

# SCOTTISH qualifications

The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) is Scotland's national body for qualifications. This leaflet explains our functions, and the qualifications and services we provide.

We are responsible for developing, accrediting, assessing and certificating all Scottish qualifications apart from university degrees and some professional-body 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. Our qualifications cover a huge range of skills and knowledge, from Languages, Mathematics, History and Science to Accounting, Agriculture, Manufacture and Computing. We also provide qualifications for learners whose first language is not English.

At first sight, the Scottish qualification system might seem complex but it is really very simple and straightforward to understand. Our fundamental aim is to provide a 'learning ladder' (or perhaps climbing frame, since you can go horizontally as well as up and down) that provides opportunities for everyone to achieve their full and true potential.

There are qualifications at all levels of attainment. Almost all school candidates gain SQA qualifications in the fourth year of secondary school, and the great majority obtain further qualifications in fifth or sixth year or in further education colleges. Increasingly, people also take them in the workplace, where we provide qualifications from junior to professional levels.

# 1 About our qualifications

We are responsible for three main types of qualification:

- Units
- Courses
- Group Awards

We develop and maintain our qualifications in partnership with education, industry, and government to ensure that they are relevant and fit for purpose.

People take our qualifications at all stages of their lives: at school, at college, at work, and in their leisure time.

# Units

Most Units are designed to take 40 hours of teaching time to complete and candidates are expected to do some additional work on their own. You achieve a Unit by passing an assessment — coursework, tests, or practical work marked by the teacher, lecturer or trainer. The marking is then checked by SQA.

The number of SCQF credit points shows how much learning has to be done to achieve the Unit. (For an explanation of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), see section 'How our qualifications work'.)

The SCQF level of a Unit shows how difficult it is. There are 12 levels in the SCQF, level 1 being the least difficult and level 12 the most difficult.

## National Units

National Units can be taken at schools, colleges, and in other training centres. There are more than 3,500 Units in a wide range of subjects such as Science, Engineering, Agriculture and Care.

National Units can be built up into National Courses, National Progression Awards (NPAs) and National Certificates (NC). Our names for the National Units at the various SCQF levels are:

- level 1** Access 1
- level 2** Access 2
- level 3** Access 3
- level 4** Intermediate 1
- level 5** Intermediate 2
- level 6** Higher
- level 7** Advanced Higher

At levels 2 to 6, each Unit is worth six SCQF credit points. At level 7, Units are worth eight points. (The details for level 1 have still to be decided.)

## Higher National Units

Higher National Units are mainly taken at college. They are the building blocks of Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Higher National Diplomas (HNDs), though they are also qualifications in their own right.

Higher National Units cover the skills and knowledge that people need in jobs at middle management and technician levels. These skills and knowledge are often also used for progression to courses in higher education.

The Units are given an official 'seal of quality' by SQA (we call this 'validation'). Colleges are closely involved in the development of the Units, and the Units have to conform to rigorous, published quality criteria.

HN Units have 8 SCQF credit points and can sit at various SCQF levels, but are normally between SCQF level 6 and 9.

## SVQ Units

SVQ Units are based on national 'standards of competence' — properly called 'National Occupational Standards'. These are drawn up by government-sponsored bodies called 'sector skills councils', which are made up of trade bodies, employers, and specialists. There are sector skills councils for most industries.

Each SVQ Unit defines one aspect of a job or a work-role, and says what it is to be competent in that aspect of the job. To achieve a Unit, candidates have to produce evidence to show they are competent.

SVQ Units can be built up into Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs). They are sometimes used in wider schemes, such as Modern Apprenticeships.

The SCQF credit points and level of an SVQ Unit will depend on the needs of the industry.

# Courses

## Standard Grades

Standard Grades are generally taken over two years of study in third and fourth year at secondary school. The Courses are made up of different parts called 'Elements', usually with an exam at the end. There are Standard Grades at SCQF levels 3, 4 and 5. Our names for these are:

**level 3** Foundation

**level 4** General

**level 5** Credit

A young person's attainments in their Standard Grades will often be used to guide their choice of what they study in the future. Generally, candidates progress from Standard Grades to National Courses.

## National Courses

National Courses are available at these levels:

**level 2** Access 2

**level 3** Access 3

**level 4** Intermediate 1

**level 5** Intermediate 2

**level 6** Higher

**level 7** Advanced Higher

Most National Courses (except Access 2 and 3) are made up of three Units plus an external assessment — usually an examination. The purpose of the external assessment is to get candidates to show that they have mastered the Course content and can apply it to new situations. The examinations are marked and checked by professional examiners appointed by SQA. At Access 2 and 3 there is no external examination and candidates must pass all three Units to achieve the Course.

Candidates are awarded grades A–D, on the basis of how they did in their external assessment. They also have to pass all the Units. There is a comprehensive appeals system for candidates who do not perform as well as expected.

