SQA Accreditation Annual Review 2023–24

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 the Scottish Government. All of the work undertaken by SQA Accreditation is overseen by the statutory Accreditation Committee.

A total of 135,151 candidates were registered in 2023–24, and 110,277 candidates were certificated. This compares with 139,265 registrations and 110,098 certifications in 2022–23.

We saw a slight drop in the number of candidates being registered and certificated for accredited qualifications over the course of 2023–24, although the numbers are almost back to pre-pandemic levels. We continue to support Skills Development Scotland with the Modern Apprenticeship programme and to ensure these are underpinned by National Occupation Standards.

Two important reports were published during 2023–24, which are relevant to the future scope of accreditation in Scotland. These were: *Fit for the Future: developing a post-school learning system to fuel economic transformation*, led by James Withers, and *It's Our Future — Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment* which was led by Professor Louise Hayward with a particular focus on qualifications offered in the senior phase of school.

The Withers report recommended that the new qualifications body have oversight of the post-school qualifications landscape, and that it should have responsibility for the development of all publicly-funded post-school qualifications and the underpinning National Occupational Standards. In SQA's response to a number of consultations in recent years, we have advocated for all post-school publicly-funded qualifications to be accredited and regulated.

In autumn 2023, the Scottish Government set up a short-life working group to look at the scope of the Accreditation function in the new qualifications body and provide advice to Ministers. This work is ongoing. The passage of the Education (Scotland) Bill will consider the scope and governance of accreditation and regulation of qualifications in Scotland, within the remit of the new body, which is to be named Qualifications Scotland.

I would like to thank staff in SQA Accreditation and the Accreditation Committee for continuing to ensure that high-quality accredited qualifications are available to the learners in Scotland this year.

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. For the purposes of this report, these qualifications are split into the following categories:

♦ **Scottish Vocational Qualifications** (SVQs)
♦ **Non-SVQs** — qualifications that are required to perform regulated job roles, including security qualifications and personal licence certificates; exam-based, and competence-based qualifications that are not SVQs, including Diplomas, Certificates and Awards in subjects such as Accounting

SQA Accreditation also plays a central role in advising and supporting standards setting organisations (SSOs) in the development and review of National Occupational Standards (NOS), and with qualification development. We are responsible for approving and quality assuring NOS 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

This Annual Review provides a summary of the operational activities carried out by SQA Accreditation in 2023–24, 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 2023–24

SQA Accreditation's annual operational activity from April 2023 to the end of March 2024 is summarised in this review. We provide an overview of significant developments in 2023–24 and details of how we met our operational objectives through project groups.

2.1 Standards and Frameworks commissioning

This year, as previously, only the review and development of National Occupational Standards (NOS) and Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) were funded by the Standards and Frameworks commissioning process managed by Skills Development Scotland (SDS). Funding for Scottish Apprenticeships was administered separately by SDS through their apprenticeship development model.

As reported last year the reallocation of funding from Scottish Qualifications towards the new apprenticeship development model has significantly reduced the number of SVQ reviews and developments in recent years. That trend continues, as shown here:

Year	Number of projects
2018–19	63
2019–20	57
2020–21	39
2021–22	16
2022–23	17
2023–24	17

The concern remains that the lack of allocated funding sees an increasing backlog of qualifications that are potentially outdated and needing updated.

Due to the commissioning process being concluded late in the operational year — August 2023 for NOS and November 2023 for SVQs — a proportionally low volume of products were approved by the target of 31 March 2024. A number were still outstanding as at the time of writing, 4 July 2024.

Commissioned products 2023–24

	Total	Approved 31/03/24	% Approved	Approved 28/06/24	% Approved
NOS	32	13	41%	26	81%
SVQs	17	0	0%	2	12%
Total	49	13	27%	28	57%

3 Project groups

A series of internal project groups were established to ensure that the objectives identified in SQA Accreditation's *Operational Plan 2023–24* 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 Stakeholder Engagement and Communication Strategies Project Group

As we did last year, we hosted two Awarding Body Forums during the 2023–24 operational year, in May and November 2023. These provide a good opportunity to share important information and gather valuable feedback from our colleagues in awarding bodies approved by SQA Accreditation.

Areas covered this year, across both forums, included: updates on SQA (Accreditation) reform; Reform/transition impact for awarding bodies; Our SVQ Review and Survey; SQA Accreditation's role in the new model of apprenticeship development in Scotland (managed by Skills Development Scotland); Assessor and Internal and External Verifier requirements post COVID-19; and Artificial Intelligence.

