

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

**4<sup>th</sup> Meeting, 2021 (Session 6), Wednesday 29 September**

### **Alternative Certification Model**

#### **Background**

In recent weeks, the Committee has heard from children and young people with regard to their experiences of the 2021 Alternative Certification Model. The Committee has also taken evidence from the Association of Directors of Education and the from education trade unions. The Committee, at this meeting, will take evidence from the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). This is the Committee's final evidence session on the 2021 Alternative Certification Model.

#### **Committee meeting**

The Committee will take evidence from the following witnesses from the SQA—

- Fiona Robertson, Chief Executive;
- Dr Gill Stewart, Director of Qualifications Development; and
- Beth Black, Director of Policy, Analysis and Standards, Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA).

A written submission has been provided by the SQA and is at [Annexe A](#) to this paper. A SPICe briefing to support this evidence session is provided at [Annexe B](#).

**Education, Children and Young People Committee Clerks  
24 September 2021**

**Annexe A**

**EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE**  
**SUBMISSION FROM SCOTTISH QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY**  
**2020-21 NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS**

**1. Introduction**

The Education, Children and Young People Committee has asked the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) to discuss the 2020-21 Alternative Certification Model put in place to ensure an appropriate balance between learning, teaching, and assessment, given the challenging circumstances caused by the pandemic. This paper provides some summary information in advance of the evidence session with SQA, to be held on 29 September 2021.

**2. Assessing National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher in 2021**

In August 2020, SQA undertook a national consultation to reduce the assessment requirements of courses. This was undertaken in recognition of the disruption to learning in 2020 and anticipated disruption in 2021. The purpose of modifications was to free up teaching and learning time, whilst maintaining the validity, credibility and standard of the qualifications. The consultation received over 23,000 responses from learners, parents, carers, teachers, lecturers, representative organisations and professional associations. Overall, feedback on the consultation supported the proposed modifications as they were seen as practical given the challenges, but changes were made in response to the feedback we received. Full details of the modifications are available [here](#).

To support teachers and lecturers, we published a total of 148 course modifications across National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher on Wednesday 7 October. Following the cancellation of exams, we published 116 subject-specific guidance documents and 134 individual assessment resources for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses, from November to February.

Given the rapidly changing circumstances of the pandemic, we acted quickly to further adapt our assessment approach, in particular the delivery of practical and performance subjects, such as Music, Drama, Dance and PE, throughout the year and in consultation with subject specialists and colleagues in Education Scotland.

In response to the continued disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic on society, the Deputy First Minister announced the cancellation of National 5 exams on Wednesday 7 October 2020 and the cancellation of Higher and Advanced Higher exams on Tuesday 8 December 2020.

The National Qualifications 2021 Group was formally established in October 2020 to provide advice on the development of the alternative certification model (ACM) for National Qualifications in 2021. Given the disruption caused by the pandemic, it was vital that the education system worked together to ensure an appropriate balance between learning, teaching, and assessment. A system-wide collaborative approach was also a recommendation of the *Rapid Review of National Qualifications Experience 2020* by Professor Mark Priestley. Regular reports on progress were provided to Scottish Ministers and the Education Recovery Group, chaired by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills.

The National Qualifications 2021 Group, made up of representatives from the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES), Colleges Scotland, Education Scotland, the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), School Leaders Scotland (SLS), the Scottish Council of Independent Schools (SCIS), Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), the Scottish Government, National Parent Forum of Scotland, and the Scottish Youth Parliament, met weekly to consider alternative certification arrangements for National Qualifications in the 2020–21 session. It was supported by a National Qualifications 2021 Working Group, which also met weekly.

In addition to parents/carers and young people being represented on the National Qualifications 2021 Group, we established a Learner Panel last year to engage and consult with young people. We continued to engage and share messages with learner organisations and their members, such as Young Scot, the Scottish Youth Parliament, and the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, and with organisations representing parents/carers, such as the National Parent Forum Scotland (NPFs), Connect and the Scottish Government's parental engagement network.

### Alternative Certification Model (ACM)

The ACM for National 5 was published on Tuesday 8 December 2020, and the same approach was adopted for Higher and Advanced Higher following their cancellation by the Deputy First Minister's on that same date. Following discussion with the National Qualifications 2021 Group, revisions to the approach were published on Tuesday 16 February 2021, following the move to remote learning.

All partners involved in the National Qualifications 2021 Group agreed that at the heart of the ACM was certification of learners based on demonstrated attainment — evidence of skills, knowledge and understanding. Based on that evidence, teachers and lecturers exercised their professional judgement to determine provisional grades for learners. Having evidence of a learner's skills and knowledge so that they can be awarded a qualification is important and is the cornerstone of our qualifications system. We know that colleges, universities and employers want to see that. It is also important for learners to have confidence in their qualifications, now and over time.

Teachers and lecturers know their learners and their individual circumstances best and so the ACM gave schools, colleges and training providers flexibility around the timing and nature of assessment to ensure that, as far as possible, there was maximum opportunity for learners to undertake the required learning and be given the best chance to succeed in any course assessments.

The ACM included support and flexibility to help address the disruption to learning caused by the pandemic:

- ◆ as highlighted above, the assessment requirements of courses were reduced in ways that teachers and lecturers thought were practical given the disruption to learning, while ensuring the qualifications remained valid and credible
  
- ◆ generic and specific course assessment guidance was provided — by Thursday 19 November for National 5 and throughout January 2021 for Higher and Advanced Higher. Assessment resources for every course, based on the unused 2020 exam papers, were also provided

- ◆ following the move to remote learning in January, the timeline for submission of provisional results was extended to Friday 25 June, providing as much time as possible for learning and teaching, enabling assessment to be delayed until learners were ready
- ◆ teacher and lecturer assessment judgements were supported with local and national quality assurance checks, to help ensure provisional results were based on national standards
- ◆ a contingency for later certification was introduced for those learners who had completed the learning for their course but, through no fault of their own, were unable to provide completed assessment evidence before Friday 25 June, as a result of experiencing particularly significant disruption

Further information on the approach is available in the [National Qualifications 2021 Alternative Certification Model \(ACM\) Methodology Report](#).

Teachers and lecturers, with the support of the system and SQA, worked hard to deliver the right results to learners, first time. However, a direct right of appeal was available, and the appeals service was the final essential part of the model.

This year, for the first time, learners could [appeal directly to SQA for free](#) and were able to register that they wanted to appeal from Friday 25 June. Appeals were processed with the support of schools, colleges and training providers after learners received their certificates on Tuesday 10 August.

### Quality assurance

Quality assurance comprised a number of elements:

- ◆ SQA provided teachers and lecturers with a significant programme of 'Understanding Standards' materials and events across all subjects. These included guidance on making grading decisions, a SQA Academy online course, subject webinars, audio presentations, exemplification of learner performances at different grades, and supported teachers and lecturers in making their assessment judgements.
- ◆ Schools, colleges and training providers conducted their own internal quality assurance in line with the ACM's defined [roles and responsibilities](#) as well as their own procedures and those of their local authority or subject networks.
- ◆ SQA also undertook a national quality assurance exercise, to look at how schools, colleges and training providers were applying the national standards. This was designed to be supportive and provided schools, colleges and training providers with feedback and advice. It did not involve the grading or moderation of individual learner assessments by SQA. Teacher judgement, based on learners' demonstrated attainment, was the final arbiter of grades awarded.

