



Qualification Design Principles

Version number	v1.1
Policy author	Policy, Research and Standards Managers
Policy owner	Martyn Ware
Business area	Policy, Research and Standards
Policy effective from	June 2025
Policy review date	June 2026
Policy approved by	Standards and Policy Group
Policy approval date	June 2025
Equality impact assessment (EqIA) date	Not applicable – screening review completed.

Why do we need the policy?

The [SQA Awarding Body Code of Practice](#) states that 'SQA qualifications will be developed in accordance with the Design Principles for that qualification type.'

Who is it for?

This policy applies to all SQA staff and appointees involved in the development or review of SQA qualifications.

What support is available?

The HNVQ Policy and NQ Policy teams can provide support on implementing this policy. You can find more information in the following documents:

- ◆ [Handbook for developing National 1 units and support notes](#)
- ◆ [Handbook for developing National 2 and 3 courses](#)
- ◆ [Handbook for developing National 4 courses](#)
- ◆ [Handbook for developing graded National Courses at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher](#)
- ◆ [Handbook for writing Higher National Units and Higher National graded units](#)
- ◆ [Handbook for Developing SQA Unit Specifications for Externally Regulated Qualifications in England and Wales](#)
- ◆ *Handbook: Using NOS industry and higher education standards in the development of SQA qualifications*
- ◆ [Writing National and Higher National Units: Guide for Writers](#)

Contents

1	Policy statement	4
2	Policy relationship to SQA's Governing Principles	4
3	Responsibilities	4
4	Definitions	4
5	Qualification Design Principles	5
5.1	Skills for Work	6
5.2	National Courses (graded)	9
5.3	National Courses (ungraded)	12
5.4	Scottish Baccalaureates	15
5.5	Awards	19
5.6	Higher National Qualifications	21
5.7	National Certificates	23
5.8	Professional Development Awards	25
5.9	National Progression Awards	27
5.10	Scottish Vocational Qualifications	29
5.11	Alternative competence-based qualifications	32

1 Policy statement

SQA qualifications are developed following the Design Principles for the qualification type.

2 Policy relationship to SQA's Governing Principles

SQA's Governing Principles govern how SQA meets its statutory duties and self-regulates its activities. The Qualification Design Principles support the following Governing Principles:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Governing Principle 2: | SQA will ensure that there is a clear rationale for the development and review of its qualifications, based on educational, vocational or business needs. |
| Governing Principle 3: | SQA will work in partnership with centres, stakeholders and independent experts to develop and review qualifications. |
| Governing Principle 4: | SQA will conduct rigorous validation processes to ensure that all qualifications are fit for purpose. |
| Governing Principle 7: | SQA will ensure that all qualifications and assessments are as fair and accessible as possible and that the needs of all candidates are met in the management of its assessments. |

3 Responsibilities

The NQ Policy and HNVQ Policy teams are responsible for making sure that Qualification Design Principles are fit for purpose and for communicating any changes to relevant staff.

4 Definitions

Design Principles are the blueprint for all SQA qualifications. They outline the features our qualifications must have to maintain our standards.

5 Qualification Design Principles

The following sections are the Design Principles for SQA's 11 product types:

- ◆ [Skills for Work](#)
- ◆ [National Courses \(graded\)](#)
- ◆ [National Courses \(ungraded\)](#)
- ◆ [Scottish Baccalaureates](#)
- ◆ [Awards](#)
- ◆ [Higher National Qualifications](#)
- ◆ [National Certificates](#)
- ◆ [Professional Development Awards](#)
- ◆ [National Progression Awards](#)
- ◆ [Scottish Vocational Qualifications](#)
- ◆ [Alternative competence-based qualifications](#)

5.1 Skills for Work

Rationale

Every Skills for Work course must have a clear rationale that:

- ♦ justifies the need for the course and its uniqueness
- ♦ provides evidence of demand for the course
- ♦ fits the needs of the vocational area
- ♦ explains how the course fits with other qualifications
- ♦ identifies the progression opportunities into and from the course
- ♦ outlines the aims, purposes and intended learning outcomes of the course, and explains how the award structure enables them

Qualification design

Skills for Work courses help candidates develop:

- ♦ skills and knowledge in a broad vocational area
- ♦ skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work
- ♦ Core Skills
- ♦ an understanding of the workplace
- ♦ positive attitudes to learning
- ♦ skills and attitudes for employability

A Skills for Work course can be made up of mandatory units only, or both mandatory and optional units. However, at least 6 SCQF credit points must be mandatory units and these must reflect the title of the course. There are no alternatives in this mandatory section. In some courses, all component units are mandatory.

Optional units can account for up to 18 SCQF credit points (12 SCQF credit points at SCQF levels 2 and 3). Optional units should reflect identified needs of the specialist area, and the rationale, aims, purposes and intended learning outcomes of the course.

Units in a Skills for Work course can be of different SCQF credit values, but they must all be at the same SCQF level as the course.

