SQA Awarding Body Code of Practice

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HISTORY OF CHANGES

Version number	Publication date	Summary of changes
V1.0	July 2014	
V1.1	March 2017	Edit to Governing Principle 1 Section 3.1 expanded to include Chief Examining Officer
V1.2	September 2023	P5 – Updates to legislative requirements (Data Protection law and Freedom of Information Act)

Contents

1: Introduction

As Scotland's national qualifications body, SQA sets, maintains and monitors qualifications and assessment standards. It works with schools, colleges, private training providers, and employers to ensure that standards are accurate, fair, and applied consistently across all qualifications and over time.

What is the Code of Practice?

The purpose of the SQA Code of Practice is to outline how SQA ensures that its qualifications are of a high quality and fit for purpose, and that the assessment of these qualifications is monitored and maintained to a consistently high standard.

By doing so, it sets out the framework by which SQA safeguards the integrity of SQA's qualifications and assessment standards and ensures public confidence.

SQA's statutory functions

Under the Education (Scotland) Act 1996, as amended by the Scottish Qualifications Authority Act 2002, SQA's general functions[1] are:

♦ to devise and develop qualifications, and keep them under review.

♦ to approve education and training establishments as being suitable for presenting people for these qualifications.

♦ to make arrangements for, assist in, or carry out, the assessment of persons undertaking education and training.

♦ to determine the entitlement of individuals to SQA qualification.

♦ to award and record qualifications.

SQA also has statutory functions which cover assessment and quality assurance in education and training establishments that offer our qualifications. These are:

♦ SQA may, in respect of education and training establishments which offer people the opportunity to obtain SQA qualifications, make such arrangements as it considers appropriate to satisfy itself as to:

— the quality of the procedures used by establishments for assessing the attainment of such people (and, in particular, those with special educational needs) in relation to SQA qualifications.
— the quality of the internal arrangements adopted by establishments for monitoring and controlling the effectiveness of their procedures.
— the suitability of such establishments for presenting persons for SQA qualifications.

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1 Education (Scotland) Act 1996 as amended by the Scottish Qualifications Authority Act 2002.

2: SQA's Governing Principles

SQA has a set of Principles which govern how SQA meets its statutory duties and self-regulates its activities. Similar principles apply to SQA qualifications that are regulated by other organisations. The structure of the Code of Practice reflects both SQA's statutory functions and the Governing Principles.

Governing Principle for governance

1   Openness to the needs of individuals, educational and vocational institutions and the needs of society is an essential aim of SQA, and therefore SQA will endeavour to ensure that processes for the development of qualifications, assessment and the maintenance of national standards are as open and transparent as possible; and informed through a research and evidence-based approach to self-regulation.

Governing Principles for qualifications

2   SQA will ensure that there is a clear rationale for the development and review of its qualifications, based on educational, vocational or business needs.

3   SQA will work in partnership with centres, stakeholders and independent experts to develop and review qualifications.

4   SQA will conduct rigorous validation processes to ensure that all qualifications are fit for purpose.

Governing Principle for approval

5   SQA will ensure that any centre offering SQA qualifications has the systems, resources and expertise to deliver and assess these qualifications to the defined standard.

Governing Principle for assessment

6   SQA will work in partnership with its appointees and centres to ensure that all assessments used in its qualifications are valid and reliable.

Governing Principle for equality

7   SQA will ensure that all qualifications and assessments are as fair and accessible as possible and that the needs of candidates are met in the administration of its assessments.

Governing Principles for quality assurance of internal assessment

8   SQA will quality assure centre assessments and assessment judgements to ensure that they maintain the defined standard.

9   SQA will work in partnership with centres to ensure that all quality assurance processes are fair, open and proportionate.

Governing Principle for awarding

10 SQA will ensure that candidates receive accurate results in the stated timeframe.

Governing Principles for monitoring standards

11 SQA will work in partnership with centres to ensure that the standards of its qualifications are consistently monitored and maintained.

12 SQA will ensure that its qualifications and assessments are open to evaluation by appropriate national and international bodies.

Governing Principle for external regulation

13 SQA will ensure that its externally-regulated qualifications and assessments are open to external scrutiny by appropriate bodies.

3: Code of Practice

3.1 : Governance

SQA's governance structure, as outlined below, has been designed to ensure the quality and standards of its qualifications and assessments.

Chief Examining Officer

The Chief Examining Officer role is undertaken by the Chief Executive. The Chief Examining Officer ensures that SQA fulfils its statutory functions as laid out in the Education (Scotland) Act 1996 and all relevant legislation applying to the organisation. This includes overseeing activities required for the regulation of qualifications as defined by statute; setting and maintaining appropriate self-regulating mechanisms within SQA Awarding Body; establishing and maintaining the standards of qualifications and awards offered and certificated by SQA; working towards publishing statistical data pertaining to qualifications in accordance with Code of Practice for Official Statistics; fulfilling all required functions of a non-departmental public body; ensuring the independence of SQA in compliance with statute and providing advice to Scottish Ministers on qualifications and standards.

