SQA Accreditation Annual Review 2022–23

An Assurance of Quality

Contents

Chief Executive's statement

SQA Accreditation has a statutory remit under the Education (Scotland) Act 1996 to accredit and quality assure qualifications and qualification products in Scotland. The work carried out by SQA Accreditation safeguards the interests of learners, apprentices, employers, funding bodies, providers, parents and Scottish Government.

Following the publication of Professor Ken Muir's report 'Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education', the Scottish Government announced that SQA would be replaced by a new qualifications body. It was also announced that work would take place to determine the future location of SQA's Accreditation function. In November 2022, the then Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, Shirley Anne Somerville, announced that the Accreditation function would remain in the new qualifications body. In the final quarter of 2022–23, staff from SQA Accreditation worked with SQA's internal reform team to map out the current activities of the function and developed customer journeys to identify areas for improvement. Work will continue in 2023–24 to consider the scope and the form of the accreditation function.

The number of candidates being registered and certificated for accredited qualifications continues to increase and now exceeds the pre-pandemic figures. During 2022–23, 139,265 learners were registered for qualifications that are accredited by us and 110,098 learners received a certificate for their accredited qualification. The number of candidates registered and certificated in 2022–23 is up on 2021–23 — from 122,468 registrations and 95,104 certifications.

In 2022–23 the Accreditation section (see Section 1 for more about SQA Accreditation's four sections) reviewed and processed over 600 submissions. This includes the approval of qualification products, accreditations, reaccreditation, extensions, amendments, withdrawals and credit rating of qualifications. Our Accreditation section has continued to support Skills Development Scotland in implementing the development of Scottish Modern Apprenticeships.

Our Regulation section conducted 12 awarding body audits and 50 provider monitoring visits. Almost all regulatory activity continues to be carried out remotely. There are currently 35 approved awarding bodies operating across a wide range of sectors.

I would like to thank all of the staff in SQA Accreditation for their continued professionalism in what has been a challenging situation and for ensuring that high-quality accredited qualifications are available to the learners of Scotland.

Fiona Robertson
Chief Executive

1   Introduction

1.1   About SQA Accreditation

The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) has two distinct and autonomous parts:

♦ SQA the awarding body
♦ SQA Accreditation

SQA Accreditation has a statutory remit under Scottish legislation to accredit and regulate qualifications in Scotland — thereby safeguarding the interests of learners, employers, parents, funding bodies, providers and Scottish Government.

We do this by independently approving and regulating awarding bodies operating in Scotland and accrediting their qualifications. We accredit any type of qualification, other than degrees, including:

♦ **Scottish Vocational Qualifications** (SVQs)
♦ **Non-SVQs** — This includes qualifications that are required to perform regulated job roles, including security qualifications and personal licence certificates. It also includes exam-based and competence-based qualifications, including Diplomas, Certificates and Awards in subjects such as Accounting and Facilities Management

SQA Accreditation also plays a central role in advising and supporting standards setting organisations (SSOs) in the development and review of National Occupational Standards, and also with qualification development. We are responsible for approving and quality assuring National Occupational Standards and qualification products including qualification structures, assessment strategies and Core Skills signposting.

In addition, SQA Accreditation is an approved Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) credit rating body and is the only body with the authority to credit rate SVQs.

SQA Accreditation consistently aims to work efficiently and effectively to fulfil its responsibilities. Our work is underpinned by a set of Regulatory Principles, Regulatory Principles Directives and the Accreditation Licence. Operational activities are driven by the responsive nature of our team and their aim to continually review and improve processes and systems for the benefit of all external and internal customers. Our three main areas of work are:

♦ accreditation of qualifications
♦ regulation
♦ research and statistics

SQA Accreditation has 21 members of staff. The team has four sections: Accreditation, Regulation, Information and Research, and Administration and Support. This Annual Review provides a summary of the operational activities carried out by the team in 2022–23, as well as project group activity and other events. Key performance statistics relating to accredited qualifications and awarding body regulatory activity are also presented.

2   Operational activity 2022–23

SQA Accreditation's annual operational activity from April 2022 to the end of March 2023 is summarised in this review. We provide an overview of significant developments in 2022–23 and details of how we met our operational objectives through project groups.

2.1   Standards and Frameworks commissioning

This year only, National Occupational Standards (NOS) and Scottish Vocational Qualifications, and associated qualification products, were funded by Standards and Frameworks commissioning. Funding for Scottish Apprenticeships was managed separately by Skills Development Scotland (SDS) through their new apprenticeship development model, often referred to as the Technical Expert Group (TEG) approach.

The reallocation of funding from Scottish Qualifications towards the new apprenticeship development model has, unfortunately, seen a significant reduction in the number of Scottish Vocational Qualification developments and reviews in recent years:

Year	Number of developments/reviews
2018–19	63
2019–20	57
2020–21	39
2021–22	16
2022–23	17

There is increasing concern over the adverse impact on learners and employers, with an apparent diminishing priority focused on the currency and assured quality of Scottish Vocational Qualifications. As reported in previous years, in the prevailing situation, the lack of allocated funding sees an increasing backlog of qualifications that are either potentially, or in some cases most likely, outdated and needing reviewed.