There may be a separate employability unit within the course structure, but this should be contextualised within the vocational area and integrated with the other units in the course. There does not need to be an employability unit, but you must include employability skills in units across the course.

Each unit should be coherent and worthy of recognition in its own right.

If there is a suite of courses with the same title at different levels, the course structure should be consistent across levels.

SCQF level and credit points

The level of a Skills for Work course must be consistent with the appropriate SCQF level descriptor.

The extent of coverage of a Skills for Work course should be comparable to appropriate existing or previous qualifications at the same level, and should be consistent with the rationale and the aims, purposes and intended learning outcomes of the course. Units must all be at the SCQF level of the course.

Skills for Work courses have the following SCQF credit points:

- ◆ National 2 and 3 courses — units total 18 points
- ◆ National 4, National 5 and Higher courses — units total 24 points

Assessment

Units are internally assessed on a pass or fail basis and are ungraded.

Unit assessment should be fit for purpose and proportionate. Units can be assessed on a unit-by-unit basis. In some courses, it is possible to gather evidence of achievement of units in an integrated way, combining assessments across units.

Assessment methodologies for Skills for Work courses should support the [Assessment for Curriculum for Excellence: Strategic Vision Key Principles](#). They should promote best practice and enable candidates to achieve the highest standards they are capable of. They should support greater breadth and depth of learning and a greater focus on skills development.

Assessment approaches should be proportionate and fit for purpose. Different forms of assessment are appropriate in different areas of learning, and this should be reflected in the assessment approaches for Skills for Work courses. Assessment in Skills for Work courses is designed to reflect the practical nature of the courses and meaningful workplace tasks.

Award of qualification

For the award of a Skills for Work course at any level, candidates must pass all the units in the course.

Grading

Skills for Work courses are ungraded.

Skills

Every Skills for Work course should provide opportunities to develop skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work. Skills for Work courses should also incorporate opportunities for candidates to develop Core Skills as defined in SQA's policy on Core Skills and other generic skills for learning, life and work across qualifications.

Skills for Work courses should be based on employability skills as defined in SQA's Essential Skills Framework.

Equality

Skills for Work courses should take into consideration the needs of all candidates. These qualifications should be as accessible and inclusive as possible to candidates who will achieve in different ways and at a different pace.

5.2 National Courses (graded)

Rationale

Every graded National Course must have a clear rationale that:

- ♦ justifies the need for the course and its uniqueness
- ♦ provides evidence of demand for the course
- ♦ explains how the course fits with other qualifications
- ♦ identifies the progression opportunities into and from the course
- ♦ outlines the aims, purposes and intended learning outcomes of the course, and explains how the award structure enables them
- ♦ gives information about who the course is for

The content of a graded National Course must be determined through rigorous validation processes and comply with the relevant requirements of SQA's Governing Principles.

Qualification design

Graded National Courses (National 5 to Advanced Higher) are course-based and must:

- ♦ provide opportunities to develop skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work
- ♦ take into consideration practical aspects of delivery and be deliverable in a range of centres. The requirements for practitioner expertise and resources should not be restrictive and should be appropriate for general qualifications
- ♦ take into consideration the needs of all candidates, and be as accessible and inclusive as possible to candidates who will achieve in different ways and at a different pace

National Course structure, SCQF level and credit points

The level of a graded National Course must be consistent with the appropriate SCQF level descriptor. The extent of coverage of a graded National Course must be:

- ♦ comparable to appropriate existing or previous qualifications at the same level
- ♦ appropriate to the SCQF credits for the course, consistent with the rationale and the aims, purposes and intended learning outcomes of the course

If there is a suite of courses with the same title at different levels, the course structure should be consistent across levels.

The following table outlines the current structure of graded National Courses.

Course	SCQF credit and level	Structure
Advanced Higher	32 points at level 7	Assessed through question papers and/or coursework and no longer unit-based
Higher	24 points at level 6	Assessed through question papers and/or coursework and no longer unit-based
National 5	24 points at level 5	Assessed through question papers and/or coursework and no longer unit-based

SCQF credit points — directed and self-directed learning

- ◆ National Courses at National 5 and Higher are notionally based on 160 hours of directed learning and 80 hours of self-directed learning and have a credit value of 24 SCQF credit points.
- ◆ National Courses at Advanced Higher are notionally based on 160 hours of directed learning and 160 hours of self-directed learning and have a credit value of 32 SCQF credit points.

Assessment

All aspects of graded National Course assessments must follow the relevant requirements of SQA's Governing Principles.

Graded National Course assessment approaches must be:

- ◆ valid and reliable
- ◆ fair, equitable, accessible and inclusive, and must allow candidates to show what they have achieved
- ◆ proportionate and fit for purpose

Assessment of National 5 to Advanced Higher courses

- ◆ All graded National Courses include a graded course assessment. Course assessment consists of question paper and/or non-question paper components (coursework) as appropriate.
- ◆ Course assessment design and assessment load must be based on the assessment strategy for National 5 to Advanced Higher courses implemented in 2017. SQA assessments promote best practice and enable candidates to achieve the highest standards they are capable of.
- ◆ There is a maximum of four course assessment components in any National 5 to Advanced Higher course.
- ◆ Course assessment at National 5 to Advanced Higher sample the skills, knowledge and understanding from the mandatory course content, as well as breadth, depth, challenge, application and integration of these, as appropriate. It may involve a question paper, assignment, performance, project, practical activity, case study, portfolio, or a combination of these, as appropriate to the study area.

