

## Maintaining Standards

how quality is maintained  
in SQA's National  
Qualifications



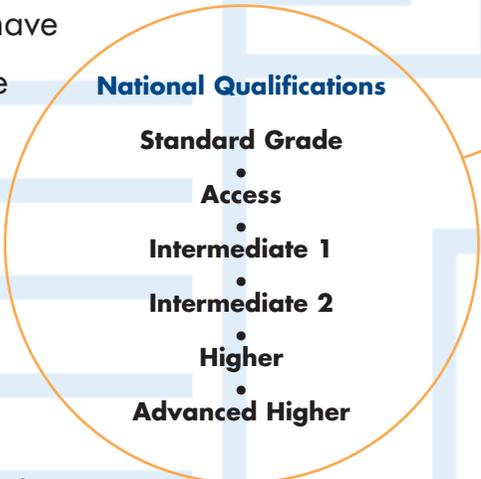
# Maintaining Standards:

## how quality is maintained in SQA's National Qualifications

If they are to work in the way that everyone expects them to, qualifications have to be valid, reliable and relevant. National Qualifications have been designed to improve access to qualifications, and to improve their relevance, while maintaining their quality.

It is important to maintain standards year on year for each subject. It is also important that, for instance, an Intermediate 2 is worth the same in one year as it will be in the next, and that candidates who achieve an Intermediate 2 have a qualification which will be recognised and valued by employers, colleges and training centres.

This leaflet explains how SQA makes sure that the high standards people expect of Scottish qualifications are maintained.



### National Qualifications

Standard Grade

•  
Access

•  
Intermediate 1

•  
Intermediate 2

•  
Higher

•  
Advanced Higher

# How are standards maintained?

## Units are assessed to national standards

National Courses are made up of National Units — usually three Units of 40 hours' duration. These Units are assessed internally, by teachers and lecturers in schools and colleges ('centres' in SQA terminology).

We have a number of ways of making sure that internal assessment is carried out to the national standard. One of these is by issuing nationally-developed Unit tests, which are accompanied by marking instructions. As long as these tests are applied properly, candidates will be assessed to the national standard.

As a further check, we sample the assessments each centre makes. We do this either by sending a subject specialist called a 'Moderator' to visit the centre, or by asking centres to send candidates' work into our offices, where a team of Moderators review a large sample.

In addition, we compare the candidates' results in their internal assessments for Units with their results in the Course examinations. If there is a discrepancy between these, then we will ask our Moderators to investigate and make sure that there are no assessment and quality assurance problems in the centre.

### Moderators

Moderators are experienced teachers recruited from centres, and trained in assessment and quality assurance by us

## National Courses are assessed to national standards

While the Units that make up a National Course are internally assessed, the Courses themselves are externally assessed, usually by means of a traditional examination. Those National Courses which are assessed by means of projects, case studies, investigations, and so on (we call these Project-based National Courses, or PBNCs), are subject to a similar external marking and checking procedure.

### Question paper Setters

Well over a year before the examination, we appoint experienced teachers and lecturers from our centres to set the question papers

### Preparing the question papers

Question papers are prepared by Setters, and are then vetted by members of the SQA Assessment Panel for the relevant subject.

## Preparing the question papers (continued)

Setters check that the papers are set at the right level, that all parts of the syllabus are covered, and that the questions (however demanding they may be) are easily understood. Once the question papers have been through this procedure, they can then be printed and stored securely in readiness for the day of the examination.

## Marking the scripts

Scripts are answer books. After the examination, they are sent to our offices, where they are processed and sent to our Markers.

Each Marker receives packages of scripts from a number of different centres.

Once the scripts are marked, our examining team (which is made up of experienced Examiners of proven ability) samples each Marker's work. If there is any doubt about a Marker's work, some or all of his or her scripts will be re-marked by the Examiners. Markers whose work has been shown to fall below the standards required are not invited back the next year.

### Markers

Markers, again, are experienced teachers or lecturers who are recruited and trained by us. All Markers have to attend training sessions at which the marking standards and instructions are agreed

## Deciding the pass mark

Once the marking is complete, the time comes to decide the pass mark.

We work on the assumption that the pass mark for each exam will be 50% — it is not possible to be absolutely sure about this because exams cannot be pre-tested. Sometimes, specifying a pass mark of 50% would make the exam easier or more difficult than the standard required.

In these circumstances, using statistical and other information, the pass mark can be adjusted slightly, up or down.

### Estimates

When a centre enters candidates for examinations, it has to submit estimates of how it expects them to perform — these estimates have to be capable of being supported by evidence (eg Unit test results and coursework)

## **Assessment appeals**

After the issue of results, some candidates might feel disappointed. Where a candidate fails to achieve the grade in the examination that was estimated as the probable result for him or her by the centre, the centre can submit an assessment appeal. The appeal has to be supported by convincing evidence that the candidate is capable of performing to the required level. If the examiners are convinced that the candidate's evidence conforms to the required national standard — and it will be judged against the same criteria as exam scripts are — the candidate's result will be improved.

## **Monitoring standards across qualifications**

It is important that all the qualifications at a particular level — Higher, for instance — should make broadly the same level of demand on candidates. We check this by means of a statistic called the National Rating. If a subject is shown to be slightly easy or too difficult, adjustments can be made in the following year's examination to bring it into line. This, of course, is not an exact science, as there is no way to make a direct comparison between, say, Maths and Music. For this reason, we cannot attempt to make all qualifications exactly equivalent — broad equivalence is what we are aiming for.

## **Monitoring standards over time, and over borders**

It is also important to maintain standards over time. This is not easy, because syllabuses are revised over the years, with new aspects coming in and others dropping out. However, we have a lot of research experience in this area, and keep an archive of candidates' work from each year to use as a basis for comparison.

This makes it possible for us to check that the standard of a qualification is broadly the same as it was some years ago.

We also benchmark our qualifications against those of other countries.

## **For more information**

Call SQA's Customer Contact Centre on 0845 279 1000 or visit SQA's website at: [www.sqa.org.uk](http://www.sqa.org.uk).



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