications are being kept in place where the SQA has “seen evidence that they had a positive impact while still allowing learners to show their skills, knowledge and understanding.”

In terms of the different approaches taken in the past years, last year Ms Robertson told the Committee that the SQA has sought to “ensure that we have fair and credible assessments”.

The evaluation of the 2022 assessments drew out a number of key themes. On Fairness it said—

“This research reveals different and complex aspects of stakeholders’ understanding of fairness in assessment. Traditionally, fairness in assessment

has focused on issues such as ensuring that learners have the same opportunity to show their skills and knowledge, that assessments are a fair test of the course content, and that they are valid and reliable. Our research shows that this conception of fairness remains important. ... However, it has also become apparent that individual fairness, where individual learner circumstances (particularly those as a result of the pandemic) are taken into account, is also important to stakeholders.”

Under the theme of “Standards” the research said—

“A major finding of SQA’s Evaluation of the 2021 ACM was a concern from practitioners about inconsistent standards being applied due to the flexibility inherent in that model. Our research found that in 2022, stakeholders, particularly practitioners, welcomed a return to a consistent, externally marked approach where all learners nationally are judged impartially to the same standard. A considerable number of respondents suggested that external assessment is important for the integrity and credibility of the qualifications system. Our analysis looking at the relationship between teacher estimates and results shows that, in general, estimated attainment results in 2022 correlated well with results. However, there were concerns from some senior appointees and qualifications teams about the validity and reliability of some of the alternative evidence submitted for appeals. Only around half of these research participants believed that the national standard was consistently understood and interpreted by teachers and lecturers in 2021–22.”

## 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.

The Government [announced in November 2022](#) that its preferred model is that the prospective new qualifications agency would include both the Awarding and Accreditation functions currently performed by the SQA.

The Scottish Government's is considering its response to the National Discussion, the Hayward Review, the Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape, alongside the Purpose and Principles for Post-School Education, Research and Skills, and its work to establish the new national education bodies.

In [her statement to Parliament on 22 June](#), the Cabinet Secretary said that she would, in respect of the Hayward Review, seek further views from teachers. She said that “with four substantive reports being published within four weeks, the Government

now requires to provide an overarching narrative that ties those outputs together to set a clear trajectory and not miss the inherent opportunities that exist.” Ms Gilruth also announced that the Government would delay introducing a reform Bill, which was expected to be the vehicle to abolish the SQA and set up the new agency or agencies. She said—

“Any reform that meets our ambitions for our young people must be bold and holistic and, crucially, must be shaped by the expertise of our teachers. I am determined to take the time needed to ensure that that happens before introducing legislation during the next parliamentary year.

“The immediate challenges faced by the teaching profession in responding to our post-pandemic school communities will not be helped by legislation, nor can I expect meaningful engagement on our future qualifications if Parliament is focused on legislating for those new bodies. Instead, the focus must be brought back to improving educational outcomes for our children and young people and on delivering excellent learning and teaching for all. The component parts of our education system must work together in a spirit of partnership.

“We must take the opportunity to design our entire national education and skills landscape to better support children, young people and adult learners. Pre-empting what is possible in the context of the new national bodies by taking a narrow legislative focus at this stage would, I believe, miss that opportunity. If we are to deliver parity of esteem across the education system, we will require a holistic approach to legislation.”

## *Delivery Board*

The SQA is involved in the Qualifications Body Delivery Board. Last year, [Fiona Robertson told the Committee](#) that “there is an end-of-year deadline for the work on a target operating model for the new body, which will look in particular at a user-led and service-led approach to delivery.” (col 33)

The Scottish Government publishes minutes of the delivery board. Recently published minutes indicates that there have been discussions on the Target Operating Model (TOM). The [minutes for a meeting in April 2023](#) indicate that a paper was being prepared at that time which would “contain high level analysis of where the team think the opportunities for transformative change are, including areas where the external environment needs to interact with the New Qualifications Body in a different way to achieve transformation.”

These minutes also noted that both the Hayward Review and the Withers Review may have an impact on what the new qualifications body will look like. [Minutes from the overall Education Reform Programme Board](#) in June 2023 suggest that a draft TOM was provided to that board in June.

