

Piloting in Qualification Development

Version number	1.0
Policy author	New Product Development Manager
Policy owner	Head of Higher National and Vocational Qualifications Policy Team
Business area	Higher National and Vocational Qualification Policy Team
Policy effective from	February 2026
Policy review date	January 2029
Policy approved by	Standards & Policy Group
Policy approval date	December 2025
Equality impact assessment (EqIA) date	July 2026

Why do we need the policy?

Qualifications Scotland, previously Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), has developed and piloted qualifications both on its own and in partnership with stakeholders in the past. This policy draws on the evidence of those experiences and responds to an identified need for greater consistency and guidance for those involved, in developing qualifications to be piloted and conducting appropriate evaluations before qualifications pilots can transition into business as usual (BAU).

This policy gives clear criteria for how we define qualifications to be piloted and provide parameters for these developments. By setting out our policy on piloting in qualification development, we want to ensure the process of approval, development and evaluation of qualification pilots is consistent and robust. This policy will be supported by a handbook to ensure the required support is available, from pre-approval through to evaluation and transition to BAU. This facilitates innovative qualification design that is effective in meeting the needs of users.

We adopt a service design approach to developing and offering qualifications to be piloted. This means we work with our stakeholders to design and develop a qualification product that works for them. Piloting is a key component of this approach to gather and act on user feedback. This policy sets out how this is done, to ensure that the development and piloting of qualifications is as open and transparent as possible, and informed through a research and evidence-based approach.

What does it apply to?

We define a qualification pilot as something new that is not available in our qualification product types, as set out in our design principles. This may be an entirely new qualification product, or something that challenges existing design principles, requiring change.

Subject and sector specific developments would not be considered piloting unless the development meets all the criteria outlined in this policy.

Piloting in qualification development is not about approaches to delivery or approaches to gathering assessment evidence. In all instances centres must demonstrate that the national standard has been met for all qualifications. Delivery approaches might be piloted from a centre perspective, but this would not be a pilot in our definition as we would only be concerned in those instances that the national standard has been met.

Qualification development pilot proposals must meet our piloting criteria as set out in the policy statement and must be approved via the enhanced governance structure set out in this policy.

If Qualifications Scotland is co-creating a qualification pilot with an external organisation, there must be a formal and/or legal agreement¹ in place. This agreement will set out the roles and responsibilities of each organisation involved. The associated policy 'Recognising stakeholder involvement in Qualifications Awarding' is listed under section 9 of this policy.

Who is it for?

This policy governs the activity of Qualifications Scotland staff in piloting activity. It intends to have a positive impact on other stakeholder groups, for example all Qualifications Scotland staff, learners, centres, and external stakeholders.

What support is available?

- handbook
- associated policies

Qualifications Scotland has clear duties to eliminate discrimination under the Equality Act (2010).

¹ Formal and/or legal agreements set out the roles and responsibilities of all parties and detail the minimum annual review and monitoring criteria. The policy outlines the specifics involved in entering a formal and/or legal agreement.

This means that our qualifications:

1. must not be unlawfully discriminatory for any learner on grounds of disability, race, age, religion or belief, sex, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity or sexual orientation (the protected characteristics); and
2. that due consideration must be given to the reasonable adjustments which can be made to provide access to the qualification for disabled learners

Qualifications Scotland has developed its Equality Review of Qualifications Process to ensure that developers proactively consider equality in the development of our qualifications, including steps that developers must take to identify, consider, remove or justify barriers within our qualifications and assessments where appropriate.

The Policy, Analysis and Standards (PAS) Equalities Team can provide support when completing an Equality Review Process. The Equality Review Process contains reflection questions fundamental to new qualification design to ensure equality, diversity and inclusion are considered from the start. The contact details below provide further information:

- pasequalities@qualifications.gov.scot

The HNVQ Policy Team (the policy authors) can provide support in reviewing papers for Standards and Policy Group. This team can also provide support in addressing any questions about this policy.

- paspolicyhmvq@qualifications.gov.scot

The Opportunity Appraisal Team can provide support in completing a business case for a proposed pilot development.

The Regulated Qualifications Team within Qualifications Portfolio Management can provide support if a Qualifications Partnership Agreement, Memorandum of Understanding, or a Trademark Licence is required. The Regulated Qualifications Team can provide related guidance across all qualifications, not just regulated qualifications.