Award of qualification

National Courses (National 5 to Advanced Higher) are attained by achieving all the components of the course assessment.

Grading

National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses are graded A–D.

The following bands and percentage mark ranges apply to National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher from 2019–20. Valid estimate bands are 1–9.

Band	Estimated performance	Notional percent range
1	Band A (upper) range	85–100
2	Band A (lower) range	70–84
3	Band B (upper)	65–69
4	Band B (lower)	60–64
5	Band C (upper)	55–59
6	Band C (lower)	50–54
7	Band D	40–49
8	No award	30–39
9	No award	0–29

Skills

All graded National Courses provide opportunities to develop skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work.

A small number of agreed National Courses incorporate Core Skills.

Equality

Graded National Courses must take into consideration the needs of all candidates. These qualifications should be as accessible and inclusive as possible to candidates who will achieve in different ways and at a different pace.

5.3 National Courses (ungraded)

Rationale

Every ungraded National Course must have a clear rationale that:

- ◆ justifies the need for the course and its uniqueness
- ◆ provides evidence of demand for the course
- ◆ explains how the course fits with other qualifications
- ◆ identifies the progression opportunities into and from the course
- ◆ outlines the aims, purposes and intended learning outcomes of the course, and explains how the award structure enables them
- ◆ gives information about who this course is for

The content of an ungraded National Course must be determined through rigorous validation processes and comply with the relevant requirements of SQA's Governing Principles.

Qualification design

Ungraded National Courses are unit-based.

Each unit in an ungraded National Course must be coherent and worthy of recognition in its own right.

Ungraded National Courses can be made up of mandatory units only, or both mandatory and optional units. However, at least 6 SCQF credit points must be from mandatory units, and these must reflect the title of the course. There are no alternatives in this mandatory section. In some courses, all component units are mandatory.

Optional units can account for up to 12 SCQF credit points. Optional units should reflect identified needs of the specialist area, and the rationale, aims, purposes and intended learning outcomes of the course.

Units in ungraded National Courses can be of different SCQF credit values, but they must all be at the same SCQF level as the course.

Ungraded National Courses must take into consideration practical aspects of delivery and be deliverable in a range of centres. The requirements for practitioner expertise and resources should not be restrictive and should be appropriate for general qualifications.

National Course structure, SCQF level and credit points

The level of an ungraded National Course must be consistent with the appropriate SCQF level descriptor. The extent of coverage of an ungraded National Course must be:

- ◆ comparable to appropriate existing or previous qualifications at the same level
- ◆ appropriate to the SCQF credits for the course, consistent with the rationale and the aims, purposes and intended learning outcomes of the course

If there is a suite of courses with the same title at different levels, the course structure should be consistent across levels.

The following table outlines the current structure of ungraded National Courses after completing the Revised National Qualifications programme.

Course	SCQF credit and level	Structure
National 4	24 points at level 4	Internally assessed, unit-based structure with added value unit
National 3	18 points at level 3	Internally assessed, unit-based structure
National 2	18 points at level 2	Internally assessed, unit-based structure

SCQF credit points — directed and self-directed learning

- ◆ National 2 and National 3 courses are notionally based on 180 hours of directed learning and have a credit value of 18 SCQF credit points. National 2 courses recognise that candidates may need more time to complete units and courses, according to their individual needs. National 3 courses recognise that candidates may need an additional half of the time required for directed learning to successfully complete the course.
- ◆ National 4 courses are notionally based on 160 hours of directed learning and 80 hours of self-directed learning, and have a credit value of 24 SCQF credit points. One of the units (6 SCQF credit points) assesses added value. This requires the candidate to show depth of understanding and/or application of skills.

Assessment

Units are internally assessed on a pass or fail basis and are ungraded.

Unit assessment must be fit for purpose and proportionate. Units can be assessed individually. In some subjects, it will be possible to gather evidence of achievement in an integrated way, combining assessments across units.

Assessment methodologies for ungraded National Courses must promote best practice and enable candidates to achieve the highest standards they are capable of. They support greater breadth, depth and challenge of learning and a greater focus on skills development.

Assessment approaches must be:

- ◆ fair, equitable, accessible and inclusive, and must allow candidates to show what they have achieved
- ◆ proportionate and fit for purpose

Candidates must provide evidence that they have achieved all the units of the course. Units can be assessed individually. In some subjects, it will be possible to gather evidence of achievement in an integrated way, combining assessments across units.

All aspects of assessments must follow the relevant requirements of SQA's Governing Principles.

