Course report 2024

Advanced Higher Biology

This report provides information on candidates' performance. Teachers, lecturers and assessors may find it useful when preparing candidates for future assessment. The report is intended to be constructive and informative, and to promote better understanding. You should read the report with the published assessment documents and marking instructions.

We compiled the statistics in this report before we completed the 2024 appeals process.

Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2023: 3,090

Number of resulted entries in 2024: 2,999

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	525	Percentage	17.5	Cumulative percentage	17.5	Minimum mark required	104
B	Number of candidates	729	Percentage	24.3	Cumulative percentage	41.8	Minimum mark required	87
C	Number of candidates	748	Percentage	24.9	Cumulative percentage	66.8	Minimum mark required	70
D	Number of candidates	619	Percentage	20.6	Cumulative percentage	87.4	Minimum mark required	53
No award	Number of candidates	378	Percentage	12.6	Cumulative percentage	100	Minimum mark required	N/A

We have not applied rounding to these statistics.

You can read the general commentary on grade boundaries in the appendix.

In this report:

- ‘most’ means greater than 70%
- ‘many’ means 50% to 69%
- ‘some’ means 25% to 49%
- ‘a few’ means less than 25%

You can find statistical reports on the statistics and information page of our website.

Section 1: comments on the assessment

Question paper

The question paper was designed to have the appropriate balance of questions to test knowledge and understanding and skills. The paper contained questions that were expected to be answered correctly by most or many candidates, as well as an appropriate proportion of questions that were expected to be more challenging. Feedback from the marking and examining teams indicated the paper was fair, balanced, and accessible.

As in previous years, candidates achieved a wide range of marks. Most candidates attempted all, or most of, the questions, but markers observed that there were some candidates who gave no response to several or, in a small number of cases, most questions. Markers also noted that there were candidates who demonstrated limited knowledge of the course content by giving few correct responses, which suggests that they were not prepared for the assessment.

Candidates performed best in questions that required them to demonstrate knowledge by giving terms or making relatively simple statements based on the mandatory knowledge. Candidates performed strongly in both of the extended writing questions, but had more difficulty when they had to show a greater degree of reasoning and understanding by applying their knowledge to unfamiliar contexts.

In question 13, where there was a choice, option A was slightly more popular, and the mean mark was slightly higher than for option B. All questions requiring extended writing differentiated candidates well.

Many candidates demonstrated competence in a wide range of skills, including processing and the selection and analysis of information from sources such as graphs and tables. Candidates generally found skills questions relating to experimental design more challenging.

Markers and examiners again raised concern that the literacy skills of some candidates had an impact on their ability to express themselves clearly and concisely, and that sometimes candidates did not gain marks as a result. The legibility of some candidates' handwriting was poor and was an issue for markers.

Section 1 of the question paper performed as expected and section 2 was more challenging than expected. This was taken into account when setting grade boundaries.

Project

Performance in the project task was as expected. Although many of the submitted reports demonstrated that candidates had carried out practical work of suitable challenge, markers and examiners noted that some candidates undertook practical work that was too simplistic for Advanced Higher level. Candidates investigated a variety of topics which allowed them to carry out novel and interesting work, but markers and examiners noted an increase in the number of centres where multiple candidates carried out very similar projects, which must be

avoided. As in previous years, candidates scored particularly well in the ‘Procedures’ and ‘Results’ sections, with the ‘Discussion’ section proving more challenging, as expected.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Question paper

Section1

Question 1	Most candidates correctly identified colorimetry as the appropriate technique.
Question 2	Most candidates were able to apply their knowledge of transport proteins to the example given.
Question 3	Most candidates were able to order the statements to describe the signalling pathway for a steroid hormone.
Question 11	Most candidates were able to identify which of the options was not an assumption of the mark and recapture technique.
Question 12	Most candidates were able to order the statements to describe meiosis I.
Question 14	Most candidates selected the correct information from the graphs.
Question 15	Most candidates identified the most representative sample.
Question 16	Most candidates were able to calculate the lowest percentage change.
Question 18	Most candidates were able to apply their knowledge of ethics to identify why the study described might be considered unethical.
Question 19	Most candidates demonstrated knowledge of a secondary immune response.