We also introduced a similar forum for information sharing and discussion with Standards Setting Organisations (SSOs), which we held in October 2023. The plan is for this to also be a regular forum either once or twice a year. The frequency is still to be agreed.

Areas covered included: Good practice for NOS review/development; SVQ design principles; SSO operational concerns, and; Update on SQA (Accreditation) reform.

3.2 AC2 form review

As part of our review and update work relating to accessibility requirements, we have updated our qualification structure grid and undertook the task of updating our AC2 Qualification Accreditation Form (AC2 Form). This is the electronic document used by awarding body representatives in presenting any accreditation submissions to Accreditation Coordination Group (ACG).

Whilst updating the qualification structure grid was not too onerous, there is more to consider with the AC2 Form, which requires more substantial revision. We view this as an opportunity and are in the process of looking at transferring this from the current Excel file to Microsoft Forms. The aim here is to provide a smoother online submission format for users.

Work is ongoing with support from the corporate Digital Accessibility team. Although proving to be a challenge we are hopeful of presenting a test version for the Autumn.

Through raising at the AB Forum in May we already have numerous offers of support from awarding bodies to help with the testing.

3.3 Education reform

Following the publication of James Withers's independent review of the skills landscape, *Fit for the Future: developing a post-school learning system to fuel economic transformation*, and Professor Louise Hayward's independent review of qualifications and assessment in Scotland, *It's Our Future — Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment*, the Cabinet Secretary took the decision to pause the education reform programme to reflect on the recommendations from these two reports.

The Scottish Government subsequently published *Purpose and Principles for Post-School Education, Research and Skills*, which sets out the framework for decision making for post-school education. In the publication, *Initial Priorities*, the Scottish Government confirmed its support for one of James Withers's review recommendations that overseeing all publicly-funded post-school qualifications (except degrees), and the underpinning occupational standards and skills frameworks, will be part of the new qualifications body's responsibilities.

A short-life working group was set up by Scottish Government to consider what the scope of the Accreditation and Regulation function should be in Qualifications Scotland. The group is made up of representatives of Scottish Government, SQA Accreditation, the Scottish Funding Council, Skills Development Scotland and the SCQF Partnership. The group has discussed the roles and responsibilities of each of the organisations involved in the post-16 education landscape. SQA Accreditation has been of the view that all publicly-funded post-16 qualifications should be accredited and regulated in the same way that they are in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Scottish Government officials will also be taking stock by having discussions with the wider education community to help inform its views.

3.4 Fast track approval of awarding bodies

The fast-track approval process has been implemented now for approximately 24 months. During the majority of this period only one awarding body was approved via this mechanism, which made it difficult to conduct any continuous improvements review. However, at the end of 2023–24 cycle, one further awarding body was able to be approved via the fast-track process. This will enable SQA Accreditation to review the criterion and mechanism in which we approve the awarding bodies through this process in the period of 2024–25 — this has been added as part of our objectives for the year.

4 Audit activity 2023–24

SQA Accreditation's regulatory function includes the approval of awarding bodies, audits of awarding bodies, and provider monitoring visits. This section provides an overview of regulatory activity for the period 2023–24. (Data has only been included in the following analyses where reports had been agreed by both regulator and awarding body by the end of 2023–24.)

Twelve awarding body audits were scheduled for the year, of which four were carried over from the 2022–23 cycle. The main factor in the carry-over involved the vacancy of a Regulation Manager position, which was filled in May 2023, having been vacant from October 2022.

Over the course of 2023–24, we continued to have difficulty meeting the provider monitoring demands due to unexpected long-term staff absences. Despite asking Scottish Government for additional funds to build resilience into the team, we continue to be impaired by underfunding. Despite this, of the planned 64 provider monitoring activities across 29 approved awarding bodies, the Regulation Officers carried out 45 provider monitoring activities across 15 awarding bodies. The monitoring activities that were planned for 2023–24 but did not take place have been reprioritised for the 2024–25 cycle.

Key figures:
12 Awarding body audits carried out
45 provider monitoring visits carried out (across 15 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 2023–24 one new awarding body was approved, and there is one other significant prospective awarding body in the fast-track approval process. One post approval audit was conducted on the newly-approved awarding body.