The [most recent minutes of the delivery board are from the May](#) meeting. At that time, the project status for the new qualifications body programme was Red “mainly due to the

lack of sign off on the resources bid ... there is a delay in finance resource due to a significant pressure in the Scottish Government and budgets are under scrutiny.”  
The minutes continue—

“The Delivery Board asked at what point are we are unable to progress without resources. SQA responded this is a significant issue and that there is an interdependency between resource funding for reform and core funding for SQA. The resource plan put forward recognises that the work needs to ramp up as we are c.16 months from the beginning of the NQB. It was further noted that SQA are unable to subsidise reform from the SQA core budget. Work will continue with the resources we have; however, resources are now ‘red’, and it is anticipated that this will result in other parts of the programme moving amber or red as a result.”

## *Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment*

Following the two OECD publications on Scottish Education in 2021, the Government commissioned Professor Louise Hayward to lead an Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment. The [review began its work in early 2022 and through 2022 and 2023 undertook a number of phases of consultation](#). Its final report was published shortly prior to the summer recess.

Some of the key recommendations in the report are:

- Adopting an SDA (Scottish Diploma of Achievement) as a graduation certificate for all senior phase educational settings.
- Removing exams in all subjects up to SCQF level 5 (e.g. National 5s), examinations may be retained in levels 6 and 7 (e.g. Highers and Advanced Highers).
- a digital profile for all learners which allows them to record personal achievements, identify and plan future learning

## **Communication with the profession and young people**

A theme of criticism of the SQA in the past years has been around its communication with the profession and young people. For example, [Ken Muir told the Committee in March 2022](#)—

“To come back to the feedback that I received from various engagements, concerns were expressed about the extent to which the SQA in its current format was a listening organisation and the extent to which it took advice from practitioners and teachers. Generally, a fair degree of discontent was expressed about how the SQA operates and the extent to which its governance, which I reference in the report, is representative of the expertise that exists in schools and classrooms in Scotland. That was the feeling that I

got and, in a lot of discussions that I had, various expressions were used about it being an unlistening and distant organisation.”

The SQA’s position is that it involves teachers are integral to much of its work. For example, its submission stated—

“We are committed to incorporating the perspectives and experiences of teaching professionals and learners in our decision-making process. Earlier this year, we sought the views of learners, teachers, lecturers, parents and carers, as well as the NQ Group and SQA’s Advisory Council, on whether the current modifications to assessment should remain in place for the session 2023-24.”

And later—

“We will also continue to engage with teachers, lecturers, learners, parents and carers throughout the year. A key focus for our organisation is on direct engagement with educators, and we have recently launched a refreshed engagement programme for our senior leaders, led by our Chief Executive, that will see them visit schools, colleges and other centres across Scotland. This wide-ranging programme is designed to be fully representative of our diverse education and skills community, and to include urban, rural and island schools and colleges. It will be supported at all levels of our organisation and will bring the insights and experiences of educators and learners directly into SQA at the highest level.”

The SQA also undertakes research into its work. The SQA stated that “thousands of learners and educators across Scotland” took part in its evaluation of the 2022 approach to assessment. The SQA produced reports on both learners and practitioners’ lived experiences of assessment in 2022.

At the time of the 2022 teacher census there was a little under 25,000 FTE teachers working in public secondary schools in Scotland.

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

7 September 2023

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The Scottish Parliament, E Edinburgh, EH99 1SP [www.parliament.scot](http://www.parliament.scot)

## Annexe B



Scottish Qualifications Authority  
Ùghdarras Theisteanas Na H-Alba

08 August 2023

Dear Ms Webber

Today, around 140,000 learners across the country are receiving their Scottish Qualifications Certificates. I know you and your fellow Committee members will want to join SQA and Scotland's education community in celebrating their achievements.

Results Day is a major milestone in the life of every learner, and the grades they receive today will allow them to take the next step on their learning journey; either continuing at school, moving on to college or university, or entering employment or a workplace-based training programme.

This year we recognised that while the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic may have been less severe than in previous years, things have not yet returned to normal. We have an approach to assessment and awarding that helps to support recovery while maintaining the standards and credibility of our qualifications.

We continued with the course assessment modifications put in place for session 2021-22 and our exam exceptional circumstances service supported learners unable to attend an exam or whose performance was impacted by personal circumstances.

We also adopted a sensitive approach to grading which provided an extra layer of protection for learners, and our free appeals service – which opened at 9am this morning – is for any learner who has concerns about a grade.

The achievements of this year's learners are again a testament to their dedication and resilience and demonstrates a further step forward along the road to recovery and normal awarding.