Board of Management

Board members have corporate responsibility for ensuring that SQA complies with any statutory or administrative requirements for the use of public funds. Other important responsibilities of Board members are:

♦ ensuring that high standards of corporate governance are observed at all times.
♦ establishing the overall strategic direction of the organisation within the policy and resources framework agreed with the responsible Scottish Ministers.
♦ ensuring that the Board operates within the limits of its statutory authority, and any delegated authority agreed with its sponsor department; takes heed of the advice provided by the Advisory Council; and operates in accordance with any other conditions relating to the use of public funds.
♦ ensuring that, in reaching decisions, the Board takes into account any guidance issued by the sponsor department.
♦ appointing, with Scottish Ministers' approval, a Chief Executive or senior full time official to SQA.

Audit Committee

The Audit Committee is established by the Board of Management, in accordance with the guidance on Audit Committees within the Scottish Public Finance Manual. It is responsible, on behalf of the Board of Management, for ensuring that SQA is subject to independent and objective review of financial systems and reporting; reviewing the effectiveness of internal controls and risk management systems; ensuring compliance with law and codes of conduct; and monitoring SQA's relationship with its auditors and regulators, including SQA Accreditation and Ofqual.

Advisory Council

The Advisory Council is appointed by Scottish Ministers under the terms of the Scottish Qualifications Authority Act 2002. The Council's primary role is to consider and provide

advice to SQA on the needs and views of stakeholders, to help SQA to make appropriate decisions on the development, maintenance and delivery of qualifications. It will consider and advise on matters relating to these qualifications, and on issues of relevance to SQA's stakeholders. In doing so, the Council should consult with and take account of the views of any other persons which it considers to have an interest in the matter prior to providing that advice.

Qualifications Committee

The Qualifications Committee provides 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.

As a public body, SQA is required to comply with legislation and with the directions of organisations including the Information Commissioner and the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman.

3.2 : Openness and transparency

SQA will endeavor to be open and transparent regarding the development of qualifications and assessments, and the maintenance of national standards. However, there may be some instances where SQA is not be able to provide information:

♦ UK data protection law (UK GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018) sets out requirements for the protection of personal data. It requires that any processing of personal data is lawful, fair and transparent, and that appropriate measures are in place to protect the personal data. All SQA employees, appointees, nominees, agency workers and secondees must comply with these requirements.

♦ The Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act (FOISA) enables the public to access information held by SQA and other public bodies, and aims to promote transparency and accountability, ensuring good decision-making in the use of public money by public bodies. When a valid request for information is received, SQA must either make the information available or explain why it is being withheld.

   In accordance with FOISA, SQA also maintains a Publication Scheme which sets out the information that it regularly publishes.

3.3 : Qualifications

Every reasonable step is taken to produce qualifications based on national standards that are as accessible as possible. SQA equality reviews qualifications to identify any aspects that might adversely impact on candidates with protected characteristics (see section 3.6: 'Equality' for more about protected characteristics). SQA aims to remove such adverse impacts wherever possible, and minimise them where it is not possible to remove them altogether.

Development

There must be a real need, demonstrated by research and market intelligence, for any new qualification. It must fill a gap in the qualifications framework and make a valuable and unique contribution to SQA's portfolio of qualifications.

SQA will:

♦ work with stakeholders to identify the qualifications that are required to meet the needs of society.
♦ consult with appropriate bodies to identify the need for the qualification.
♦ operate a system of collecting feedback from stakeholders to review the qualifications regularly and engage in a programme of updating.

SQA qualifications will be developed in accordance with the Design Principles for that qualification type. Design Principles state the mandatory structure of a qualification, detailing the rules to adhere to when designing the qualification.

SQA is one of the national partners in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and is committed to using the SCQF in developing and describing its Scottish qualifications. The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework has 12 levels, from basic learning at SCQF level 1 to doctorates at SCQF level 12. The level shows the difficulty of the learning for the qualification. Each qualification also has a credit value, which is expressed in points; these show the size of the qualification and how much work is involved in achieving it.

SQA will engage with stakeholders who have current relevant experience to help with the development of a specific SQA qualification or suite of qualifications in a specific area.

All qualifications are subject to rigorous validation processes, carried out by subject experts, which ensure that all new and revised SQA qualifications are valid, credible and fit for purpose. Validation checks that:

♦ the qualification conforms to the SQA design principles and technical requirements that are current at the time of its validation.
♦ there is a demonstrable need for the qualification, it fills a gap in the qualifications framework, and it makes a valuable and unique contribution to SQA's portfolio of qualifications.
♦ the qualification is accessible to all candidates who could potentially achieve it.
♦ the qualification requires a candidate to demonstrate significant, achievable outcomes in a recognised curricular or vocational area.
♦ the qualification is coherent and its title accurately reflects its content.