The close working relationships with SSOs/Delivery partners maximised results for the outputs of qualification products for Scotland. The important contribution from our quality assurance colleagues in Northern Ireland and Wales similarly supported the review, revision and production of National Occupational Standards (NOS).

We continue to work closely with all the aforementioned stakeholders and Skills Development Scotland (SDS), who are responsible for managing the commissioning and funding of the programme on behalf of the three Devolved Administrations, to ensure the best possible products are approved and made available for all who use them.

3   Project groups

A series of internal project groups were established to ensure that the objectives identified in SQA Accreditation's *Operational Plan 2022–23* could be realised. These project groups included representatives from each of the SQA Accreditation sections:

- Accreditation
- Regulation
- Information and Research
- Administration

The operational activities carried out by project groups are summarised here.

3.1 SVQ Research Project

SQA Accreditation is conducting a review of the Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) brand, to ensure it still meets the needs of awarding bodies, providers, employers, learners and other stakeholders. This will also examine whether SVQs are sustainable and appropriate qualifications for the evolving labour market.

The first phase of this research project is now complete; this phase consisted of 40 workshops, starting in May 2020 and ending in August 2021, with approximately 280 participants. These sessions focused on:

- What is good about SVQs
- Any issues regarding SVQs
- Solutions to these issues

Phase one workshop results have been published in the SVQ review report. Using the key themes identified in the phase one consultation, a questionnaire was developed to seek users' views on possible changes to the SVQ brand. This was issued in March 2023 and closed in late April. The results are currently being analysed and will be presented to the Accreditation Committee for discussion.

3.2 Stakeholder Engagement and Communication Strategies Project Group

Two Awarding Body Forums were hosted during the operational year: in April and November 2022. As agreed with our approved awarding bodies, we plan to continue with these twice a year. SQA Accreditation appreciates the participation of attendees and hopes all have found our sessions to be as beneficial as we have.

3.3 Fast track approval of awarding bodies

Our new approval process has been implemented now for an initial 12-month trial period. Within this time three awarding bodies have been eligible for this process, but only one has been fully engaged and progressed through as fast track. Our new risk assessment model allows us to determine whether an application can be considered for fast track approval.. The monitoring of this process has identified some areas for improvement, which means that the initial project group needs to be resumed to identify all improvement actions and make the necessary changes.

3.4 Self-assessment

The new self-assessment feedback template has now been fully implemented and all awarding bodies for the year 2022–23 received expanded feedback, adding value to the self-assessment process.

4 Audit activity 2022–23

SQA Accreditation's regulatory function includes the approval of awarding bodies, audits of awarding bodies, and provider monitoring visits (PMVs). This section provides an overview of regulatory activity for the period 2022–23. (Data has only been included in the following analyses where reports had been agreed by both regulator and awarding body by the end of 2022–23.)

The effects of the global pandemic, despite having subsided somewhat, still impacted the way we carried out audits and provider monitoring activities in the 2022–23 cycle. These continued to be remote both for awarding body audits and provider monitoring visits, though, exceptions were made where in-person monitoring was of benefit to a particular provider.

Of the 16 awarding body audits scheduled for the year, 12 took place, with four audits carried over into the 2023–24 cycle. There were various factors that limited the audits carried out. Firstly, the vacant Regulation Manager position meant that only a select number of these audits could be carried out by the Senior Regulation Manager due to work capacity issues, with the two remaining audits being moved into the 2023–24 cycle. Secondly, one audit was moved into the 2023–24 cycle and carried out in April, to accommodate the awarding body. Finally, another audit was moved into the 2023–24 cycle to allow provider monitoring activity to take place first, as that awarding body's number of providers had significantly increased in that period.

Over the course of 2022–23, we have seen an improvement to provider monitoring visits as normal practice seemed to be returning and more providers across more awarding bodies were active, though we were still carrying out remote visits. However, continued Accreditation staff illness did again prevent some allocated provider monitoring activity being conducted. SQA Accreditation carried out provider monitoring activity of 23 of the 35 approved awarding bodies. This has been an increase of 10 from the previous year.

Awarding body audits are based on a three-year cycle, depending on their level of risk. Provider monitoring visits aim to check the effectiveness of the awarding body's systems and to enable SQA Accreditation to identify any areas of concern that may help to inform our regulatory activities and safeguard the learner experience.

Following audit and PMV activity, SQA Accreditation conducted 12 awarding body audits and 50 provider monitoring visits across 23 awarding bodies in 2022–23.

12 Awarding body audits carried out	**50 provider monitoring visits carried out (across 23 awarding bodies)**
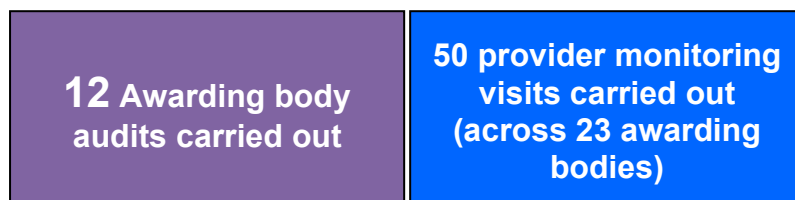
4.1 Awarding bodies

SQA Accreditation is responsible for approving awarding bodies to deliver qualifications of social, economic, environmental or cultural benefit to Scotland.

