Key messages from systems verification activity in 2023

Introduction

Systems verification is the process by which we check that centres have the necessary policies and procedures to deliver SQA qualifications documented and effectively implemented. Our systems criteria are well-established and are fully met in the majority of verification activities.

Analysis of the outcomes of systems verification shows us a number of issues that can pull down the overall confidence ratings for a centre, and can be easily addressed. We have identified these here and provided tips on how to ensure that your procedures fully meet our requirements.

Key statistics

282 Systems Verification activities were completed during 2023.

In 163 (58%) of these activities all the SQA criteria were met and the centre achieved a High Confidence outcome at the first attempt.

The outcomes for all activities were:

- 163 (58%)High Confidence
- 14 (5%) Broad Confidence
- 102 (36%) Reasonable Confidence
- 2 (0.7%) Minimal Confidence
- 1 (0.3%) No Confidence

Where criteria were not fully met (119 activities):

- 88 were met at first attempt at evidence review against required actions (74%)
- 26 were met at second evidence review attempt (22%)
- 5 were met at third evidence review attempt (4%)

Year-on-year, the same criteria result in Amber ratings (meaning that the centre's procedures are not fully compliant with the requirements). This means that the centre cannot achieve the High Confidence rating until the identified issues are addressed. Most of these also have a high impact rating, which means that Amber ratings in these criteria will automatically pull the overall outcome down to Reasonable Confidence, rather than Broad Confidence, which is the reason for the higher percentage of Reasonable Confidence outcomes.

Criterion with most Amber ratings	2021	2022	2023
1	1.5	1.5	1.5
2	6.2	4.8	3.1
3	6.1	6.2	6.2
4	3.6	3.6	3.6
5	3.5	6.1	2.2

If you are reviewing your policies and procedures or preparing for a systems verification visit, you might find it helpful to check your procedures against the most common reasons for non-compliance — we explore these below. All the requirements are detailed in the document 'Systems Verification Criteria: Guidance for Centres' Systems-verification-criteria-guide-QA (2).pdf

Criteria — general

Criterion 1.5, Malpractice procedures

This is consistently the most non-compliant criterion, and has a high impact rating.

Common pitfalls include:

- Not using the full definition of malpractice used by SQA.
- Not including internal appeals against malpractice decisions (confusing this with assessment appeals).
- Not including the requirement to notify SQA of any investigations conducted by another awarding body, industry body, funding agency or regulator, as well as any cases of proven malpractice or withdrawal of approval by another awarding body.
- Not including the requirements to report all suspected and proven centre malpractice to SQA.
- Not stating the correct retention periods for assessment records for malpractice cases.

Criterion 2.2, assessor and internal verifier induction, and criterion 3.1, candidate induction

Both of these criteria had higher non-compliance in 2023 than in previous years. This may be partly due to systems verification in 2020 and much of 2021 being conducted against restricted criteria and difficulties in reviewing implementation of these processes during the COVID period.

Common pitfalls include:

- Not having checklists or other records to confirm that induction has taken place (signed hard copies or online versions).

- Not including all SQA requirements (as listed in SV guidance) in candidate or assessor and internal verifier induction and the checklists.
- Not having specific induction to the roles of assessor and IV, as opposed to generic staff induction to an organisation.

Criterion 3.6, complaints procedures and criterion 4.8, appeal procedures

Criterion 3.6, complaints procedures is consistently in the top five criteria for non-compliance, and similar issues tend to arise with criterion 4.8, appeal procedures.

Common pitfalls include:

- Not including all the required stages of appeals and complaints.
- Not including the right of escalation to SQA once the centre's own procedures have been exhausted, and to the regulator for regulated qualifications (SQA Accreditation or Ofqual).

Criteria — data management

This is an area of high non-compliance across all centre types and all the criteria have a high impact rating.

Criteria 6.1, registering candidates

Common pitfalls include:

- Not including a link to SQA's current data privacy statement on candidate enrolment documents and/or induction checklists.
- Not reverting to the candidate's home address after using the centre address for receipt of the certificate *or* not providing candidate contact details: email and/or phone number. This is important because SQA need to be able to contact candidates, particularly if a problem arose with a centre or the centre closed unexpectedly with current candidates.

Criterion 6.2, candidate entries

Common pitfalls include:

- Not submitting candidate entries to SQA early in their course of study. Learners undertaking SQA qualifications must be registered with SQA to have their rights as SQA candidates. SQA also needs visibility of current entries in order to plan quality assurance activities.
- Not updating candidate entries after completion dates have passed – to result or withdraw them. This leaves open entries at SQA, which are misleading in terms of planning for quality assurance. In many cases, unit results are submitted where a candidate has partial achievement on a group award, but the group award entry is not withdrawn (which is necessary to allow unit certification to be released) or the completion date is extended if the candidate is continuing. This can also lead to non-compliances in criterion 6.3, candidate results.

Criteria — other

Criterion 4.1, Internal verification procedures

This doesn't feature in the top five for non-compliances, but is always close. In systems verification, we look at documented procedures and the implementation of these will be checked in qualification verification. Issues with your documented internal verification could, therefore, also result in non-compliances in qualification verification.

For systems verification, common pitfalls include:

- Documented internal verification procedures not meeting all of SQA's requirements.
- In particular, not having three-stage procedures with pre-assessment, during assessment and post-assessment stages.

You can get additional guidance on what should be included in your internal verification procedures and the type of records you should keep from the following documents on the SQA website:

Internal verification: A guide for centres (sqa.org.uk)
HNVQ Internal Verification Toolkit - SQA