Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba

Douglas Ross MSP
Convener
Education, Children and Young People's Committee

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11 March 2025

Dear Convener,

SQA ACCREDITATION & QUALITY ASSURANCE OF NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

As you know, the accreditation function within the SQA, and proposals for this to move to Qualifications Scotland, has been of considerable interest to members. This interest has also featured in the scrutiny of Higher History qualifications.

I am aware that the debate has, at times, led to a conflation of the role of accreditation, with the role of delivering and quality assuring National Qualifications. Whilst we all share the ambition to ensure that qualifications delivered in Scotland are of the highest quality and integrity, it is important to recognise that accrediting qualifications is a separate function to activity that is undertaken to deliver and quality assure National Qualifications, such as Higher History.

I am keen that we support a clearer articulation and understanding of these two distinct functions and have therefore attached a paper that has been prepared by the SQA in this respect. The paper sets out how 'SQA Awarding' quality assure and self-regulate National Qualifications, and should be read alongside the SPICe briefing that 'SQA Accreditation' provided to members during Stage 1 of the Education (Scotland) Bill.

I hope you and members find this information useful, and I look forward to further debate on the accreditation function during Stage 2 of the Education (Scotland) Bill.

Yours sincerely

JENNY GILRUTH

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REGULATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE OF NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS AND HIGHER NATIONAL (HN) QUALIFICATIONS: BRIEFING FOR SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT

Purpose

This paper outlines the self-regulatory activities undertaken by SQA Awarding to quality assure qualifications developed and delivered as Scotland's national awarding body.

There is a distinction between this role and the role carried out by SQA Accreditation. The accreditation role was detailed in a paper published by the Scottish Parliament Information Centre in October 2024 and is available here.

Background

SQA has two distinct parts – SQA Accreditation and SQA Awarding Body, with different roles and responsibilities. Table 1, below, summarises these differences.

Table 1: Summary of distinct responsibilities for SQA Awarding and Accreditation

Role	SQA Awarding	SQA Accreditation
Developing and maintaining Qualifications	Yes	No
Delivering Qualifications	Yes	No
Marking, Grading and Resulting Qualifications	Yes	No
Certification Qualifications	Yes	No
Regulating National Qualifications (National 1-5; Higher; Advanced Higher)	Yes	No
Regulating Higher National Qualifications	Yes	No
Regulating SVQs (and other main components of a Modern Apprenticeship)	No	Yes
Regulating selected sector specific qualifications (e.g. Security Industry	No	Yes
Approving Awarding Bodies	No	Yes
Accrediting qualifications	No	Yes
Funding Qualification Delivery	No	No
Reviewing the quality of Learning and Teaching	No	No

Discussion

SQA Awarding Body and its Code of Practice

For all qualifications delivered in Scotland that are not regulated by SQA's accreditation function, the SQA Awarding Body Code of Practice (The Code) outlines the framework by which SQA safeguards the integrity of its qualifications and assessment standards to ensure public confidence through its self-regulation activities.

The Code is underpinned by 13 high level Governing Principles which show how SQA meets its statutory duties and self-regulates its awarding activities. The Code and Governing Principles is a public document, available from SQA's website.

Implementation of the Code and its Governing Principles is supported through SQA's underpinning policies, processes and procedures, guidance and training documents and risk registers, all of which undergo cycles of continuous improvement activity. Policies are accompanied by Equality Impact Assessments and, where required, Child Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessments.

Annually, SQA must provide evidence that it is complying with these Governing Principles. Compliance is monitored by the internal Code of Practice Governing Group, chaired by SQA's Senior Responsible Officer, the Director of Qualifications Development. This group is also responsible for ensuring SQA Awarding is compliant with the requirements of all SQA's external qualifications regulators: SQA Accreditation, Ofqual (for regulated qualifications delivered in England) and Qualifications Wales (for regulated qualifications delivered in Wales).

The Code also sets out how the organisation's governance supports compliance with the Governing Principles. The key role is that of Chief Examining Officer whose role is defined in the Code of Practice as ensuring that:

> '....SQA fulfils its statutory functions as laid out in the Education (Scotland) Act 1996 and all relevant legislation applying to the organisation.'

SQA's Board of Management and Qualifications Committee also play important parts in supporting SQA's regulatory activity. The specific role of the Qualifications Committee is defined in the Code as being to provide:

> '....strategic, policy and technical advice to the Board and senior officers on SQA's qualifications and their assessment, quality assurance and awarding systems. It also oversees the work of SQA in developing qualifications that meet the needs of candidates, centres and employers, now and into the future.'

