

Evidence-based Decision Making — A Strategy for Research and Analysis for Qualifications Scotland 2026–28

February 2026

Introduction

This document lays out how Qualifications Scotland will carry out research and analysis, and how we will make best use of these functions to improve the qualifications system available to learners in Scotland and beyond. Since SQA established its Policy, Analysis and Standards Directorate as a central focus for research and analytical activities across the organisation, a huge amount of work has taken place to ensure that research and data analysis are carried out to the highest possible standard. It is now appropriate to look at how we will continue to build our research and data analysis capabilities as Qualifications Scotland over our first three years, and leverage the work produced to make more informed and better decisions for learners.

This document should be seen as a reference point for colleagues across the organisation, and should guide all of Qualifications Scotland's research and analysis activities, no matter where in the organisation these are carried out.

The primary purpose of our research and analysis work is to improve the quality of decisions that the organisation makes, which leads to a higher quality qualifications system for all learners. By publishing our work, we aim to inform thinking and decision making across the wider system. This purpose should be the touchstone for all research and analysis activity in the organisation — activities which do not lead to better decisions should be deprioritised, and those which do improve the quality of organisational decision making must be treated as essential, even when there is pressure on capacity or resources.

Evidence-based decision making

We have committed to making decisions based on evidence, but to fully embed this will require changes in organisational culture. This objective was previously stated in SQA's Corporate Plan, *A Prospectus for Change*, as one of the organisation's key deliverables: 'Promote a culture of openness and evidence-based decision making within SQA and across the education community.' Achieving this cultural change is essential to ensuring Qualifications Scotland is different from SQA.

Changing the organisational culture to place research and analysis at the heart of decision making underpins the transformation necessary to ensure that we fully meet

the needs of all of our educators and learners. The organisation’s objectives to build stronger relationships with learners and educators, to reform qualifications and assessments, and to grasp the potential of technology, are all contingent on high-quality and transparent decision making.

It is essential that improved organisational decision making is firmly based on evidence. This evidence can come from a number of sources, including, but not limited to, research and analysis. The graphic below shows some of the key sources of evidence which should be considered in decision making, although it must be recognised that not all decisions require the same quantity or types of evidence. However, due consideration should be given to what evidence should come from each of the sources below in making the best possible decisions.



Our research and analysis functions must ensure that the organisation has the highest quality evidence possible available in each of the areas above. This may mean that

where relevant data is not being captured, new systems and/or processes are implemented to gather that data.

Progress to date

- Support is given to colleagues working on research and analysis across the organisation. However, due to the lack of centralisation of activity, there is a need to create a robust framework to ensure standards are agreed and maintained.
- SQA had stated aims to be more evidence led, and had recently made much greater use of research and analysis in much of its decision making, but this was not done in a systematic and fully thought-out way. As Qualifications Scotland, we need to give stronger voice to research and analytics to make this happen, and to further embed research and analytics in its processes and decision making.
- There has been significant progress in carrying out analysis and applying advanced analytical techniques in the National Qualifications attainment space. There is now a need to deliver a broader remit of analytical insight to support wider decision making.
- In recent years, SQA moved to an approach where research and analysis is published externally by default. This helps to inform decision making across the sector. However, we do not have a fully systematic approach to publication and dissemination of research and analysis. This means that the organisation does not always get the maximum value from all the work that is carried out, and that some colleagues who may find a piece of research and analysis to be useful may not be aware of the work and its conclusions.

Aspirations

- We aspire to be a leading source of research and analytics insight into education and assessment within Scotland.
- We aim to look for opportunities for research and analysis to be used to improve decision making across the organisation.
- We will ensure that research and analysis is always carried out ethically and to a high standard.

Suggested approach

This section outlines the key principles of how we will fully achieve the ambitions set out earlier in this document. While there has already been substantial progress since the establishment of the Policy, Analysis and Standards Directorate, to bring about these changes requires a significant shift in organisational culture. We aim to embed a culture in the organisation which respects and understands research and analysis, and is comfortable relying on the conclusions of high-quality work. This is our overarching principle, with all of the others in this section contributing to that change.

Overarching principle

Culture: Embed a culture in the organisation which respects and understands research and analysis, and is comfortable relying on the conclusions of high-quality work.

