

Qualification Verification Criteria: Guidance for centres





Qualification verification: Guidance for centres

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What happens during qualification verification?

Qualification verification is the process by which SQA verifies that centres are assessing their candidates in line with national standards, and that assessment decisions comply with SQA's Quality Assurance Criteria.

The SQA staff who are responsible for carrying out qualification verification are qualification verifiers (QVs). Qualification verifiers (QVs) are experienced subject experts who are appointed by SQA to undertake qualification verification (visiting, virtual, remote and central verification) for SQA.

There is specific guidance on each quality assurance criterion for qualifications verification in our document *Qualification Verification Criteria: Guidance for centres*. It includes:

- ◆ the rationale including each quality criterion in qualification verification
- ◆ specific SQA requirements relating to each criterion
- ◆ examples of types of evidence required to demonstrate meeting the criterion
- ◆ additional sources of information and guidance available from SQA

QVs are allocated centres and qualifications, and will liaise with you to set up a qualification verification event. The allocations are made under an intelligence-led, risk-based model.

You will receive a qualification verification event (which will be virtual or visiting) within the first year after gaining approval for a qualification, if you have candidates registered with SQA. After this, we will schedule events based on our intelligence-led, risk-based model.

If your centre has been approved as an SQA centre recently, you will have experience of providing documentary evidence against the quality criteria.

Please note: There are other Quality Assurance Criteria that cover systems verification. In systems verification, a systems verifier will review your quality assurance systems, policies and procedures against the systems verification criteria, and will consider your evidence of the ongoing implementation of your policies and procedures. The systems verifier will consider your context to provide information and advice on improvements you could make, and will highlight any examples of good practice.

How should I prepare for a qualification verification event?

If your centre is selected for qualification verification, a QV will contact the centre to initiate the event planning process. The QV will indicate how the visit will be conducted.

Visiting verification: the QV will contact your SQA Co-ordinator to arrange a visit date. Verification is likely to be carried out on one day, but the planning and the preparation will have taken place at various stages. The QV will issue the visit plan at least two weeks prior to the agreed visit date.

Virtual verification: the event will be conducted with the centre using Microsoft Teams. Verification planning will culminate in an evidence submission date, and an agreed date and time for a virtual meeting. You will be asked to liaise with the qualification verifier during the visit planning process to determine the timelines and the method of submission for your evidence. Alternatively, you may provide a QV with internal access to your file system to review the requested evidence. We advise our QVs to request evidence at least two weeks before the agreed visit date, and the visit plan to be issued to centre four weeks before the visit date. In the full QV report, all qualification verification criteria will be reported on.

Group Award verification: when a centre has been selected for group award verification, this is likely to take place virtually and therefore will follow the same QA criteria. The difference between GA verification and virtual verification is that the selection of units and candidates will come from the candidates entered on the Group Award that has been selected. In addition to this, there may be more than one qualification verifier involved in the activity and SQA will assign a primary verifier. The role of the primary verifier is to reduce the number of EVs contacting a centre during visit planning. The primary verifier will liaise directly with the centre on behalf of all the verifiers involved to gather the information required. They will also take the lead on the virtual feedback session and allow all the qualification verifiers involved to be part of the session and feedback on their own qualifications and answer any questions the centre may have.

Remote verification: this will address criteria 2.1 (where applicable) and 4.2 – 4.7. The focus will be on internal assessment and verification and, where applicable, on the assessors' and internal verifiers' competence to assess and internally verify in line with the qualification requirements.

Central verification: SQA will contact centres to indicate how central verification will take place for a specific qualification. Centres will receive clear detailed and documented information about the process and procedures to follow for the central verification request.

During discussions, you may advise the QV that your centre is not delivering the qualification you have been selected for, and the QV would therefore advise SQA to record your centre as 'not running'.



Steps in the qualification verification process

The qualification verification planning process

The QV will:

- 1 Make initial contact with the SQA co-ordinator within 10 working days of the centre receiving selection notification.

The QV will not contact subject staff directly unless authorised to do so by the SQA co-ordinator.