Every school, college and training provider in Scotland delivering National Qualifications was subject to national quality assurance. They were selected for one or more subjects, at one level only, depending on the number of courses they delivered.

## Provisional results

Provisional results for 519,429 National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses were submitted to SQA by Friday 25 June. This was the highest number of entries in the past seven years. The provisional grades were not altered by SQA unless, in a very small number of cases, an administrative error was identified, in collaboration with the school, college or training provider. Learners were informed of their grades by centres before submission to SQA for resulting.

The overall entries for all National Qualifications (National 2 to Advanced Higher, including Skills for Work) in 2021 were 660,661. This was an increase of 8,201 on 2020 and was the highest number of entries in the past five years.

Entries at National 5 decreased by 2,666 to 297,973. Entries at Higher increased by 8,447 to 194,661 and Advanced Higher increased by 3,225 to 26,795.

## Attainment

The distribution of 2021 August attainment is available on [SQA's statistics page](#).

A to C attainment in 2021 at National 5 was 255,517 or 85.8% (267,558 or 89.0% in 2020). At Higher it was 169,989 or 87.3% (166,208 or 89.3% in 2020). At Advanced Higher it was 24,162 or 90.2% (21,935 or 93.1% in 2020).

The biggest change was at A grade. Attainment at A grade in 2021 at National 5 was 46.7% (42.3% in 2020), at Higher 47.6% (40.0% in 2020) and 51.0% at Advanced Higher (46.3% in 2020).

Some variation in attainment and the composition of attainment is to be expected between courses and over time. This year, we saw more movements in attainment than we would see in a normal year when exams are held. Learners across Scotland experienced disruption to learning and teaching and periods of remote learning. Modifications to assessment, the absence of external assessment and the flexibility in how and when courses were assessed by teachers and lecturers, which was required due to the levels of disruption, may also have impacted on attainment.

Given the exceptional circumstances in which National Courses were awarded in both 2020 and 2021, it is not possible to draw definitive conclusions on any changes in education performance across these two years, or in comparison to 2019.

## Equalities

Throughout the development of the model, we had equalities at the heart of our thinking and developed and published equality impact assessments and child rights and wellbeing impact assessments to inform our approaches and decisions, as well as to demonstrate our compliance with our statutory obligations.

In developing the ACM, we had due regard to the potential equalities impacts of our decisions and processes and sought to ensure that our guidance to centres on equalities in the provisional results process assisted them in fulfilling their equalities responsibilities. We also ensured that the arrangements for appeals were designed to address any cases of discrimination by centres.

Statistical analysis for 2021 shows that, relative to each year in the period 2017 to 2019, the A and A–C attainment rates are up for all groups at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher.

Relative to 2020, attainment at grade A is up for all characteristics: Sex, Disability, SIMD, Additional Support Needs and Ethnic group at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher.

When focusing on the most deprived and least deprived groups in 2021, the attainment gap is smaller than in 2019 and previous years, but slightly wider than in 2020. Given the exceptional circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic, the disruption to learning and teaching, and the very different approaches to assessment and grading over the past two academic years, and, importantly, a very different grade distribution, comparisons need to be treated with caution and it is not possible to draw definitive conclusions on any changes in education performance across these two years or in comparison to pre-pandemic years.

Full tables and analysis are available in the [2021 Alternative Certification Model: Equalities Monitoring Report](#).

### Higher National and Vocational Qualifications

Beyond National Qualifications, SQA also worked collaboratively with the Higher National and Vocational Qualifications 2021 Group that had representation from all parts of further education and vocational training. The group developed general and subject-specific advice and guidance to support assessment for vocational qualifications. Colleges and training providers welcomed the flexibility of the advice and guidance to facilitate their assessment approaches. SQA also worked with regulatory bodies to confirm the assessment arrangements required for regulated qualifications, including Scottish Vocational Qualifications and Licence to Practice qualifications. With Skills Development Scotland, SQA ensured the continued delivery of Scotland's apprenticeships.

### **3. Assessing National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher in 2022**

Following the decision by Ministers that exams should go ahead in 2022 if it is safe to do so, SQA continues to take advice from a National Qualifications 2022 Group and monitor public health advice to prepare for a range of scenarios.

These scenarios and the associated contingencies, agreed by partners, acknowledge the possibility of further disruption in the months ahead and will help to ensure the safe delivery of National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses. The arrangements take into account some early evaluation of the 2021 ACM as well as greater experience of how the pandemic might behave.

In keeping with previous years, SQA will continue to provide an Understanding Standards programme of events and materials that support teachers and lecturers with assessment decisions, building on their experience of determining provisional results in 2020-21. SQA will also continue to work with schools, colleges and training providers in checking the internally assessed elements of National Qualifications to ensure they meet national standards.

We have set out [more detailed information](#) on the current position with each scenario. Communications materials and activities have been developed in collaboration with partners from across the education sector. We will continue to provide all schools, colleges and training

providers, as well as learners, parents and carers, with information regarding National Qualifications in 2021-22 – at [www.sqa.org.uk/nq2022](http://www.sqa.org.uk/nq2022).

#### **4. Conclusion**

The Scottish Government announced in June that SQA is to be replaced by a new curriculum and assessment agency and has commissioned an independent review to advise on next steps, which is expected to report early next year. Until a replacement organisation is established, SQA will continue to fulfil its statutory functions and deliver for Scotland's learners. This includes delivery of exams and other assessments to schools, colleges and training providers in 2022, which learners can have pride in, and which universities, colleges and employers can have confidence in.

SQA is committed to making a positive contribution to Professor Ken Muir's review of Scotland's education bodies and the next steps that flow from his work. This will help secure a smooth transition which will support and safeguard the interests of learners and provide continuity of service to schools, colleges and training providers.

Scottish Qualifications Authority  
September 2021



**Education, Children and Young People Committee**  
**School Assessment: Alternative Certification Model 2021**  
**Wednesday 29 September 2021**

## INTRODUCTION

As part of its work examining the Alternative Certification Model (ACM) 2021, the Committee has agreed to take evidence from the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). This paper provides an overview of evidence the Committee has heard and read during the past few weeks regarding the ACM. It covers the arising themes from the evidence including the views of pupils, teachers and stakeholder organisations.

Further background information about assessment arrangements in 2020 and 2021 is available in the SPICe briefings for the Committee's 15 and [22 September meetings](#). The 22 September briefing also contains the full summary of evidence from the informal sessions the Committee held with young people throughout week beginning 13 September 2021.

Please note, the SQA submission to the Committee was not available at the time of writing and therefore is not referred to in this paper.

## ASSESSMENT ARRANGEMENTS IN 2021

### Review of 2020 ACM ahead of 2021 arrangements

Alternative Certification Models (ACMs) were adopted in 2020 and 2021 following the cancellation of exams as a result of COVID-19. The arrangements were adapted in 2021 following criticism of the 2020 system. Further background information on the 2020 and 2021 ACMs are available in the SPICe briefings for the Committee's 15 and [22 September meetings](#).

