



scottish credit and  
qualifications framework

# AN OVERVIEW OF THE QUALITY ASSURANCE OF SCQF CREDIT RATING BODIES



## 1 PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

This Guide provides information on the quality assurance systems used by the Credit Rating Bodies of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), also referred to as *the Framework*. The focus of this Guide is on the Quality Assurance of the Credit Rating Process, not on the design or delivery of qualifications and learning programmes. This Guide explains the quality assurance processes used by the original Credit Rating Bodies: the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and Scotland's colleges and it also explains the way in which the SCQF Partnership approves and monitors new Credit Rating Bodies.

## 2 A WORD ABOUT TERMINOLOGY

Different groups of people use the SCQF including learning and training providers, learners, teachers, parents, employers and careers advisors. Often these different groups describe the learning programmes in the SCQF in different ways. Some speak of *qualifications*, others of *courses*, *units*, *modules*, *learning provision* or just *provision*. For simplicity, in this guide we use *learning programmes* to encompass this wide variety of terms.

## 3 ABOUT THE SCQF

The SCQF is Scotland's Lifelong Learning Framework. It has been in place since 2001 and is a well-known and frequently-used means of describing learning programmes in Scotland. It was created by bringing together the mainstream Scottish qualifications into a single structure:

- the National and Higher National Qualifications of SQA;
- the qualifications of HEIs in Scotland;
- Scottish Vocational Qualifications.

These mainstream qualifications contributed to the development of the SCQF since it was from the level and demands of these qualifications, offered in a range of different environments, that the 12 SCQF Levels were derived.

The SCQF also includes other learning programmes from a diverse range of providers which includes provision from Awarding Bodies other than SQA, employers, professional bodies, voluntary and community organisations.

## 4 ABOUT THE SCQF PARTNERSHIP

In November 2006, the SCQF Partnership was established as a company limited by guarantee to manage the Framework. The company became a registered charity in Scotland in March 2007. The SCQF Partnership works closely with its partners and stakeholders to ensure that the quality assurance supporting the SCQF is rigorous and that its separate aspects link and take account of each other wherever possible.

The members of the SCQF Partnership are key bodies and agencies all of which have significant responsibility for learning in Scotland. They are:

- Scottish Ministers;
- Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Scotland;
- SQA;
- Universities Scotland; and
- Scotland's Colleges.

The aims of the SCQF Partnership are to:

- maintain the quality and integrity of the Framework;
- promote and develop the Framework as a tool to support lifelong learning; and
- develop and maintain relationships with other frameworks in the UK, Europe and internationally.

## 5 DESCRIBING LEARNING PROGRAMMES IN THE SCQF

The SCQF describes learning programmes in terms of outcomes by using two measures: *SCQF Levels* and *SCQF Credit Points*.

The SCQF has 12 Levels which are based on a set of *Level Descriptors*. The Level Descriptors are generic and broad and apply to learning in any discipline. They describe the characteristics and complexity of learning outcomes at each level in the Framework. The level of learning programmes increases with the demand of the learning - SCQF Level 1 being the least demanding and SCQF Level 12 the most.

SCQF Credit Points indicate the volume of learning outcomes in terms of the notional learning time that an average learner would take to achieve them. One SCQF Credit Point represents a notional ten hours of learning.

The SCQF Framework diagram shows the SCQF and the mainstream Scottish qualification types that are included. The SCQF Database contains information on all Credit Rated learning programmes and an interactive Framework diagram is also available. These can be accessed on the SCQF website at [www.scqf.org.uk](http://www.scqf.org.uk).



## 6 PUTTING LEARNING PROGRAMMES INTO THE SCQF

### 6.1 Credit Rating Bodies

In order to be placed in the SCQF, a learning programme has to be *Credit Rated* by an SCQF Credit Rating Body. When the SCQF was first established the only Credit Rating Bodies were the HEIs and SQA. However, the partners recognised the need to extend the credit rating facility beyond these bodies to include a wider range of learning programmes in the Framework. Therefore, following a pilot in 2006, Scotland's colleges were granted credit rating powers.

In 2008, continuing the commitment to extend the facility to credit rate, the SCQF Partnership agreed a Quality Assurance Model for approving new Credit Rating Bodies.

The names of all approved SCQF Credit Rating Bodies are given on the SCQF website at [www.scqf.org.uk](http://www.scqf.org.uk).

### 6.2 Credit Rating

Credit rating is the process of allocating an SCQF Level and SCQF Credit Points to any learning programme that meets the required criteria which are that it:

- is based on learning outcomes;
- is subject to reliable and valid methods of assessment that are recorded;
- has a minimum of a notional 10 hours of learning;
- is included within an appropriate quality assurance system.

