

## Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 22 January 2025

3<sup>rd</sup> Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

# Higher History Review 2024

## Introduction

1. Following publication of the outcomes of this year's National Qualifications on 6 August 2024, concerns were raised about the standards applied in the marking of examinations in Higher History. Following these concerns, the SQA Chief Examiner commissioned SQA's Head of Standards to carry out a review.
2. On 6 November 2024, the SQA wrote to the Committee highlighting the publication of the findings of that review. This letter is attached in **Annexe A**. [The findings are published in full on the SQA website.](#)
3. At its meeting on [4 December 2024](#), the Committee took evidence from:
  - Jenny Gilruth, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills
  - Clare Hicks, Director, Education Reform, Scottish Government
  - Fiona Robertson, Chief Executive, SQA
4. During that session, the Cabinet Secretary highlighted her engagement with the Scottish Association of Teachers of History (SATH) on the findings of the SQA's review.
5. Following the meeting, the Committee issued an invitation to SATH to provide evidence at a future meeting.

## Committee meeting

6. At its meeting today, the Committee will take evidence from:
  - Kirsty Macdonald, Faculty Head of Social Subjects, Paisley Grammar School and President, Scottish Association of Teachers of History (SATH)
  - Rebecca Hanna, Teacher of History and Politics at Linlithgow Academy and Committee Member, Scottish Association of Teachers of History (SATH)
  - Andy Johnston, History Teacher, Ross High School and Committee Member, Scottish Association of Teachers of History (SATH)

## Supporting information

7. SPICe has produced a briefing paper for this session which is attached at **Annexe B**.

**Committee Clerks**  
**January 2025**

## Annexe A

Dear Mr Ross

Firstly, may I congratulate you on your appointment to Convenor of the Education, Children and Young People Committee. I look forward to meeting you in due course.

I am writing to let you and your fellow Committee members know that today we have published the findings of the review of Higher History in 2024.

The review has concluded that the marking standard in 2024 did not change and that the marking and grading processes worked as intended. Learners were not disadvantaged and can be confident that the attainment rate for Higher History accurately reflected their performance.

Independent, external scrutiny of the review was carried out by Richard Harry, Executive Director of Qualifications and Assessment at WJEC, Wales' largest awarding body. Mr Harry, an expert in standard-setting and exams, has endorsed the findings and confirmed the evidence supports the report's conclusions.

As I reported to the Committee in September, I commissioned the review of Higher History after a number of concerns were raised about the marking standard, in the media, on social media and directly with SQA. The review was important to provide reassurance to learners and teachers and to provide confidence in the results and the processes that underpinned them.

The review was conducted by SQA's Head of Standards with support and oversight from the Director of Policy, Analysis and Standards, neither of whom had any prior involvement in the marking or grading of Higher History.

The evidence-led review report concludes that:

*“All stages of SQA’s normal processes were followed rigorously and robustly, and in accordance with SQA’s established processes and procedures. The Higher History exam team acted with integrity throughout this process.”*

*“The standard set in the Higher History assessments...was not higher than that set in previous years that this examination has run.”*

*“Feedback from markers, who are all teachers, provided in their reports to SQA was overwhelmingly focused on the poor standard of responses provided by learners in this year’s examinations.”*

While I acknowledge that the review has taken longer than anticipated, it was important to ensure it was robust and rigorous, in the interests of learners. We also had to ensure the external reviewer had sufficient time to analyse, assess and audit the evidence and conclusions.

**ECYP/S6/25/3/3**

There are always lessons for us to learn and this report highlights some areas for wider reflection, which I welcome. In particular, we need to improve how we deal with feedback we receive from markers so that they know that their concerns are being listened to and, where necessary, dealt with. We are committed to giving all learners and educators a stronger voice as we transition into Qualifications Scotland.

In conclusion, learners can be confident that their Higher History qualifications are credible and fair, and reflect the knowledge, understanding and skills they have acquired.

