SCOTTISH QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY **10/4**

CODE OF PRACTICE GOVERNANCE GROUP – MARCH 2020

CANDIDATE AND CENTRE MALPRACTICE 2020

1 Context

This paper sets out proposed adjustments to SQA's management of concerns of possible candidate and centre malpractice across the qualifications portfolio, in response to the unprecedented global COVID-19 pandemic.

2 Status

SQA's *Malpractice: Information for Centres* explains the procedures in place within SQA, and our expectations of centres, in relation to prevention, detection, and investigation of possible malpractice.

Candidate malpractice – internal assessments

SQA expects centres to manage concerns of possible candidate malpractice in accordance with the centre's own candidate malpractice policy and procedures.

Candidate malpractice – external assessments

SQA has procedures in place to identify, investigate and reach decisions in terms of concerns of possible candidate malpractice identified during invigilation or marking of National Qualifications.

In 2019 SQA managed malpractice referrals in relation to the work of 3,700 individual candidate entries. All malpractice cases were triaged by the Assessment Arrangements team to be treated either as candidate malpractice or centre malpractice. Of the 3,700 referrals, 2,600 were referred to centre malpractice. The remaining 1,100 candidates were investigated through candidate malpractice procedures.

Records for these are kept on the system by Qualification / Level, not component so it is not possible to definitively state the number of coursework-related referrals.

However, from experience the Assessment arrangements team estimates that 75-85% of these referrals relate to coursework rather than examined components. This is backed up by analysis of referral reason (83% for collusion, plagiarism, assessment condition breach – which are categories generally used for coursework and rarely for examined components).

There were 153 penalties issued to candidates in 2019 (4.1% of referrals). Of these:

- 27 warnings (no adjustment to marks/ grade)
- 27 revisions to marks
- 99 cancellations (2.7% of referrals)

This amounts to penalties for 0.03% of entries. Again, we can't give a definitive breakdown of how many of these penalties would be for coursework components, but this is estimated at 75-85%.

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The investigation of candidate malpractice involves schools and colleges preparing an investigation report for consideration by an SQA candidate malpractice panel. The investigation will often be led by a senior manager within the school or college interviewing each candidate to whom a concern relates, as well as potentially their classmates and teachers.

For all coursework components not marked via MFP or traditional means (97/131 components) staff members will be needed in the office to pull and scan materials to create casefiles.

Centre malpractice

SQA expects centres to bring concerns of possible centre malpractice to our attention, for consideration of any investigation necessary. Concerns are also raised with SQA by third parties (eg candidates) or within SQA's own processes, principally external verification of internal assessments and marking of National Qualifications externally assessed coursework.

Investigation can be led by SQA in some circumstances, or more frequently an investigation will involve the school, college or training provider preparing an investigation report for consideration by an SQA centre malpractice panel. For externally regulated vocational qualifications, if an investigation is judged necessary, then SQA is obliged to notify the appropriate regulator.

In January – December 2019, SQA considered 421 referrals for possible centre malpractice. Of these, 128 were closed at the screening stage. The screening stage is the first stage in the centre malpractice process. Here, expert SQA staff consider the available evidence and evaluate any risk to the integrity of certification. This can also include instructions to apply a hold to certification until the investigation has been concluded. 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. This communication is very carefully managed as these are always difficult conversations, which involve a significant degree of anxiety for centre staff and candidates who are to be interviewed either by an investigator within the centre, or by an SQA investigation team.

In 2019, 285 concerns were investigated to a conclusion. Of these, 171 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.

The most prevalent principle finding in 2019 was 'Assessment conditions not applied – level of direction', with 88 out of 171 findings. These findings often relate to National Qualifications externally assessed coursework for which assessment conditions are described in SQA Course Specifications and Coursework Assessment Task documents. Over-direction can include malpractice such as provision to candidates of writing frames, templates, model answers, sentence starters, primary and secondary research sources and results, feedback on drafts where these are contrary to required assessment conditions as well as a small number of findings where there had been more direct interventions by centre staff.