At the end of the operational year 2023–24, there were 36 awarding bodies approved by SQA Accreditation. You can read the full list of approved awarding bodies on our website, and in Appendix 1 of this review.

4.2 Analysis of Issues and Recommendations

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. During an awarding body audit or provider monitoring visit, an Issue may 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 that there is

potential for improvement. There is no requirement for the awarding body to take action in response to this, but it would be seen as good practice and demonstration of continuous improvement if they actioned the Recommendation. During an awarding body audit or provider monitoring visit, 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 2023–24 was 25. The risk ratings assigned to the issues are shown in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1: Risk level assigned to awarding body issues
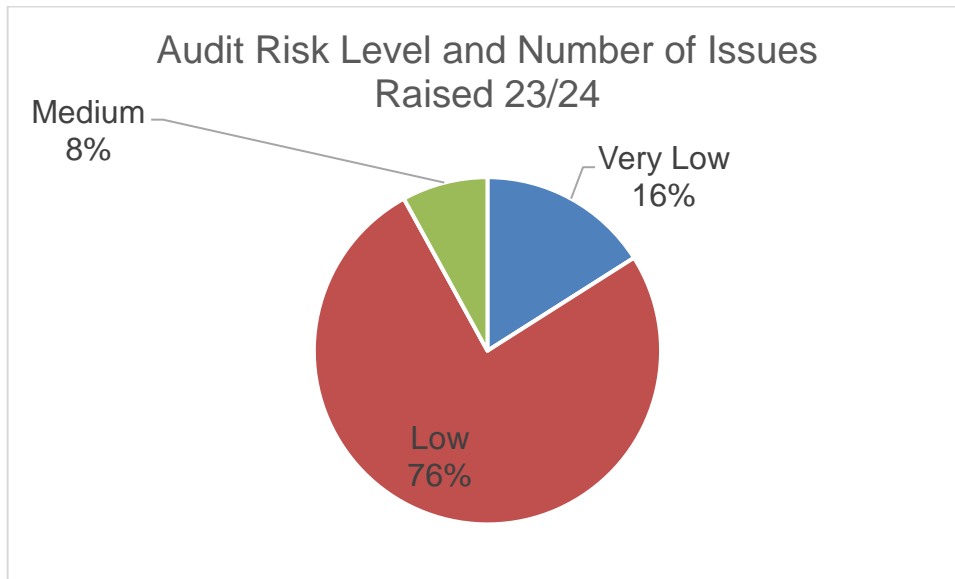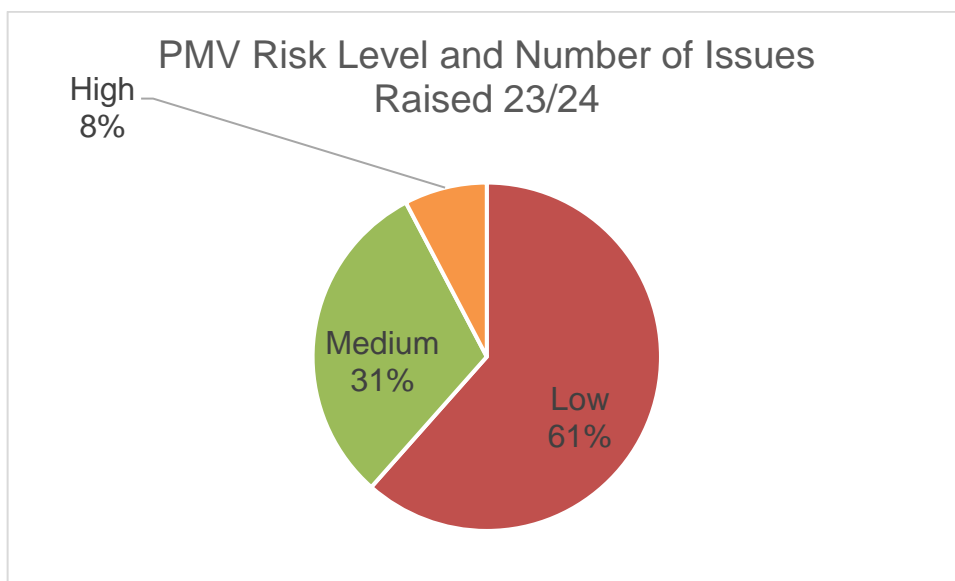

