

SCOTTISH QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY

B168/1.4 i

BOARD OF MANAGEMENT – 26 MARCH 2025

Minutes of the meeting of the extraordinary Board of Management meeting held at 2pm on Wednesday 29 January 2025 by video conference.

Members

- * Ms S Rogers (Chair)
- * Ms F Robertson (Chief Executive)
- * Ms A Davis
- * Mr R Erskine
- * Mr S Hagney
- * Ms C McFarlane
- * Mr S Hewitt
- Mr J Morton
- Mr G Smith
- * Professor K Thomson
- Ms M Wailes

Officers

- * Ms J Blair
- * Mr J Booth
- * Mr M Campbell
- * Mrs D Mahmoud
- * Mr J McMorris
- * Ms D Stewart
- * Mr M Ware

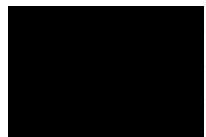
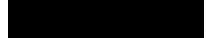
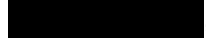
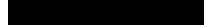
- * Indicates present

In attendance

Mr S Borley, Head of Chief Executive's Office, SQA

Mr A Dickson, Head of Finance, SQA

Ms M McKerrell, Head of Standards, Malpractice, and Complaints, SQA (3.1 only)

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1 OPENING REMARKS

1.1 Welcome and Apologies

Chair welcomed Board members to the meeting, noting that apologies had been received from:

- Fiona Robertson
- John Morton

- Grahame Smith
- Michelle Wailes

The Chair noted that both the Chief Executive and Ms Wailes had recently suffered family bereavements, and the Board expressed their sincere condolences.

The Chair provided a brief update on the recent meeting of the Education and Young People Committee in the Scottish Parliament, and asked Mr Booth to provide an update. He outlined the evidence presented by the Scottish Association for the Teaching of History (SATH) during their appearance before the Committee and highlighted where SQA had robustly responded to some inaccuracies in the claims made at Committee. Additionally, UNITE the Union has submitted correspondence to the Education and Young People Committee challenging SATH's evidence with regard to a specific matter.

The Chief Executive Officer and Chair have been invited to appear before the Committee in February to provide SQA's response. This development underscores the critical importance of the ongoing work related to the Prospectus for Change, particularly in strengthening relationships with practitioners and the wider education system.

1.2 Declaration of Any Conflicts of Interest

There were no conflicts of interest raised in relation to the agenda.

1.3 Minutes of the previous meetings

The minutes of the meetings on:

- 31 October
- 27 November

Were approved by the Board, subject to amendments to be sent by board members to Mr Borley in relation to the 31 October minutes.

1.4 Matters Arising

There were no other matters arising that would not be covered in the course of the agenda.

2 UPDATES

2.1 Chair's Update

The Chair provided a brief update to the Board on recent key events, noting that the period since November 2024 had been particularly busy. She updated the Board on her recent meeting with the Cabinet Secretary.

The Chair expressed gratitude to Ms Blair and the Operations team for their efforts in finalising the position of the 2025 exam timetable under very challenging circumstances, noting that the Cabinet Secretary had also echoed her sentiments.

Regarding Transition, the Chair reported that progress was being made in the appointment of a Head Teacher to the Special Advisor position, with plans to implement a similar approach for the college sector.

She also provided an update on Board governance proposals included in the Bill, highlighting that she had been given the opportunity to help shape its provisions related to Board governance. The Chair extended her thanks to Board members who had taken the time to discuss these matters with her over the past few days.

The Chair noted that the Minister for Skills, Mr Graham Dey MSP, had visited SQA's Optima office the previous day to meet with staff, and the visit had been successful.

Additionally, the Board was informed that a written response from the Cabinet Secretary was expected regarding the Chair's submission in response to the Cabinet Secretary's commission, including the positioning of Accreditation.

The Board noted the update.

2.2 Chief Executive's Update

The Board noted that the Chief Executive was not present at the meeting.

3 PAPERS FOR APPROVAL

3.1 Awarding 2025: Establishing our Awarding Approach

Mr Ware provided a brief introduction to the Awarding and Grading for National Courses Policy for the period 2025-2027.

Ms McKerrell, Head of Standards, Malpractice, and Complaints, then presented the policy to the Board, highlighting the following key points:

- The Awarding and Grading policies have been combined into a single document, marking a change from previous years.
- The proposed policy will apply from 2025 to 2027 unless a specific need arises for a review within this period.
- The policy now incorporates the use of early warning data/information and a new checklist to support the process.

The Board noted that the policy had been reviewed and approved by the Qualifications Committee at its meeting the previous week.

Prof. Thomson confirmed that the Qualifications Committee had given the policy thorough scrutiny. The Committee welcomed the clarity brought by combining the two policies, as well as the inclusion of the new checklist and opportunities for escalation, feedback loops, and outcome reporting. The Committee had also discussed the escalation process linked to early warning triggers, noting that work was ongoing in this area. The importance of clear communication around the policy was emphasised, with plans to incorporate reference to key points of the approach into communications ahead of the exam diet to ensure transparency for learners and parents.

Lessons learned from the pandemic were also considered in the development of the policy, particularly in relation to teacher judgments and understanding of standards. Estimates remain an input in the awarding process, and the early warning process takes this data into account as part of the overall approach. It was agreed that the policy would be amended to make this explicit.

