Stakeholder Survey

A report on the results from SQA Accreditation's stakeholder survey

2012–13

Executive summary

This report details key findings from SQA Accreditation's stakeholder survey conducted between October and December 2012.

In total, 43 complete responses were received from a range of awarding bodies, sector skills councils, standards setting bodies and other stakeholders.

The following **key conclusions** can be drawn from the survey:

♦ Stakeholders have considerable understanding of, and confidence in, SQA Accreditation.
♦ Stakeholders' experience of working with SQA Accreditation is mainly positive and SQA Accreditation fares well when compared with stakeholders' experience of working with other UK qualification regulators.
♦ The services and support SQA Accreditation provides are highly valued by stakeholders.
♦ The key strengths of SQA Accreditation that stakeholders value are:
— customer service
— helpful and knowledgeable staff
— dedicated and personal point of contact
— professional and supportive nature
— clear and rigorous processes
— communication

There were no major areas of concern highlighted in the survey results. However, a number of **areas for consideration** were identified:

♦ Communication through a range of channels regarding SQA Accreditation's processes and procedures
♦ SQA Accreditation's website
♦ Further improvement of bureaucratic or inflexible processes
♦ Further support, guidance and/or information on:
— quality enhancement rating (QER)
— regulatory principles
— Quickr
— AC2 form

Contents

1   Introduction

SQA Accreditation is dedicated to continuously improving its levels of service, and ensuring that stakeholders get the opportunity to share their opinions and influence the direction of change. SQA Accreditation considers the feedback from stakeholder surveys together with views and comments gathered on an on-going basis in order to identify potential areas for improvement and development.

This report details key findings from SQA Accreditation's stakeholder survey conducted between October and December 2012.

The purpose of the survey was to gather information on stakeholders' experiences of working with SQA Accreditation and to identify key strengths and weaknesses with the view to inform further improvement. The survey was also used as a tool to gather responses to a number of changes made to SQA Accreditation's key services and activity, including:

♦ streamlining of the accreditation process
♦ extension of SCQF credit rating and levelling to include all qualifications, not just SVQs
♦ the change from criterion-based regulation to principle-based regulation

The survey was open for responses from 25 October to 14 December 2012. SQA Accreditation's key stakeholders were invited by e-mail to respond to the survey and invitations were sent to multiple contacts at 35 awarding bodies, 33 sector skills councils (SSCs) and standard setting bodies (SSBs) and three others. Responses were encouraged via reminder e-mails and engagement from Accreditation Managers and Regulation Managers.

2   Response to survey

Invitations were sent to multiple contacts at 35 awarding bodies, 33 SSCs and SSBs, and three others. A total of 139 people were invited to respond.

In total, 43 complete[1] responses were received from SQA Accreditation's stakeholders, representing 31% of all those invited to respond. However, some stakeholders chose to collate one response from their organisation while others provided multiple responses. Therefore, when considering the responses received from stakeholder organisations rather than individual contacts, the response rate was 54%.

For 37% of respondents (16) this was the first time they had responded to a stakeholder survey from SQA Accreditation.

Figure 1: Response by stakeholder type (%)
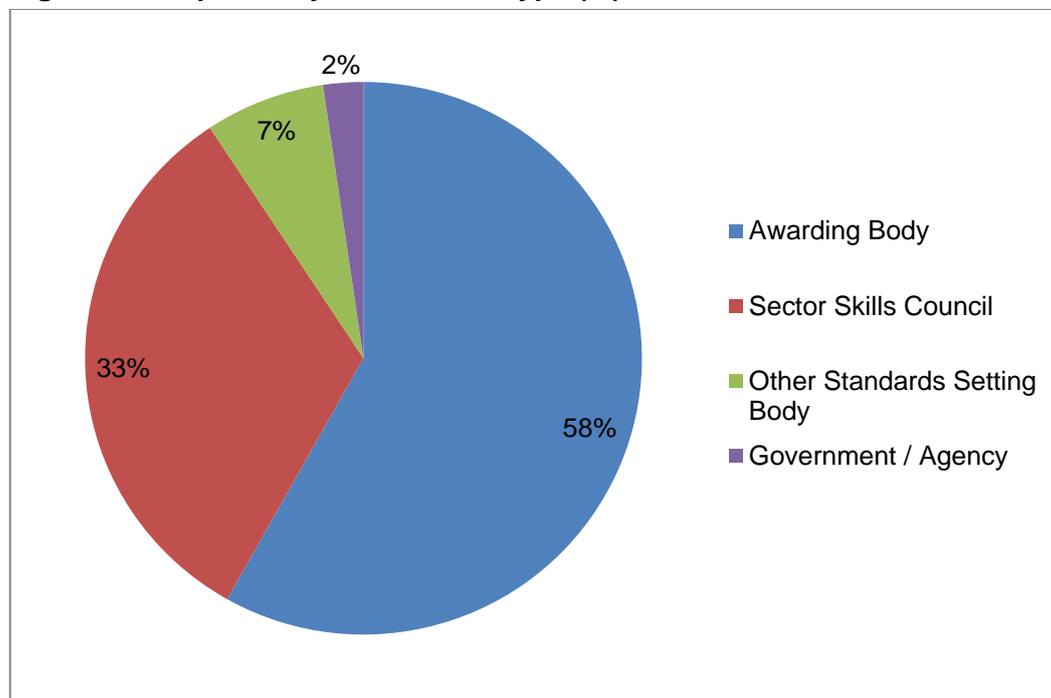
The majority of responses were from awarding bodies (58%) rather than SSCs. The full breakdown by stakeholder type is as follows:

Awarding bodies
- 25 awarding body responses were received
  - 23 'unique' awarding bodies (two awarding bodies submitted multiple responses)
  - 2 anonymous responses

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[1] Some responses were received which only answered a limited number of questions at the beginning of the survey. These have not been included. In some instances they were replaced by complete responses at a later date.

SSCs
♦ 14 SSC responses were received
  — 11 unique SSCs (three SSCs submitted multiple responses)
  — 2 anonymous responses

SSBs
♦ three SSBs

Other
♦ one government agency

Please note that not all questions received a 100% response rate.

3   Understanding SQA Accreditation

Stakeholders were asked to indicate if they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements regarding their understanding and opinion of SQA Accreditation's key roles and functions. Respondents' levels of understanding about SQA Accreditation varied although, in most cases, there was a good understanding by stakeholders regardless of how long they had worked with SQA Accreditation.

Table 1: Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I think SQA Accreditation's role and remit are clearly defined	14	27	1	0	0
I am aware of SQA Accreditation's remit to accredit all qualifications in Scotland other than degrees and university qualifications	25	17	0	1	0
I am aware of SQA Accreditation's two distinct sections — Accreditation and Regulation — and their main duties	19	21	2	1	0

In response to 'I think SQA Accreditation's role and remit are clearly defined' the response was overwhelmingly positive with all but one answering either 'strongly agree' or 'agree'. There were no negative responses to this statement.

Figure 2: I think SQA Accreditation's role and remit are clearly defined
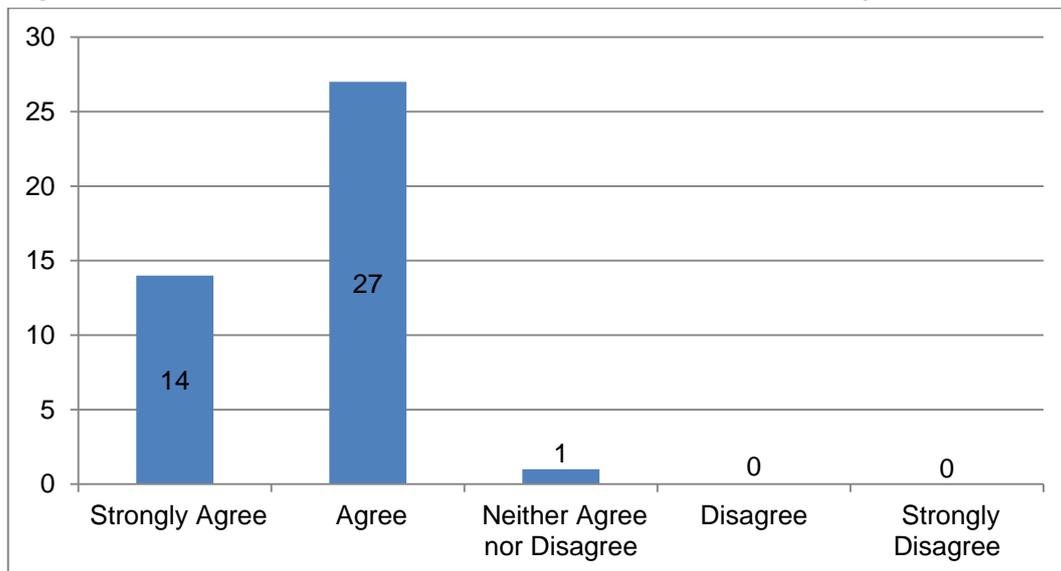
Despite having worked with SQA Accreditation for more than five years, one SSC disagreed on the following statements:

♦   I am aware of SQA Accreditation's remit to accredit all qualifications in Scotland other than degrees and university qualifications.

♦ I am aware of SQA Accreditation's two distinct sections — Accreditation and Regulation — and their main duties.

Figure 3: I am aware of SQA Accreditation's remit to accredit all qualifications in Scotland other than degrees and university qualifications
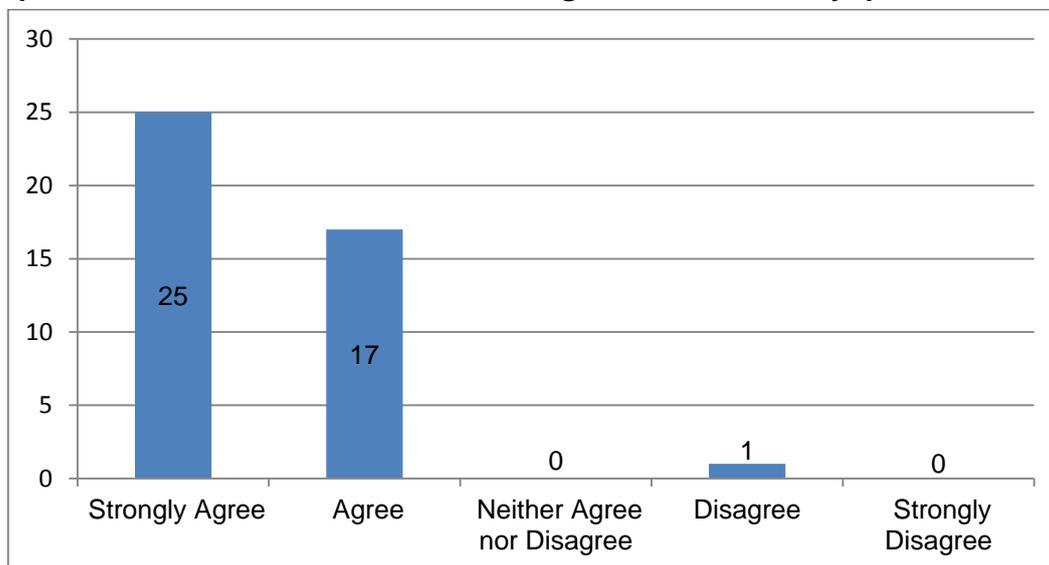
Figure 4: I am aware of SQA Accreditation's two distinct sections — Accreditation and Regulation — and their main duties
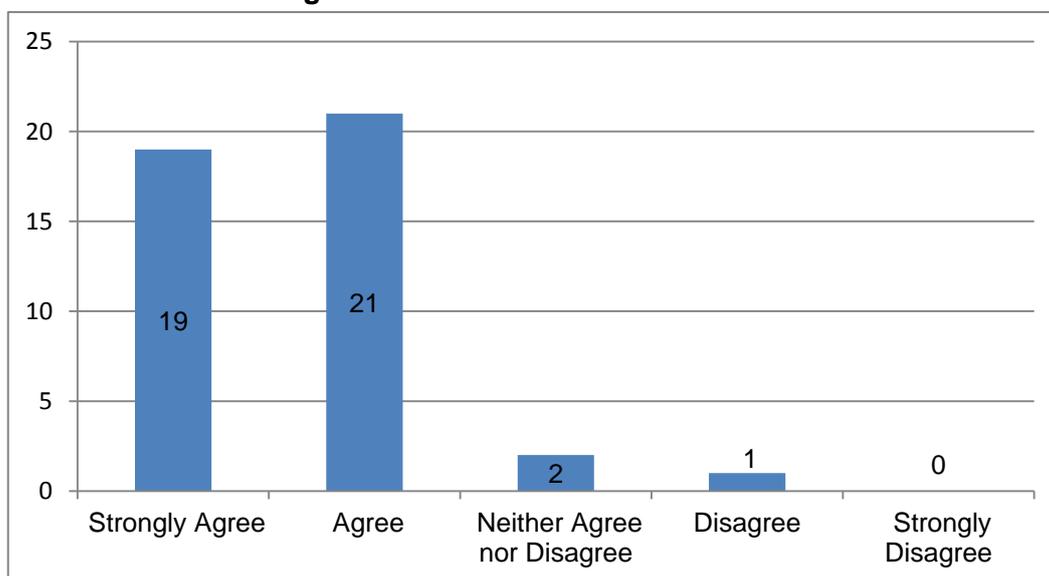
The small volume of negative responses, along with the three respondents who answered 'neither agree nor disagree' to these statements, indicates that SQA Accreditation is effectively communicating its role and remit to stakeholders. However, there are still some stakeholders who could benefit from further information to improve their understanding of SQA Accreditation, its remit and responsibilities.