Following the [Scottish Government's reversal of SQA-awarded downgraded results](#)<sup>1</sup>, Stirling University Professor of Education Mark Priestly and colleagues were commissioned to carry out a Rapid Review of National Qualifications experience 2020 in order to ensure lessons were learned in the shaping of the 2021 ACM. The Scottish Government [published the review report on 7 October 2020](#)<sup>2</sup>. The review is explored in more detail in the [SPICe briefing for the 1 November 2020 Education and Skills Committee meeting](#).

It concluded that SQA, the government, local authorities and schools faced "an extremely difficult set of circumstances" with no easy solutions. The report found that: while all parties

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<sup>1</sup> [Ministerial Statement, COVID-19 \(Education\), 11 August 2020](#)

<sup>2</sup> [National Qualifications experience 2020: rapid review, 2020](#)



involved in the process acted with integrity; there were variations in the awarding of estimated grades; a lack of transparency around external moderation; equalities implications of the statistical approach used by SQA were “under-emphasised by both the government and SQA until late in the process”; and trust in the SQA had been damaged.

The review report made nine recommendations. These included: the suspension of National 5 exams in 2021; the development of a transparent system for moderation of teacher estimated grades; development of approaches to collaborated decision making around assessment; a commitment to equalities; ensuring young people are included in stakeholder engagement; ensuring clear communication of assessment arrangements for 2021; reviewing the appeals system, considering the rights of young people in line with UNCRC; commissioning of independent research into development and application of the 2020 ACM; and the development by SQA and others of digital materials and systems for producing, assessing and moderating assessment evidence.

The Scottish Government accepted the review’s recommendations except for the call for independent research examining the 2020 ACM, which it said would be considered as “a future project as part of our research strategy in education”.

Following the 2021 ACM, teaching union NASUWT called for reflection on the influence of the review. In its [submission to the Committee](#)<sup>3</sup> ahead of the 22 September 2021 meeting, NASUWT stated:

“...considerable reflection is now needed on whether the recommendations and outcomes of that review from 2020 have indeed influenced the direction of travel in 2021.” – [NASUWT submission, September 2021](#)

### **Members may wish to explore with SQA:**

- **To what extent did the Priestley Review lead the SQA’s thinking and actions in developing the ACM in 2020/21?**

### **Alternative Certification Model 2021**

Following the publication of the Rapid Review of National Qualifications, [the Deputy First Minister John Swinney MSP announced in October 2020 that the recommendation to cancel National 5 exams in 2021 would be accepted](#)<sup>4</sup>. The initial intention was to go ahead with Higher and Advanced Higher exams, however the [decision to cancel these exams as well was announced in December 2020](#)<sup>5</sup>. Announcing the cancellation, the Deputy First Minister said:

“...we will adopt a new model that is based on the one developed for National 5 qualifications and make awards on teacher judgement of evidence of learner

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<sup>3</sup> NASUWT submission to Education, Children and Young People Committee, September 2021

<sup>4</sup> [Scottish Government news release: SQA Awards 2020](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Scottish Government news release: SQA Awards update](#), December 2020

attainment. This approach is more flexible and takes account of the reality of the disruption so many pupils have already had to their learning.” – [Scottish Government news release, 8 December 2020](#)

The Alternative Certification Model (ACM) was developed by the SQA with reference to the National Qualifications 2021 Group. The [ACM for 2021 was a five-stage process](#):

- **Stage 1:** November 2020 until April 2021, teachers and lecturers accessed subject specific guidance, assessment resources and Understanding Standards materials and webinars from SQA.
- **Stage 2:** April to May 2021 School, college and local authority quality assurance continues. During May, SQA requests, reviews and provides feedback on samples of assessment evidence from each school and college.
- **Stage 3:** End of May to 25 June 2021 Schools, colleges, local authorities and SQA work through final stages of local and national quality assurance and feedback to reach provisional results that are consistent, equitable and fair.
- **Stage 4:** By 25 June 2021 Schools and colleges submit quality assured provisional results to SQA.
- **Stage 5:** Appeals process for 2020-21 A free appeals service, available directly to learners for the first time, is the fifth and final stage of the alternative certification model.

The second lockdown from 5 January to mid-April 2021 meant pupils were learning remotely for the first part of the year. This further limited the time available for schools to gather evidence and run assessments, and the committee has heard from education trade union witnesses that they were not aware of any contingency plans prior to the lockdown. In its [March 2021 submission to the Education and Skills Committee](#)<sup>6</sup>, the EIS said that a majority of secondary school teachers expressed:

...deep anxiety about the timescales remaining for assessment to be undertaken by senior phase students. – [EIS submission, March 2021](#)

EIS listed young people sitting multiple assessments across multiple subjects in a tight timeframe as a key concern, with the lack of support and information from SQA also highlighted numerous times. [NASUWT provided subject-specific evidence to the Committee](#)<sup>7</sup> highlighting that course content had not been adapted or removed in certain subjects including Dance at National 5 and Higher; there was insufficient time available to gather required assessment evidence in English and Geography; and confusion around requirements for History. In evidence to the [3 March 2021 meeting of the Education and Skills Committee, SQA Chief Executive Fiona Robertson said that SQA had](#)<sup>8</sup>:

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<sup>6</sup> [EIS submission to Education and Skills Committee, March 2021](#)

<sup>7</sup> [NASUWT subject specific evidence to Education and Skills Committee, March 2021](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Education and Skills Committee, 3 March 2021](#)

“...sought to take a proportionate approach across the subjects. In the sciences, and in a number of other subjects, the assessment is synoptic—that is, it is not topic by topic; you are looking at a range of issues in any assessment approach. It can be difficult to remove elements in those subjects, whereas it may be more straightforward to do that in other subjects.

...we have worked hard to ensure coherence of approach across the considerable number of subjects that we offer while being cognisant of the well-established differences in assessment...For many practical subjects we have, in effect, carried out a second round of modifications, which bear in mind the current circumstances. For example, in music, young people can record themselves playing, so they do not have to be in the school physically.” – [Official Report, 3 March 2021](#)

During the meeting, Fiona Robertson also told members that SQA had sought to give schools and colleges flexibility in the assessment approach taken:

“We have provided flexibility, so I do not anticipate that, across Scotland, every young person will be taking exactly the same exam paper or that the exam paper will be split into sections. There will be a variety of approaches reflecting the circumstances, the curriculum approach that is taken by individual schools, the progress that was made before Christmas and the work that has been done since Christmas.” – [Official Report, 3 March 2021](#)

The [SQA issued an update on the assessment process in April 2021](#)<sup>9</sup> which said:

“Evidence should be gathered under controlled conditions to ensure a degree of equity. It is the quality of evidence which is critical, rather than quantity and therefore there is no need for a large portfolio or ring-binder of classroom based work. There is no requirement to replicate full formal exams or prelims this year. Classroom based assessments should be spread over the remaining weeks to help manage the marking and quality assurance activities as well as reduce pressure on learners.”