The total number of PMV issues raised in 2023–24 was 52. The risk ratings assigned to the issues are shown in Figure 2.
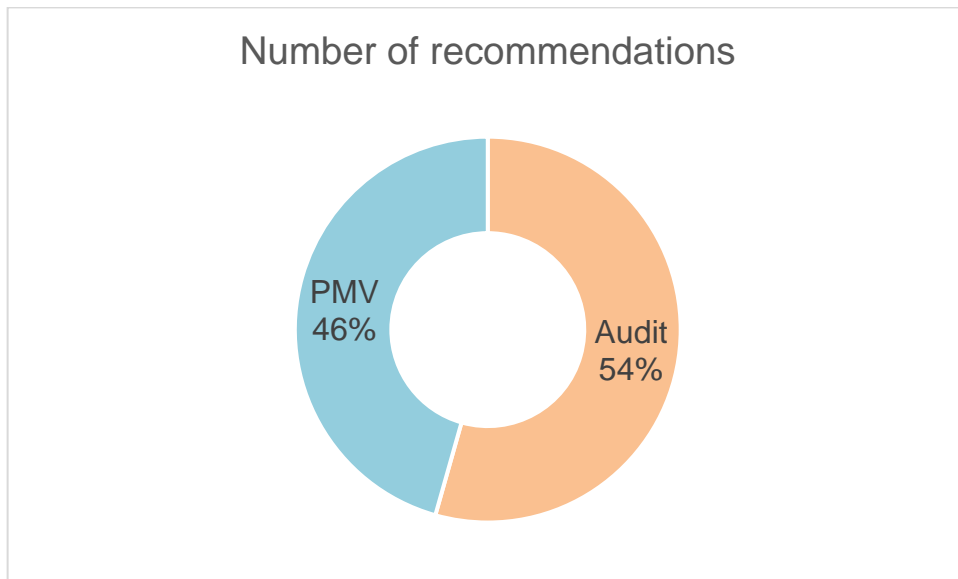
Figure 2: Risk level assigned to provider monitoring issues

The total number of recommendations raised in 2023–24 was 56.

- 31 from awarding body audits
- 26 from provider monitoring visits

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

4.3   Themes of Issues and Recommendations raised

4.3.1   Audits

Having analysed the issues raised against awarding bodies during audits in 2023–24, the highest number of awarding body audit Issues were raised against Principles:

- 7: The awarding body must have an effective approach for communicating with its staff, stakeholders and SQA Accreditation.
- 9: The awarding body and its providers must maintain accurate documents, records and data.

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

Audit Issues against Principles
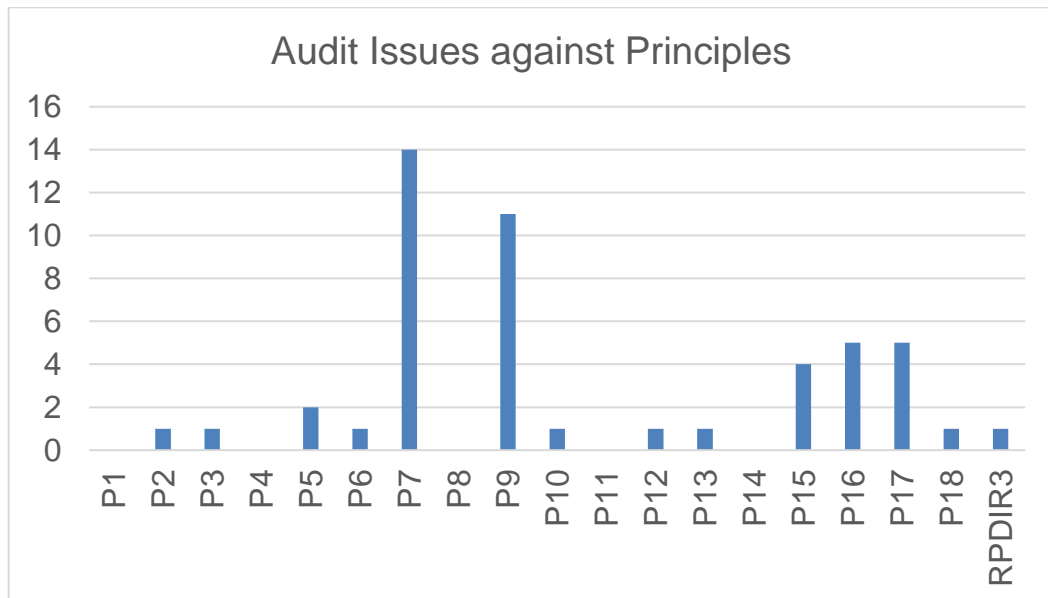
The greatest number of recommendations at audit were raised against Regulatory Principles:

♦ 5: The awarding body and its providers must provide clear information on their procedures, products and services and ensure that they are accurate and appropriate to accredited qualifications.
♦ 7: The awarding body must have an effective approach for communicating with its staff, stakeholders and SQA Accreditation.
♦ 9: The awarding body and its providers must maintain accurate documents, records and data.

