

## Introduction

Since their introduction in 1990, Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs), as a qualification type, have been subject to one review – Gordon Beaumont’s Review of 100 National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and SVQs, conducted in 1995. Beaumont found widespread support for the concept of SVQs, with over 85% of employers confirming that SVQs (and NVQs) gave their employees competence, and that their benefits outweighed the costs.

Individual SVQs are reviewed on a regular basis as determined by the sector however there has been no further review of SVQs as a qualification type since 1995.

Given the changes in the vocational education and training landscape since 1995, SQA Accreditation decided that it was important to undertake a piece of research to determine whether SVQs continue to meet the needs and expectations of Scotland, and whether they provide value and benefits to Scotland’s employers, learners and society in general.

SVQs were introduced to assess competence in the workplace and to provide a guarantee to learners and employers that individuals who complete an SVQ have the necessary skills, knowledge and understanding for a chosen occupation. In conducting the research, SQA Accreditation was seeking to satisfy itself that this remains the case and whether further improvements could be made to the qualification type.

The research sought to determine what works well with the qualification type, what works less well, and what could be improved. Phase 1 of the research involved engagement with learners, training providers, colleges, awarding bodies, standard setting organisations and employers. This phase was carried out via workshops. This report summarises the outcomes of these workshops and sets out some areas of possible improvements. These will be subject to a further and more focused consultation (Phase 2) considering areas for improvement.

## Context

There are currently 398 accredited SVQs offered by 13 awarding bodies. The number of candidates registered and certificated for SVQ for the last five financial years is shown in the table below.

Financial Year	Number of Registrations	Number of Certifications
2017–18	43190	31391
2018–19	44811	33763
2019–20	46273	34698
2020–21	28237	23490

2021–22	38585	26433
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The number of candidates being registered and certificate in 2019–20 was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of candidates registered and certificated in the first two quarters of the current financial year (2022–23) are significantly up on the same two quarters of the last financial year (2021–22) as shown in the table below.

Financial Year (April to September)	Number of Registrations	Number of Certifications
2021–22	15452	13900
2022–23	26219	23143

Based on the number of registrations and certifications for the first two quarters, it is likely that the number of registrations and certifications for financial year 2022-23 will be back to the pre-pandemic levels.

The research was undertaken prior to the Scottish Government’s recent announcement of a Review of the Skills Landscape in Scotland. Nonetheless, the research showed strong support for SVQs as a qualification type across learners, providers, colleges, awarding bodies, sector bodies and employers. There were some suggestions for change which the participants felt were worth exploring and these are picked up in the discussion below and in the attached consultation questions.

## Phase 1 Methodology

To understand whether SVQs continue to be an appropriate type of qualification to assess competence, SQA Accreditation held workshop sessions with candidates, training providers, colleges, employers, awarding bodies and standard setting organisations. Originally, it had been planned to hold these workshops face-to-face, however, due to the COVID-19 pandemic they were held using Microsoft Teams.

A total of 40 workshops were held, with a maximum of 10 participants per workshop, with one hour allocated to each workshop. Each session was facilitated by the Information and Research Manager. Two other members of the accreditation team assisted in taking notes and answering any technical questions.

During each workshop the notes were shared on Microsoft Teams allowing participants to correct any statements. The notes were also emailed to the participants after the workshop to allow for reflection and further comments. Each workshop consisted of three questions:

- ◆ What works well with SVQs?
- ◆ What works less well with SVQs?
- ◆ What might the solutions be?

A qualitative review was undertaken of the comments given by the participants. The following discussion picks up on the key themes made during the workshop. Not all of the comments or themes are directly related to the SVQ qualification type but have been included where they merit consideration by other stakeholders.

# Discussion

## Perception of the SVQ brand

In almost all workshops, people commented positively about the reputation of SVQs. Participants noted that the qualification type was well understood and known as a means of assessing competence in the workplace. This was less frequently stated in those workshops that involved candidates.

Almost all workshops referred to SVQs as being well recognised and said that there is a good level of understanding what an SVQ is and what it means when an individual has achieved an SVQ. A couple of workshops referred to there being a positive link between SVQs and the labour market. It is also seen as a stable qualification type and that its longevity is seen positively.

Several workshops referred to the qualification as being developed by industry for industry. This was viewed positively by those workshops and was seen as a recognition that employers valued the qualification, knowing that a candidate who had achieved the SVQ would be able to demonstrate competent performance. One workshop (Training Providers) referred to the trust that employers have in SVQs and the confidence that employers have in the content of the SVQ.

