



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## Research and Information Service Briefing Note

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# The Scottish Qualification Authority: Quality Assurance and Governance

## 1. Introduction

The Scottish Qualification Authority (SQA) is the national accreditation and awarding body in Scotland.

In its **accreditation** role, it accredits vocational qualifications offered across Scotland. It also approves awarding bodies.

As an **awarding body**, SQA is responsible for the development and delivery of the new National Qualifications which have been introduced to support the Scottish Government's Curriculum for Excellence (CfE).

This briefing note outlines the **quality assurance** arrangements and **governance** model adopted by the SQA. It also refers to the separation of awarding and accrediting functions and makes comparison to the system in Northern Ireland.

## 2. Quality Assurance

### 2.1. Background

The SQA has designed a system of checks which are intended to ensure that assessment is consistent and of high quality. This is known as verification.<sup>1</sup>

#### Internal verification

Centres (schools or any other approved organisations) are responsible for the internal verification of their assessments and must have an internal system of quality checks in place.

#### External verification

SQA appoints teachers/lecturers with recent experience in the delivery and assessment of their subject to carry out external verification in centres. SQA states that it encourages centres and staff to see verification as a valuable Quality Improvement process.

### 2.2. Centre Approval and Verification

In August 2013, some changes were introduced to the way SQA quality assures centres offering their qualifications. If a centre wishes to offer SQA qualifications it must now go through two phases known as Approval and Verification.<sup>2</sup>

#### 2.2.1. Approval

The first stage of approval is to confirm that the organisation has the management structure and quality assurance system to support the assessment and internal verification of SQA qualifications. This is called the **Systems approval** process.

The second stage is known as **Qualification approval** and considers the qualification type that an organisation wants to offer. The process focusses on equipment, training and assessment materials. It also considers the staff involved in delivering the assessment and internal verification of the qualifications.

#### 2.2.2. Verification

SQA carries out two types of verification visits known as Systems Verification and Qualification Verification.

**Systems verification** involves SQA gathering information about centres to determine how often to carry out a verification visit. Evidence can come from a variety of sources, such as findings from previous systems verification visits or information provided by candidates or employees.

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<sup>1</sup> SQA Website: Available at <http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/4429.html>

<sup>2</sup> SQA Website: Available at <http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/66052.4585.html>

Every newly approved centre receives a systems verification visit, and all SQA approved centres are visited at least once every three years.

**Qualification verification** takes place to promote national consistency in assessment decisions. SQA appoints experienced practitioners to carry out qualification verification in centres. These practitioners have recent experience in delivering and assessing qualification.<sup>3</sup>

A **Sample verification Visit Report** can be found at the following url:

[http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files\\_ccc/Qualification\\_Verification\\_Visit\\_Report.pdf](http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/Qualification_Verification_Visit_Report.pdf)

### 2.3. Quality Assurance criteria

Centres are measured against 6 categories of Quality Assurance criteria.<sup>4</sup> These are outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1: Quality Assurance Criteria**

Quality Assurance criteria	Detail
1. Management of a Centre	SQA requires a centre to have a fully documented quality management system in place to support all SQA qualifications on offer.
2. Resources	The centre must ensure that it has sufficient resources to enable candidates to achieve the competences defined in SQA qualifications.
3. Candidate support	This includes initial guidance on course choice, induction and ongoing support, certification and pre-exit advice.
4. Internal assessment and verification	Centres must have written procedures for ensuring that all assessment decisions are consistent with national standards, and must maintain records of the internal verification process.
5. External assessment	Where qualifications include an external assessment which is set and marked by SQA, the responsibility for ensuring that national standards are met lies with SQA.
6. Records/data management	SQA requires centres to maintain a fully documented and effectively managed system to ensure accurate data is retained within the centre and exchanged with SQA.

<sup>3</sup> SQA (2013) *Guidance on Visiting Qualification Verification for Higher National and Vocational Qualifications*: Available at [http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files\\_ccc/sqapdf.v2.pdf](http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/sqapdf.v2.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> SQA (2012) *Quality Assurance Criteria 2013/14*  
Available at [http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files\\_ccc/Quality\\_Assurance\\_Criteria\\_2012.pdf](http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/Quality_Assurance_Criteria_2012.pdf)

## 2.4. National Qualification: External Verification

SQA advises a centre if it has been chosen for verification. If selected a centres submits entries and SQA will select a sample for verification. Centres are notified if candidate's work is to be sampled.

In the event of verification, a centre must compile assessment evidence for the candidates selected. This includes details of candidates' achievement, candidates' evidence, assessment instrument, marking instructions and internal verification records. If a centre is selected for central verification, SQA will uplift material on a particular date.

## 2.5. Higher National (HN): External Verification

The verification of Higher National qualifications is performed at Unit level (typically 40 hours of work). A Verifier reviews work in progress (incomplete evidence) during any verification visit; sampling (where possible) a minimum of three single Units.

Some centres prefer to produce their own instruments of assessment for HN Units. In these cases, the SQA recommend that any assessment materials are forwarded to the Verification team for **prior verification** before the candidates take the assessments.

