



Qualifications Scotland Awarding Body Code of Practice

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We are committed to using plain language. If you have any suggestions on how we can improve, let us know at editor@qualifications.gov.scot.

History of changes

Version number	Publication date	Summary of changes
V1.0	July 2014	
V1.1	August 2016	Edit to Governing Principle 1 Section 3.1 expanded to include Chief Examining Officer
V1.2	September 2023	P5 – Updates to legislative requirements (Data Protection law and Freedom of Information Act)
V1.3	August 2025	P4 – Update to description of Chief Examining Officer, to remove reference to dual role as Chief Executive.
V1.4	May 2026	SQA changed to Qualifications Scotland throughout. Section 1 updated to include new statutory functions as per the Education (Scotland) Act 2025. Section 3.1 updated to reflect current governance structure.

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1 Introduction

As Scotland's national qualifications body, Qualifications Scotland sets, maintains and monitors qualifications and assessment standards. It works with schools, colleges, private training providers, and employers to ensure that standards are accurate, fair, and applied consistently across all qualifications and over time.

What is the Code of Practice?

The purpose of the Qualifications Scotland Code of Practice is to outline how Qualifications Scotland ensures that its qualifications are of a high quality and fit for purpose, and that the assessment of these qualifications is monitored and maintained to a consistently high standard.

By doing so, it sets out the framework by which Qualifications Scotland safeguards the integrity of Qualifications Scotland's qualifications and assessment standards and ensures public confidence.

Qualifications Scotland's statutory functions

Qualifications Scotland's statutory functions, as outlined in the Education (Scotland) Act 2025 include the following general functions:

- to devise qualifications (whether for itself or others to award)
- to approve education and training establishments as suitable for presenting persons for Qualifications Scotland qualifications
- to determine a person's entitlement to Qualifications Scotland qualifications and, where a person is so entitled, to award and record such a qualification
- to keep under review and revise qualifications
- to make arrangements for, assist in or carry out the assessment of persons undertaking education and training

Qualifications Scotland also has statutory functions which cover quality assurance in education and training establishments that offer our qualifications.

Qualifications Scotland:

- must, in respect of qualifications it has devised, make such arrangements as it considers appropriate to satisfy itself as to the quality of such qualifications
- may, in respect of education and training establishments which have been approved, make such arrangements as it considers appropriate to satisfy itself as to:

- the quality of the procedures adopted by such establishments for assessing the standards of attainment of persons undertaking Qualifications Scotland qualifications (and, in particular, such persons with educational support needs),
- the quality of the internal arrangements adopted by such establishments for monitoring and controlling the effectiveness of such procedures, and
- the overall suitability of such establishments for presenting persons for Qualifications Scotland qualifications

2 Qualifications Scotland's Governing Principles

Qualifications Scotland has a set of Principles which govern how it meets its statutory duties and self-regulates its activities. Similar principles apply to Qualifications Scotland qualifications that are regulated by other organisations. The structure of the Code of Practice reflects both Qualifications Scotland's statutory functions and the Governing Principles.

Governing Principle for governance

- 1 Openness to the needs of individuals, educational and vocational institutions and the needs of society is an essential aim of Qualifications Scotland, and therefore Qualifications Scotland will endeavour to ensure that processes for the development of qualifications, assessment and the maintenance of national standards are as open and transparent as possible; and informed through a research and evidence-based approach to self-regulation.

Governing Principles for qualifications

- 2 Qualifications Scotland will ensure that there is a clear rationale for the development and review of its qualifications, based on educational, vocational or business needs.
- 3 Qualifications Scotland will work in partnership with centres, stakeholders and independent experts to develop and review qualifications.
- 4 Qualifications Scotland will conduct rigorous validation processes to ensure that all qualifications are fit for purpose.

Governing Principle for approval

- 5 Qualifications Scotland will ensure that any centre offering Qualifications Scotland qualifications has the systems, resources and expertise to deliver and assess these qualifications to the defined standard.

Governing Principle for assessment

- 6 Qualifications Scotland will work in partnership with its appointees and centres to ensure that all assessments used in its qualifications are valid and reliable.

