



## SQA Centre Malpractice Annual Report 2021

This report provides information on SQA's approach to managing centre malpractice concerns in 2021.

Like 2020, centre malpractice referrals for 2021 should be seen in the context of the disruption to education and training caused by the pandemic.

This is our definition of malpractice:

*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.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> *Malpractice: Information for Centres* [https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files\\_ccc/2020-malpractice-information-centres.pdf](https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/2020-malpractice-information-centres.pdf), page 5

The information in this report 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.

## Summary of concerns

This information on centre malpractice in 2021 should be seen in the context of the second year of disruption to education and training caused by the pandemic. These included centre closures, the cancellation of 2021 National Qualification external assessments by Scottish Ministers, and the impact of public health restrictions. In June and August 2021 SQA's Code of Practice Governance Group confirmed the approach to be taken by SQA when managing concerns of possible centre malpractice across the qualifications portfolio.

Risk-based decisions were taken by SQA malpractice panels, following consideration of available information, to identify the appropriate response to specific centre malpractice concerns as described in *Malpractice: Information for Centres*. Those approaches included closing the matter without further investigation, bringing the matter to the attention of the centre for action locally, or initiating investigations whether centre-led (devolved) or SQA-led where necessary.

**Table 1 Overview of concerns in NQ and HNMQ**

Year	Concerns logged	Ongoing	Concerns closed at screening	Concerns 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
2021	88	2	49	37	34	3

Table 1 shows that in 2021 a total of 88 concerns were logged, of which 49 were closed at the screening stage. Of these, 18 concerns were brought to the attention of the centre for action locally. The screening stage is the first stage in the centre malpractice process. Here, 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 2021, 37 concerns were investigated to a conclusion. Of these 34 led to a finding of malpractice. 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 88 concerns logged in 2021 account for less than 6% of the number of centres registered to deliver SQA qualifications by the end of 2021.

**Table 2 Qualification type**

<b>Year</b>	<b>National Qualifications</b>	<b>Higher National or Vocational Qualifications</b>	<b>Total</b>
2017	75	33	<b>108</b>
2018	222	48	<b>270</b>
2019	367	54	<b>421</b>
2020	32	31	<b>63</b>
2021	53	35	<b>88</b>

The total concerns given in Table 2 include 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.

**Table 3 Source of concerns**

Year	Concerns identified by SQA staff, including appointees, during marking and quality assurance processes	Concerns identified in other ways	Total
2017	57	51	<b>108</b>
2018	207	63	<b>270</b>
2019	360	61	<b>421</b>
2020	25	38	<b>63</b>
2021	27	61	<b>88</b>

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 in 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.

**Table 4 Principal type of malpractice identified in panel findings**

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	<b>51</b>
2018	13	51	72	5	1	1	<b>143</b>
2019	11	88	60	5	6	1	<b>171</b>
2020	14	5	6	0	3	4	<b>32</b>
2021	13	2	7	0	11	1	<b>34</b>

Table 4 shows the principal type of malpractice for those cases where the panel reached a finding of malpractice. A malpractice panel decision can include findings across a number of

centre practices, and there is a degree of subjectivity in defining the principal type of finding in unique and complex circumstances.

The most prevalent principal finding type was that there had been a failure of administrative systems for assessment and certification. This comprised 12 findings for HNVQ and one for NQ.

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 measure required by SQA as a result of malpractice investigations in 2021**

Malpractice panels consider whether remedial or improvement actions are to be recommended or required. The measure most frequently mandated by a malpractice panel 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 have been implemented.

In many 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.

Information provided for centre malpractice in 2021 should be seen in the context of the second year of disruption to education and training caused by the pandemic. SQA continues to work with centres to prevent, identify, investigate and mitigate any concerns of possible malpractice, as described in *Malpractice: Information for Centres*.