

Colleges Scotland's Submission to the Education and Culture Committee on the Scottish Qualifications Authority – Spending Decisions and Outcomes

Introduction

Colleges Scotland welcomes the opportunity to submit views on the spending decisions and outcomes delivered by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). Our responses to the questions on each specific theme are answered in turn below.

1. The main ways in which the SQA contributes to the development of education policy and the main outcomes it has helped to deliver.

There is a very strong relationship between the college sector and the SQA. SQA qualifications form the bulk of the provision for education and training in Scotland's colleges. There are significant advantages to this close relationship, but there are some disadvantages.

Colleges use SQA qualifications in the following ways:

- To offer advanced level programmes (HNC and HND) to a national standard across a wide range of subjects. These programmes draw on industry input to keep them relevant and up-to-date.
- To offer non-advanced level programmes (National Certificate) to a national standard in vocational subjects.
- To offer short courses such as National Courses (e.g. Highers), National Progression Awards and Skills for Work
- To build college-devised programmes using SQA Units
- To work in collaboration with SQA to develop college-based courses that are tailored to specific purposes and validated by the SQA
- To offer SQA's work-based vocational qualifications based on industry standards (SVQs)
- To use the progression pathways that SQA has built on the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), facilitating transition between school and college, college and university, and college and work-based learning. Articulation agreements between colleges and universities are founded on these.
- To build tailored senior vocational pathways for progression from school to college using the building blocks of SQA qualifications and SQA Units that have been levelled on the SCQF framework and credit-rated.

Colleges take advantage of SQA's Quality Assurance (QA) systems and procedures in the following ways:

- To set up and maintain internal quality systems using the frameworks developed by SQA.
- Accessing a QA development service from SQA to improve internal QA.
- To have external audit of the quality of the college's internal assessment arrangements and systems.
- To use standardised assessment materials developed by SQA, including online testing via [SOLAR](#).
- To train staff in quality assurance processes and procedures using the resources present in [SQA Academy](#).
- College staff participate as SQA appointees in its QA systems and develop experience and understanding through engagement with provision in institutions other than their own.
- SQA also provides support to the Quality Managers Network managed by the College Development Network (CDN).

SQA also provides exemplars of assessment for its units and pre-verified assessments for college use. These are valuable resources for the college sector. SQA has also developed resources for teaching the content of some of its programmes. However, this is an area in which SQA is disadvantaged relative to its competitors (other awarding bodies) who are able to provide substantial amounts of high-quality support materials for use by staff teaching to their awards.

In summary, the college sector view is that SQA contributes well to the development of education policy through:

- Construction of units to match the needs of new and re-designed curriculum in the post-16 sector.
- Implementation of new arrangements for assessment as required for Curriculum for Excellence, and in line with modern developments in computer-aided assessment.
- Development of national frameworks for qualifications design.
- Assuring the quality of delivery of vocational education through its QA processes.
- Assuring quality of assessment across all levels of award (SCQF levels 2 – 9) through its QA processes.
- Working with Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), employers and employer organisations to develop awards that are fit for purpose.
- The creation of SQA Academy programmes for teaching staff that provide professional development in curriculum design, assessment design, validation and quality assurance.
- Securing national standards for qualifications.

With the bulk of college qualification provision based on SQA as the main provider there is consequentially a very strong suite of national frameworks, standards and benchmarks. This leads to a coherent sector and helps social mobility as students can easily move from one regional college to another.

2. How the SQA assesses whether it is providing value for money.

The college sector notes that:

- SQA uses its established steering groups and committees to engage with stakeholders and receive feedback. Colleges are well-represented on such groups.
- SQA liaises with SSCs and employers to ensure its awards are meeting employer/industry needs in an efficient manner.

3. How it evaluates the impact of its activities.

The college sector notes that:

- SQA uses its established steering groups and committees to engage with stakeholders and receive feedback. Colleges are well-represented on such groups.
- SQA usually commissions internal evaluations of pilot projects and of any new arrangements that it puts in place.

4. How it has demonstrated leadership in ensuring that qualifications continue to be relevant to the needs of learners, educators and employers.

- The SQA has proactive engagement with SSCs and employers to ensure its vocational awards continue to meet employer needs.
- The SQA works in collaboration with other national agencies such as the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) and Council for the Curriculum, Examination & Assessment (CEA) to ensure consistent approaches to the regulation of qualifications.
- The SQA operates its own Sector Panels with representation from employers and college practitioners to make decisions in relation to new or revised qualifications.
- The SQA works with Education Scotland to ensure close match of SQA awards to planned curriculum reform (such as Curriculum for Excellence).

5. How the SQA plans to become self-financing and the likely impact of this on publicly-funded education providers.

Increasing fees and charges

A self-financing SQA could result in an increase in SQA fees for candidates and charges for its support for colleges. To have SQA fees increasing at a time when funding to the college sector is falling in real terms would impact negatively on the sector's ability to maintain its own level of service to its students.

The post-school sector has many competing awarding bodies, some of which provide teaching resources that are more extensive and of higher quality than those from SQA. If SQA fees increase through a necessity for SQA to self-finance then colleges would be more likely to shop around for more cost effective providers of vocational qualifications. This would have a negative impact on the current national coherence and could limit the extent to which students could easily move from one regional college to another.

It is worth explaining another important aspect of the close relationship between Scotland's colleges and SQA. In developing or updating new qualifications, SQA relies heavily on support from practitioners in the college sector. College staff will work with SQA officials and industry representatives to devise individual Units and create exemplar assessment materials. They may also develop some teaching resources. The bulk of SQA's verifiers and assessors are drawn from college staff. While there is some remuneration to colleges for this staff time, the reality is that SQA (and the sector) benefits from large amounts of time, effort and know-how contributed at no cost to SQA.

An increase to SQA fees and charges would raise the possibility that the present arrangements for college practitioners to participate in award development and QA might be disrupted. Colleges may seek full cost recovery for staff time that is used for SQA award development and to support SQA's quality assurance processes. This could limit the extent to which new developments could be progressed and colleges given support in improving quality of delivery and assessment.

Activities to generate further income

SQA has the potential to further develop its resources for teaching and assessing the content of its awards. There would be particular interest in the college sector in resources that could be easily incorporated into college VLEs, or in other online formats such as mobile devices.

The sale of such resources could provide additional income for SQA and offset the need to increase its fees and charges and this reduce the risk of the scenarios outlined above.