I hope this is helpful. I would, of course be happy to answer any questions that the Committee may have.

Yours sincerely

Fiona Robertson

SQA Chief Executive and Scotland's Chief Examining Officer

The report and supporting materials are available on the [Higher History subject page](#) of SQA's website:

[Higher History Review 2024](#)

[Higher History Review 2024 – Summary version](#)

[SQA's process for awarding graded National Courses - infographic](#)

## Annexe B



# Education, Children and Young People Committee

**22 January 2025**

## Higher History

### Introduction

The Committee has agreed to hear from the [Scottish Association of Teachers of History](#) (SATH) in relation to the examination, marking and awarding of Higher History in the 2024 diet.

This brief paper explores SQA's data, summarises the subsequent report on the review of the Higher History exam, and summarises the main points that arose during the Committee's evidence session with SQA and the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills on [4 December 2024](#).

### SQA results

The SQA published the provisional results of the 2024 Diet on 6 August 2024. The results were, as usual, released in December taking account of any appeals.

History is a popular subject at Higher. In 2024 it had 10,265 entries, the fourth highest number of entries behind only English, Mathematics and PE.

The following table shows the percentage of candidates attaining an A grade of the selected subjects and the difference in percentage points compared to 2023 and 2019.

| <b>Subject</b>              | <b>Grade A</b> | <i>Difference to 2023 (ppts)</i> | <i>Difference to 2019 (ppts)</i> | <b>Grade A-C</b> | <i>Difference to 2023 (ppts)</i> | <i>Difference to 2019 (ppts)</i> | <b>Entries 2024</b> |
|-----------------------------|----------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------|
| English                     | 27.2%          | -0.5%                            | 3.8%                             | 74.9%            | -1.4%                            | 1.5%                             | 36,300              |
| Mathematics                 | 40.7%          | 1.7%                             | 7.8%                             | 72.8%            | -0.5%                            | 0.4%                             | 18,480              |
| Physical Education          | 27.7%          | -5.5%                            | 0.1%                             | 86.8%            | -1.4%                            | -1.3%                            | 11,665              |
| History                     | 24.5%          | -12.9%                           | -4.4%                            | 66.1%            | -13.1%                           | -7.1%                            | 10,265              |
| Chemistry                   | 29.9%          | -3.0%                            | -0.1%                            | 74.4%            | -3.4%                            | -1.4%                            | 9,900               |
| Business Management         | 35.6%          | -2.3%                            | 4.1%                             | 78.7%            | 0.7%                             | 2.7%                             | 9,515               |
| Modern Studies              | 37.3%          | -3.6%                            | 2.8%                             | 76.4%            | -1.9%                            | 0.0%                             | 9,495               |
| Physics                     | 28.9%          | -5.2%                            | 0.1%                             | 75.7%            | -1.6%                            | 0.7%                             | 8,065               |
| Geography                   | 33.1%          | -7.3%                            | 5.4%                             | 75.0%            | -3.6%                            | -0.9%                            | 7,575               |
| Human Biology               | 23.4%          | -6.4%                            | -1.3%                            | 64.6%            | -6.4%                            | -4.9%                            | 7,450               |
| Applications of Mathematics | 19.6%          | -5.5%                            |                                  | 60.6%            | -13.2%                           |                                  | 2,995               |
| Care                        | 2.7%           | -5.7%                            | -7.6%                            | 38.0%            | -25.1%                           | -18.3%                           | 330                 |
| <b>All Highers</b>          | <b>30.7%</b>   | <b>-2.6%</b>                     | <b>2.2%</b>                      | <b>75.1%</b>     | <b>-2.3%</b>                     | <b>0.2%</b>                      | <b>196,260</b>      |

The selection of the twelve subjects in the table above was based on the top ten subjects by the number of entries with the addition of two subjects which saw greater drops in the A-C pass rate than History. Compared to 2023, the rate of entries attaining A-C grades in History fell by 13.1ppts. The two subjects where the fall was greater were Applications of Mathematics (-13.2ppts) and Care (-25.1ppts), albeit Care has relatively few entries.

