

Scottish Quality Concerns Scheme AY 2022-23 - Summary report

December 2023

Introduction

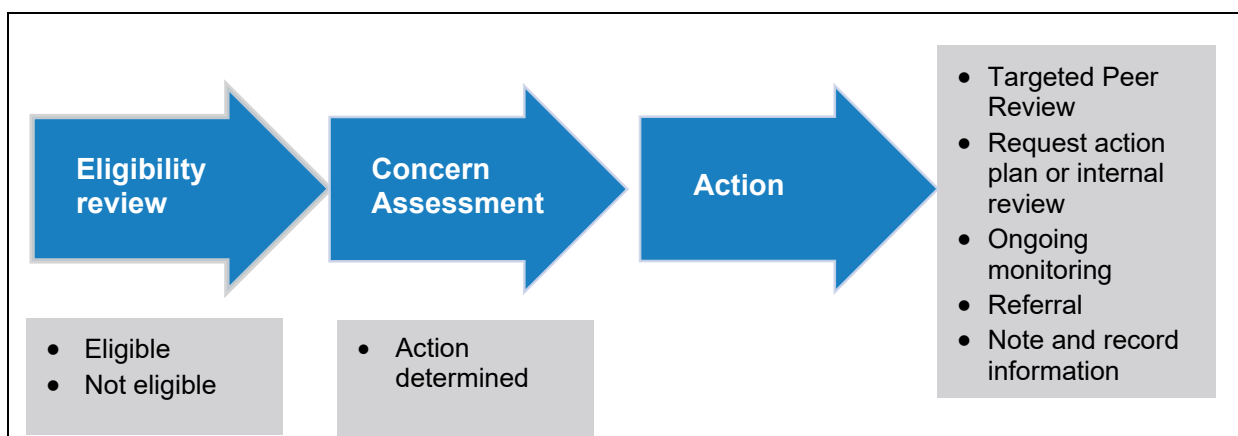
1 This is a summary report on the [Scottish Quality Concerns Scheme](#) (SQCS) in AY 2022-23 and is produced under QAA’s Outcome Agreement (OA) with the Scottish Funding Council (SFC).

2 The Scheme provides an opportunity for students, staff and other parties to raise Concerns about the quality and standards of Scottish higher education to the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). The aim of the Scheme is to support confidence in how quality and standards are managed within the Scottish higher education sector. It does this by providing an independent mechanism for assessing and responding to Concerns raised with QAA outside regular review arrangements. Concerns raised under the Scheme relate to how higher education institutions (HEIs) in Scotland manage academic standards, the quality of learning opportunities, and the information that they make available about their provision. QAA evaluates and investigates Concerns raised under the Scheme to safeguard and improve the overall quality of Scottish higher education by addressing systemic weaknesses within a particular HEI.

3 In AY 2022-23 the Scheme has continued to have ongoing impact and value, providing an effective way to do a deep dive into priority issues at the optimum time. For example, in session 2022-23 the Scheme looked in-depth at the marking and assessment boycott (MAB) response implemented by two institutions. This in-depth analysis informed a QAA report to SFC on the MAB. Where genuine Concerns about provision are identified, the Targeted Peer Review element (a rigorous investigation) provides a route to respond and address issues quickly and effectively.

The SCQS process

Figure 1: Overview of the SQCS process



4 SQCS is a three-stage process:

- Eligibility review
- Concern Assessment
- Action (which includes a Targeted Peer Review option).

5 When a Concern has been deemed eligible after initial review, it is assessed to determine the next steps. The Concern Assessment is a rigorous process in itself, involving the in-depth scrutiny of evidence provided by the party raising the Concern and response from the institution (typically with additional evidence). Following Concern Assessment, the options are:

- Note and record information
- Referral to other relevant body
- Ongoing monitoring
- Request for action plan and internal review
- Targeted Peer Review.

6 The Targeted Peer Review element is normally undertaken where there is an accumulation of evidence in respect of the matter raised and in relation to the level of risk identified to quality and standards. The process for a Targeted Peer Review includes provision of documentation, analysis of data and documentation, and a review visit including meetings with staff and students as appropriate.

