SCOTTISH QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY

EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

BRIEFING

Introduction

The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) is the national accreditation and awarding body in Scotland. It is a Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB) and the Education (Scotland) Act 1996 sets out SQA’s functions and the governance arrangements to oversee SQA’s distinct accreditation, regulatory and awarding responsibilities. SQA is sponsored by the Scottish Government’s Learning Directorate.

In its accreditation role, SQA accredits vocational qualifications that are offered across Scotland, including Scottish Vocational Qualifications, and approves awarding bodies that wish to award them.

SQA is the statutory awarding body for qualifications in Scotland. Its duties are to develop, validate, quality assure and award a national framework of qualifications. In addition, SQA has a statutory duty as the regulator for National Qualifications in Scotland as defined by the Equality Act (2010).

SQA’s Contribution to the National Framework

SQA’s Corporate Plan 2016/19 sets out the linkages between its Strategic Goals and the Scottish Government’s National Outcomes (Annex 1).

SQA measures progress against the Strategic Goals in its Quarterly Performance Report on the status of development and delivery across the organisation, which includes key performance indicators (KPIs). The report is discussed in detail at Management and Executive Team level, reviewed by SQA’s Audit Committee at its scheduled meetings and reported to the SQA Board.

SQA’s Directorates develop their own plans which set out the actions they will take to contribute to the Strategic Objectives set out in the Corporate Plan, and these actions are reflected in staff objectives. SQA managers discuss and agree staff objectives at the start of the year and monitor progress against objectives in face to face meetings every 6 months in line with SQA’s Performance Management Process.

SQA is currently undertaking a Project to review its Corporate Performance Measures recognising the need to ensure KPIs which provide leading rather than lagging indicators of performance. This Project has established high level outputs, defining What Success Looks Like for SQA, and Outcomes which will help to measure performance and progress in achieving SQA’s Critical Success Factors, with the aim of introducing new KPIs for 2017/18.

Supporting Scotland’s Learners – Ensuring Relevant Qualifications

SQA’s remit is to ‘Develop and Deliver High Quality Qualifications, Products and Services for the benefit of Learners and of Scotland’

To achieve this SQA works with schools, colleges, universities, industry, and government, to provide high quality, flexible and relevant qualifications.
There are SQA qualifications for everyone:

- students in schools and colleges
- trainees and apprentices
- people who already have qualifications, and those who don’t
- people who are in employment, and those who aren’t
- those seeking academic or vocational qualifications

In line with the Christie Principles, SQA strives to ensure that its qualifications are inclusive and accessible to all, that they recognise the achievements of learners, and that they provide clear pathways to further learning or employment.

**How SQA Quality Assures its Work**

SQA assures the standard of assessment throughout the life-cycle of its qualifications from the development of qualifications, the development of external assessment question papers or internal assessments for use in centres; the quality assurance of internal assessment decisions and ensuring the marking of question papers through to the process of setting grade boundaries.

SQA undertakes regular reviews of its performance in the development and operational delivery of its qualifications. Where necessary, processes and procedures are modified to address any issues.

At all stages in the above activities there are robust operational processes supported by clear guidance to ensure that the assessment expertise of SQA staff and the subject-specific expertise of SQA Appointees is brought together to ensure that all stakeholders have confidence in the setting, assurance, maintenance and monitoring of SQA assessment standards.

The development phase of the National Qualifications was structured around gaining feedback from teaching professionals. SQA published draft versions of every single unit and course that was developed specifically to gain input from practitioners. This gave all stakeholders an unprecedented opportunity to influence the final course and unit design.

SQA carries out an annual programme of engagement surveys covering a range of stakeholders including learners, parents, teachers and employers. In the last report in Scotland (January 2016) 84% of respondents believe SQA has high credibility and 91% believe SQA can be trusted. A customer satisfaction survey is planned before the end of the financial year.

Further insight into the customer perspective is sought through stakeholder groups such as the Scottish Training Federation and College Quality Focus Groups, College Curriculum Advisory Group and feedback solicited and received through our customer teams and through direct correspondence.