The SQA provided schools with exam scripts that could be used. The SQA also provided advice for teachers on how to develop their own assessments. Schools were not required to use the SQA scripts, and, if they were, they could be used in full or in part. However, some of the guidance for, particularly more paper-based subjects, indicated that the closer the assessments were to normal end of course assessments the more realistic and reliable teachers' estimated grades would be<sup>10</sup>. During the Spring there were reports of schools appearing to replicate exam conditions, with [Connect highlighting schools across the country were taking different approaches](#)<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> [SQA: National Qualifications 2021 Group update: Alternative Certification Model Stage 2, April 2021](#)

<sup>10</sup> E.g. [https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files\\_ccc/guidance-estimates-n5-physics.pdf](https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/guidance-estimates-n5-physics.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> [BBC: Parents question fairness of exams, 13 May 2021](#)

[In evidence to the Committee at the 22 September 2021 meeting](#)<sup>12</sup>, EIS General Secretary Larry Flanagan stated that exam arrangements varied by school and by subject. In response to questions around the number of assessments pupils faced over a period of a few weeks, he said that this had been due to the three-month winter lockdown, and not the ACM itself. Mr Flanagan said:

“What schools did in a lot of instances is if a young person didn’t achieve their perceived potential first time around was to give them a second chance. Now in one sense that adds to assessment, but it also gives the student a second chance.” – [Education, Children and Young People Committee, 22 September 2021](#)

During the same session, Seamus Searson of SSTA said that the 2021 ACM had failed to take the impact of the three-month lockdown into account.

The Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP), YouthLink Scotland and Young Scot surveyed young people across Scotland as part of their Lockdown Lowdown series. The [Lockdown Lowdown 3 survey](#)<sup>13</sup> was carried out between March and June 2021 and published in July 2021, received 2,404 responses from young people across the country. Members should note that the survey was an open online survey, the respondents may not be representative of young people as a whole and therefore the results should be treated with caution. Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed they felt prepared for 2021 assessments. 34% said they neither agreed nor disagreed, 44% selected ‘strongly disagree’ or ‘disagree’, while 22% said ‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’. When asked to what extent they were confident that teacher assessment of grades would be delivered fairly in 2021, 40% neither agreed nor disagreed, 38% selected ‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’, while 22% said they ‘strongly disagreed’ or ‘disagreed’.

Of those who believed teacher assessment would be fairly delivered, ‘trust in teachers’ was the most common theme in their responses, with ‘teachers being supportive and understanding’ coming in second. Of those who disagreed, ‘criticism of approach’ came top of the list, with the impact of COVID on results coming second. Of those who neither agreed nor disagreed, ‘difficulty with remote learning’ was the most common response theme while ‘criticism of approach’ came second.

Assessment results on were published on 10 August 2021. [SQA’s summary of results showed](#)<sup>14</sup>:

- A-C attainment rates for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher (85.8%, 87.3% and 90.2% respectively) were down on 2020 but are higher than A-C attainment rates in each year in the period 2017 to 2019

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<sup>12</sup> [Education, Children and Young People Committee, 22 September 2021](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Lockdown Lowdown 3: What young people think as lockdown begins to ease, July 2021](#)

<sup>14</sup> [SQA Attainment Statistics. August 2021](#)

- Grade A attainment rates for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher (46.7%, 47.6% and 51.0% respectively) were up on 2020 and are higher than grade A attainment rate for each year in the period 2017 to 2019.

On [Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> September, SQA published further analysis of the results](#)<sup>15</sup>. This analysis looked at attainment by centre type: education authority schools, colleges, independent schools and other. It found that:

- The National 5 A-C and A attainment rates by centre decreased across all centre types between 2020 and 2021.
- The Higher A-C and A attainment rates by centre decreased for almost all centres except for independent schools and centres in the 'other' category between 2020 and 2021.
- While the attainment gap between independent and education authority schools grew between 2020 and 2021, it remained lower than in pre-pandemic years, suggesting a system where grades are not based on performance in a final exam may be beneficial to pupils at state schools.

The statistics show that the attainment gap between education authority and independent schools was as follows:

- Higher A-C passes: 16.4% in 2017, 16.5% in 2018, 18.9% in 2019, 8.9% in 2020 and 10.5% in 2021.
- Higher A passes: 27.5% in 2017, 28.1% in 2018, 32% in 2019, 29% in 2020 and 30% in 2021.
- National 5 A-C passes: 15.9% in 2017, 18.2% in 2018, 17.6% in 2019, 9.2% in 2020 and 11.7% in 2021.
- National 5 A passes: 33.1% in 2017, 36.2% in 2018, 36% in 2019, 32.5% in 2020 and 32.1% in 2021.

A full breakdown of the above figures can be found at **Annex 1** of this briefing.

#### **Members may wish to explore with SQA:**

- **What contingency planning had SQA prepared ahead of the winter lockdown, who was this communicated to and how?**
- **How might the 2021 ACM have been better adapted to suit the changing public health circumstances?**

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<sup>15</sup> [SQA Attainment Statistics 2021](#)

- **How were considerations of pupil's health and wellbeing built into the design of the 2021 ACM?**
- **What conclusions does SQA draw from the attainment statistics published last week with regards to the impact of the ACM on the gap between education authority and independent schools' results?**
- **How does the 2021 ACM compare to exam-based models or a model based solely on teacher judgement as a measure of achievement?**

### **Young people's experiences of the 2021 ACM**

During the [Committee's informal evidence sessions with young people held across the week beginning 13 September 2021](#)<sup>16</sup>, participants were asked to share their experiences of the 2021 ACM. Many young people across the groups said they saw benefits of system based on continuous assessment, as this gave pupils the opportunity to be assessed throughout the year. While some pupils reported being broadly content with their final grade awards, the majority reported feeling under pressure during the 2021 ACM process because of the volume of assessments they faced over a period of a few weeks. Pupils in one group suggested continuous assessment required further trialling to ensure the right balance.

Confusion around what evidence would be used to assess pupils during the 2021 ACM was a common theme across the groups. Pupils said it was unclear what emphasis there was on different aspects of assessment, this also differed by subject and there was confusion over whether course work was to be marked. Pupils felt the ACM would have worked more effectively if it had not been for the winter lockdown, as remote learning made it more difficult to understand what was required of them. Technical issues also caused problems.

Several young people said the flexibility of the 2021 ACM was positive, as this gave them the ability to sit assessments on different dates if needed. Young carers found this to be a positive development as assessments could be rearranged if they were unable to attend due to caring responsibilities.