Most young people who qualify for places at college and university do so on the basis of their Highers and Advanced Highers.

### **Skills for Work Courses**

Skills for Work Courses encourage school-age candidates to become familiar with the world of work. They develop knowledge and skills that are important to employment and life.

Skills for Work Courses offer candidates practical experiences that are linked to particular careers. They are normally delivered by a school and college working in partnership. The candidate gets an early taste of college and the chance to work on practical skills that are directly related to work, and this provides real benefits by offering positive learning experiences in a real-life situation.

Skills for Work Courses are assessed by the teacher or lecturer, and have no final exam. Marking is checked by SQA.

# Group Awards

## National Progression Awards (NPA)

NPAs are designed to assess a defined set of skills and knowledge in specialist vocational areas and link to National Occupational Standards — the basis of SVQs.

NPAs are at SCQF levels 2–6, and are mainly used in colleges for short programmes of study.

NPAs will be introduced from Summer 2006.

## National Certificates

There are National Certificates at SCQF levels 2–6. They aim to develop a range of skills and knowledge, including transferable skills, such as Core Skills. Each National Certificate also has specific aims relating to a subject or occupational area and is designed to prepare candidates for further progression.

National Certificates are primarily aimed at 16–18 year olds and adults in full-time education, normally at a college. They prepare candidates for more advanced study at HNC/HND level or employment.

National Certificates will be introduced from Summer 2006.

## **Higher National Certificates and Higher National Diplomas (HNCs and HNDs)**

Higher National Certificates and Higher National Diplomas are well respected qualifications that were introduced in the mid 1920s. For over 80 years, these qualifications have provided the skills and knowledge needed for training towards jobs at middle management and technician level.

They are made up of Higher National Units and cover a huge range of occupations. Many HNDs allow the holder entry to the second or third year of degree courses.

HNCs are at SCQF level 7; HNDs are at level 8.

## **Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs)**

Scottish Vocational Qualifications are based on job competence, and recognise the skills and knowledge people need in employment. There are SVQs in most occupations, and they are available for all types and level of jobs, including operatives, craft-workers, technicians and managers.

SVQs are primarily delivered to candidates in full-time employment and in the workplace. They are available at SCQF levels 4–12.

## **Professional Development Awards (PDAs)**

PDAs are qualifications for people who are already in a career or vocation and who wish to extend or broaden their skills. People often take a PDA after completing a degree or vocational qualification.

People do PDAs at their workplace or at college. There are PDAs at SCQF levels 6–12.

## **Customised Awards**

Though SVQs, PDAs and our other qualifications meet the needs of the majority of organisations, we also offer specially-designed vocational qualifications to meet an organisation's specific needs for skills and expertise.

## **2 Adding value — more about our qualifications and how they work**

### The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework

You need to know a bit about how the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) works to understand SQA's qualifications.

Along with some of our partners, such as Universities Scotland, we have developed and introduced the SCQF. The SCQF is a way of comparing and understanding Scottish qualifications, including ours. It does this by giving qualifications a **level** and **credit points**. These tell you how difficult the learning for a qualification is, and how long it takes to achieve the qualification.

The job of the SCQF is to make it easier for everyone in Scotland to understand the range of Scottish qualifications and how they relate to each other. This, in turn, makes progression and transfer between qualifications easier.

The **level** of a qualification shows how difficult it is. There are 12 levels in the SCQF, level 1 being the least difficult and level 12 the most difficult.

The number of SCQF **credit points** shows how much learning has to be done to achieve the qualification. One SCQF credit point equals about 10 hours of learning (including assessment), so a candidate achieving a qualification with 24 SCQF credit points will have done approximately 240 hours of learning.

All of our qualifications are in the SCQF. Levels and credit points are shown on the certificates we issue to candidates.

The table below shows how SQA qualifications and those awarded by universities fit into the SCQF.

SCQF level	SQA National Units, Courses and Group Awards	Higher Education	Scottish Vocational Qualifications
12		Doctorates	SVQ 5
11		Masters Degree	
10		Honours Degree	
9		Ordinary Degree	
8		Higher National Diploma	SVQ 4
7	Advanced Higher	Higher National Certificate	
6	Higher		SVQ 3
5	Intermediate 2 Standard Grade Credit		SVQ 2
4	Intermediate 1 Standard Grade General		SVQ 1
3	Access 3 Standard Grade Foundation		
2	Access 2		
1	Access 1		

# Core Skills

Core Skills are an essential part of many of our qualifications.

Core Skills are five skills which everybody needs, no matter their walk of life, and which employers look for in potential employees. The Core Skills are:

- Communication
- Numeracy
- Problem Solving
- Information Technology
- Working with Others

Everybody who achieves SQA qualifications automatically gets a Core Skills Profile — a listing of the Core Skills they've achieved. This appears on the profile page of the Scottish Qualifications Certificate.