Award of qualification

For the award of an ungraded National Course at National 2, National 3 and National 4, candidates must pass all the units in the course.

Grading

Ungraded National Courses are ungraded.

Skills

All ungraded National Courses provide opportunities to develop skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work.

A small number of agreed National Courses incorporate Core Skills.

Equality

Ungraded National Courses must take into consideration the needs of all candidates. These qualifications should be as accessible and inclusive as possible to candidates who will achieve in different ways and at a different pace.

5.4 Scottish Baccalaureates

Rationale

Every Scottish Baccalaureate must have a clear rationale that:

- ◆ justifies the need for the qualification and its uniqueness
- ◆ provides evidence of demand for the qualification
- ◆ explains how it fits with other qualifications
- ◆ identifies the progression opportunities into and from the qualification
- ◆ outlines the aims, purposes and intended learning outcomes of the qualification, and explains how the award structure enables them
- ◆ gives information about who this course is for

Qualification design

Scottish Baccalaureates are group awards at SCQF level 7. They are made up of three courses and an interdisciplinary project unit.

Two of the courses must be at SCQF level 7 (Advanced Higher) and one course must be at SCQF level 6 (Higher).

Two of the courses must be in a specialised subject grouping.¹ This must include a mandatory underpinning course in either:

- ◆ Mathematics, Applications of Mathematics, Mathematics of Mechanics, or Statistics; or
- ◆ English, Gàidhlig or ESOL

The third course must come from either the specialised subject grouping or an agreed broadening grouping.² The arrangements document must specify which courses count towards the Baccalaureate and clearly identify any restricted routes.

¹ Apart from the mandatory underpinning courses, specialised subject grouping courses appear in one Baccalaureate only.

² Courses in the broadening groupings can appear in more than one Baccalaureate.

Scottish Baccalaureate frameworks

Science	Languages	Expressive arts	Social sciences
Specialised subject grouping: mandatory underpinning courses			
Mathematics*/ Applications of Mathematics/ Mathematics of Mechanics*/ Statistics*	English*/ESOL/ Gàidhlig*	English*/ESOL/ Gàidhlig* or Mathematics*/ Applications of Mathematics/ Mathematics of Mechanics*/ Statistics*	English*/ESOL/ Gàidhlig* or Mathematics*/ Applications of Mathematics/ Mathematics of Mechanics*/ Statistics*
Interdisciplinary project	Interdisciplinary project	Interdisciplinary project	Interdisciplinary project
Specialised subject grouping: other specialised courses			
At least ONE course	TWO courses	At least ONE course	At least ONE course
Biology* Chemistry* Environmental Science Human Biology Physics*	Cantonese* French* Gaelic (Learners)* German* Italian* Latin* Mandarin* Spanish* Urdu	Art and Design* Dance Drama* Music* Music Technology* Photography	Classical Studies* Economics* Geography* History* Modern Studies* Philosophy Politics Psychology RMPS* Sociology
Broadening grouping			
Max ONE course		Max ONE course	Max ONE course
Computing Science* Design and Manufacture* Engineering Science* Geography* Graphic Communication* Psychology		Design and Manufacture* Fashion and Textile Technology Graphic Communication* Media Physical Education*	Accounting* Business Management* Environmental Science
* Currently available at Advanced Higher level			

SQA's course catalogue is kept under constant review. New courses may be added, or existing courses may be deleted or replaced.

SCQF level and credit points

Two Advanced Higher courses at SCQF level 7 have a credit value of 64 SCQF credit points.

One Higher course at SCQF level 6 has a credit value of 24 SCQF credit points.

The interdisciplinary project unit is at SCQF level 7 (Advanced Higher) and is worth 16 SCQF credit points (SQA double credit unit).

Assessment

The interdisciplinary project unit is internally assessed and externally verified.

Award of qualification

Candidates must achieve two Advanced Higher courses (SCQF level 7), one Higher (SCQF level 6) and the interdisciplinary project (Advanced Higher) (SCQF level 7).

Grading

The interdisciplinary project is graded A, B or C. There is no grade D award for the project.

Scottish Baccalaureates are awarded at pass or distinction.

Candidates who achieve at least a grade A in one Advanced Higher course, a grade A in one other course and a grade B in all other components will achieve distinction overall. Candidates who do not meet these criteria but who pass all the mandatory components will achieve a pass.

Skills

Scottish Baccalaureates can provide opportunities to develop skills from the following frameworks:

- ◆ Core Skills
- ◆ Skills for Learning, Skills for Life and Skills for Work
- ◆ Essential Skills

It is expected that a Scottish Baccalaureate will have embedded the Core Skill of problem solving through the work of the interdisciplinary project.

Candidates should show evidence of development and self-evaluation of cognitive and generic skills in an area of career or personal interest in one or more of the specialist or broadening subject groupings. These include skills such as employability, enterprise, citizenship, sustainable development and economic development.