SQA’s internal audit service is provided by Scott-Moncrieff, and until 2016/17 its external auditor was KPMG - responsibility has now transferred to Audit Scotland. SQA is also subject to audit by Lloyds Register Quality Assurance Ltd. (LRQA), who assess the organisation’s processes and procedures against ISO9001 Quality Management Systems and ISO27001 Information Security Management.
SQA is committed to ensuring the highest level of customer service as demonstrated by our Customer Charter. Our published Complaints Handling Process forms a critical part of this commitment and seeks to resolve any customer dissatisfaction as quickly as possible. The complaints process gives clear timescales for resolution and provides further information regarding escalation to regulators and The Scottish Public Service Ombudsman.

Supporting Industry

SQA provides qualifications from junior to professional levels in the workplace and strives to ensure that all qualifications are developed and maintained to the same rigorous high standards, and that they all make valuable and unique contributions to Scotland’s Skills Strategy.

Qualifications serve a range of important purposes in validating learning for individuals and for employers:

- They support the standards of achievement required by the economy, businesses, and society.
- They show the achievements of the individual.
- They provide a record of an individual’s progression as they develop through life, allowing them to build on their prior learning and to progress in education, training and work.

In order to achieve this, SQA qualifications must:

- Reflect the appropriate level of learning, and capture all aspects of the required skills.
- Be flexible enough to suit different learning styles and different employers’ needs.
- Provide units of learning that are relevant, valued and can be used to benefit the individual, society and business.
- Allow for progression through lifelong learning as the needs of individuals, society and businesses change.
- Be of a quality and standard that ensures that value is maintained over time and career moves.

*Over the last seven years certification of SQA qualifications (courses, awards and units) which have been developed and delivered to support individuals and employers in Scotland has grown significantly with 132,000 certifications in 2015/16 an increase of nearly 73%. In particular, SQA plays a key role in the apprenticeship programme for Scotland both from an accreditation and qualifications perspective.*

Curriculum for Excellence

The introduction of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) represented the most significant change in Scotland’s education and qualifications systems in a generation. SQA is one of three partner organisations responsible for CfE - the 3-18 curriculum in Scotland and its role is to design and develop new National Qualifications and assessments that support the principles and aims of CfE and ensure that we can routinely and consistently give assurance about a student’s ability to meet the four capacities underpinning CfE.

The curriculum and qualifications aim to ensure that all children and young people in Scotland develop the knowledge, skills and attributes they will need if they are to flourish in life, learning and work, now and in the future. The attributes and capabilities of the four capacities are: successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors.
The qualifications were designed to build on the learning gained in Broad General Education and to adhere to the principles of CfE. They not only allow learners to demonstrate attainment against consistent and stringent standards, but also recognise personal development, employability and entrepreneurial skills. There is a strong focus on encouraging learners to reflect on their progress and skills set, enabling them to be successful, productive members of society.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills recently announced changes in the approach to unit assessment as a result of feedback. These changes involve a significant programme of work scheduled to take place over three years commencing in 2017/18. SQA is currently establishing the activities to be undertaken and the resources required to deliver this work.

In 2015/16 142,862 candidates across Scotland received their SQA results certificating 586,305 National Qualifications. In addition 128,833 Group Awards, 10,048 Ofqual qualifications and 94758 Unit-only certificates were issued.

International and Commercial

SQA’s international activities continue to support the Scottish Government’s international strategy; its plans to engage with specific countries; and the promotion of Scottish education and Scotland worldwide.

The reputation of Scotland’s education and training system has been enhanced through the provision of a range of qualifications and the delivery of a number of consultancy projects. In particular, there has been increased demand for HNDs and Customised Awards and for assistance to develop in-country vocational qualifications and national qualifications frameworks.

SQA has engaged with international universities to enhance and increase the mobility of students seeking to complete part of their degree at an overseas university. The Diploma to Degree programme was firmly established and generated interest from universities in a number of countries including the USA, Canada and Australia.

Engagement with international partners, organisations and agencies ensures SQA continues to enhance its expertise and skills through mutual learning.

In addition, by utilising its expertise, products and services, SQA is able to generate income outside Scotland thereby reducing the grant contribution required from the Scottish Government.

There has been a substantial increase in certifications outside Scotland rising from 5,600 in 2010 to 23,800 in 2015/16. The increase in demand has been driven by the international reputation of Scottish Education and SQA’s reputation for quality and standards. SQA is competing successfully with large private sector organisations both within and outwith Scotland to provide high quality qualifications and services.

