

Agenda Item	6.
Report No	EDU/16/21

HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: Education

Date: 2 September 2021

Report Title: **2021 SQA Attainment/OECD Report implications**

Report By: Executive Chief Officer- Education and Learning

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 The report provides a summary of 2021 attainment in Highland secondary schools, based on early data analysis. In 2021 the Alternative Certification Model, the periods of remote learning and the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic (including the impact of self-isolation for staff and young people) created challenges for schools and for young people which will have had an impact on attainment.
- 1.2 The report provides a brief summary of the implications of the June 2021 OECD Report into Scottish education.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 The Committee is invited to:-
- i. note the content of this initial attainment report and the improvements identified in this year's Senior Phase attainment;
 - ii. agree to formally congratulate the young people, their families, staff and partners for significant improvement in the overall Highland Council Education attainment results;
 - iii. agree that a further attainment paper will be brought to the 17 November 2021 committee meeting, following the release of the initial Insight Toolkit and school attainment reviews, which will allow comparison of national and virtual comparator attainment data; and
 - iv. note that positive destinations will be further reported on in February 2022.

3. Implications

- 3.1 **Resource** - The paper was informed by the priorities within the corporate plan and the education and learning service plan.

- 3.2 **Legal** - There are no legal implications contained within the contents of this report.
- 3.3 **Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural)** - Planned improvements and the highlighting of good practice will support better outcomes and take cognisance of the specific challenges related to equality, poverty and rurality.
- 3.4 **Climate Change / Carbon Clever** - There are no climate change issues arising from this report.
- 3.5 **Risk** - Reputational risk should schools in the Highlands' attainment not continue to improve and progress into the second quartile.
- 3.6 **Gaelic** - The delivery of better outcomes will build on the recent SQA success of our young people undertaking GME and GLE course work and courses.

4. Comparative Senior Phase Attainment Analysis

- 4.1 The data included in this report should be considered in the light of the following points:
- as yet, the Insight National Benchmarking Toolkit has not been published for the 2021 results, so comparison between attainment in Highland schools and attainment in other Local Authorities (LA), and comparison of attainment in Highland schools and virtual comparators cannot yet be carried out. Future reports will be brought to the November 2021 and February 2022 Education Committee meetings;
 - the 2021 Alternative Model for certification included a new appeals process and at the time of writing this report it is not yet clear how this will affect attainment in Highland schools or headline attainment figures nationally;
 - a concomitant of the new appeals process is that patterns of "No Awards" are different this year, as withdrawing candidates from courses would have removed their right to appeal. Consequently, there are candidates achieving "No Award" in session 2020/21 who, last session, would most likely have been withdrawn from course presentation. This year there are more "No Awards" than in 2020 but fewer than in the three preceding years (see **Appendix 1** for further explanatory detail);
 - the data reported here relates to full courses (National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher): individual unit attainment adds further tariff points for young people and data on this will be incorporated into the next attainment report to committee;
 - college results have not yet been fully incorporated into the annual figures: these will raise the overall attainment;
 - Local Authorities have been cautioned, in the Insight Benchmarking Tool, against comparing 2019/20 attainment data with attainment in other sessions due to the different attainment patterns seen in 2020. The 2020 data cannot therefore be used to directly demonstrate subject, school or authority improvement compared to previous years. Because of this, attainment in session 2020/21, summarised in this report, focuses on comparison with attainment in sessions 2017/18 and 2018/19; and
 - national pass rate data has been published, which averages pass rates across all local authorities. In the November committee paper, we will explore how Highland pass rates compare to our virtual comparators, paying particular attention to patterns of withdrawals and No Awards across different Local Authorities.