It is worth considering that since some existing stakeholders are not clear about SQA Accreditation's responsibilities and functions, there may also be a need to improve communication with new and prospective stakeholders.

One comment highlighted the importance of SQA Accreditation continually communicating its key role and functions to both new and existing stakeholders:

'It is always worth reiterating the two distinct roles of SQA Accreditation whenever possible, especially for those individuals not in regular contact with SQA Accreditation.'

SQA should ensure it is communicating its role and responsibilities to both new and existing stakeholders via consistent messages presented through various platforms. For example, via the website, direct contact, strategic meetings and through printed documentation. Existing stakeholders overwhelmingly understand SQA Accreditation. However, to ensure this is the case for all stakeholders, it is important for SQA Accreditation to reinforce key messages whenever possible.

4   Working with SQA Accreditation

4.1 Stakeholder engagement

SQA Accreditation aims to always operate as a professional organisation that stakeholders value. It is important therefore to gather stakeholders' opinions to ensure SQA is meeting their expectations and engaging with them to an appropriate level.

The survey asked respondents to rate two statements relating to their opinions of SQA Accreditation and the services offered:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I believe that SQA Accreditation is a professional organisation	21	19	2	0	0
I value the services SQA Accreditation delivers	23	18	2	0	0

Figure 5: I believe that SQA Accreditation is a professional organisation
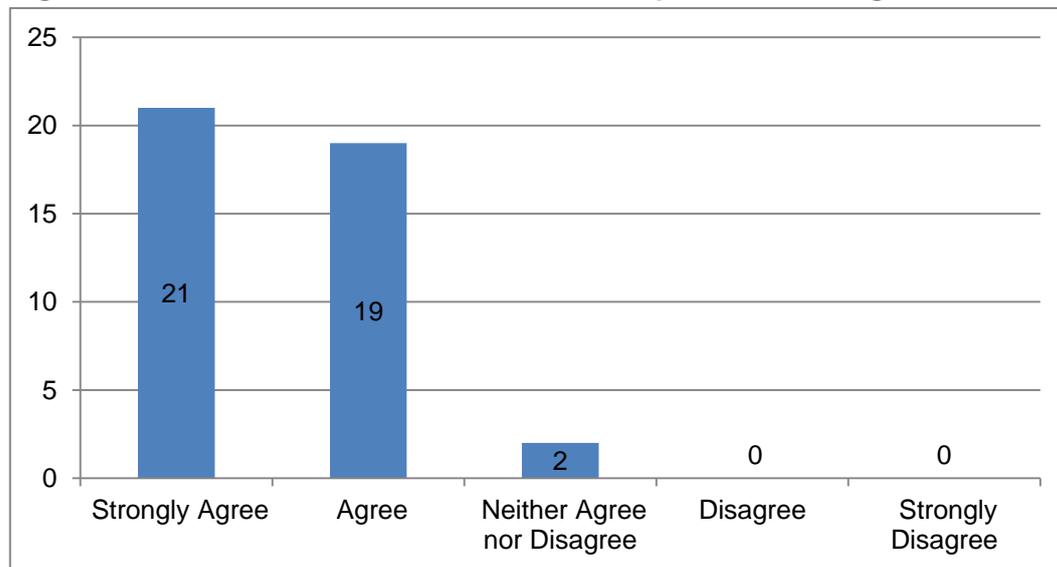
Figure 6: I value the services SQA Accreditation delivers
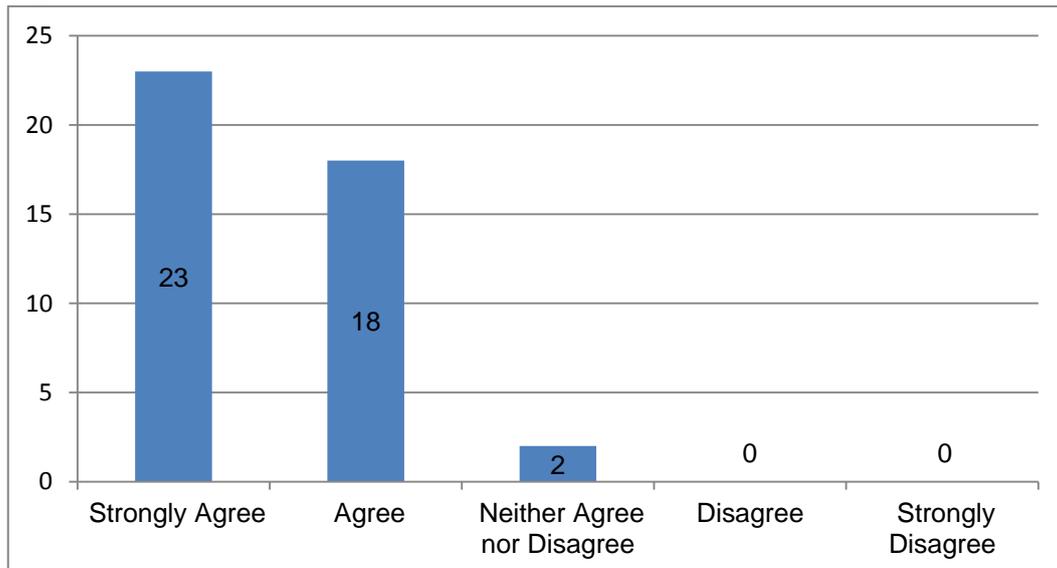
Although the response was overwhelmingly positive, two respondents answered that they 'neither agree nor disagree' with both statements. Despite this being a *neutral* response rather than a negative one, ideally all respondents would have either strongly agreed or agreed with these statements.

This demonstrates that there is still further and continuing activity SQA Accreditation could undertake to ensure all stakeholders value SQA Accreditation and the services that it delivers.

SQA Accreditation engages with stakeholders in a number of different ways and often with multiple contacts in the same organisation. For example, stakeholders are allocated a specific contact from SQA Accreditation, such as an Accreditation Manager and a Regulation Manager in the case of an awarding body, and an Accreditation Manager for SSCs/SSBs. The Head of Accreditation is the key contact for some stakeholders, plus there is general contact from other teams such as administration and the research and information team.

Survey responses reflect this way of working, with the majority of respondents stating that they have 'regular contact' with a specific member of staff and 'some contact' with SQA Accreditation in general.

Figure 7: Stakeholder's contact with SQA Accreditation
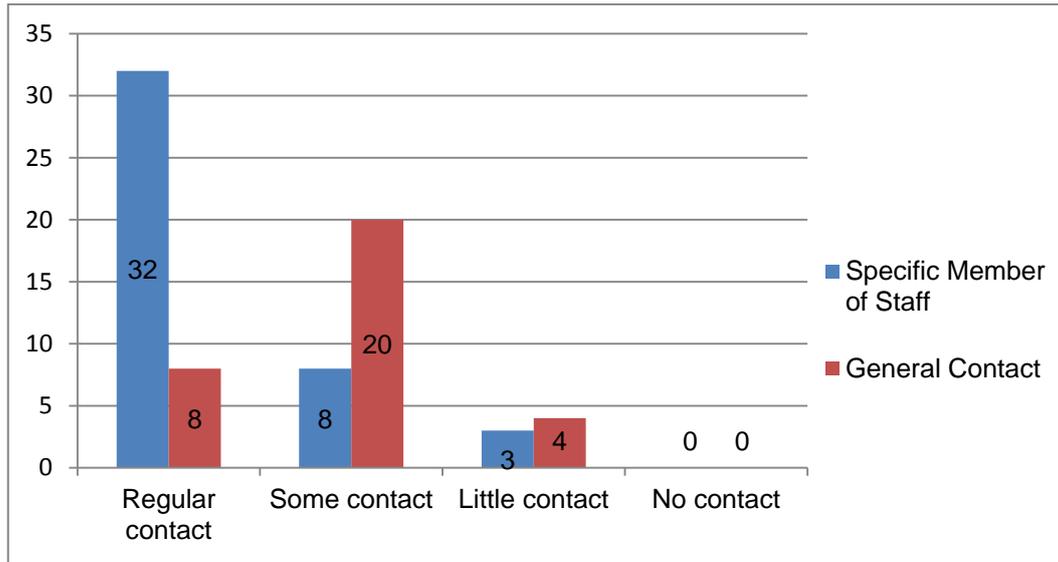
Throughout the survey, stakeholders provided comments regarding how highly they value communication and engagement from SQA Accreditation. The allocation of a dedicated contact was also highlighted as a key strength of SQA Accreditation and is greatly valued by stakeholders.

Some respondents provided additional feedback on the contact they have with SQA Accreditation:

'Staff are always available when needed.'

' ...We find [Accreditation Manager] so helpful, also willing to go that extra mile and very professional. All our contacts at SQA are always very helpful.'

'Both [Accreditation Managers] have provided services to our organisation and we could not be more happy with their feedback and help.'

'Regular contact with [Accreditation Manager] who is fully engaged in our work and extremely supportive…has been heavily involved with the development work of qualifications and associated SCQF credit rating work. …also attends [a] forum which I chair.'

'Depending on the role of individual, most have regular contact at either a general or specific level.'

These comments highlight the value placed on SQA Accreditation staff and the high level of contact and engagement they have with stakeholders. This is a key strength of SQA Accreditation and one that sets it apart from other UK regulators.

However, some respondents said that they do not have much contact with SQA Accreditation altogether. Three respondents answered 'little contact' with a specific member of staff.

♦ One was a 'duplicate response' from an awarding body where another respondent stated they had 'regular contact' with a specific staff member.

- Two had been working with SQA for over five years and had 'little contact' with a specific staff member and no general contact. No further comment was provided.

- One of the respondents who stated that they had 'little contact' with a specific staff member as well as little general contact, also answered 'fair' on a number of other questions regarding staff availability, knowledge of needs and provision of support and guidance. A response of this nature should be of concern to SQA Accreditation and a process introduced to improve engagement with this specific stakeholder.

All 43 respondents answered a question on the main nature of their contact with SQA Accreditation. As expected the highest results were for:

- accreditation of SVQs (68% of respondents)
- credit rating and levelling of qualifications (63% of respondents)
- development of Scottish Qualification Products (51% of respondents)

Figure 8: Main nature of contact with SQA Accreditation

Horizontal bar chart showing the main nature of contact with SQA Accreditation:

Category	Value
Other	2
Ad hoc consultation/research projects	6
Credit rating and levelling of qualifications	27
National Occupational Standards (NOS) related activities	19
Sector Skills Agreement / Sector Qualification Strategy work	10
Submission of quarterly uptake data	12
Audit of awarding body	18
Becoming an awarding body	5
Accreditation of other qualifications	16
Accreditation of regulatory qualifications required by legislation	9
Accreditation of SVQs	29
Development of Scottish Qualification Products	22

Other activities stated by respondents were audit and centre monitoring visits, guidance on regulatory activity and advice relating to Modern Apprenticeship frameworks and Modern Apprenticeship Group (MAG).

4.2 Services and performance

SQA Accreditation undertook a number of continuous improvement activities over the past two years in an effort to improve the overall experience for its stakeholders, reduce bureaucracy, increase support and guidance provided, and make SQA Accreditation's processes work more efficiently.

Stakeholders were asked to comment on whether services had improved over the time they had worked with SQA Accreditation.