The percentage of pupils attaining an A grade in History fell by 12.9ppts compared to 2023, this was the second highest fall in the percentage of As after Latin (Latin had 145 entries at Higher in 2024). Applications of Mathematics and Care saw a much lower reduction in the percentage attaining As as History.

Among the 10 most popular subjects at Higher, the percentage of pupils who attained A-C grades in Higher History in 2024 (66.1%) was the second lowest (after Human Biology). In 2023 the A-C pass rate had been the second highest of those same subjects.

The fall in the A-C rate is notable. There have been significant year-on-year shifts in the past. For example, the percentage of entries in Higher History attaining A-C fell 9.6 ppts between 2018 and 2019. The fall in 2019 may be partially explained by the introduction of the Scottish history question paper in that year.

Taking Higher entries as a whole, there was a fall in both the percentage of pupils attaining an A grade and A-C compared to 2023. Compared to 2019, there was a rise of 2.2 ppts in the proportion of entries attaining As and a rise of 0.2 ppts in the A-C rate compared to 2019.

The Higher results are expected to change over time and from year to year. Taken at a cohort level, Higher results are one of the few consistent measures of performance of the Scottish school education system over the long term (over ten years and more). This is, of course, not to say that they should be the only measure of success at an individual level. The SQA's approach to setting standards is known as 'attainment referencing'. The [SQA explains](#)—

“This means the intention is to maintain performance standards by using expert judgement of assessment performance using qualitative evidence, supported by statistics. This is different from 'norm-referenced' approaches (which seek to maintain the same overall outcomes regardless of individual performance) or 'criterion-referenced' approaches (which seek to prioritise performance standards through consideration of performance against specified criteria).”

Members will be aware that the pandemic disrupted approaches to assessment of graded school qualifications. Exams returned in 2022 but with modifications to the course assessment approaches. Some modifications remained in 2023 and 2024 saw a return to full course assessment. Modifications for Higher History in 2022-23 were a removal of the coursework assignment and an optional question introduced in the British, European and world history question paper. This change reduced the minimum number of topics needing to be covered for this paper from four to three.

The assessment of Higher History in 2023-24 consisted of—

- Question paper 1, consisting of essay-type questions on British, European and world history (44 marks)
- Question paper 2, consisting of source-based questions and a knowledge question on Scottish history (36 marks)
- Coursework in the form of an assignment (30 marks)

## Review of Higher History

The following section is a summary of the SQA's review of Higher History in 2024.

The fall in both the percentage of entries attaining an A and the percentage of entries attaining A-C created disquiet after the results were published. The SQA initiated an internal review on 11 September into the awarding process for Higher History in 2024. The review was published [on 6 November 2024](#).

SQA summarised the findings of the report in the following points:

- This year's Higher History assessments were set and marked by an experienced and established exam team; the team took no action to change the marking standard
- In response to marker feedback, marking instructions in 2024 included more points of detail to ensure better consistency of marking; this is normal practice, supported by academic research

- Learners were not required to provide more detailed responses to obtain marks than in previous years; specifically, there is evidence of learners being awarded a mark without naming specific individuals
- While some markers provided feedback on the marking standard, the overwhelming feedback was about the poor standard of performance; 81% of markers (56 out of 69) provided feedback saying that learner performance on the Scottish history paper was lower or much lower than in 2023
- Variation in marking is not uncommon (particularly in humanities subjects such as history which by their nature are more subjective than subjects such as sciences and maths); however, checks and balances identify and control any variations and these were followed fully in 2024 and ensured all marking was on standard
- Analysis of appeals outcomes for Higher History in 2024 shows evidence of greater reliability in marking than in previous years

The report concluded that:

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

## *Clarity on the standards of marking*

The report noted that having clarity over the required standard for any qualification is “critical to confidence in its outcomes”. For Highers, the report explained—

“The core standard is defined in course specifications, specimen question papers and annual question papers with their associated marking instructions, all taken together. Each of these is published on SQA’s website. The standard is exemplified through SQA’s Understanding Standards website and at associated events and activities. Further guidance is provided through our annual course reports that provide feedback on learner performance in each year’s assessments to help inform teaching and learning for future years.”