- 4.2 Significant changes were made to SQA courses during session 2020/21, with the intention of ensuring that courses could be completed in an academic year where remote learning was a significant factor. These course and assessment adjustments mean that any analysis of 2020/21 attainment should be considered in the knowledge that comparison with historic attainment is not comparing like with like. The course adjustments affected attainment patterns in a range of ways in Highland and we await national data which will allow us to determine if these patterns are reflected elsewhere in the country.
- 4.3 For session 2020/21, National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses were awarded based on provisional results, which were judgements, based on demonstrated attainment, made by teachers and lecturers, of a learner's final band. SQA supported this process with assessment resources and quality assurance sampling. Further quality assurance was carried out within Highland Council. This whole process was called the Alternative Certification Model. In order to ensure that courses could be completed in a session disrupted by periods of remote learning, adjustments were made to course content and assessment processes at all levels.
- 4.4 Subject-specific guidance on gathering evidence for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher was available from SQA's NQ subject pages. This detailed the key evidence that teachers and lecturers should gather to determine provisional results for each learner, with a degree of flexibility permitted within the framework.
- 4.5 Teachers were further supported by the SQA Academy course 'Determining provisional results at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher', which explained the steps teachers and lecturers should take when determining a provisional result. It also provided guidance on the high-level principles that teachers and lecturers should follow when judging learner evidence. All teachers in Highland involved in deciding provisional grades were expected to access this SQA Academy Course (see **Appendix 2** for full quality assurance checklist for every course at every level in every school).
- 4.6 S4 attainment headlines are as follows. The percentage of S4 candidates achieving 5 or more A-D Awards at Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) Level 5 (National 5 Level) is 45.65%. This compares favourably with the figure of 44.68% in 2019 and 44.24% in 2018.
- 4.7 The percentage of S4 candidates achieving 5 or more A-C Awards at SCQF Level 5 in 2021 is 38.37%, compared to 36.47% in 2019 and 37.03% in 2018.
- 4.8 The percentage of S4 candidates achieving 5 or more Awards at SCQF Level 4 is 70.13%. This compares favourably with the figure of 67.94% in 2019 and 68.09% in 2018. These improvements in S4 attainment show an encouraging improvement trend, despite the challenges of session 2020/21 mentioned above.
- 4.9 S5 attainment headlines are as follows (calculated as a percentage of the S4 roll for that cohort). The percentage of S5 candidates achieving 5 or more A-D Awards at SCQF Level 6 is 16.32%, slightly down on 2019 (17.02%) but ahead of 2018 (15.18%). The percentage of S5 candidates achieving 5 or more A-C Awards at SCQF Level 6 in 2021 is 14.28%, compared to 14.12% in 2019 and 12.78% in 2018. The percentage of S5 candidates achieving 5 Awards at Grade A is 6.36%, ahead of 2019 (3.46%) and 2018 (2.69%).

4.11 S6 attainment headlines are as follows. Cumulative attainment for S6 pupils, shows that, by the end of S6, the percentage of the cohort achieving 5 or more Awards at SCQF Level 6 (A-D) is 34.43%, up from 31.69% in 2019 and 33.89% in 2018. The percentage of S6 candidates cumulatively achieving 5 or more A-C Awards at SCQF Level 6 in 2021 is 29.56%, compared to 26.15% in 2019 and 30.13% in 2018. The percentage of S6 achieving 1 or more A-C Awards at SCQF Level 7 (Advanced Higher Level) is 21.22%, up from 17.21% in 2019 and 19.95% in 2018.

As with S4, the data for S5 and S6 indicate generally positive improvement patterns. The release of the national Insight data will allow us to ascertain the extent to which these patterns are mirrored elsewhere in the country, and in our virtual comparator data. The attainment results mentioned here for S4-6 are represented in chart form in **Appendix 3**.

4.12 As mentioned above, the course modifications introduced by SQA this session affected course outcomes in different ways. In some instances, the changes led to improved outcomes whereas in others there was no such effect. For example, for Higher English, in 2021, 34.8% of the entire S5/6 cohort in Highland achieved a pass (A-C), compared to 29.8% in 2019 and 28.4% in 2018. Similarly, in Higher History, 11.9% of the entire S5/6 cohort in Highland achieved a pass (A-C), compared to 9.3% in 2019 and 10.3% in 2018. Conversely, in Higher Maths, in 2021, 14.1% of the entire S5/6 cohort in Highland achieved a pass (A-C), compared to 15.1% in both 2019 and 2018. Similarly, in Higher Chemistry, 7.8% of the entire S5/6 cohort in Highland achieved a pass (A-C), compared to 9.1% in 2019 and 8.9% in 2018. Publication of the Insight Benchmarking Toolkit will allow us to explore how this relates to outcomes of the virtual comparator in a further report to Committee.

4.13 Attainment of the young people most affected by deprivation in session 20/21 shows some improvement. In 2021, S4 young people in Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation Quintile 1 (most affected by deprivation) achieved a 95.02% A-D pass rate at Level 5, compared to a 94.18% A-D pass rate for young people in Quintile 5 (least affected by deprivation). This is the first time that those from the most deprived backgrounds have had a better pass rate than those in the least deprived group.

4.14 In 2021, S5 young people in Quintile 1 achieved a 91.30% A-D pass rate at Level 6, compared to a 93.07% A-D pass rate for young people in Quintile 5. This represents an attainment gap of 1.77% for this measure. In 2019 the gap was 3.97%.