Quality Assurance of National Qualifications

The Code outlines how SQA ensures the standard of National Qualifications and protects the integrity of certification. There are many quality assurance activities embedded in the end-to-end process of National Qualifications delivery and a number of these activities are outlined below.

Each quality assurance activity is supported through policy and guidance documentation. For national courses, quality assurance activities are monitored through a year-round weekly scorecard of metrics and the risk register of the weekly Certification Programme Group, chaired by the SQA Director of Operations.

Quality assurance activities are carried out throughout the lifecycle of a qualification, and include the following key steps:

Qualifications development: SQA works with stakeholders to develop its qualifications based on evidence of need and in accordance with the design principles for that qualification. Each qualification is developed in accordance with specific design principles and is aligned to a Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework level and credit value. They are subject to checks to ensure that they are valid, credible, practicable and fit for purpose.

All SQA qualifications are subject to a cycle of review to ensure they remain current and fit for purpose.

Monitoring delivery of internally assessed qualifications (National 1 to National 4 ungraded courses): Qualifications verification ensures that the assessment approaches used by centres are valid and assessment judgements are reliable. Centres whose standards are not accepted are required to undertake remedial activity before learners are certificated. A centre cannot deliver an SQA qualification unless it has approval from SQA to do so.

SQA also provides a prior verification service which ensures that centre-devised assessments are valid and consistent with the required standard.

Quality assurance of externally assessed qualifications (National 5 to Advanced Higher) – before assessment takes place: SQA undertakes many quality assurance activities to ensure that the assessment of graded national courses is valid, reliable, fair and equitable.

Assessments (question papers and coursework) and their associated marking instructions are developed by practising teachers and lecturers and undergo a series of checks by independent reviewers and validators before final sign off by an experienced SQA Qualifications Manager.

Quality assurance of externally assessed qualifications– after assessment takes place: A fundamental part of quality assurance is the process of standardisation of the marking instructions, which allows the Principal Assessor to finalise the draft detailed marking instructions based on a review of a sample of responses from learners who have sat the question papers. This is crucial to inform the next key action: training of markers, which aims to ensures they carry out their roles and responsibilities to a clear, required standard.

Marking itself is also quality assured, for example with seeded sample scripts in marker's allocation, to ensure marking is to the national standard. Any deviation is identified and rectified before certification.

Key to maintaining standards is the grade boundary process. This ensures awarding decisions are grounded in qualitative and quantitative evidence. While the aim is to set the same level of demand every year, grade boundaries may be change – with the number of marks required to achieve a grade moving up or down - so that the level of demand is maintained and is comparable from year to year. Such adjustments are applied where required however, in a normal awarding year, the median grade boundary movement is zero.

Quality assurance of externally assessed qualifications – after certification takes place: Learners and centres can appeal against decisions made by SQA while developing, quality assuring and assessing qualifications. This is a free-of-charge service open to all learners.

SQA delivers a programme of Understanding Standards events. This aims to help practitioners deepen their understand of the standard of the qualifications they deliver.

SQA provides a wide range of subject-specific materials to explain the national standards, with real examples drawn from learner responses to assessment materials with commentaries as to why they have, or have not, met the standard.

In addition, SQA publishes course reports1, which outlines where the whole cohort of learners has done well or show areas for development, for each externally assessed graded course. This helps those delivering the courses understand the national standard and to help prepare learners for the following year.

SQA also monitors awarding standards over time, meaning it can track that a course or unit is equally demanding across years, even if it has been replaced or reviewed.

Quality Assurance of Higher National and Vocational Qualifications

For Higher National qualifications (a range of other qualifications, including National Certificates, National Progression Awards and SQA Awarding's vocational portfolio) – including those regulated by SQA Accreditation, Ofqual or Qualifications Wales - many of the above quality assurance measures apply.

These qualifications are similarly developed based on evidence of need and in accordance with the design principles; delivering centres are approved and verified to ensure their competence to deliver the qualification and a programme of verification activity ensures centres continue to meet the standards required.

Key in quality assuring these qualifications is the assessment verification process. This ensures centres delivering SQA qualifications are assessing candidates in line with national standards, and that assessment decisions comply with our quality assurance criteria.

SQA manages this year-round activity through an HNVQ Certification Programme Group, applying the tried-and-tested practice from National Qualifications to the whole portfolio.

Scottish Qualifications Authority

March 2025

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1 For internally assessed qualifications, SQA annually publishes qualification verification summary reports with the same aim and purpose as the course reports.