## SVQs and NOS

Many commented on the link between National Occupational Standards (NOS) and the SVQs and this was generally seen to be a positive given that there is a single uniform standard across awarding bodies that offer the same SVQ. However, a number of groups commented on the frequency of NOS and SVQ reviews and felt that the infrequent reviews have resulted in NOS and SVQs which are not as up-to-date as they could be.

One group suggested that, where a small change was required, awarding bodies should be allowed to make that change.

A number of the Training Provider workshops commented that they were not aware when NOS and SVQs are being reviewed and would welcome more communication about this so that they could participate in the reviews.

A college workshop suggested that there should be a section on SQA Accreditation's website for providers to leave comments about the content or structure of SVQs. An alternative suggestion was for SQA Accreditation to publish the details of the sector body responsible for particular SVQs.

However, there were some suggestions that the link between NOS and SVQ units could be relaxed and this might create additional flexibility. One group felt that this might mitigate against those situations where the NOS have not been reviewed and working practices have changed. This would allow awarding bodies to make relevant changes to the units. It was also felt that this could enable providers and employers to mould the units so that they better fitted the needs of the employer.

## **NOS and coverage of job roles**

A few comments were made about whether NOS truly cover all job roles within a particular sector across the UK. It was felt that there was some geographical variation in how particular job roles were performed and that therefore the NOS were not always relevant. This leads providers to have to create artificial situations to be able to assess the candidates.

Some other groups suggested that greater flexibility could be achieved by allowing units not based on NOS to be included in SVQs. It was suggested that each awarding body offering the SVQ be permitted to include non-SVQ units in its accreditation submission. However, it was recognised that this would mean that two awarding bodies offering the same SVQ would be likely to have differences in content.

## **Assessment**

Almost all of the workshops attended by Training Providers and Colleges commented on the fact that there is no final examination with SVQs. They felt that this was a strong attraction for candidates, particularly for those that had struggled with examinations in school. These groups also commented on the experiential learning and practical nature of the qualification. Ongoing assessment was seen as a key strength of the qualification. It allows candidates to see that they are progressing and can boost confidence. Candidates felt that this was particularly helpful and many candidate groups also commented on the absence of an examination as being helpful.

However, one group commented on the inclusion of end-tests in some SVQs, which can only be taken once all SVQ units have been achieved. This group was concerned that the achievements of the SVQ units cannot be used as evidence towards the end-test, and it was felt that this test duplicates some or all of the assessment requirements in the SVQ units.

## **Learning and development**

Many of these workshops commented on how the candidates' confidence grew as they progressed through the qualification, particularly with regards to younger candidates. One group also said that this applied to some adults, particularly those who were older and possibly undertaking a qualification for the first time since leaving school.

A number of workshops commented on the fact that candidates were able to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding without having to undertake an academic qualification. One of the candidate workshops commented on the ability to link theory with practice. This was also commented on by a Training Provider workshop where they felt that academic qualifications provided the theory but not the practice. A number of workshops commented that the qualification type lends itself to reflective practice. This is seen as a strength as it allows candidates to make the connection between their off-the-job learning and what they are doing in their job role.

The training provider and college workshops also reflected on the fact that the SVQ suits a range of learning styles. The flexibility of the qualification assisted with this. Most groups were positive about the fact that a range of assessment techniques could be used with SVQs and that this offers additional flexibility. This was particularly valued by the training providers when the pandemic began and they were able to make more use of technology to

continue with assessments. A couple of college workshops commented that SVQs were particularly useful for candidates with learning difficulties, particularly dyslexia, given the range of assessment approaches which can be used.

## **Holistic assessment and funding**

A number of workshops referred to the fact that, with SVQs, holistic assessment is extremely beneficial — particularly in being able to use a single piece of evidence for a range of performance criteria across a number of units. While this was seen as a strength, some training provider workshops referred to the funding model of Modern Apprenticeships (which include SVQs) not aligning with the holistic assessment approach.

Funding is normally paid on milestones, which for most apprenticeships is based on achievement of units. Training providers felt that the funding model changed their behaviour to ensure that they met their milestone targets. It may therefore be beneficial for Skills Development Scotland to consider its current funding model and whether an alternative could support the use of holistic assessment. Some groups felt that it would be beneficial if a map was produced for each SVQ which showed where the commonalities were between units to aid holistic assessment.

## **Progression**

A number of workshops referred to the progression opportunities that the achievement of an SVQ could bring. This was stated in relation to progressing to a higher-level SVQ, but a number of groups also referred to progression into HNCs and HNDs. A number of candidates also cited this and indicated that they had plans to progress onto an HNC once they had completed the SVQ.

