

REPORT (FINAL DRAFT)

**KEY AUDIENCE RESEARCH – EMPLOYER AND
TRAINING PROVIDER CENTRE AUDIENCES**

January 2025

PREPARED FOR: Scottish Qualifications Authority

Report (Final Draft)

**Key Audience Research –
Employer and Training Provider Centre
Audiences**

Ashbrook Research & Consultancy Ltd

January 2025

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SQA Profile

- In November/December 2024, seven out of ten respondents rated SQA's credibility as being **high**. This outcome is notably lower than that found in February/March 2024. However, in the most recent survey, few respondents believed SQA to have low credibility, as was the case in the last survey in February/March 2024
- For those who believed SQA to have high credibility, this was primarily due to beliefs that SQA 'has good and well-recognised qualifications'
- Respondents in November/December 2024 provided an average score of 7.81 out of a possible 10 in terms of their satisfaction with SQA's performance, with this representing a notable fall since February/March 2024
- Two thirds of respondents in November/December 2024 believed that they knew enough about SQA, with this representing a notable fall since the last survey

SQA Qualifications Profile

- Respondents most commonly stated that they knew enough about 'National 5s', 'Highers', 'SVQs' and 'HNCs/HNDs', whilst lowest levels of belief that enough was known about qualifications of which respondents were aware related to National 1s to National 3s
- Those who thought they knew enough about qualifications were most likely to believe that 'National 5s', 'Highers', 'PDAs', 'HNCs/HNDs' and 'SVQs' could be trusted, whilst this was least likely to be the case in relation to 'National 2s' and 'National 3s'

- Those who knew enough about qualifications were most likely to believe that 'National 5s', 'Highers', 'Advanced Highers', 'PDAs', 'HNCs/HNDs' and 'SVQs' were appropriately challenging
- Those who thought they knew enough about qualifications were most likely to believe that 'Highers', 'HNCs/HNDs', 'PDAs' and 'SVQs' support progression to further study
- Overall, a quarter of respondents in November/December 2024 stated that their views on the credibility of all qualifications they had heard of – taken together – had changed over the last year, with this representing a rise since the last survey
- In the most recent survey, one in six respondents stated that their views on the credibility of all qualifications they had heard of – taken together – had become more positive (with this representing a rise since February/March 2024), whilst almost one in ten respondents here stated that their views had changed and had become less positive (with this outcome being very similar to that found in the last survey)

SQA Contact and Communications Profiles

- Over two out of five respondents in November/December 2024 stated that they had had contact from SQA or had contacted SQA (with this representing a notable fall since February/March 2024), whilst these respondents provided an average score of 8.13 out of a possible 10 for their contacts (with this representing a notable fall since the last survey)
- In November/December 2024:
 - Respondents provided an average score of 7.57 out of a possible 10 in terms of 'the appropriateness of the level of detail of communications from SQA' (with this representing a notable fall since February/March 2024)

- Respondents provided an average score of 7.49 out of a possible 10 in terms of 'the clarity of communications from SQA' (with this, again, representing a notable fall since the last survey)
- Respondents provided an average score of 7.43 out of possible 10 in terms of 'the timeliness of communications from SQA' (with this, once again, representing a notable fall since the last survey)
- An average score of 7.37 out of a possible 10 was provided by respondents in terms of their overall rating of their communications from SQA. Yet again, this represents a notable fall since the last survey

SQA Consultation and Engagement Profile

- In November/December 2024, an average score of 7.11 out of a possible 10 was noted in terms of SQA's consultation and engagement, with this representing a significant fall since the last survey

A Prospectus for Change Commitment Profile

- Overall, a quarter of respondents in November/December 2024 agreed that SQA is earning back the trust of learners and teachers
- Overall, a third of respondents in November/December 2024 agreed that SQA is using technology to provide a more streamlined service
- Overall, three out of ten respondents in November/December 2024 agreed that SQA qualifications reflect the changes taking place in society and the economy

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Project Background

This report details findings to emerge from research undertaken on behalf of SQA by Ashbrook Research & Consultancy Ltd.

The research focused on the derivation of information from four respondent types:

- Employers (individuals responsible for training, recruitment or HR)
- ETP learners (individuals engaged in learning through ETPs)
- ETP teaching professionals (individuals with teaching responsibilities within ETPs)
- ETP managers (individuals with ETP managers' roles in ETPs)

1.2 Methodological Approaches, Response Levels and Analysis Protocols

Data was collected during November and December 2024 by means of the administration of structured telephone interviews with employers and the administration of an online questionnaire with ETP learners, ETP teaching professionals and ETP managers.

A total of 178 structured telephone interviews were undertaken with employers (out of a target of 250), whilst the following number of online responses were achieved:

- 93 ETP learners (out of a target of 500)
- 69 ETP teaching professionals (out of a target of 250)
- 68 ETP managers (out of a target of 100)

Accordingly, following discussions with SQA, it was decided that outputs for this cycle of the ETP audiences research would be reported

on only at an aggregate level, particularly on the basis that data collected for the ETP learners, ETP teaching professions and ETP managers is largely indicative in nature.

In addition, it was decided following discussions with SQA that comparisons with the last survey undertaken in February/March 2024 would also only be reported at an overall level (rather than for each of the four audiences, as would normally be the case).

Equal weightings were applied to the respondent types on the following basis:

- Employers
- ETP learners
- ETP teaching professionals
- ETP managers

1.3 The Questionnaire and Reporting Protocols

Sections 2.0 to 6.0 inclusive detail findings in relation to each of the areas covered in the questionnaire, namely:

- SQA profile
- SQA qualifications profile
- SQA contact and communication profiles
- SQA consultation and engagement profile
- A prospectus for change commitment profile

Thereafter, Section 7.0 provides a number of key messages for SQA which emerged from the research.

All of the variances noted in this report are statistically significant (unless otherwise stated) and it should be stressed that the variances which are cited are the most notable statistically significant variances,

and that not all statistically significant variances are cited due to a desire to avoid producing an overly lengthy report.

The statistical tests applied to data to test the significance of variances found in the data samples were determined by the type of data/variable that was being tested and included chi-square tests, t-tests and analysis of variance, with SPSS being used to carry out both survey analysis and statistical testing.

2.0 SQA PROFILE

2.1 SQA's Credibility

'How would you rate the current credibility of SQA?'

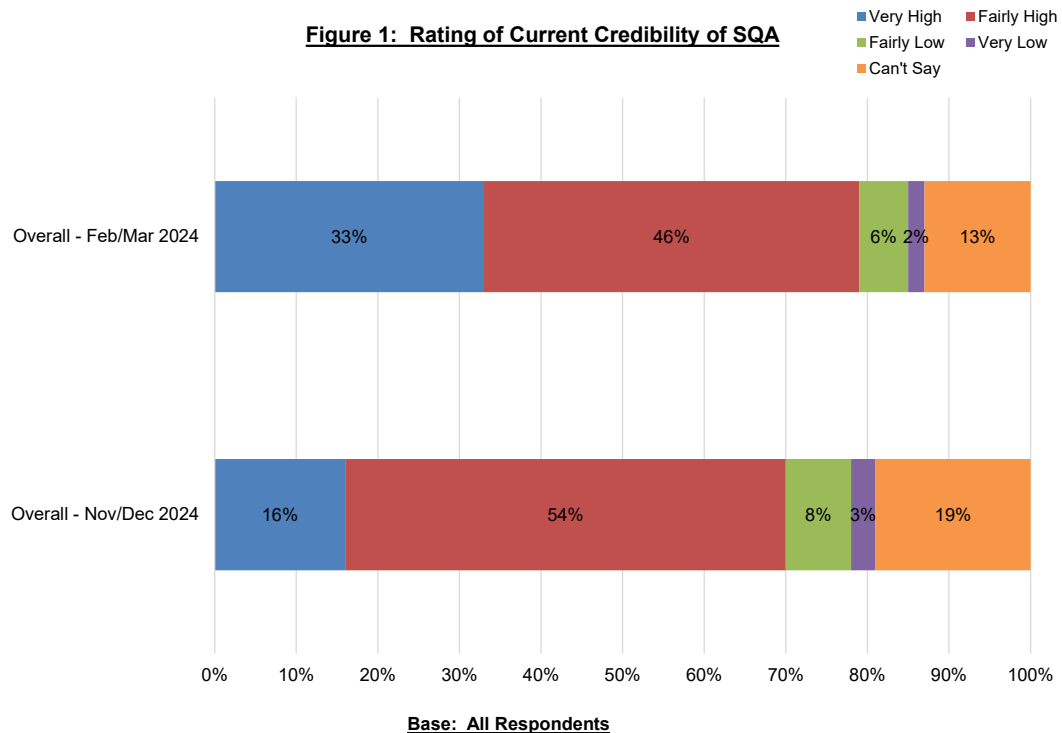


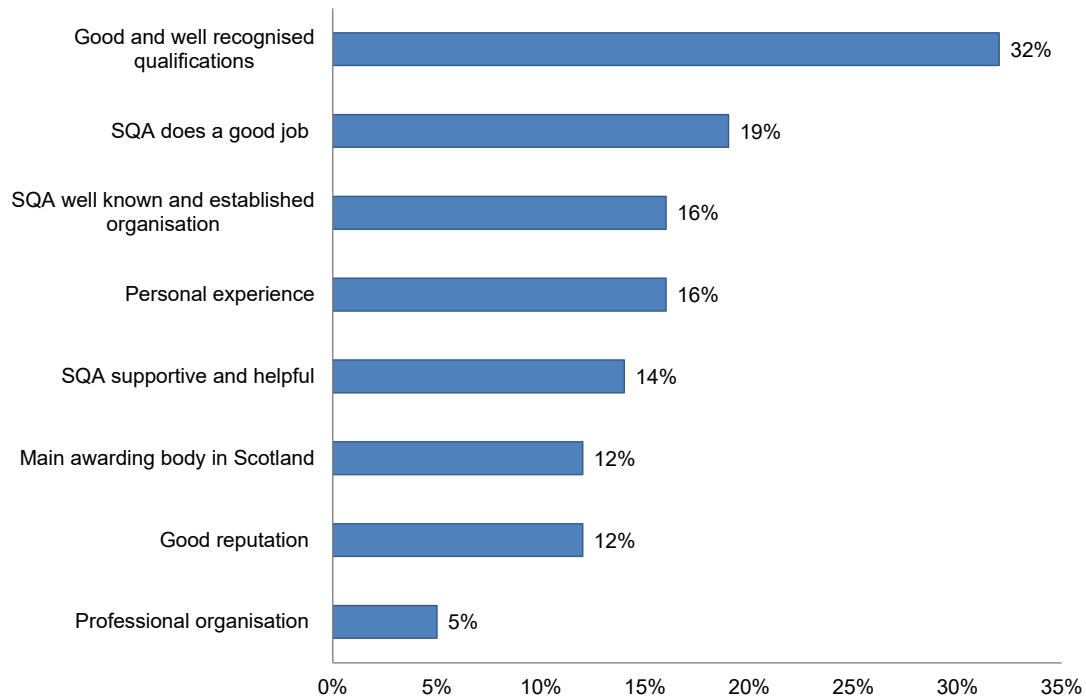
Figure 1 indicates that, in November/December 2024, seven out of ten respondents (70%) rated SQA's credibility as being **high**. This figure is notably lower than that found in February/March 2024 (79%).