Core Skills can be achieved in many different ways:

## Core Skills in National Courses

For candidates doing National Courses, many Core Skills are embedded in National Units. This means that, for the most part, there is no need for Core Skills to be taught separately — they can be gained in the course of achieving the Units, Courses and Group Awards.

There are also dedicated Core Skills Units which can be taken to make up for any shortfall in Core Skills achievement. These are available at SCQF levels 2 to 6.

## Core Skills in SVQs

Core Skills are also a component of most SVQs. They are particularly important where the SVQs are used as part of a government sponsored skills scheme such as Modern Apprenticeships.

There are also dedicated Workplace-Assessed Core Skills Units for those Group Awards and training schemes which require them.

## Core Skills in NCs, HNCs and HNDs

In National Certificates, Higher National Certificates and Higher National Diplomas, all five Core Skills will normally be developed. Core Skills can be 'embedded' in Units — in much the same way as they are in National Units. They can be achieved by doing dedicated Core Skills Units which are specifically designed to assess the Core Skill. Or they can be 'signposted', which means that there are opportunities to develop the Core Skills in an HNC or HND but that they aren't formally assessed.

Core Skills that are embedded or have been achieved through dedicated Core Skills Units will appear on the candidate's Scottish Qualifications Certificate. Signposted Core Skills will be achieved without appearing on the certificate.

## Certificates

We issue two types of certificate:

- **Scottish Qualifications Certificate (SQC):** this is the Certificate received by all candidates — we issue over 360,000 SQCs each year. The SQC lists all the Units, Courses and Group Awards the person has achieved, and it is updated every time a person achieves a new qualification. A full record of achievement can be provided on request. The SQC also has a profile page which details the person's Core Skills and SCQF profiles.
- **Commemorative Certificates:** these certificates are sent to candidates who achieve a Group Award.

We provide a range of services and support which derive from our expertise in developing and maintaining a comprehensive system of qualifications.

## **Quality assurance**

We assure the quality of our qualifications by verifying the assessment decisions made by teachers and lecturers. We do this to ensure that national standards are being maintained.

A team of External Verifiers regularly sample the assessment decisions made in schools, colleges and other centres.

Depending on the nature of what's being assessed, they can do this by post, or by visiting the school or college.

## **Professional Development Programme**

SQA runs an annual Professional Development Programme aimed at helping teaching and training professionals with their Continuing Professional Development. The workshops focus on aspects of assessment, qualifications delivery and quality assurance procedures.

## International development

Scotland is recognised throughout the world as a centre of excellence in education and training. Our ambition is to build on this so that SQA is regarded as an international leader in learning and assessment.

To achieve this, we have identified three key areas for action:

- international benchmarking and intelligence
- promoting Scottish education and training
- commercial activities to support education and training development

A growing number of overseas organisations are offering SQA qualifications — other countries are using our standards as a benchmark for developing their own systems and qualifications. Our systems have been used as models for developments in Europe, Australasia, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East. We have a strong track record of working with governments, donor agencies and partners to support the development of education internationally by sharing our expertise.

## Website and other e-business

There's a wealth of support materials online at [www.sqa.org.uk](http://www.sqa.org.uk). Secure areas of the website allow access to assessment materials for teachers. This includes interactive guidance on how to mark for National Qualifications, and an enormous bank of National Assessments that can be used to assess Units.

We also provide a number of ways for the schools, colleges and other organisations which use our qualifications to interact with us electronically. Using computer-based systems, our customers can now do most of their administration online, which cuts down the time and effort involved.

## **Other services**

We conduct examinations for a number of Scottish, UK and overseas bodies. These include the Scottish Police Service, and the Department for Transport, and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency.

We also hold the National Register of Streetworks.

Our Research and Information Services function provides information, intelligence, briefings, statistical analysis and underpinning research to support our qualifications and services. You can find much of this work on our website.

We provide help and support for all the organisations which use our qualifications by maintaining a team of dedicated customer support specialists — each centre has a named contact in SQA. We also provide help and advice for candidates during the annual round of examinations for National Qualifications.

The SQA is run by a Board of Management and an Executive Management Team. Board members are appointed by Scottish Ministers and come from a wide variety of Scottish education and commercial establishments. The SQA is responsible for the delivery of its functions to Scottish Ministers through the Scottish Executive Education Department.

We have approximately 650 professional, administrative and ancillary staff operating from offices in Glasgow city centre and Dalkeith, near Edinburgh.

As well as our office and field staff, we also use over 21,000 teaching professionals to help us administer and deliver our assessment, quality assurance and development functions.

## More information

Our Customer Relations and Marketing Team will be happy to provide further information on any aspect of our products and services.

Please get in touch at:

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