## **Structure and format**

A number of workshops commented that the structure of the qualification was helpful in assisting candidates to understand what they would be undertaking in the SVQ. Some of the training providers also felt that the structure was beneficial for employers in that they could then determine which of the optional units would be best suited for their candidates. However, a number of groups commented on the language used in NOS and therefore in the SVQs. It was generally felt that the language could be simplified so that it could be more easily understood by candidates. It was commented that assessors had to translate the NOS into plain English, which greatly assisted candidates in understanding what was required of them.

A number of workshops also commented on the fact that there is no set period for learning — candidates can learn at their own pace. The candidate workshops commented positively on this, but some felt that where there is minimal or infrequent contact from assessors that they can become demotivated. Some of the candidates commented positively about their assessors and mentioned that they see their assessors on a monthly basis. While this is not directly related to the qualification type, it does need to be highlighted as it may have an impact on achievement. Given that the SVQ brand is seen as assisting in improving candidates' confidence, awarding bodies and providers should consider ways to ensure that assessment is conducted on a regular basis.

## **Recognition by employers**

There were mixed views about how the SVQ is perceived. Some groups referred to employers seeing it purely as tick-box exercise rather than a developmental process for individuals. Some employers view it as a training programme rather than a qualification of competence. Others expressed views that employers were very aware that it is a qualification and value the flexibility that most SVQ structures have.

A few groups commented on SVQs that have multiple pathways and stated that this inhibited flexibility and choice of units for some of their employers (mostly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)). It was felt that having a small mandatory section and then a list of options would make SVQs more attractive for SMEs and create more flexibility.

## **Increasing flexibility**

Some groups felt that flexibility could be created by awarding bodies promoting the use of individual units or groups of individual units. However, it was recognised that this may not lead to a recognised qualification. It was also felt that this may increase the motivation for some learners as they can perceive the time taken to achieve the full SVQ as lengthy. These groups also noted that there would need to be a change in the funding rules so that private training providers could make these available.

## **Workplace Core Skills and Meta Skills**

A few groups commented about the relationship between SVQs and Workplace Core Skills, particularly in relation to Modern Apprenticeships. Most of those commenting felt that the Workplace Core Skills should be fully embedded into SVQs and that this would make the Modern Apprenticeship programme more seamless. Other groups commented on Skills Development's Scotland's introduction of meta skills into the new apprenticeships and felt that there was a need to consider how SVQs aligned to or incorporated the meta skills.

Some of the provider groups felt that funding drove behaviour from employers regarding their choice of SVQ (and Modern Apprenticeship) and had not considered the candidate's suitability for the SVQ given their job role. This resulted in significant additional resource for the provider in carrying out simulated assessments. These groups felt that some sort of skills scan would assist in ensuring that candidates were undertaking the SVQ (and Modern Apprenticeship) that was most appropriate to their job role rather than seeking an SVQ (and Modern Apprenticeship) level that attracts additional funding.

## Summary

In general, the qualification type continues to be respected and valued by all who use it. The SVQ brand has strong recognition, and its purpose is generally well understood. There is confidence amongst users that an individual who achieves an SVQ has demonstrated competence in their job role. There is good awareness of its relationship with NOS. There was also a recognition that candidates achieving an SVQ could progress onto other qualifications.

Key positives about the qualification type include:

- ◆ Building confidence in the learner.
- ◆ Learners being able to learn at their own pace.
- ◆ Assists with reflective learning.
- ◆ Supports learners who may have additional needs, such as dyslexia.
- ◆ Wider stakeholder trust and confidence in the qualifications.

Some suggestions for improvement were made including:

- ◆ Relaxing the relationship with NOS.
- ◆ Including non-SVQ units within an SVQ.
- ◆ Consider how to make the SVQ more flexible.
- ◆ Removal of end-tests which duplicate assessment within the SVQ units.
- ◆ Alignment or inclusion of meta skills.

There are many players involved in the design, delivery, assessment and funding of SVQs. SQA Accreditation works in partnership with most of these players. In the workshops some issues were identified which relate to the broader system. These include:

- ◆ Frequency of NOS and SVQ reviews.
- ◆ Funding model inhibits holistic assessment.
- ◆ Candidates being entered onto inappropriate SVQs based on their job role.

The issues highlighted above will be shared with relevant partners for their consideration.

SQA Accreditation has developed a consultation on the suggestions for improvement and these can be found at

[https://accreditation.sqa.org.uk/accreditation/Research\\_and\\_Statistics/Current\\_Research](https://accreditation.sqa.org.uk/accreditation/Research_and_Statistics/Current_Research) and will be open from 06/03/2023 until 07/04/2023.