Almost every group of young people the Committee heard informal evidence from cited the SQA's communication with young people, their teachers and their schools as an issue. Young people did not feel they had been involved in consultation around 2021 arrangements. MSYP Cameron Garrett was the only young person sitting on the SQA's National Qualifications 2021 group<sup>17</sup> alongside 15 – 20 adult members. In a blog on the Scottish Youth Parliament website in April 2021, he wrote:

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<sup>16</sup> [A summary of evidence is available in the Committee's 22 September 2021 papers.](#)

<sup>17</sup> SQA's National Qualifications Group members are: Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES); Colleges Scotland; Education Scotland; Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS); National Parent Forum of Scotland (NPFOS); School Leaders Scotland (SLS); Scottish Council of Independent Schools (SCIS); Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA); Scottish Government; Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP)



“The reality is that young people in education have felt let down and ignored over the course of the pandemic – something I can relate to, based on my own experiences and those of the young people I speak to every day. Trying to explain how young people are feeling, or what we need from the system, as the only young person in the room, is definitely not easy.” – [Cameron Garrett MSYP, Blog, 29 April 2021](#)

Some pupils reported hearing about 2021 assessment arrangements via the media. One group told MSPs they felt pupils were being spoken about without being able to speak up, describing this as “infuriating”. Young people said they felt that schools and learners were not given the information they needed and may have been able to better cope if this had been provided.

Concerns around the potential for pupils to cheat were highlighted during some sessions, with reports of pupils being able to access assessment papers and questions online. Pupils at one school reported feeling misled by papers posed on social media by others. The also stated there was no way for teachers to know who had seen papers online and who had not.

The lack of study leave was highlighted by a number of pupils. Young carers said this was unfair, and the absence of supported study had also made preparation more challenging. One school pupil who was fasting during the assessment period highlighted the lack of study leave left them with only three hours a day to study.

Some young people also felt support provided varied by teacher. Differences around the way schools recognised pupils’ exceptional/mitigating circumstances were highlighted during the SYP session. Committee members also heard some young people felt colleges had been forgotten and many college students of all ages had spent their year online.

Concerns around mental health and wellbeing were highlighted by nearly all groups of young people. Pupils mentioned the pressure they felt under to achieve good marks in assessments and said this led to stress and exhaustion. Pupils also spoke of crying regularly and suffering from headaches. Young carers said they had felt mentally drained at times.

#### **Members may wish to explore with SQA:**

- **The Rapid Review of National Qualifications Experience 2020 recommended SQA carry out more engagement with young people and clearly communicated assessment plans for 2021. However, pupils and teaching unions have reported that this did not take place. What is the SQA’s response to these claims and how will the SQA ensure that stakeholders and young people feel that they are meaningfully involved in decision-making in the future?**
- **How did the SQA support, inform and brief young people to engage in its decision making in a meaningful way?**



- **The Committee has heard criticism from young people and teaching unions of SQA's approach to communication around the 2021 ACM. What communication plans were in place, how were these communicated to schools and what effort was made to ensure plans were understood by senior leaders, teachers and pupils?**
- **Young people have reported sitting multiple assessments in the space of a few weeks, impacting their mental health and wellbeing. How did this situation arise and how what lessons will be learned from this?**
- **Pupils have told the Committee they had concerns around cheating as exam papers were being shared online. How secure was the 2021 ACM and how were concerns around cheating dealt with by SQA?**

### **Quality Assurance process**

During the 22 September 2022 Committee meeting, members sought information from witnesses about the process of quality assurance and moderation in place during the 2021 ACM. While the 2020 process initially saw SQA moderate results, this year's ACM did not follow this and there was no moderation from SQA. Instead, moderation and quality assurance processes were set up. ADES representative Audrey May told the Committee these were set up at school, local authority and Regional Improvement Collaborative (RIC) level. Ms May said that this led to collection of good data and a reduced number of pupil appeals.

When asked about the use of historical data in the quality assurance process, ADES representative Tony McDaid said that this was used to give a picture of what had gone before and the focus was on professional judgement, support and quality assurance.

Teaching unions had different views on the quality assurance process. SSTA's Seamus Searson stating some members had reported pressure to downgrade results <sup>18</sup>:

"There were some alterations...there were pressures in some places to downgrade grades because they were out of keeping with previous years. There was not too many asking to be pushed up, it was more questioning what level the grades were. It did happen at different points: sometimes it happened in a department, sometimes it happened across schools and local authorities whether they like it or not they did do that exercise of looking back at the history of the schools and using that as a guide. Because what schools didn't want to do was put their heads above the parapet and then be identified as some concern. Many schools were conservative with their grades and tried to keep them in keeping with previous years." –

[Education, Children and Young People Committee meeting 22 September 2021](#)

EIS General Secretary Larry Flanagan said that EIS did not have difficulty with the quality assurance process in place, and where a small number of members did get in touch on the

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<sup>18</sup> [Education, Children and Young People Committee, 22 September 2021](#)

issue of being asked to downgrade or upgrade marks, EIS advised them to refuse to do this on the basis this type of moderation was not part of the ACM model. Tara Lillis, National Official (Scotland) at NASUWT told the Committee that feedback on this from their members was variable; while they had heard from members that had pushed back on attempts to moderate grades, there may be members NASUWT have not heard from that had grades overturned.

### **Members may wish to explore with SQA:**

- **How did SQA assure this year's results were consistent across the country?**
- **How might results' reliability be assured in a system incorporating continuous assessment?**
- **What role did SQA play in the overall quality assurance process?**

### **SQA appeals process: 2020 and 2021**

Questions around the SQA appeals process and its transparency were raised in 2020 and 2021. The campaign group SQA Where's Our Say, which was set up following Results Day 2020, [wrote to the Education and Skills Committee in February 2021](#)<sup>19</sup> to highlight SQA's perceived lack of engagement with young people around the 2021 appeals process. The letter also raised concern about the closure of the 2020 appeals process in December 2020, stating young people had been left with "no redress".

Child and Family Law Lecturer Dr Tracy Kirk [shared research with the Education and Skills Committee in March 2021](#), highlighting her research work on SQA and international human rights obligations. Dr Kirk's research concluded in her research that the SQA have breached the Equality Act 2010 with their approach to students "disproportionately disadvantaged by the SQA processes of 2020". Dr Kirk also stated there were young people who had lost places at university "because no appeals process has been forthcoming".

During the [10 March 2021 meeting of the Education and Skills Committee](#)<sup>20</sup>, Children and Young People's Commissioner Young Advisor Abigail McGill raised concerns about the fairness of the appeals system and SQA's lack of engagement with young people:

"We are just as concerned that the appeals process will not be fair this year [2021] either, because everything has been up in the air and nothing has come back down. The SQA has said that it is working with our office, but it is not, and its current appeals process is not rights compliant, specifically in respect of the right to redress and remedy. At the minute, our future seems to be very much out of our hands." – [Official Report, 10 March 2021](#)

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<sup>19</sup> [SQA Where's Our Say? Letter to Education and Skills Committee, February 2021](#)

<sup>20</sup> [Education and Skills Committee, 10 March 2021](#)

The SQA ran a consultation on the 2021 appeals process from 12 until 26 March 2021. It received a total of 1,114 responses<sup>21</sup> – 78% (868) of which were from teachers, 9% (104) from parents and carers and 2% (23) from learners<sup>22</sup>. Themes emerging from the consultation included: a need for clear communications with learners about the ACM and appeal arrangements; exceptional circumstances facing learners should be considered; mixed opinion on whether or not a result could be downgraded on appeal; and some support for learners to have a direct route of appeal. Respondents had mixed views as to whether schools and centres should handle appeals in the first instance. While learners and parents were supportive of this, teachers expressed concerns about the additional workload and damage to relationships with learners, parents and carers.

