

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

Introduction

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

The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)

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

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

2022 Appeals process and review

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

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

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

- a clerical check of their SQA assessments — exam script and/or coursework, or

- a review by SQA senior appointees of the assessment evidence submitted by their centre, taking into account their performance in any required coursework

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

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

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

2023 Appeals process

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

- all parts of the assessments have been marked;
- the marking is in line with national standards;
- the marks given for each answer have been totalled correctly; and
- the correct result has been entered on our system.

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

Examination Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service

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

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

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

Continuing effects of the pandemic and industrial action

Certification of National Qualifications this year will be on a similar basis to last year with modifications made to courses. For example, there are reductions in coursework and, in some cases, a reduction in the examined content. Modifications are on a course-by-course basis.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The future of certification

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

Ned Sharratt
Senior Researcher
25/04/2023

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

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