From Figure 1, it can also be seen that, in November/December 2024, around one in ten respondents (11%) believed SQA to have **low** credibility. This figure is only marginally different from that found in the last survey (8%).

Figure 1 also indicates that, in November/December 2024, almost one in five respondents (19%) felt unable to comment as to SQA's credibility. This represents a rise since the last survey (from 13%).

‘Why did you provide a high rating of SQA’s credibility?’

**Figure 2: Reason for Providing High Rating of SQA Credibility
(Unprompted)**



Base: Respondents Believing SQA to Have High Credibility

Figure 2 indicates that, when those stating their belief that SQA had **high** credibility were asked – on an unprompted basis – why this was the case, their **primary response** focused around ‘SQA having good and well-recognised qualifications’ (32%).

Thereafter, **secondary unprompted mention** was made here of a number of other reasons, including:

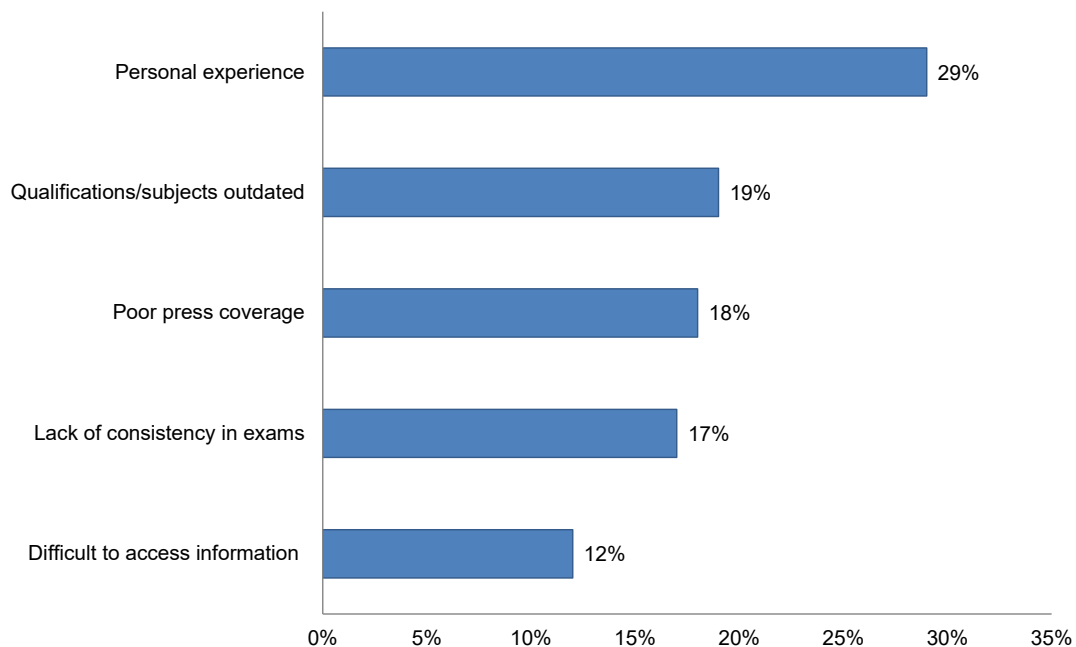
- SQA ‘doing a good job’ (19%)
- SQA being a well-known and well-established organisation (16%)
- Personal experience (16%)
- SQA being supportive and helpful (14%)
- SQA being Scotland’s main Awarding Body (12%)
- SQA having a good reputation (12%)

Further examination of the data indicated that, between February/ March 2024 and November/December 2024, increasing unprompted reference was made here to:

- SQA being supportive and helpful (rising from 8% to 14%)
- Personal experience (rising from 7% to 16%)
- SQA having a good reputation (rising from 4% to 12%)

‘Why did you provide a low rating of SQA’s credibility?’

**Figure 3: Reason for Providing Low Rating of SQA Credibility
(Unprompted) - Indicative**



Base: Respondents Believing SQA to Have Low Credibility

On an indicative basis, Figure 3 indicates that, when those stating their belief that SQA has **low** credibility were asked – again, on an unprompted basis – why this was the case, their **primary responses** focused around:

- Personal experience of SQA (29%)
- Qualifications and/or subjects being outdated (19%)
- Poor press coverage of SQA (18%)
- Lack of consistency in exams (17%)

2.2 Satisfaction with SQA's Overall Performance

'How satisfied would you say you are with the performance of SQA overall, where '1' means 'completely dissatisfied' and '10' means 'completely satisfied'?'

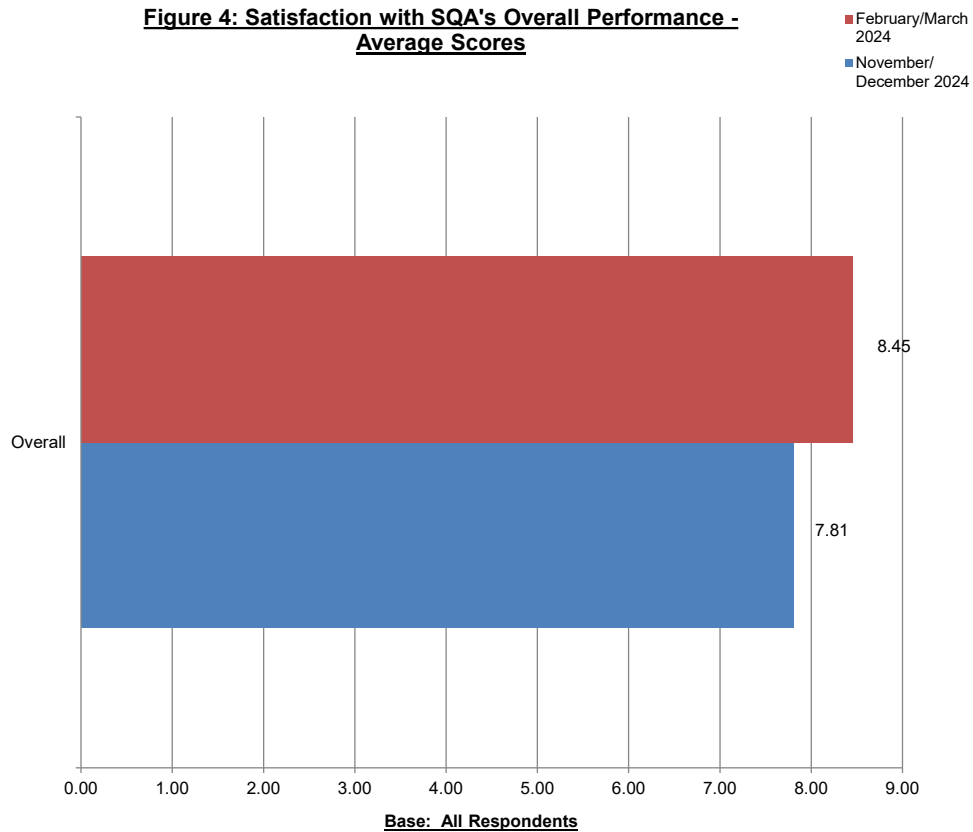


Figure 4 indicates that, overall, respondents in November/December 2024 provided an average score of 7.81 out of a possible 10 in terms of their satisfaction with SQA's overall performance. This represents a notable fall since February/March 2024 (from 8.45).

2.3 SQA Knowledge and Information Profile

‘Do you believe you know enough about SQA?’

Figure 5: Enough Known About SQA

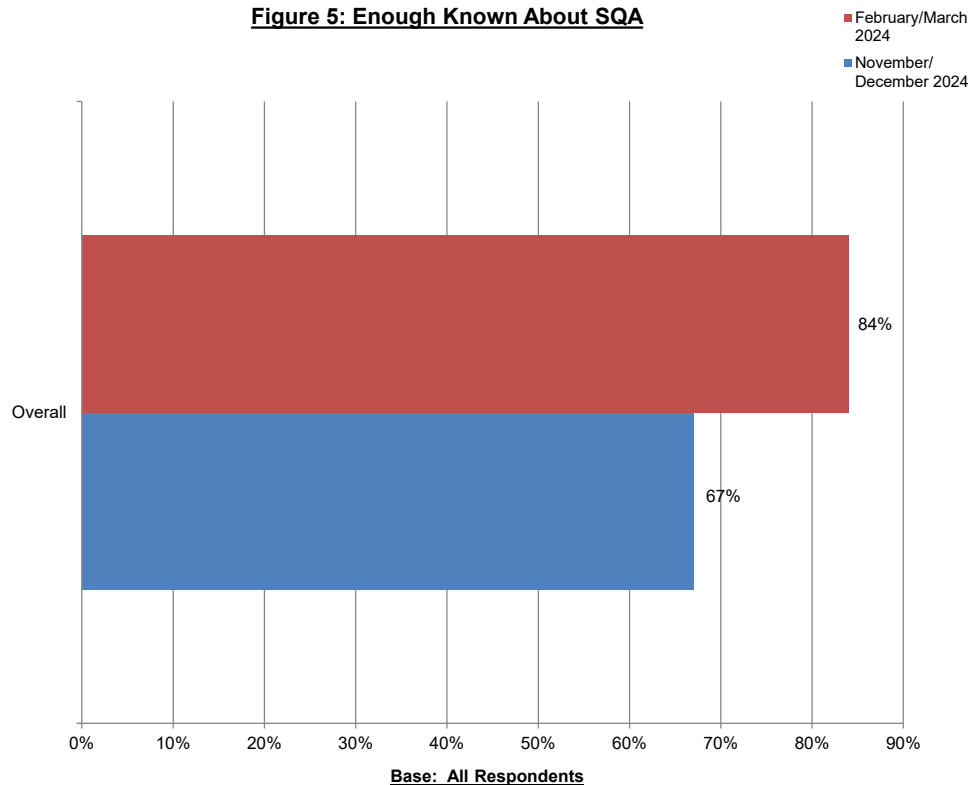
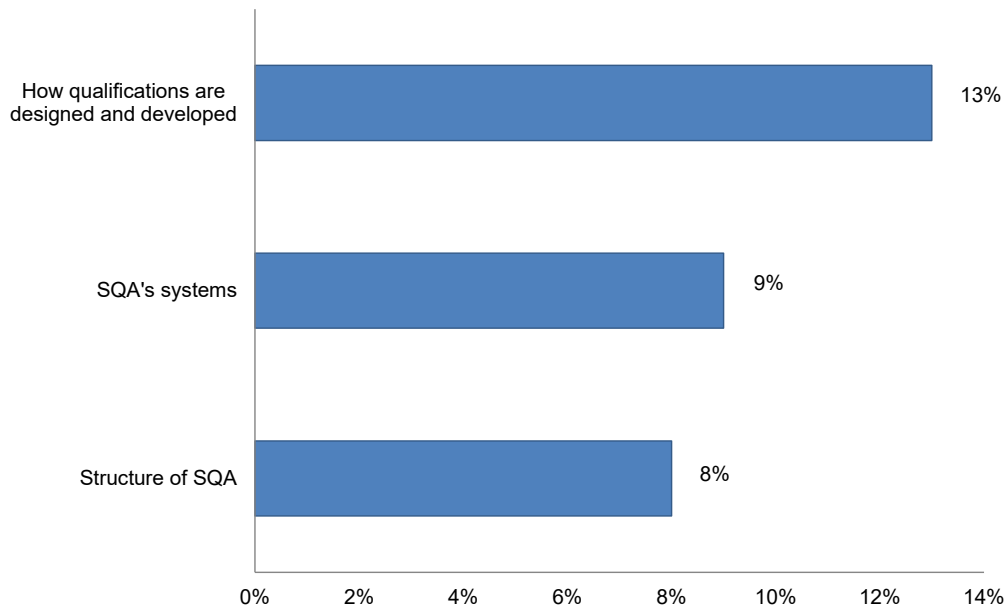