The SCQF Partnership wants to ensure that, wherever possible, eligible learning programmes are included in the Framework. As wide a range of learning from as many learning providers as possible helps learners and potential learners to:

- gain formal recognition in a national context;
- understand the way that different learning programmes of all types and levels relate to each other;
- see how different learning programmes might fit together;
- understand the credit values and levels of these learning programmes;
- find suitable routes to progression; and
- take up opportunities to learn throughout their lives.

### 6.3 Routes to Credit Rating

There are two routes to have a learning programme credit rated:

- either an organisation seeks to have its learning programme credit rated by an existing Credit Rating Body;
- or an organisation seeks credit rating powers on its own account and credit rates its own learning programmes once the SCQF Partnership approves it to do so.

It is the decision of individual organisations to choose which route they want to select in getting their learning programmes credit rated.

## 7 QUALITY ASSURANCE AND THE SCQF

As developers and owners of the Framework, all HEIs, SQA and Scotland's colleges are Credit Rating Bodies. There is a separate and different system for quality assuring the credit rating activities of these original partner bodies and they each have their own process. HEIs, colleges and SQA have established quality assurance processes which are rigorously and regularly monitored and reported on by their own review bodies. These review bodies are:

- QAA Scotland for the HEIs;
- HMIE for Scotland's colleges;
- The Scottish Government for SQA.

This section provides information on the quality assurance arrangements in HEIs, SQA, and Scotland's colleges.

### 7.1 Quality Assurance Arrangements for HEIs

All HEIs operate in the context of a Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) in Scotland. The QEF has five main elements:

- a comprehensive programme of internal reviews, run by the institutions themselves with guidance issued by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC);
- external enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR), carried out by QAA Scotland on HEIs over a four-year cycle;
- the provision by HEIs of public information about quality, based on addressing the different needs of a range of stakeholders including students and employers;
- a programme of national enhancement themes and international benchmarking activities, managed by QAA (Scotland) and aimed at encouraging teachers, support staff and learners to share good practice and generate ideas and models for innovation in learning and teaching;
- an increased voice for student representatives in institutional quality systems, supported by a national development service, Student Participation in Quality Scotland (sparqs).

HEIs also work to QAA-produced:

- code of practice on arrangements including those for managing quality which includes the assessment of students, external examining, programme design, validation and review;
- code of practice for managing collaborative provision;
- subject benchmark statements (mainly at Honours Degree level) setting out the characteristic attributes, knowledge and skills associated with a Degree in the subject;
- national Framework for Qualifications of HEIs in Scotland – this sets out the characteristic generic attributes and skills associated with a Degree and other HEI qualifications.



## 7.2 Quality Assurance Arrangements for SQA

SQA is required to report quarterly on its progress against key targets which are set annually and agreed with the Scottish Government.

Scottish Government also assesses the effectiveness of SQA internal audit arrangements in periodic reviews by its Internal Audit Service and in the scrutiny of plans and reports prepared by SQA's internal auditor.

SQA is subject to a quinquennial Policy and Financial Management Review. This looks at whether:

- SQA continues to be required;
- the existing status is correct;
- the functions in question are being delivered in the most effective manner.

## 7.3 Quality Assurance Arrangements for Scotland's colleges

The SFC ensures that the funding of learning and teaching in colleges in Scotland is closely linked to quality enhancement. As with HEIs, the SFC requires that colleges hold their own systems up to critical internal scrutiny and also participate in periodic external review.

The internal scrutiny is based upon the colleges' robust quality procedures and confirms that colleges:

- track learner destinations to employment and further study;
- monitor retention and attainment rates at programme and college-wide levels;
- ensure that students help to shape their learning experiences;
- undertake self-evaluation and take action upon this to ensure improvements for strategic planning and learning and teaching;
- report annually on internal quality enhancements to the SFC.

The external review of provision is conducted by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) on behalf of the SFC. External review complements the processes of self-evaluation that colleges undertake internally. External review adds value to arrangements by:

- providing independent judgements in published reports on the quality of the learner experience;
- fostering professional dialogue with staff, promoting reflection and supporting quality activities.

## 8 QUALITY ASSURANCE ARRANGEMENTS FOR CREDIT RATING BODIES APPROVED BY THE SCQF PARTNERSHIP

In 2008, the SCQF Partnership agreed a Quality Assurance Model (QAM) to facilitate the extension of Credit Rating Bodies. Drawing on the quality assurance arrangements in existing Credit Rating Bodies, the SCQF Partnership's QAM for approving and monitoring new Credit Rating Bodies is founded on:

- a) Robust criteria;
- b) A system to support applicant organisations;
- c) Carefully selected and well-trained reviewers;
- d) A strong approval process;
- e) A strong monitoring process.

This section provides an overview of the QAM. Further detailed information can be found in the *Quality Assurance Model: Guidance Notes* which can be obtained from the SCQF Partnership or downloaded from the SCQF website at [www.scqf.org.uk](http://www.scqf.org.uk).