Figure 9: In the time that you have been working with SQA Accreditation, do you feel that our services have improved?
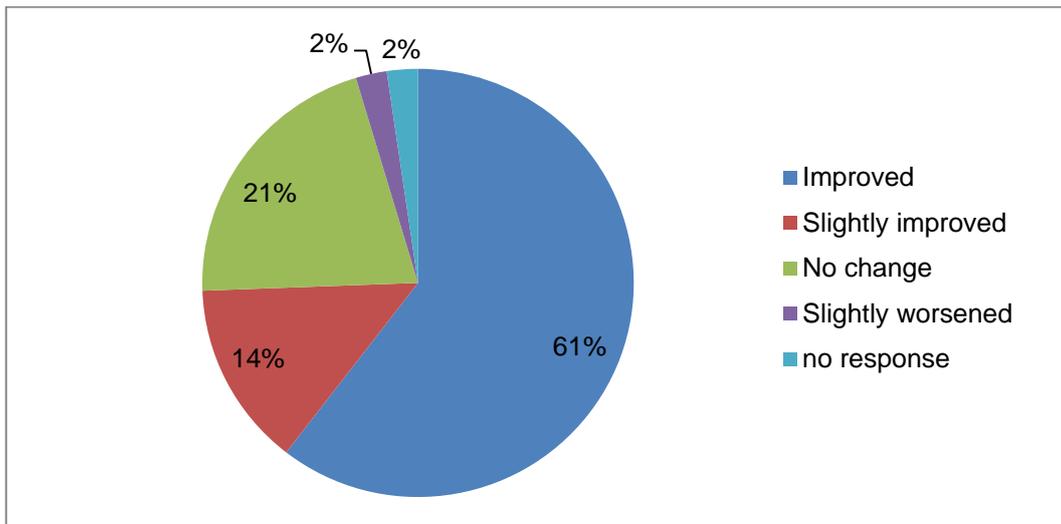
There were 42 responses to this question and it is encouraging to note that 61% said that services had improved and 14% said that they had 'slightly improved'.

However, 21% (9) of respondents said that they felt there was no change in the time they have worked with SQA Accreditation and 2% (one respondent) said that services had 'slightly worsened'. This is nearly a quarter of the responses received and considering the work undertaken over the last year to improve services for both the benefit of internal processes and stakeholder engagement, SQA Accreditation may still have further work to do to continue improvements and ensure changes work to benefit stakeholders, both externally and internally.

Respondents were also invited to expand on their answer. The following comments were received:

'Over the years we have instigated more KiT meeting which have helped improve on-going dialogue and enhanced open two-way communications. As a result, face-to-face meetings both at SQA and our offices have been welcomed and further cemented good working relationships.'

'SQA officers have been extremely helpful in our application to be an awarding body and [throughout] our first audit.'

'Good throughout.'

'Annual awarding body/SSC event is useful.'

'Openness to and consultation regarding new projects.'

'SQA combining qualification accreditation with free credit rating and levelling.'

'Notable improvements are in a more consistent interaction with [SQA] Accreditation and the new forms and processes for accreditation of qualifications.'

Overall, comments were positive and supported the changes made to services and processes. However, one respondent highlighted concerns regarding inflexibility and unrealistic timescales in relation to centre monitoring visits:

'We have had a number of informal complaints from our Recognised Centres about the approach of staff to auditing our centres. They have pointed out the unprofessional behaviour of dealing with audits and specifically the distinct lack of understanding in terms of a centre's requirements…the quite inflexible approach of SQA staff has resulted in unnecessary burden on some centres that are expected to fit in with the unrealistic timescales for producing documentation and reports at short notice when they have limited staffing in their centre and have tried to reorganise audits without success.'

It is recommended that SQA Accreditation's regulation team engages with the specific awarding body to address these concerns.

Stakeholders were then asked to rate aspects of the services offered by SQA Accreditation in relation to staff knowledge, engagement and communication.

Figure 10: Looking at certain aspects of the services offered by SQA Accreditation, please indicate how well we perform under the headings below
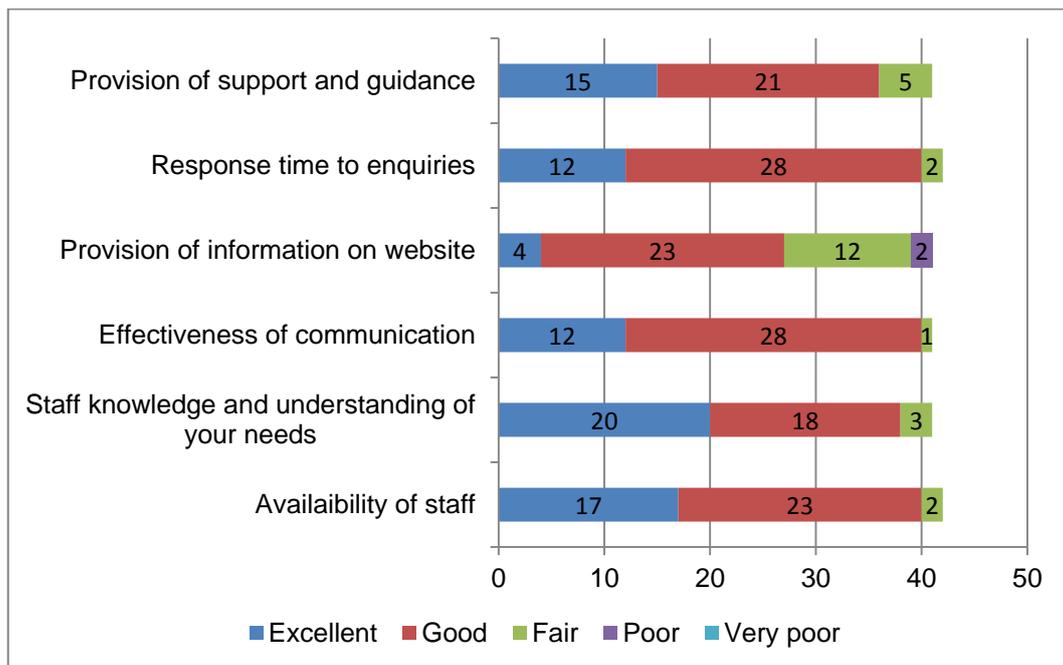
Feedback was positive for most services with the majority of responses being 'excellent' or 'good'. The following services received the highest ratings:

♦ Staff knowledge and understanding of your needs (49% answered 'Excellent')
♦ Effectiveness of communication (68% answered 'Good')
♦ Response time to enquiries (67% answered 'Good')
♦ Provision of support and guidance (51% answered 'Good')
♦ Availability of staff (55% answered 'Good')

There were a total of 25 'fair' (10%) and 2 'poor' (1%) ratings given out of a total of 248 responses. Twelve of the 'fair' ratings and the two 'poor' ratings were against the 'Provision of information on website'.

Some respondents added further comment, particularly regarding the website:

'Website info is often outdated or difficult to find.'

'Website is good to navigate and when you find the information, it is fair, but sometimes there are problems finding specific items such as the AC2 form. However information relating specifically to quality assurance is generally excellent from both website and staff.'

'Professional — listening and taking on board our views before making decisions, and feeding back to us.'

Issues with SQA Accreditation's website recurred later in the survey when stakeholders were asked to identify the main weaknesses:

'Website often difficult to find information.'

'Have signed up for email alerts but have yet to receive an email from SQA Accreditation via these alerts.'

'Finding links/docs on website.'

*'Confusion in relation to the Awarding Body/Regulation/Accreditation — in terms of receipt of communications and **particularly navigation on the website**.'*

This indicates that while SQA Accreditation performs well overall in areas of staff engagement, providing support, communication and knowledge, there is still a need to continually improve services and stakeholder engagement. Despite a number of improvements made to SQA Accreditation's website over the last few years, there is clearly a need for further work, both in terms of usability and regarding the information provided.

SQA Accreditation should pay particular attention to website navigation, provision of information, consistent approach to design, and clear differentiation between SQA Accreditation and SQA Awarding Body.

4.3 SQA Accreditation and other regulators

SQA Accreditation wanted to gather feedback on its performance in comparison with other UK qualifications regulators. Stakeholders were asked firstly if they had any contact with other regulating authorities and secondly, how they felt SQA Accreditation compared. The three other regulators the survey asked for comparisons with were: Ofqual, the Welsh Government, and CCEA Accreditation.

Of the stakeholders that responded to the survey, the majority had some form of contact with all four regulators, to varying levels. Respondents had the most frequent contact with SQA Accreditation (56%) and secondly with Ofqual (35%).

The following tables show the comparisons between SQA Accreditation and other UK qualification regulators, split by the stakeholders' frequency of contact with each regulator. [2] The 'comparison' field shows the stakeholders' opinions of SQA Accreditation in comparison with the other regulators.

Table 2: Comparison of SQA Accreditation against Ofqual

Ofqual	SQA Accreditation	Comparison	Total	%
Frequent contact	Frequent contact	Much better	1	
		Slightly better	5	
		The same	5	
	Frequent contact total		**11**	**73%**
	Some contact	Much better	1	
		Slightly better	2	
		Slightly worse	1	
	Some contact total		**4**	**27%**
Frequent contact with Ofqual total			*15*	*35%*
Some contact	Frequent contact	Much better	5	
		no response	1	
		Slightly better	1	
	Frequent contact total		**7**	**37%**
	Little contact	The same	2	
	Little contact total		**2**	**10%**
	Some contact	Much better	3	
		Slightly better	4	
		The same	3	
	Some contact total		**10**	**53%**
Some contact with Ofqual total			*19*	*44%*
Little contact	Frequent contact	Much better	2	
	Frequent contact total		**2**	**67%**
	Some contact	Slightly better	1	
	Some contact total		**1**	**33%**
Little contact with Ofqual total			*3*	*7%*
No contact	Frequent contact	Much better	1	
		No contact with this regulator	2	
	Frequent contact total		**3**	**100%**
No contact with Ofqual total			*3*	*7%*
Not relevant	Some contact	No contact with this regulator	1	
	Some contact total		**1**	**100%**
Not relevant total			*1*	*2%*
No response	Frequent contact	Much better	1	
	Frequent contact total		**1**	**50%**
	No response	No response	1	
	No response total		**1**	**50%**
No response total			*2*	*5%*
Grand total			**43**	**100%**

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[2] Where 'no response' is shown, there was no answer given to this part of the question.

- Of the 35% of respondents that have **frequent contact** with Ofqual:

  — 73% also have **frequent contact** with SQA Accreditation. Those stakeholders said that in comparison with Ofqual, SQA Accreditation was either much better (1), slightly better (5), or the same (5).

  — 27% have **some contact** with SQA Accreditation. Those stakeholders said that in comparison with Ofqual, SQA Accreditation was either much better (1), slightly better (2), or slightly worse (1).

The stakeholder who answered 'slightly worse' did not provide any further comment.

- Of the 44% of respondents that who have **some contact** with Ofqual:

  — 37% have **frequent contact** and 53% have **some contact** with SQA Accreditation. Those stakeholders said that in comparison with Ofqual, SQA Accreditation was much better (8), slightly better (5), or the same (3).

  — 10% have **little contact** with SQA Accreditation. In comparison with Ofqual, all (2) said that they were the same.

- Of the 14% that had **little or no contact** with Ofqual, 84% had **frequent contact** with SQA Accreditation. Those stakeholders said that in comparison with Ofqual, SQA Accreditation was 'much better' (3) or 'slightly better' (1).

Overall, in comparison with Ofqual, SQA Accreditation fares well with the survey's respondents, with only one respondent answering that SQA Accreditation was 'slightly worse' than Ofqual. Where respondents had experience of working with both SQA Accreditation and Ofqual, the majority said that their experience with SQA Accreditation was either 'much better' (13) or 'slightly better' (13). Ten responses in total said that they were the same.