4.15 In 2021, S6 young people in Quintile 1 achieved a 90.79% A-D pass rate at Level 6, compared to an 89.44% A-D pass rate for young people in Quintile 5. This indicates that there was no attainment gap related to deprivation for this measure in 2021. In 2019 the gap was 11.96% for this measure. In 2021, S6 young people in Quintile 1 achieved a 93.07% A-D pass rate at Level 7, compared to a 94.68% A-D pass rate for young people in Quintile 5. This represents an attainment gap of 1.61% for this measure. In 2019 the gap was 30.00%.

4.16 Combining all year groups, candidates in Quintile 1 in 2021 achieved A-D pass rates of 92.0% at National 5, 91.2% at Higher and 93.1% at Advanced Higher, compared to all-candidate pass rates of 92.5%, 92.3% and 93.2% respectively.

These 2021 pass rates for Quintile 1 improve on 2019 figures, which were 85.7% for National 5, 85.8% at Higher and 53.3% for Advanced Higher. In 2019, candidates in Quintile 1 represented 5.3% of all presentations, whereas in 2021 the figure is 12.6%. A-C Pass rates for Quintiles 1 and 5 for these key measures are shown in **Appendix 3**.

- 4.17 Candidates eligible for free school meals also achieved strong A-D pass rates in 2021, 91.8% at National 5, 90.2% at Higher and 97.4% at Advanced Higher. In 2019, the equivalent pass rates were 84.6% at National 5, 88.9% at Higher and 80.8% at Advanced Higher. In 2019 candidates eligible for free school meals represented 6.3% of all presentations, whereas in 2021 the figure is 7.8%.
- 4.18 For all of the above measures concerning attainment related to deprivation, it is important to note that presentation patterns (and therefore pass rates) varied this year (see above) due to the Alternative Certification Model. Publication of the Insight Benchmarking Tool will allow more detailed analysis of the deprivation-linked attainment gap in Highland, including comparison with other local authorities and our virtual comparator outcomes.
- 4.18.1 The data outlined above appears to be in line with the reported reduction of the attainment gap when comparing 2021 data with 2019 data. Close analysis of these measures in the coming session will allow us to determine the sustainability of the improvement seen here.
- 4.19 Full attainment data for literacy and numeracy will be reported once we have the national comparative figures (including the contribution of individual unit results, which is not included here), but some headline reporting is possible.
- 4.20 In terms of literacy, in session 2021, 87.16% of S4 pupils achieved at least SCQF Level 4 through success in English courses, compared to 87.64% in 2019. 68.57% of S4 pupils achieved SCQF Level 5 through success in the National 5 English course, compared to 67.22% in 2019. In S5, 49.00% of the cohort achieved SCQF Level 6 through success in the Higher English course, compared to 45.22% in 2019.
- 4.21 For numeracy, in session 2021, 85.41% of S4 pupils achieved at least SCQF Level 4 through success in Maths courses, compared to 75.18% in 2019. 51.20% of S4 pupils achieved SCQF Level 5 through success in National 5 Maths courses, compared to 42.78% in 2019. In S5, 19.80% of the cohort achieved SCQF Level 6 through success in the Higher Maths course, compared to 21.46% in 2019.
- 4.22 Once national comparator data is available it will be possible to assess the extent to which the numeracy and literacy data has been affected across the country by course modifications and the effect of remote learning (see above). Meanwhile it is worth noting the improvement in 4 of the 6 measures mentioned above.
- 4.23 Attainment of Care Experienced young people in session 2020/21 will be reported on once the national comparative data is available. Numbers of young people in this category are small, so year on year attainment fluctuates. However, it is important to note the successes achieved by young people in this group. Initial analysis shows that in 2021, the 88 care experienced young people in S4 in Highland achieved 147 Awards at National 2, 3 & 4 and 88 A-D passes at National 5 level. The 64 care experienced young people in S5 in Highland achieved 24 passes at National 2, 3 & 4, 29 A-D passes at National 5 and 19 A-D passes at

Higher. The 22 care experienced young people in S6 in Highland achieved 7 passes at National 2, 3 & 4, 7 A-D passes at National 5, 11 A-D passes at Higher and 3 A-C passes at Advanced Higher. These results represent admirable achievement for young people working at times in the most difficult of circumstances.

4.24 22 young people in S4 achieved passes at SCQF Level 4 in Gaelic (Learners), compared to 12 in 2020 and 9 in 2019. 50 young people achieved A-C passes at SCQF Level 5 in Gaelic (Learners) compared to 48 in 2020 and 34 in 2019. 53 young people achieved A-C passes in SCQF Level 5 in Gaidhlig, compared to 47 in 2020 and 43 in 2019.

