



Ethical Standards Commissioner

SCOTTISH QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY: GOOD PRACTICE CASE STUDY

A case study illustrating the steps taken by SQA, particularly during planning and assessment, during an appointment round in 2023.



Panel Composition

Five panel members including two independent, bringing a range of different industry experiences and helpful contributions to the process.



Extended Planning Phase

Robust planning phase ensuring understanding of the change process being experienced by the body, and how to effectively communicate the requirements of the role to applicants.



Stakeholder Panel

Fully briefed and trained stakeholder panel to generate useful information for the selection panel.



Applicant Feedback

100% of previous applicants experienced something new or innovative during the process with many positive references to the stakeholder panel.

Background

This appointment round, seeking a new Chair, commenced in March 2023. The Scottish Qualifications Authority was undergoing a significant period of change during the appointment process. As a result, the round was undoubtedly influenced by the legislative and public sector reform changes that were underway, namely the Education (Scotland) Bill, published on 5 June 2024, replacing the SQA with Qualifications Scotland, part of a wide-ranging programme of reform within Scottish education.

From the SQA website: *Qualifications Scotland is being created to better align with the needs and expectations of young people, adult learners, educators, and other stakeholders. The new body aims to foster a culture that prioritises these groups in its operations and decision-making processes. The structural governance arrangements will ensure a greater emphasis on the views and needs of these stakeholders.*

It was against this backdrop that the Chair appointment round took place, and the panel worked effectively to identify, address and overcome a number of challenges during the appointment round.

I very much enjoyed the recruitment process. It was clear, detailed and also quite exciting, which is not an easy combination to achieve. I found that the areas which were explored during the process were very relevant to my experiences as Chair over the past 12 months. In particular the opportunity to explore issues with stakeholders, to think about the media / communications aspects of our work and the need to bring people along with us in the quest for positive change have been absolutely mission critical... In including stakeholders into the application process, I think that helped build a sense of ownership from those colleagues, many of whom I have engaged with since my appointment.

On how the appointment process tied up with the experience in post SQA Chair and successful applicant

Early Engagement

Early engagement is an opportunity for the panel to begin early discussions on the needs of the board, before moving into the fuller planning phase, and often involves the use of information gathered from other sources such as the Scottish Government's Public Appointments Team, the relevant government Sponsor Team and the public body itself. Early engagement is an opportunity to discuss the body's succession planning and general requirements of the upcoming round.

Although this chair appointment was set against a challenging operational landscape, as can often be typical for chair roles, some of its challenges were particularly unique to the body in question. The panel were tasked with clearly identifying the exact nature of the skills required for the role, both in terms of the legislative transfer of the chair role and in terms of the commitment required for the role.

Early Engagement cont.

More specifically, this meant an evaluation of the time commitment that would be needed during the body's period of transformation. Both the nature of skills required, and time commitment were difficult to define, and from the outset required considerable allocation of time for discussion. Early preparation and consideration of the ongoing legislative changes by the Scottish Government's Public Appointment Team and the body's Sponsor Team led to a positive and constructive early engagement meeting, whilst also ensuring that the panel understood the operational environment in which the round was taking place.

The size of the panel is also noteworthy. Typically, a selection panel will consist of two to three individuals, and often includes an independent panel member. Independent panel members can offer a constructively critical perspective to the panel's deliberations (2022 Code of Practice). For the SQA round, a total of five panel members were involved, including two independents, which allowed relevant sectoral experience to be shared during the process. The round's early activity ensured that the panel were fully informed and briefed through the whole planning phase, and that the panel were fully engaged with the ministerial requirements for the chair role.

This activity is vital to not only securing a successful outcome, but maintaining an applicant focussed approach with clarity on the ask of applicants, particularly when the appointment round is more challenging than usual.

In summary, early engagement proved to be a vital part of the process for this appointment round, and it was observed by the ESC's representative on the panel (the Public Appointments Adviser (PAA)) that the early preparation for this round was an exceptionally well executed part of the process overall – due to the clarity of all participants on the wider sectoral / political context and their own specific role and contribution to the assessment. .