Section 2

Question 1(b)	Most candidates were able to perform this calculation.
Question 1(c)(ii)	Some candidates were able to give a general conclusion from the data. Where candidates did not gain marks, this was often because they focussed on particular aspects of the data, for example, which compound was most attractive to the flies.
Question 1(d)	Some candidates were able to interpret what a negative value for preference index indicated about the flies' behaviour. Where candidates did not gain marks, this was often because their response didn't give any indication of a behaviour.
Question 1(e)(i)	Most candidates could apply their knowledge of signal transduction to explain how the binding of odour molecules would affect the

ligand-gated ion channels. This is an area of the course where performance is often strong.

Question 1(e)(ii) Few candidates achieved the second point on the marking instruction because they did not relate the data given about the levels of calcium ions to movement of this ion through the channels. Where the command word is 'explain', candidates will not gain marks for simply stating values from graphs.

Question 2(a)(i) Most candidates gave a way in which equipment can be sterilised.

Question 2(b)(i) Many candidates were able to perform this calculation.

Question 3(a) Only some candidates demonstrated knowledge of the interactions that hold integral membrane proteins in place. In some cases, candidates confused hydrophobic interactions between R-groups and the membrane with interactions between one R-group and another.

Question 3(b)(i) While many candidates successfully made the link between increasing temperature and increasing diffusion rate, few identified the second trend relating to the effect of temperature as the number of transmembrane domains increased. Some candidates did not follow the instruction in the stem and related the number of transmembrane domains to diffusion rate, with no reference to temperature.

Question 3(b)(ii) Few candidates were able to suggest why a higher number of transmembrane domains might be advantageous.

Question 4(c)(i) Few candidates were able to suggest how the batches of slurry should be applied. Some candidates referred to the production of the slurry rather than its application and therefore did not address the question being asked.

Question 4(c)(ii) Few candidates were able to perform this calculation. Candidates needed to recognise that information from the introductory stem was required.

Question 4(d)(i) Most candidates could give a null hypothesis.

Question 4(e) Many candidates were able to suggest why the conclusion given may not be valid. Most candidates who gained marks for this question correctly picked up on the idea that the experiment described did not rule out a benefit to the growth of other types of crops.

Question 5(b) Few candidates showed good understanding of what happens during a phosphorylation cascade. Although candidates referred to many kinases being involved, they did not always demonstrate clear understanding of the kinases operating in a series.

Question 5(c)	Few candidates achieved the maximum 3 marks for describing how failure of insulin signalling leads to diabetes. Some candidates relied on knowledge from a lower level and made no reference to the relevant Advanced Higher content. Few candidates referred to fat and muscle cells in the context of Glut-4 recruitment and glucose uptake.
Question 6(a)(i)	Some candidates could describe events in the rhodopsin signalling pathway and few were able to give values to describe how amplification is achieved in this system. Some candidates who did not demonstrate the specific knowledge required described unrelated events involving ligand binding or general nerve transmission.
Question 6(a)(ii)	Most candidates could apply the appropriate knowledge to link loss of cone cells with degeneration of colour vision.
Question 6(b)(ii)	Few of the candidates who identified that a reduction in the proliferation of white blood cells would result in a compromised immune system used the information in the stem to make the link to reduced uptake/absorption of vitamin A.
Question 7	All marks in this extended writing question were accessed, and candidates performed very well overall. Most candidates achieved 2 marks or greater, and many achieved 3 or 4 marks.
Question 8(a)(i)(ii)	Most candidates could state the term ‘ethogram’, but only some could suggest why the use of an ethogram improved validity.
Question 8(a)(iii)	Most candidates could describe what is meant by anthropomorphism.
Question 8(b)	Most candidates were able to explain the advantage of at least one of the aspects of experimental design described.
Question 8(c)	Most candidates were able to describe their chosen term relating to the study of behaviour.
Question 9(a)(i)	Most candidates were able to give the term ‘hermaphrodite’.
Question 9(b)(i); (ii)	Although many candidates successfully made the comparison of reproductive strategy, few were able to suggest a reason for the trend they gave.
Question 10(a)(i)	Some candidates could apply their knowledge of viral life cycle to give the next stage from the information in the diagram.
Question 10(a)(ii)	Where candidates missed out on marks in this question, it was often because they gave incomplete definitions, which are not sufficient at this level.