- 2 Establish that there is enough available evidence to make an informed verification decision by checking that there will be evidence of sufficient assessment decisions having been made to warrant a visit.
- 3 At least six weeks before the agreed date of the event, e-mail the SQA co-ordinator to tell them which units they have selected to verify.
- 4 Request additional information in relation to selected units:
 - ◆ names of assessors and internal verifiers
 - ◆ the awards/units they are assessing/verifying
 - ◆ candidate SCN and stage of progression
 - ◆ for regulated qualifications, notification in respect of assessors/internal verifiers that are qualified or unqualified
- 5 Discuss the format for the verification event and how this will look for the centre and all involved. For visiting verification, visit plans will be issued two weeks before the agreed visit date. For virtual verification, an evidence submission date of at least two weeks

before the agreed virtual event date should be agreed during visit planning. The visit plan will be issued four weeks before the virtual event date.

- 6 Set up and arrange the verification event (eg using MS Teams).
- 7 For visiting activity, at least two weeks before the event, and for virtual activity, at least four weeks before the event, send a completed event visit plan to the SQA co-ordinator detailing:
 - ◆ The assessors/verifiers/candidates who are selected for interview.
 - ◆ It is generally best for interviews to be conducted face-to-face, but other types of formats such as MS Teams, tele- or video- conference, and telephone interviews are also acceptable.
 - ◆ An outline of what they would like to cover during the course of the event and an indication of the running order.
 - ◆ An outline of the rationale for sampling (please see next section for further information on sampling).
 - ◆ The standard documentation required for the activity (this is advised at the bottom of the QV visit plan).

The Group Award verification planning process

The QA team will:

1. Make initial contact with the SQA co-ordinator to advise of the Group Award selections.
2. Liaise directly with the SQA co-ordinator to follow the steps to gather the information required for GA visit planning.
3. Establish that there is enough available evidence to make an informed verification decision by checking that there will be evidence of sufficient assessment decisions having been made to warrant a visit.
4. Request additional information in relation to selected units:
 - ◆ names of assessors and internal verifiers
 - ◆ the awards/units they are assessing/verifying
 - ◆ candidate SCN and stage of progression
 - ◆ for regulated qualifications, notification in respect of assessors/internal verifiers that are qualified or unqualified
5. Allocate activity to the necessary EVs and set up an area for all EVs involved in the Group Award activity for collaboration and allocate a primary verifier (where applicable) to lead the verification process.
6. Provide the EVs with the information gathered during the planning process.

The QV or primary verifier will:

1. Liaise with the SQA co-ordinator on behalf of all the EVs involved in the Group Award activity to arrange a time and date for the activity and discuss the arrangements if there is a requirement for assessor, internal verifier or candidate interviews.
2. Liaise with all the qualification verifiers involved in the Group Award activity to determine the appropriate candidate sample across all units selected.
- 6 Set up and arrange the verification event (eg using MS Teams).
- 7 Send a final visit plan at least two weeks before the evidence submission agreed date detailing:
 - ◆ The assessors/verifiers/candidates who are selected for interview.
 - ◆ Arrangements for interviews using formats such as MS Teams, tele- or video-conference, and telephone interview
 - ◆ An outline of what they would like to cover during the course of the event and an indication of the running order.
 - ◆ An outline of the rationale for sampling (please see next section for further information on sampling).
 - ◆ The standard documentation required for the activity (this is advised at the bottom of the QV visit plan).

SQA co-ordinator for qualification verification process

Your SQA co-ordinator should:

- ◆ Receive initial contact from the QV via email with notification of selection for qualification verification.
- ◆ Liaise with the QV to provide the necessary information required to determine whether a verification event is required.
- ◆ Inform the QV if the centre is not running the units or awards that they have been allocated to verify.
- ◆ Return the 'Request for Information' to the QV within two weeks, covering all the units being sampled (this can be provided using the SQA email template provided or in any required format).
- ◆ Ensure that all documentary evidence is available for review electronically using the centre's own electronic format or the SQA centre evidence hub. To protect SQA systems, web links and downloadable systems such as Drop Box are not acceptable methods of evidence submission. If your centre is 'paper-based', the QV will contact SQA for guidance).
- ◆ Ensure that the relevant evidence in line with SQA Quality Assurance Criteria is submitted for review. Please refer to document [Qualification Quality Assurance Criteria](#)
- ◆ Inform all relevant staff about the date of the activity.
- ◆ Arrange for assessors, verifiers and candidates to be available to be interviewed during the event or by telephone.
- ◆ Ensure all requested staff are available for the feedback session.