4.25 In S5, 16 young people achieved A-C passes at SCQF Level 6 in Gaelic (Learners), compared to 13 in 2020 and 16 in 2019. 29 young people achieved A-C passes in SCQF Level 6 in Gaidhlig, compared to 27 in 2020 and 24 in 2019. These increases in Gaelic (Learners) and Gaidhlig passes are very welcome and we hope to see further increases in session 2021/22.

5. Attainment meetings

5.1 Attainment meetings with Head Teachers of all Highland secondary schools will recommence during the first term of the 2021/22 academic session, once the national comparative Insight data has been published. These attainment meetings will explore historic attainment patterns in each school and attainment projections for 21/22.

5.2 The context of these attainment meetings will be affected by the national discussions on the June 2021 Organisation for Economic Development (OECD) Independent Review of Curriculum for Excellence (see below under Item 6). Projections of future attainment may also be affected by any additional changes to SQA courses and assessment processes which may be put in place due to the ongoing pandemic.

6. OECD Review Implications

6.1 Highland Council will engage fully with the national conversation about the OECD Review recommendations (and the other aspects of the OECD Review) and future attainment reports to the Education Committee will be in that new context of reform, reporting on progress as it happens throughout session 2021/22 and beyond. The OECD recommendations cover adapting the Senior Phase, simplifying policies and institutions, and aligning qualifications, system evaluation and curriculum.

7. Next Steps

7.1 The following key actions will be priorities in session 2021/22:

- 1) further analysis of attainment patterns once the Insight National Benchmarking Toolkit has been published;
- 2) recommencement of individual attainment meetings;
- 3) support for schools in planning Senior Phase delivery, especially in terms of adapting processes in the light of any national adjustments to courses and assessment processes;
- 4) engaging in the national conversation responding to the OECD Independent Review of CfE: this will involve officers and school staff and will include regular reporting to the Education Committee on progress; and

- 5) support Members with the scrutiny of ASG attainment data and identification of next steps;

Designation: Executive Chief Officer – Education and Learning

Date: 13 August 2021

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APPENDIX 1

No Awards and withdrawals.

In typical years (with examination diets), there will be a significant number of candidates who receive “No Award” as their result in National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses. This is because candidates for whom teachers had estimated No Award will remain presented for courses if there is a possibility of the candidate achieving at least a D if the exam goes well for them on the day. Some of these candidates will, inevitably, not attain a D, so will appear in the attainment data as “No Award”. Some candidates, for whom teachers have estimated a D or better, perform badly on the day and achieve “No Award”. All pupils who have “No Award” are included in the pass rate statistics. So, for example, if there are 100 pupils presented for a course and 90 pass at A-D, while 10 achieve “No Award” the pass rate would be 90%. No Awards have been falling gradually as presentations become more accurate in terms of ensuring young people are presented at the right level of course.

In 2020, teachers were asked to estimate the performance of young people in each course, and to rank order pupils. It would seem that it would have been logical to remove all candidates from presentation if the teacher judgement was that they would not achieve an A-D pass. However, at the time of submission of the estimates, the plan was still that SQA would apply an algorithm based on historic performance, which might have meant that those pupils close to the D grade boundary in the rank order list might have had their No Award upgraded to a D (and in fact that did happen in some instances when the results were first issued). Consequently, course entries in 2020 had fewer No Award results than in typical years (because candidates that were not near the Grade D boundary were withdrawn from presentation, and because there were no candidates, of course, who had a bad day in the examination hall). However, there were still some No Awards, so the overall pass rate, though higher than usual, did not reach 100%.

In 2021, teachers submitted provisional grades based on demonstrated attainment. This year, the SQA introduced an appeals system, where appeals could be generated by young people themselves. If schools had withdrawn young people for whom teachers had arrived at a provisional grade of No Award, then those young people would have had no right of appeal. Therefore, our advice to schools was to leave candidates in the presentation lists so their rights were respected with regard to appeals. However, where candidates and their families agreed to withdrawal that would happen. Consequently, there are more No Awards than in 2020, but fewer than in 2019, because, of course, no candidates had a bad performance on examination day. Had we removed the right of young people to appeal their provisional grades we would have had a 100% pass rate.

In terms of raw numbers, the following table demonstrates the point:

Academic Year	Number of “No Awards”
2020/21	520
2019/20	158
2018/19	630
2017/18	1034

The reduced number of No Awards in 2020 led to an increased pass rate, for obvious reasons. Consequently, this is one of the reasons that comparison between 2020 and 2021 pass rates is problematic.