The report continued:

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

The report discussed some of the challenges in developing standards for disciplines with subjective content, such as History. These challenges are around ensuring



consistent marking of, for example, extended answers when there may be a wide range of acceptable answers. The report stated—

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

In terms of communicating the expected standard to teachers, the report highlighted:

- [the 2023 Higher History Course report](#), which sets out area of the assessments where candidates have performed well or not so well
- The [Higher History section of the SQA’s Understanding Standards website](#)
- The [course specification](#) and a “specimen question paper and marking instructions were published in September 2023 to reflect the updated course specification and to exemplify the standard.”

## *Development of the exam in 2024*

The report said that the normal processes were undertaken to develop questions and that there “is evidence that the 2024 question papers were judged to be on standard by the validator, and that feedback was considered and acted upon by the PA [Principal Assessor] and QM [Qualifications Manager] where appropriate”. The report also said that the feedback from markers was that the paper was fair.

The report claimed that between 2019 and 2024, “the general marking principles, layout, the number of marks available for each question type, and instruction on how to award marks have not changed over this time, so there is no evidence of a change in the general marking approach.” Nevertheless the report also said that the marking instructions for question paper 2 have evolved over that time “to include more exemplification of the standard.” Providing more detail in the marking instructions is intended to improve consistency of marking. The report noted:

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

## *Markers and marking*

The report noted that the SQA finds ensuring that there are sufficient markers challenging every year. The [eligibility for being a marker is](#) either:

- Preferably, the individual is currently delivering the qualification at the level they wish to mark and have at least one additional year of delivery experience (ie two years minimum); or
- The individual has delivered the qualification in the previous two years.

There has been commentary that the approach to marking had changed and required candidates to name individuals. The review explored this and said that it had found “examples of responses that were awarded high marks without naming specific individuals (and thus shows that the suggestion that this could not be achieved is incorrect)”. It also said that the exemplification within the marking instruction included “at least 20 [examples of answers] which provide specific knowledge without the need for naming a specific individual”.

The report included an analysis of markers’ feedback on markers instructions. It said that these were mixed, with some being critical but some being positive. The report set out some of the comments, two contrasting comments are set out below:

“The marking was so harsh this year, particularly in the explain question. It felt like the goal posts were moved after the exam. Pupils should not need to name individuals relating to an issue if the historical knowledge is excellent and links effectively to the question.”

And—

“Marking instructions are very clear and well laid out which is a great support and point of reference.”

From the quotes, it is clear that at least some of the markers were under the impression that specific names were required to access some marks. There are, however, quality checks that take place after marking has concluded.

The report set out the processes in place to support markers to ensure the standardisation of marking. These include markers’ meetings. The report noted—

“The key purpose of the meeting is to allow markers to explore and debate the standard they are being asked to apply. This debate is critical to a clear understanding of the standard and so to markers’ ability to apply it accurately and consistently in their marking. Further adjustments to the marking instructions can be agreed at the markers’ meeting in response to discussion of issues raised. In recent years, there has been no need for further changes at the markers’ meeting. ... Markers’ meetings can be challenging and include robust discussion while markers confirm their understanding of the standard. This is a key part of the process of ensuring a shared understanding of the standard to be applied in marking.”