Figure 5 indicates that, overall, two thirds of respondents in November/December 2024 (67%) stated their belief that they knew enough about SQA. This represents a notable fall since February/March 2024 (from 84%).

‘What would you like to know more about SQA?’

Figure 6: Knowledge Desires re SQA (Unprompted)



Base: Respondents Not Knowing Enough About SQA

When respondents stating that they didn't know enough about SQA were asked – on an unprompted basis – what they would like to know more about it, Figure 6 indicates that the three **most prominent** unprompted outcomes were to know more about:

- How qualifications are designed and developed (13%)
- SQA's systems (9%)
- The structure of SQA (8%)

3.0 SQA QUALIFICATIONS PROFILE

3.1 Qualification Profile

‘Do you think you know enough about the qualifications of which you are aware?’

Table 1: Enough Known About Qualifications of Which Respondents Are Aware

Overall		
	February/March 2024	November/December 2024
Highers	88%	74%
Advanced Highers	68%	56%
National 1s	27%	25%
National 2s	30%	27%
National 3s	36%	30%
National 4s	60%	50%
National 5s	74%	64%
HNCs/HNDs	80%	72%
PDAs	57%	52%
SVQs	88%	74%

Table 1 indicates that, in November/December 2024, overall, respondents **most commonly** stated that they knew enough about the following qualifications of which they were aware:

- Highers (74%)
- SVQs (74%)
- HNCs/HNDs (72%)
- National 5s (64%)

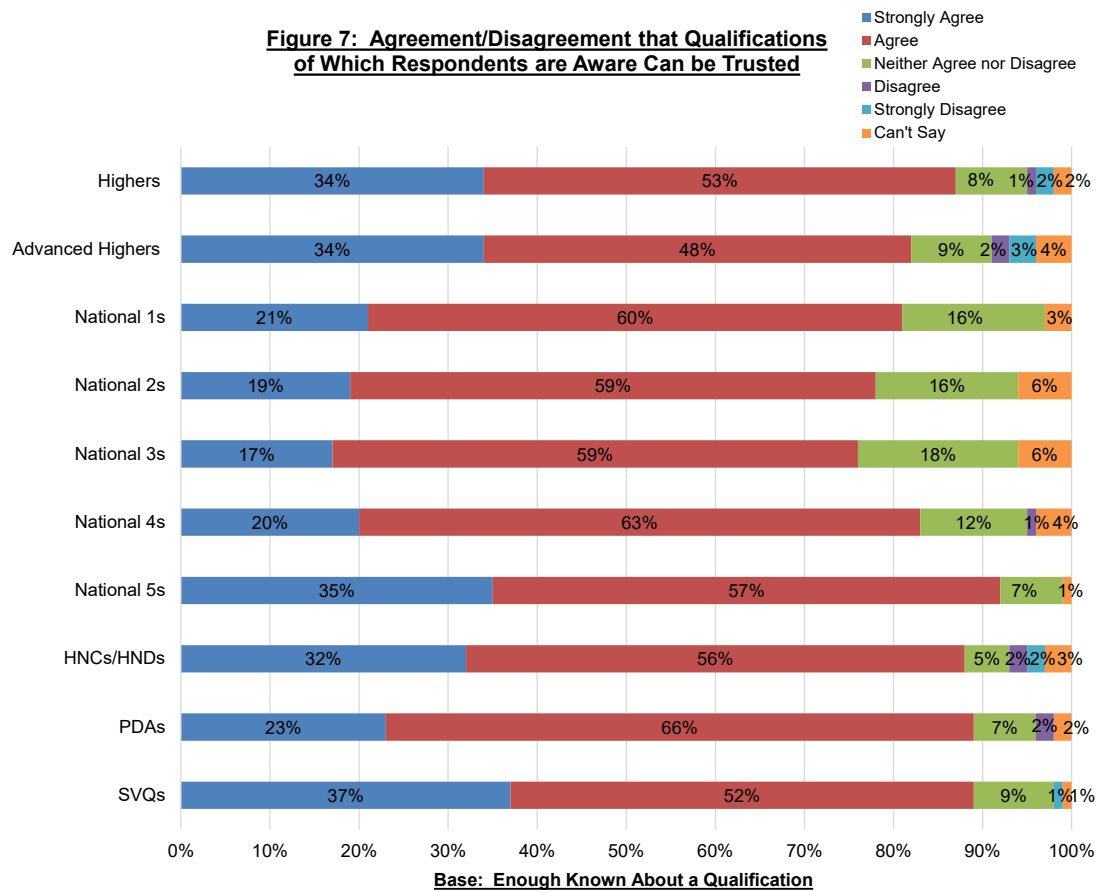
Table 1 also indicates that the **lowest levels** of belief that enough was known about qualifications of which respondents were aware related to:

- National 1s (25%)
- National 2s (27%)
- National 3s (30%)

Table 1 also indicates that, between February/March 2024 and November/December 2024, there was a **decrease** in the extent to which those aware of **all** of the qualifications under consideration believed they knew enough about them, with these decreases being most apparent in relation to:

- Highers (falling from 88% to 74%)
- Advanced Highers (falling from 68% to 56%)
- National 4s (falling from 60% to 50%)
- National 5s (falling from 74% to 64%)
- SVQs (falling from 88% to 74%)

‘How strongly would you agree or disagree that each of the qualifications you think you know enough about can be trusted?’¹



From Figure 7, it can be seen that those who thought they knew enough about qualifications were **most likely** to believe that the following ‘could be trusted’:

- National 5s (92%)
- PDAAs (89%)
- SVQs (89%)
- HNCs/HNDs (88%)
- Highers (87%)

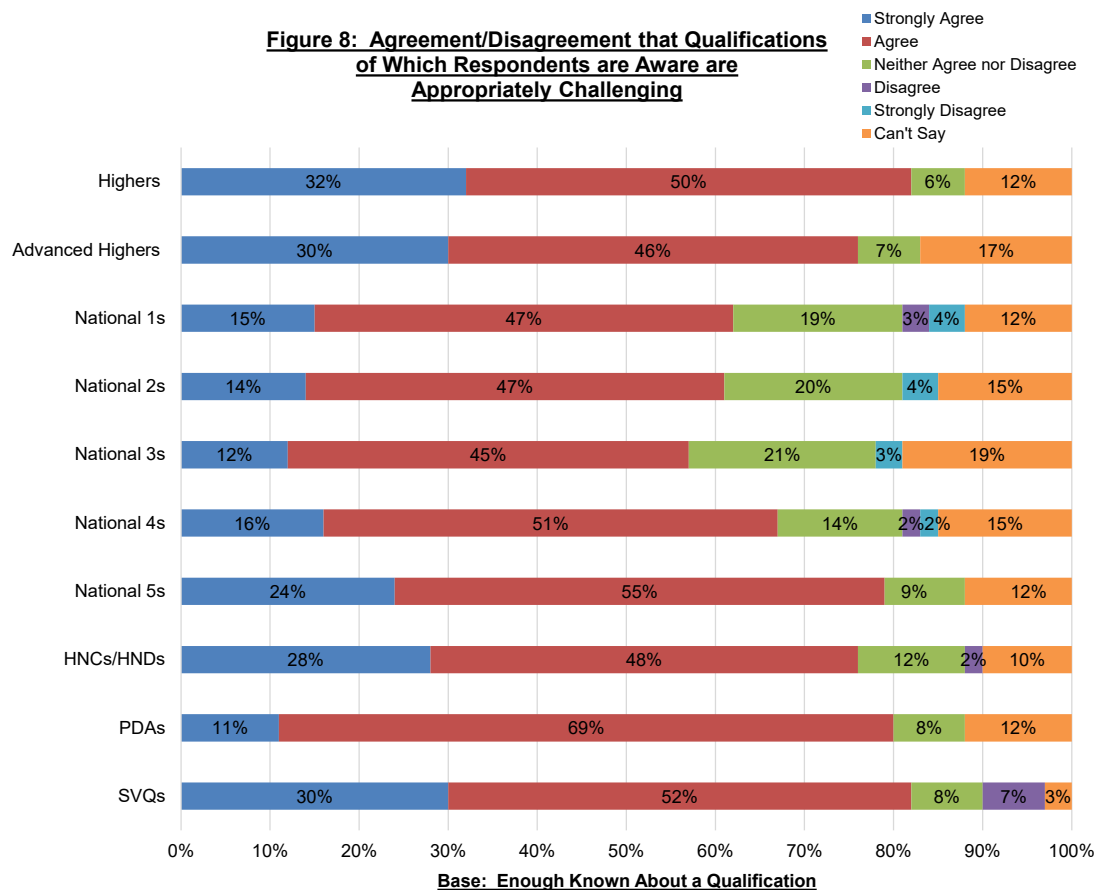
¹ This question, together with those relating to Figures 8 and 9 were asked for the first time in November/December 2024.

