

Higher National Certificates and Diplomas: information for higher education institutions

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1 Introduction

In 2003, SQA introduced a new set of design principles for Higher National Certificates and Diplomas. These were developed after extensive research and consultation, and are known as the '2003 design principles'. They replace a set of rules that had been established during the previous review of HN qualifications in 1988. This guide explains the changes and some of the positive effects they will have.

1.1 HN Modernisation

Using the 2003 design principles, HNCs and HNDs are now undergoing an extensive programme of modernisation. This will strengthen their vocational relevance and confirm their status as a direct articulation route into degree programmes.

For eighty years, HNCs and HNDs have supported the key occupations of managers, technicians and technologists. In Scotland, where we hold 'useful knowledge' in great esteem, it is hardly surprising that some 20% of those with Higher National Certificates and Diplomas go on to complete undergraduate degrees at university.

The revised HNCs and HNDs will continue these trends in supporting students in employment and further study. They will also:

- ◆ educate young people to have a positive mental attitude and further develop Core and other transferable skills
- ◆ harness the experience and talents of mature students
- ◆ attract students from across all the diverse communities in Scotland, and attract equal numbers of male and female students
- ◆ provide students with a flexible approach to learning, and access to part-time courses, open-learning or e-learning opportunities
- ◆ provide a system that records appreciation and accreditation of previous study or work experience

1.2 How will revised HNCs and HNDs add value?

The main features of the revised HNCs and HNDs are:

- ◆ HNCs and HNDs are firmly grounded in reality. The content and assessments of every Higher National qualification are established by extensive consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, detailed testing and refinement.
- ◆ Market research is carried out among employers, HEIs and other stakeholders to establish exactly what knowledge, skills and understanding is needed.

- ◆ National Occupational Standards (developed by UK sector skills councils) influence the content of each HNC or HND.
- ◆ The content of HNCs and HNDs has the potential to be closely matched to the syllabuses of professional qualifications.
- ◆ Every proposal for a new HNC or HND is given detailed scrutiny by a Validation Panel of stakeholders: employers, universities and colleges, professional bodies and subject specialists.
- ◆ HNCs and HNDs match the demands and level descriptors of the SCQF for the first year of higher education (HNC, level 7) and the second year (HND, level 8).
- ◆ All HNCs and HNDs include Graded Units. These assess the principal aims of the qualification and grade the candidate's achievement.
- ◆ HNCs and HNDs have a flexible structure — a mandatory section plus options — to allow candidates to take more specialist or higher level Units to satisfy the requirements of specific degree programmes or professional bodies.
- ◆ All Higher National qualifications require the effective development of the personal skills and qualities demanded by every employer or professional body.

2 What's new in HNC/Ds?

The four new features of the 2003 design principles are:

- ◆ SCQF level and credit points
- ◆ Graded Units
- ◆ mandatory section
- ◆ Core Skills

2.1 SCQF level and credit points

All Units in revised HNCs and HNDs will be allocated SCQF credit points and levels. Units will normally be at SCQF levels 7 or 8.

Each Unit has eight SCQF credit points. (This differs from the allocation of credit under the SCOTCAT system.)

All HNC Group Awards will be designed to be at SCQF level 7 and will be allocated 96 SCQF points.

All HND Group Awards will be designed to be at SCQF level 8 and will be allocated 240 SCQF points.

This means that all HNCs will be the same size, as will all HNDs.

2.2 Graded Units

All HNCs and HNDs designed according to the new principles contain one or more Graded Units. These are part of the mandatory section of the Group Award.

- ◆ HNCs have one Graded Unit worth 8 SCQF credit points at SCQF level 7
- ◆ HNDs have one Graded Unit worth 8 SCQF credit points at SCQF level 7, plus 16 SCQF points from Graded Units at SCQF level 8

The purpose of the Graded Unit is to assess the candidate's ability to integrate and apply the knowledge and skills gained while working towards the HNC or HND, and to demonstrate that he or she has achieved the principal aims of the qualification. Graded Units are project-based or examination-based.

Graded Units will be graded A, B or C, with C being competent, A highly competent, and B somewhere in between.

2.3 Mandatory section

All HNCs and HNDs will have a mandatory section of core Units (including Graded Units) that every candidate will take.

HNCs will have a mandatory section of no less than 48 SCQF credit points. Eight of these credit points must be from a Graded Unit at SCQF level 7.

HNDs will have a mandatory section of no less than 96 SCQF credit points. Sixteen of these credit points must be from Graded Units at SCQF level 8, and eight from a Graded Unit at SCQF level 7.

The title allocated to a Group Award cannot be used for Group Awards that have a different mandatory section. (For example, the HNC Horticulture will have a specified mandatory section, and no other Group Award with a different mandatory section can be validated using that title.)

2.4 Core Skills

All HNCs and HNDs will provide opportunities for candidates to further develop the five Core Skills of Communication, Numeracy, Information Technology, Problem Solving and Working with Others to a specified level. The level of Core Skill development will be established through market research.