Qualification development processes, procedures and quality checks will ensure that, new and revised qualifications, specifications, guidance and assessment materials are clear to all users.

Review

SQA qualifications will be subject to maintenance throughout their life and will be reviewed at relevant intervals, as appropriate to the qualification type, to determine whether they remain current and fit for purpose.

Any qualification whose uptake rate is lower than the agreed low-uptake threshold for that qualification type will be deemed to be no longer current, and will be withdrawn unless there is a demonstrable need to retain it.

Transition arrangements will be put in place before the withdrawal of a qualification to ensure that existing candidates who are entered for it (or at other levels if the qualification is in a hierarchy) are not disadvantaged.

Information about these arrangements will be made available to centres at the earliest opportunity. SQA will ensure that candidates' interests are safeguarded. Transition arrangements will be kept as simple as possible for candidates, centres and SQA.

3.4 : Approval

All centres that are delivering SQA qualifications and presenting candidates for certification will go through an approval process to ensure that they are capable of doing so. The process through which a centre seeks approval may vary, but the processes ensure that centres have appropriate systems, resources and expertise to deliver and assess SQA's qualifications to the defined standard.

3.5 : Assessment

SQA will ensure the assessment methodology of its qualifications is fit for purpose.

Every reasonable step is taken to create assessments based on national standards that are as accessible as possible. SQA conducts equality checks of assessments to identify any aspects that might adversely impact on candidates with protected characteristics (see 3.6: Equality). SQA aims to remove such adverse impacts wherever possible, and minimise them where it is not possible to remove them altogether.

SQA-devised assessments

SQA uses a range of assessment instruments for qualifications. Assessment instruments for SQA-devised assessments will be appropriate to the qualification type, subject and level.

All exemplar assessments developed by SQA will be subject to quality assurance checks to ensure that they are valid, reliable, fair and accessible, demonstrate national standards, and promote good practice in assessment. SQA exemplar questions, items and tasks will demonstrate good practice in avoiding unnecessary barriers which could have an adverse impact on candidates on grounds of any of the protected characteristics.

Validity and reliability

Validity is a measure of the accuracy of an assessment; reliability is concerned with the consistency of assessment.

SQA will work with subject experts to ensure that the assessment of its qualifications is valid and reliable. SQA will ensure that its staff and appointees have the skills and knowledge needed to meet their responsibilities in relation to the delivery of qualifications and the maintenance of standards of assessment. All SQA staff and appointees will receive the appropriate training to allow them to carry out their responsibilities. Training provision will be monitored and evaluated to ensure that it remains fit for purpose.

Fairness

Questions, items or tasks and their supporting Marking Instructions will be developed to pose no unnecessary barriers that could have an adverse impact on candidates on grounds of any of the protected characteristics.

All SQA assessments (live and exemplar) will be subject to quality assurance checks to ensure that the assessment of SQA qualifications is valid, reliable, fair and accessible and meets national standards year on year.

Process

SQA is responsible for planning and delivering the cycle of external assessment. All external assessment procedures will be published in good time and will be communicated to centres involved in the external assessment of SQA qualifications.

SQA will ensure sufficiently trained appointees are available to carry out specialist roles in the administration of external assessment. Marking teams will be managed to ensure that a common standard is maintained by providing training and a system of quality control. SQA will scrutinise the quality of work of each marker and takes action where required.

Centre resources for external assessment

Centre resources must be sufficient to support external assessment. Centres involved in the external assessment of SQA qualifications must provide suitable accommodation and facilities to meet the assessment needs of candidates. Chief invigilators must ensure that examination materials and candidate assessments, including scripts and electronically-stored evidence, are securely stored until dispatch.

Centre-devised assessments

Validity and reliability

SQA's verification processes will ensure that internally-assessed evidence has been assessed in accordance with the relevant assessment specification, and that assessment decisions are valid, reliable and in line with the national standard.

SQA will ensure that standards and conditions for internal assessment are specified and communicated to all centres carrying out internal assessment of SQA qualifications.

3.6 : Equality

SQA supports the principle of equal opportunities in employment, education and training and opposes all forms of unlawful discrimination on the grounds of disability, race, age, religion or belief, sex, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity or sexual orientation. This reflects the requirements of the Equality Act 2010 and wider public equality duties for promoting equality, eliminating discrimination and achieving equity.

SQA's qualifications and assessments cannot be unlawfully discriminatory, and reasonable adjustments will be made for disabled candidates, where these are consistent with maintaining the integrity of the qualification.