To achieve approval, organisations must demonstrate that they can meet SQA Accreditation's Regulatory Requirements. In 2022–23 there were no new awarding body approvals — although two prospective awarding bodies came forward seeking approval.

At the end of the operational year 2022–23, there were 35 awarding bodies approved by SQA Accreditation. You can read the full list of approved awarding bodies on our website.

4.2   Analysis of Issues and Recommendations

In an audit, Issues are recorded by the audit team where evidence shows that the awarding body is not compliant with SQA Accreditation's Regulatory Principles, posing a potential risk to learners and/or to the integrity of the qualification. Awarding bodies must address the Issues raised via an action plan. An Issue can be raised against multiple Regulatory Principles and/or Regulatory Directives.

A Recommendation can be recorded if the audit team considers that an awarding body's systems and processes meet the Regulatory Principles, but there is potential for improvement. There is no requirement for the awarding body to take action in response to this, but actioning the recommendation would be seen as good practice and demonstration of continuous improvement. One Recommendation may be raised against multiple Regulatory Principles and/or Regulatory Directives. Our regulatory requirements can be viewed in the Regulation section of our website.

The total number of awarding body audit issues raised in 2022–23 was 33. The risk ratings assigned to the issues are shown in Figures 1 and 2.
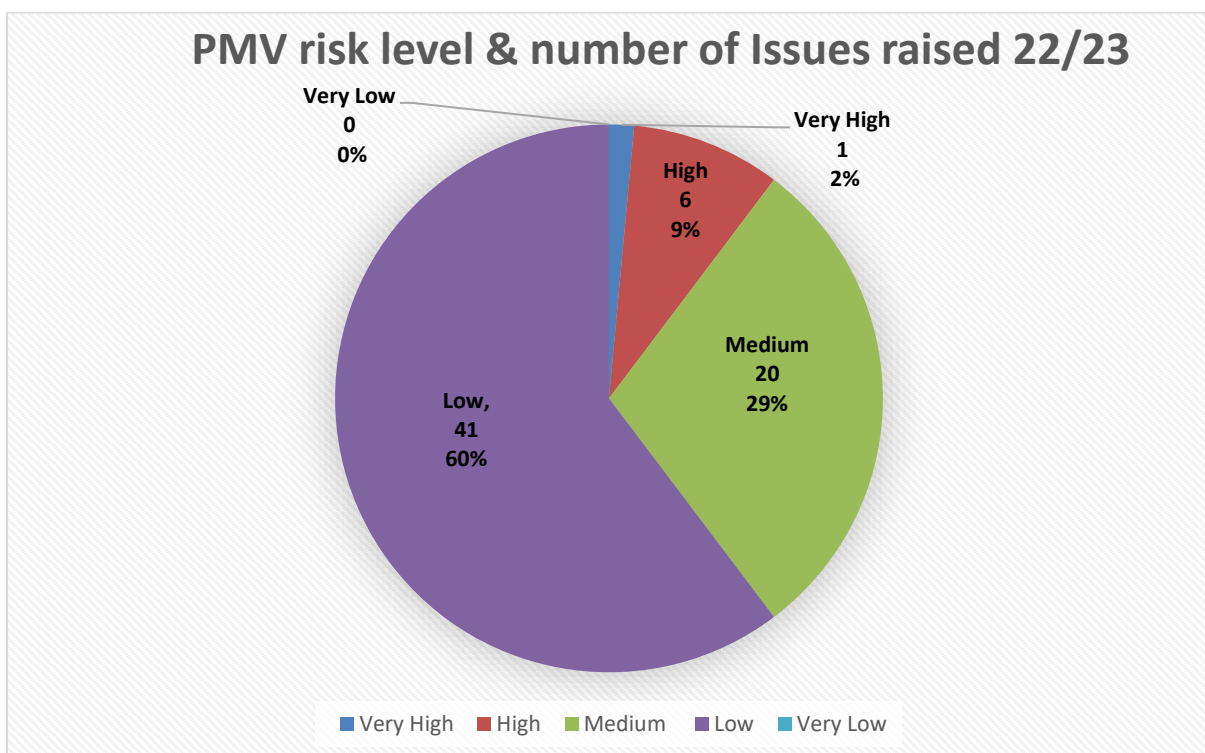
Figure 1: Risk level assigned to awarding body issues
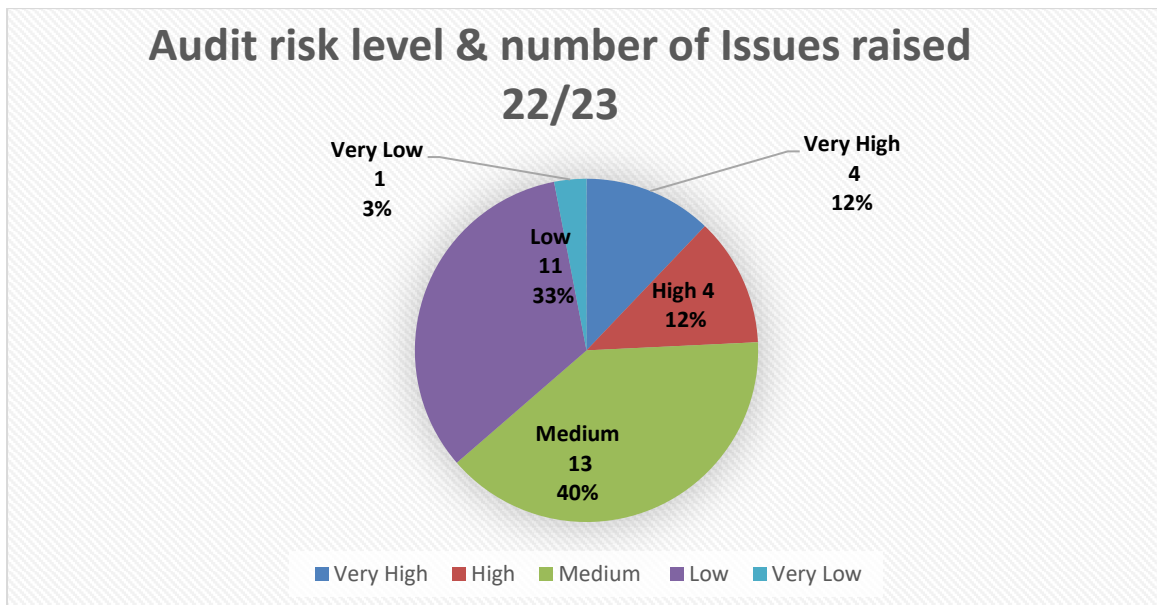
The total number of PMV issues raised in 2022–23 was 68. The risk ratings assigned to the issues are shown in Figure 2.
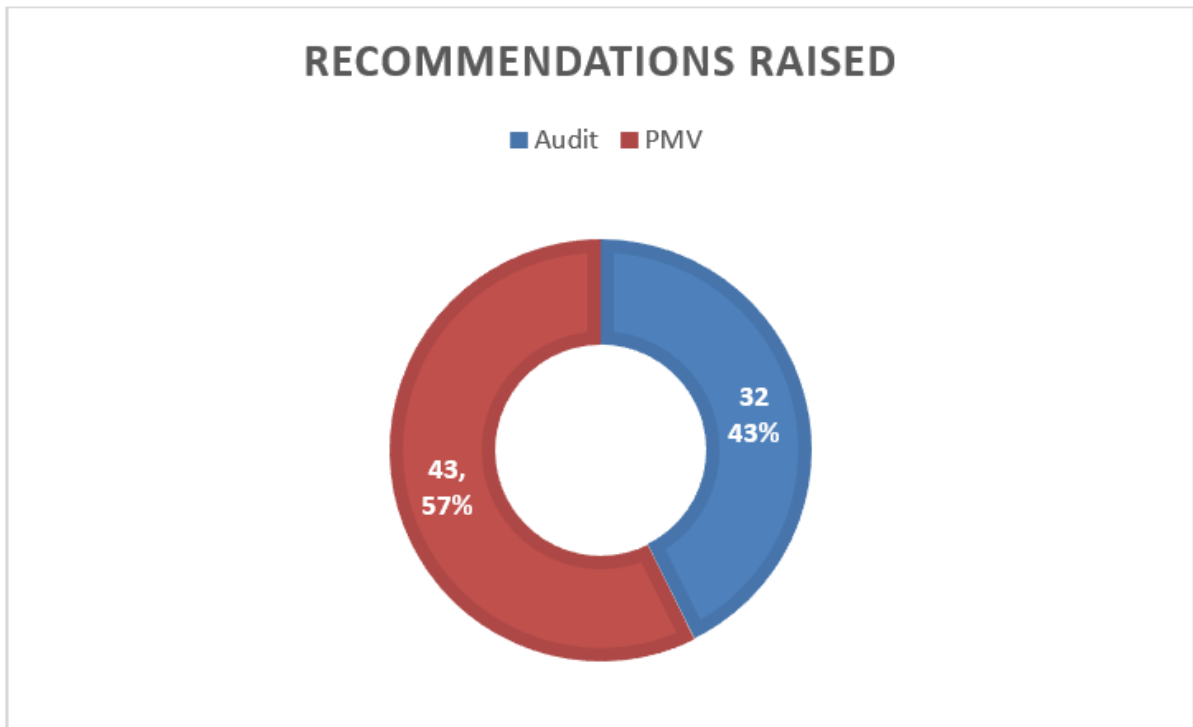
Figure 2: Risk level assigned to provider monitoring issues

The total number of recommendations raised in 2022–23 was 75.