To help you mark this important day and support young people, I am pleased to share with you information about today's results, and importantly, the help and support that is available to learners as they take their next steps in education, training or employment.

### Results Day 2023

Learners are receiving their results by post today and those who signed up for and activated their MySQA account will also be receiving their results by text and/or email from 8am this morning (Tuesday 8 August).



Together with Nationals, Highers and Advanced Highers, learners will be achieving a wide range of Skills for Work courses, Awards, National Certificates and National Progression Awards, which are part of a broadening of the curriculum and support a range of initiatives such as Developing the Young Workforce.

We are a proud Corporate Parent and SQA colleagues and their families, along with representatives of Who Cares? Scotland, MCR Pathways, and the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, will be sending a congratulatory video message to all care experienced young people to recognise their success in their SQA courses and awards.

The alternative awarding arrangements in place in 2020 and 2021, the generous approach in 2022, and the significantly different circumstances in which exams took place in 2019 and before, mean that comparisons of attainment between years should be treated with caution and do not allow for any conclusions to be drawn on changes in education performance.

However, A to C attainment across most courses at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher are above pre-pandemic levels. This reflects the achievement of learners, combined with the sensitive approach to grading we have adopted in 2023.

We also thank Scotland's teachers, lecturers and the wider education community for their dedication over the past year.

The headline attainment figures for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses are:

<b>National 5</b>	<b>Higher</b>	<b>Advanced Higher</b>
<b>321,360</b> entries	<b>191,810</b> entries	<b>27,750</b> entries
A-C attainment rate <b>78.8%</b>	A-C attainment rate <b>77.1%</b>	A-C attainment rate <b>79.8%</b>
A attainment rate <b>38.6%</b>	A attainment rate <b>32.8%</b>	A attainment rate <b>33.0%</b>

For any young person who has a concern about a grade, our free direct appeals service is now open. Our advice is for learners or their parents and carers to speak to their school, college or training provider in the first instance if they have concerns. They are best placed to address any concerns and provide their learners with advice and support.

#### Support for learners

- SQA's Appeals 2023 service is free of charge and opens at 9am today. More information has been sent to learners' homes, and can be found at [sqa.org.uk/appeals](https://sqa.org.uk/appeals)
- If learners have a query about their certificate, they can call SQA's Candidate Advice Line on 0345 279 1000
- Skills Development Scotland's Results Helpline: 0808 100 8000

- UCAS: Clearing resources can be found at [ucas.com/clearing-launch](https://ucas.com/clearing-launch)

The national attainment statistics and further information about how the qualifications were awarded can be found at:

- [Provisional Attainment Statistics \(August\) 2023](#)
- [SQA Chief Examining Officer's 2023 National Qualifications and Awards Results Report](#)
- [Grade Boundaries 2023](#)
- [Component Marks 2023](#)
- [Assessment Arrangements 2023](#)
- [National Qualifications 2023 Methodology Report](#)
- [2023 Awarding: Equalities Monitoring Report](#)
- [SQA Press Release](#)

#### How results were arrived at in 2023

The global COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the cancellation of exams in Scotland in 2020 and 2021 and alternative approaches to certification. Since 2022, we have returned to formal external assessment (exams and coursework). However, it has been clear to SQA that measures continue to be needed to support the recovery of learning and teaching, while maintaining standards.

SQA worked with partners across the education community, including teachers, lecturers, learners, parents and carers, throughout the year to agree the approach to assessment. A wide-ranging package of support was delivered. This support aimed to enable learners to demonstrate what they know, understand and can do, within the context of the ongoing recovery. It included:

a continuation of the course assessment modifications, building on the approach in 2021–22, which was based on consultation with teachers and lecturers, and welcomed by them, which reduced the volume of assessment to ease learner, teacher and lecturer workload and maximise time for teaching and learning. These either:

- removed or reduced elements of an exam and/or coursework or provided more choice in an assessment
  - removed a topic from an exam
- an Examination Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service for learners who were unable to attend an exam or whose performance was impacted by personal circumstances
- a sensitive approach to grading, to help ensure fairness for learners while maintaining standards
- a free appeals service for any learner who has concerns about a grade — they can appeal either via their school or college or by using SQA's learner direct service. Further details on the appeals service are available at [Appeals service 2023](#).

Every year, SQA's role is to evaluate performance in 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.