In contrast, those who thought they knew enough about qualifications were **least likely** to believe that two could be trusted:

- National 3s (76%)
- National 2s (78%)

Figure 7 indicates that levels of **disagreement** that qualifications which respondents thought they knew enough about could **not** be trusted were extremely limited, with this also applying to the extent to which respondents felt unable to express an opinion.

‘How strongly would you agree or disagree that each of the qualifications you think you know enough about are appropriately challenging?’



From Figure 8, it can be seen that those who thought they knew enough about qualifications were **most likely** to believe that the following were ‘appropriately challenging’:

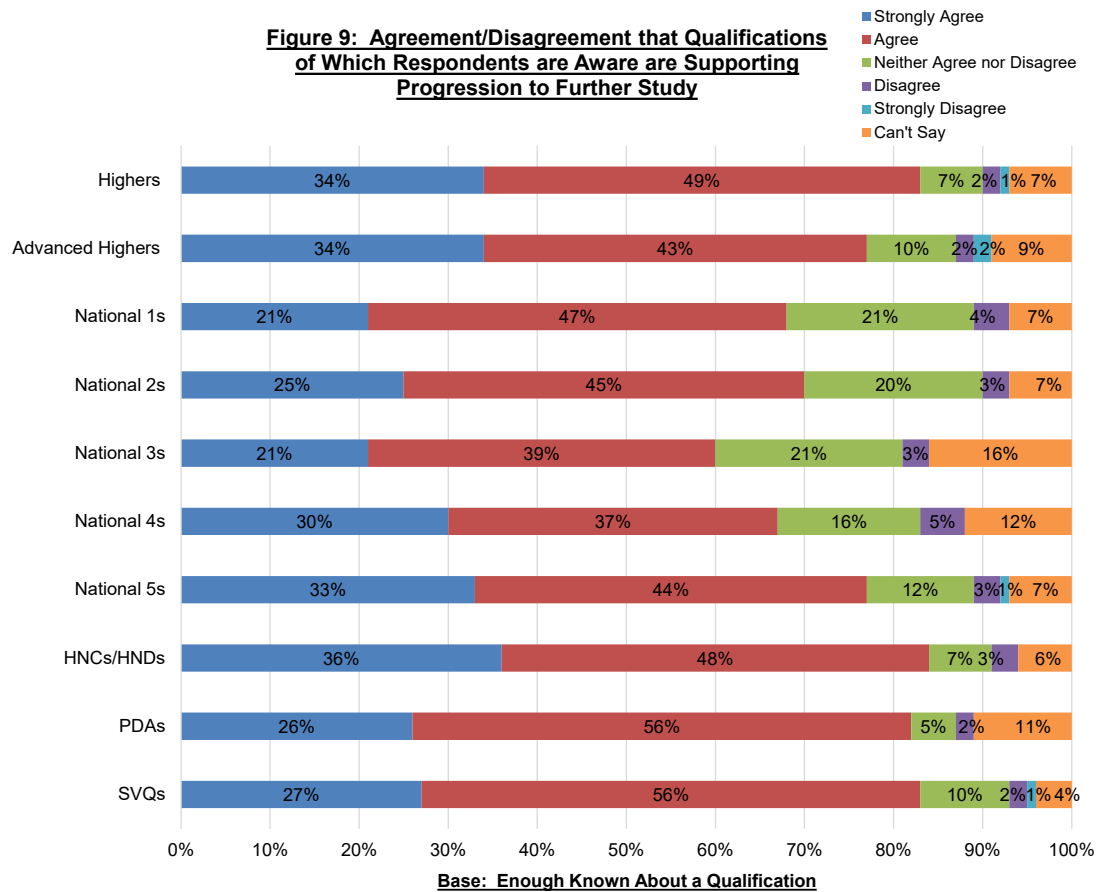
- Highers (82%)
- SVQs (82%)
- PDAs (80%)
- National 5s (79%)
- Advanced Highers (76%)
- HNCs/HNDs (76%)

In contrast, those who thought they knew enough about qualifications were **least likely** to believe that the following were appropriately challenging:

- National 3s (57%)
- National 2s (61%)
- National 1s (62%)

Figure 8 also indicates that levels of **disagreement** that qualifications which respondents thought they knew enough about were **not** appropriately challenging were extremely limited.

‘How strongly would you agree or disagree that each of the qualifications you think you know enough about support progression to further study?’



From Figure 9, it can be seen that those who thought they knew enough about qualifications were **most likely** to believe that the following ‘support progression to further study’:

- HNCs/HNDs (84%)
- Highers (83%)
- SVQs (83%)
- PDAs (82%)

In contrast, those who thought they knew enough about qualifications were **least likely** to believe that the following support progression to further study:

- National 3s (60%)
- National 4s (67%)
- National 2s (70%)

Figure 9 also indicates that, once again, levels of **disagreement** that qualifications which respondents thought they knew enough about did **not** support progression to further study were very limited, with this also applying to the extent to which respondents were unable to express an opinion here, although this was most notable in relation to:

- National 3s (16%)
- National 4s (12%)
- PDAs (11%)

3.2 Changes in Views About SQA Qualifications

‘How have your overall views on the credibility of all of the qualifications you have heard of taken together changed over the last year?’

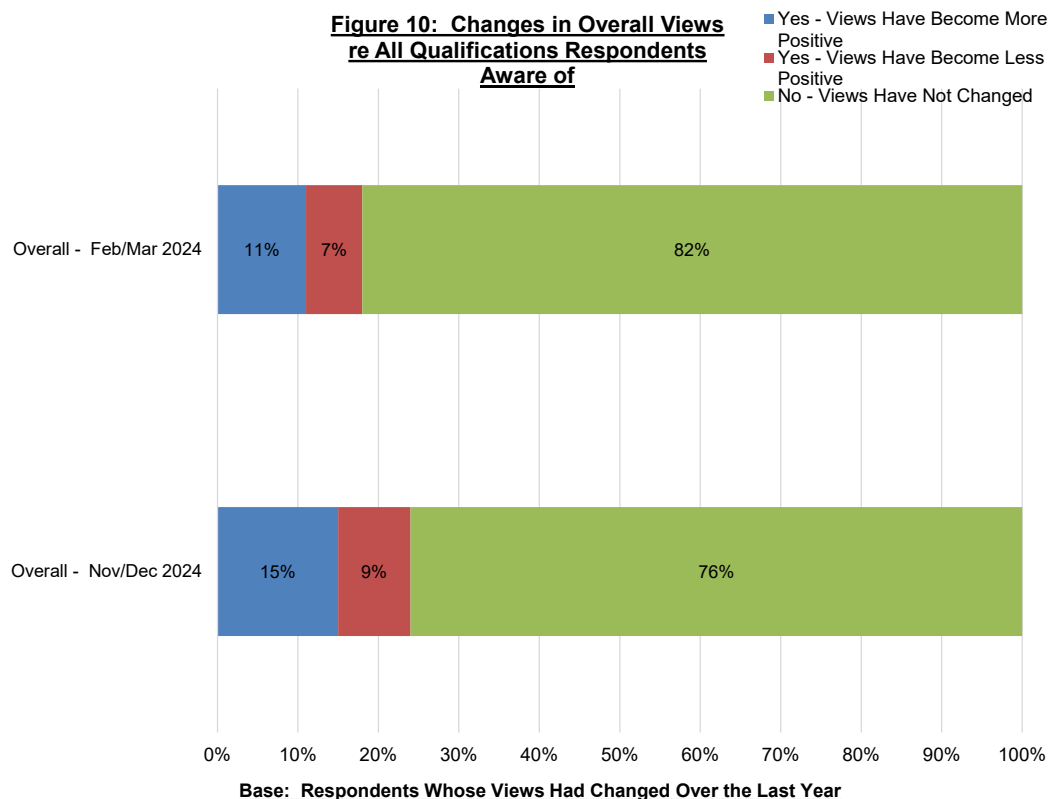


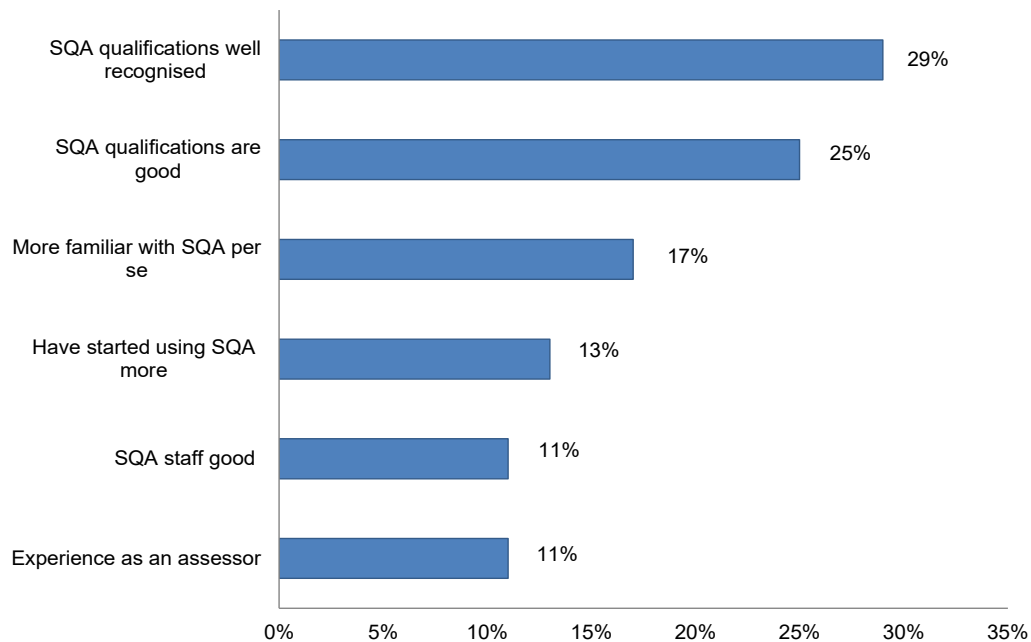
Figure 10 indicates that, overall, a quarter of respondents in November/December 2024 (24%) stated that their views on the credibility of all qualifications they had heard of – taken together – had changed over the last year. This represents a rise since February/March 2024 (from 18%).