Table 3: Comparison of SQA Accreditation against the Welsh Government

Welsh Government	SQA Accreditation	Comparison	Total	%
Frequent contact	Frequent contact	Slightly better	1	
		The same	3	
	Frequent contact total		**4**	**100%**
Frequent contact with Welsh Government total			*4*	*9%*
Some contact	Frequent contact	Much better	4	
		Slightly better	2	
		The same	5	
		no response	1	
	Frequent contact total		**12**	**50%**
	Little contact	Slightly better	1	
	Little contact total		**1**	**4%**
	Some contact	Much better	1	
		Slightly better	2	
		Slightly worse	1	
		The same	7	
	Some contact total		**11**	**46%**
Some contact with Welsh Government total			*24*	*56%*
Little contact	Frequent contact	Much better	2	
		Slightly better	1	
		The same	1	
	Frequent contact total		**4**	**50%**
	Some contact	Much better	1	
		Slightly better	1	
		The same	2	
	Some contact total		**4**	**50%**
Little contact with Welsh Government total			*8*	*19%*
No contact	Frequent contact	Much better	1	
		No contact with this regulator	2	
	Frequent contact total		**3**	**75%**
	Little contact	No contact with this regulator	1	
	Little contact total		**1**	**25%**
No contact with Welsh Government total			*4*	*9%*
no response	Frequent contact	No response	1	
	Frequent contact total		**1**	**50%**
	No response	No response	1	
	No response total		**1**	**50%**
No response total			*2*	*5%*
Not relevant	Some contact	No contact with this regulator	1	
	Some contact total		**1**	**100%**
Not relevant total			*1*	*2%*
Grand total			**43**	**100%**

- Of the 9% of respondents that have **frequent contact** with the Welsh Government:

  — 100% also have **frequent contact** with SQA Accreditation. Those stakeholders said that in comparison with the Welsh Government, SQA Accreditation was either slightly better (1) or the same (3).

- Of the 56% of respondents who have **some contact** with Welsh Government:

  — 50% have **frequent contact** with SQA Accreditation. Those stakeholders said that in comparison with the Welsh Government, SQA Accreditation was either much better (4), slightly better (2), or the same (5).

  — 46% also have **some contact** with SQA Accreditation. Those stakeholders said that in comparison with the Welsh Government, SQA Accreditation was either much better (1), slightly better (2), the same (7), or slightly worse (1).

  — 4% (1) has **little contact** with SQA Accreditation and felt that SQA Accreditation was slightly better in comparison with Welsh Government.

The stakeholder who answered 'slightly worse' did not provide any further comment.

- Of the 19% that have **little contact** with Welsh Government:

  — 50% have **frequent contact** and 50% have **some contact** with SQA Accreditation. Feedback was that SQA Accreditation was either much better (3), slightly better (2), or the same (3) as Welsh Government.

Overall, in comparison with the Welsh Government, SQA Accreditation fares well with the survey's respondents with only one respondent answering that SQA Accreditation was 'slightly worse' than the Welsh Government. Where respondents had experience of working with both SQA Accreditation and the Welsh Government, the majority (18) said that their experience was the same for both SQA Accreditation and the Welsh Government.

Table 4: Comparison of SQA Accreditation against CCEA Accreditation

CCEA Accreditation	SQA Accreditation	Comparison	Total	%
Frequent contact	Frequent contact	Much better	1	
		The same	2	
	Frequent contact total		**3**	**100%**
Frequent contact with CCEA Accreditation total			*3*	*7%*
Some contact	Frequent contact	Much better	3	
		no response	1	
		Slightly better	2	
		The same	3	
	Frequent contact total		**9**	**56%**
	Some contact	Much better	1	
		Slightly better	1	
		The same	5	
	Some contact total		**7**	**44%**
Some contact with CCEA Accreditation total			*16*	*37%*
Little contact	Frequent contact	Much better	3	
		The same	2	
	Frequent contact total		**5**	**42%**
	Little contact	Much better	1	
	Little contact total		**1**	**8%**
	Some contact	Much better	1	
		No contact with this regulator	1	
		Slightly better	2	
		Slightly worse	1	
		The same	1	
	Some contact total		**6**	**50%**
Little contact with CCEA Accreditation total			*12*	*28%*
No contact	Frequent contact	Much better	1	
		No contact with this regulator	4	
	Frequent contact total		**5**	**63%**
	Little contact	No contact with this regulator	1	
	Little contact total		**1**	**12%**
	Some contact	No contact with this regulator	1	
		The same	1	
	Some contact total		**2**	**25%**
No contact with CCEA Accreditation total			*8*	*19%*
Not relevant	Some contact	No contact with this regulator	1	
	Some contact total		**1**	**100%**
Not relevant total			*1*	*2%*
No response	Frequent contact	No response	2	
	Frequent contact total		**2**	**75%**
	No response	No response	1	
	No response total		**1**	**25%**
No response total			*3*	*7%*
Grand total			**43**	**100%**

- Of the 7% of respondents that have **frequent contact** with CCEA Accreditation:

  — 100% also have **frequent contact** with SQA Accreditation. Those stakeholders said that in comparison with CCEA Accreditation, SQA Accreditation was either 'much better' (1) or 'the same' (2).

- Of the 37% of respondents that have **some contact** with CCEA Accreditation:

  — 56% have **frequent contact** with SQA Accreditation. Those stakeholders said that in comparison with CCEA Accreditation, SQA Accreditation was either much better (3), slightly better (2), or the same (3).

  — 44% also have **some contact** with SQA Accreditation. Those stakeholders said that in comparison with CCEA Accreditation, SQA Accreditation was either much better (1), slightly better (2), or the same (3).

- Of the 28% of respondents that have **little contact** with CCEA Accreditation:

  — 42% have **frequent contact** with SQA Accreditation. Those stakeholders said that in comparison with CCEA Accreditation, SQA Accreditation was either 'much better' (3) or 'the same' (2).

  — 50% have **some contact** with SQA Accreditation. Those stakeholders said that in comparison with CCEA Accreditation, SQA Accreditation was either much better (1), slightly better (2), the same (1), or slightly worse (1).

  — 8% (1) also has **little contact** with SQA Accreditation but felt that SQA Accreditation was 'much better' in comparison.

The stakeholder who answered 'slightly worse' did not provide any further comment.

Overall, in comparison with the CCEA Accreditation, SQA Accreditation fares well with the survey's respondents with only one respondent answering that SQA Accreditation was 'slightly worse' than CCEA Accreditation. Where respondents had experience of working with both SQA Accreditation and CCEA Accreditation, the majority (10) said that their experience with SQA Accreditation was much better than their experience with CCEA Accreditation.

When invited to provide further detail on their answers about the services SQA Accreditation delivers in comparison with other UK regulators, the following comments were provided by respondents:

'…I would say that the service in Scotland is much more personal.'

'We believe SQA respond to our concerns quickly, with considered response that tries to ensure both sides' requirements are met.'

> *'SQA Accreditation offer a better service than those provided in the other UK nations, through the role of a dedicated Manager to provide advice and guidance — a service which is not as effective in other UK nations.'*

> *'I have far more contact with SQA than the other regulators but my contact [Accreditation Manager] is exceptional and couldn't be more supportive.'*

Overall, response was positive towards SQA Accreditation. In comparison with other UK regulators, SQA Accreditation was largely seen as either the same or better. In each comparison, there was one respondent answered that SQA Accreditation was slightly worse than the comparative regulator. This response was from the same stakeholder on all three comparisons but no further comment was provided.

Although only a small number of stakeholders expanded on their answers, it was highlighted that SQA Accreditation's strengths are in the personal engagement with stakeholders, the knowledge and advice provided, and the understanding of stakeholders' needs. This is reiterated in the key strengths respondents highlighted later in the survey (see Section 7 Key strengths).

5 Accreditation

SQA Accreditation's role in the qualification development process includes an advisory role and a formal approval role. SQA Accreditation approves structures and credit rating for qualifications, and accredits qualifications offered by approved awarding bodies. Qualifications may require various stages of approval by SQA's Accreditation Co-ordination Group (ACG) as the structures are developed, the SCQF credit rating is assessed, and the qualifications are submitted for accreditation.

SQA Accreditation also has an advisory role in the development of National Occupational Standards (NOS) and is involved in the process for approval of NOS.

5.1 Streamlining the accreditation process

Following a review of the accreditation process, SQA Accreditation introduced a streamlined approach to accreditation in February 2012, which went live in April 2012. This cut the number of forms that stakeholders need to submit and reduced the volume of information required by ACG. It also introduced the AC2 form — which is now the basis of all submissions, including new accreditations, reaccreditations, amendments, and withdrawals. Throughout 2012–13, SQA Accreditation has taken on board feedback from stakeholders and made minor changes to the process on an on-going basis.

SQA Accreditation was interested in how these changes have been received by stakeholders and whether the changes made have improved the overall experience of working with SQA Accreditation throughout the accreditation process. The key goal was to reduce bureaucracy in the accreditation process and a number of questions were included in the survey in order to gather stakeholders' opinions and identify any areas that require further improvement.

This section of the survey is of more relevance to awarding bodies, therefore response figures were lower with a total of 34 responses.

The survey asked stakeholders to indicate if they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements regarding the accreditation process.

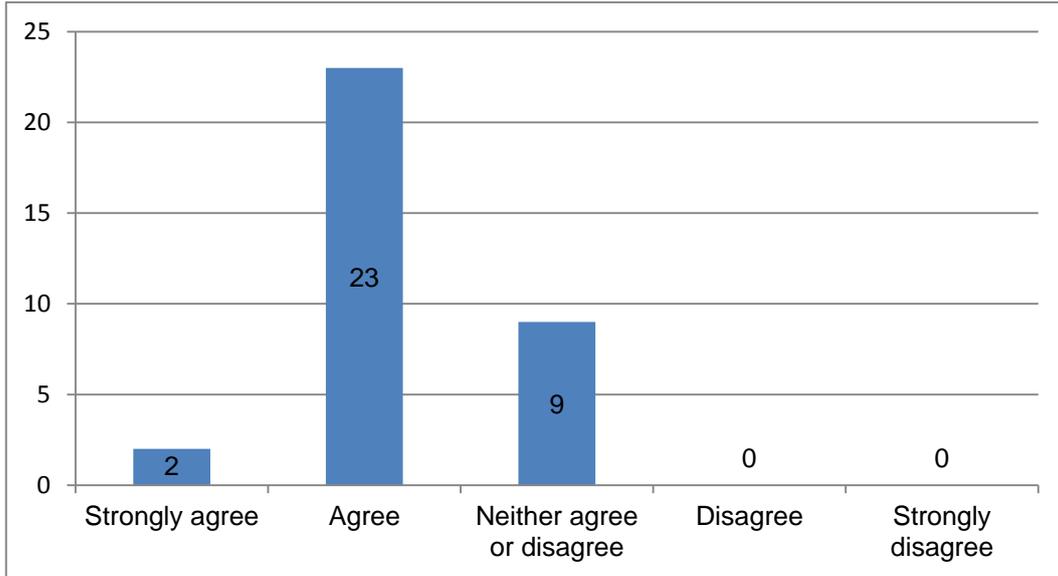**Figure 11: Bureaucracy in the accreditation process is reduced**