The report explored markers’ experience of the markers’ meetings for the Higher History exam in 2024. It said—

“Of the 69 markers who submitted a marker report for the Scottish history question paper, there were about 40 comments specifically about the markers’ meeting. The majority of these were positive comments about the meeting being face to face, allowing for discussion about the standard. ... There were about five comments where markers were less positive about the markers’ meeting. They commented on what they felt to be mixed messages at the meeting and felt there was lack of clarity ... There is evidence that following the markers’ meeting, some markers were not clear about the standard to be applied in marking [question paper] 2. There is no evidence that these concerns were raised by a sufficient number of markers or

sufficiently strongly for the PA [Principal Assessor] to judge that further clarification of the marking instructions was required following the meeting. There is also no evidence that the PA judged such clarification to be required as a result of the quality assurance of marking undertaken by the exam team at any stage during the marking process.”

The report explained how the SQA undertakes a marker check. It said, “a sample of marked exam scripts is randomly selected from each marker and reviewed by a member of the exam team to ensure they have applied the marking instructions as agreed at the markers’ meeting and that this has been done consistently.” The report continued—

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

The report explained that the markers are graded A-C. ‘A’ being when all the selected marked exam scripts have been marked to the standard reflected in the marking instructions, ‘B’ when scripts are “slightly outwith the accepted tolerances”, and ‘C’ when markers have “shown significant severity, leniency or inconsistency, such that their allocation of scripts is remarked or partially remarked”. The report stated—

“In 2024, for the British, European and world history question paper, the number of ‘A’ and ‘B’ markers was similar to that in 2023. For the Scottish history question paper, grading for markers changed slightly this year, with the number of ‘A’ markers decreasing from 78% in 2023 to 67% in 2024; correspondingly the number of ‘B’ markers increased from 22% in 2023 to 33% in 2024. There were no markers graded ‘C’ at the marker check. It is usual to observe slight variations in marker gradings year on year. There was no concern expressed by either the QM or PA about the standard of marking this year.”

## *Feedback from markers*

Markers are asked to provide feedback on the quality of candidates’ performance. In 2024, they were asked to provide feedback compared to 2023 and 2019. Members will note that the markers will either be current teachers of Higher History, marker will have taught the course in the past two years. The report stated—

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

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

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

- 66% felt that the performance standard was lower or much lower than in 2019.

“For the Scottish history question paper in 2024:

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

The report also highlighted themes arising from both papers. In paper 1 (British, European and world history) the themes were:

- Strong essay introductions and knowledge and analysis sections
- Weak or poor evaluation and conclusion sections
- A high number of incomplete papers submitted

In paper 2 (Scottish history), the themes were:

- Candidates below level of previous years and displaying National 5 level ability
- Candidates were strongest on the ‘Explain’ questions (though a few markers said this was not the case for the Migration and Empire option)

Compared to 2023, the average percentage achieved in 2024 in paper 1 fell 11.1 percentage points and the average mark in paper 2 fell 15.0ppts.

## *Setting grade boundaries*

The final stage before certification is the setting of grade boundaries.

As noted above, the SQA does not take a norm-referenced approach, which would broadly seek to ensure that similar numbers of A’s, B’s, Cs, etc are awarded each year. The SQA does move the boundaries of grades from the nominal boundaries to “help ensure assessments have worked as planned and that standards are consistent from one year to the next”.

This process involves a range of individuals. The SQA’s [A Guide to Setting Grade Boundaries](#) states—

“In order for changes in grade boundaries to occur, decisions must be supported by valid evidence from the principal assessor and agreement reached by all members of the awarding meeting. In many cases, information is extracted from analysis of individual questions within the assessment instrument(s) that did not function as expected. Identification of particular questions allows impact to be clearly discerned (how many marks more difficult or easy the examination was) and also which candidates, and therefore which grade boundaries, would be affected. In addition, given the decisions on grade boundaries based on the standard of assessment, the

resulting grade distribution should be explainable. There is no fixed proportion of grades; the ability of the candidates must be reflected in the grade distribution since to do otherwise would be unfair.”