Question 10(c)	Some candidates did not gain any marks for this question because they gave responses that discussed issues such as politics but demonstrated no relevant biological knowledge.
Question 11(a)	Although most candidates attempted a response, many did not gain marks because they focused their answer solely on describing female choice.
Question 11(b)	Many candidates did not gain marks because they did not make use of the information in the stem giving the meaning of positive and negative numbers on the y-axis of the graph.
Question 12(a)	Few candidates described the distribution of both species. Some candidates who did not gain marks gave incorrect/no/partial data, while others gave data for production rather than water depth.
Question 12(b)	Most candidates were able to apply their knowledge to name the type of competition.
Question 12(c)(ii)	Few candidates were able to use the information to justify the description of the competition as asymmetric.
Question 13A	All marking points were accessed. Point 6 was sometimes not awarded because candidates did not demonstrate understanding of differences between the pathways for membrane and secreted proteins. Although many candidates described post-translational modification in the Golgi, and demonstrated knowledge of glycosylation as the major modification, few described multiple steps to add various sugars.
Question 13B	All marking points were accessed. Some candidates focussed their entire response on control at the G1 checkpoint and did not seem aware that active CDKs operate throughout the cell cycle. Many candidates showed understanding of the role of p53. Although many candidates knew that retinoblastoma is a tumour suppressor that acts at the G1 checkpoint, point 8 was sometimes missed because descriptions of its mechanism of action were inaccurate, with candidates sometimes confusing transcription and translation.

Project

1. Abstract

Most candidates provided an abstract with a suitable aim, together with the main findings of their investigation. Where candidates did not gain this mark, it was usually because the aim was not stated clearly, the findings stated were not consistent with the data presented, or the candidate had not followed the instruction about placement of the abstract within the report.

2. Introduction

Most candidates gave an acceptable aim and hypothesis. Candidates commonly did not state both the independent and the dependent variables, or their hypotheses lacked appropriate directionality, and so they did not gain this mark. A few candidates gave hypotheses that did not match the stated aims(s).

Many candidates made a reasonable attempt to describe underlying biology, achieving two or more marks for their accounts. As in previous years, only a few candidates were awarded the full 4 marks in this section. Where candidates were not awarded marks, this was often because accounts lacked the necessary breadth and depth and/or contained significant errors and inaccuracies in the biology presented. Candidates sometimes did not address biology fundamental to the topic being studied, while presenting large amounts of information not clearly relevant to the aim(s). These issues may be, at least in part, a consequence of candidates obtaining information from sources, particularly websites, that did not describe relevant biology at Advanced Higher level. Although most candidates tried to provide justification for the work carried out, some justifications were only tenuously linked to the actual investigation.

3. Procedures

Most candidates use procedures that were appropriate to the aims of the investigation. Where this mark was not awarded, it was because the procedures used would not allow the aim(s) to be achieved.

While most candidates achieved at least 1 mark for describing the procedures they used, only some candidates were awarded 2 marks. There were several reasons why candidates missed out on achieving full marks for describing their procedures. The most common reason for not achieving full marks were that some details of the procedures were missing, descriptions lacked clarity or contained contradictory information, and candidates wrote the procedures in the imperative voice (usually as a list of instructions).

Many candidates included a description of a negative control, where appropriate, or explained why no negative control was required. Some candidates also included appropriate baseline measurements or positive controls which, although not considered for the awarding of 3(c), potentially provided useful data for analysis and evaluation in the discussion section of the report.

Most candidates were aware of the need to control or, where appropriate, monitor confounding variables, but only some did this satisfactorily.

Most candidates demonstrated awareness of the need for repeats and replicates, with most candidates gaining 3(e) (Sample size is appropriate) for carrying out at least repeat measurements. However, far fewer candidates showed understanding of the need to consider factors such as the extent of variation when deciding upon an appropriate sample size for any given investigation. Many candidates also achieved the mark for independent replication.

Most candidates described an appropriate pilot study and justified how it informed their final procedures. Where candidates did not gain the mark for a pilot study, it was usually because they did not adequately justify its importance rather than because no pilot study was carried out.

Many candidates carried out work that had suitable complexity, creativity, or accuracy. Candidates did not gain this mark when their work was not suitably complex for this level, or where they used well-known published protocols with little or no modification or originality.

4. Results

Nearly all candidates recorded data that were relevant to the aims of the investigation, and most included raw data in the report. Raw data were often recorded in an appendix, which helped the flow of the report when the raw data were extensive. A few candidates missed out on this mark because what was presented as raw data was already partially processed.