Figure 12: SQA Accreditation provides sufficient support and guidance throughout the accreditation process
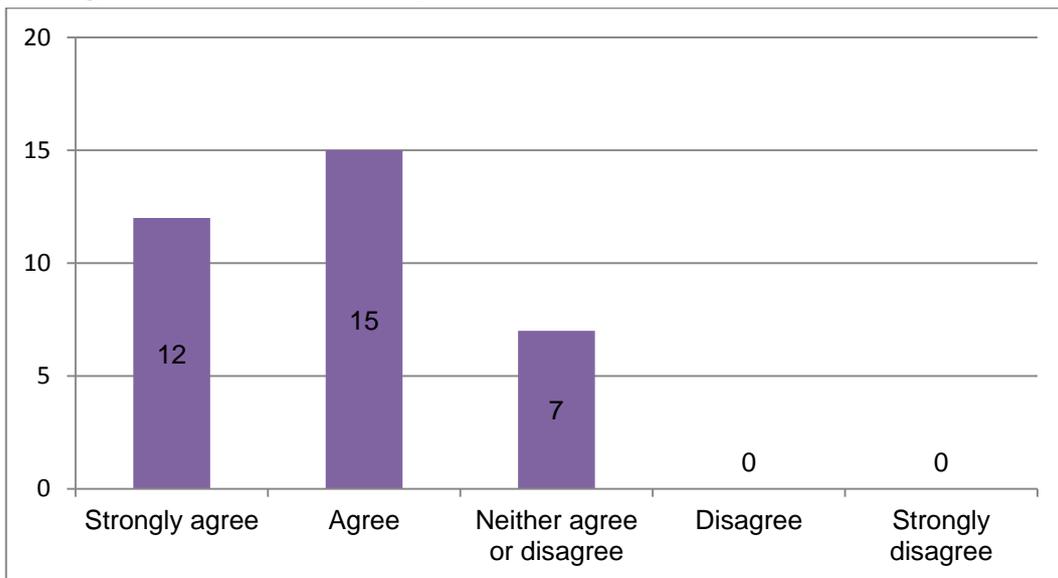
Figure 13: The amount of information that awarding bodies need to supply for a qualification submission is appropriate
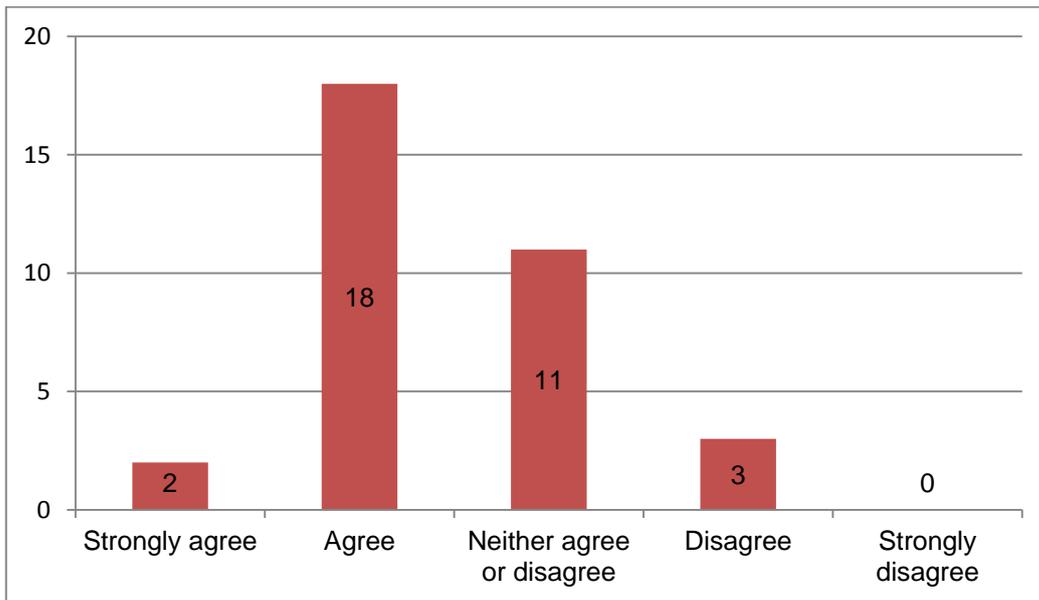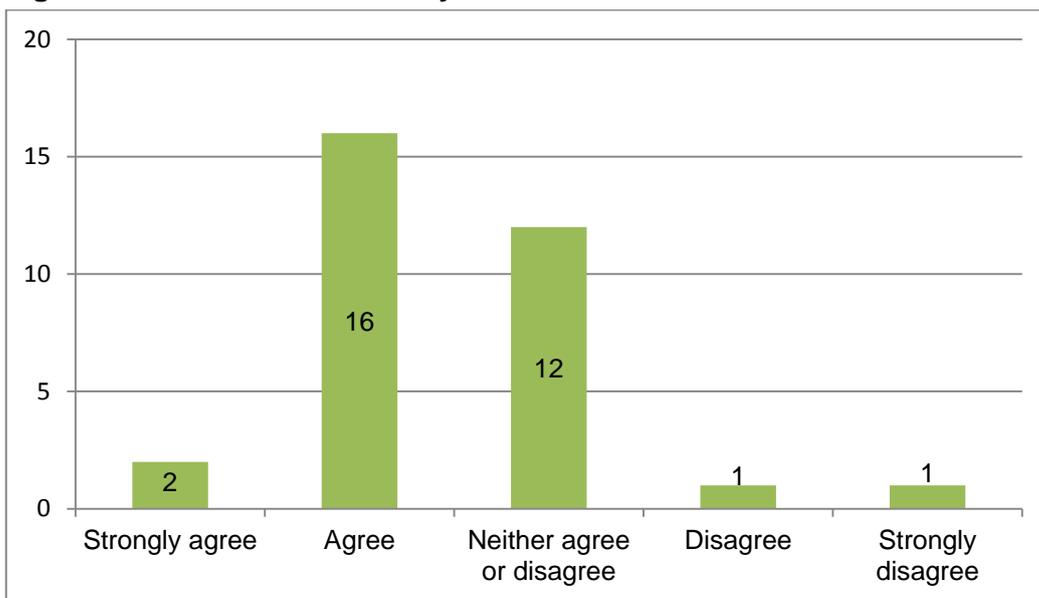

Figure 14: The AC2 form is easy to use

As demonstrated in the figures above, the majority of the feedback was positive with all four statements receiving feedback that respondents either 'strongly agree' or 'agree'. Particularly positive results are that:

♦ 68% of respondents agreed and 6% 'strongly agreed' that bureaucracy in the accreditation process had reduced; and

♦ 35% of respondents strongly agreed and 44% agreed that SQA Accreditation provides sufficient support and guidance through the accreditation process.

The other two statements also received a positive response with over 50% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statements. However, both statements also received neutral feedback of over 30% and some negative feedback:

♦ 32% of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed and 9% (3) disagreed that the amount of information that awarding bodies need to supply for a qualification submission is appropriate.

♦ 35% of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed and 3% (1) disagreed that the AC2 form is easy to use.

♦ 3% (1) of respondents strongly disagreed that the AC2 form is easy to use.

When asked to provide further detail on the answers provided, the following comments were received:

'The only part of the AC2 form that I found difficult was the section titled 'Qualification Structure and SCQF Credit Rating'. It is unclear as to how this should be completed.'

'With regard to the AC2 as yet we have not had to use it but on the surface it appears to be far easier to use.'

'An issue with the new AC2 form is that the Excel format is not practical to use when a lot of information in an individual field is required. The new format of the ACG Decision List is also not as practical to use and requires information to be extracted into spreadsheets.'

With the majority of the feedback being positive, it is evident that the changes made to the accreditation process over the last year have made some significant improvements to the general process of accreditation and have somewhat achieved the goal to reduce bureaucracy in the accreditation process. Changes have been well received by stakeholders in the main but there is still further improvement to be considered, particularly with regard to the design of the AC2 form and the volume of information that awarding bodies need to supply.

As part of continuous improvement, SQA Accreditation should ensure that its guidance relating to the AC2 form is clear and that stakeholders are aware of the support available to them throughout the accreditation process. Understanding stakeholders' needs is crucial when changing processes and SQA should bear in mind the effect that a change in process may have on stakeholders' experiences. In line with existing practice, SQA Accreditation should take stakeholder feedback on board and improve services wherever possible.

5.2 Other services and support

SQA Accreditation provides a number of other services and support in addition to regulation and the accreditation of qualifications. These include qualification product development, SCQF credit rating and levelling, and the development of NOS. SQA Accreditation engages with sector skills councils, standard setting

bodies and awarding bodies regarding these services and is continuously looking to identify areas of improvement, or potential additional support services.

Stakeholders were asked to rate how satisfied they are with the input or support from SQA Accreditation in the following areas:

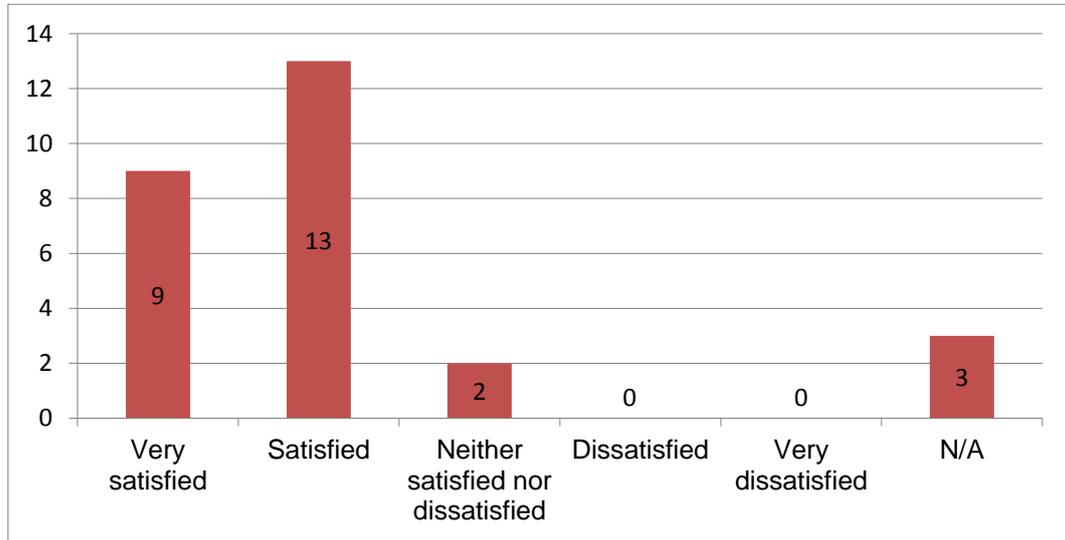**Figure 15: Qualification Product Development**
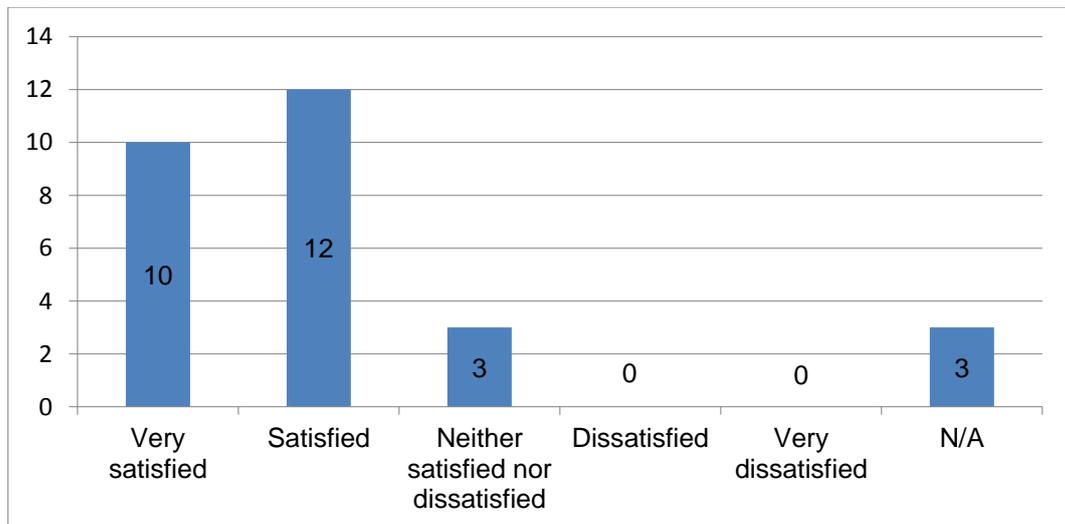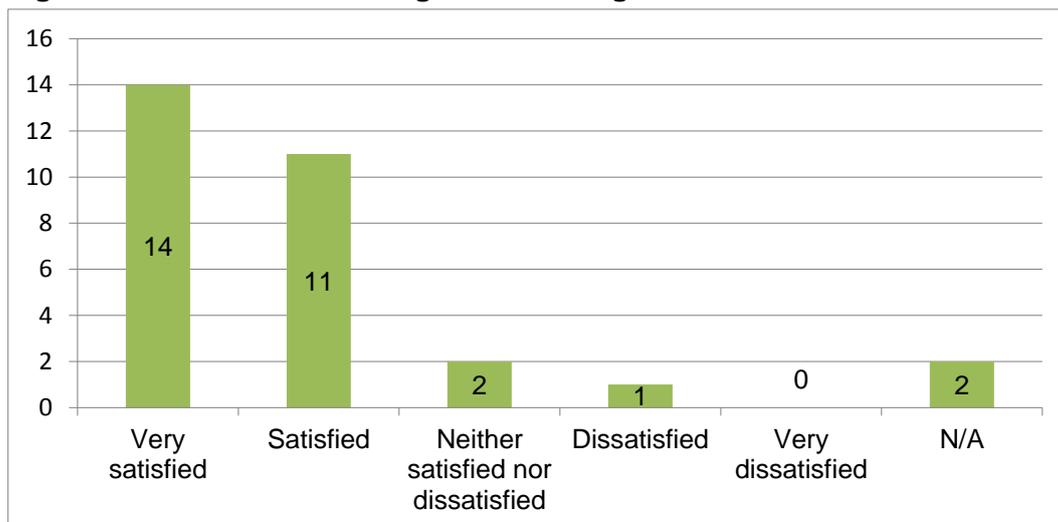

Figure 16: NOS

Figure 17: SCQF Credit Rating and Levelling

Respondents were also asked to provide further comment on their answers. The following comments were provided:

'Excellent support for development of SVQ products and to support credit rating activities. Good level of engagement with NOS products.'