Governing Principle for equality

- 7 Qualifications Scotland will ensure that all qualifications and assessments are as fair and accessible as possible and that the needs of candidates are met in the administration of its assessments.

Governing Principles for quality assurance of internal assessment

- 8 Qualifications Scotland will quality assure centre assessments and assessment judgements to ensure that they maintain the defined standard.
- 9 Qualifications Scotland will work in partnership with centres to ensure that all quality assurance processes are fair, open and proportionate.

Governing Principle for awarding

- 10 Qualifications Scotland will ensure that candidates receive accurate results in the stated timeframe.

Governing Principles for monitoring standards

- 11 Qualifications Scotland will work in partnership with centres to ensure that the standards of its qualifications are consistently monitored and maintained.
- 12 Qualifications Scotland will ensure that its qualifications and assessments are open to evaluation by appropriate national and international bodies.

Governing Principle for external regulation

- 13 Qualifications Scotland will ensure that its externally-regulated qualifications and assessments are open to external scrutiny by appropriate bodies.

3 Code of Practice

3.1 Governance

Qualifications Scotland's governance structure, as outlined below, has been designed to ensure the quality and standards of its qualifications and assessments.

Chief Examining Officer

The Chief Examining Officer provides expert leadership on the regulation and standards of qualifications in Scotland, under the authority of the Education (Scotland) Act 2025. This role is separate from the Chief Executive Officer and focuses exclusively on qualifications oversight and assessment integrity.

This role's key responsibilities include:

- Overseeing Qualifications Scotland's awarding body activities to ensure that qualifications meet statutory standards.
- Maintaining the integrity, fairness, and reliability of Qualifications Scotland's qualifications and assessments.
- Providing independent expert advice on qualifications, assessment, and standards to Scottish Ministers, in support of the Chief Executive Officer's formal communications.
- Ensuring the publication of statistical information on qualifications in line with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics.
- Supporting the independence and credibility of Qualifications Scotland's regulatory functions as a non-departmental public body.

Board

Board members have corporate responsibility for the overall governance, strategic direction and performance of Qualifications Scotland, including ensuring that it fulfils its statutory functions and complies with any statutory or administrative requirements for the use of public funds. Other important responsibilities of Board members are:

- Ensuring that high standards of corporate governance are observed at all times.
- Establishing the overall strategic direction of the organisation within the policy and resources framework agreed with the responsible Scottish Ministers.
- Ensuring that the Board operates within the limits of its statutory authority, and any delegated authority agreed with its Scottish Government sponsor department.
- Ensuring that the organisation consults with, and has regard to the views of, the Strategic Advisory Council in accordance with statutory requirements.

- Ensuring appropriate engagement with statutory committees, including those representing the interests of learners, teachers and practitioners; and operates in accordance with any other conditions relating to the use of public funds.
- Ensuring that, in reaching decisions, the Board takes into account any guidance issued by the sponsor department.
- Appointing, with Scottish Ministers' approval, a Chief Executive to Qualifications Scotland.

Audit and Risk Committee

The Audit and Risk Committee is established by the Board in accordance with the requirements of the Scottish Public Finance Manual. Its purpose is to provide independent and objective oversight to support strong financial stewardship and effective organisational control.

Acting on behalf of the Board, the Committee ensures that Qualifications Scotland's financial systems and reporting are subject to robust scrutiny. It reviews the effectiveness of internal controls and risk management arrangements, monitors compliance with legal and ethical standards, and oversees relationships with auditors and regulators, including Qualifications Scotland Accreditation and Ofqual.

Strategic Advisory Council

The Strategic Advisory Council is appointed by Scottish Ministers under the terms of the Education (Scotland) Act 2025 and the Qualifications Scotland (Strategic Advisory Council) (Establishment) Regulations 2026. Its purposes are those set out in section 9(1) of the Education (Scotland) Act 2025; namely, to consider matters relating to Qualifications Scotland's functions and qualifications and provide advice to Qualifications Scotland, and / or Scottish Ministers.