Ahead of Results Day 2021, SYP, the Children and Young People’s Commissioner, NUS Scotland, Who Cares? Scotland, SQA Where’s Our Say? and a number of organisations and academics signed an [open letter in June 2021](#) to SQA calling for changes to be made to the appeals process to ensure their grade would not go down on appeal and the impact of the pandemic on learners would be taken into account. [In response, SQA said](#) that it had “consulted widely” on the approach to appeals, including an online session with its learner panel, adding:

“There are clear, broad grounds of appeal in place and, for the first time, learners have a free direct right of appeal.” – [SQA response to open letter, June 2021](#)

In September, a [newspaper reported senior SQA figures stated](#)<sup>23</sup> pupils are likely to have a direct route of appeal to challenge results in the event exams are cancelled.

At the Committee’s 22 September meeting, members asked panellists for their views around whether pupils facing exceptional circumstances should have had appeals granted. Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES) representative Tony McDaid said that while in 2020 there had been prelim evidence that could be used to back up teacher judgement, in 2021 the emphasis was on the need to gather evidence over a short period of time (due to the winter lockdown). Pupils were given opportunities to do assessments more than once if necessary. Fellow ADES representative Audrey May said that in the past, appeals based on exceptional circumstances had always related to ‘on the day’ issues preventing a pupil from taking an exam.

Later in the session, Larry Flanagan said EIS was of the view that the appeals process should be evidence based. He said basing them on teachers’ opinion alone put them in a difficult place as professionals, noting that in 2020 there had been an evidence base via prelims and assessments completed pre-pandemic. The 2021 ACM evidence base was more wide ranging, taking in teacher observations, classwork and a range of other options.

During the Committee’s informal evidence sessions, the topic of appeals relating to the 2021 ACM was not widely mentioned. In one session, the SQA’s [Appeals 2021 leaflet](#) was

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<sup>21</sup> SQA [2021 National Qualifications Appeals Process Consultation Analysis](#)

<sup>23</sup> [The Herald: SQA: Direct appeals likely to be retained if exams axed](#)

highlighted as an example of good communication. This was co-designed with young people.

### Members may wish to explore with SQA

- **What assessment has been made of the success or otherwise of the 2021 appeals process? How will this inform the appeals process going forward?**
- **While the SQA's consultation on appeals was open to young people, there was a low response rate. How will SQA use this to inform future engagement with young people?**
- **Will the direct route of appeal stay in place in 2022 and beyond?**
- **What consideration will SQA give to appeals for pupils facing exceptional circumstances as a result of the pandemic?**

### ASSESSMENT PLANS FOR 2021-22

On 18 August 2021, the [Cabinet Secretary announced that exams are to take place in 2022, dependent on public health advice<sup>24</sup>](#). Two contingency plans will be in place:

- If it is safe for exams to go ahead but there has been “further significant disruption to learning as a result of COVID-19”, coursework and assessments will be modified.
- In the event exams cannot take place due to public health conditions, grades will be awarded based on teacher judgement of in-year assessments.

Responding to this announcement, [EIS Scotland said](#) the union would rather have seen S4 assessments cancelled “in the interests of supporting education recovery and wellbeing among this cohort” and stated that assessment and learning in future should better serve the needs of Scotland's learners. The [Scottish Secondary Teachers Association \(SSTA\)](#) said in its Members' Bulletin that it was not consulted ahead of the announcement and has concerns around increased teacher workload due to a potential increased number of exams. [NASUWT said it welcomed the announcement of plans](#), however further detail of how they will work in practice is needed.

On 15 September 2021, [SQA published further information about 2021-22 assessment plans<sup>25</sup>](#). This put forward three potential scenarios:

- **Current public health advice: SQA exam diet with modifications (as announced by the Cabinet Secretary):** In this scenario, exams take place as planned in spring 2022. In recognition of ongoing disruption, SQA has kept modifications from 2020-21 in place and “in most cases” learners will do less

<sup>24</sup> [Scottish Government news release: National Qualifications 2022](#)

<sup>25</sup> [SQA National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher assessments 2021-22](#)

assessment than in a normal year. [A subject breakdown of modifications is available on the SQA website.](#)

- **Increased levels of disruption: SQA exam diet with modifications plus additional measures:** Further additional measures to will be introduced to take into account any disruption faced. For example, learners may be provided with additional information to help them focus study. Assessments will not change.
- **Public health advice leads to exams being cancelled: Teachers and lecturers determine provisional results:** The exam diet will be cancelled in the event of the introduction of restrictions on in-person gatherings. The main focus will be learning and teaching, with teachers and lecturers using “the type, quality and volume of evidence that would be needed to support quality assured estimates in a ‘normal’ year”. This will be used to support provisional results. The guidance states: “there is no requirement for schools, colleges and training providers to run additional assessments. Doing so would place excess workload on teachers, lecturers and learners. Provisional results would be based on in-year assessments that normally take place during the school year such as prelims, practical activities, performances and class tests.”

Following publication of the guidance, the EIS raised concerns in [newspaper reports](#)<sup>26</sup> about a “dual assessment approach where schools prepare for exams but also need to gather extra evidence in case exams are cancelled.”

[During the Committee’s 22 September 2020 meeting](#)<sup>27</sup>, Larry Flanagan reiterated the need to avoid this approach. He also said more detail was needed from SQA around what can be gathered as evidence. ADES representative Tony McDaid told the Committee that it was important to make sure that the qualification system for 2021-22 needed to take two years of disrupted learning into account. He stated the system should be tailored to the needs of young people. SSTA General Secretary Seamus Searson told the Committee during its 22 September 2021 evidence session that the union was concerned schools will start trying to collect assessment evidence in case of another lockdown.

During the [Committee’s informal evidence sessions on in September 2021](#)<sup>28</sup>, young people in one group also stressed the need for clarity around exam arrangements for 2022. They were keen for a Plan A and Plan B approach; however they said clear communication was needed in order to give clarity to pupils, schools and teachers.

#### **Members may wish to explore with SQA:**

- **How will the needs of current senior phase pupils who have experienced two years of disrupted learning be factored in to planning for 2021-22**

<sup>26</sup> [The Herald: SQA: Direct appeals likely to be retained if exams axed](#)

<sup>27</sup> [Education, Children and Young People Committee, 22 September 2021](#)

<sup>28</sup> [A summary of evidence is available in the Committee’s 22 September 2021 papers.](#)

**assessments? Are there concerns about pupils covering the required breath of knowledge and skills?**

- **When will further information about 2021-22 assessments be published?**
- **How can the situation of teachers/schools preparing for three scenarios be avoided and how will SQA guidance help schools and colleges here?**
- **How will plans for 2021-22 assessments take into consideration the mental health and wellbeing of teachers and pupils?**
- **What steps will be taken to improve on the SQA's communication of the plans for assessment in 2022?**

## **THE FUTURE OF ASSESSMENT IN SCOTLAND**

Two recent OECD reports have considered aspects of Scotland's assessment system:

- [Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future<sup>29</sup>](#) (June 2021)
- [Upper-secondary education student assessment in Scotland<sup>30</sup>](#) (August 2021)

[Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future<sup>31</sup>](#) considers Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) overall. In relation to assessment, the [report states that](#):

“...the approach to student assessment and the nature of the learning experience in the classroom will not change in the Senior Phase unless the approach to the assessment of qualifications is fully aligned to match CfE ambitions.” – p121

It goes on to suggest approaches that could be piloted when moving toward this approach. These include: more portfolio assessments in line with CfE's four capacities; increased emphasis on flexible and continuous assessment rather than end of year external exams; more use of digital opportunities for feedback and support; maintaining and possibly strengthening a strong role for teacher judgement with appropriate moderation. Further detail on the report can be found in the [SPICe briefing for the Committee's 8 September 2021 meeting](#).