'[Accreditation Manager] is always very supportive. They always respond in a timely manner, providing appropriate advice and workable solutions.'

'We have received valuable support at all stages of the process from [Accreditation Manager].'

'Always receive excellent advice and support from our Accreditation Manager.'

Responses were largely positive, with the majority of respondents saying that they were 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with SQA Accreditation's input or support of these services. There was one 'dissatisfied' response in regard to credit rating activity, although this was not expanded on in the comment field.

When asked how SQA Accreditation could provide a better service in these areas, two responses were received:

'SQA have offered to provide us with training relating to the credit rating process, so I do not believe at this stage that they would need to do anything else to support us. They seem to go over and above to help people understand the processes, which is extremely valuable. I feel the level of service is already to the required standard.'

'…Would like to point out that all the existing supporting guidance has been really helpful eg qualification product process, Core Skills signposting guidance, credit rating guidance and the SVQ structure forms etc.'

5.2.1 Credit rating

As a credit rating body, SQA Accreditation approves the credit rating of qualifications and units for the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework. Following a review of the credit rating methodology, SQA Accreditation revised
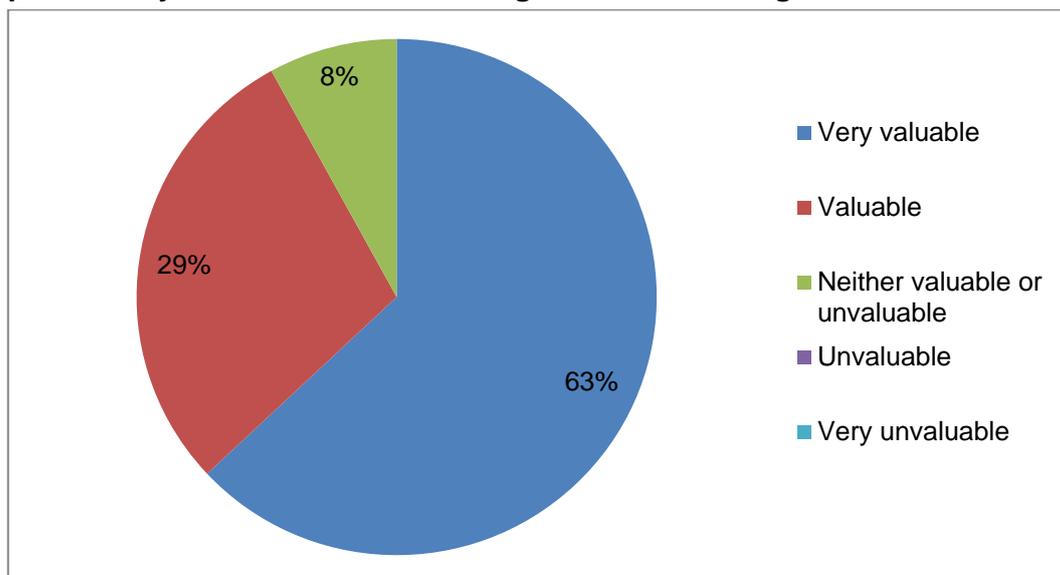
the credit rating process and documentation with the aim of reducing bureaucracy. SQA Accreditation also extended its credit rating and levelling methodology for the SCQF in September 2011 to include the credit rating of all SQA-accredited qualifications rather than just SVQs.

SQA Accreditation wanted to gather additional feedback on their credit rating service and the support they provide regarding credit rating and levelling for the SCQF. The survey therefore posed a number of questions to gauge stakeholders' awareness of the support and guidance offered by SQA Accreditation.

♦ Of the 41 responses received, two were not aware that SQA Accreditation's methodology for credit rating had been updated to include all accredited qualifications rather than just SVQs.

♦ Of the 41 responses received, two were not aware of SQA Accreditation's guidance document *Credit Rating and Levelling Qualifications for the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework*.

♦ Of the 41 responses received, two were not aware that SQA Accreditation provides a free SCQF training/information service for awarding bodies and sector skills councils.

♦ In each question, there were two respondents who said that they were not aware of the support and guidance provided by SQA Accreditation. One respondent answered 'no' to all questions and also answered that they were 'dissatisfied' with the input of SQA Accreditation on credit rating in a previous question, whereas the other answers were from different stakeholders each time and no further comments were provided.

SQA Accreditation was also interested to find out how valuable stakeholders find the support and guidance provided in regard to credit rating and levelling.

Figure 18: Please indicate how valuable you find the support and guidance provided by SQA Accreditation in regard to credit rating

Legend:
- Very valuable
- Valuable
- Neither valuable or unvaluable
- Unvaluable
- Very unvaluable

Pie chart values: 63%, 29%, 8%

♦ Of the 38 responses received, 24 (63%) said that the support and guidance was very valuable and 11 (29%) said it was valuable. There were no negative responses.

Further comments received in regard to credit rating were:

'Even though we have not yet had training, we have found the feedback to date excellent and we will shortly be arranging training.'

'SQA hosted and attended our credit rating workshops to provide advice and support which was helpful.'

'[SSC] is currently in the process of having qualifications Credit and Levelled for SQA Accreditation consideration. Our knowledge of the credit rating system is therefore very current. The information that has been provided by SQA about the system is very thorough and helpful, and support and guidance through the system from SQA Accreditation staff is invaluable.'

'Not seen it'

'Very valuable — in particular, SCQF Level Descriptors and SQA's SCQF Credit Rating Service Guide for Submitting Bodies'

'We used it in credit rating of units from six qualifications this year and it is very helpful.'

'Added value could be brought to credit rating by looking at where there are/could be duplication of processes and provide clarity around the frameworks that have been credit rated and the issues arising from credit rating work.'

In response to the survey's request for feedback on any further support stakeholders would like SQA Accreditation to provide throughout the credit rating process, the following suggestions were provided:

'Continued support and attendance at credit rating standardisation events.'

'Combining this with accreditation has been very helpful.'

'None'

'We valued the 1-1 support provided by the Accreditation Manager. They respond to queries very quickly and provides all documents and guidance required to ensuring the process is efficient and delivers high quality outputs.

'Additional clarity around SQA Accreditation's expectation of awarding bodies in the credit rating process.'

Overall, SQA Accreditation received positive feedback against all of the additional services noted above. Not all services were relevant to every respondent but in the majority of responses, stakeholders said that they were satisfied with the support and guidance they receive from SQA Accreditation. Paying particular attention to the credit rating services provided by SQA Accreditation, respondents were satisfied with the support they receive and greatly value the free credit rating service and training.

Most stakeholders are aware of the support and guidance provided by SQA Accreditation and this is being utilised by stakeholders. However, there are a few who are not aware of the range of support services SQA Accreditation provides. There is scope for further communication regarding this to ensure all stakeholders are kept informed and supported throughout their qualification development and accreditation activity.

SQA Accreditation should ensure that guidance and communications regarding additional services are kept up-to-date and made accessible to stakeholders via the website, the alert service 'accreditation news' and via direct contact.
It is also recommended that the relevant Accreditation Manager contacts the respondent who felt dissatisfied with the support provided regarding credit rating to ensure they are fully aware and up-to-date with the range of support and guidance SQA Accreditation can provide.

6   Regulation

A number of changes were made recently to SQA Accreditation's regulation activity and processes. The primary changes were the move from criterion-based to principle-based regulation and, in an effort to reduce bureaucracy and improve processes, a Quickr repository was introduced as a tool to assist awarding bodies with the management of documentation required for quality assurance activities such as audits and centre monitoring visits.

6.1   Regulatory principles

SQA Accreditation regulates its approved awarding bodies and their accredited qualifications according to the *SQA Accreditation Regulatory Principles (2011)* and the supporting regulatory directives. These high-level principles were introduced on 1 April 2012, replacing the *Awarding Body Criteria (2007)*.

The academic year 2012–13 has been a transition year for SQA Accreditation's regulation activity, with the move from criterion-based regulation to principle-based regulation being optional for awarding bodies. From 1 April 2013, all awarding bodies will be required to operate within SQA Accreditation*'s Regulatory Principles (2011)*. SQA Accreditation was therefore interested in gathering feedback from awarding bodies that are already working to the principles as well as those who are yet to make the change. Feedback from this section of the survey will also be used to inform the formal review of the principles.

This section of the survey was only of relevance to awarding bodies therefore response figures were lower at 25 responses.

Of the 25 awarding bodies that responded to the survey, 11 (44%) are already operating to the regulatory principles. One of the responses was a 'duplicate' response from an awarding body, meaning that 10 'unique' awarding bodies are already operating to the new regulatory principles.

SQA Accreditation was interested in finding out how prepared awarding bodies were for the move to principle-based regulation and the requirement to operate against SQA Accreditation's *Regulatory Principles (2011)* from 1 April 2013. The survey therefore asked respondents to say whether or not they agreed with a number of statements about the regulatory principles.

Figure 19: Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding SQA Accreditation's Regulatory Principles
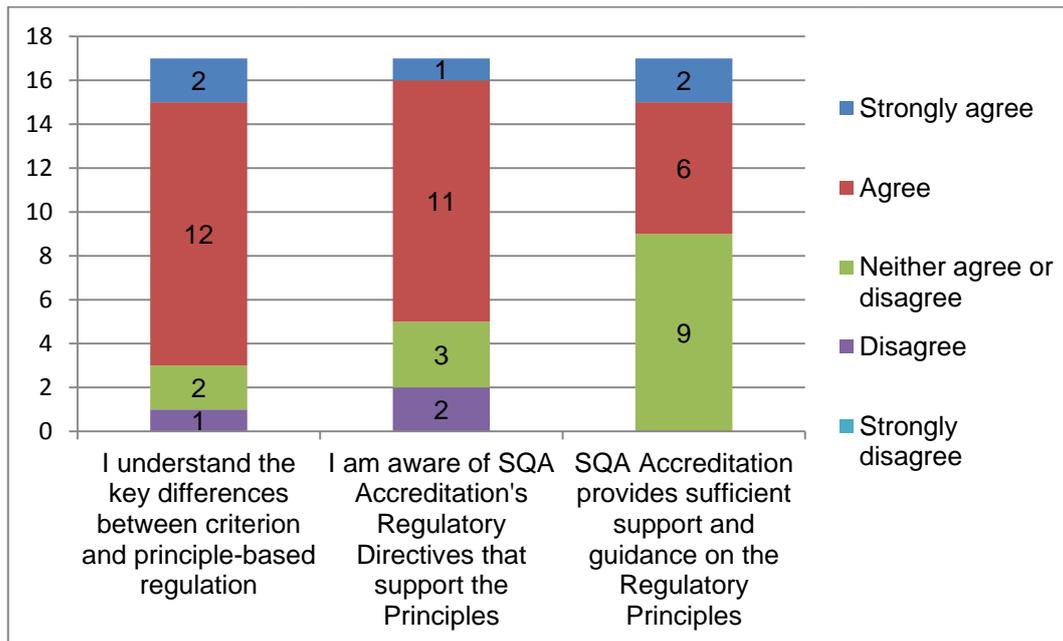
Of the 17 responses received in this section of the survey:

♦ 82% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they understood the key difference between criterion- and principle-based regulation. However, there were a small percentage of respondents who were neutral (12%, 2) or disagreed (6%, 1).

♦ 71% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were aware of the regulatory directives that support the principles. However 17% (3) neither agreed nor disagreed and 12% (2) disagreed.

♦ 47% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that SQA Accreditation provides sufficient support and guidance on the regulatory principles. However, the remaining responses (53%, 9) were neutral, with stakeholders saying that they 'neither agree nor disagree' with the statement. Five of these neutral respondents moved to principle-based regulation in 2012.

When respondents were asked to provide further detail on their answers, only one comment was received:

'Although not yet operating to the new Principles, work has been underway to understand them, disseminate to relevant staff and understand implications, and in this regard, the following comment is made: Further clarification on audit requirements and perhaps an example of an audit report based on the principles would be helpful.'

Although response to the statements was positive in the majority, a few respondents said that they did not understand the difference between principle-based and criterion-based regulation and were not aware of the regulatory directives.

There were also a rather large number of neutral responses to the statements, particularly in regard to the statement that SQA Accreditation provides sufficient support and guidance on the regulatory principles. These responses came from awarding bodies that are currently working to the regulatory principles and those that are working against the criteria.

Of the 14 awarding bodies that responded to the survey and are not yet working to the regulatory principles, 11 said that they are prepared for the mandatory implementation of the principles by 1 April 2013. The remaining three awarding bodies did not provide an answer.