The Council is an independent statutory advisory body. Its role is to:

- Provide informed, evidence-based advice on matters relating to Qualifications Scotland.
- Represent a broad range of stakeholder interests.
- Ensure that stakeholder perspectives inform the development and delivery of qualifications and associated functions.

The Council does not:

- Exercise executive or decision-making powers.
- Direct the operations of Qualifications Scotland.

In doing so, the Council should engage constructively with Qualifications Scotland, have regard to consultations undertaken by Qualifications Scotland, and consult Qualifications Scotland and its committees where appropriate.

Qualifications Scotland remains accountable to Scottish Ministers for the performance of its statutory functions. The Council supports, but does not replace, this accountability relationship.

Qualifications Committee

The Qualifications Committee provides assurance, oversight and advice to the Board on the design, delivery, quality assurance and awarding arrangements for qualifications and any associated policies, in line with the Board's statutory duties. It also oversees the work of Qualifications Scotland in developing qualifications that meet the needs of candidates, centres and employers, now and into the future.

The Qualifications Committee has a duty to ensure that its advice is set into the context of the corporate plan, effective business planning and risk assessment. The Qualifications Committee will ensure that appropriate links are in place with the work of the Strategic Advisory Council and the Learner and Practitioner Committees.

Learner Interest Committee

The Learner Interest Committee is a sub-committee of the Qualifications Committee and is established by law.

Once fully established, the Committee will have regard to the voices, needs, and lived experiences of learners in informing the organisation's direction. The Committee will seek to understand learner priorities and will ensure that these perspectives are taken into account in the development of Qualifications Scotland's plans, continuous improvement activities, and strategic decision-making.

The Committee will consider and provide advice on policies, qualifications, and services from a learner-centred perspective, with particular regard to fairness, accessibility, and the achievement of positive outcomes for learners.

In carrying out its functions, the Committee will support the organisation in remaining responsive to learners, inclusive in its approach, and focused on delivering meaningful benefits for learners.

Teacher and Practitioner Interest Committee

The Teacher and Practitioner Interest Committee is a sub-committee of the Qualifications Committee and is established by law.

Once fully established, the Committee will draw on the expertise of individuals engaged in teaching, assessment, and the delivery of learning. The Committee will ensure that Qualifications Scotland benefits from professional insight reflecting the practical realities of classrooms, training environments, and assessment practice.

The Committee will consider and provide advice on the design and implementation of qualifications, standards, and policies, with particular regard to their impact on practitioners in practice. In doing so, the Committee will support decision-makers in maintaining a clear understanding of effective practice and operational realities.

Through its work, the Committee will contribute to decisions that are informed by professional experience and that support the delivery of high-quality learning and assessment across the organisation.

Expert Group on Qualifications Standards

The Education (Scotland) Act 2025 also requires Qualifications Scotland to establish a group, to be known as the Expert Group on Qualifications Standards, for the purposes of advising Qualifications Scotland on the quality of qualifications. At the time of writing work was underway to put this Group in place. The Group does not form part of Qualifications Scotland's formal governance arrangements.

3.2 Openness and transparency

As a public body, Qualifications Scotland is required to comply with legislation and with the directions of organisations including the Information Commissioner and the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman.

Qualifications Scotland will endeavour to be open and transparent regarding the development of qualifications and assessments, and the maintenance of national standards. However, there may be some instances where Qualifications Scotland is not able to provide information:

- UK data protection law (UK GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018) sets out requirements for the protection of personal data. It requires that any processing of personal data is lawful, fair and transparent, and that appropriate measures are in place to protect the personal data. All Qualifications Scotland employees,

appointees, nominees, agency workers and secondees must comply with these requirements.

- The Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act (FOISA) enables the public to access information held by Qualifications Scotland and other public bodies, and aims to promote transparency and accountability, ensuring good decision-making in the use of public money by public bodies. When a valid request for information is received, Qualifications Scotland must either make the information available or explain why it is being withheld.

In accordance with FOISA, Qualifications Scotland also maintains a Publication Scheme which sets out the information that it regularly publishes.