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

- a written warning
- 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.

Centre malpractice panels weigh very heavily their responsibility to avoid disadvantage to candidates caught up in these circumstances through no fault of their own. In 2019, one single NQ malpractice investigation resulted in an adjustment to candidate marks. This was a very serious case relating to a cohort of National 5 and Higher Music candidates, and to the Composing Review part of the assignment. The local authority was very heavily involved in leading the investigation. The Composing Review contributes 5% of the overall grade for candidates at National 5 and Higher.

Current circumstances

The current unprecedented global crisis has led to significant adjustments to SQA's approaches to assessment and quality assurance. These adjustments are in response to supply issues, to seek to minimise the health risks to SQA staff and others, and importantly to minimise distress and disadvantage to learners.

Centres similarly have taken radical steps in terms of staff and learner attendance, at a time where individual wellbeing is under much pressure. Applying SQA's standard procedures for investigation of possible candidate and centre malpractice carries risks including:

- Risk of delay and unfairness in concluding investigations due to limited availability of staff and candidates within centres,
- Risk of appearing unsupportive of schools, colleges and training providers in such unprecedented times, in contrast to other stakeholders who are deferring inspection at this time,
- Risk of negatively affecting the wellbeing of staff and candidates within centres at a difficult time,
- Risk of appearing inconsistent and disproportionate when compared with other significant adjustments to assessment and quality assurance systems, and
- Risk of tying up time for SQA staff whose time could be well used in supporting contingency planning and other activities, at a time of limited availability.
- Risk of additional staff in the office to handle and scan hardcopy evidence.

Proposed adjustments

It is proposed in the current unprecedented circumstances that for the period March – June 2020:

Candidate malpractice – external assessments

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- Schools and colleges will not be asked to investigate concerns of possible candidate malpractice raised by markers in relation to externally assessed coursework,
- A record will be kept of any concerns of possible candidate malpractice raised by markers for review at a later date to identify any systemic concerns around authentication of candidate evidence that should be brought to the attention of the Head of Centre in the new 2020-21 academic session. This will not take the form of an investigation and no retrospective adjustment to certification will be applied.

Centre malpractice

- Schools and colleges will not, at this point, be asked to investigate concerns of possible centre malpractice raised by markers in relation to externally assessed coursework,
- A record is to be kept of any concerns of possible centre malpractice raised by markers for review at a later date to identify any systemic concerns.
- This record will include only the marking exceptions at this point, to reduce staff presence required to scan scripts onto file within SQA's Lowden office. At a later date, when public health advice changes, these marking exceptions can be analysed and compared with the scripts to which they relate if necessary. A decision can then be made in each instance as to whether the concerns need to be brought to the attention of the Head of Centre in the new 2020-21 academic session. This may include an investigation request potentially leading to a finding of centre malpractice, but no retrospective adjustment to certification will be applied.
- For other centre malpractice concerns for schools, colleges and training providers, a decision as to any investigation needed will be taken within the Malpractice & Complaints team:
    - For this period, new investigations will not normally be initiated unless they raise potentially significant concerns in relation to validity of current assessments for qualifications which indicate occupational competence, represent a license to practice, or may present a risk to public safety. These areas have been indicated by external regulators to be appropriate for particular caution.
    - For this period, where a centre self-reports a concern that does not relate to these areas, they will be empowered to apply their own procedures and judgement to manage the matter to a conclusion, with advice if required, and to provide a report of their findings to SQA in due course.
    - In each instance where a concern is raised, and the Malpractice & Complaints team judges that this is not appropriate to move to investigation at this point, a record will be kept for reference in the event that a similar concern arises later.
    - For centre malpractice investigations currently underway, a decision as to the continuation of the investigation will be taken on a case by case basis by the Malpractice & Complaints team.

3 Recommendation

The group is asked to approve the proposed approaches described above.

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