SQA Centre Malpractice Annual Report 2020

This report provides information on SQA's approach to managing centre malpractice concerns in 2020.

Malpractice is defined as:

Malpractice means any act, default or practice (whether deliberate or resulting from neglect or default) that is a breach of SQA requirements, including any act, default or practice that:

♦ *compromises, attempts to compromise, or may compromise, the process of assessment, the integrity of any SQA qualification, or the validity of a result or certificate; and/or*
♦ *damages the authority, reputation or credibility of SQA or any officer, employee or agent of SQA.*

Malpractice can arise for a variety of reasons:

♦ *Some incidents are intentional and aim to give an unfair advantage or disadvantage in an examination or assessment (deliberate non-compliance). Examples might include:*

— *completing assessment work on behalf of learners; or*
— *falsification of information leading to certification*

♦ *Some incidents of malpractice are unintentional. We define unintentional malpractice as 'maladministration', which includes incidents that arise due to ignorance of SQA requirements, carelessness or neglect in applying the requirements. Examples might include:*

— *seeking approval to offer a new qualification after the deadline for new approval applications has passed; or*
— *requesting late certification of learners after a regulated qualification's certification end date*

Malpractice can include both deliberate non-compliance with SQA requirements and maladministration in the assessment and delivery of SQA qualifications.[1]

The information below covers SQA activity across all qualification and centre types and across all assessment methodologies. We log all concerns that are raised and report on them irrespective of the outcome.

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1 Malpractice: Information for Centres https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/2020-malpractice-information-centres.pdf page 5

Summary of concerns across the centre malpractice lifecycle

Overall information provided for 2020 is reflective of the impact of Covid-19 including centre closure, the cancellation of National Qualification exams by Scottish Ministers and the impact on associated processes such as the marking of coursework. In March and August 2020 SQA's Code of Practice Governance Group confirmed adjustments required for SQA's management of concerns of possible candidate and centre malpractice across the qualifications portfolio, in response to the unprecedented global COVID-19 pandemic.

Specific adjustments due to the cancellation of NQ marking procedures included:

♦ For candidate & centre malpractice there was no marking of NQ externally assessed coursework, and as such centres were not asked to investigate concerns of possible malpractice which would have arisen through the marking procedures.

♦ For NQ centre malpractice concerns, reported to SQA in 2020 but at the time of March 2020 not yet reported to the centre (either due to screening activity or because the concern was received after centre closure), SQA contacted Heads of Centre in October 2020 to bring any concerns to their attention; in these instances, the centre was not required to undertake an SQA investigation but rather to use the information to seek assurances and determine any action locally to confirm the validity of centre assessment practices.

Overall adjustments in relation to HNVQ & NQ included:

♦ New investigations were not initiated (during the period March – August 2020) unless they raised potentially significant concerns in relation to the validity of current assessments for qualifications which indicate occupational competence, represent a license to practice, or may present a risk to public safety. This is consistent with the principles adopted across UK qualifications regulators.

♦ Where a centre self-reported a concern (during the period March – August 2020) that did not relate to the areas specified in the last bullet point, they were empowered to apply their own procedures and judgement to manage the matter to a conclusion, with advice if required, and to provide a report of their findings to SQA in due course.

♦ For each instance where a concern was raised, and the Malpractice and Complaints team judged that it was not appropriate to move to investigation (during March – August 2020), a record was kept for reference in the event that a similar concern might arise later.

♦ For centre malpractice investigations which were underway by March 2020, a risk-based decision as to the continuation of the investigation was taken on a case-by-case basis by the Malpractice and Complaints team.

Table 1: Overview of concerns at NQ and HNVQ

Year	Concerns:				Following Investigation:	
	Logged	Ongoing	Closed at screening	Concluded following investigation	Finding of malpractice	No finding of malpractice
2017	108	9	23	76	51	25
2018	270	8	27	235	143	92
2019	421	8	128	285	171	114
2020	63	5	22	36	32	4

Table 1 shows that in 2020 a total of 63 concerns were logged, of which 22 were closed at the screening stage. The screening stage is the first stage in the centre malpractice process. Here, expert SQA staff consider the available evidence and evaluate any risk to the integrity of certification. Where concerns are closed at this stage centres may not be contacted or informed; they may be unaware a concern was raised.

Where an investigation is initiated, centres are informed and involved in the process. In 2020 36 concerns were investigated to a conclusion. Of these 32 led to a finding of malpractice[2]. Centres are always informed of the outcome of any centre malpractice investigation and where there is a finding of malpractice, the Head of Centre has the right of appeal.

Ongoing cases have yet to resolve and may be at pre-screening, screening, or investigation stages.

The 63 concerns logged in 2020 accounts for less than 4% of number of centres registered to deliver SQA qualifications by the end of 2020.