Thousands of practising teachers and lecturers work with experienced SQA staff every year and are at the heart of the awarding process – they set the assessments (exams and coursework), mark and quality assure them. They also play a key role in setting the grade boundaries and in SQA's exceptional circumstances and appeals services.

In conclusion, learners can be confident that the qualifications they receive today are credible and fair, and reflect the knowledge, understanding and skills they have acquired in difficult circumstances. Universities, colleges and employers can also be confident that standards and integrity have been maintained in 2023.

I look forward to joining you at Committee in September.

# SQA written submission

## 1. Introduction

The Education, Children and Young People Committee has asked the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) to discuss National Qualifications in 2023, and education reform. This short paper provides summary information in advance of the evidence session on 13 September 2023.

## 2. National Qualifications Results in 2023

### Background

The 2022-23 exam diet reflected further positive progress on the path back to normal awarding, building upon the return to formal SQA assessments (exams and coursework) in 2021-22. The achievements of learners – enabled and supported by Scotland's wider education community – once again demonstrated their knowledge and resilience.

The ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic were less severe than in previous years but 2023 was not yet a return to normal. SQA adopted an approach to assessment and awarding that balanced recovery and fairness with the need to maintain the standards and credibility of our qualifications.

A wide-ranging package of support was developed for learners, with learners. This was shaped by direct engagement through our Learner Advisory Group, ensuring the voices of Scotland's learners were at the centre of decisions that impacted them.

It was also enhanced by input from others across the education and skills sectors, including teachers, lecturers, parents and carers, and their representative organisations within our National Qualifications Strategic and Working Groups and the SQA Advisory Council.

Together, we agreed the right package of support that helped learners demonstrate their skills, knowledge and understanding, whilst recognising the challenges they have faced. The strong results achieved by learners – which fell within the range bounded by the 2019 results (pre-pandemic) and the 2022 results – are testament to this.

The support included:

- Continuation of course assessment modifications. These removed or reduced elements of an exam and/or coursework, provided more choice in assessments or removed exam topics.
- An Exam Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service for those who were unable to sit exams or whose performance was impacted by personal circumstances (for example, because of illness or bereavement).
- A sensitive approach to grading (see below). This helped ensure fairness for this year's learners while maintaining national standards.

- A free appeals service (see below) including the option for learners to directly appeal to SQA.

In addition to the SQA package, we worked with partners across the education and skills community to strengthen their offering, including online advice from Education Scotland, local authorities, schools and colleges.

### **Our sensitive 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 practising teachers/lecturers) in grade boundary meetings.

SQA announced in November 2022 that it would adopt a sensitive approach to grading 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, based on evidence. Grade boundary meetings take into account a range of information including the performance of the assessment, marker feedback and teacher estimates.

This year, our sensitive approach carefully considered whether the assessment performed as intended. We then considered the impact of the course assessment modifications that were in place and then we looked at the legacy impact of the pandemic upon learning and teaching.

Further information on our approach to awarding is contained in our [National Qualifications 2023 Awarding – Methodology Report](#).

### **Attainment**

The distribution of 2023 attainment by grade is summarised below. Further statistical information about 2023 results is available on [SQA's statistics webpage](#).

The alternative awarding arrangements in place in 2020 and 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. However, A to C attainment across most courses at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher are above pre-pandemic levels. This reflects the achievement of learners, combined with the sensitive approach to grading we have adopted in 2023.

2023 headline results

National 5	Higher	Advanced Higher
<b>321,360</b> entries	<b>191,810</b> entries	<b>27,750</b> entries
A-C attainment rate <b>78.8%</b>	A-C attainment rate <b>77.1%</b>	A-C attainment rate <b>79.8%</b>
A attainment rate <b>38.6%</b>	A attainment rate <b>32.8%</b>	A attainment rate <b>33.0%</b>

2023 results in context

Year	National 5 A-C	Higher A-C	Advanced Higher A-C
2019	78.2%	74.8%	79.4%
<b>2023</b>	<b>78.8%</b>	<b>77.1%</b>	<b>79.8%</b>
2022	80.8%	78.9%	81.3%

Further observations and analysis on the delivery of National Qualifications and Awards in 2023 is contained in the [Chief Examiner’s Report](#) which is also appended to this paper.