Nearly all candidates chose appropriate formats to present their data, but the quality of presentation was variable. Some candidates were awarded no marks for the presentation of their data, even though they included both a table and a graph, and only a few candidates were awarded 2 marks for having correct and accurate presentation of both tables and graphs. Tables not having suitable or complete headings and units was a common error, as was the inclusion of an excessive number of decimal places in mean values. A few candidates did not include a graph, even though their data were suitable for graphical presentation. Candidates were not awarded marks where graphs had unsuitable labels and/or scales or where points were plotted inaccurately. A significant proportion of candidates chose to use computer-generated graphs. While this is acceptable, candidates often presented graphs of poor quality using these tools. The scanning of hand-drawn graphs was sometimes an issue where the quality of scanning was too poor, or the images too small, to allow markers to read the graphs well enough to decide upon the awarding of marks.

5. Discussion

Many candidates gave a conclusion that was relevant to the aim and supported by the data in the report. In a few cases, the conclusion was relevant but not supported by the data presented, for example indicating trends that did not exist in the data. Only a few candidates gave a valid conclusion. The validity of conclusions was often compromised by methodological flaws such as inadequate control of confounding variables or a sample size that was too small.

The evaluation marks in this section are intended to be demanding and, as in previous years, obtaining these marks proved challenging for candidates.

Most candidates attempted to evaluate their procedures, but only some gained marks. Some candidates missed out on marks because they largely repeated descriptions of how they had carried out their procedures and did not include suitable justification of why their experimental design was appropriate. Candidates often did not go beyond very simple justification, such as stating repeats were carried out to make the results more reliable. This is not sufficient at this level, and candidates who gained marks showed appropriate understanding by justifying why the sample size they used was appropriate in terms of, for example, the degree of variation observed. Similarly, candidates often described the controls they used and how they controlled or monitored confounding variables, but they did not explain how these aspects of their procedures had an impact on validity. Some candidates limited their opportunity to gain marks from evaluating their procedures by not addressing all the areas outlined in the marking instructions.

The evaluation of results proved especially challenging, with only some candidates gaining marks in this section. Most candidates attempted to provide some evaluation of their results, but not all addressed all three of the areas outlined in the marking instructions. Critical discussion is required for marks to be awarded for the evaluation of results, and many candidates did not demonstrate the required level of understanding.

Candidates who had carried out overly simple projects were often limited in the discussion they could offer in this section. Some candidates tried to outline variation between repeats and replicates but gave inaccurate descriptions of the variation or didn't offer any explanation of the differences observed. Candidates sometimes tried to use statistical analysis to help with the analysis of results, but candidates sometimes used or interpreted tests incorrectly. When trying to interpret their results, many candidates did not consider the appropriateness of the procedures, the accuracy of the measurements, or the reliability of the data. Few candidates carried out additional processing or presentation of their data, beyond the presentation of mean values, to help discuss the meaning of trends. A few candidates made good use of relevant and robust sources to inform a good discussion of the findings in relation to the underlying biology discussed earlier in the report.

6. Presentation

Most candidates followed the structure outlined in the guidance for candidates and submitted projects with an appropriate structure, which was easy to follow. Most candidates' reports also had a suitable title and a contents page with page numbers. A few candidates missed out on this mark because the page numbers listed in the contents page did not match those in the report.

Although most candidates referred to at least three sources, only a few correctly cited and listed the required minimum of three sources.

Only a small number of reports exceeded the maximum word count.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper

It was clear that many candidates had prepared thoroughly for this assessment and demonstrated a good depth and breadth of knowledge across the mandatory knowledge detailed in the course support notes (Appendix 1 of the Advanced Higher Biology Course Specification). Candidates preparing for future assessments should also work towards having a sound knowledge and understanding of this biology.

As well as being able to demonstrate knowledge of the mandatory course content, candidates must be able to show understanding and reasoning by being able to apply that knowledge in unfamiliar contexts. To help candidates understand and process novel information within questions, teachers and lecturers should continue to encourage them to read questions carefully and focus their responses on the question being asked. Candidates should be careful not to base their responses solely on mandatory knowledge when information in the stem of a question is needed.

Teachers and lecturers should also give candidates opportunities to develop and practise the range of skills described in the course specification. Skills are assessed throughout the question paper, but the data handling question contains a high proportion of this type of question, and candidates should be familiar with this and the use of the information in a supplementary sheet. Candidates must be careful to use the given data, and other information, when required. When drawing conclusions, candidates should avoid simply restating results or giving responses using only some of the data they are being asked to consider.