3.3 Qualifications

Every reasonable step is taken to produce qualifications based on national standards that are as accessible as possible. Qualifications Scotland equality-reviews qualifications to identify any aspects that might adversely impact on candidates with protected characteristics (see section 3.6 'Equality' for more about protected characteristics). Qualifications Scotland aims to remove such adverse impacts wherever possible, and minimise them where it is not possible to remove them altogether.

Development

There must be a real need, demonstrated by research and market intelligence, for any new qualification. It must fill a gap in the qualifications framework and make a valuable and unique contribution to Qualifications Scotland's portfolio of qualifications.

Qualifications Scotland will:

- work with stakeholders to identify the qualifications that are required to meet the needs of society
- consult with appropriate bodies to identify the need for the qualification
- operate a system of collecting feedback from stakeholders to review the qualifications regularly and engage in a programme of updating

Qualifications Scotland qualifications will be developed in accordance with the Design Principles for that qualification type. Design Principles state the mandatory structure of a qualification, detailing the rules to adhere to when designing the qualification.

Qualifications Scotland is one of the national partners in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and is committed to using the SCQF in developing and describing its Scottish qualifications. The Scottish Credit and Qualifications

Framework has 12 levels, from basic learning at SCQF level 1 to doctorates at SCQF level 12. The level shows the difficulty of the learning for the qualification. Each qualification also has a credit value, which is expressed in points; these show the size of the qualification and how much work is involved in achieving it.

Qualifications Scotland will engage with stakeholders who have current relevant experience to help with the development of a specific Qualifications Scotland qualification or suite of qualifications in a specific area.

All qualifications are subject to rigorous validation processes, carried out by subject experts, which ensure that all new and revised Qualifications Scotland qualifications are valid, credible and fit for purpose. Validation checks that:

- The qualification conforms to the Qualifications Scotland design principles and technical requirements that are current at the time of its validation.
- There is a demonstrable need for the qualification, it fills a gap in the qualifications framework, and it makes a valuable and unique contribution to Qualifications Scotland's portfolio of qualifications.
- The qualification is accessible to all candidates who could potentially achieve it.
- The qualification requires a candidate to demonstrate significant, achievable outcomes in a recognised curricular or vocational area.
- The qualification is coherent and its title accurately reflects its content.

Qualification development processes, procedures and quality checks will ensure that new and revised qualifications, specifications, guidance and assessment materials are clear to all users.

Review

Qualifications Scotland qualifications will be subject to maintenance throughout their life and will be reviewed at relevant intervals, as appropriate to the qualification type, to determine whether they remain current and fit for purpose.

Any qualification whose uptake rate is lower than the agreed low-uptake threshold for that qualification type will be deemed to be no longer current, and will be withdrawn unless there is a demonstrable need to retain it.

Transition arrangements will be put in place before the withdrawal of a qualification to ensure that existing candidates who are entered for it (or at other levels if the qualification is in a hierarchy) are not disadvantaged.

Information about these arrangements will be made available to centres at the earliest opportunity. Qualifications Scotland will ensure that candidates' interests are

safeguarded. Transition arrangements will be kept as simple as possible for candidates, centres and Qualifications Scotland.

3.4 Approval

All centres that are delivering Qualifications Scotland qualifications and presenting candidates for certification will go through an approval process to ensure that they are capable of doing so. The process through which a centre seeks approval may vary, but the processes ensure that centres have appropriate systems, resources and expertise to deliver and assess Qualifications Scotland's qualifications to the defined standard.

3.5 Assessment

Qualifications Scotland will ensure the assessment methodology of its qualifications is fit for purpose.

Every reasonable step is taken to create assessments based on national standards that are as accessible as possible. Qualifications Scotland conducts equality checks of assessments to identify any aspects that might adversely impact on candidates with protected characteristics (see 3.6 Equality). Qualifications Scotland aims to remove such adverse impacts wherever possible, and minimise them where it is not possible to remove them altogether.

Assessments devised by Qualifications Scotland

Qualifications Scotland uses a range of assessment instruments for qualifications. Assessment instruments for assessments devised by Qualifications Scotland will be appropriate to the qualification type, subject and level.