**Appeals**

One of the features of this year’s package of support was the free and direct appeals service. This gave all learners the right to request a review of their marked exam papers. The ‘marking review’ system was in place prior to the pandemic. An ‘alternative evidence’ model was introduced as an emergency measure in 2022.

This change was based on the need to ensure fairness for all learners and agreed by partners. It was communicated as part of a wide-ranging campaign of direct

engagement with all learners. This comprehensive and inclusive campaign ensured learners had all the information they needed to make informed decisions.

We also continued to engage and share messages with organisations representing learners and their parents and carers, including the Scottish Youth Parliament, National Parent Forum of Scotland and Connect.

Priority was given to those whose appeals related to a place at university or college, a training placement or employment. A series of information booklets were provided to all learners throughout the year, including on Appeals. This was in addition to co-ordinated social media campaigns that signposted learners to valuable support.

The 2023 appeals process has now closed. SQA has received around 1,000 priority appeals and more than 38,000 standard appeals across a broad range of courses. Results for priority appeals have been communicated to learners and reported to higher education institutions via UCAS in line with all other UK awarding bodies. The deadline for submission of standard appeals was Friday 1 September and SQA is now working through these appeals. Statistics on appeals outcomes will be published in December.

### **3. Assessing National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher in 2024**

We recognise that the disruption to teaching and learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic continues to have an impact on teaching and learning. This was a key consideration in 2023 and is being considered carefully as we assess evidence and consult with stakeholders to agree our approach to National Qualifications in 2024.

We are committed to incorporating the perspectives and experiences of teaching professionals and learners in our decision-making process. Earlier this year, we sought the views of learners, teachers, lecturers, parents and carers, as well as the NQ Group and SQA's Advisory Council, on whether the current modifications to assessment should remain in place for the session 2023-24.

We are grateful to everyone who shared their feedback.

After careful consideration, and reflecting on the feedback we received, we confirmed in March this year that coursework and exams for practical subjects that were removed from the assessment of National 5s, Highers and Advanced Highers during the COVID-19 pandemic will return in 2023-24. Elements of the modifications will be kept in a small number of courses, where there is robust evidence of their benefit to learners.

This decision – agreed following extensive consultation with the wider education community and balancing wide-ranging and sometimes conflicting views – provides certainty for learners, teachers and lecturers. It also aligns with other awarding bodies throughout the UK, many of whom returned to their pre-pandemic models in 2022-23.

By reaching this decision in a timely manner, it provided clarity for educators and supported their planning for the 2023-24 session. We will continue to clearly communicate both the approach itself and the rationale, directly to educators and to their representative groups. This will include support through a wide programme of

Understanding Standards activities. We will also continue to engage directly with learners so that they can better understand what it means for them.

For Higher National and Vocational Qualifications (HNVQ), a similar approach will be taken, retaining aspects of alternative assessment arrangements which benefit learners, while returning to a fuller assessment approach.

We will continue to work with partners on the NQ Group, which includes representatives from across the education community, on detailed arrangements for awarding National Qualifications in 2024. The first meeting of the NQ Group 2024 is scheduled to take place later this month.

We will also continue to engage with teachers, lecturers, learners, parents and carers throughout the year. A key focus for our organisation is on direct engagement with educators, and we have recently launched a refreshed engagement programme for our senior leaders, led by our Chief Executive, that will see them visit schools, colleges and other centres across Scotland. This wideranging programme is designed to be fully representative of our diverse education and skills community, and to include urban, rural and island schools and colleges. It will be supported at all levels of our organisation and will bring the insights and experiences of educators and learners directly into SQA at the highest level.

#### **4. Education reform**

The publication of the Independent Review of Assessment and Qualifications and the Independent Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape is welcome. SQA engaged positively with both reviews, drawing on our expertise, experience of past reforms, and evidence. These reports could have significant implications for our education and skills system and for SQA and the new qualifications body. Great care will be needed to ensure that any change and reform that follows is coherent, understood, aligned - and deliverable.

In June, the Cabinet Secretary for Education Skills announced that she was delaying the introduction of legislation to replace SQA, to consider these reports and engage with educators.

As Scotland's national awarding and accreditation body, SQA will continue to feed in advice and expertise to the reform process.

While the timeline for the replacement of SQA has changed, and we await the Scottish

Government's response to reviews which have now concluded, our commitment to supporting all learners and educators has not. We will continue to deliver to ensure that the positive legacy of SQA provides the strongest foundation for Scotland's new qualifications body.