The mandatory knowledge within all key areas of investigative biology can be assessed at any point within the question paper, and a good grasp of this course content will be particularly important to achieve marks in the experimental design questions.

Centres should give candidates opportunities to practice a variety of questions across all key areas so that candidates become familiar with the standard required at Advanced Higher. Past papers, and their associated marking instructions, are available on the SQA website.

Project

Teachers and lecturers must ensure they are using the most recent version of the Advanced Higher Biology Coursework Assessment Task.

There are examples of project reports, showing the marks awarded, on the Understanding Standards website.

Candidates must be made aware of the 'Instructions for candidates' within the coursework assessment task document, and they should be directed to refer to these throughout all stages of their investigations.

Candidates should choose a topic to investigate, but teachers and lecturers must agree the topic to ensure it is appropriate, as detailed in the coursework assessment task document. The topic chosen should have a clear biological focus. Candidates should be encouraged to apply their knowledge of investigative biology to develop sound protocols with appropriate controls, procedures that allow key variables to be controlled, a reasonable sample size, and independent replication. Markers did not report candidates undertaking overly ambitious plans, and centres should continue to discourage this. Teachers and lecturers must also ensure that projects offer sufficient challenge at this level, as carrying out work that is too simplistic may compromise the ability to access all the available marks.

As stated in the guidance, candidates from the same centre should investigate different topics. In large centres, it may be necessary to have more than one candidate doing similar topics, but they must carry out all stages of the investigation independently of each other, and it is not expected that several candidates from a centre will carry out similar projects. Candidates from the same centre must have different aims. Resources, including online resources, are available to help candidates formulate ideas and develop their protocols, but candidates must be careful to use these resources in a way that avoids possible plagiarism.

Teachers and lecturers involved in the supervision of projects must be aware of the need to comply with all relevant safety and ethical regulations and codes of practice, including those relating to the use of microbiological techniques. The 'Instructions for candidates' indicates that candidates should be involved in preparing a risk assessment for their procedures, but teachers or lecturers must check this, as they are responsible for ensuring appropriate risk assessment has been done and all work is being carried out safely. Teachers and lecturers must also ensure any ethical concerns around the use of human subjects or other animals have been appropriately accounted for.

When considering what to include in the account of underlying biology, candidates should try to ensure they have focused on information that is most relevant to their investigation's aim(s). The account needs to be at the appropriate level and have sufficient depth to support later discussion. Candidates should be aware that they need not limit themselves to theory covered within the Advanced Higher Biology course. To help avoid using incorrect or unscientific information, candidates should be encouraged to use sources that are scientifically rigorous. When justifying the biological importance of their project, candidates must explain why the piece of work they are carrying out is important. Where they use model organisms/systems, candidates should explain the importance of the system they are using in answering any wider question being studied.

When planning and carrying out their experiments, candidates should consider the questions relating to validity and reliability in the 'Instructions to candidates'. Based on what markers and examiners observed in this year's reports, it would be useful to consider the following key points:

- Where appropriate, candidates must include and describe the negative control. Where a negative control is not appropriate, candidates must show that they have considered this and explain why one is not required.
- Although not essential, the inclusion of baseline measurements and positive controls, where appropriate, is encouraged, as data from these procedures can help with later analysis and evaluation.

- All key confounding variables must be controlled or, where appropriate, monitored.
- Candidates should be encouraged to apply their knowledge of investigative biology and consider designing procedures involving the randomisation of treatments where the control of confounding variables is not possible.
- Candidates should be aware that the appropriate sample size will vary depending on the investigation being carried out, and that the simple duplication required to achieve mark 3(e) (Sample size is appropriate) may not be sufficient to be able to draw valid conclusions.
- Considering sample size is an essential part of planning, and a suitable pilot study may be helpful.

When writing the description of procedures in their report, candidates must follow the instruction to use past tense and imperative voice. They must avoid giving a set of instructions. The description of procedures must be sufficiently detailed to allow the investigation to be repeated. Considering the questions in the 'Instructions for candidates' that relate to writing procedures will help candidates ensure they have included all the necessary information, including the controls that were used; how confounding variables were controlled; the sample size used; how independent replication was achieved; and how the pilot study/studies informed the final procedure.