SQA co-ordinator for group award verification process

Your SQA co-ordinator should:

- ◆ Receive initial contact from the QA team regarding the notification of selection for group award activity.
- ◆ Liaise directly with the QA team to provide the necessary information as part of the GA process
- ◆ Liaise directly with the QV to finalise the visit plan and make arrangements for the Virtual feedback event.
- ◆ Inform the QA team if the centre is not running the units or awards the QV has been allocated to verify.
- ◆ Ensure that all documentary evidence is available for review electronically using own electronic format or SQA centre evidence hub. To protect SQA systems, web links and downloadable systems such as Drop Box are not acceptable methods of evidence submission. If your centre is paper-based, the QV will contact SQA for guidance).
- ◆ Ensure that the relevant evidence in line with SQA Quality Assurance Criteria is submitted for review. Please refer to document [Qualification Quality Assurance Criteria](#)
- ◆ Inform all relevant staff about the date of the activity.
- ◆ Arrange for assessors, verifiers and candidates to be available to be interviewed during the event or by telephone.
- ◆ Ensure all requested staff are available for the feedback session.

Event planning: the risk-based approach

Responsibility for, and control of, sampling lies with the qualification verifier.

Factor	Risks
Assessors and internal verifiers	New and/or inexperienced.
Qualification	New or revised qualification framework.
Unit	New or revised units. Lapsing units. New assessments or marking guides.
Locations	New location. Remote location.
Mode of attendance	Full time vs evening or infill.
Class groups	High class numbers. Number of groups per assessor.
Intelligence	Required actions or recommendations from the previous verification report. Information from Senior External Verifier, QA Logistics Team.

The sampling approach is to sample over time:

- ◆ Large numbers of assessors and internal verifiers.
- ◆ Assessment sites (locations).
- ◆ Class groups.
- ◆ Modes of attendance.
- ◆ Range of qualifications (such as HN/VQ/NQ/Customised Awards/Regulated Qualifications).

There can be no one-size-fits-all approach. The sampling approach for each centre will vary according to the needs and exigencies of the centre.

Rationale for sampling

The general purpose of qualification verification sampling is to:

- ◆ Confirm that centres are interpreting standards correctly and that they have in place internal verification and assessment systems that allow valid, reliable and fair assessment decisions to be made.
- ◆ Choose an appropriate range of assessment and verification decisions to verify, based on management of quality assurance risk. (Unless candidate numbers are very small, the QV will rarely scrutinise all candidates' work on a single visit. Instead, they will select a

sample of candidates' evidence.) Please remember that it will be the verifier, and not centre staff, who decides (prior to the visit) which candidates' evidence will be scrutinised.

- ◆ Vary for each centre according to the needs of the centre and the type of qualifications being verified.
- ◆ For units in VQs and Regulated Qualification Frameworks (RQFs), the QV must adhere strictly to any sampling requirements detailed in the assessment strategy. If there are no sampling requirements in the assessment strategy, the sampling should be proportionate to the overall number of candidates enrolled and the numbers of assessors/verifiers involved in assessment/ verification.



Retaining candidate evidence for sampling

SQA requires centres to retain all candidate evidence for the group award and/or units until at least three weeks after the official completion date (the completion date you provided to SQA).

If the first contact for the session is made by the qualification verifier within three weeks after the completion date, **all** candidate evidence must be retained until after the verification visit has taken place. Please refer to [Evidence Retention Guidance](#) on SQA website.

Referencing evidence

Referencing (sometimes called 'tracking') helps qualification verifiers navigate evidence efficiently, enabling verification to be carried out in a time-effective way. It should:

- ◆ Show clear tracking of evidence to each outcome/unit so that assessors and internal verifiers and qualification verifiers can make efficient judgements. How you achieve this will depend on the approach taken by your centre as to the degree and detail of referencing — for example, the amount of holistic assessment taking place — and the quantity of evidence being referenced.
- ◆ For Vocational Qualification (VQ) and Regulated Qualification Framework (RQF) units: the centre must show how the evidence covers each component of the unit standard (normally broken into units and outcomes, and sometimes further defined as evidence requirements, performance criteria and knowledge).
- ◆ Identify the link between the candidate evidence and assessment decisions. This also has benefits for candidates collecting evidence in terms of tracking their own progress and achievement. For assessors, referencing allows the tracking of evidence that has been assessed and accepted, which helps with forward planning.
- ◆ Be an agreed responsibility between assessor and candidate — there are no set rules about this. For VQ/RQF units at higher levels, candidates normally take more responsibility for gathering and referencing their evidence. It is important that candidates are not overwhelmed with referencing responsibilities, as their main priority is to show that they have the necessary skills and knowledge to meet the standard being assessed.
- ◆ As with conventional signatures, assessors and verifiers must be able to signify in a legitimate way that they have confirmed assessment/verification decisions and the identity of the candidate. This could be done by the assessor/verifier using a code, such as using an appropriate password, PIN, electronic signature or symbol, or any combination of these. Whatever code is used, it must be secure and only be available for use by the assessor or verifier it belongs to, just as a hand-written signature would be.

The three phases of internal verification

SQA promotes a three-phase model of internal verification, which means that there are a number of opportunities for the QV to discuss and sample different aspects of the verification process.

Those phases are:

- ◆ before assessment
- ◆ during assessment
- ◆ after assessment

The QV will want to verify the three stages and to discuss with assessors and internal verifiers how the centre processes and procedures support the IV model.

Before assessment

- ◆ This is when centre staff members should check and agree the interpretation of assessment materials and requirements.
- ◆ Your centre should also agree on how assessment should proceed, and check resources are up to date and sufficient.
- ◆ This stage should happen for new awards and, if applicable, before a new qualification block/semester runs.
- ◆ Evidence of your discussions and agreements should be included in a verification schedule, strategy or plan, showing proposed verification activities.

During assessment

- ◆ This stage keeps things on track and informs the internal verifier as to the quality of assessment coming through.
- ◆ A 'dipping-in' process helps identify where additional assessor support may be required.
- ◆ It is especially important where new units are being offered or where assessors are assessing units for the first time.
- ◆ Final verification is related to checking the quality of final assessment decisions on completed outcomes/units.

After assessment

- ◆ This stage encompasses the review and evaluation of the overall assessment.
- ◆ The process has a view to continuous improvement in relation to awards/units.
- ◆ It will normally involve the review of previous assessment and verification decisions, processes, practices and resources.
- ◆ It is important to note, where an assessor or IV is unqualified, there is a requirement for their work to be signed off by a qualified assessor or IV. This must be recorded and easily identifiable in the evidence submitted.

The verification event

- ◆ For visiting activity, you should allow a full working day for a verification event, although with virtual activity, the actual event may be much shorter, with electronic evidence being reviewed before the actual virtual event.
- ◆ At the verification event, the QV will check that all the centre's quality assurance policies and procedures, which may have been uploaded to the centre hub, are being reviewed as part of the qualification verification activity.
- ◆ Examples of the type of evidence you might present to the verifier have been provided in the SQA Qualification Quality Assurance Criteria document. It is perfectly acceptable to provide different evidence reflecting the actual practice in your centre, providing it clearly meets the relevant quality criterion. You may use different terminology to the terms used in our guidance.
- ◆ Evidence may be in the form of electronic files rather than paper documentation. You are not required to print out evidence, but you must ensure the verifier can access the files easily. For any centre wishing to submit evidence in paper format, please liaise with your QV during visit planning and provide SQA's QA Logistics team with 48 hours' notice of evidence being sent SQA's offices.
- ◆ Depending on the discussions during the planning process, the QV may already have access to your evidence and will only be arranging a virtual event to interview candidates and assessors/internal verifiers, to discuss and request further information on the evidence provided, and to provide feedback.
- ◆ You should use the virtual meeting as an opportunity to discuss any developmental or support requirements you have with your QV.

Discussions with staff and candidates

While it is desirable for the QV to meet staff and candidates during the activity, it is not essential.

Discussions can be conducted via telephone if this is easier.

Candidates

It is helpful to talk with candidates, individually or in groups. This is valuable from the point of view of ascertaining the support they receive and how procedures are applied from their perspective.

Examples of areas for discussion include:

- ◆ frequency of contact

- ◆ induction to qualification
- ◆ support and guidance provided
- ◆ communication of progress/achievement

Assessors/IVs

Discussions with assessors and internal verifiers will give the QV valuable insight into how assessment and verification takes place. This allows them an opportunity to get information that can't readily be found from looking at records of evidence and assessment. Example areas include:

- ◆ how standardisation is achieved
- ◆ maintaining CPD
- ◆ assessor support, candidate induction, internal verification methods and processes
- ◆ ensuring access to assessment
- ◆ how the process works

The verification decision

The verification decision you receive will include traffic light ratings — green, amber or red — for each criterion being verified:

Green

- ◆ You have provided evidence that fully meets the criterion.
- ◆ There are no required action points.