4.3.1 Provider monitoring

The highest number of Issues raised from provider monitoring activity was against Principles 5, 9 and 18:

♦ 5: The awarding body and its providers must provide clear information on their procedures, products and services and ensure that they are accurate and appropriate to accredited qualifications.
♦ 9: The awarding body and its providers must maintain accurate documents, records and data.
♦ 18: The awarding body and its providers must ensure that it has safeguards to prevent and manage cases of malpractice and maladministration.

PMV Issues against Principles
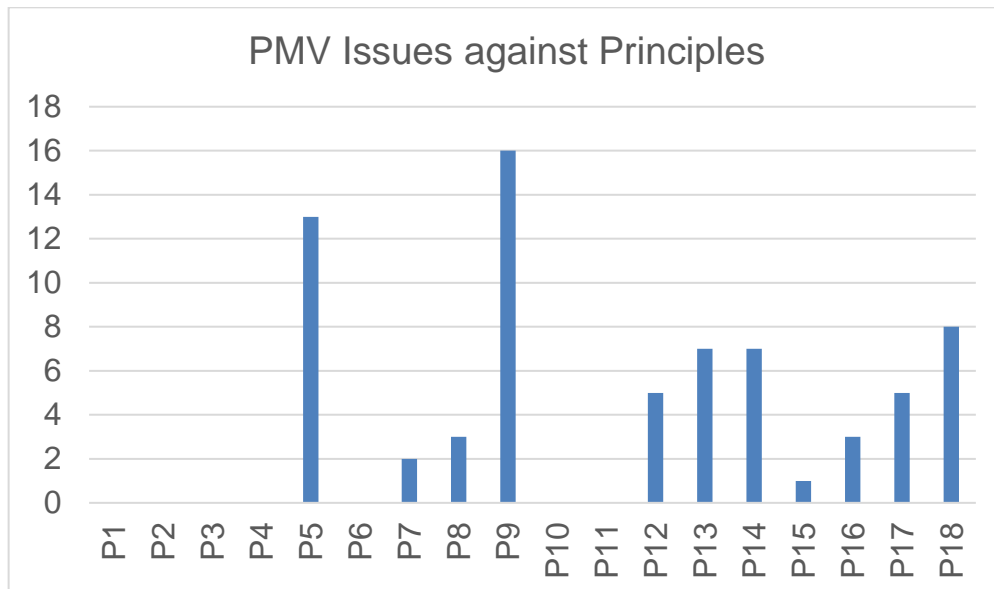
The provider monitoring outcomes continue to demonstrate the more general theme of providers failing to follow awarding body policy or processes, or not understanding the documented policy or processes correctly and therefore being deemed non-compliant. Additionally, there are often inaccuracies in providers' process or policies in relation to escalation routes for malpractice cases.

The greatest number of recommendations were raised against Regulatory Principles 6 and 9 during provider monitoring activity:

♦ 6: The awarding body must continually review the effectiveness of its services, systems, policies and processes.
♦ 9: The awarding body and its providers must maintain accurate documents, records and data.

5 Accreditation activity 2023–24

This section provides an overview of accreditation activity for the period 2023–24.

Since Q1 of 2022–23 we have only reported on two qualification type categories (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 2023–24, SQA Accreditation had a total of **730 accredited qualifications**[1]. This is made up of Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) and Non-SVQs.