Candidates can develop the following skills through the interdisciplinary project:

- ◆ application of subject knowledge and understanding

- ◆ research skills: analysis and evaluation
- ◆ interpersonal skills: negotiation and collaboration
- ◆ planning: time, resource and information management
- ◆ independent learning: autonomy and challenge in own learning
- ◆ problem solving: critical thinking, and logical and creative approaches
- ◆ presentation skills
- ◆ self-evaluation: recognition of own skills development and future areas for development

Equality

Scottish Baccalaureates must take into consideration the needs of all candidates. These qualifications should be as accessible and inclusive as possible to candidates who will achieve in different ways and at a different pace.

5.5 Awards

Rationale

Every Award must have a clear rationale that:

- ◆ justifies the need for the qualification and its uniqueness
- ◆ provides evidence of demand for the qualification
- ◆ explains how it fits with other qualifications
- ◆ identifies the progression opportunities into and from the qualification
- ◆ outlines the aims, purposes and intended learning outcomes of the qualification, and explains how the award structure enables them
- ◆ gives information about who the course is for

An Award must:

- ◆ have value and be worthy of certification in its own right
- ◆ meet a defined purpose, which may be broad or specialist

Qualification design

Awards may be made up of mandatory units only, or both mandatory and optional units.

If the Award is made up of a single unit, the unit must be the same level as the Award. If the Award is made up of more than one unit, more than half the units must be at the level of the Award.

An Award must contain at least one whole unit. There is no limit to the number of units an Award can contain.

Awards can be any combination of Higher National (HN) Units, Scottish Vocational Qualification (SVQ) Units, National (Workplace) Units and National Units. The units can be of any credit value.

Awards can contain courses or other group awards.

An external assessment from a National Course may not contribute to an Award.

SCQF level and credit points

Awards and their component unit(s) can be set at SCQF levels 1–12.

There is no restriction on the value of SCQF credit points. Units can be of any SQA credit value. However, fractional SCQF credits must be rounded up or down as appropriate to the correct SCQF credit value.

Assessment

Units within an Award are assessed internally.

Award of qualification

Candidates must achieve the required number of units (mandatory and/or optional) in the Award framework.

Grading

Candidates must pass the units within the chosen framework pathway of the Award. They are ungraded.

Skills

Awards can provide opportunities to develop skills from the following frameworks:

- ◆ Core Skills
- ◆ Skills for Learning, Skills for Life and Skills for Work
- ◆ Essential Skills

Given the flexible nature of Awards, there is no design requirement for any of the above skills to be included within an Award unless it is appropriate.

Equality

Awards must take into consideration the needs of all candidates. These qualifications should be as accessible and inclusive as possible to candidates who will achieve in different ways and at a different pace.

5.6 Higher National Qualifications

Rationale

Every Higher National Qualification must have a clear rationale that:

- ◆ justifies the need for the qualification and its uniqueness
- ◆ provides evidence of demand for the qualification
- ◆ explains how it fits with other qualifications
- ◆ identifies the progression opportunities into and from the qualification
- ◆ outlines the aims, purposes and intended learning outcomes of the qualification, and explains how the award structure enables them
- ◆ gives information about who the course is for

Qualification design

Higher National Certificates (HNCs) must include a mandatory section of at least 48 SCQF credit points. This must contain a graded unit of 8 SCQF credit points at SCQF level 7.

Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) must include a mandatory section of at least 96 SCQF credit points. This must contain one graded unit worth 8 SCQF credit points at SCQF level 7, and one or more graded units totalling 16 SCQF credit points at SCQF level 8.

SCQF level and credit points

HNCs are at SCQF level 7 and worth 96 SCQF credit points. Of these, at least 48 SCQF credit points must be at SCQF level 7.

HNDs are at SCQF level 8 and worth 240 SCQF credit points. Of these, at least 64 SCQF credit points must be at SCQF level 8.

Assessment

The purposes of graded units are to:

- ◆ assess candidates' ability to integrate and apply the knowledge and/or skills gained in the individual HN Units to show they have met the principal aims of the group award
- ◆ grade candidates' achievement

Units within a Higher National Qualification are internally assessed.

Award of qualification

To gain a HNC or HND, candidates must achieve the required unit assessments and graded units within the group award.

Grading

HNC and HND graded units are graded A–C.

Skills

HNCs and HNDs should clearly include opportunities for candidates to develop Core Skills to levels required by the occupations or progression pathways they support. This means all five Core Skills should be developed in every HN programme.

Equality

Higher National Qualifications must take into consideration the needs of all candidates. These qualifications should be as accessible and inclusive as possible to candidates who will achieve in different ways and at a different pace.

Further considerations for Qualification Design Teams

HN Unit and graded unit specifications

SQA produces guidance on how to write HN Unit and graded unit specifications. These include templates and examples of how the specifications should be laid out. Always use this guidance when developing new or revised HN Unit or graded unit specifications.