All exemplar assessments developed by Qualifications Scotland will be subject to quality assurance checks to ensure that they are valid, reliable, fair and accessible, demonstrate national standards, and promote good practice in assessment. Exemplar questions, items and tasks developed by Qualifications Scotland will demonstrate good practice in avoiding unnecessary barriers which could have an adverse impact on candidates on grounds of any of the protected characteristics.

Validity and reliability

Validity is a measure of the accuracy of an assessment; reliability is concerned with the consistency of assessment.

Qualifications Scotland will work with subject experts to ensure that the assessment of its qualifications is valid and reliable. Qualifications Scotland will ensure that its staff and appointees have the skills and knowledge needed to meet their responsibilities in relation to the delivery of qualifications and the maintenance of standards of assessment.

All Qualifications Scotland staff and appointees will receive the appropriate training to allow them to carry out their responsibilities. Training provision will be monitored and evaluated to ensure that it remains fit for purpose.

Fairness

Questions, items or tasks and their supporting Marking Instructions will be developed to pose no unnecessary barriers that could have an adverse impact on candidates on grounds of any of the protected characteristics.

All Qualifications Scotland assessments (live and exemplar) will be subject to quality assurance checks to ensure that the assessment of Qualifications Scotland qualifications is valid, reliable, fair and accessible and meets national standards year on year.

Process

Qualifications Scotland is responsible for planning and delivering the cycle of external assessment. All external assessment procedures will be published in good time and will be communicated to centres involved in the external assessment of Qualifications Scotland qualifications.

Qualifications Scotland will ensure sufficiently trained appointees are available to carry out specialist roles in the administration of external assessment. Marking teams will be managed to ensure that a common standard is maintained by providing training and a system of quality control. Qualifications Scotland will scrutinise the quality of work of each marker and will take action where required.

Centre resources for external assessment

Centre resources must be sufficient to support external assessment. Centres involved in the external assessment of Qualifications Scotland qualifications must provide suitable accommodation and facilities to meet the assessment needs of candidates. Chief invigilators must ensure that examination materials and candidate assessments, including scripts and electronically-stored evidence, are securely stored until dispatch.

Centre-devised assessments: validity and reliability

Qualifications Scotland's verification processes will ensure that internally-assessed evidence has been assessed in accordance with the relevant assessment specification, and that assessment decisions are valid, reliable and in line with the national standard.

Qualifications Scotland will ensure that standards and conditions for internal assessment are specified and communicated to all centres carrying out internal assessment of Qualifications Scotland qualifications.

3.6 Equality

Qualifications Scotland supports the principle of equal opportunities in employment, education and training and opposes all forms of unlawful discrimination on the grounds of disability, race, age, religion or belief, sex, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity or sexual orientation. This reflects the requirements of the Equality Act 2010 and wider public equality duties for promoting equality, eliminating discrimination and achieving equity.

Qualifications Scotland's qualifications and assessments cannot be unlawfully discriminatory, and reasonable adjustments will be made for disabled candidates, where these are consistent with maintaining the integrity of the qualification.

Section 96(7) of the Equality Act 2010 gives Qualifications Scotland, as the appropriate regulator of general qualifications in Scotland, a power to specify and publish where 'reasonable adjustments' to National Qualifications should not be made. Reasonable adjustments are steps taken to avoid a disadvantage to a disabled person.

Qualifications Scotland develops methods of assessment and quality assurance which are sensitive to the needs of all candidates but which do not compromise our overarching aims of fairness and consistency. Assessment arrangements are provided to allow disabled candidates and/or those with additional support needs to access the assessment without compromising its integrity. For disabled candidates, Qualifications Scotland will make reasonable adjustments in accordance with relevant legislation.

3.7 Quality assurance of internal assessment

Qualifications Scotland's external verification system will ensure that instruments of assessment are valid and reliable, and that centres' assessment decisions are in accordance with national standards.

Qualifications Scotland will accept centres' assessment decisions that are in accordance with national standards and assist centres in achieving national standards where necessary.

Quality assurance is a shared responsibility with stakeholders, where this is consistent with the maintenance of national standards. Qualifications Scotland will provide centres with information about the verification process. Centres will be informed of the requirements that they must meet in relation to the verification process.