From Figure 10, it can also be seen that one in six respondents in November/December 2024 (15%) stated that their views had changed and had become **more positive**, with this representing a rise since February/March 2024 (from 11%).

Finally, Figure 10 indicates that, in November/December 2024, almost one in ten respondents (9%) – whose views on qualifications had changed – stated that they had become **less positive**, with this outcome being very similar to that found in the last survey (7%)².

‘In what ways have your views become more positive?’

Figure 11: Ways in Which Views on the Overall Credibility of Qualifications Have Become More Positive (Unprompted) - Indicative



Base: Views Have Become More Positive in Figure 10

² This variance is not statistically significant.

Although on an indicative basis, Figure 11 indicates that – when those stating their views regarding qualifications had become more positive – were asked (on an unprompted basis) why this was the case, their **primary responses** focused around:

- SQA qualifications being well recognised (29%)
- SQA qualifications being good (25%)

4.0 SQA CONTACT AND COMMUNICATIONS PROFILES

4.1 Contact Profile

‘Have you had contact from SQA or have you contacted SQA?’

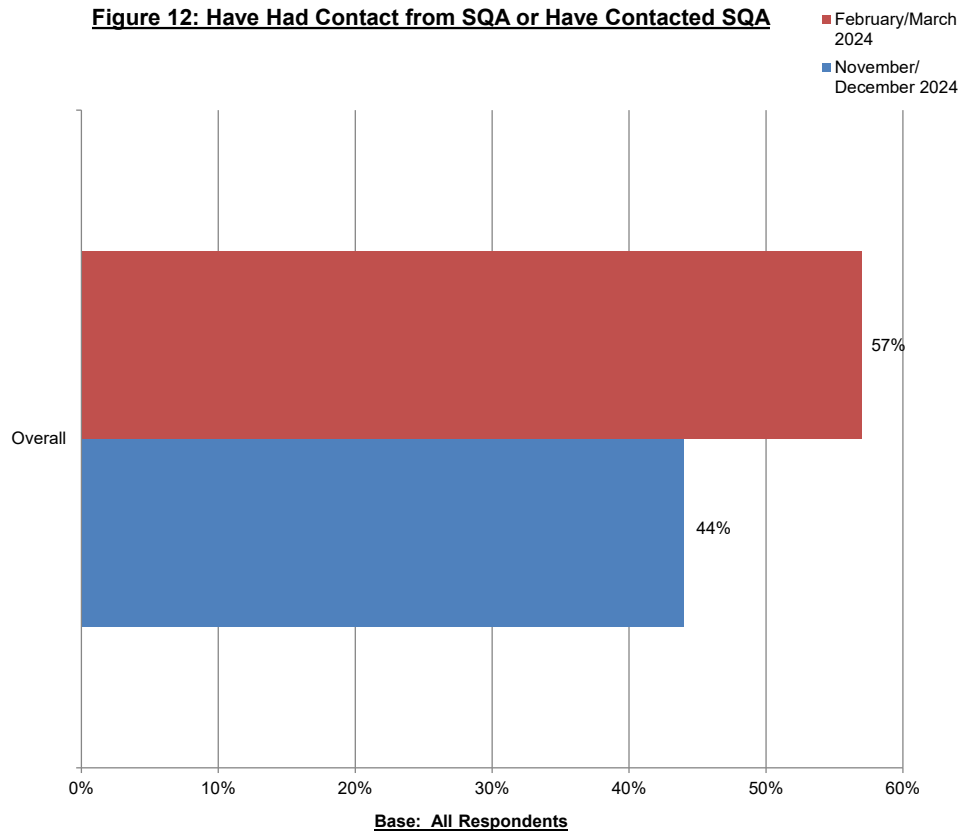


Figure 12 indicates that over two out of five respondents in November/December 2024 (44%) stated that they had had contact from SQA (in the case of Employers, ETP Teaching Professionals and ETP Managers) or had contacted SQA (in the case of ETP Learners). This represents a notable fall since February/March 2024 (from 57%).

‘How would you rate your contact from SQA or contact with SQA, on a scale from 1 to 10, where ‘1’ is ‘very poor’ and ‘10’ is ‘very good’?’

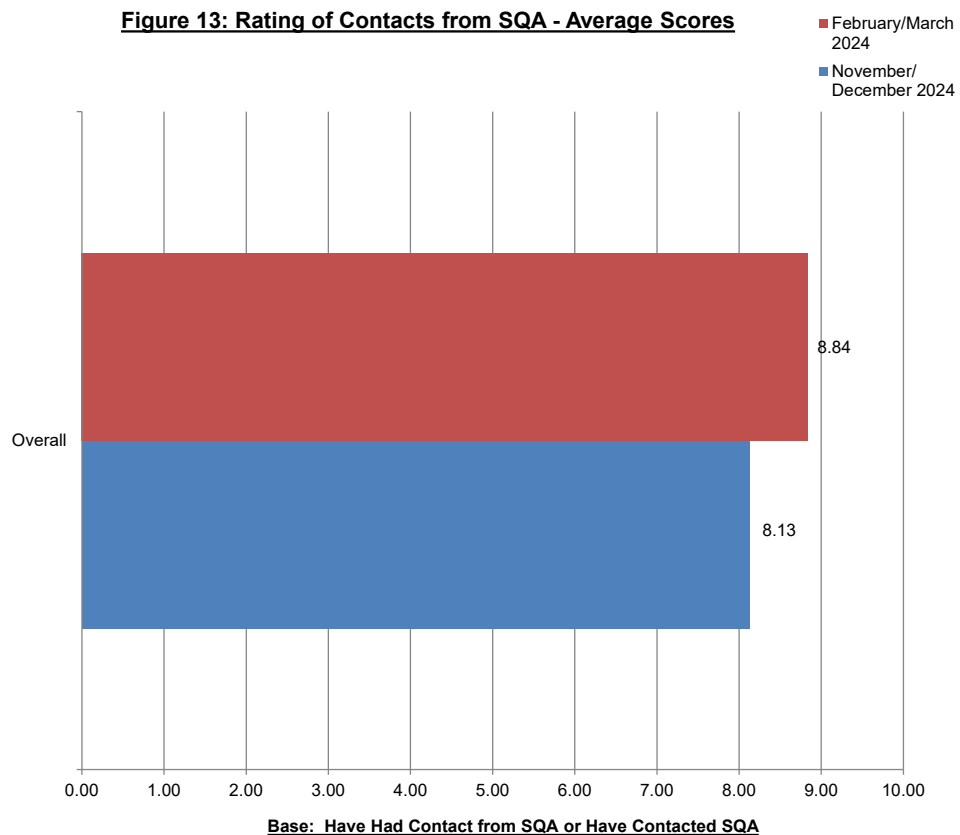
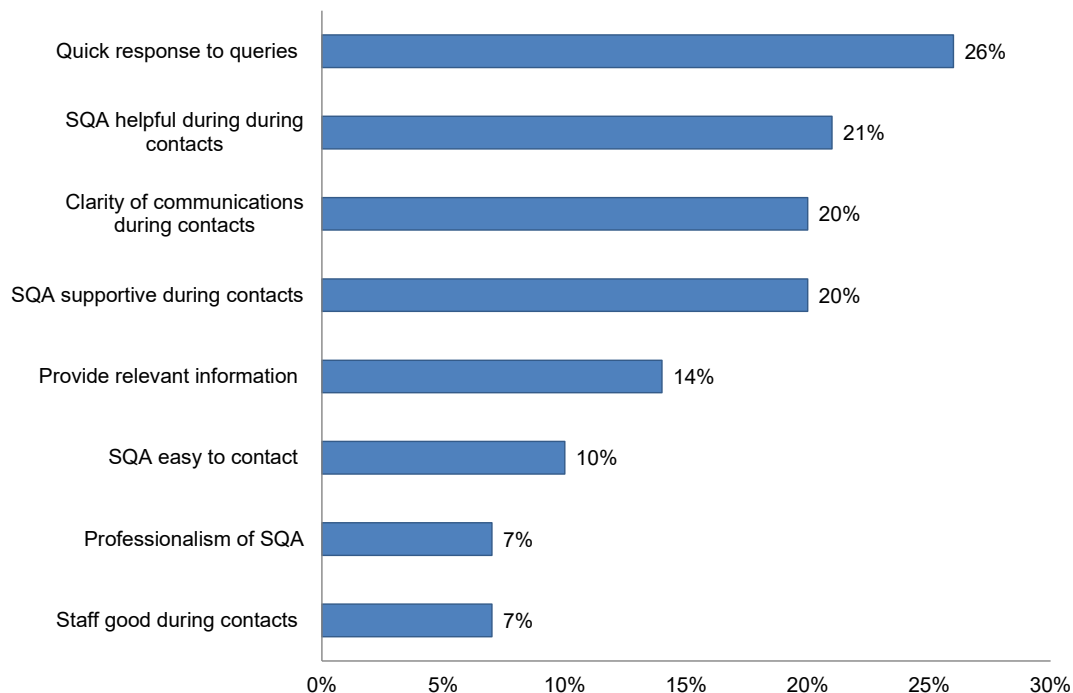


Figure 13 indicates that, when respondents in November/December 2024 were asked how they rated their contact from SQA (in the case of Employers, ETP Teaching Professionals and ETP Managers) and contact with SQA (in the case the ETP Learners), an average score of 8.13 out of a possible 10 was noted. This represents a notable fall since the last survey (from 8.84).

‘Why did you choose a positive rating for SQA contacts?’

**Figure 14: Reasons for Choosing Positive Rating of SQA Contacts
(Unprompted)**



Base: Provided Rating of 6 to 10

From Figure 14, it can be seen that, when those noting a positive rating in terms of SQA contacts (ie provided a rating of between 6 and 10) were asked (on an unprompted basis) in November/December 2024 why this was the case, their **primary responses** were:

- SQA's quick response to queries (26%)
- SQA being helpful during contacts (21%)
- Clarity of communications during contacts (20%)
- SQA being supportive during contacts (20%)

Thereafter, **secondary unprompted mention** was made here of a number of other factors, including:

- Contacts providing relevant information (14%)
- SQA being easy to contact (10%)

Further examination of the data here indicated that, between February/ March 2024 and November/December 2024, there was **increasing unprompted reference** made here to:

- Clarity of communications during contacts (rising from 5% to 20%)
- SQA being supportive during contacts (rising from 14% to 20%)

In contrast, since the last survey, **decreasing unprompted reference** was made here to:

- SQA's quick response to queries (falling from 33% to 26%)
- SQA being helpful during contacts (falling from 31% to 21%)
- SQA being easy to contact (falling from 22% to 10%)

4.2 Communications Profile

'How would you rate the appropriateness of the level of detail of communications from SQA, on a scale from 1 to 10, where '1' is 'very poor' and '10' is 'very good'?