♦ 32 from awarding body audits
♦ 43 from provider monitoring visits

Figure 3: Proportion of recommendations from audit and provider monitoring visits

4.3   Themes of Issues and Recommendations Raised

The highest number of awarding body audit Issues in 2022–23 were raised against Principles 6, 9 and 10:

Principle 6: The awarding body must continually review the effectiveness of its services, systems, policies and processes.

Principle 9: The awarding body and its providers must maintain accurate documents, records and data.

Principle 10: The awarding body must ensure that its systems and processes for the identification, design, development, implementation and review of qualifications and assessments are fit for purpose.

Note that one Issue can be assigned to more than one principle.

Figure 4: Audit issues raised against regulatory principles

Audit issues raised against regulatory principles
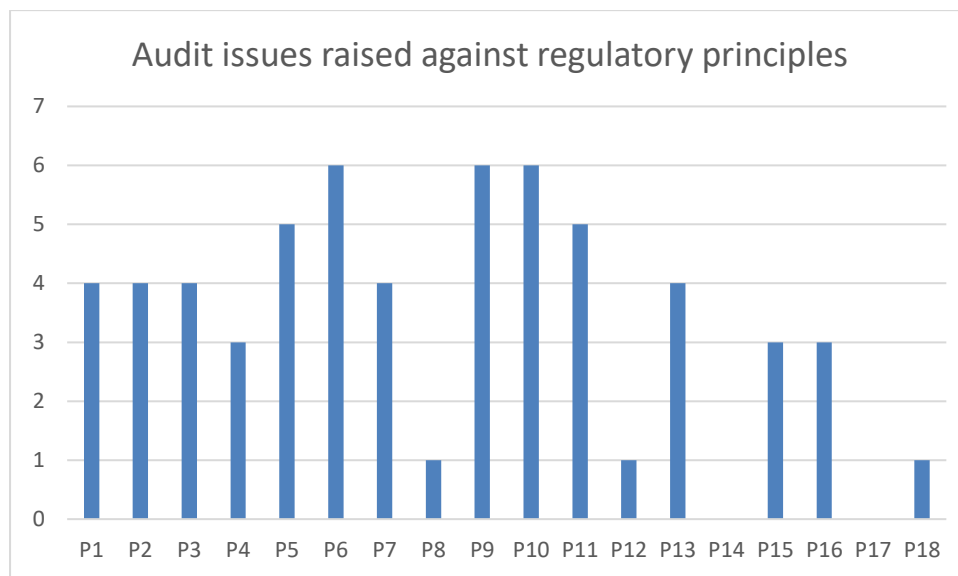
The Issues across the year that arose across several awarding bodies included:

♦ Awarding bodies not making accurate or appropriate references to SQA Accreditation/ accredited qualifications, particularly in the areas of business planning, awarding body literature and websites and qualification development policies.

♦ Awarding body policies and processes not fully reflecting current practice. Particularly since COVID-19, changes that been made have now been permanently adopted and policies haven't been updated. Policy examples include external quality assurance, provider risk rating, qualification/assessment.

The highest number of Issues from provider monitoring activity were raised against Principles 9, 16 and 13:

Principle 9: The awarding body and its providers must maintain accurate documents, records and data.

Principle 13: The awarding body and its providers must ensure that they have systems and processes which ensure the effective quality assurance of accredited qualifications.

Principle 16: The awarding body and its providers must have open and transparent systems, policies and procedures to manage complaints.

Common themes arising, which are broadly similar to those found at audit include:

♦ Inaccurate provider-devised policies that omit key information. Noticeably this year, this includes equal opportunities policies, complaints policies, malpractice and maladministration.

♦ Version control of documents, either didn't exist or wasn't being maintained.

♦ External quality assurance (EQA) visits not being conducted in line with AB requirements, for example certain elements not being reviewed, or visits having not been conducted in line with timeframes.

Figure 5: PMV Issues raised against regulatory principles

PMV Issues raised against regulatory principles

Various Recommendations were identified during awarding body audit and provider monitoring visits.

The greatest number of recommendations at awarding body audit were raised against Regulatory Principles 1, 9 and 11:

Principle 1: The awarding body must have an accountable officer and demonstrate that it has clearly defined and effective governance arrangements.

Principle 9: The awarding body and its providers must maintain accurate documents, records and data.

Principle 11: The awarding body must ensure that its qualifications portfolio is effectively managed, maintained and reviewed.