Validation of HN Unit specifications

A key part of validation is to confirm the proposed allocation of SCQF levels and SCQF credit points to each unit, and this needs to be done consistently. Until the process of devolving this to centres is fully worked out, SQA will validate all new or revised HN Unit specifications. Centres may continue to develop HN Unit specifications for validation by SQA.

Validation of HN Group Awards and graded units

Group award validation may continue to be carried out by centres with devolved powers to do so. As graded units relate to the principal aims of a group award, they can also be validated by devolved centres as part of group awards.

Validation periods

Design teams must keep HN Units, graded units and group awards under review to make sure they are still fit for purpose. Normally, reviews take place every five years. However, validation panels may recommend more frequent reviews. Specific time periods of validation will not be specified.

5.7 National Certificates

Rationale

Every National Certificate must have a clear rationale that:

- ♦ justifies the need for the qualification and its uniqueness
- ♦ provides evidence of demand for the qualification
- ♦ explains how it fits with other qualifications
- ♦ identifies the progression opportunities into and from the qualification
- ♦ outlines the aims, purposes and intended learning outcomes of the qualification, and explains how the award structure enables them
- ♦ gives information about who the course is for

Qualification design

All National Certificates have a mandatory section. The mandatory section can contain alternative units, but all alternatives must reflect the title of the National Certificate. Alternative units must, in general, serve the same purpose and be at the same SCQF level as the units they are substituting.

For National Certificates at SCQF levels 2 and 3, the mandatory section is a minimum of 27 SCQF credit points. For National Certificates at SCQF levels 4, 5 and 6, the mandatory section is a minimum of 36 SCQF credit points.

National Occupational Standards

National Certificates must be aligned to National Occupational Standards (NOS), or other professional or trade body standards, as appropriate to the group award. Further information is available in [*Using National Occupational Standards, industry and higher education standards in the development of SQA qualifications*](#).

National Courses

National Certificates may include a maximum of three graded National Course assessments, as appropriate to the group award area. A National Course equates to one credit in the National Certificate framework.

SCQF level and credit points

National Certificates can be set at SCQF levels 2–6.

National Certificates at levels 2 and 3 are made up of units with a credit value of 54 SCQF credit points.

National Certificates at levels 4, 5 and 6 are made up of units with a credit value of 72 SCQF credit points.

Component units of a National Certificate must be at a level appropriate to the qualification's position in the SCQF. The majority of the credit points must be at the level of the group award.

Assessment

National Certificates may include a maximum of three graded course assessments, as appropriate to the group award area.

Units within a National Certificate are internally assessed.

Award of qualification

Candidates must achieve all the units and a grade A-C in any graded courses in the National Certificate framework.

Grading

National Courses contained within National Certificates are graded A–D. Grades awarded are based on the total marks achieved across all components of the course assessment.

National Certificates are ungraded.

Skills

National Certificates should clearly include opportunities for candidates to develop Core Skills to the levels required by the occupations or progression pathways they support. This normally means incorporating all five Core Skills in every National Certificate.

National Certificates should facilitate credited attainment of specific Core Skills if they are critical to the aims of the group award. In this case, they should appear in the mandatory section either as a discrete unit or within another unit.

Equality

National Certificates must take into consideration the needs of all candidates. These qualifications should be as accessible and inclusive as possible to candidates who will achieve in different ways and at a different pace.

5.8 Professional Development Awards

Rationale

Every Professional Development Award (PDA) must have a clear rationale that:

- ♦ justifies the need for the qualification and its uniqueness
- ♦ provides evidence of demand for the qualification
- ♦ explains how it fits with other qualifications
- ♦ identifies the progression opportunities into and from the qualification
- ♦ outlines the aims, purposes and intended learning outcomes of the qualification, and explains how the award structure enables them
- ♦ gives information about who the course is for

Qualification design

PDAs are made up of at least two units or one double credit unit, which must all be validated and credit rated by SQA. These can be HN Units, SVQ Units, National (Workplace) Units and National Qualification Units.

Units can be mandatory and/or optional, and must reflect the title of the group award. The choice of structure must reflect the title and aim of the award. This is checked at validation. For example, if an award is made up solely of optional units, it must be shown how each combination of units provides the skills and knowledge outlined in the aims of the group award.

PDAs must be aligned to NOS, or other professional body standards, as appropriate to the group award area.

It is possible to have PDAs with the same vocational context at different SCQF levels. However, each group award must have distinct aims that correspond with the level of the PDA, and there must be a separate need and demand for each level.

PDAs can also be embedded within other qualifications, such as HNCs and HNDs. In this case, there must be a separate rationale, aims, purpose and structure for the PDA. This must be supported by market research (although validation may take place at the same time as the HNC or HND).

SCQF level and credit points

All PDAs and their component units are credit rated against SCQF. They may be set at SCQF levels 6–12.

At SCQF level 6, PDAs are made up of units with a minimum credit value of 12 SCQF credit points.

At SCQF levels 7–12, PDAs have a minimum credit value of 16 SCQF credit points.

At least half the SCQF credit points must be at the level of the group award.