### 8.1 Robust Criteria

**Criterion 1 - The good standing of the body** - This criterion seeks information on the financial stability of the organisation as it carries out its current activities – these might be, for example, awarding or training functions. It deals with what the body does, how it operates financially, how it is structured, its standing and reputation in the design and delivery of learning and qualifications in Scotland and who its partners and users are.

**Criterion 2 - The robustness of the quality assurance system** - This criterion deals with the organisation's quality assurance arrangements for its existing functions – such as, for example, design, delivery and assessment of qualifications. Credit rating must be brought into the existing quality assurance system as an integrated process rather than a bolted-on feature. Therefore existing systems need to be robust and able to accommodate the credit rating process.

The SCQF Partnership confirms that:

- the organisation has a robust quality assurance system for its current awarding activities;
- these current awarding activities have some form of externality in them to ensure rigour;
- the organisation regularly carries out internal quality assurance reviews;
- the organisation's quality assurance system is itself subject to external review.

The matter of **externality** is important. The SCQF Partnership ensures that both the organisation's current awarding activities and its own quality assurance system are subject to some form of direct external review.

**Criterion 3 - The body's capacity and commitment** - This criterion concentrates on the way in which credit rating is undertaken. The SCQF Partnership checks the rigour of the processes supporting the credit rating function.



The SCQF Partnership ensures that it has confidence that the organisation has the capability and capacity to:

- integrate the credit rating function into its current activities;
- operate credit rating rigorously alongside all its other activities (without losing the rigour with which these are operated);
- keep credit rating in the years ahead.

#### *Credit rating the learning programmes of others*

When a new Credit Rating Body is first approved it is permitted to credit rate **only** its own learning programmes. Organisations require approval to credit rate the learning programmes of other bodies (called *third party credit rating*). This is a separate activity which can only be undertaken once a Credit Rating Body has put its own credit rating processes into practice and has demonstrated a successful track record.

**Criterion 4** is for Credit Rating Bodies, approved by the SCQF Partnership, that wish to credit rate the learning programmes of others. The SCQF Partnership ensures that the Credit Rating Body has the capacity, commitment and experience to credit rate for others. It looks at its track record since approval as a Credit Rating Body and considers how it would perform the additional function of third party credit rating and how it would manage the new function so as not to put learners and the reputation of the SCQF at risk.

## **8.2 A System to Support Applicant Organisations**

The SCQF Partnership runs open information sessions for organisations interested in finding out more about becoming a Credit Rating Body. These sessions cover the quality assurance requirements in general and the approval process in particular. Details of these sessions are posted on the SCQF website.

If, after attending the information session, an organisation wants to take matters further, a representative of the SCQF Partnership will make a Pre-Application Visit to discuss the Application Process and Approval Criteria in detail with regard to the organisation.

## **8.3 Carefully Selected and Well-Trained Reviewers**

For all applications, the SCQF Partnership forms a Review Team comprising a member of the SCQF Executive Team, an appointed external reviewer and a member of the SCQF Quality Committee. The reviewers are all experienced quality assurance practitioners from a wide range of backgrounds. Whatever their background, the reviewers undertake training in the QAM before embarking on their duties.

## **8.4 A Strong Approval Process**

### ***Approval to become a Credit Rating Body***

The Review Team scrutinises all applications and any materials supplied by the organisation then meets with the organisation to carry out the review against criteria 1 to 3. After the visit, the Review Team provides a report on its findings to the SCQF Quality Committee for their recommendation to the SCQF Partnership Board and the Board decides whether to approve the organisation as a Credit Rating Body or not.

The decisions that the SCQF Partnership Board may reach are:

- Approved – the organisation can start to credit rate its own qualifications within the scope defined in the approval. Approval is not time limited;
- Conditional approval - the SCQF Partnership works with the organisation to agree the ways in which the condition(s) can be lifted;
- Not approved - the organisation may appeal the decision. When an organisation is not approved it may be given one further opportunity to resubmit its application.

### ***Approval for third party credit rating authority***

When a body wants to seek third party credit rating status, Criterion 4 forms the basis of the application. The application is reviewed by an Executive Officer of the SCQF Partnership who puts the matter to the SCQF Quality Committee for consideration. The committee makes a recommendation to the SCQF Partnership Board, basing its recommendation on the evidence that was submitted with the application form and bearing in mind the body's track record in credit rating its own qualifications.

The decisions that the SCQF Partnership Board can come to here are the same as for initial approval and the same arrangements for dealing with these decisions apply to third party credit rating decisions.

## **8.5 A Strong Monitoring Process**

### ***Annual monitoring***

The SCQF Partnership monitors all new Credit Rating Bodies annually in a process which comprises:

- Self assessment by the organisation;
- A meeting between an SCQF Partnership Executive Officer and the Credit Rating Body to discuss the result of the self assessment and review progress generally.