Figure 6: Audit Recommendations raised against principles

Audit Recommendations raised against principles
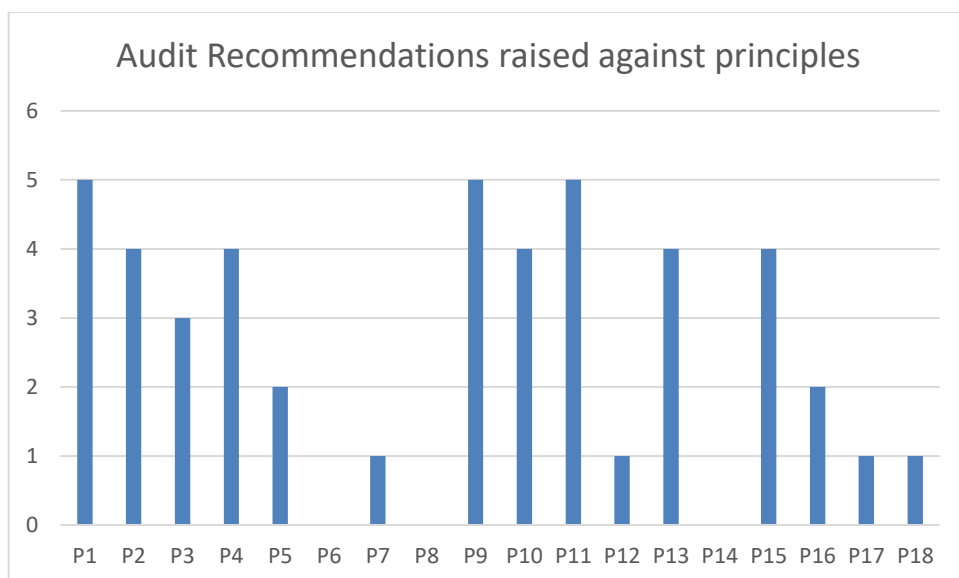
The greatest number of recommendations raised during provider monitoring activity were against Regulatory Principles 9, 6 and 12:

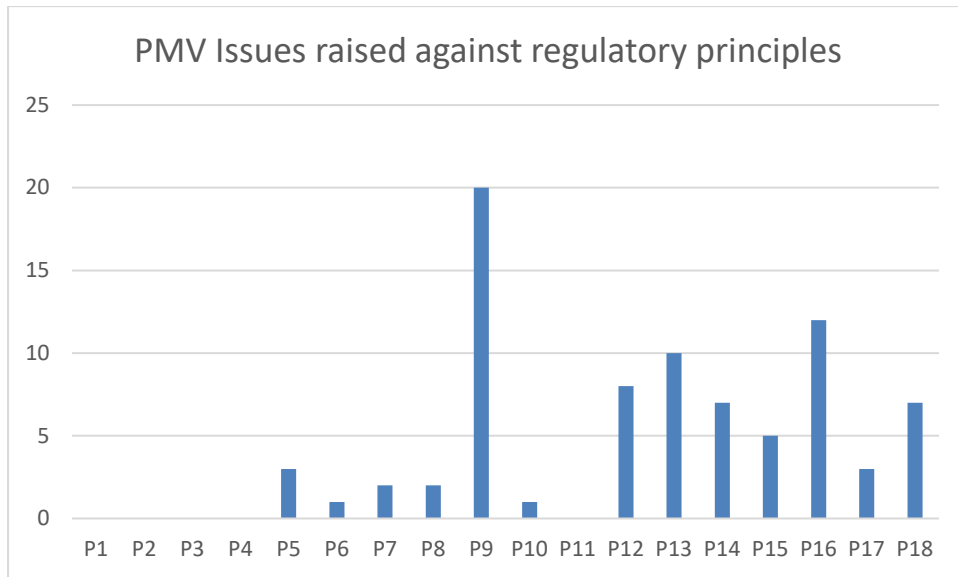**Principle 9:** The awarding body and its providers must maintain accurate documents, records and data.

Principle 6: The awarding body must continually review the effectiveness of its services, systems, policies and processes.

Principle 12: The awarding body and its providers must ensure that they have the necessary arrangements and resources required to manage and administer qualification delivery and assessment.

Figure 7: PMV Recommendations raised against principles

PMV Recommendations raised against principles
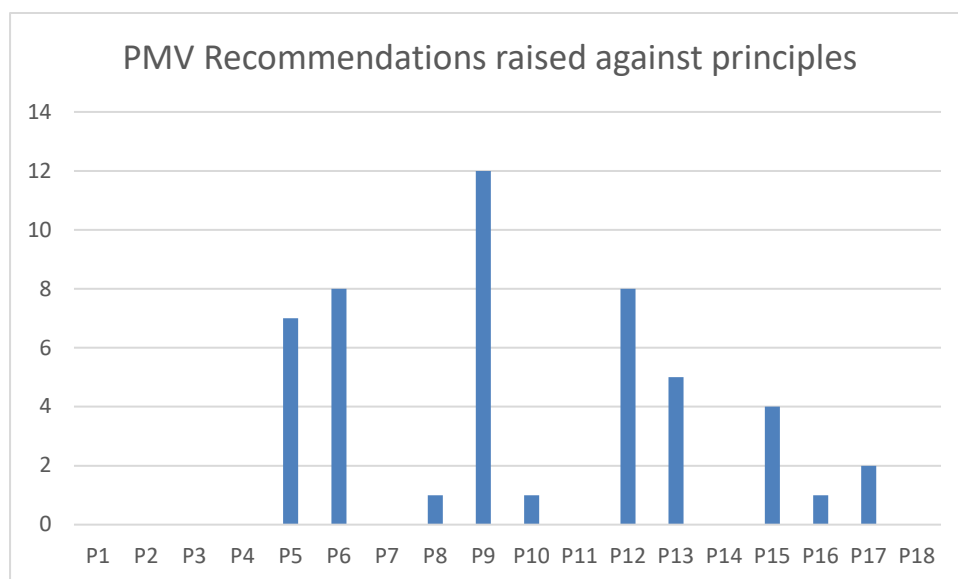
5   Accreditation activity 2022–23

SQA Accreditation's core functions include the approval of awarding bodies, approval of qualification products, accreditation of qualifications, and credit rating approval. This section provides an overview of accreditation activity for the period 2022–23.