SCQS applications

7 In AY 2022-23 QAA received **three** applications to the SQCS within the period 1 August 2022 to 31 July 2023. All three cases were related to the Marking and Assessment Boycott (MAB).

8 In addition, QAA was approached by a professional, regulatory and statutory body (PSRB) with a MAB-related issue, which QAA agreed to review and identify options for resolution first, with the understanding that a formal Concern could be raised if that was not successful. QAA provided an informal evaluation and finding to the institution and PSRB and agreed a way forward that mitigated the need for a formal Concern and supported positive outcomes for students. The institution is clear on expectations for future management of assessment relating to PSRB needs.

9 Reasons for rejecting applications to the Scheme are listed in Table 1. **One** of the three cases was **rejected**.

10 QAA maintains a log of all submissions to the Scheme and monitors these for trends and patterns. Where a trend or pattern is indicated, QAA evaluates the need for appropriate actions with the institution(s).

Table 1: Reason for rejecting application

Reason for rejecting a submission to the scheme	Number of cases
<i>NB: more than one reason can be cited for rejecting applications</i>	
Concern does not indicate serious systemic or procedural shortcomings	1
Concern is unrelated to standards and/or quality and/or information on HE courses	
Applicant has not taken the matter up with the subject	
Other organisations (e.g. PSRBs, OIA, courts) involved	
Concern does not indicate serious inaccurate/incomplete public information	
The concern is not about an institution we can investigate	
Concern has already been resolved	
Concern is not about an HE course	

Analysis of submissions and outcomes

11 All three cases were related to the impact of industrial action. Two cases in 2023 related to industrial action being undertaken by University College Union (UCU) members. The action started in April 2023, the marking and assessment boycott (MAB) started on 20 April 2023 and was called off on 6 September 2023, however, the wider industrial action, which includes strike action, remains ongoing. The third case related to issues around the impact of industrial action from 2017-18. These Concerns cases related to the MAB, and the PSRB matter identified above, were helpful in completing a September 2023 report for the SFC on the impact of the MAB. All three 2022-23 Concerns cases related to different higher education institutions and were submitted by varied third parties: current full-time postgraduate student; current member of academic staff; and current External Examiner. Two cases related to postgraduate courses. The case submitted by the student was about failure to provide services during industrial action in 2017-18. The other two cases were related to management of academic standards. Table 2 provides a summary of Concerns Assessment outcomes.

Table 2: Summary of Concerns Assessment outcomes

Action following Concern Assessment	Number of cases in 2022-23
Note and record information	2
Referral to other relevant body	0
Ongoing monitoring	0
Request for action plan and internal review	0
Targeted Peer Review	0

Targeted Peer Review

12 In AY 2022-23 QAA did not complete any Targeted Peer Reviews.

Developing the Scheme

13 QAA reviewed and refreshed the Scheme in 2021 to develop and clarify the Scheme's remit and process stages. This revised Scheme, the Scottish Quality Concerns Scheme, was first implemented in AY 2022-23.

14 Two points are highlighted arising from the first year of SQCS operation:

- two cases related to the MAB in AY 2022-23 and this provided a valuable opportunity to look in depth (through the Concerns Assessment stage of the process) at the response implemented by two institutions and informed reporting to the SFC on this matter at the end of August 2023
- in reviewing and reflecting on case management, the following adjustments to the reporting template will support a more systematic and consistent approach:

For form T-15 (Concern Assessment Meeting Form) Key discussion points section:

- a summary overview of the case including overall QAA view
- list each point raised in the Concern
 - list the relevant evidence
 - report the point raised by the individual submitting the Concern
 - report the corresponding institutional response (this would be extracted from the HEI response to the T-09 email where institutions are asked to provide information about institutional processes and approaches to the issue raised and any supporting evidence; and any enhancement, learning or changes in progress or proposed)
 - a summary of QAA's view on the point
- explicit coverage of the 'four factors to be taken into account from the SCQS' - which are listed just above the reporting box.

For form T-15 (Concern Assessment Meeting Form) Outcomes section:

- include a summary of the main findings from the process and make explicit reference to the three aspects that Concerns would typically relate to:
 - standards, quality, or information about HE provision
 - serious systemic or procedural shortcomings
 - serious inaccurate or incomplete information.

Published - January 2024

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Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786
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