Outlining the Scottish Government's response to the OECD CfE report, [Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills Shirley-Anne Somerville MSP announced in a Ministerial Statement on 22 June 2021<sup>32</sup>](#) that:

- The inspection function will be moved out of Education Scotland in order to balance the need for local flexibility with consistency in outcomes;

<sup>29</sup> OECD [Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future, 2021](#)

<sup>30</sup> [Upper-secondary education student assessment in Scotland, OECD, 2021](#)

<sup>31</sup> OECD [Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future, 2021](#)

<sup>32</sup> [Ministerial Statement: Curriculum for Excellence, Official Report 22 June 2021](#)



- SQA will likely be replaced with a “new specialist agency” responsible for curriculum and assessment.
- Professor Ken Muir, former Chief Executive of the General Teaching Council for Scotland, will take forward a review on the reform of Education Scotland and the SQA. He chairs an [External Expert Panel of teachers and academics](#)<sup>33</sup> which will begin consulting with stakeholders this autumn. The panel will then have a role in drafting next steps.

The second report, [Upper-secondary education student assessment in Scotland](#)<sup>34</sup> was published on 31 August 2021. This work, by Professor Gordon Stobart, was commissioned as part of the OECD’s work on the Scottish education system. Professor Stobart is an Honorary Research Fellow at Oxford University and was appointed by the OECD to carry out the work. The report compares Scotland’s approach to assessment in the senior phase of secondary school with systems used in nine other countries. Arrangements being implemented in these countries are explored in the report. For example, in Norway some exams are now computer-based and pupils have access to online resources. Pilot studies in New Zealand, Israel, Norway and Finland also found online and on-screen assessments could be implemented, though there were logistical challenges of doing this. The report also looks at how other countries adapted assessment and examination arrangements as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. A full summary of the report is available in the [SPICe briefing for the Committee’s 9 September 2021 meeting](#); recommendations are highlighted below.

The report recognises the challenges countries face in aligning broad visions for education such as CfE with examination policies in the senior phase of school. It explains that many other countries use alternative forms of assessment such as school-based exams, teacher assessment, presentations and practical assessments as part of their qualifications systems.

The OECD sets out options for the future of assessment for Scotland to explore, including: Removal of National 5 examinations in S4 and move toward a school graduation certificate or diploma; developing a more resilient upper-secondary assessment system, with a qualifications system based on a combination of continuous assessment, school-based exams and external exams; better alignment of assessment with CfE through broadening forms of assessment, including interactive approaches such as computer-based exams, e-Portfolios and practical assessments used in countries such as Norway, New Zealand, Finland and Israel; increasing the role of teachers in school-based assessment and moving away from centralised moderation; ensuring students are a key stakeholder in development of assessments; and further developing the role of vocational qualifications.

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<sup>33</sup> [Scottish Government: Reform of SQA and Education Scotland Expert Panel: draft terms of reference](#), 2021

<sup>34</sup> [Upper-secondary education student assessment in Scotland, OECD, 2021](#)



The [Scottish Government news release](#)<sup>35</sup> announcing the publication of the review states that the recommendations:

“...will be considered as part of a wider conversation with learners, teachers, parents and others on how Scotland’s qualifications and assessment system can best evolve in line with the curriculum and society of today.”

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills Shirley-Anne Somerville MSP will update Parliament on how the Scottish Government intends to take the OECD’s recommendations forward as part of wider work to implement the OECD recommendations following their review of CfE.

The [EIS](#) response welcomed the OECD report’s suggestions for “de-cluttering” the S4-S6 examination “ladder”, stating this could help ease assessment overload. Suggestions on the enhanced role of teacher assessment were also welcomed for consideration, however EIS stated the use of more digital based assessment would need “careful consideration”. [Connect’s](#) response outlined the challenges of the current system and said the findings “chime with what many educators, parents and young people have been saying for many years”. The [Scottish Youth Parliament](#) welcomed the report’s call for continued engagement with young people on the issue of exams and assessments.

### **Views on the future of assessment**

During the Committee’s 22 September 2021 meeting, Seamus Searson of SSTA said any new system should be based on joined up assessment using teachers’ own tracking and monitoring of pupils. Larry Flanagan of EIS said the new system should be built around trust of teachers. Audrey May of ADES said that continuous assessment needed to be developed, and that there may still be exams in any new system but the balance could be shifted and learning around moderation and quality assurance could be used to build a new system with more emphasis on assessment.

In [evidence to the Education and Skills Committee on 10 March 2021](#)<sup>36</sup>, Young Adviser for the Children and Young People’s Commissioner Coll McCail said there was now an “amazing chance” to look at the way assessment and exams are carried out in the future:

“For two years now, we have used a model of continuous assessment. This is the chance to look at reforming the education system in that regard, because there is a perception—certainly among young people—that exams are outdated. After working for a year, being assessed on two hours of work in a pressure cooker environment in May might work for some, but it does not work for the majority.” - [Official Report, 10 March 2021](#)

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<sup>35</sup> [Scottish Government news release: National qualifications and assessments, 2021](#)

<sup>36</sup> [Education and Skills Committee Official Report 10 March 2021](#)

In a briefing provided to the Committee, SYP highlighted work carried out by MSYPs looking at how assessment might change in the years ahead. MSYPs were generally supportive of an assessment system with less emphasis on external exams. However, they also stated improvements to the 2021 ACM system were needed. MSYPs suggested improvements could include:

- Ensure young people are included in the development of assessment systems.
- Assessments that help pupils not planning to head to college or university. These could include vocational qualifications and apprenticeships.
- To make the appeals system fairer.
- Standardising continuous assessment across schools, as the 2021 ACM saw pupils in different schools sitting different assessments and this can potentially result in disparity of grades awarded.
- Assessment training and support for teachers.
- Making sure grades awarded under the ACM have the same recognition as grades awarded in previous years.

Who Cares? Scotland (WCS) also provided the Committee with a briefing setting out steps to incorporate into a future assessment system to ensure it does not unfairly disadvantage care experienced people. These are:

- A no detriment policy built in to the appeals process, giving young people a guarantee that their grade will not go down if they appeal it and that exceptional circumstances they have experienced are considered.
- Ensure a learner's care experienced status can be considered in appeals. WCS notes that while there is a route for protected groups to access a 'Discrimination' route of appeal, this is not open to care experienced people as the Equality Act 2010 does not list care experience as a protected group in law.
- Include care experience within Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) to ensure the needs of care experienced young people are considered.
- Create tailored information and support for care experienced learners to ensure they are aware of how to access processes such as appeals.