Amber

- ◆ You have provided some evidence in support of this criterion, but it is not sufficient.
- ◆ Required action points will be set.

Red

- ◆ The evidence you have provided falls well short of meeting the criterion.
- ◆ Required action points will be set.

Required action points, recommendations and good practice

Required action points are given when a judgement has been made that there is either insufficient evidence, little evidence or no evidence. They must be acted upon.

Recommendations are made so you can enhance your existing policies, procedures or practices. This is not mandatory, but we encourage you to consider and adopt them.

Good practice is, in our definition, practice that is over and above what might be expected, and may demonstrate a particularly creative approach.

An amber or red rating against a criterion will result in a required action point. The QV will explain why your evidence does not meet our requirements and what you must do to fix this.

If the outcome rating for a category is 'minimal confidence' or 'no confidence', the verifier will ask for your head of centre to be present during the feedback session. The verifier will agree a timescale with you within which you must submit evidence of how you have addressed each required action. They will also tell you how to submit your evidence electronically or agree a date for a follow-up virtual event, if necessary.

- ◆ The verifier will explain how they reached each decision and inform you of the overall rating for each of the categories: resources; candidate support; and internal assessment and verification.
- ◆ The criteria have different impact levels, which affect the overall rating for each category.
- ◆ The verifier will calculate the outcome for each category, which will be one of the following: high confidence, broad confidence, reasonable confidence, minimal confidence or no confidence.

Feedback

The verifier will provide verbal feedback at the end of the event to the SQA co-ordinator and any other staff you choose to have present. The feedback will cover the verifier's findings against every criterion and any required actions. For visiting verification, this will take place face-to-face, and for virtual verification it will take place via Microsoft Teams.

The report

You should receive your report within 15 working days of the visit/virtual event. It will reflect the feedback you were given on the day and will not include anything that you were not made aware of.

Depending on the outcome of the visit, sanctions may be imposed on your centre. These could range from entry in an action plan to address the agreed required actions, through to suspension or removal of qualification approval. It is important that you submit evidence of how you have addressed each required action on or before the agreed date. Please remember that your qualification verifier is there to offer advice and guidance; our aim is the same as your aim: for your SQA centre to be running smoothly, with efficient and effective systems that make your job more straightforward and meet our quality criteria.

If you want to query anything in your report, contact your QA Logistics Officer or qav@sqa.org.uk.

Outcome ratings and sanctions

If, in exceptional circumstances, you have difficulty meeting the agreed action date, it is important to contact SQA at the earliest opportunity.

Potential sanctions for non-compliance in qualification verification activity:

Outcome rating	Sanction in relation to qualification verification
High Confidence	
Broad Confidence	Entry in Action Plan
Reasonable Confidence	Suspension of specific qualification certification: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ by verification group ◆ by qualification Suspension of approval application by verification group Suspension of direct certification claim status: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ by verification group ◆ by qualification
Minimal Confidence	Suspension of specific qualification approval: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ by verification group ◆ by qualification
No Confidence	Withdrawal of specific qualification approval: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ by verification group ◆ by qualification

If you submit incomplete or insufficient evidence to address the required actions, this could result in your risk-rating being increased and further sanctions being applied if you do not address the required action(s) within the revised timescale. (See table above.)

Where a centre repeatedly has non-compliant QA outcomes, across multiple activities and consistently over a period of time, this may result in the severity of sanctions being increased.

Feedback following the visit

We are keen to hear from you about your experiences and any suggestions you have for us to improve our practice. We will send you a link to a feedback questionnaire along with your visit report. Please take the time to complete this as your feedback matters to us.

Appeals

If you disagree with the outcome of the visit, you can appeal. The head of centre or their representative should contact the Head of HN/Vocational Qualification Delivery within 10 working days of receiving the written report to agree a time to discuss the matter.

If the outcome of this is not satisfactory, you should submit your appeal in writing. For more information, see: [The Appeals Process: Information for Centres](#) on our website.