From Q1 2022–23 we will only report on two qualification types (SVQs and Non-SVQs), compared to the three that were used previously (SVQs, Other, and Regulation & Licensing).
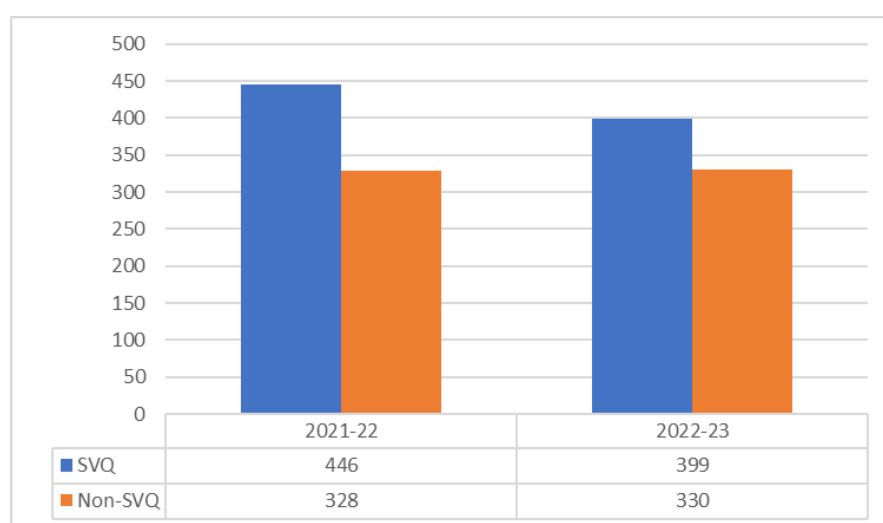
5.1   Accredited qualifications

At the end of 2022–23, SQA Accreditation had a total of **729 accredited qualifications**[1]. This is made up of Scottish Vocational Qualifications, Regulatory and Licensing qualifications, and 'Other' qualifications.

Figure 8: Number of accredited qualifications by type

	2021-22	2022-23
■ SVQ	446	399
■ Non-SVQ	328	330

5.1.1   Accredited Scottish Vocational Qualifications

At the end of 2022–23 there were **399 accredited SVQs**, which is a decrease of 47 compared to the previous financial year's total of 446.

SVQs are offered by 16 approved awarding bodies, and account for 54.7% of all accredited qualifications.

5.1.2   Accredited Non-SVQ qualifications

At the end of 2022–23, there were **330 non-SVQ qualifications accredited** — an increase of two qualifications compared to 2021–22.

Non-SVQ qualifications are offered by 29 approved awarding bodies, and account for 45.3% of all currently accredited qualifications.

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1 Qualifications that have lapsed are not included.

5.2   Withdrawn qualifications

A total of 71 qualifications were withdrawn during 2022–23. This total comprised:

♦   45 Scottish Vocational Qualifications
♦   6 Non-SVQs qualifications
♦   20 Workplace Core Skills

The most common reasons for withdrawal included:

♦   low or zero uptake, resulting in SQA Accreditation invoking the Zero Uptake Policy
♦   no future demands

For further detailed information on the performance of our accredited qualifications on a quarterly basis, please see our Quarterly Statistics Reports.

5.3   Market performance

Data on the performance of SQA accredited qualifications is collected from approved awarding bodies on a quarterly basis. Quarterly data is compiled to produce financial year totals for candidate registrations and certifications. Tables 1 to 3 present annual totals for SVQs and non-SVQ qualifications, as well as Workplace Core Skills, and compares the data to previous years' totals.

5.3.1 SVQ market performance

The total number of registrations and certifications is tracked and compared to previous financial years.

In 2022–23 the number of registrations and certifications showed a small to moderate increase respectively compared to 2021–22:

♦   registrations increased by 0.9% (360 registrations)
♦   certifications increased by 6.2% (1,628 certifications)

Table 1: SVQ registrations and certifications by financial year

Year	Registrations	± (%)	Certifications	± (%)
2016–17	44,538	-4	35,220	+4
2017–18	43,838	-2	33,414	-5
2018–19	44,811	+2	33,763	+1
2019–20	46,273	+3	34,698	+3
2020–21	28,237	-64	23,490	-48
2021–22	38,585	+37	26,433	+13
2022–23	38,945	+1	28,061	+6

5.3.2 Non-SVQ qualifications market performance

Non-SVQ registrations and certifications showed large changes in comparison to 2021–22:

♦ registrations increased by 19.6% (16,417 registrations)
♦ certifications increased by 19.5% (13,366 certifications)

Table 2: Non-SVQ qualifications registrations and certifications by financial year

Year	Registrations	± (%)	Certifications	± (%)
2016–17	68,437	-2%	53,733	2%
2017–18	73,000	7%	54,282	1%
2018–19	82,849	13%	70,387	30%
2019–20	85,299	3%	69,527	-1%
2020–21	42,246	-50%	23,684	-66%
2021–22	83,883	99%	68,671	190%
2022–23	100,320	20%	82,037	5%

While SVQs remain as the Scottish Government's qualification of choice for inclusion in Modern Apprenticeship Frameworks, alternative competence-based accredited qualifications may be approved for inclusion where there is not an appropriate SVQ. As a result, an increasing number of alternative competency based qualifications are now included in Modern Apprenticeship Frameworks, which could go some way to explaining the growing annual uptake of these qualifications.

5.3.3 Workplace Core Skills market performance

Workplace Core Skills were specifically developed to assess core skills in a work environment. They contribute to employability and are a component of Modern Apprenticeships in Scotland.

At the end of 2022–23 there were 125 accredited Workplace Core Skills.

Registrations for Workplace Core Skills have increased by 3% (842 registrations) compared to 2021–22, and certifications have increased by 8% (2,059 certifications).

Table 3: Workplace Core Skills registrations and certifications by financial year

Year	Registrations	± (%)	Certifications	± (%)
2016–17	37,295	-3	32,545	+5
2017–18	38,654	+4	30,636	-6
2018–19	38,093	–1	30,536	-0.3
2019–20	37,689	-1	32,956	+8
2020–21	23,037	-39	20,002	-39
2021–22	31,616	+37	24,551	+22
2022–23	32,458	+3	26,610	+8

The number of registrations and certifications of qualifications and Workplace Core Skills is continually monitored, and the information is published in SQA Accreditation's Quarterly Statistics Reports, which can be found in the Research and Statistics section of our dedicated SQA Accreditation website.

5.4   SQA Accreditation — key figures summary

Activity	Total
Provider monitoring visits performed and reports published	**23**
Awarding body audits carried out	**12**
Candidate registrations across all accredited qualifications	**139,265**
Candidate certifications across all accredited qualifications	**110,098**
New awarding bodies received approval by SQA Accreditation	**0**
Awarding bodies in total approved by SQA Accreditation	**35**

6 Our plan for 2023–24

We will continue to support the Scottish Government with regards to the Modern Apprenticeship Programme, as well as supporting the Standards and Frameworks programme, by offering advice and guidance on continual improvement with particular focus on commissioning, quality assurance systems and processes.

We will conclude our review of the SVQ brand. We will publish the outcomes of our phase two consultation and will share how we propose to proceed with improvements to the SVQ brand.

We will conduct provider monitoring activity in relation to the implementation and support provided by awarding bodies for the new qualifications developed by the Technical Expert Group (TEG) Process. This is to ensure that the transition to the new qualifications being developed are appropriate for learners and employers.

We will also be carrying out some internal work to look at our regulatory strategy.

We will work with Scottish Government officials as they seek to determine what activities our function should deliver as part of the education reform programme. Once the scope of our function is known, we will commence work to ensure that we have the appropriate resources, processes and systems in place so that we can seamlessly transform into our new responsibilities.

Appendix: Approved awarding bodies

SQA Accreditation approved awarding bodies as of 31 March 2023.

Abbreviation	Awarding body
AFS	Alcohol Focus Scotland
ASQ	Associated Sports Qualifications
AAT	Association of Accounting Technicians
ACCA	Association of Chartered Certified Accountants
BIIAB	BIIAB Qualifications Limited
CIH	Chartered Institute of Housing
CMI	Chartered Management Institute
Not Applicable	City & Guilds of London Institute
Not Applicable	EduQual
ECITB	Engineering Construction Industry Training Board
EAL	Excellence, Achievement and Learning Limited
Not Applicable	FireQual Ltd.
FAA	First Aid Awards Limited
FAQ	Future (Awards & Qualifications) Limited
GQA	GQA Qualifications Limited
Not Applicable	Highfield Qualifications
IMI	IMI Awards Limited
ITC	ITC First
Not Applicable	Lantra Awards Limited
MPQC	Mineral Products Qualifications Council
NEBOSH	National Examination Board in Occupational Safety and Health
Not Applicable	Pearson Education Limited
Not Applicable	PIABC Limited
QFI	Qualifications for Industry
RAD	Royal Academy of Dance
Not applicable	RSL
Not Applicable	SafeCert Awards Limited
STA	Safety Training Awards Limited
SQA	Scottish Qualifications Authority
Not Applicable	SFEDI Awards

Abbreviation	Awarding body
Not Applicable	Smart Awards Ltd.
BHSQL	The British Horse Society Qualifications Limited
Not Applicable	The Prince's Trust
REHIS	The Royal Environmental Health Institute of Scotland
VTCT	Vocational Training Charitable Trust