Number of accredited qualifications by type

	2022-23	2023-24
■ SVQ	399	379
■ Non-SVQ	330	351
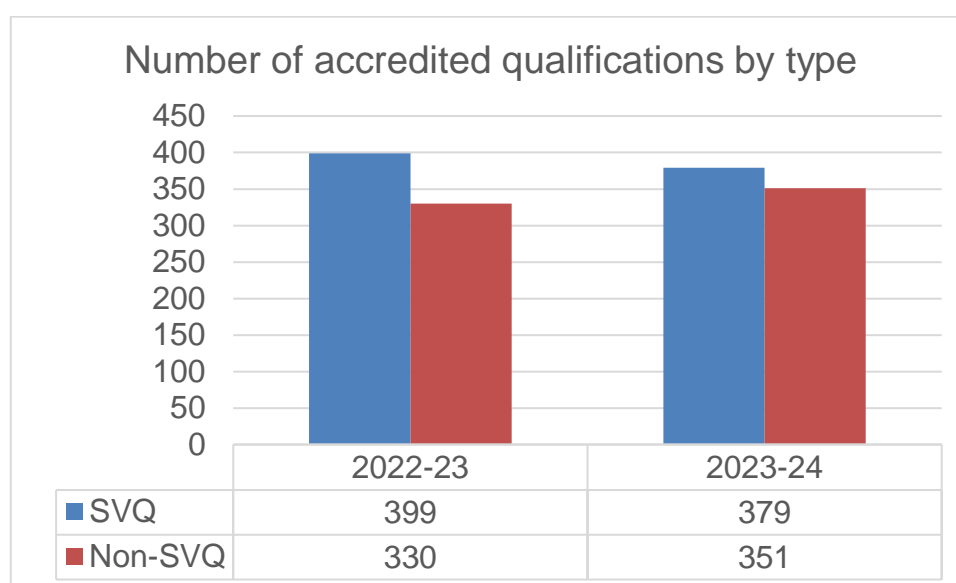
5.1.1 Accredited Scottish Vocational Qualifications

At the end of 2023–24 there were **379 accredited SVQs**, which is a decrease of 20 compared to the previous financial year's total of 399.

SVQs are offered by 12 approved awarding bodies, and account for 51.92% of all accredited qualifications.

5.1.2 Accredited Non-SVQ qualifications

At the end of 2023–24, there were **351 accredited non-SVQ qualifications**— an increase of 21 compared to 2022–23.

Non-SVQ qualifications are offered by 30 approved awarding bodies, and account for 48.08% of all currently accredited qualifications.

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1 Qualifications that have lapsed are not included.

5.2   Withdrawn qualifications

A total of 72 qualifications were withdrawn during 2023–24. This total comprised:

♦ 42 Scottish Vocational Qualifications
♦ 20 Non-SVQs qualifications
♦ 10 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. The following visualisations present annual totals for SVQs, non-SVQ qualifications, as well as Workplace Core Skills, and compares the data to previous years' totals.

5.3.1   SVQ market performance

SVQ market performance is shown by measuring the total number of registrations and certifications compared to previous financial years.

In 2023–24 the number of registrations and certifications showed small changes compared to 2022–23:

♦ registrations decreased by 3.94%
♦ certifications increased by 1.22%

The visualisation below shows the impact of the pandemic in 2020 and demonstrates that registration and certification numbers have almost recovered to pre-pandemic levels.

SVQ registrations and certifications by financial year

	2019–20	2020–21	2021–22	2022–23	2023-24
Registrations	46,273	28,237	38,585	38,945	37,409
Certifications	34,698	23,490	26,433	28,061	28,403
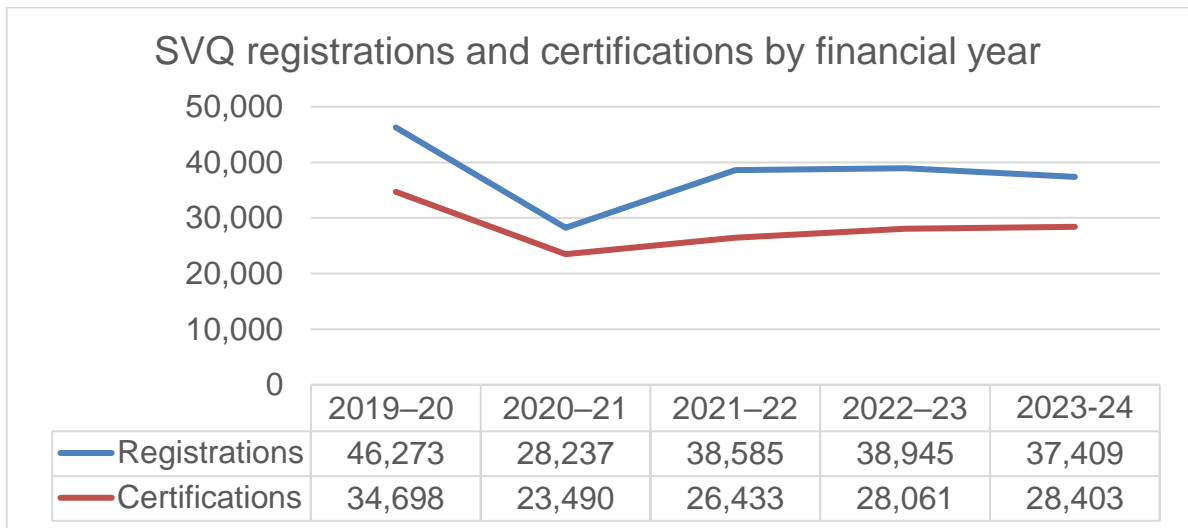
5.3.2 Non-SVQ qualifications market performance