There should be new titles for all revised PDAs that reflect the vocational context and the SCQF level of the group award. So, revised PDAs are titled 'Professional Development Award in XXXX at SCQF level X', for example, 'Professional Development Award in Enterprise at SCQF level 8'.

Assessment

Units within a Professional Development Awards are internally assessed.

Award of qualification

Candidates must achieve all unit assessments within the group award.

Grading

Professional Development Awards are ungraded.

Skills

PDAs should provide all candidates with opportunities for the development of Core Skills and other generic skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work. You can use the following skills frameworks:

- ◆ Core Skills
- ◆ Skills for Learning, Skills for Life and Skills for Work
- ◆ Essential Skills

Equality

PDAs must take into consideration the needs of all candidates. These qualifications should be as accessible and inclusive as possible to candidates who will achieve in different ways and at a different pace.

5.9 National Progression Awards

Rationale

Every National Progression Award must have a clear rationale that:

- ◆ justifies the need for the qualification and its uniqueness
- ◆ provides evidence of demand for the qualification
- ◆ explains how it fits with other qualifications
- ◆ identifies the progression opportunities into and from the qualification
- ◆ outlines the aims, purposes and intended learning outcomes of the qualification, and explains how the award structure enables them
- ◆ gives information about who the course is for

Qualification design

National Progression Awards can be made up of HN Units, SVQ Units, National (Workplace) Units and National Qualification Units.

They must contain at least two units.

National Occupational Standards

National Progression Awards must be aligned to National Occupational Standards, or other professional or trade body standards, as appropriate to the group award.

SCQF level and credit points

National Progression Awards can be set at SCQF levels 2–6.

National Progression Awards have a minimum credit value of 12 SCQF credit points (at least two units).

At least half of the credit points must be at the level of the group award. Where half of the unit credits are at one level and half are at another level, you must provide a strong rationale to determine the overall SCQF level.

Assessment

Units within a National Progression Award are internally assessed.

Award of qualification

Candidates must achieve all the unit assessments within the group award.

Grading

National Progression Awards are ungraded.

Skills

National Progression Awards should provide opportunities to develop Core Skills and other generic skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work. You can use the following skills frameworks:

- ◆ Core Skills
- ◆ Skills for Learning, Skills for Life and Skills for Work
- ◆ Essential Skills

Equality

National Progression Awards must take into consideration the needs of all candidates. These qualifications should be as accessible and inclusive as possible to candidates who will achieve in different ways and at a different pace.

5.10 Scottish Vocational Qualifications

Regulation

SQA Awarding Body is regulated and approved by SQA Accreditation to deliver Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) and, as such, must comply with [SQA Accreditation Regulatory Principles](#). SQA Awarding Body is subject to regular audit visits to ensure ongoing compliance with these principles.

Rationale

To accredit an SVQ:

- ◆ SQA Accreditation must approve the organisation offering the qualification as an SVQ awarding body
- ◆ there must be clear evidence that SQA has the support of the key interest groups that will enable it to operate effectively in the occupational sector in Scotland. There must be clear evidence of significant long-term demand and support for the SVQ from Scottish employment interests
- ◆ the target market in Scotland must be identified, and there must be a plan for marketing the SVQ in Scotland
- ◆ there must be evidence of progression opportunities in Scotland

Qualification design

Each SVQ must:

- ◆ use associated qualification products approved by SQA Accreditation
- ◆ have a one-to-one relationship with an approved National Occupational Standard (NOS), defined by a standards-setting organisation and each qualification unit
- ◆ be written in the form of units and outcomes
- ◆ assess the application of skills, knowledge and understanding in a specific occupation to the standard required in the workplace
- ◆ be specified at a level consistent with published descriptions

SQA must adopt the SVQ qualification structure specified by the standards-setting organisation and approved by SQA Accreditation. This must include:

- ◆ the title of the SVQ
- ◆ the level of the SVQ
- ◆ which units must be achieved, and which are optional or additional
- ◆ how the content of the NOS links to the relevant Core Skills, and whether there should be discrete Core Skills units

In exceptional circumstances, SQA may decide there are reasons to depart from this structure. The need for an alternative structure must be justified, with evidence of significant, long-term demand and support from Scottish employment interests.

SCQF level and credit points

All SVQs must be [SCQF credit rated and levelled](#).

The units can be of any SCQF credit value.

Normally, the overall SCQF level of the SVQ is determined by the most common level of the SCQF credits which make up the units of the SVQ. More detailed information can be found in [Credit Rating of SQA Accredited Qualifications for the SCQF](#).

Assessment

Assessment methods and processes must:

- ◆ be fit for purpose, rigorous, reliable and compatible with unit accumulation
- ◆ be free from any barriers that unnecessarily restrict access — the only exception is where statutory restraints require some restrictions to be defined
- ◆ take account of the needs of the variety of organisations and individuals who are expected to use it
- ◆ include arrangements for candidates who have particular assessment requirements
- ◆ encourage simple and practicable assessment and discourage unnecessary bureaucracy

SQA must submit detailed proposals for assessment and guidance for each SVQ accreditation proposal. The proposal must adopt the general principles for assessment and external quality control specified by the relevant standards-setting organisation and be approved by the regulatory bodies.