Planning

The planning phase for this round lasted five months. This is longer than is typical, but in this round was of great benefit. End of round reporting suggests that the planning phase was focussed on understanding the complexities of the role, and that the panel were keen to ensure a robust and thorough planning phase to benefit everyone involved for the full duration of the appointment round. This timescale also took account of the wider environment and need for full understanding of the change process being experienced by the SQA. There was post round reflection that the time allowed for sufficient dialogue with the minister, presenting options to them and allowing the panel to consider how to effectively communicate a complex set of criteria in an accessible way for applicants. Additionally, engaging with the wider operational changes being experienced by the SQA allowed the panel to explore what potential applicants might understand of the body and space it was working in, and designing the applicant pack and person specification with this in mind. All of this activity demonstrates real engagement with the body and the role being advertised, along with ensuring there was a true applicant focus during the planning phase.

Planning cont.

The strength of the panel also contributed to the effectiveness of the round's planning phase. The panel were clearly aligned in their objective to fully consider the needs of the board, both current and future, and in ensuring that the attraction and ask of applicants was fully identified and communicated.

Outreach

The attraction and ask of applicants were carefully explored. The SQA reform process was clearly outlined in the applicant pack, which also included what the reform process would mean and its impact to the Chair holder in particular. Transparency over the time commitment is required for all roles being appointed to, although during this appointment round it was clearly communicated that, although the time requirement would increase during the body's period of transition, the time commitment would be regularly reviewed during the body's period of transition.

A detailed publicity plan was also crafted, outlining the anticipated start and completion date of planned outreach activity, specific actions to occur and who would lead on responsibilities for those actions. The plan included consideration of where the opportunity would be promoted, with early notification to key stakeholders before the opportunity went live, and then full promotion through social media and other relevant websites / networks once live.

A final push on social media occurred two weeks before the closing date. The plan also included time near the closing date to follow up with applicants who had started but not finalised / submitted an online application, with a reminder that the deadline was approaching.

Assessment Methods

A fully briefed and trained stakeholder panel was used during assessment, which involved candidates participating in a panel discussion session with educational stakeholders. The stakeholders then provided a written report back to the panel on these discussions. The panel was made up of teacher, lecturer, parent and learner representatives and their involvement was set against the criteria on stakeholder engagement / motivation. The stakeholder panel were fully briefed on their purpose and remit, and of the relevant provisions of the Code of Practice for Ministerial Appointments to Public Bodies in Scotland. They met with each candidate to explore a series of pre-prepared questions, and a summary of the evidence from candidates, and the views of the stakeholder panel, was provided to the selection panel. The aim of this part of the assessment was to provide the selection panel with supplementary evidence to consider, while actual assessment was not delegated to the stakeholders. It was reflected in end of round reporting that this panel generated useful information for consideration in addition to the evidence gathered at interview.

Assessment also included a media interview which was conducted by the Scottish Government's media team and livestreamed to the panel in another room. Candidates were prepared for this on arrival at interview, and reflections suggest that this exercise worked well and provided both the selection panel and candidates with real time insight and experience. This chosen assessment method was also purposeful, given the high-profile nature of the role.

Applicant Survey

An applicant survey was carried out approximately three months after the announcement that an appointment had been made. The applicant survey results for the round reflect a positive experience for the majority of those who responded and also had a higher-than-average response rate at 57%, which is encouraging. 100% of those also provided demographic data. 25% of respondents were women, 25% were disabled and 50% were first time applicants. We must keep in mind however that this is only a snapshot view of those who responded.

100% of those who had previously applied for a public appointment experienced something new or innovative to the process, which is encouraging to see. Of those who responded, 75% felt the applicant pack contained all the details needed to apply and 100% felt the requirements of the role were clearly outlined. In addition, 100% of respondents felt the time and effort to apply was reasonable, 75% felt the amount of information supplied was just right and 75% felt the application process was clear. 100% felt the first stage of assessment was relevant to the skills, knowledge and experience outlined in the applicant pack, and 75% felt the same for second stage of assessment. 50% of respondents requested feedback and of those, 50% felt the feedback received was constructive, tailored and meaningful. Throughout the survey there were several comments on the effectiveness of the stakeholder panel in particular.