Contents

1	Policy statement	6
2	Policy relationship to our Code of Practice and Governing Principles	8
3	Roles and responsibilities	9
4	Identification and approval of proposed pilot qualifications	10
4.1	Governance route for approval	12
4.2	Enhanced governance route for approval.....	12
4.2.1	Stage 1: Standards and Policy Group	12
4.2.2	Stage 2: BCG	12
5	Development of pilot qualifications	13
6	Evaluation and monitoring of pilot qualification delivery	14
7	Transition to BAU	15
8	Definitions	16
9	Policies and legislation	17

1 Policy statement

Qualifications Scotland will explore developing and piloting qualifications where our existing products do not currently meet an identified need and where the development will provide a benefit for end users.

We define a qualification pilot as something new that is currently not available, carried out with small-scale end user delivery and an iterative review process before being considered for introduction more widely. Before starting a qualification pilot development, testing and prototyping with all relevant directorates must have taken place to ensure that internal systems can adapt to support the pilot.

We will develop and pilot qualifications only where **all** the following criteria can be evidenced:

- The risk to learners is low², due to mitigations in place.
- The risk to Qualifications Scotland is low, since qualification pilots will only be available to a limited number of learners and centres, and have been approved through the enhanced governance route.
- The pilot proposal includes evidence of viable and sustainable upscaling, that is, budget, processes, staff and system resources have been considered.
- The proposal evidences the requirement for new design principles or challenges existing design principles.
- The enhanced governance process for piloting qualifications has been followed.

Subject and sector specific developments are not considered piloting unless the development meets all the criteria outlined in this policy.

The aim of a qualification development pilot is to use it as an information gathering exercise. We carry out extensive evaluation of delivery with learners and compare lived experience with original aims of the pilot, while also mitigating risk. A qualification development pilot should evaluate what is required for larger or full-

² By low risk we mean that there should not be a negative impact on the learner (learner experience or outcomes) as a result of undertaking a pilot qualification.

scale delivery, including internal processes and systems. A pilot should not fail³, as prototype and testing should be conducted first, allowing for failure to occur at an earlier stage before the pilot. Only minor adjustments should be needed when planning to upscale⁴.

Piloting must always be an opportunity to innovate. Qualifications Scotland is committed to learning from the pilot experience and implementing changes based on user feedback and experience, following principles of service design.

This policy provides information to support all stakeholders involved in the approval, development, and evaluation of qualification development pilots. The policy and associated handbook provides consistency in process and endorsement of qualification development pilots while enabling innovation to ensure we meet the needs of learners, centres, training providers and employers.

The enhanced governance process for piloting qualifications must be followed, with Business Case Group (BCG) then forming the final approval stage to proceed to pilot. Please note that prototype development and testing should be carried out before starting the piloting stage. More details are available in the supporting handbook.

Qualifications Scotland is committed to equality of opportunity and to a culture that respects difference. We believe that, as an employer and public body, we can play a leading part in promoting equality, diversity and inclusion by making them an integral part of our decision-making. As such, principles of equality must be central to piloting in qualification development.

Our [Equality of Access policy](#) outlines our duties around the Equality Act 2010, anti-racist education, children's rights and corporate parenting which can be found on the [policies for centres](#) page of our website. Training, support and guidance to enable inclusive practice is available from the PAS Equalities Team.

³ To ensure minimal risk to learners before delivery begins.

⁴ Pausing or extending a pilot must be approved by Standards and Policy Group and supported by strong rationale. Further information provided in supporting handbook.

2 Policy relationship to our Code of Practice and Governing Principles

The purpose of the our Code of Practice is to outline how we ensure that our qualifications are of a high quality and fit for purpose, and that the assessment of these qualifications is monitored and maintained to a consistently high standard. By doing so, it sets out the framework by which we safeguard the integrity of our qualifications and assessment standards and ensure public confidence. This policy supports the following Governing Principles:

- Governing Principle 1:** Openness to the needs of individuals, educational and vocational institutions and the needs of society is an essential aim of Qualifications Scotland, and therefore Qualifications Scotland will endeavour to ensure that processes for the development of qualifications, assessment and the maintenance of national standards are as open and transparent as possible; and informed through a research and evidence-based approach to self-regulation.
- Governing Principle 2:** Qualifications Scotland will ensure that there is a clear rationale for the development and review of its qualifications, based on educational, vocational or business needs.
- Governing Principle 3:** Qualifications Scotland will work in partnership with centres, stakeholders and independent experts to develop and review qualifications.
- Governing Principle 4:** Qualifications Scotland will conduct rigorous validation processes to ensure that all qualifications are fit for purpose.
- Governing Principle 7:** Qualifications Scotland will ensure that all qualifications and assessments are as fair and accessible as possible and that the needs of candidates are met in the administration of its assessments.
- Governing Principle 9:** Qualifications Scotland will work in partnership with centres to ensure that all quality assurance processes are fair, open and proportionate.
- Governing Principle 12:** Qualifications Scotland will ensure that its qualifications and assessments are open to evaluation by appropriate national and international bodies.

3 Roles and responsibilities

The following business areas have roles and responsibilities to meet the requirements of the enhanced governance process, to proceed to pilot.

- Qualifications Development Directorate (QDD)
- PAS Equalities, Policy HNVQ, Research and Evaluation teams
- Operations Directorate
- Business Systems
- Corporate Strategy and Business Development Directorate (specifically the Opportunity Appraisal and Bid Management Team)

The following governance groups and boards are part of the enhanced governance process, as outlined in section 4.

- Standards and Policy Group
- BCG

Qualifications Scotland

- PAS will support pilot approval, development and evaluation activities, through this policy and the accompanying handbook.
- QDD and Business Development will investigate opportunities to develop proposed qualification development pilots and liaise with relevant business areas across the organisation before the proposal is submitted.
- QDD will seek corporate approval and endorsement to proceed with development of qualification pilots, in line with the enhanced governance process.
- QDD will develop qualification development pilots using a service design approach working with our stakeholders. This must include internal stakeholders.
- QDD and Operations Directorate will work collaboratively to monitor qualification development pilots and consider operational scalability throughout.
- QDD will liaise with Research and Evaluation on appropriate evaluation activities, including monitoring and enhancing qualifications in a pilot.
- Opportunity Appraisal and Bid Management will conduct relevant marketing and communication activities to ensure viability.

- QDD, Operations and Business Development will work collaboratively with centres and partners, providing support as required.
- Where required, QDD (qualification development teams with QPM support) will develop a formal and/or legal agreement when collaborating with an external stakeholder.
- QDD, PAS, and Operations will set out a plan for transition from pilot to BAU qualification, in terms of length of time for pilot delivery, scalability, aims and objectives achieved.
- To ensure the validity and credibility of the qualifications we offer, and to protect learners, all existing policies and guidance will apply to qualification development pilots.
- When the qualification is validated, PAS will develop design principles for the new qualification product.

External stakeholders and partners in proposed pilot qualifications

- When collaborating with Qualifications Scotland, there must be a formal and/or legal agreement in place.

Centre delivering and assessing any qualification development pilot

- Centres must meet all Qualification Scotland's requirements.
- Centres must commit to principles of the qualification development pilot from the outset.
- Centres must commit to participating in evaluation activities to determine how the pilot is functioning.

4 Identification and approval of proposed pilot qualifications

Policy requirements

We must maintain the credibility of our qualifications and their assessment with all users. We must also ensure that there is a clear rationale for the development and review of our qualifications, based on educational, vocational, or business needs.

To ensure we maintain our qualification products, provide benefit to our learners, and make best use of public money, there is an enhanced governance structure in place for this policy. This will ensure there is oversight of all proposed qualification developments, allowing us to take a strategic and proportionate approach to piloting.

We will develop and pilot qualifications only where **all** the following criteria can be evidenced:

- The risk to learners is low⁵, due to mitigations in place.
- The risk to Qualifications Scotland is low, since pilot qualifications will only be available to a limited number of learners and centres, and have been approved through the specified governance route.
- The pilot proposal includes evidence of viable and sustainable upscaling, that is, budget, processes, staff and system resources have been considered.
- The proposal evidences the requirement for new design principles or challenges existing design principles.
- The enhanced governance process for piloting qualifications has been followed.

Subject and sector specific developments are not considered piloting unless the development meets all the criteria outlined in this policy.