The Board discussed potential operational risks, particularly around perceived workload. It was agreed that while assessments must be robust enough to meet learner needs, it is also important to ensure they do not place undue burdens on educators i.e. there is an ongoing need to balance considerations of validity, reliability, practicability and fairness. A collaborative approach with educators will be essential in balancing these considerations in future work to rebalance assessment for national courses.

Given the scrutiny and approval from the Qualifications Committee, the Board endorsed the policy. It was agreed that the Chair should review the revised version before it is published.

3.2 Performance Committee Standing Orders

Ms Davis, as convenor of the Performance Committee presented the standing orders, highlighting the minimal amendments made and noted that the presented version had been approved by the Performance Committee at their last meeting.

The Board approved the standing orders.

3.3 Remuneration Committee Standing Orders

The Chair presented the Remuneration Committee standing orders, reporting that they had been subject to substantial revision and highlighting that the Terms of Reference and a summary of the changes made had been included in the papers.

The Chair provided overview of the changes being proposed and the justifications thereof, confirming that Remuneration Committee members had discussed and approved these.

Subject to one small amendment to paragraph 5.5.5, the Board were content to approve.

4 PAPERS FOR DISCUSSION

4.1.1 Financial Performance Report

Mr Dickson provided an update on the financial position, reporting that all figures remain within a reasonable estimate of the forecast. Key updates included:

- Confirmation from the Scottish Government that approval for marketing expenditure in 2024/25 will not be granted, shifting the focus to planning for 2025/26.
- Capital expenditure is forecasted to remain on track.
- There was a focus on international activity:
 - Success in generating additional income from activities in China.

- Business Development is working closely with Communications to support student recruitment efforts in international universities.
- New frameworks are being developed with Qualifications Development.
- Further expansion in international markets will require additional support through marketing and sales efforts.

Mr Dickson also noted that the budget for 2025/26 was in development and would be presented to the Board for approval in March.

The Board expressed its thanks to Mr Dickson and his team for their efforts.

4.2 People Committee Standing Orders Update

Ms Mahmoud provided a verbal update on the progress in developing standing orders for the proposed People Committee. She noted that discussions with SQA's recognised trade unions regarding representation and voting rights on the committee were ongoing.

The Chair provided an overview of how this work aligns with the new governance arrangements proposed in the Education Bill for Qualifications Scotland. She highlighted the challenges of developing governance structures while the wider educational landscape continues to evolve.

The Board discussed the benefits of similar arrangements recently introduced in the college sector and recognised the opportunity to learn from these precedents. It was agreed that simplicity is key and that developing these structures should be a collaborative across the education sector.

4.3 Awarding Programme Update

██████████ was welcomed to the meeting and provided an update on the National Qualifications (NQ) Awarding Programme, reporting that the overall programme status remains green. He provided an overview of the key updates and milestones of the programme.

Ms Blair noted that the evaluation of the access to marked scripts trial has been completed, and the team was awaiting survey results from EIS membership. The findings would be presented to a future Board meeting to assess and confirm the next steps.

The Board noted the update and recorded its thanks to ██████████.

4.4 Transition Board Update and Feedback from Cabinet Secretary's Commission

The Chair provided an update on the business and discussions of the Transition Board from its meeting the previous week. It was noted that all internal project boards have now been established and have begun their work.

The Transition Board received an update on branding, highlighting significant progress in collaboration with both the Scottish Government and SQA. Three logo designs for Qualifications Scotland are currently being tested with key stakeholder

groups to inform the final recommendation. This workstream is expected to conclude in February, after which the focus will shift to delivery.

An update was also provided on the Values workshops held with SQA staff in November 2024. Feedback from these sessions has been used to develop a set of core values for Qualifications Scotland. The outputs from these workshops will be shared with SQA staff in early 2025.

Regular internal communications regarding the transition process have now been established, ensuring that colleagues are kept informed about key discussions and developments.

It was agreed that Mr Booth would bring the communications strategy and plan back to the Board for further discussion.

4.5 Prospectus for Change: Follow Up From 27 November Board

Mr Borley presented the paper, which built upon the discussion at the previous Board meeting regarding the Prospectus for Change and the medium-term financial outlook. The paper reflected on the Board's comments and outlined the next steps SQA will take in 2025.

The Board welcomed the document and found it helpful in keeping them informed. It was acknowledged that while the updates provided a clear direction, the points and actions outlined would continue to be developed into a more comprehensive plan.

There was discussion around HN Next Gen, recognising the challenges in this area. Efforts to stabilise the programme internally were ongoing, and engagement with the college sector had been positive, with strong support and collaboration emerging.

The Board also discussed the future financial status of the organisation and how the budget would be allocated in future.

It was noted that *Think Customer* had been an ongoing initiative aimed at embedding a customer-first approach across the organisation. This work was now being taken forward as part of efforts to embed the new values, particularly Open and Caring.

Ms Mahmoud provided an update on the issue of appointee status. The Board noted that it would continue to receive updates as they became available.

5 PAPERS FOR INFORMATION

5.1 Committee Reports

Performance Committee

Ms Davis presented the minute of the Performance Committee meeting on 21 August and provided a verbal update on the meeting of the Committee on 5 December, which the Board noted.

Qualifications Committee

Prof Thomson presented the minute of the Qualifications Committee meeting on 6 November and provided a verbal update on the meeting of the Committee on 22 January 2025, which the Board noted.

6 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business raised.

7 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Board would take place on Wednesday 26 March 2025.