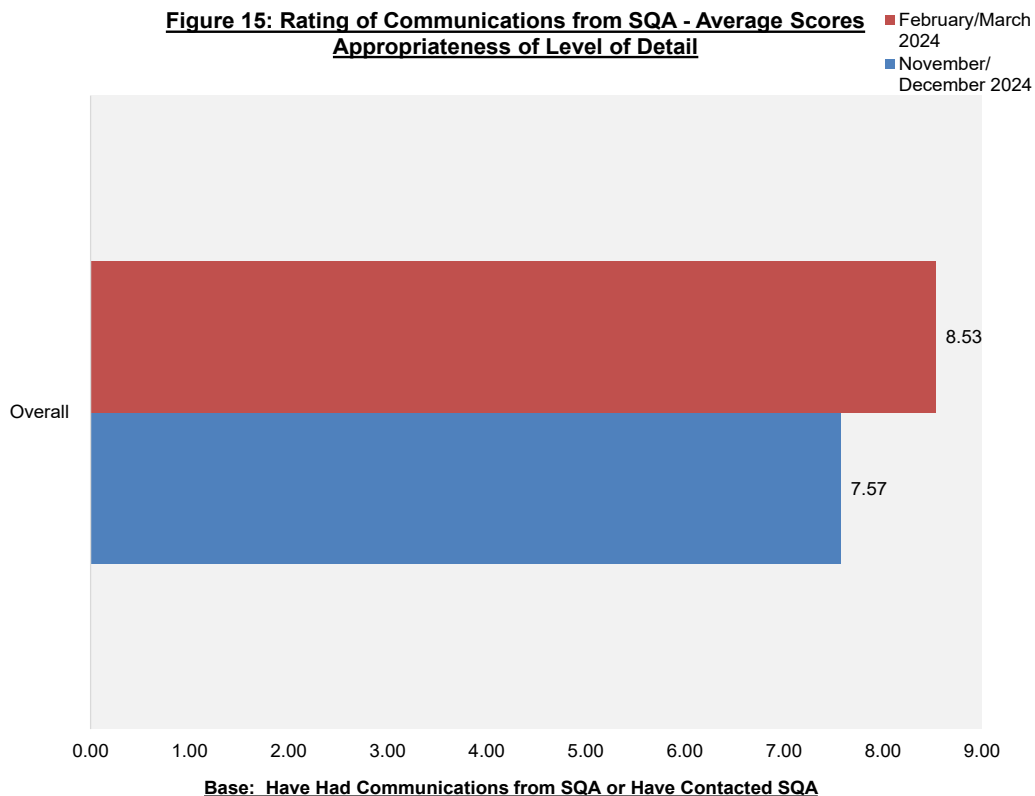


Figure 15 indicates that respondents in November/December 2024 provided an average score of 7.57 out of a possible 10 in terms of the **appropriateness of the level of detail of communications from SQA**. This represents a notable fall since February/March 2024 (from 8.53).

‘How would you rate the clarity of communications from SQA, on a scale from 1 to 10, where ‘1’ is ‘very poor’ and ‘10’ is ‘very good’?’

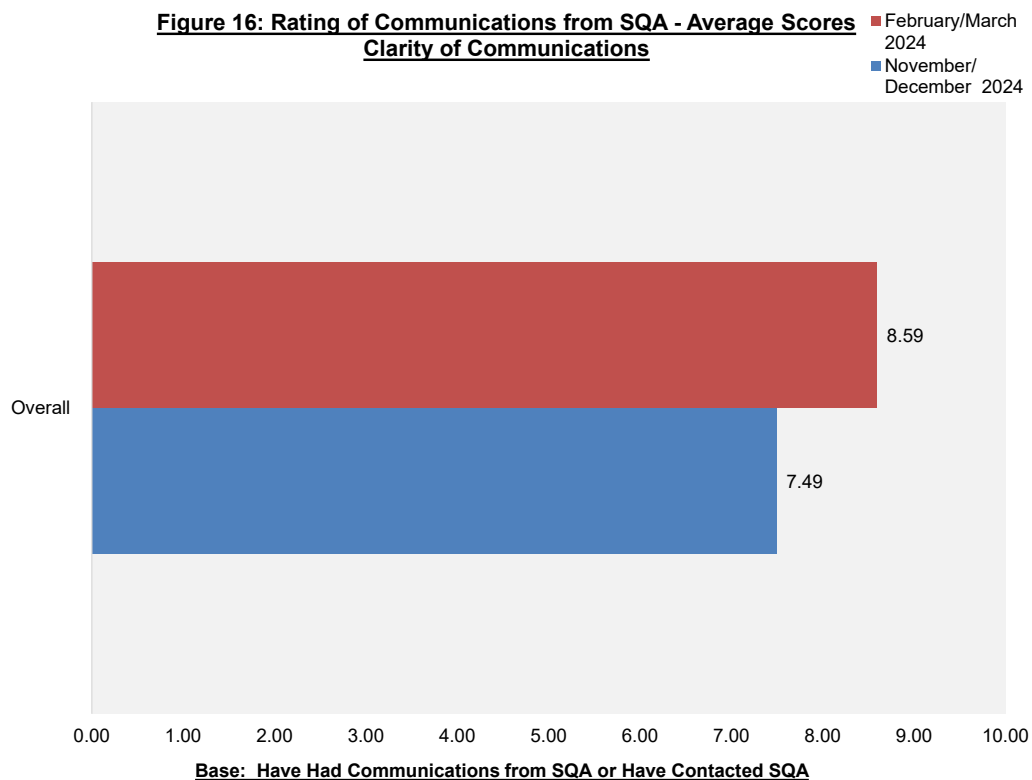
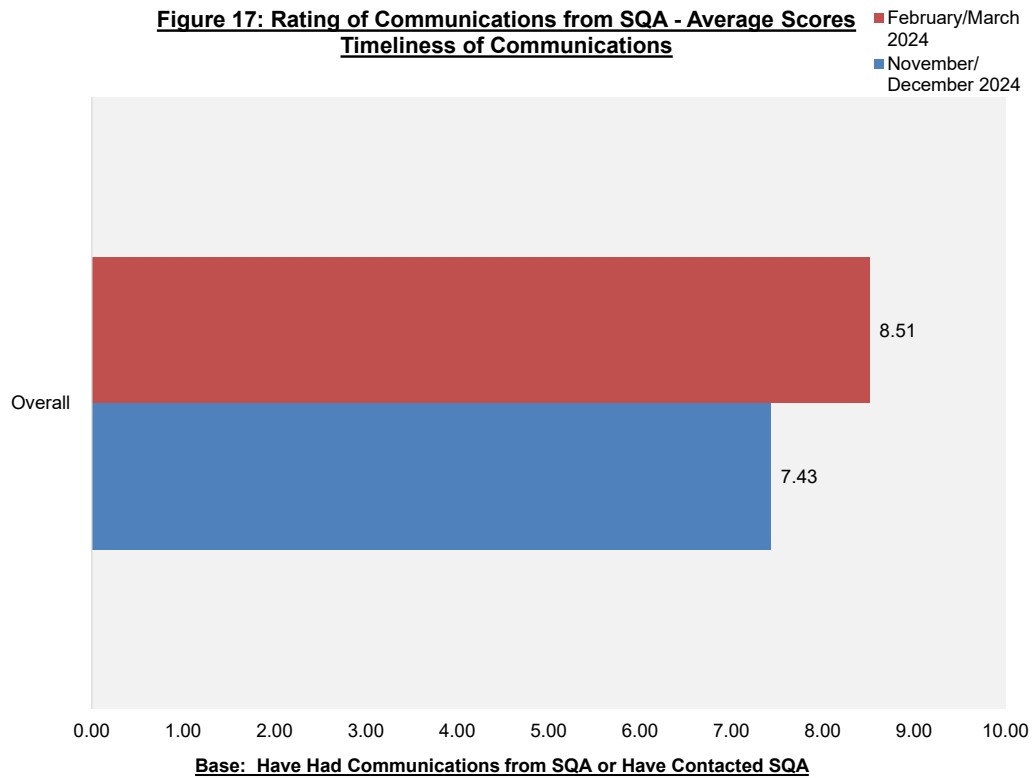


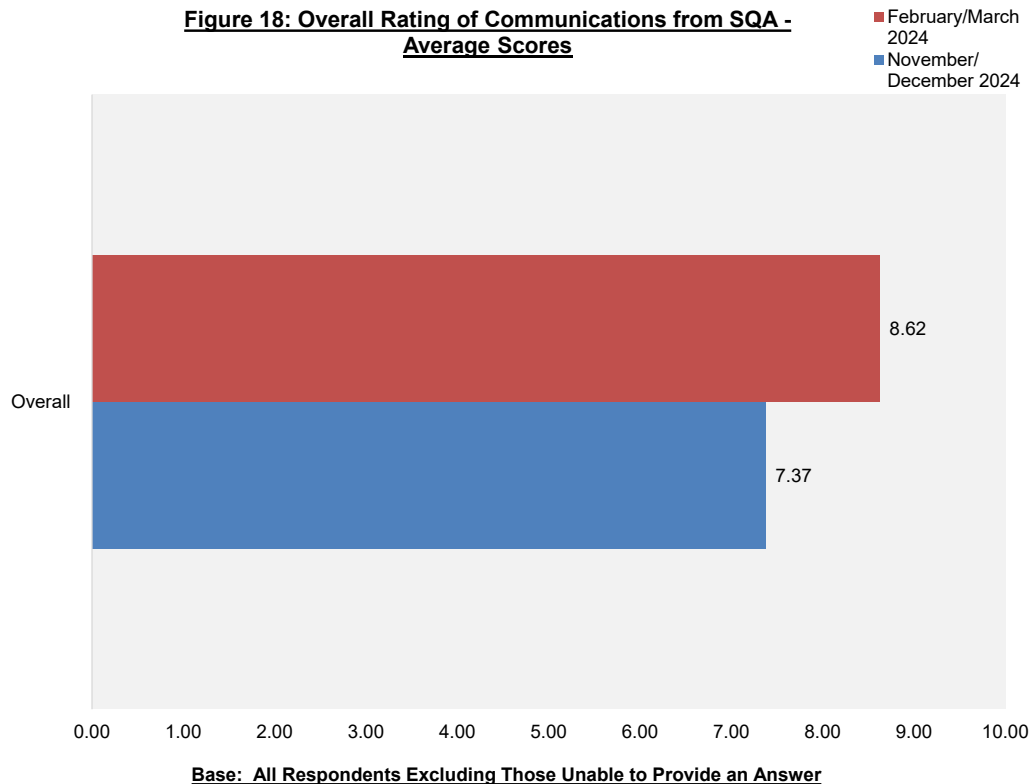
Figure 16 indicates that respondents in November/December 2024 provided an average score of 7.49 out of a possible 10 in terms of **clarity of communications from SQA**. This, again, represents a notable fall since the last survey (from 8.59).