When asked what further activity awarding bodies would like to see SQA Accreditation undertake to support the move to the regulatory principles, the following comments were received:

> *'Although we are confident we are working to the new Regulatory Principles, we would welcome a specific session from SQA Accreditation about the Principles, impact, views and expectations for key departments within [awarding body].'*

> *'No additional information. We simply need to take time out to prepare our full audit trail.'*

> *'Awarding bodies may need to request more clarification around meeting certain conditions and how they differ from the current criteria.'*

> *'Once an initial meeting has taken place with SQA Accreditation, there will be a clearer idea if further support is required. However useful information and guidance around how audits will be approached, how the principles will be interpreted by SQA Accreditation staff and how audits will be reported would be helpful.'*

This is good news for SQA Accreditation in regard to the preparedness of awarding bodies for the move to the *Regulatory Principles (2011)* on 1 April 2013. Of the awarding bodies yet to make the move to principle-based regulation, nearly all said that they were prepared. No major issues were highlighted with the regulatory principles as stakeholders have confirmed that they understand principle-based regulation and are aware of the supporting directives.

However, at a critical point in the transition it would be expected that all relevant stakeholders would have sufficient advice and guidance from SQA Accreditation. The responses received shows that this is not always the case. Despite this, stakeholders have not expressed any great concerns.

SQA Accreditation plans to update stakeholders on the interim progress of the *Regulatory Principles (2011)* and answer any concerns they may have at SQA Accreditation's awarding body/SSC event in March 2013. However, to ensure that stakeholders have the most successful transition to the regulatory principles, SQA Accreditation should ensure that it continues to engage with stakeholders who are preparing for the move to SQA Accreditation's *Regulatory Principles (2011)* as well as those already operating to them.

6.2 Quickr

SQA Accreditation introduced Quickr, collaboration software that allows awarding bodies to submit documentation required for audits and centre monitoring visits, so reducing bureaucracy and the amount of information awarding bodies have to submit prior to audit. Awarding bodies are responsible for managing the documentation on their Quickr account to ensure information is up-to-date on an on-going basis.

This section of the survey was more relevant to awarding bodies, therefore response figures were lower with a total of 25 responses.

♦ 84% of awarding bodies said that they have used Quickr to provide SQA Accreditation with documentation and indicated that they were aware it was the awarding body's responsibility to keep documentation on Quickr up-to-date.

♦ The remaining 16% said that they had not yet used Quickr to provide SQA Accreditation with documentation.

The 21 respondents who had used Quickr to provide SQA Accreditation with information then rated a further set of statements:
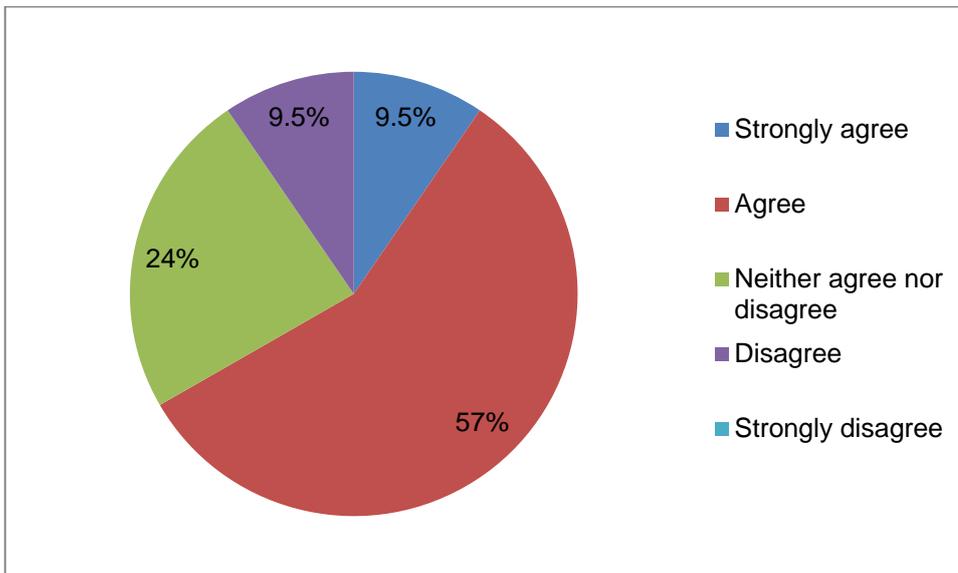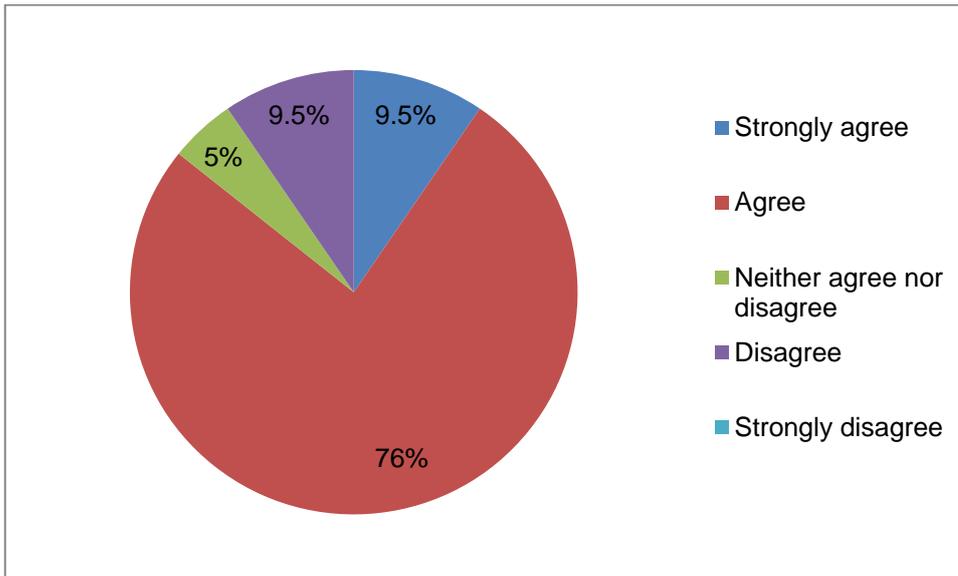
Figure 20: Quickr is easy to use

Figure 21: Quickr is a useful tool to reduce the amount of ongoing paperwork awarding bodies are required to submit to SQA Accreditation

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

(Pie chart values: 9.5%, 76%, 5%, 9.5%, 9.5%)

- ♦ A total of 66.5% of respondents who **had** used Quickr strongly agreed or agreed that Quickr is easy to use.

- ♦ A total of 85.5% strongly agreed or agreed that Quickr is a useful tool to reduce the amount of on-going paperwork awarding bodies are required to submit.

Although this is a positive response overall, some respondents had a neutral response or disagreed with the statements:

- ♦ Two respondents disagreed that Quickr is easy to use.

- ♦ Two respondents disagreed that Quickr is a useful tool to reduce the amount of paperwork.

- ♦ One of these respondents disagreed with both statements.

When asked to provide further comment regarding Quickr, respondents provided the following feedback:

'Sometimes Quickr does not accept revised documentation. It is not always clear whether this is to do with us or Quickr itself.'

'Requesting awarding bodies to reorganise Quickr documentation already uploaded due to the introduction of new principles seems unnecessary and overly bureaucratic. Although easy to use uploading and organising documentation is a time consuming process.'

'Quickr is a useful tool to reduce the amount of on-going paperwork awarding bodies are required to submit to SQA Accreditation. However, it would have been useful to receive feedback on the first upload of information place on the Quickr site which then could have informed

decisions regarding moving documents to the new folder addressing the Principles.'

According to the feedback, Quickr is a useful tool in general. It is relatively easy to use and has made good improvements in the effort to reduce the amount of on-going paperwork to be submitted to SQA Accreditation. Communication regarding the use of Quickr has been effective as awarding bodies understand that they should maintain the documentation on Quickr. However, it has been identified that Quickr can at times be temperamental and can be time consuming when making changes to any documentation already uploaded.

In order to reduce bureaucracy and the amount of time spent by awarding bodies maintaining the documentation on Quickr, SQA Accreditation could consider how to communicate with awarding bodies on the documentation required (and its format) during and following the transition to the regulatory principles. A clear and consistent approach to how Quickr should be used would be beneficial to stakeholders. It may also be useful to consider and communicate the process for raising any troubleshooting issues with SQA Accreditation.
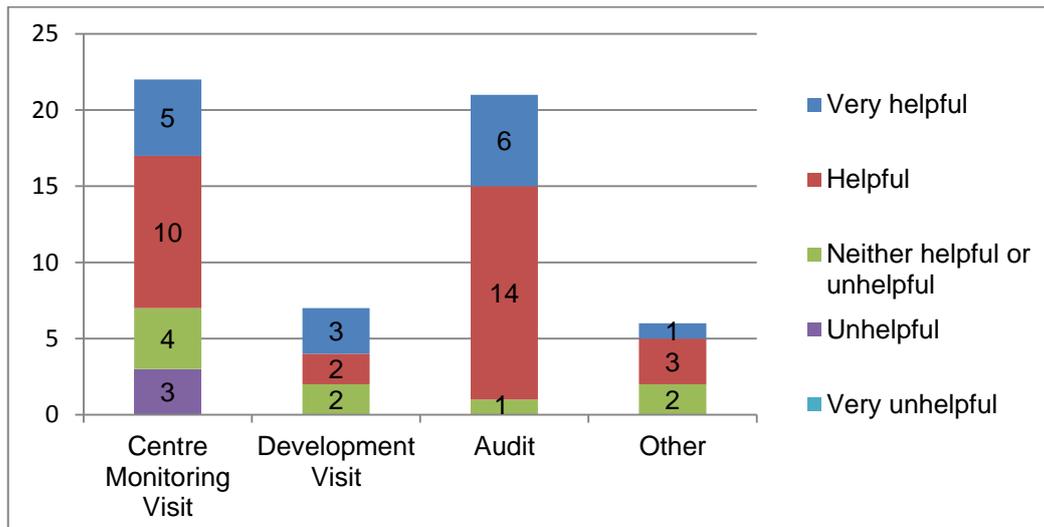
6.3 Quality assurance activity

SQA Accreditation has a responsibility to ensure that accredited qualifications are delivered to candidates at a high standard. Quality assurance activities, in the form of awarding body audits and centre monitoring, help to make sure that awarding bodies act in accordance with SQA Accreditation's regulatory principles. Audits are carried out according to each awarding body's quality enhancement ratings and against the *SQA Accreditation Regulatory Principles (2011)*.

SQA Accreditation wanted to gather feedback on its quality assurance activity and identify potential areas of further improvement. Over the past 12 months, the majority of the activity carried out by SQA Accreditation was on audits and centre monitoring visits, although some development visits and 'other' activity also took place.

The survey asked respondents to rate how helpful SQA Accreditation's quality assurance activity was to their awarding body.

Figure 22: How helpful have you found SQA Accreditation's quality assurance activities?

Overall the quality assurance activity undertaken by SQA Accreditation is positively received.

♦ 45% of awarding bodies who had centre monitoring visits in the past 12 months felt that they were helpful and 23% felt that they were very helpful. However, 14% (3) felt that the centre monitoring visits were unhelpful.

♦ 67% of awarding bodies who had been involved in audit activity in the past 12 months felt that they were helpful and 29% felt that the audit activity was very helpful.

When asked to provide further detail on their answers, the following comments were provided:

'These quality assurance activities complement our own internal activities to inform how we can improve our QA processes and negate problems.'

'Have received a lot of very useful help and guidance during submission to become an awarding body.'

'We wholly endorse SQA Accreditation's quality assurance activities and find them consistent with an organisation committed to ensuring quality monitoring and reviewing of an Awarding Organisation's compliance with regulatory principles.'

'The quality assurance activities enhance our ability to focus on internal areas for improvement. However, the sample size of CMV does not reflect the quantity of our centres which may lead to a disproportionate focus on an individual centre's comment or operation. There would be benefit in the dates of the AB audit and CMV being aligned more closely allowing the AB to clearly focus on holistically addressing any non-compliances or observations and reducing complex reporting and response.'

Comments were positive in the main with respondents saying that SQA Accreditation's quality assurance activity was helpful and the support provided

throughout activity was also beneficial. However, two comments were received that highlighted stakeholder concerns with centre monitoring visits and inflexible processes:

'Relatively helpful other than the informal complaints from our centres on the approach of SQA staff being inflexible and unrealistic.'