SQA Financial Position - Reducing Dependency on the Public Purse

As a delivery organisation SQA prepares short term and medium term financial forecasts based on assumptions on the projected income associated with candidate entries in schools, colleges and training providers, and on estimates of the potential growth of its other income sources. Due to the nature of its business SQA has the ability to generate some income outwith Scotland by utilising its expertise, products and services. SQA’s financial models are reviewed on a regular basis at executive and Board level and are discussed annually with Scottish Government.
Just over 76% of SQA’s expenditure relates to people costs in terms of staff resources and the costs of Appointees - the 15,000 teaching professionals and industry specialists who support SQA operations annually. Property, depreciation and miscellaneous costs account for a further 10% with the majority of the remaining 14% associated with the delivery of National Qualifications in Scotland.

Information management and the associated systems used to process data and successfully certificate candidates are critical in supporting SQA in delivering its role and responsibilities.

In line with SG’s Digital First initiative SQA is focused on how it can take advantage of technology solutions to drive improvements in its service delivery, provide better services to customers and create efficiencies in its processes. This focus is reflected in the SQA Change Programme.

As an NDPB, SQA must provide qualifications across a wide portfolio with a range of subjects, sectors and levels for the benefit of Scotland. Many of these qualifications have by their nature low and very low uptake and, as a result the cost of development and delivery is not offset by candidate entry charges for a significant number of qualifications. As SQA is unable to cover the costs of delivering its services the remaining funding requirement is met through Scottish Government grant in aid from the Learning Directorate.

### Scottish Government Funding (extract from Audited Annual Accounts)

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** Change in treatment to satisfy accounting standards

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*S Programme Grant is funding received from bodies such as the Scottish Government to fund specific activity such as Curriculum for Excellence.

** Grant-in-aid (GIA) is the Scottish Government funding required by SQA to support regular business activities.

(1) 2013/14 GIA figure includes a payment of £2.4m to allow SQA to satisfy HMRC requirements relating to the timing of payment of tax for Appointees

(2) 2011/12 Capital Funding figure includes £2.5m for leasehold building improvements at the Lowden Building at Shawfair

SQA has faced significant challenges in developing a sustainable financial model. The organisation prepares short term and medium term financial forecasts based on assumptions on the projected income associated with candidate entries in schools, colleges and training providers, and on estimates of the potential growth of its other income sources.

As the Qualifications Body for Scotland SQA provides a wide range of qualifications including many non-commercial products required to support niche sectors in the economy. The cost of development, delivery and maintenance of these qualifications is not covered by SQA’s candidate entry prices, which have not increased since 2010.

A further pressure on income is the impact of the fixed charge arrangement for local authorities which was introduced to provide stability in budgets during the implementation of the new qualifications, and to ensure that pricing did not affect presentation behaviours. The
fixed charge was based on 2012/13 candidate entry patterns and on the assumption that presentation practice would be in line with the agreed CfE philosophy of bypass and reduction in average number of subjects taken. Actual presentation practice has been significantly different with in particular, higher volumes of entries at National 5 level and lower entries for National 4. Recalibration of the fixed charge model to Local Authorities to reflect actual candidate entries submitted by schools in 2015/16 would have generated £1.2m of additional income for SQA. Although the fixed charge does not cover costs it would reduce the grant requirement needed from Scottish Government.

The recent announcement by the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary on the Revision of National Qualifications will require a significant programme of work which will need to be resourced and funded. SQA is seeking to deliver the changes as effectively and efficiently as possible however there will be increased costs over the next three years which will need to be factored into SQA’s financial models. Wherever possible and affordable SQA will use technology to free up resources and reduce costs.

**Scottish Government Grant Funding**

SQA submits its Corporate Plan and budget to the Scottish Government at the end of January each year indicating the forecast grant requirement. The budget includes a potential additional grant requirement that is recognised by the Scottish Government. Factors driving the need for additional grant include:

- Uncertainty around the number of candidate entries which have a significant impact on SQA costs. The Local Authority fixed cost model holds charges at 2012/13 entry levels, but actual entries have varied considerably.
- SQA will not know the actual costs of delivery until schools submit their finalised entries on 31 March.
- SQA has been asked to undertake additional activities in the course of the year to secure safe delivery of and support for the new qualifications, and
- Volatility of cashflow due to the variability of business income and the unpredictable nature of cash receipts from markets outside Scotland.

The Scottish Government Sponsor Department and its Finance Business Partner work with SQA to understand the financial position. Meetings are held on a regular basis, and SQA provides quarterly returns indicating financial progress against agreed targets.