Section 96(7) of the Equality Act 2010 gives SQA, as the appropriate regulator of general qualifications in Scotland, a power to specify and publish where 'reasonable adjustments' to National Qualifications should not be made. Reasonable adjustments are steps taken to avoid a disadvantage to a disabled person.

SQA develops methods of assessment and quality assurance which are sensitive to the needs of all candidates but which do not compromise our overarching aims of fairness and consistency. Assessment arrangements are provided to allow disabled candidates and/or those with additional support needs to access the assessment without compromising its integrity. For disabled candidates, SQA will make reasonable adjustments in accordance with relevant legislation.

3.7 : Quality assurance of internal assessment

SQA's external verification system will ensure that instruments of assessment are valid and reliable, and that centres' assessment decisions are in accordance with national standards.

SQA will accept centres' assessment decisions that are in accordance with national standards and assist centres in achieving national standards where necessary.

Quality assurance is a shared responsibility with stakeholders, where this is consistent with the maintenance of national standards. SQA will provide centres with information about the verification process. Centres will be informed of the requirements that they must meet in relation to the verification process.

Verification outcomes will be reported to centres within published timescales, and centres will be provided with feedback and support. SQA will have a process for managing appeals against verification outcomes.

SQA will select the appropriate form of verification for the qualifications being verified. SQA will select sufficient centres and qualifications to ensure an appropriate level of verification is conducted for each qualification type. Centre and qualification selection will take into account available intelligence, and will be aimed at reducing risk.

SQA will recruit, appoint and train sufficient personnel with the appropriate subject and/or occupational and assessment expertise to verify SQA assessments.

SQA will regularly review its external verification system to ensure best practice. Information about any changes made to the external verification system will be made available to centres at the earliest opportunity and appointees fully trained on any changes to the system.

3.8 : Awarding

All candidates will be issued with a record of their results on successful completion of their qualifications, in accordance with the timescales published.

SQA Units

Candidates who have met the standard of one or more SQA Units will receive their result in accordance with the stated Unit completion date. Units which form part of a National Course will be resulted with that Course.

SQA Group Awards

Candidates who have successfully achieved all the Units of a Group Award will receive their Group Award result, together with the contributing Units in accordance with the Group Award completion date.

National Courses

In qualifications where cut-off scores such as pass/fail or grade boundaries are used, SQA will ensure that they reflect candidate performance that is in line with established standards.

SQA will use a range of relevant information and expertise to determine cut-off scores. This might include some or all of the following, as appropriate to the qualification:

♦ performance/grade descriptions.
♦ exemplar material.
♦ the assessment and associated marking instructions.
♦ candidate evidence.
♦ statistical information (eg mark distributions, item statistics, cohort information).
♦ other relevant qualitative and/or quantitative information.

In qualifications where different assessments are used each year, SQA will ensure that cut-off scores maintain comparability of standards.

Results enquiries

Procedures for dealing with enquiries related to external assessment decisions will be available to candidates and to those administering assessments.

SQA will ensure that centres have procedures for dealing with enquiries about centre assessment decisions.

Malpractice

SQA's systems and procedures will ensure that cases of malpractice are detected and dealt with. 'Malpractice' includes maladministration and non-compliance and means any act, default or practice which is a breach of SQA requirements and compromises, or has the possibility of compromising, the integrity of any SQA qualification or certificate.

SQA is committed to safeguarding its reputation for the quality and credibility of its qualifications, therefore all allegations of malpractice will be investigated consistently, fairly and impartially.

Reporting Results

The Annual Statistics Report will provide details of the results for SQA qualifications in the academic year.

3.9 : Monitoring standards

Annually

Each year, SQA will evaluate the performance of its assessments. For National Courses, grade boundaries, pass rates and qualitative data provided by examination teams will be used in the preparation of future assessments.

Question papers will be annually evaluated with learners and centres to continuously improve their design and maintain assessment standards.

Monitoring of standards over time

SQA's Monitoring Standards programme will monitor whether its qualifications are awarded on the basis of standards that are comparable to those in the past. The programme includes yearly samples covering various levels and areas in the main qualification types.

For SQA, comparability over time means that a Course or Unit has remained equally demanding over time, even when reviewed or replaced; that candidates in one year have been set tasks that are as demanding as in another year; and that similar evidence has received the same judgement.

SQA will maintain an archive of assessment material. The maintenance of this archive contributes to the monitoring of standards over time by providing material for comparison and benchmark scripts for setting grade boundaries in National Qualifications.

Benchmarking

SQA will, where possible, participate in benchmarking and comparability studies to understand how its qualifications compare with assessments available in other education systems.

3.10 : External regulation

SQA is accredited by SQA (Accreditation) and other regulators to offer a range of qualifications. SQA will adhere to the accrediting or other regulatory criteria to ensure that the assessment of its qualifications is valued and credible with users, partner organisations and the wider community.