'The process for centre visits is still unacceptable and causes us significant problems. I have raised this issue time and time again without any progress.'

It is recommended that SQA Accreditation's regulation team contact the awarding bodies that raised these concerns to investigate and resolve the issues highlighted.

6.4 Quality enhancement rating (QER)

SQA Accreditation has a quality enhancement model in place for rating approved awarding bodies which indicates the level of full audit activity to be carried out. SQA Accreditation was interested in finding out whether the quality enhancement rating (QER) was understood by its stakeholders.

♦ Of the 28 stakeholders who responded to this question, 11 said that they understood the QER and 17 said that they did not understand the rating.

♦ If looking at awarding bodies' responses only, the feedback was still that the majority did not understand the QER (13), whereas 10 did understand it.

Some respondents offered additional feedback on the question, noting that they understood the ratings but weren't sure of the formal process for SQA Accreditation to communicate it to the awarding body or how they were calculated. Another comment highlighted potential areas for improvement:

'The scoring and risk levels are clearly documented but it would be helpful to have more clarification around how the QER is calculated and how standardisation across the Accreditation team is achieved in terms of coming to a consistent rating for similar issues. The rolling nature of the process and the CMV reporting, leads to delays in reporting the QER and uncertainty when an audit is due.'

Understanding of the QER by stakeholders is low. With the majority of respondents saying that they do not understand the QER. The comment received from one respondent highlights that communication of the QER, and how it is derived, could be improved. It would be expected that all stakeholders should understand the QER rating as it is a key element of SQA Accreditation's regulatory activity and determines the level of full audit that needs to be carried out. Despite there being a web page on SQA Accreditation's website dedicated to the quality enhancement process, stakeholders are not receiving the information or support they need in order to understand the ratings they are allocated.

Although this *negative* response towards the QER may be a result of the knowledge of the specific personnel who completed the survey, SQA Accreditation needs to ensure they are engaging with stakeholders effectively and providing sufficient information to awarding bodies regarding the QER. As

mentioned above, there is a web page dedicated to the QER but it may be useful to provide stakeholders with a regular reminder of the QER, covering what it means and how it is derived.

7   Key strengths

SQA Accreditation is interested in understanding the key aspects of its services that stakeholders' value. The survey invited respondents to feed back their thoughts on their experience with SQA Accreditation and to list what they consider to be its main strengths. Comments received in this section have been allocated a key word to assist with the grouping of comments and can be summarised as follows:

Themes (Strengths)	Total
Audits	1
Communication	8
Continuous improvement	1
Customer service	15
Engagement	1
Free events	2
Processes and guidance	9
Quality assurance	1
Quickr	1
Regulation	2
Staff	14
Grand total	**55**

Customer service
The most common recurring theme among the strengths was 'customer service' and respondents listed the following as SQA Accreditation's key strengths:

'Access to staff when faced with problem'

'Approachable'

'Available'

'Committed'

'Customer service'

'Excellent customer service'

'Helpful'

'Helpfulness'

'Immediate access to named individuals and their professional responses'

'Professional'

'Providing a dedicated Accreditation Manager to SSCs'

'Responsive'

'Support for the team'

'Supportive'

'Technical knowledge of qualifications and sectors'

Within this customer service strand, there are further recurring themes such as the helpful and supportive nature of SQA Accreditation, the approachability and access to staff, and generally high levels of professionalism and customer service.

Staff

Following from the theme of customer service, SQA Accreditation's 'staff' were also highlighted as a key strength. Respondents said the following about SQA Accreditation staff:

'Availability of staff for help and guidance'

'Knowledgeable staff'

'Knowledgeable and enthusiastic staff'

'Knowledgeable staff'

'Positive, supportive team and approachable senior management'

'Professionalism and supportiveness of staff'

'Retaining specific contacts'

'Staff'

'Staff helpful and attentive'

'The availability of accreditation manager who I have found to be very helpful'

'The availability of direct contact with named individuals who will respond quickly to enquiries'

'The people — the knowledge and personality of the staff. Whilst helpful they still maintain strict criteria'

'A consistent comment from all respondents is the supportive nature and approachability of SQA Accreditation staff'

'Staff are always available when needed'

Once again, there are common themes to be found within the broader strand of 'staff', particularly:

♦ knowledge and experience
♦ supportive and approachable nature
♦ the allocation of a direct contact

These strengths were also highlighted by respondents in other sections of the survey (see 4.1 Stakeholder engagement).

Processes and guidance
The common theme of 'processes and guidance' was also highlighted as a strength by respondents, specifically:

'Accreditation of qualifications'

'Although sometimes laborious — most processes are documented and therefore are achievable'

'An integrated qualifications system which includes all types of qualifications within a framework using credits and levels'

'Clear processes and guidance'

'Clear support information'

'Guidance materials very informative and useful'

'Supporting information'

'The processes are very clear and approval is planned and takes place regularly for products'

In line with the strengths noted in 'customer service' and 'staff', the supportive nature of SQA Accreditation in regard to clear and documented processes and guidance is seen as a key strength of SQA Accreditation. The accreditation process is also highlighted as a strength.

Communication
Another common theme that was identified in the strengths listed by stakeholders was 'communication'. This is in line with the other key strengths highlighted in 'customer service', 'staff' and 'processes and guidance'. Specific comments provided by respondents were:

'Ability to speak to contacts (ie not remote/electronic)'

'Always willing to answer queries'

'Communication with Accreditation team'

'Good communication'

'Good communication to AO from SQA staff'

'Good input and regular contact with Accreditation Manager'

'Good response times'

'Willingness to discuss issues'

Other

There were a number of other strengths indicated by respondents and these are listed as follows:

'Awarding body audit'

'Commitment to continuous improvement'

'Active engagement and support for activities'

'Free events'

'Free training for SCQF credit rating'

'Rigour'

'Introduction of Quickr site has increased the availability of information and ability to flexibly respond'

'Risk ratings'

'Principles appear to be more straightforward to work with'

All of these key strengths are evident throughout the survey. Respondents particularly value the knowledge of SQA Accreditation's staff and their approachability and support, as well as the high level of communication and engagement that SQA Accreditation provides. Many of these strengths are what differentiate SQA Accreditation from other UK regulators.

8   Potential areas for improvement

SQA Accreditation is interested in identifying potential areas for improvement and further development and welcomes views of stakeholders to help inform future activity. Throughout the survey, respondents provided information that could help make further changes to improve the stakeholder's experience of working with SQA Accreditation.

8.1 Weaknesses

The survey invited respondents to feed back their thoughts on their experience with SQA Accreditation and to list what they consider to be its main weaknesses. Comments received in this section have been allocated a key word to assist with the grouping of comments and can be summarised as follows:

Themes (Weaknesses)	Total
Audits	2
Bureaucracy	11
CMVs	1
Communication	3
Inconsistency	1
Regulation	1
Relationship with other regulators	1
Support of staff	4
Training	1
UK restricted qualifications	1
Website	4
Grand total	**30**

Bureaucracy

The most common recurring theme in the weaknesses highlighted by respondents was 'bureaucracy'. Despite on-going efforts by SQA Accreditation to reduce bureaucracy and improve stakeholders' experience of working with SQA, respondents still felt that there were issues with certain processes that resulted in overly bureaucratic practice. Respondents listed the following as SQA Accreditation's key weaknesses:

'Accreditation timescale'

'Asking for too much paper work from AOs to support the accreditation process'

'Inconsistency in communications and still a tendency towards bureaucracy'
'Requirement for separate credit and rating rather than a simple read across — creates duplication'

'Sometimes the inflexibility of bureaucratic procedures'

'Inflexibility of approach'

'Inflexible criteria around Regulatory Directive on data submission, which adversely impacts learners and centres'

'Sometimes the inordinate 'nit picking''

'Still quite paper-based approach'

'The processes used for accreditation in picking up and then rejecting products on minor issues such as spelling errors'

'Use of hard copy, instead of electronic, delays process of formal notifications'

Within the theme of bureaucracy, further common themes can be identified from the comments, particularly:

♦ paper-based submissions rather than electronic
♦ inflexible procedures

Website

Another common weakness listed by respondents in this section was the website which was also a recurring theme throughout the survey. Respondents listed the following as SQA Accreditation's key weakness:

'Confusion in relation to the Awarding Body/Regulation/Accreditation — in terms of receipt of communications and particularly navigation on the website'

'Finding links/docs on website'

'Website'

'Website often difficult to find information'

The key recurring comments regarding the website include:

♦ that the website is often outdated
♦ information is difficult to find
♦ provision of information is not always adequate
♦ there is confusion between SQA Accreditation and the wider SQA.

Support of staff

Although highlighted as a key strength of SQA Accreditation, 'support of staff' is also a common theme as a weakness, specifically in regard to staff cover during absence and a need for flexible staff engagement. Respondents listed the following as weaknesses:

'Continuity of staff contacts'

'Reliance on the competence of the Accreditation Manager, rather than more general and wider support'

'Sometimes need flexibility of staff so we can use anyone for this'

'Sometimes the staff 'back-up' when the usual staff are not there eg on holiday'

Communication

Another common theme that occurs as a strength of SQA Accreditation as well as a weakness is 'communication'. The weaknesses in this area are specifically in two areas — confusion between SQA Accreditation and SQA Awarding Body (and their different remits) and lack of clarity on timescales relating to the approvals process. Respondents listed the following as weaknesses:

'Confusion in relation to the Awarding Body/Regulation/Accreditation — in terms of receipt of communications and particularly navigation on the website'

'Lack of direct engagement with approvals process — reliance on Accreditation Manager for submission'

'Lack of published timescales/stages for dealing with submissions'

Other

The other weaknesses listed by stakeholders were:

'Centre Audits'

'Hands-on audit processes which do not appear to be targeted on a risk basis'

'CMV process and reporting can cause confusion and complexity in the process of responding to NCs and observations'

'Inconsistent recording of unit information'

'Differences in the regulatory regimes'

'Not always necessary to have training'

'Inability to offer qualifications outside the UK'

8.2 Recommendations

The survey results show an overwhelmingly positive profile of SQA Accreditation and its performance and service delivery. However, respondents' answers to specific questions, the additional comments they submitted and the weaknesses they listed, all provide SQA Accreditation with information that can inform future changes and improvements.

It should be noted, however, that in most cases any *negatives* have been raised by a small number of respondents rather than representing the majority opinion of stakeholders.

Throughout the report some general recommendations that SQA Accreditation may want to consider have been made and these are summarised below.

Recommendations

SQA Accreditation should continue efforts to reduce bureaucracy in its processes and procedures, paying particular attention to inflexible practice and the reliance on paper-based submissions.

Further improvements should be made to SQA Accreditation's website, particularly in regard to ensuring the website is kept up-to-date, ease of navigation, provision of information and differentiation from SQA Awarding Body.

SQA Accreditation should improve engagement with stakeholders regarding the quality enhancement rating, considering in particular the communication of what it means for awarding bodies and how it is derived. This needs to go further than a dedicated web page as this approach has not been sufficiently successful.

Renewed efforts should be made to inform stakeholders of the role and remit of SQA Accreditation and how SQA Accreditation differs from SQA Awarding Body. Particular consideration could be made to how these messages are communicated to existing and prospective stakeholders.

SQA Accreditation needs to ensure it delivers consistent messages regarding its responsibilities in relation to its two distinct roles — accreditation and regulation — and to consider how these messages are communicated to existing and prospective stakeholders.

SQA Accreditation needs to ensure that guidance relating to the AC2 form is clear and that stakeholders are aware of the range of support available to them throughout the qualification development and accreditation processes.

SQA Accreditation should continue to engage with stakeholders who are preparing for the move to the regulatory principles — as well as those already operating to the principles. Particular attention could be made to improving the support and guidance provided to awarding bodies during the transition period.

SQA Accreditation should consider its arrangements for stakeholder cover during periods of staff absence.

SQA Accreditation should consider how timescales relating to the approval process are communicated to stakeholders. Particular consideration could be made to the publication of expected timescales and the process for informing stakeholders of the progress of their submission.

SQA Accreditation should make stakeholders aware of additional services offered and adopt a range of methods to ensure stakeholders are kept up-to-date. Particular consideration could be made to communication via the website, an e-mail alert service and printed information.

SQA Accreditation should improve guidance and support on the use of Quickr, particularly in regard to how Quickr should be updated following the transition to the regulatory principles. A clear and consistent process needs to be communicated to stakeholders.

A small number of comments highlighted areas of concern from particular stakeholders. A member of SQA Accreditation should contact the stakeholders to address their specific concerns.