BCG will check that these criteria have been met. If these criteria cannot be met, then the qualification development pilot cannot proceed.

Each group and/or board forming part of the enhanced governance process must approve the proposed qualification development pilot in principle. If any stage of the governance process does not approve the proposal, then the qualification development pilot cannot proceed.

If all previous groups and/or boards have approved the proposal in principle, then BCG will make the final decision about a proposed qualification development pilot as per BAU processes.

⁵ By low risk we mean that there should not be a negative impact on the learner (learner experience or outcomes) as a result of undertaking a pilot qualification.

If at any point the pilot proposal is rejected, a revised development can take place as a qualification that meets our existing design principles. That revised proposal would still need to go through BCG and our BAU processes for approval.

4.1 Governance route for approval

The process map and procedure for the enhanced governance route to approve a qualification development pilot is available on Promapp.

4.2 Enhanced governance route for approval

4.2.1 Stage 1: Standards and Policy Group

Where an opportunity is identified to develop a qualification pilot, QDD colleagues must present the pilot proposal form to Standards and Policy Group for approval in principle before proceeding to any other governance groups outlined here.

Submissions to Standards and Policy Group must include evidence that the Operations and Business Systems Directorate has been involved and would be able to support the proposed pilot, following the Equality Review Process. The Equality Review Process contains reflection questions fundamental to new qualification design to ensure equality, diversity and inclusion are considered from the start. The contact details below provide further information:

- pasequalities@qualifications.gov.scot

4.2.2 Stage 2: BCG

As per BAU processes, BCG will consider and review the business case, mindful that this is a pilot. QDD colleagues must demonstrate that the pilot proposal clearly meets the criteria set out in the policy statement (section 1). They must show that the enhanced governance process has been followed, that the proposal to proceed with qualification development pilot has been approved in principle at each previous stage and is supported by relevant business areas across the organisation.

BCG will make the final decision about a proposed pilot as per BAU processes and determine if it meets the criteria outlined in the policy statement (section 1).

If a qualification development pilot is approved and the proposal includes working with an external agency, at this point Qualifications Scotland must have a formal and/or legal agreement in place.

5 Development of pilot qualifications

Policy requirements

Qualification Scotland takes a service design approach to qualification development. This is particularly significant during a pilot. We require stakeholders to be involved in the development to ensure the qualification product is credible, valid, and fair.

Qualifications Scotland must therefore:

- Carry out rigorous scoping to identify evidence of demand from learners, subject specialists, employers and centres, aligned with skill requirements in the relevant sector. The benefits and risks of any qualification development pilot to learners should also be evidenced. This is scoping to establish proof of concept (see section 8, definitions).
- Identify and develop any prototype product or systems that may be required for the pilot, ensuring thorough suitability, reliability, and that quality testing and adjustments are conducted before moving to the pilot stage.
- Engage with relevant internal teams across all relevant business areas, provide information on development and operationalising processes, determining impact on internal and systems processes, including validation before the pilot starts.
- Set out clear timelines for the pilot.
- Establish and conduct a fair and transparent centre selection process.
- Establish a Qualification Development Team, with representatives from the relevant sectors, educators, learners, and sector skills councils.
- Provide training to those writing and vetting units or producing other relevant information materials.

- Provide training to and vetting of anyone involved in producing assessment materials.
- Develop, evaluate and maintain the qualifications in a fair and transparent manner.

Qualifications Scotland must lead all qualification development pilots unless working in partnership with an external agency, with the required formal and/or legal agreement outlining different roles for the partners involved.

Qualifications Scotland must lead on matters of assessment literacy and oversee the writing of any qualification specification (or equivalent) materials.

Where innovation means that qualification development piloting does not adhere to Qualifications Scotland policy or is not in line with our guidance or existing operational processes, a rationale must be presented during the enhanced governance process, to ensure organisational support. Any such instance must feature as a key point of interest within the evaluation of the pilot qualification.

Qualifications Scotland must identify mitigating measures to ensure that no learner is disadvantaged through participating in a qualification development pilot. This includes following the Equality Review Process throughout the pilot.

All qualification development pilots will be approved as ready for delivery by Standards and Policy Group. Full validation for BAU delivery will not take place until after the pilot delivery and evaluation has completed.

