



SQA Centre Malpractice Annual Report 2023

This report provides information on SQA Awarding Body's approach to managing centre malpractice concerns in 2023.

Like 2020 to 2022, centre malpractice referrals for 2023 should be seen in the context of the disruption to education and training caused by the pandemic.

Malpractice is defined as:

- ◆ *any act, default or practice (whether deliberate or resulting from neglect or default) that is a breach of SQA requirements, including any act, default or practice that:*
- ◆ *compromises, attempts to compromise, or may compromise, the process of assessment, the integrity of any SQA qualification, or the validity of a result or certificate; and/or*
- ◆ *damages the authority, reputation or credibility of SQA or any officer, employee or agent of SQA.*

Malpractice can arise for a variety of reasons:

- ◆ Some incidents are intentional and aim to give an unfair advantage or disadvantage in an examination or assessment (deliberate non-compliance). Examples might include:
 - completing assessment work on behalf of learners; or
 - falsification of information leading to certification
- ◆ Some incidents of malpractice are unintentional. We define unintentional malpractice as 'maladministration', which includes incidents that arise due to ignorance of SQA requirements, carelessness or neglect in applying the requirements. Examples might include:
 - seeking approval to offer a new qualification after the deadline for new approval applications has passed; or
 - requesting late certification of learners after a regulated qualification's certification end date

Malpractice can include both deliberate non-compliance with SQA requirements and maladministration in the assessment and delivery of SQA qualifications.

The information below covers SQA activity across all qualification and centre types and across all assessment methodologies. We log all eligible concerns that are raised and report on them irrespective of the outcome.

Summary of concerns across the centre malpractice lifecycle

Overall information provided for centre malpractice in 2023 should be seen in the context of the continued disruption to education and training caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

SQA recognised that, while the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic may have been less severe than in previous years, things had not yet returned to normal. We had an approach to assessment and awarding that helped to support recovery of teaching and learning while maintaining the standards and credibility of our qualifications. This included the continuation of modifications to assessment, freeing up time for learning and teaching and providing Understanding Standards materials, as well as other advice and support to help practitioners prepare learners effectively for SQA’s assessments.

Working with partners in the education and training community, SQA delivered approaches to awarding all qualifications in this challenging year, ensuring that learners got the results they deserved and developed the knowledge and skills they needed to progress to further learning, training or work.

Risk-based decisions were taken by SQA specialist officers and malpractice panels, following consideration of available information, to identify the appropriate response to specific centre malpractice concerns as described in [Malpractice: Information for Centres](#). Those approaches included closing the matter without further investigation, bringing the matter to the attention of the centre for action locally, or initiating investigations. This was centre-led (devolved) or SQA-led, as applicable — see <https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/96858.html> for more information.

In April 2023, SQA also published [information](#) setting out our approach to malpractice concerns in relation to any qualifications regulated by Ofqual or Qualifications Wales.

Table 1 — Overview of concerns at NQ and HNMQ

	Concerns logged	Ongoing concerns	Concerns closed at screening	Concerns concluded following investigation	Finding of malpractice following investigation	No finding of malpractice following investigation
2019	421	8	128	285	171	114
2020	63	5	22	36	32	4
2021	88	2	49	37	34	3
2022	207	10	138	59	45	14
2023	212	9	147	56	42	14

Table 1 shows that in 2023 a total of 212 concerns were logged, of which 147 were closed at the screening stage. Of these, 49 concerns were brought to the attention of the centre for action locally. The screening stage is the first stage in the centre malpractice process. Here, expert SQA staff consider the available evidence and evaluate any risk to the integrity of certification. Where concerns are closed at this stage centres may not be contacted or informed; they may be unaware a concern was raised. The table indicates that the number of concerns logged has varied over the

last five years. This reflects the changes to how our qualifications were assessed during the global pandemic.

Where an investigation is initiated, centres are informed and involved in the process. In 2023 56 concerns were investigated to a conclusion. Of these 42 led to a finding of malpractice. (Please note that a small number of these findings are still within the appeal period, meaning centres may exercise their right to ask SQA to reconsider its decision.)