## 2.6. Reporting

After each round of verification activity, SQA publishes key messages that have been identified by the assessment teams. Additionally, once all verification has been completed for the academic session, an annual National Assessment Report is published for each subject. This report is produced by the Principal Verifier and is based on the findings of all verification activity that has taken place across all verification rounds.<sup>5</sup>

# 3. SQA Governance

## 3.1. Background

A Chair and Board are appointed by the Scottish Government to manage and direct SQA. There is also an Advisory Council appointed by the Scottish Government to provide independent advice to Ministers and SQA.<sup>6</sup>

SQA's Management Team is responsible to the Chair and the Board for day-to-day operations. The Management Statement and Financial Memorandum, drawn up by the Scottish Government Education Department in consultation with SQA, sets out the broad framework within which SQA operates.

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<sup>5</sup> SQA (2014) *NQ Verification 2013–14 Key Messages, Round 1*

<sup>6</sup> SQA (2003) *Financial Statement and Financial Memorandum*: Available at [http://www.sqa.org.uk/files\\_ccc/SQA-MSFM-2003.pdf](http://www.sqa.org.uk/files_ccc/SQA-MSFM-2003.pdf)

## 3.2. Awarding and Accrediting Functions

### Scotland: SQA

The SQA is both an **awarding body** and **accreditor** of qualifications. The Scottish Government has given SQA the remit of accrediting any qualifications which are offered in Scotland, with the exception of degrees. However, SQA will only accredit qualifications offered by awarding bodies they have approved.

To facilitate the separation of awarding and accrediting functions, the Education (Scotland) Act 1996, sets out the requirements of the accrediting function and, in particular, the requirement to have an **Accreditation Committee**. The Act specifies that the majority of members of the Accreditation Committee must be neither members nor employees of SQA.

The Act effectively set up the Accreditation Committee as a quasi-Board. In addition, the Main Board at SQA cannot overturn any decision made by the Accreditation Committee. The Committee is directly accountable to Ministers for the decisions that it makes.<sup>7</sup>

SQA have 3 Board Members on the Accreditation Committee, one of whom is the Convenor of the Accreditation Committee. The discussions which take place at Accreditation Committee are fed back to the Main Board by the Convenor. Minutes are presented to the Main Board for noting.

The other members of the Accreditation Committee are drawn from a range of employers and organisations including Rolls Royce, NHS, Education Scotland, the Lloyds Banking Group, Scottish Water, Federation of Small Businesses, the Scottish Prison Service and the Principal of Forth Valley College.

Standing Orders stipulate that the SQA Board has a role to play in appointing Members to the Accreditation Committee and that it also has to approve the relevant Standing Orders. This is designed to ensure that the Accreditation Committee functions in the same way as other SQA committees.<sup>8</sup>

Initially, the Accreditation Committee made decisions with regards to the actual accreditation of qualifications. However, this proved problematic. Therefore, the Scottish Government, having taken legal advice, agreed that this action could be devolved internally to an officer group. This group is known as the Accreditation Coordination Group (ACG).

All members of the ACG are from the SQA accreditation unit. Essentially, the ACG makes the accreditation decisions on behalf of the Accreditation Committee and advises the Committee of the decisions made on its behalf.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Information provided by SQA

<sup>8</sup> SQA (2003) *Management Statement And Financial Memorandum*

<sup>9</sup> SQA *Accreditation Coordination Group Standing Orders*

### 3.3. Northern Ireland: Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)

Similarly to the SQA, CCEA is both an awarding body and accreditor. CCEA is managed by a Council that consists of a Chairman and 8 other members. The Chairman and Council Members are ministerial appointments and typically represent the sectors of education and the business world.<sup>10</sup>

The CCEA Council has responsibilities which include:

- establishing the overall direction of CCEA
- constructively challenging CCEA's team of executives
- ensuring that the Department of Education (DE) is kept informed on changes CCEA's strategic direction
- ensuring compliance with regard to spending public funds
- appointing the Chief Executive of CCEA (with Department of Education approval)

In addition to Council, there are a number of committees. With the exception of the Finance Committee, membership of other committees includes independent representatives, education practitioners, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, and auditors. The Audit & Risk Committee includes a Department of Education Observer.

The Department of Education states that the CCEA organisational structure separates the executive responsibilities of awarding and accrediting. It is suggested that this is enabled by the awarding organisation being led by the Director of Qualifications and the regulation/accreditation team being led by a senior manager. Both report separately to the Chief Executive. Additionally, all executive functions are subject to scrutiny by committees and Council.

In April 2010, the arrangements for regulation changed in Northern Ireland:

- **CCEA Accreditation** is the regulator for **non-vocational qualifications**. These include GCSEs, GCE AS, A Levels and other General qualifications
- **The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual)** regulates **vocational qualifications**

Ofqual is also responsible for regulating GCSEs, A levels and National Curriculum Assessments in England. It reports directly to Parliament in Westminster and the

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<sup>10</sup> Information provided by the Department of Education

Northern Ireland Assembly. While independent, it gives advice to Government on qualifications and assessment.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> CCEA (2013) *General Conditions of Recognition* :Available at [http://www.rewardinglearning.org.uk/docs/accreditation/general\\_conditions\\_of\\_recognition\\_september\\_2013\\_v2.pdf](http://www.rewardinglearning.org.uk/docs/accreditation/general_conditions_of_recognition_september_2013_v2.pdf)