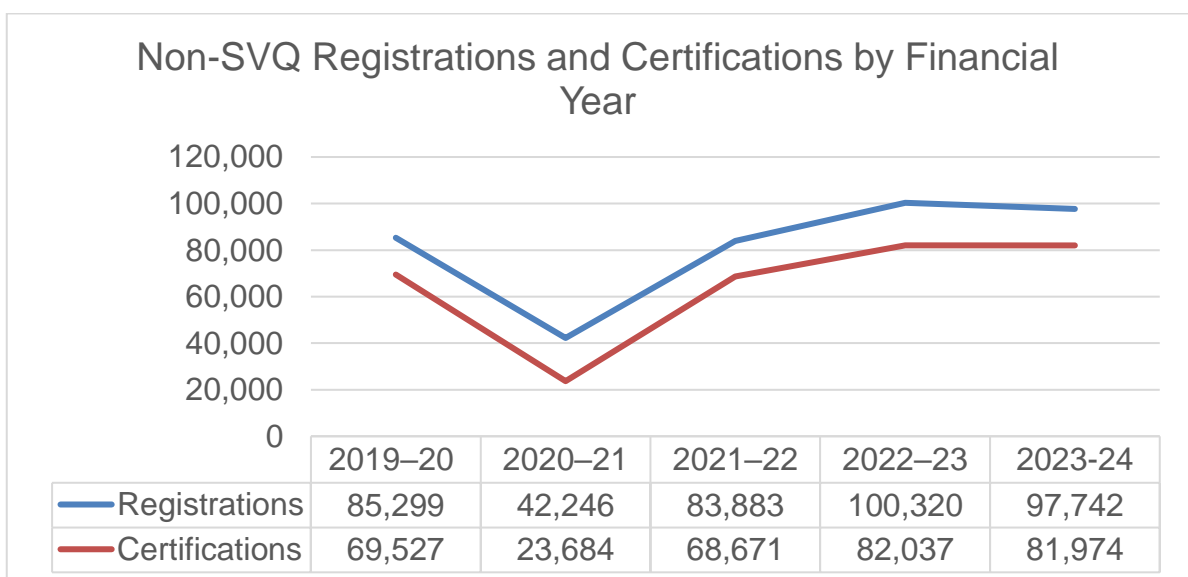Non-SVQ registrations and certifications showed small changes in comparison to 2022–23:

♦ registrations decreased by 2.57%
♦ certifications decreased by 0.08%

Non-SVQ Registrations and Certifications by Financial Year

	2019–20	2020–21	2021–22	2022–23	2023-24
Registrations	85,299	42,246	83,883	100,320	97,742
Certifications	69,527	23,684	68,671	82,037	81,974