**SQA Accreditation**

SQA also has a responsibility under the Education Act, through its accreditation function, to set and maintain standards for awarding bodies, and for accredited qualifications such as Scottish Vocational Qualifications and other licence to practice qualifications.

The accreditation function is a discrete and autonomous part of SQA, and is accountable to the Accreditation Committee and then to Scottish Government. The Accreditation Committee is a statutory committee having been established by the Education (Scotland) 1996 Act.

SQA Accreditation is funded separately by the Advanced Learning and Science Directorate of the Scottish Government. This is the subject of separate budget discussions between Accreditation and the Scottish Government Directorate and determines the extent of activities within that function.
Christie Principles

SQA works in line with the Christie Principles in the following ways:

Services built around people and communities

SQA's qualifications and services provide recognition of the education, training and skills undertaken and achieved by learners. Qualifications provide routes to employment, further study and self-development. They are a passport to enhanced opportunities and life chances for individuals. This benefits individual learners, the communities in which they live and work, and ultimately the economy and society as a whole, which benefits from an educated and skilled workforce.

Our flexible qualification portfolio enables individual career choices and pathways. We provide a range of qualifications to suit the many and varied needs of individuals, employers and universities. Our qualifications cover all SCQF levels and can be taken in a variety of settings – schools, colleges, training providers, universities, and workplaces.

We believe we have achieved democratisation in our qualification development model. We co-develop qualifications with a wide range of practitioners and subject experts from school, colleges, universities, and industry who write and review qualifications. We also engage in wider consultation with a range of stakeholders including teachers, lecturers, business and industry, and professional and parent bodies.

We ensure our qualifications are fit-for-purpose through independent, representative validation panels.

Qualifications and assessment are delivered in partnership with schools, colleges, training provider, employers and universities. Assessments and exams are also created and reviewed in partnership with practitioners and subject experts.

SQA recognises its place as a major public body and is committed to working within the community and this is reflected in our approach to our Corporate Social Responsibility. The CSR Annual Review 2015/16 will soon be available on our website and a hard copy will be provided.

Work with other public services

SQA works closely with other public services. In particular:

- Skills Development Scotland, particularly in supporting Developing the Young Workforce activity and the apprenticeship programmes.
- Scottish Funding Council, with our Higher National qualifications, widening access and regional outcome agreements. SQA has been providing a shared HR service for the SFC.
- Education Scotland, primarily focused on implementing CfE.
- Local Authorities and Scotland's colleges, through qualification and assessment development and delivery and the provision of support for teachers and lecturers.

Prevention and Equality

SQA's Chief Executive is accountable for the fulfilment of SQA's equality duties, and is supported in this by SQA's Equality Steering Group.
SQA’s Equality Steering Group’s key responsibilities include:

- Considering implications for SQA of relevant legislative developments.
- Promoting and advocating increased organisational understanding of SQA’s equality commitments.
- Ensuring consistency across the organisation in SQA’s approach to delivering these commitments.

SQA endeavours to ensure all its qualifications and assessments are fair and inclusive. We do this through a number of mechanisms:

- We have established an Equality Review of Qualifications. This review scrutinises qualifications as they are developed to identify and remove barriers to inclusion, where possible. National Qualifications and Units that are part of Group Awards have been prioritised.
- Our Assessment Arrangements process addresses requirements for disabled candidates and/or those with additional support needs.
- We have established an Equality and Inclusion Key Partners’ Group, which provides a strategic forum for stakeholders to provide advice to SQA on issues of access to SQA qualifications for learners from all equality groups.
- Our Centre Approval process requires SQA centres to submit an Equal Opportunities policy/statement and a statement on how they will support candidates with additional needs in assessment.

SQA has also recently carried out research on the link between HNC/D achievement and the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). This shows that HNC/Ds are making a positive contribution to learners from deprived areas engaging with higher education and providing progression pathways to employment or degree study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SIMD (1–5)</th>
<th>Percentage of HNs achieved</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (most deprived)</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 (least deprived)</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
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</table>

**Corporate Parenting**

Corporate Parenting was added to the Equality Steering Group’s responsibilities in February 2016 following Board approval of SQA’s Corporate Parenting Plan. SQA is delighted to be a National Corporate Parent and is committed to improving outcomes for looked after children and care-experienced young people. SQA’s Corporate Parenting Plan outlines the outcomes it will work towards and the action it will take to meet its responsibilities and make a difference to the lives of Scotland’s care-experienced young people.
Improve performance and reduce costs

SQA’s main costs are its staff, and the costs of the 15,000 Appointees who work with the organisation on the development and delivery of its products and services. Quality is critical to SQA given the high stakes nature of its activities consequently the organisation is striving to make efficiencies whilst maintaining quality and improving its customers’ experience.