‘How would you rate the timeliness of communications from SQA, on a scale from 1 to 10, where ‘1’ is ‘very poor’ and ‘10’ is ‘very good’?’



From Figure 17, it can be seen that, in November/December 2024, respondents provided an average score of 7.43 out of a possible 10 in terms of the **timeliness of communications from SQA**, with this, once again, representing a notable fall since February/March 2024 (from 8.51).

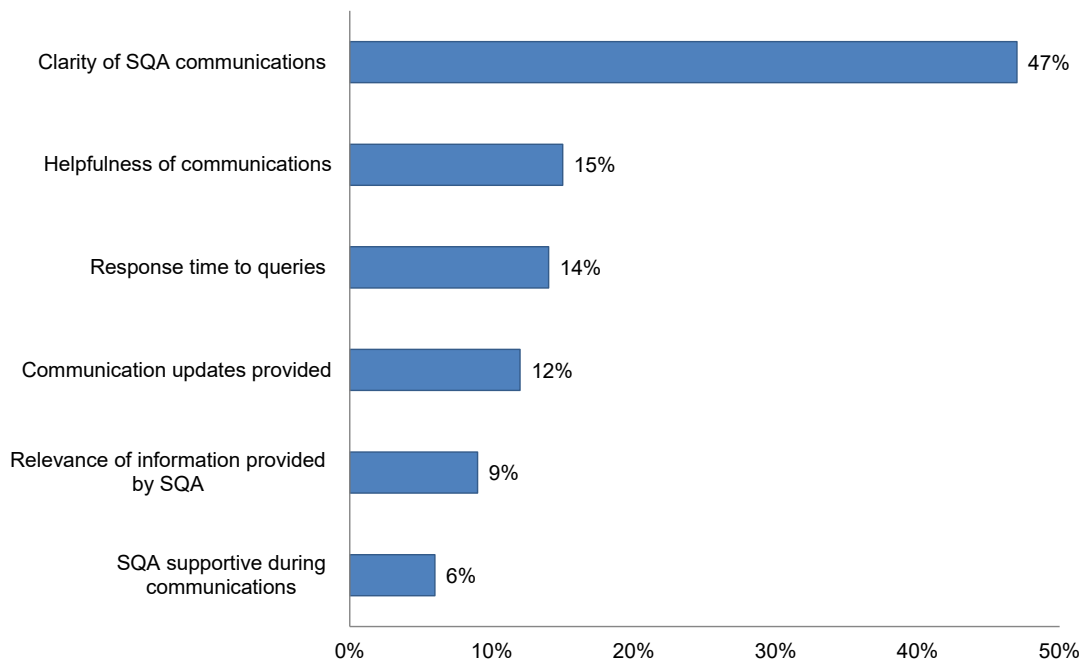
“Overall, how would you rate communications from SQA, on a scale from 1 to 10, where ‘1’ is ‘very poor’ and ‘10’ is ‘very good’?”



From Figure 18, it can be seen that an average score of 7.37 out of a possible 10 was provided by respondents in terms of their **overall rating of their communications from SQA**. Yet again, this represents a notable fall since the last survey (from 8.62).

‘Why did you choose a high rating number here?’

Figure 19: Reasons for Choosing Good Rating of SQA Communications



Base: Provided Rating of 6 to 10

When those providing a high rating number for SQA in terms of its overall rating of its communications (ie provided a rating of 6 to 10) were asked – on an unprompted basis – why this was the case, Figure 19 indicates that their **primary response** related to ‘the clarity of SQA communications’ (47%).

Thereafter, **secondary unprompted mention** was made here of a range of other reasons, including:

- The helpfulness of SQA communications (15%)
- SQA’s response time to queries (14%)
- Communications updates being provided by SQA (12%)

Further examination of the data indicated that, since February/March 2024, increasing unprompted reference was made here to ‘SQA being

knowledgeable and/or informative in communications' (rising from 5% to 17%).

In contrast, decreasing unprompted reference was made here to respondents 'encountering no communication problems with SQA' (falling from 10% to 2%).

5.0 SQA CONSULTATION AND ENGAGEMENT PROFILE

‘How would you rate how well SQA consults or engages with you or you and your peers, on a scale from 1 to 10, where ‘1’ is ‘very poor’ and ‘10’ is ‘very good’?’

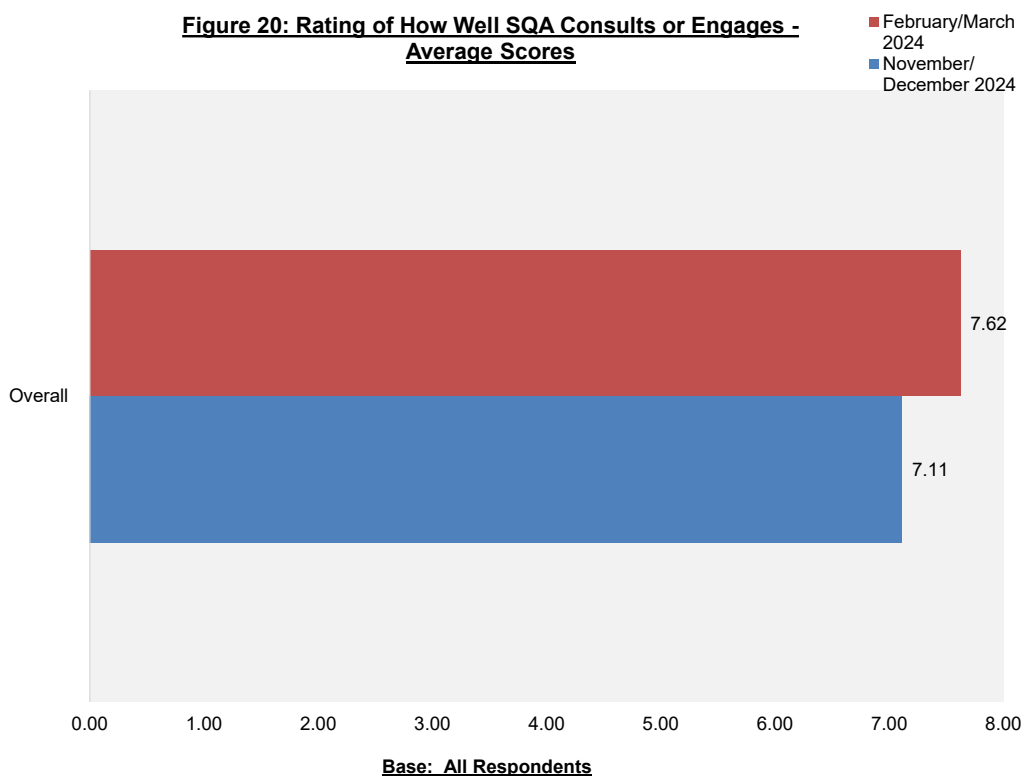
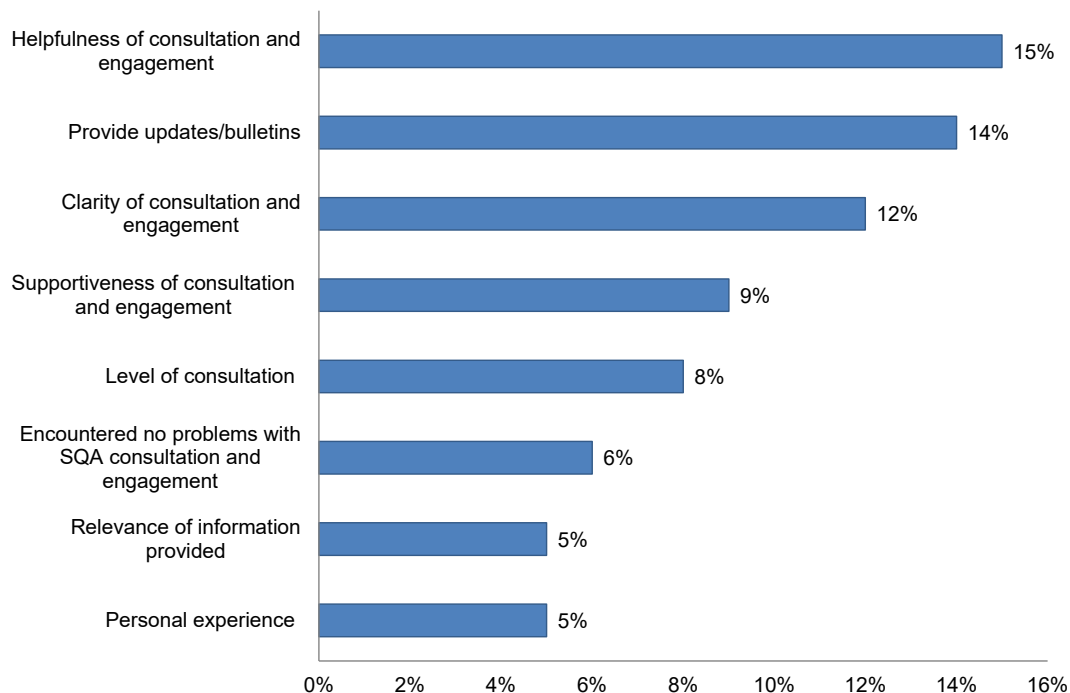


Figure 20 indicates that, when respondents were asked to rate how well SQA consults or engages with them (in the case of Employers, ETP Teaching Professionals and ETP Managers) and consults with themselves or their peers (in the case of ETP Learners), an average score of 7.11 out of a possible 10 was noted in November/December 2024. This represents a significant fall since February/March 2024 (from 7.62).

‘Why did you choose this good rating number?’