The chance to meet the stakeholder group provided great and varied insights

Applicant Survey Respondent

Finally, all who responded felt the process was fully or partially fair and transparent, and all who responded were aware of ESC regulation, with 75% feeling that this regulation makes the process fairer and more transparent.

57%



Response rate

100%



Previous applicants who experienced something new or innovative

100%



Felt **first** stage assessment was relevant to what was outlined in the applicant pack

75%



Felt **second** stage assessment was relevant to what was outlined in the applicant pack

Success

This as a successful round with plenty of good practice demonstrated throughout. Starting with early discussions between the Scottish Government's Public Appointments Team, the body's Sponsor Team and the ESC's representative (Public Appointments Adviser), it ensured aligned thinking and understanding of the board's needs at the time, and of the upcoming legislative changes and resulting impact to the board.

Successes cont.

The planning phase was purposeful in the time it took to understand the requirements of the role and how to effectively communicate these to potential applicants.

The publicity plan was thoroughly considered, with dates aligned with key outreach activity. There was a three-stage approach to advertising, with initial promotion of the opportunity before it went live and to raise awareness; promotion while the opportunity was live through social media and other relevant websites / networks and finally a last push through these avenues and reminder notifications to those who had started but not yet submitted an application as the deadline drew near.

The assessment methods were carefully selected to ensure the chosen criteria were carefully and fully explored. The assessment methods were also creative in nature, allowing for a team of subject experts (stakeholder panel) to interact with candidates, in addition to providing candidates with an opportunity to have real time insight and experience through the media exercise. Many of those who responded to the applicant survey commented on the effectiveness of the stakeholder panel, and for respondents who have previously applied for public appointments, all of them commented on the creativity used during assessment with the stakeholder panel.

Key Learning

This round was particularly successful in identifying key challenges of appointing during a period of significant change for the body, and demonstrated effective and creative ways of approaching these challenges during all stages of the process. The panel were keenly engaged with all stages of the process, most clearly demonstrated through the early engagement and planning phase where the level of detailed discussion given to the requirements of the role, the attraction strategy and assessment methods resulted in a positive outcome for the board.

The composition of the panel is also a key area for learning for future appointment rounds, to this board and others. While panel membership will vary depending on the needs of the board and the objectives of any given appointment round, the SQA panel included two IPM's who brought different and valuable experiences, alongside the panel chair, another SG senior official and Commissioner's representative.

Outcome

The success appointment was announced on 27 November 2023:

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/public-appointment-chair-appointed-to-the-scottish-qualifications-authority-board/>

12 Months On

12 months following the appointment, the panel chair for the round was asked to complete a survey seeking views on what difference the appointment has made to the board. The ESC is particularly interested in the difference appointments make to the work of the board in relation to board behaviour, board impact and board measures development (i.e. how the board knows it is working).

The 12 month on survey helps to establish how far any key objectives of the appointment round were met (in this case, a key objective was appointing someone able to lead cultural and organisational change). The panel chair highlighted that in undertaking their new role, and given the profile of the position and operational context in which the body is working, the new chair attended an induction meeting with the appointing minister. Subsequently, regular meetings have taken place with them and the Scottish Government Director General, demonstrating the level of support the new appointee had moving into their role. Another key criteria for the successful candidate was communication skills and effective stakeholder engagement; the panel chair observes in the 12 month review form that the new chair has been able to focus on strengthening engagement between the SQA board and all SQA staff.

Given the profile and importance of the SQA Chair role, an induction meeting took place between the Cabinet Secretary and Chair and regular meetings have been held throughout the year with the Chair and Cabinet Secretary and separately between the Chair and SG Director General.

**On the activity undertaken to support the appointee into the board role
SQA Panel Chair**



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