The proposal must specify:

- ◆ internal and external quality assurance requirements
- ◆ what must be assessed in the workplace
- ◆ what can be simulated and what are the requirements of a realistic working environment
- ◆ occupational expertise and qualification requirements of assessors and quality assessors how to assess knowledge, understanding, skills and outcomes
- ◆ the amount and type of evidence to be collected

SQA must be able to provide assessment opportunities for candidates throughout Scotland.

For information on assessment carried out in a language other than English, please refer to the policy: *Language of Assessment and Certification in Regulated Qualifications Offered by SQA (Delivered in the United Kingdom)*.

Award of qualification

Candidates must achieve all the required unit assessments within the Group Award.

Grading

SVQ Units are normally internally assessed on a pass or fail basis. SVQs are not graded.

Skills

Workplace Core Skills must be signposted in all SVQs.

Equality

SVQs must take into consideration the needs of all candidates. These qualifications should be as accessible and inclusive as possible to candidates who will achieve in different ways and at a different pace. The only exception is where statutory restraints require some restrictions to be defined, for example where the qualifications confer a licence to practice.

Further considerations for Qualification Design Teams

Quality assurance mechanisms

SQA must show how existing quality assurance mechanisms will be applied for each SVQ accreditation proposal. In particular, arrangements must be shown for ensuring:

- ◆ the quality and consistency of assessment provided at any location and between locations (Centres must be approved to offer SVQs and SQA must ensure that centres meet the approval criteria in full before they are allowed to submit claims for certificates. Further information is provided in the [*Systems and Approval Guide*](#).)
- ◆ the system for recording evidence and for recording assessment and verification decisions is reliable, auditable and manageable.

5.11 Alternative competence-based qualifications

Regulation

SQA is regulated and approved by the UK regulators (SQA Accreditation/Ofqual/Qualifications Wales and CCEA) to deliver competence-based qualifications in the UK and, as such, must comply with the various regulatory requirements set out by each regulator. SQA is subject to regular audits to ensure ongoing compliance with these principles, conditions, and associated requirements.

Rationale

Every alternative competence-based qualification must have a clear rationale that:

- ◆ justifies the need for the qualification and its uniqueness
- ◆ provides evidence of demand for the qualification
- ◆ explains how it fits with other qualifications
- ◆ identifies the progression opportunities into and from the qualification
- ◆ outlines the aims, purposes and intended learning outcomes of the qualification, and explains how the award structure enables them
- ◆ gives information about who the course is for

Qualification design

Alternative competence-based qualifications must:

- ◆ include statements of competence, skills, knowledge and understanding that are capable of being measured over time
- ◆ define the assessment strategy and methodology, including:
 - quality assurance requirements
 - what must be assessed in the workplace
 - what can be simulated and what are the requirements of a realistic working environment
 - occupational expertise and qualification requirements of assessors and quality assurers
- ◆ demonstrate how National Occupational Standards (NOS) and/or other relevant professional standards have been considered or are incorporated into the qualification
- ◆ adhere to regulator titling conventions
- ◆ detail the qualification structure, showing mandatory, optional and additional units
- ◆ identify the combinations of units required to achieve the qualification
- ◆ be accredited and/or approved by- a regulator
- ◆ be SCQF credit rated if developed for the Scottish market
- ◆ have defined Guided Learning Hours (GL) and Total Qualification Time (TQT) if developed for the English and/or Welsh markets.

Throughout the development of these qualification product types, consideration should be given to the funding streams available in all markets in which the qualifications will be sold, and how this may affect the development and delivery of these qualification types.

SCQF level and credit points Alternative competence-based qualifications can be at any level of the SCQF, and the units can be of any SCQF credit value.

Normally, the overall SCQF level of the alternative competence-based qualification is determined by the most common level of the SCQF credits which make up the units of the qualification. More detailed information can be found in [Credit Rating of SQA Accredited Qualifications for the SCQF](#).

There may be a difference between the number of SCQF credit points allocated and the Regulated Qualifications Framework or Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales credit points allocated to the original units or qualifications.

Assessment

The relevant SSO's assessment strategy should be used in the assessment and subsequent quality assurance of the qualifications.

Units in an alternative competence-based qualification are internally assessed on a pass or fail basis.

Award of qualification

Candidates must achieve all the unit assessments within the group award.

Grading

Alternative competence-based qualifications are ungraded.

Skills

Alternative competence-based qualifications awards must provide candidates with opportunities to develop Core Skills where appropriate.

Equality

Alternative competence-based qualifications must take into consideration the needs of all candidates. These qualifications should be as accessible and inclusive as possible to candidates who will achieve in different ways and at a different pace. The only exception is where statutory restraints require some restrictions to be defined, for example where the qualifications confer a licence to practice.