Verification outcomes will be reported to centres within published timescales, and centres will be provided with feedback and support. Qualifications Scotland will have a process for managing appeals against verification outcomes.

Qualifications Scotland will select the appropriate form of verification for the qualifications being verified. Qualifications Scotland will select sufficient centres and qualifications to ensure an appropriate level of verification is conducted for each qualification type. Centre and qualification selection will take into account available intelligence, and will be aimed at reducing risk.

Qualifications Scotland will recruit, appoint and train sufficient personnel with the appropriate subject and / or occupational and assessment expertise to verify Qualifications Scotland assessments.

Qualifications Scotland will regularly review its external verification system to ensure best practice. Information about any changes made to the external verification system will be made available to centres at the earliest opportunity and appointees fully trained on any changes to the system.

3.8 Awarding

All candidates will be issued with a record of their results on successful completion of their qualifications, in accordance with the published timescales.

Qualifications Scotland units

Candidates who have met the standard of one or more Qualifications Scotland units will receive their result in accordance with the stated unit completion date. Units which form part of a National Course will be resulted with that course.

Qualifications Scotland group awards

Candidates who have successfully achieved all the units of a group award will receive their group award result, together with the contributing units in accordance with the group award completion date.

National Courses

In qualifications where cut-off scores such as pass / fail or grade boundaries are used, Qualifications Scotland will ensure that they reflect candidate performance that is in line with established standards.

Qualifications Scotland will use a range of relevant information and expertise to determine cut-off scores. This might include some or all of the following, as appropriate to the qualification:

- performance / grade descriptions
- exemplar material
- the assessment and associated marking instructions
- candidate evidence
- statistical information (such as mark distributions, item statistics, cohort information)
- other relevant qualitative and / or quantitative information

In qualifications where different assessments are used each year, Qualifications Scotland will ensure that cut-off scores maintain comparability of standards.

Results enquiries

Procedures for dealing with enquiries related to external assessment decisions will be available to candidates and to those administering assessments.

Qualifications Scotland will ensure that centres have procedures for dealing with enquiries about centre assessment decisions.

Malpractice

Qualifications Scotland's systems and procedures will ensure that cases of malpractice are detected and dealt with. 'Malpractice' includes maladministration and non-compliance, and means any act, default or practice which is a breach of Qualifications Scotland requirements and compromises, or has the possibility of compromising, the integrity of any Qualifications Scotland qualification or certificate.

Qualifications Scotland is committed to safeguarding its reputation for the quality and credibility of its qualifications, therefore all allegations of malpractice will be investigated consistently, fairly and impartially.

Reporting results

The suite of annual Official Statistics will provide details of the results for Qualifications Scotland qualifications in the academic year.

3.9 Monitoring standards

Annually

Each year, Qualifications Scotland will evaluate the performance of its assessments. For National Courses, grade boundaries, pass rates, and qualitative data provided by examination teams will be used in the preparation of future assessments.

Question papers will be annually evaluated with learners and centres to continuously improve their design and maintain assessment standards.

Monitoring of standards over time

Qualifications Scotland's Monitoring Standards programme will monitor whether its qualifications are awarded on the basis of standards that are comparable to those in the past. The programme includes yearly samples covering various levels and areas in the main qualification types.

For Qualifications Scotland, comparability over time means that a course or unit has remained equally demanding over time, even when reviewed or replaced; that candidates in one year have been set tasks that are as demanding as in another year; and that similar evidence has received the same judgement.

Qualifications Scotland will maintain an archive of assessment material. The maintenance of this archive contributes to the monitoring of standards over time by providing material for comparison and benchmark scripts for setting grade boundaries in National Qualifications.

Benchmarking

Qualifications Scotland will, where possible, participate in benchmarking and comparability studies to understand how its qualifications compare with assessments available in other education systems.

3.10 External regulation

Qualifications Scotland is accredited by Qualifications Scotland (Accreditation) and other regulators to offer a range of qualifications. Qualifications Scotland will adhere to the accrediting or other regulatory criteria to ensure that the assessment of its qualifications is valued and credible with users, partner organisations and the wider community.