

Background Notes for SQA Examination Attainment and Staying on Rates

1. Sources and Definitions

1.1 Sources

Data on National Qualifications were obtained from the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and refer to post-appeals attainment.

School roll figures were obtained from the Scottish Government School Census as at September in the relevant year. Pupils entering or leaving the school after Census date may affect the percentages given for examination attainment. Roll figures include pupils in mainstream classes and in integrated SEN units.

Most of the Candidate Stage data (i.e. S4, S5, S6) presented here were obtained from schools' management information systems. Stage was otherwise estimated to within approximately 0.5% chance of error.

1.2 Changes to National Qualifications

Skills for work courses - Since 2006/07 "Skills for Work" courses have been widely available in secondary schools.

"Skills for Work" courses are practical courses designed to be an equivalent option to an existing qualification, such as a Standard Grade. The courses have been developed by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) to enable and encourage young people in S3 and above to develop important knowledge and skills, useful for both employment and for life. These courses are intended to provide pathways to employment, training or further education. Learning is mainly practical and takes place in schools, colleges and other work-related settings. Courses available during the period covered by this publication are at Access and Intermediate levels.

2.1 Changes to definitions

Between the academic years 2005/06 and 2006/07 a change was made to the way that attainment figures are calculated for students taking exams at centres other than their base school. The 2006/07 and 2007/08 figures in this publication were calculated using the new definition 2005/06 figures use an older definition.

Before 2006/07 attainment statistics were based on the presenting centre only, i.e the centre where a student studied for and took the exam. From 2006/07 all awards are credited to the school or college at which a pupil is based. This means that pupils based in publicly funded schools who took courses in Further Education (FE) colleges or other centres will now be credited with any resulting awards, whereas previously they would not have been. As well as the national totals, this affects the local authority level figures as pupils taking courses at schools other than their base school may cross LA boundaries.

In 2007/08, of 720,000 NQ courses taken by pupils based in publicly funded secondary schools, 4,400 were in FE colleges or other centres. The results for these 4,400 courses would not previously have been recorded in these statistics but they do not significantly affect the national totals.

The new figures are published without a break in the series. It will however be useful to bear in mind that a change has been made when making detailed historic comparisons.

2.2 Definitions

National and education authority averages do not include independent or special schools. Education authority averages include education authority secondary schools only, whereas national averages include all publicly funded secondary schools.

For Standard Grade, only awards at 1-6 are included. Candidates are awarded a grade dependant on their performance against set criteria and there are 3 levels of award - credit (grades 1&2), general (grades 3&4) and foundation (grades 5&6). A '7' is awarded where a candidate completes/passes the course but not at a level of performance required to gain one of the other 6 grades.

The figures represent cumulative attainment by the end of each stage. For example, figures showing attainment by the end of S4 may include the results of Standard Grade or Intermediate courses completed by the same pupils when they were in S3.

In order to record the attainment of an entire year group, attainment in S5 and S6 is reported as a percentage of the relevant S4 roll. For example, attainment in S5 in 2007/08 is calculated as a percentage of the S4 roll in September 2006. S6 attainment is calculated from the S4 roll in September 2005.

The S5 staying on rates are calculated as the estimated January roll in S5 divided by the previous year's S4 roll as at September. The estimated January roll in S5 is calculated by subtracting the number of first term leavers in S5 from the September S5 roll. The S6 staying on rate is calculated by dividing the September S6 roll by the S4 roll two years before.

3. Notes

Examination results are an important indicator of performance, but not one that gives the full picture of education. These results should be considered alongside other indicators of pupils' progress, such as the quality of the learning experience and the ethos of the school.

Sometimes differences in the patterns of results from year to year may be due to fluctuations in pupils' abilities in different year groups rather than to any underlying trend in school performance.

Some schools make provision for pupils with additional support needs either within their mainstream roll or in integrated units. This can have a significant impact on

attainment patterns. However, the overall effect is heavily dependent on the number of pupils and the nature of their additional support needs.

Staying on rates affect the potential of a year group to gain awards in S5 and S6; therefore, a low staying on rate may be part of the explanation for a low percentage of awards at these stages.

For more information on exam attainment in Scottish schools please see the National Statistics Publication “SQA Attainment and School Leaver Qualifications in Scotland: 2007/08” at the link below.

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/03/09154229/0>