The report stated that the fact that there had been lower average marks for questions in all three components (including the coursework assessment) in the Higher had been taken into account. The report stated—

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

Initially the boundary setting meeting had concluded that no adjustment from the notional boundaries was required. The process was revisited however as, on reflection “it was agreed that there had not been sufficient discussion of the impact of return to full course assessment for Higher History in line with the awarding approach for 2024”. It is not clear from the report who was party to this decision, but during evidence to the Committee on 4 December, Fiona Robertson confirmed that she had, “asked that we consider whether modest adjustments should be made on the basis of the return of coursework, in a way that, crucially, would be consistent with the way that we were treating other courses.” (Col 85) The result of the re-convened boundary setting meeting was to lower all grade boundaries by 2 ppts, i.e. improving the grades for some learners.

## *Predictable questions*

There is likely to be a balance to be considered in developing assessments to ensure that similar areas of knowledge and skills are covered year to year, while not being too predictable. The review stated—

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

The review said that the questions in the 2024 exam, “due to the questions asked this year, there was less opportunity to gain marks for the same recalled knowledge”.

Some of these issues were considered by the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment which said that it had evidence that “a great deal of learner time was spent on rote learning and examination rehearsal”. [Under its recommendation 21, the IRQA suggested:](#)

“[The national qualifications body should seek to] extend the range of assessment methods within National Qualifications and identify what other actions might be taken to reduce the potential for rote learning and enhance the learner experience.”

The SQA’s report on Higher History provided examples of remarkably similar answers being provided. An extract from a 2019 script said—

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

An extract from a 2024 script said—

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

## *Recommendations*

The report made a number of recommendations. Not all of those are included here. Members may be interested in the following—

- SQA should review the way feedback is provided by markers, how this feedback is considered and used appropriately, effectively and consistently as part of the awarding process, and how markers are informed about the actions taken to address any concerns they have raised. This should help to mitigate concerns that issues markers have experienced during marking have not been addressed at later stages of the quality assurance process before final awards are made.
- As part of the reflection above, SQA should consider seeking formal, written feedback from markers immediately following every markers’ meeting instead of waiting until the end of the marking period. This would allow the PA and their team to be clear about any issues that markers believe may impact the quality of marking and that may need to be addressed by further advice to markers or action during the quality assurance process. Consideration should be given to how information on any issues raised by this feedback and actions taken to address them is provided to the relevant awarding meeting.
- SQA should ensure, when making changes to course specifications, that the intended consequences for teaching and learning and assessment of such changes are made clear to and clearly understood by teachers.
- SQA should consider its approach to the assessment of Higher History and potentially of other humanities subjects. The optional nature of the question papers for Higher History is a contributory factor to some of the challenges set out in this review. While, given the nature of the subject, retaining some form of optionality is probably inevitable and desirable, consideration should be given to reducing the number of options in consultation with teachers, learners and other stakeholders in a way that minimises any impact on the choices available to learners while strengthening the operation of our assessments.

- As part of its ongoing improvement of communications and engagement with teachers and learners, as it prepares to transition to Qualifications Scotland, SQA should help build a stronger understanding across the education community of the end-to-end operation of the national examinations system and of the roles and processes that underpin it.

## Course report 2024

Every year, the SQA produces a report on candidates' performance in its courses. As with previous years, the [Higher History Course report 2024](#) highlights areas where candidates have performed well and less well, and some of the issues that candidates faced in accessing more marks. The purpose of these reports is to support teachers to prepare the current and future years' pupils who are taking Higher History.

## Evidence on 4 December 2024

On [4 December 2024, the Committee took evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, Jenny Gilruth MSP and Fiona Robertson, Chief Executive and Chief Examiner of the SQA.](#)

The Cabinet Secretary said that she was keen not to “stray into operational matters, which are for the SQA”. She said—

“I recognise the concerns that have been raised by history teachers. It was quite right and proper that the SQA interrogated the evidence and that it conducted a fulsome review, which I am sure committee members have looked at and read in detail.” (Col 73)

Fiona Robertson spoke about the report summarised above. She said—

“The report and the review into higher history sought to be evidence based. As an awarding body, we have a responsibility to award qualifications on the basis of the performance of learners. The evidence that we laid out in the report reflects the evidence that we gained through the awarding process. It includes the feedback of markers, who are teachers working in schools across Scotland and who provided feedback on the standard that they saw through the marking process ...