The SCQF Quality Committee receives reports on the annual monitoring of each Credit Rating Body and, provided all is well, the organisation remains on the list of Credit Rating Bodies on the SCQF website. If there are concerns, the SCQF Quality Committee can instigate a Periodic Review.

### ***Periodic Review***

In addition to the annual monitoring, new Credit Rating Bodies will be subject to a Periodic Review at least every four years – or earlier if the SCQF Quality Committee deems it necessary on the basis of the report from the annual monitoring.

### ***Removal of credit rating authority***

The SCQF Quality Committee can remove the authority to credit rate if concerns are raised at the Periodic Review or if its activities adversely affect the reputation either of the SCQF or of the Credit Rating Body.



## 9 BENEFITS OF THE SCQF QUALITY ASSURANCE MODEL

The QAM for becoming a Credit Rating Body may require some organisations to make adjustments to their existing processes, particularly with regard to the level of **externality** required. Organisations that have undergone this process have found that this has been beneficial, not just in terms of gaining approval as a Credit Rating Body but also for enhancing and adding rigour to their existing systems.

### **The Scottish Police College has told us:**

*With improved quality assurance processes we have been able to enhance best practice across the college, standardise processes and procedures in all aspects of programme design and delivery and expand the skill base throughout the organisation thus making QA an accepted part of college core business.*

### **And the Chartered Institute of Bankers in Scotland said:**

*The process of becoming a Credit Rating Body for SCQF did provide certain challenges for a professional body of our size and resources. However we have found it to be a positive experience which has helped enhance our quality procedures bringing different dimensions to our processes. In particular the need to be more self-reflective in what we do and the introduction of greater externality has been useful.*

## APPENDIX 1: FURTHER INFORMATION

### **Partners**


**Scottish Ministers** are responsible for policy and strategy on qualifications and lifelong learning and work closely with all of the bodies which make up the SCQF Partnership.

**QAA Scotland** is an independent body whose role is to safeguard standards and quality. QAA Scotland provides a set of national reference points and guidance for the assurance of the standards and quality of qualifications in HEIs and it carries out external reviews of how well HEIs are managing quality and standards.

**SQA** is the national Awarding and Accreditation Body in Scotland. SQA is an executive non-departmental public body sponsored by the Scottish Government.

As **an Awarding Body** SQA Awarding is responsible for the development, credit rating, validation, assessment and certification of its qualifications; and assuring the quality of centres offering its qualifications including schools, colleges, training providers and employers. It provides a credit rating service for the qualifications of others.

As **an Accreditation Body** SQA Accreditation is a distinct, discrete function of SQA. It has a statutory role to authorise and accredit qualifications, other than Degrees, that are offered across Scotland including Scottish Vocational Qualifications. It also recognises and approves Awarding Bodies to offer these qualifications through centres. It provides a means by which approved Awarding Bodies can have accredited qualifications credit-rated.



**HEIs** are represented in the SCQF Partnership by **Universities Scotland**. HEIs are autonomous institutions which award their own Undergraduate and Masters Degrees and other higher education qualifications. They are responsible for the quality of a range of processes including programme design, delivery and maintenance; assessment of learners; and making awards to successful learners. HEIs credit rate their own qualifications and, should they choose to offer such a service, they can also credit rate the qualifications of other organisations.

**Colleges** are represented in the SCQF Partnership by **Scotland's Colleges**. Colleges deliver and assess qualifications and have responsibility for the quality of these processes. They are responsible for the quality of any qualifications which they develop and validate themselves. Colleges credit rate their own qualifications and, should they choose to offer such a service, they can also credit rate the qualifications of other organisations.

### ***Employer representative***

The SCQF Partnership has an employer representative on its Board. This is intended to provide a direct link to the business community. In addition it provides a link to discuss the implications of advice and guidance from Sector Skills Councils relating to individual sectoral and business needs in relation to quality assurance.

### ***Stakeholders***

**SFC** funds HEIs and colleges. The SFC is responsible for ensuring that the provision of learning and teaching in HEIs and colleges is quality assured and that there are processes of continuous quality enhancement supporting learning in these institutions. It expects HEIs and colleges to manage the quality of their learning provision and to undertake self-evaluation. It also commissions QAA Scotland and HMIE to carry out external reviews of HEIs and colleges respectively.

**HMIE** is an executive agency of the Scottish Government. On behalf of the SFC it assures and enhances the quality and standards of colleges through a process of quality reviews. HMIE also publishes aspect reports on a range of topics and carries out enhancement activities that identify and disseminate excellent and innovative practice within colleges in Scotland.

### ***Links***

[Student Participation in Quality Scotland](#)

[The Quality Enhancement Framework in Scotland](#)

[The SCQF Interactive Framework](#)



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