Figure 21: Reasons for Providing Good Rating re Consultation and Engagement (Unprompted)



Base: Provided Rating of 6 to 10

When those providing a good rating number for SQA in terms of its consultation and engagement in November/December 2024 (ie provided a score of between 6 and 10) were asked – on an unprompted basis – why this was the case, Figure 21 indicates that their **primary responses** were those of:

- The helpfulness of SQA’s consultation and engagement (15%)
- Being provided with updates and bulletins during consultation and engagement (14%)
- The clarity of consultation and engagement (12%)

Thereafter, **some unprompted mention** was made here of a number of other reasons, including:

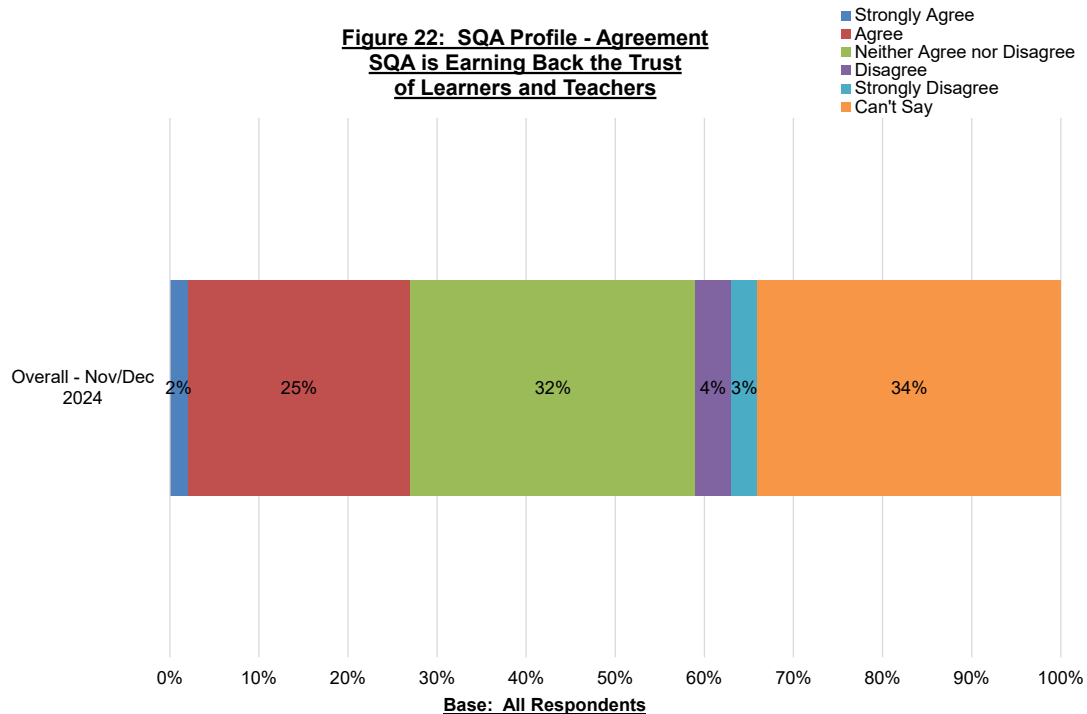
- The supportiveness of consultation and engagement from SQA (9%)
- The level of consultation (8%)

Further examination of the data indicated that, between February/ March 2024 and November/December 2024, **increasing unprompted reference** was made here to 'being provided with updates and bulletins during consultation and engagement' (rising from 4% to 14%), whilst, during that time, there was **decreasing unprompted reference** made here to a number of other reasons, including:

- Clarity of consultation and engagement (falling from 12% to 0%)
- The level of consultation (falling from 8% to 0%)
- SQA making efforts to engage (falling from 11% to 0%)

6.0 A PROSPECTUS FOR CHANGE COMMITMENT PROFILE ³

‘How strongly would you agree or disagree that SQA is earning back the trust of learners and teachers?’



From Figure 22, it can be seen that, overall, over a quarter of respondents in November/December 2024 (27%) **agreed** that ‘SQA is earning back the trust of learners and teachers’.

³ These questions were asked for the first time in November/December 2024.

‘How strongly would you agree or disagree that SQA is using technology to provide a more streamlined service?’

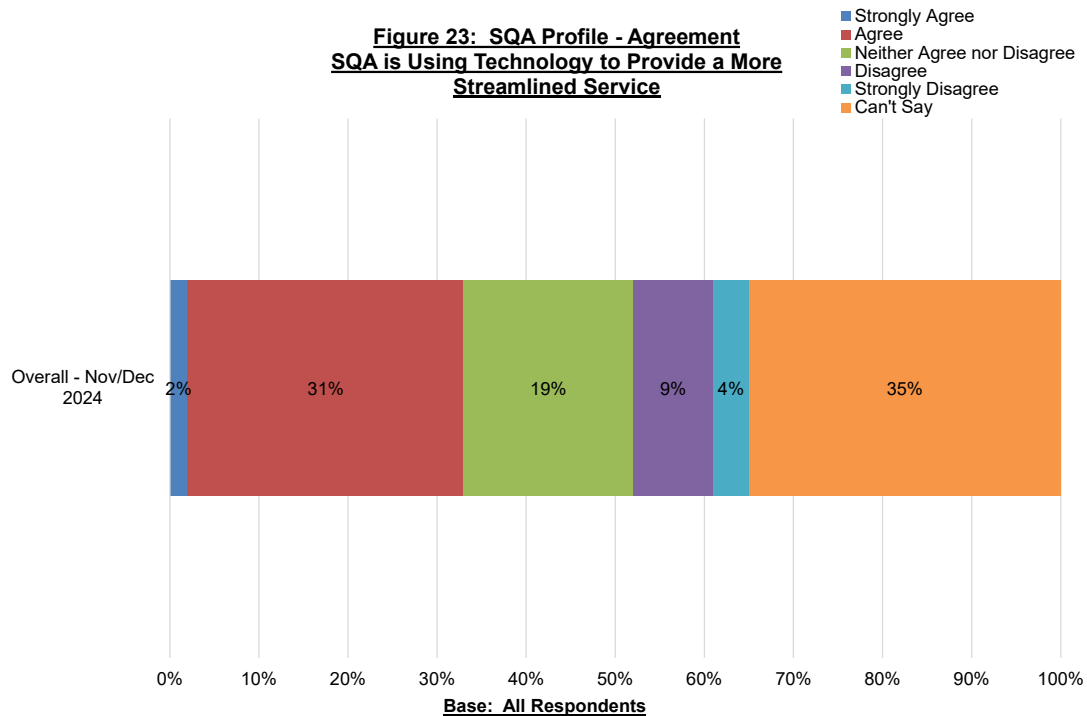


Figure 23 indicates that, overall, a third of respondents in November/ December 2024 (33%) **agreed** that ‘SQA is using technology to provide a more streamlined service’.

‘How strongly would you agree or disagree that SQA qualifications reflect the changes taking place in society and the economy?’

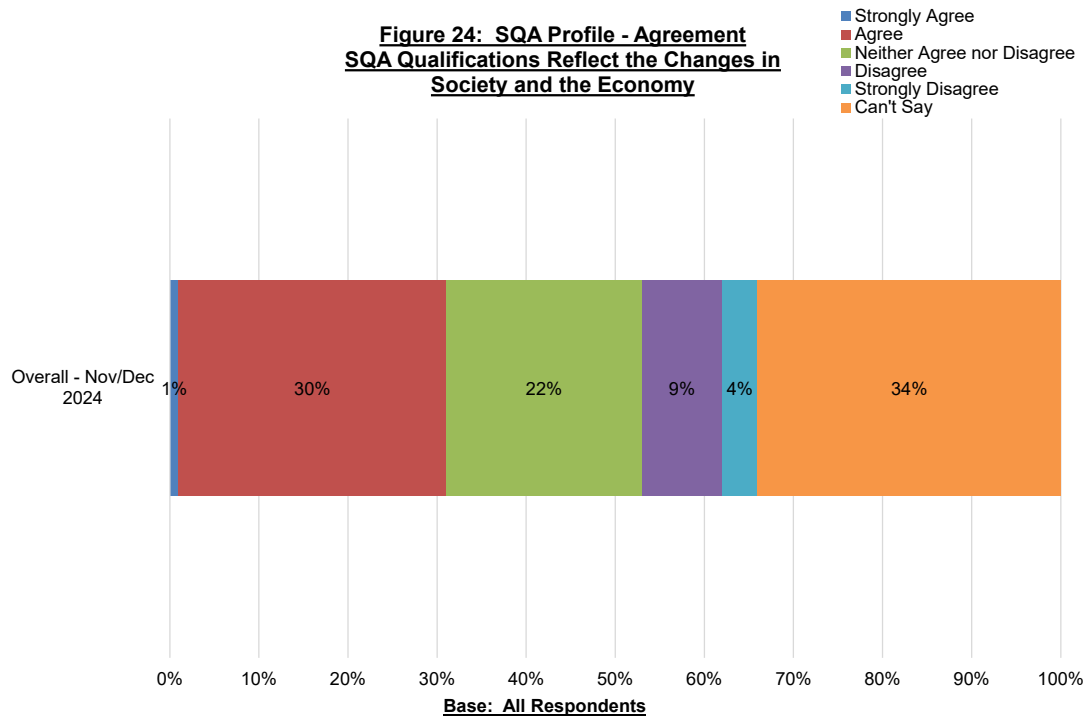


Figure 24 indicates that three out of ten respondents in November/December 2024 (31%) **agreed** that ‘SQA qualifications reflect the changes in society and the economy’.

7.0 KEY MESSAGES

The latest phase of the key audience research undertaken amongst the ETP audiences has highlighted a number of negative changes since the last survey, including:

- A fall in perceived high credibility of SQA, together with a rise in its perceived low credibility
- A fall in satisfaction with SQA's overall performance
- A fall in beliefs that enough is known about SQA
- Falls in beliefs that enough is known about all qualifications of which respondents are aware, with these falls being significant for many qualifications
- A fall in levels of satisfaction with SQA contacts
- Falls in terms of SQA communications overall and in terms of the appropriateness of the level of detail of communications from SQA, their clarity and their timeliness
- A fall in the rating of how well SQA consults and engages

From a more positive perspective:

- There are beliefs – and, in some cases, strong beliefs – that enough is known about qualifications of which respondents are aware
- There is a general consensus – and, in some cases, a strong consensus – that SQA qualifications can be trusted, are appropriately challenging and support progression to further study (with little disagreement with each of these attributes)
- For those whose views about SQA qualifications they were aware of – taken together – had changed, it was more likely that they had become more positive than less positive