In a [submission to the Education and Skills Committee in March 2021](#)<sup>37</sup>, SSTA stated that it had long called for an assessment system that prioritised teachers' professional judgement. With regards to SQA's role as a qualifications body, SSTA stated:

The general view from teachers is that the SQA is adrift from teachers and, as an organisation, has not led the way during the crisis nor anticipated the challenges

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<sup>37</sup> [SSTA submission to Education and Skills Committee, March 2021](#)

that teachers have faced. The guidance has been seen by many members as too little and too late. Unfortunately, this has been a view held by many teachers for a number of years. – [SSTA submission](#)

During the [Committee's informal evidence sessions with young people](#)<sup>38</sup>, many participants said the introduction of some form of continuous assessment throughout the year would be a positive development. Some suggested assessment structured by units would ensure these assessments had enough time between them. Many young people did want to see a final exam take place in some form, but the majority wanted this to count toward less of the overall grade than it does during a normal exam year. Only one school pupil said they favoured a final exam over continuous assessment.

Participants felt there is an opportunity to change the assessment system to place a higher value on learning but felt there was a risk of no action being taken as the system can be resistant to change.

Pupils across several groups the Committee spoke to were supportive of recognising pupils' effort throughout the year in final qualifications awarded. This could include considering the willingness to learn, performance in ongoing assessment, behaviour and other work. The need for a new system to give recognition to challenges facing individual pupils was raised by several groups. Some young people felt continuous assessment could allow pupils with different skill sets to show these in presentations or practical work. This would lead to more equity in learning. Consideration of different learning styles was also highlighted and it was noted that some do not respond well to an exam hall environment.

Young carers the Committee spoke to said assessment throughout the year was helpful as this takes some of the pressure off juggling study with caring responsibilities, which can be mentally draining at times. They felt multiple assessments take the pressure off and enabled pupils to fulfil their potential. When asked if they trusted teachers to mark assessments fairly, pupils in several groups said that they did.

During the sessions, pupils also mentioned:

- Pupils could be given information about Highers prior to the 4<sup>th</sup> year summer holidays to help them prepare for the “big jump” from National 5 to Higher. One pupil said they would welcome wider learning opportunities within schools, as some employers don't see exam grades as a benchmark for a young person's abilities.
- Advanced Highers were highlighted as a good example of how qualifications should be due to the focus on exploring and learning about a subject as opposed to being all about exams.

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<sup>38</sup> [A summary of evidence is available in the Committee's 22 September 2021 papers.](#)

- The importance of practical activities and the need to ensure vocational qualifications have parity with academic study.
- The need for fun to be put back into learning, with recognition of activities pupils are passionate about. The Duke of Edinburgh Award was highlighted as an example of this.

**Members may wish to explore with SQA:**

- **What involvement SQA has had in discussions around the future of Scotland's assessment system beyond 2021-22?**
- **How will SQA be involved in the work of the Expert Panel on the reform of SQA and Education Scotland?**
- **What timescale does SQA envisage for changes to Scotland's assessment system; do you expect change to be a gradual process or take place be introduced in one assessment year?**

**Lynne Currie  
SPICe Research  
24 September 2021**

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

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

**ANNEX A****SQA ATTAINMENT STATISTICS 2021**

The below tables are featured in [SQA's 2021 Attainment Statistics publication](#)<sup>39</sup>.

**Table 2. National 5 A-C attainment rates by centre type (2017-2021)**

|                     | 2017         | 2018         | 2019         | 2020         | 2021         |
|---------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| <b>National 5</b>   | <b>79.5%</b> | <b>77.4%</b> | <b>78.2%</b> | <b>89.0%</b> | <b>85.8%</b> |
| EA Schools          | 78.6%        | 76.3%        | 77.2%        | 88.5%        | 85.1%        |
| College             | 70.9%        | 70.6%        | 67.6%        | 85.7%        | 74.9%        |
| Independent Schools | 94.5%        | 94.5%        | 94.8%        | 97.7%        | 96.8%        |
| Other               | 82.5%        | 87.2%        | 82.8%        | 96.4%        | 84.4%        |

**Table 3. National 5 A attainment rates by centre type (2017-2021)**

|                     | 2017         | 2018         | 2019         | 2020         | 2021         |
|---------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| <b>National 5</b>   | <b>37.1%</b> | <b>35.1%</b> | <b>35.1%</b> | <b>42.3%</b> | <b>46.7%</b> |
| EA Schools          | 35.0%        | 32.8%        | 32.9%        | 40.4%        | 44.8%        |
| College             | 30.7%        | 27.7%        | 25.2%        | 34.9%        | 33.2%        |
| Independent Schools | 68.1%        | 69.0%        | 68.9%        | 72.9%        | 76.9%        |
| Other               | 77.2%        | 57.4%        | 55.2%        | 65.5%        | 62.2%        |

**Higher A-C and A attainment by centre type**

In line with the national picture, Higher attainment of A-C results as a percentage of total entries (A-C attainment rate) showed a decrease on 2020 but remained high in relation to historical levels for all centre types except Other (Table 6). Due to the small numbers taking Higher through Other centres, the A-C attainment rate has been more variable historically.

**Table 5. Higher A-C attainment rates by centre type (2017-2021)**

|                     | 2017         | 2018         | 2019         | 2020         | 2021         |
|---------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| <b>Higher A-C</b>   | <b>77.0%</b> | <b>76.8%</b> | <b>74.8%</b> | <b>89.3%</b> | <b>87.3%</b> |
| EA Schools          | 76.2%        | 76.1%        | 73.9%        | 88.8%        | 86.7%        |
| College             | 66.6%        | 61.2%        | 56.3%        | 81.7%        | 79.2%        |
| Independent Schools | 92.6%        | 92.6%        | 92.8%        | 97.7%        | 97.2%        |
| Other               | 65.1%        | 92.1%        | 80.2%        | 97.3%        | 97.9%        |

**Table 7. Higher A attainment rates by centre type (2017-2021)**

|                     | 2017         | 2018         | 2019         | 2020         | 2021         |
|---------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| <b>Higher A</b>     | <b>28.7%</b> | <b>28.4%</b> | <b>28.3%</b> | <b>40.0%</b> | <b>47.6%</b> |
| EA Schools          | 27.0%        | 26.7%        | 26.1%        | 38.0%        | 45.6%        |
| College             | 18.0%        | 15.3%        | 14.7%        | 28.7%        | 37.7%        |
| Independent Schools | 54.5%        | 54.8%        | 58.1%        | 67.0%        | 75.6%        |
| Other               | 42.1%        | 69.8%        | 54.5%        | 59.3%        | 68.1%        |

<sup>39</sup> [https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files\\_ccc/attainment-statistics-\(august\)-2021-statistical-summary-centre-type.pdf](https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/attainment-statistics-(august)-2021-statistical-summary-centre-type.pdf)