While SVQs remain as the 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 competence-based qualifications are now included in Modern Apprenticeship Frameworks, which could go some way to explaining the growing annual uptake of these qualifications.
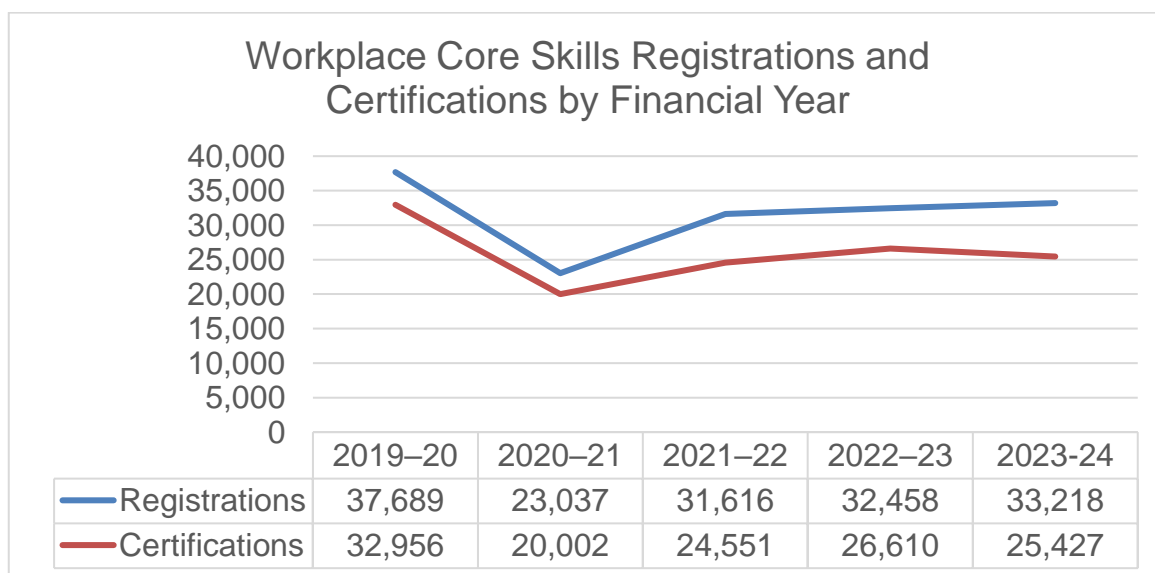
As with SVQs, there was a definitive dip in the uptake of qualifications during the pandemic, but the numbers have now fully recovered and even increased.

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 2023–24 there were 95 accredited Workplace Core Skills offered by seven awarding bodies.

Registrations for Workplace Core Skills have increased by 2.34% compared to 2022–23, and certifications have decreased by 4.45%.

Workplace Core Skills Registrations and Certifications by Financial Year

	2019–20	2020–21	2021–22	2022–23	2023-24
Registrations	37,689	23,037	31,616	32,458	33,218
Certifications	32,956	20,002	24,551	26,610	25,427

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	**45**
Awarding body audits carried out	**12**
Candidate registrations across all accredited qualifications	**135,154**
Candidate certifications across all accredited qualifications	**110,379**
New awarding bodies received approval by SQA Accreditation	**1**
Awarding bodies in total approved by SQA Accreditation	**36**

6 Our plan for 2024–25

We have developed a three-year operational plan as we prepare to transition into the new qualifications body, Qualifications Scotland. This will still be reviewed on an annual basis to determine whether new objectives need to be added or whether some have been completed and can be removed.

Our main objective for the next three years is to manage the transition of the accreditation and regulation function into Qualifications Scotland. As the Education (Scotland) Bill has now been published, we can start to think about what we need to have in place ready for the creation of the new body.

We updated our Regulatory Principles in 2021 and, in the Stakeholder Survey that took place after their publication, awarding bodies indicated that it would be useful to review the Supplementary Information section. Now that three years have passed since the publication, and almost all awarding bodies will have had at least one audit, the time is right to review the Supplementary Information. In the course of the financial year 2024–25, we be contacting to seek views on this section of the Regulatory Principles.

We will also be carrying out our three-yearly stakeholder survey. As always, we want to understand what we do well and what we could do better. This year, this information will be particularly helpful to us as we think about what improvements we can make when we transition to Qualifications Scotland.

We will be working jointly with Skills Development Scotland to pilot a new approach to developing National Occupational Standards, SVQs and Modern Apprenticeships.

Appendix 1: Approved awarding bodies

SQA Accreditation approved awarding bodies as at 31 March 2024.

Abbreviation	Awarding body
AFS	Alcohol Focus Scotland
ASQ	Associated Sports Qualifications
AAT	Association of Accounting Technicians
ACCA	Association of Chartered Certified Accountants
BIIAB	British Institute of Innkeepers Awarding Body
CIH	Chartered Institute of Housing
CMI	Chartered Management Institute
Not Applicable	City & Guilds of London Institute
Not Applicable	EduQual
Not Applicable	EMPI Awards
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 Awards Limited
Not Applicable	SafeCert Awards Limited
STA	Safety Training Awards Limited
SQA	Scottish Qualifications Authority

Abbreviation	Awarding body
Not Applicable	SFEDI Awards
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