Candidates should ensure that all raw data is included in the report, preferably in an appendix if the raw data are extensive. Candidates should be encouraged to continue to use a variety of graphical presentations to display data in interesting and informative ways. They should consider what they have learned from previous levels and the relevant information in the 'Instructions for candidates' to ensure the quality of presentation is appropriate. Candidates must combine data from replicates to present summarised data in a graph supported by an appropriate table, but they are not limited by this, and the processing and presentation of data in additional ways might provide scope for further analysis and evaluation of their results. If candidates choose to create computer-generated graphs, they must ensure the scales, labels, and plots are appropriate for the presentation and analysis of scientific data. They should also ensure that all graphs are of a suitable size to allow data and trends to be easily observed.

When evaluating procedures, candidates must go beyond a description of procedures and explain how aspects of their experimental design were required to allow them to draw valid conclusions. Candidates should use the questions within the 'Instructions for candidates' to help them ensure that they address all the points within the marking instructions, and that their discussion is supported with appropriate justification.

When evaluating their results, candidates should follow the guidance in the 'Instructions for candidates' to support them to address all the required aspects. Investigations that are too simplistic may not offer much scope for discussion in this section. Candidates should use an analysis of the variation between repeats and replicates to support discussion about whether variability is due to error in laboratory practice, intrinsic variation in the biological samples studied, or the treatments that have been planned.

Although not mandatory, statistical analysis may benefit the analysis of results. If using statistical analysis, it is important that candidates understand the statistics they are using to prevent them making errors in interpretation. In particular, candidates should be careful to

only make claims about the statistical significance of their findings where their data and the statistical test used supports this. To achieve marks for interpreting their results, candidates need to go beyond stating trends and address how their procedures impact on the meaning of trends and findings. Candidates often find it particularly difficult to interpret results that do not match their hypothesis and/or previous findings. In these instances, they should try to distinguish between the effects of methodological weaknesses and treatments that have no effect. Candidates will be in a good position to give meaningful discussion of findings in relation to the underlying biology and related research if they have selected the most relevant and useful information to include in the introduction section of their report.

Teachers and lecturers should continue to encourage candidates to structure their reports in the sections given in the 'Instructions for candidates'. Candidates should take care to check that the contents page and page numbers match in the final, submitted, version of their report.

Candidates should follow the information in the guidance exactly when citing and listing references. Candidates should be careful to provide full references when accessing journal articles online.

Teachers and lecturers should continue to advise candidates to keep the length of their report within the maximum word count.

Appendix: general commentary on grade boundaries

SQA's main aim when setting grade boundaries is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and levels and maintain comparable standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.

For most National Courses, SQA aims to set examinations and other external assessments and create marking instructions that allow:

- a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional grade C boundary)
- a well-prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70% of the available marks (the notional grade A boundary)

It is very challenging to get the standard on target every year, in every subject, at every level. Therefore, SQA holds a grade boundary meeting for each course to bring together all the information available (statistical and qualitative) and to make final decisions on grade boundaries based on this information. Members of SQA's Executive Management Team normally chair these meetings.

Principal assessors utilise their subject expertise to evaluate the performance of the assessment and propose suitable grade boundaries based on the full range of evidence. SQA can adjust the grade boundaries as a result of the discussion at these meetings. This allows the pass rate to be unaffected in circumstances where there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more, or less, difficult than usual.

- The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more difficult than usual.
- The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been less difficult than usual.
- Where levels of difficulty are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.

Every year, we evaluate the performance of our assessments in a fair way, while ensuring standards are maintained so that our qualifications remain credible. To do this, we measure evidence of candidates' knowledge and skills against the national standard.

During the pandemic, we modified National Qualifications course assessments, for example we removed elements of coursework. We kept these modifications in place until the 2022–23 session. The education community agreed that retaining the modifications for longer than this could have a detrimental impact on learning and progression to the next stage of education, employment or training. After discussions with candidates, teachers, lecturers, parents, carers and others, we returned to full course assessment for the 2023–24 session.

SQA's approach to awarding was announced in March 2024 and explained that any impact on candidates completing coursework for the first time, as part of their SQA assessments, would be considered in our grading decisions and incorporated into our well-established

grading processes. This provides fairness and safeguards for candidates and helps to provide assurances across the wider education community as we return to established awarding.

Our approach to awarding is broadly aligned to other nations of the UK that have returned to normal grading arrangements.

For full details of the approach, please refer to the National Qualifications 2024 Awarding — Methodology Report.