APPENDIX 2

SQA National Qualifications - Session 2020/21

Quality Assurance Template for Highland Council Schools

For completion by departments/faculties to cover each subject and level

School:	
Department/Faculty:	

Understanding Standards

Confirm that *all* staff involved have engaged in *all* of the following activities.

Activity	Check all that apply
Read, and as appropriate, discussed, current documentation available on SQA website in relation to Course Specification and Assessment.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Read current documentation available on SQA website in relation to Understanding Standards.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Attended SQA webinars or watched recordings of webinars in relation to Understanding Standards.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have completed the 2020-21 Quality Assurance of Estimates course for National Qualifications on SQA Academy <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have been provided with the opportunity to raise questions regarding Understanding Standards with colleagues and/or SQA.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Staff have engaged with SQA advice on unconscious bias, have watched the Royal Society video on unconscious bias, to be found here, or have explicitly addressed the concept of unconscious bias in other ways.	<input type="checkbox"/>
All assessment arrangements in place for all candidates provide the appropriate support for candidates who require additional support: this support has been agreed with candidates and families and relevant staff are fully aware of arrangements.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Equalities considerations are taken into account in the process of arriving at provisional grades	<input type="checkbox"/>
SQA guidance on remote assessment has been followed where candidates have been unable to attend school to complete assessment activity.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Staff have followed SQA guidance on confidentiality of assessments and have conveyed the importance of confidentiality to young people involved in assessments.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Staff are aware of school's quality assurance procedures.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Staff are aware that officers from The Highland Council will quality assure the school's provisional grades and quality assurance processes.	<input type="checkbox"/>

Moderation and Verification of assessment processes

As not all activities listed in this section are compulsory, please check only those activities undertaken.

Activity	Check all that apply
Professional dialogue <i>within</i> department/faculty relating to standards as an exercise in moderation has been undertaken at subject team/faculty level and brief record kept.	<input type="checkbox"/>

To support department/faculty decision making, professional dialogue relating to standards as an exercise in moderation has been undertaken with staff delivering the same subject/level in other school(s).	<input type="checkbox"/>
Records are available of the use of specific candidates' work from this school used in any of the above moderation exercises.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Specific instruments of assessment and marking instructions used in gathering evidence for candidates have formed part of the moderation discussion with other school(s), though the focus has been on the correct application of the national standard in assessment judgements.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Support has been sought from Highland Council officers where problems have arisen with the moderation process.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sampling of learners' assessment evidence to ensure that marking is consistent with national standards has been undertaken at subject/faculty level and recorded.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sampling of learners' assessment evidence to ensure that marking is consistent with national standards has been undertaken with other school(s).	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sampling of learners' assessment evidence was submitted and accepted as part of SQA's external verification sampling process.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feedback received from SQA as part of SQA external verification was acted upon as appropriate (if applicable).	<input type="checkbox"/>
Records are available of the use of specific candidates' work from this school used in any of the above verification exercises.	<input type="checkbox"/>

Provisional Results

Activity	Check all that apply
An agreed range of evidence and/or number of targeted pieces was used consistently in judgement of provisional result for each candidate.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Multiple staff have been involved in marking assessments and grade judgements for each candidate wherever possible. Where this is not possible, suitable moderation activity has underpinned provisional result decisions.	<input type="checkbox"/>
All provisional results are based on the candidate evidence of demonstrated attainment collected during the course of session 2020-21 and no results are based on any inferred attainment.	<input type="checkbox"/>
All candidate evidence has been collected in accordance with the conditions specified by SQA.	<input type="checkbox"/>

Summary of Provisional Results Data – complete one table per course on offer (add more as required)

Course:		Level:				
	Entries	A	B	C	D	F
Number						
% of entries						
Data Analysis						Y/N
Are provisional results and grade distributions reasonably consistent with historical performance data for this subject/level? (If No, please provide narrative for significant variance: this narrative will form part of the discussion for Highland Council QA engagement in June).						
<i>Reasons for variations</i>						

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Completed by

Name	Designation	Date
	e.g. Faculty Head/Principal Teacher	

Senior Management Quality Assurance

Activity	Check
Have reviewed performance data and discussed any reasons for variation from typical historical data.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Confirm satisfaction that subject team approach to provisional results judgements and quality assurance procedures is in accordance with agreed procedures.	<input type="checkbox"/>

Completed by (both to be involved)

Name	Designation	Date
	Head Teacher	
	SQA Coordinator	

APPENDIX 3

Attainment Charts