- Value: Use research and data to derive meaningful, evidence-based and actionable insights.
- Efficiency: Use research and data to enable efficiency improvements, optimising our operations and everyday business processes.
- Ethics: Maintain the highest ethical standards across all research and data analysis. This includes safeguarding and working with children and young people, anonymity, data governance and data ethics, and ensuring that work is carried out in line with our organisational values.
- Transparency: Be open and publish research and analysis findings externally, even when it is challenging to do so.
- Codes of practice: Champion and adhere to the Code of Practice for Statistics and our Code of Research Practice for all work across the organisation. Show due care for both researchers and participants.
- Challenge: Be brave, and highlight where research and analysis findings are being ignored within decision making.
- Impact: Ensure that we maximise the impact of our research and analysis. Be custodians of good research and data and analytics practice. Contribute to meeting our public sector equality duty.

- Collaboration: Engage, co-create and connect with stakeholders, including academic communities, to share findings, collaborate on work and demonstrate thought leadership.

What actions will we take?

All of the actions outlined in this section contribute to driving the required cultural change. They also contribute to many of the different principles outlined above. Although mapping actions to principles is not an exact process, we have highlighted the main areas where making necessary changes will have the largest impacts.

- Agree approach to publication of research and analysis in a timely and transparent fashion. Publish results even when the findings do not align with preconceived expectations. (Transparency, Challenge, Ethics)
- Be proactive and innovative in engaging stakeholders and gathering user feedback to inform future work programmes. (Collaboration)
- Build and implement a set of common processes and ways of working for all research across the organisation. Ensure all colleagues working in research have the support they need. (Impact, Ethics)
- Constructively challenge when decisions being made conflict with research and analysis findings. (Challenge, Value)
- Create an Ethical Review Group that includes an external chair. (Ethics, Transparency)
- Create an external network to share research and analysis findings. (Collaboration, Transparency)
- Develop a visible plan of activity that is syndicated and recognised through the organisation. (Value, Efficiency)
- Embed an agreed approach to evaluation for major organisational projects and initiatives, including a requirement to develop a Theory of Change. (Impact, Efficiency)
- Embed the Standards for Intelligent Transparency from the Code of Practice for Statistics across the organisation. (Transparency, Ethics, Codes of practice)
- Establish an external Research Advisory Group. (Ethics, Transparency)
- Further develop our Internal Research Group to spread awareness of best practice across the organisation. (Impact, Ethics)

- Implement and refine a set of common definitions, processes and ways of working for analysis across the organisation. (Impact)
- Look for ways in which we can support the development of researchers, statisticians and analytical experts in Scotland. (Collaboration, Ethics)
- Look to maximise the benefits that the organisation gets from research and analysis, including focusing on more effective dissemination, and by ensuring that research and analysis findings lead to organisational change. (Value, Efficiency, Transparency, Challenge, Impact)
- Maintain and further develop our Code of Research Practice, and supporting guidance, to ensure that it acts as a touchstone for all research across the organisation. (Codes of practice, Ethics)
- Produce plans of activity and establish backlogs of opportunities that are syndicated and recognised through the organisation. (Efficiency)
- Reaffirm the organisation's commitments regarding ethics, equity, and sustainability being fundamental to our Code of Research Practice and the research process. (Ethics, Codes of practice)
- Require all research projects across the organisation to undergo ethical review. (Ethics, Efficiency)
- Review our statistical publications against revisions to the Code of Practice for Statistics to ensure compliance and best practice in line with the pillars of Value, Trustworthiness and Quality. (Codes of practice)
- Seek opportunities to collaborate with other stakeholders, both educational and academic, on research and analysis. (Collaboration, Value)
- Use estimated benefits to prioritise research and analysis activity. (Efficiency, Value)
- Utilise emergent technologies and applications to make insight more accessible and usable. (Value, Efficiency)
- Where appropriate, use participatory approaches and co-creation with learner and educator research to ensure that research meets the needs of these groups. (Collaboration, Ethics, Transparency)

Monitoring and evaluating success

Given that we are publishing this strategy at the point of our transition to Qualifications Scotland, and as the organisation embarks on a substantial programme of qualifications and assessment reform, it is likely that our research and analysis needs may change over the three year period that this strategy covers. As such, it should be seen as a living document, which we will review regularly to ensure that it remains current.

We will monitor all of the actions listed in this strategy to understand their impact, and whether additional actions are needed. If they prove to be insufficient to achieve the cultural change required, further actions will be added to ensure that research, analysis and evidence-based decision making are central to the organisation's approach. These commitments are vital to ensuring that Qualifications Scotland is clearly different from SQA.

It is also important to understand how we will know if the strategy is achieving the desired outcomes. Some key measures of success include:

- improvement in Key Audience Research scores on how well the organisation consults and engages with stakeholders
- more coherent organisational approach to research and analysis, including dissemination and ensuring organisational action in response
- increased levels of partnership working, including using participatory and co-created methods
- being explicit about the research and analysis that inform key decisions