6 Evaluation and monitoring of pilot qualification delivery

Policy requirements

Qualifications Scotland is committed to learning from pilot experience and implementing changes based on user feedback and experience. All pilots must be monitored and evaluated to determine if modifications are required and to monitor progress against original aims and objectives of the pilot development.

The evaluation must run throughout the delivery of the qualification development pilot.

Where innovation means that qualification development piloting does not adhere to Qualifications Scotland policy or is not in line with our guidance or operational processes, this must be a key point of interest for the evaluation.

The findings of the evaluation must inform decisions about moving from pilot to BAU. The nature of a pilot will see some iterative changes to the qualification during delivery. To ensure fairness to learners and clarity for centres, current qualification coding processes must be followed to allow accurate certification to take place and to allow learners to articulate and progress appropriately.

Further information is available in the guidance handbook to support colleagues in ensuring good practice when conducting robust evaluation.

7 Transition to BAU

Following a successful delivery of the pilot, and in alignment with the agreed duration of pilot delivery, evaluation findings should be reviewed and any further iterative changes required should be agreed and actioned.

Standards and Policy Group will be presented with pilot evaluation findings and requirements for transition to BAU. The evaluation must include input from teams across all relevant business areas. This group will approve qualification development pilot to become BAU or make further recommendations before the qualification transitions from pilot to BAU.

The Equality Review Process should be followed throughout the piloting process, and finalised at the end of the pilot before transitioning to BAU. The Equality Review Process should be supported with evidence from the evaluation activities conducted during the pilot.

The qualification can then proceed through full validation for wider delivery in line with Qualifications Scotland's policy on validation. PAS will develop design principles for the new qualification product.

8 Definitions

Term	Definition
Assessment literacy	Referring to the knowledge, skills and processes required to understand the purposes, principles and practices of assessment.
Minimum viable product (MVP)	An early, basic version of a product that meets the minimum necessary requirements for use with end users but can be adapted and improved in the future, especially after user feedback. It provides you with quick information about how effective a product is, using minimal resources and significant changes can be made, unlike a pilot.
Proof of concept	Initial idea in the research stage, to create and communicate vision. Goals are linked to the business need or government directive. This is where evidence is gathered, resources are identified, and viability of a project is determined. Decisions are made at this point as to whether the project should proceed to prototype, testing and pilot.
Prototype	A prototype is a rudimentary working model of a product or information system, usually built for demonstration purposes or as part of the development process.
Service design	The Scottish Service Design Method ⁶ is a structured approach developed to improve public services in Scotland by focusing on user-centred design principles. It emphasises understanding the needs, behaviours, and experiences of service users to create more effective, accessible, and inclusive services. This typically involves collaboration with stakeholders, iterative prototyping, and testing to ensure services are designed with empathy and practical insights.
Testing	An internal procedure intended to establish the quality, performance, or reliability of something (in this case, a prototype), especially before it is taken into widespread use. This should take place before piloting a qualification.
Pilot	Something new that is currently not available. This should be carried out as a small-scale implementation before being introduced more widely. The aim of a pilot is to use it as an information gathering exercise (through extensive evaluation of end user delivery and internal processes) while also mitigating risk. It should evaluate what is required for larger or full-scale delivery. A

6 Scottish Government (2019)., *The Scottish Approach to Service Design (SAatSD)*. Available [here](#).

Term	Definition
	pilot should not fail, as prototype and testing should be conducted first. Only minor adjustments should be needed when planning to upscale.

9 Policies and legislation

All Qualifications Scotland policies should be considered when developing a qualification to be piloted. The assumption is that all policies continue to apply as specified. However, given the ambition is to innovate where an existing policy may present a barrier to a pilot qualification development, a strong rationale must be presented and approved as part of the proposal to develop a pilot.

Our Code of Practice and Governing Principles should also be considered when developing a qualification to be piloted. It sets out the framework by which we safeguard the integrity of our qualifications and assessment standards and ensure public confidence.

Related policies can be found internally on our Policy and Guidelines intranet page under 'Qualifications'.

- Equality of access to SQA qualifications
- Qualification Design Principles
- Validation of Qualifications Scotland Qualifications
- Recognising stakeholder involvement in Qualifications Awarding
- Lifespan of SQA qualifications policy

Note: The above policies remain current and you can continue to use them. They will be updated in the style of Qualifications Scotland when they're next due for review.