



# SQA Centre Malpractice Annual Report 2024

This report provides information on SQA's (as an awarding body) approach to managing centre malpractice concerns in 2024.

Centre malpractice referrals for 2024 should be seen in the context of the return to full course assessment for graded National Courses, which included the re-introduction of the coursework component for most subjects and levels.

## SQA's approach to centre malpractice

SQA's approach depends on the qualifications affected. Concerns relating to most SQA qualifications are governed by the processes described in [Malpractice: Information for Centres](#).

The small minority of concerns relating to qualifications externally regulated by Ofqual or Qualifications Wales are handled in line with the [Malpractice policy and procedures for SQA Qualifications regulated by Ofqual and/ or Qualifications Wales](#).

In both of these documents, SQA defines malpractice 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 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
  - falsification of information leading to certification
- ◆ Some incidents of malpractice are unintentional. We describe unintentional malpractice as 'maladministration'. This 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

- 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 in this report 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

The overall information for centre malpractice in 2024 should be seen in the context of the return to full course assessment for graded National Courses, which included the re-introduction of the coursework component for most subjects and levels. The approach to awarding in 2024 was to use well-established procedures while considering any impact of this return to full course assessment.

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.

Those responses included closing the matter without further investigation, bringing the matter to the attention of the centre for action locally, or initiating investigations, the latter being centre-led (devolved) or SQA-led, as applicable — see ['Reporting malpractice' on our website](#) for more information.

**Table 1 — Overview of concerns at NQ and HNVQ**

	Concerns logged	Ongoing concerns	Concerns closed at screening	Concerns concluded following investigation	Finding of malpractice following investigation	No finding of malpractice following investigation
<b>2019<sup>1</sup></b>	421	8	128	285	171	114
<b>2020</b>	63	5	22	36	32	4
<b>2021</b>	88	2	49	37	34	3
<b>2022</b>	207	10	138	59	45	14
<b>2023</b>	212	9	147	56	42	14
<b>2024<sup>2</sup></b>	424	5	314	105	75	30

<sup>1</sup> Note 2019 is included for comparative purposes as the last year where there was full course assessment for graded National Courses

<sup>2</sup> [Malpractice policy and procedures for SQA Qualifications regulated by Ofqual and / or Qualifications Wales](#) applied to seven of 424 referrals and one of 105 investigations in 2024.

Table 1 shows that in 2024 a total of 424 concerns were logged, of which 314 were closed at the screening stage. Of these concerns, 160 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 shows that the number of concerns logged has varied over the last six years. This reflects the changes to how our qualifications were assessed during the global pandemic, with 2024 seeing the return of full course assessment for the first time since 2019. The increase in numbers of concerns logged in 2024 reflects the re-introduction of coursework in a number of subjects and levels, with the overall total being close to that recorded in 2019

Where an investigation is initiated, centres are informed and involved in the process. In 2024 105 concerns were investigated to a conclusion. Of these, 75 led to a finding of malpractice. Please note that a small number of these findings are still within the appeal period, meaning that 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](#).

The 75 investigations that concluded in a finding of centre malpractice related to around 5% of the centres registered to deliver SQA qualifications by the end of 2024.

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

**Table 2 — Concerns by 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
2024	391	33	424

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**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Concerns identified by SQA staff, including appointees, during marking and quality assurance processes</b>	<b>Concerns identified in other ways</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>2019</b>	360	61	421
<b>2020</b>	25	38	63
<b>2021</b>	27	61	88
<b>2022</b>	160	47	207
<b>2023</b>	167	45	212
<b>2024</b>	370	54	424

Table 3 shows the origin of all logged concerns. Those identified by SQA have been identified because of our processes or raised 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 or 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**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Failure of administrative systems for assessment and certification</b>	<b>Assessment conditions not applied—level of direction</b>	<b>Assessment conditions not applied—other</b>	<b>Internal assessments not in line with standards</b>	<b>Other security breach</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>2019</b>	11	88	60	5	6	1	171
<b>2020</b>	14	5	6	0	3	4	32
<b>2021</b>	13	2	7	0	11	1	34
<b>2022</b>	10	21	7	1	5	1	45
<b>2023</b>	5	21	6	3	5	2	42
<b>2024</b>	11	32	20	1	10	1	75

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. There were 29 findings related to NQ and three relating to HNVQ.

## **Measures required by SQA as a result of malpractice investigations in 2024**

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.

For any concern, an SQA centre malpractice panel considers whether remedial or improvement actions on the part of the centre are to be recommended or required as part of its decision-making process. The measures most frequently mandated by a malpractice panel are to require the centre to develop a plan to address the malpractice identified, often monitored by SQA to confirm full implementation, or to increase the level of quality assurance scrutiny for the affected area.

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 centres had taken sufficiently robust steps and did not require any additional actions to be taken.

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.

SQA continues to work with centres to prevent, identify, investigate and mitigate any concerns of possible malpractice, as described [on our 'Reporting malpractice' web page](#).