Centres are always informed of the outcome of any centre malpractice investigation. Where there is a finding of malpractice, the Head of Centre has the right of appeal — the procedure is set out in our publication *The Appeals Process* https://www.sqa.org.uk/files_ccc/Appeals_Process.pdf.

These 42 investigations concluding in a finding of centre malpractice related to less than 3% of the centres registered to deliver SQA qualifications by the end of 2023.

Ongoing cases have yet to resolve and may be at pre-screening, screening, or investigation stages.

Table 2 — Qualification type

Year	National Qualifications	Higher National or Vocational Qualifications	Total
2019	367	54	421
2020	32	31	63
2021	53	35	88
2022	174	33	207
2023	179	33	212

The total concerns given in Table 2 include those closed at screening, those ongoing and those concluded.

The National Qualifications category comprises National 1 to National 5, Highers and Advanced Highers, National Qualifications Units, Awards, National Certificates and National Progression Awards.

The Higher National and Vocational Qualifications category comprises Higher National Diplomas, Higher National Certificates, Scottish Vocational Qualifications, Higher National or Vocational Units and Professional Development Awards.

Table 3 — Source of concerns

Year	Concerns identified by SQA staff, including Appointees, during marking and quality assurance processes	Concerns identified in other ways	Total
2019	360	61	421
2020	25	38	63
2021	27	61	88
2022	160	47	207
2023	167	45	212

Table 3 shows where all logged concerns originate. Those identified by SQA are those that have been raised because of our processes or identified by a member of staff or by an appointee carrying out their duties for SQA.

Concerns identified in other ways include those raised with SQA directly by centres or centre staff, those raised by learners or their parents/carers, or any other third party that chooses to raise an issue with SQA.

Table 4 — Principal type of malpractice identified in panel finding of malpractice

Year	Failure of administrative systems for assessment and certification	Assessment conditions not applied — level of direction	Assessment conditions not applied — other	Internal assessments not in line with standards	Other security breach	Other	Total
2019	11	88	60	5	6	1	171
2020	14	5	6	0	3	4	32
2021	13	2	7	0	11	1	34
2022	10	21	7	1	5	1	45
2023	5	21	6	3	5	2	42

Table 4 shows the principal type of malpractice for those cases where the malpractice panel reached a finding of malpractice. A malpractice panel decision can include findings across several centre practices and there is a degree of subjectivity in defining the principal type of finding in unique and complex circumstances.

The most prevalent principal finding type was that there had been a failure to apply specified assessment conditions in terms of the level of direction provided to candidates. This comprised 20 findings related to NQ and one relating to HNVQ.

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

- ◆ providing specialist support to ensure compliance within the centre
- ◆ applying required actions to enable certification to proceed
- ◆ increased quality assurance monitoring
- ◆ withdrawing approval to offer specific qualifications
- ◆ withdrawing centre approval status

Furthermore, to maintain the integrity of certification, a finding of malpractice may also lead to adjustments to candidate results (including those only awarded either 'Pass' or 'Fail' result) which may, in turn, affect their certificated award.

Types of measure required by SQA as a result of malpractice investigations in 2023

SQA centre malpractice panels consider whether remedial or improvement actions are to be recommended or required as part of its decision-making process. The measures most frequently mandated by a malpractice panel to safeguard the integrity of certification are to provide subject specialist support, and/or to require the centre to develop a plan to address the malpractice identified, evidenced with a report detailing actions that have been implemented.

In many of the instances, centres acknowledged the problems that had arisen, and identified their own comprehensive improvement actions. In these cases, SQA was satisfied that the centre had taken sufficiently robust steps and did not require any additional actions to be taken. Additionally, in some instances more than one action may be mandated by SQA where there is a finding of malpractice across multiple practices within the centre.

SQA reserves the right to mandate measures even where an investigation did not conclude in a finding of malpractice. This is often where practice has been judged to have fallen short of best practice, but not to the point of malpractice.

Information provided for centre malpractice in 2023 should be seen in the context of the continued disruption to education and training caused by the pandemic. SQA continues to work with centres to prevent, identify, investigate and mitigate any concerns of possible malpractice, as described in *Malpractice: Information for Centres*.