SQA developed and launched the SQA Change Programme based on a ‘Digital First’ approach which aims to improve the way it delivers its business by adopting and exploiting technology. The Change Programme aims to:

- Reduce risk and improve the robustness of SQA’s critical business systems.
- Restructure manual processes and procedures to secure efficiencies.
- Focus on the learner/customer journey.
- Ensure the organisation is easier to do business with.
- Enable the scaling of operations.

It has proved to be challenging to deliver efficiencies of process and procedure against a background of the significant change presented by the implementation of CfE, which demanded dual running of the old and the new qualifications over the last three years.

In support of CfE, SQA invested in an electronic marking system to improve the quality of marking and to deliver process efficiencies. It was estimated that the costs of the system would be more than off-set by the savings secured from changes in process. The e-marking system does deliver significant quality benefits however the key assumption that it would reduce the requirement for e-markers’ meetings resulting in significant savings, has not transpired. There has remained a continued demand for face to face meetings to support practitioners as they become familiar with the new qualifications.

The Revision of National Qualifications Programme announced by the Deputy First Minister will mean further change over the next three years and will also demand significant staff resource and focus. SQA is continuing to manage these demands and wherever possible will seek to utilise technology to deliver efficiencies.

Addressing climate change

SQA is committed to ensuring that sustainable development and the environment are factored into our work - both as a public body and as Scotland's national awarding body.

Over the past few years, as a responsible public body, we have developed strategies and projects to help reduce our impact on the environment, particularly in relation to our CO2 output. Examples of some of our initiatives include our staff travel plan, which has led to our cycle-friendly employer status from Scottish Government’s Cycle Scotland, and our carbon management plan, which has resulted in over 4,000 young trees being planted by staff volunteers in conjunction with the Scottish Central Forest Trust.

As Scotland's national awarding body, we provide a wide range of high quality, internationally recognised qualifications and associated services, which are developed and maintained in partnership with industry to ensure that they are relevant and address their needs.

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1 www.sqa.org.uk/mysector
SQA is also in the unique position to be able to support a deeper understanding of the issues around climate change through our qualifications and awards in schools, colleges and training providers - from Environmental Science to Geography, Horticulture, the Sciences and Health & Safety.

Additionally, our qualifications meet the needs of the industries that are key to addressing climate change - the power and renewables, environment - natural and built - engineering, land based, utilities, waste and construction sectors. We have a range of qualifications that include the study of climate change, the environment and renewable energy within them.

**Conclusion**

SQA welcomes the opportunity to provide the committee with an overview of its’ activities and operation.
### Mapping of SQA Strategic Goals to National Outcomes

<table>
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<tr>
<th>National Outcomes</th>
<th>2016-19 SQA Strategic Goals</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We live in Scotland that is the most attractive place for doing business in Europe</td>
<td>Develop, deliver and maintain a portfolio of qualifications and services to support the needs and aspirations of Scotland, its people and its economy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We realise our full economic potential with more and better employment opportunities for our people</td>
<td>Provided leadership and expertise in a range of areas including assessment, qualification development and quality enhancement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>We are better educated, more skilled and more successful, renowned for our research and innovation</td>
<td>Support the Scottish Government’s agenda to maximise the benefits of international engagement and co-operation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our young people are successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens</td>
<td>Ensure our culture and values support the engagement and wellbeing of our staff and foster their commitment to the success of SQA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our children have the best start in life and are ready to succeed</td>
<td>Deliver high-quality, continually improving, efficient and responsive services to our customers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We live longer healthier lives</td>
<td>Continue to develop SQA as a leading public body and key player in the skills, training and education landscape.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have tackled the significant inequalities in Scottish society</td>
<td>Continue to pursue a business model that would enable SQA to reduce its dependency on the public purse, and invest in and improve the Education and Skills system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have improved the life chances for children, young people and families at risk</td>
<td>Independently accredit, quality assure and regulate approved Awarding Bodies and qualifications thereby safeguarding the interests of learners.</td>
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