“Very serious questions were raised in relation to higher history this year, and I have treated them very seriously. That is why I commissioned the review. The review was commissioned by me and undertaken by my colleagues within our existing structures and responsibilities. It was the right thing for us to do, given the questions that were raised.” (Col 76)

The review was undertaken by SQA staff members. Fiona Robertson said that the Welsh Joint Education Committee had provided an external review of the report. Some members of the Committee pressed the Cabinet Secretary to establish an independent review. She declined to do so. Both the Cabinet Secretary and Fiona Robertson linked the question of who should review any issues around the awarding of National Qualifications to the question of where the accreditation and regulation function should sit in future, and the scope of that function. Ms Robertson said—

“At the moment, the regulator in Scotland does not do national qualifications at all. They are self-regulated. There are some choices around that. If anything, rather than considering whether the work should have been done independently or not, the question therefore gives rise to a consideration of future arrangements. We all want there to be public confidence in our education system and our qualifications system. I certainly want that. If the arrangements that are in place give rise, for whatever reason—rightly or wrongly—to the kinds of questions that have been asked today, it is legitimate to question those arrangements. However, it is important that I highlight that everyone who has been involved in the review has acted with the utmost integrity. I fully stand by the report.” (Col 98)

Fiona Robertson argued that fundamentally the debate has been around a difference of professional opinion. She said—

“A lot of the debate around the issue has been a debate between teachers, and I absolutely acknowledge that there is a strength of view among teachers—among all teachers, in fact. However, there is a variety of views on the issue, including the very strongly held views, which have integrity, of the principal assessor and the senior marker.

“I was aware that, whatever conclusions the report reached, there would not be unanimity of view among teachers, regardless of whether they worked for the SQA as markers or appointees. It is important that we not seek to divide teachers into those who mark for the SQA and those who do not. A significant number of teachers mark for the SQA. Most teachers mark for the SQA during their careers, and I would like to see more of them do that.” (Col 81)

The Committee explored whether there may be falling standards of literacy more generally. Fiona Robertson stated—

“Some evidence is emerging from markers, not just in history but in other areas where we expect extended pieces of writing, that some learners—not all, because we still see excellence—are struggling more than previously. History is a subject where we might see that play out, because we expect extended pieces of writing” (Col 96)

The Cabinet Secretary said that she was keen to continue to hear directly from History teachers. She said—

“Although the Government accepts the findings of the SQA’s review, I am keen to work with the history teaching profession and to hear its feedback. It is hugely important that it is part of the process and of what comes next.” (Col 75)

## **SATH Survey**

SATH undertook a survey of its members on this topic, although the results of this survey do not appear to be published. It has been reported in the media that there were 174 responses to the survey and the responses were broadly critical of the handling of this issue.



The 2023 teacher census reported that there were 1004 teachers (FTE) whose main subject was history teaching in public secondary schools in Scotland. The headcount figure would be higher, and this data does not include those working in the independent sector. It is not clear how SATH undertook its survey and whether the survey sample was self-selected.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills told [Parliament on 9 January 2025](#)—

“The Scottish Government and the SQA met the Scottish Association of the Teachers of History immediately after the publication of the survey results and agreed that there would be a package of measures to support teachers delivering higher history in 2025, including a dedicated inquiry line so that teachers, lecturers and school leaders can raise questions directly with the SQA. Another understanding standards webinar has also been organised. Further, I have asked to meet the president of SATH, and I look forward to doing so.”

**Ned Sharratt, Senior Researcher (Education, Culture), SPICe Research**  
**16 January 2025**

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