Table 2: Qualification type

Year	National Qualifications	Higher National or Vocational Qualifications	Total
2017	75	33	108
2018	222	48	270
2019	367	54	421
2020	32	31	63

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2 Please note that a small number of these findings are still within the appeal period, meaning centres may exercise their right to ask SQA to reconsider its decision.

The total concerns given in Table 2 includes those closed at screening, those ongoing and those concluded.

The National Qualifications category comprises National 1 to National 5, Highers and Advanced Highers, National Qualifications Units, Awards, National Certificates and National Progression Awards.

The Higher National and Vocational Qualifications category comprises Higher National Diplomas, Higher National Certificates, Scottish Vocational Qualifications, Higher National or Vocational Units and Professional Development Awards.

HNVQ concerns in 2020 amounted for nearly half of the concerns managed (31 out of a total of 63). Whilst NQ concerns decreased by just over 90% from 2019, HNVQ concerns decreased by just over 42% from 2019.

Table 3: Source of concerns

Year	Identified by SQA staff, including appointees, during marking and quality assurance processes	Identified by other ways	Total
2017	57	51	108
2018	207	63	270
2019	360	61	421
2020	25	38	63

Table 3 shows where all logged concerns originate. Those identified by SQA are those that have been raised as a result of SQA processes or identified by an SQA member of staff or by an SQA appointee through the course of their SQA activity.

Concerns identified by other ways include those raised with SQA directly by centres or centre staff, those raised by learners or their parents/carers, or any other third party that chooses to raise an issue with SQA.

In 2020, NQ concerns identified by SQA accounted for 12 concerns, with the remaining being reported by the centre or by a third party. In the same period, HNVQ concerns identified by SQA accounted for 13 concerns. Out of a total of 63 concerns those identified by SQA accounted for nearly 40% of all concerns reported.

Table 4: Principal type of malpractice identified in panel finding of malpractice

Year	Failure of administrative systems for assessment and certification	Assessment conditions not applied: level of direction	Assessment conditions not applied: other	Internal assessments not in line with standards	Other security breach	Other	Total
2017	2	34	5	9	1	0	51
2018	13	51	72	5	1	1	143
2019	11	88	60	5	6	1	171
2020	14	5	6	0	3	4	32

Table 4 shows the principal type of malpractice for those cases where the malpractice panel reached a finding of malpractice.

The most prevalent principal finding type was that there had been a failure of administrative systems for assessment and certification. This comprised of 6 findings related to HNVQ and 8 relating to NQ.

The next most frequent principal finding type related to assessment conditions not being applied. This can relate to the level of direction in assessed coursework for which assessment conditions are described in SQA Course Specifications and Coursework Assessment Task documents. It can also relate to other assessment conditions such as use of laptops with internet access, additional time and use of paper-based assessment where online assessment is required.

When a finding of malpractice is made SQA has a range of measures available to safeguard the integrity of certification. These include:

♦ provision of specialist support to ensure compliance within the centre
♦ application of required actions to enable certification to proceed
♦ requirement for increased quality assurance monitoring
♦ withdrawal of approval to offer specific qualifications
♦ withdrawal of centre approval status

Furthermore, in order to maintain the integrity of certification, a finding of malpractice may also lead to adjustments to candidate results (including those only awarded either 'Pass' or 'Fail' result) which may, in turn, affect their certificated award.

Types of measures required by SQA as a result of malpractice investigations in 2020

SQA malpractice panel considers whether remedial or improvement actions are to be recommended or required as part of its decision-making process. The measure most frequently mandated by a malpractice panel to safeguard the integrity of certification is to require the centre to undertake further actions. An example would be for the centre to develop a plan to address the malpractice identified, and to provide a report with evidence that actions had been implemented.

In many of the instances, centres acknowledged the problems that had arisen, and identified their own comprehensive improvement actions. In these cases, SQA was satisfied that the centre had taken sufficiently robust steps and did not require any additional actions to be taken. Additionally, in some instances more than one action may be mandated by SQA where there is a finding of malpractice across multiple practices within the centre.

SQA reserves the right to mandate measures even where an investigation did not conclude in a finding of malpractice. This is often where practice has been judged to have fallen short of best practice, but not to the point of malpractice.

The list of measures below is to illustrate the types of measures that can be applied:

- ♦ actions required by the centre, including the provision of an action plan
- ♦ qualification de-approval
- ♦ centre de-approval
- ♦ adjustment to marks/results
- ♦ Quality Assurance: Future Qualification Verification Selection
- ♦ Quality Assurance: Systems Verification Selection for centre
- ♦ Specialist Subject Support
- ♦ Liaison Team Support
- ♦ Specialist Systems Support

SQA continues to work with centres to prevent, identify, investigate and mitigate any concerns of possible malpractice, as described in *Malpractice: Information for Centres*.