3 Progression pathways and articulation with degree programmes

3.1 How the design of HNC and HNDs will aid articulation

The mandatory/optional structure of revised HNCs and HNDs allows students to choose the options that will best suit the progression pathways they wish to follow. Guidance on progression pathways is now **required** as a condition of validation of any new HNC or HND. This includes information about articulation with degree programmes, and any specified Units at particular levels required for progression.

Students on HNC programmes who wish to progress to further study, such as the second year of a degree programme or an HND, could be given the opportunity to undertake more than the 96 SCQF credit points required for the HNC Group Award.

Similarly, students on HND programmes who wish to progress to further study, such as the third year of a degree programme, could be given the opportunity to undertake those optional Units that have been specifically designed for that progression.

The additional credits can be gained from subject-specific Units or from (for example) the new *Personal Development Planning* Unit or *Work Role Effectiveness* Units. The *Personal Development Planning* Unit is worth 8 SCQF points at level SCQF 7 and enables students to use personal development planning to assess their existing abilities and make post-HN plans (including transition to degree study). The *Work Role Effectiveness* Units are worth 24 SCQF points at SCQF level 7 or level 8, and allow students who are employed to gain credit for existing skills that are closely aligned to occupational standards.

3.2 Other measures to support progression and articulation

Students should be given information on any articulation requirements at the start of their HNC or HND study programme. This will allow them to make appropriate choices.

The Scottish Qualification Certificate (SQA's cumulative record of the qualifications a person has achieved) will detail the Units achieved, together with their SCQF credit points and level. This should help HEIs to map a student's

Higher National qualifications to those required for articulation with a degree study programme.

Other measures involve action by centres, HEIs, SQA and agents such as the Regional Forums, and include:

- ◆ additional HN credits offered by colleges
- ◆ bridging arrangements between colleges and HEIs
- ◆ national initiatives such as those provided by the Mapping, Tracking and Bridging project (MTB)
- ◆ regional initiatives such as those offered by the Regional Forums
- ◆ summer schools or programmes offered by individual HEIs

3.3 Added value and worth of applicants with an HNC or HND

A fifth of those who achieve Higher National qualifications move on to university courses. The 2003 design principles strengthen the ‘added value’ of applicants with an HNC or HND for admission to degree courses. For example, the new format facilitates holistic assessment and the range of assessment methods, including examination-based assessments, enable students to demonstrate higher-level skills and synthesis of knowledge.

Research carried out by SQA in 2003 with Admission Tutors found that applicants with an HNC/D were of good quality and that their maturity, high levels of motivation, and richness of life and work experience were a distinct advantage to HEIs and other students on the course. The new-style HNCs and HNDs will strengthen and enhance these qualities, and this makes it worthwhile to consider each applicant on their merits as well as on their academic record.

4 Transition period for HNC/Ds

The modernisation of all HNC/Ds began in 2003 and will be completed by the end of 2008. This means there will be a period when old and new-style HN qualifications will run concurrently, so please be aware of the following facts:

- ◆ Higher National Certificates and Diplomas designed under the 1988 rules will remain valid for many years to come, and will be found on the Scottish Qualification Certificate with Merit Statements. These qualifications do not include Graded Units, and Units within these awards will not normally have SCQF levels.
- ◆ During the development phase of the 2003 design principles, pilot projects were run in Social Sciences, Communications and Computing using ‘integrative assessments’ (graded A, B or C) instead of Graded Units. The pilot HNCs had two integrative assessments, and the HNDs had four.
- ◆ The majority of HN Units within Group Awards are being revised and rewritten. This means they will be levelled and will not contain Merit Statements. However, there are a small number of Units that have been levelled but have not been rewritten, and therefore will still contain Merit Statements. These will be rewritten in due course and the Merit Statement removed.
- ◆ Under the 2003 design principles, the Graded Units replace the use of merits in HNCs and HNDs. However, in a few cases some qualifications may also still contain Units that have a Merit Statement (see previous bullet point). In time, these Units will be replaced with those that do not contain Merit Statements.

Students may therefore present with qualifications gained under the 1988, pilot, or 2003 designs. Some 2003 HNC/Ds may also contain one or two subject Units that still contain Merit Statements.

5 Frequently asked questions

Why have HNCs and HNDs changed?

In 2003, SQA introduced new design principles following an extensive review of Higher National qualifications. The reasons for the review were to:

- ◆ uphold SQA's commitment to provide qualifications fit for purpose
- ◆ ensure that Higher National qualifications meet the changing needs of students, centres, employers and the economy in the twenty-first century
- ◆ maintain the high uptake of Higher National qualifications in Scotland
- ◆ ensure that Higher National qualifications reflect the changes resulting from major reviews of National Qualifications and Scottish Vocational Qualifications
- ◆ ensure good progression pathways exist between HNCs and HNDs, National Qualifications, SVQs, degrees and employment opportunities

How were the new design principles established?

In three main ways:

- ◆ through extensive consultation by questionnaire with centres, HEIs, employers and other stakeholders
- ◆ by using a number of focus groups to tease out issues and make recommendations
- ◆ by applying the lessons learned from three pilot projects to test the emerging design principles

Have methods of assessment changed?

The new format for Units, and the introduction of Graded Units, facilitate holistic assessment using a range of methods — including examinations. This enables students to demonstrate the attainment of higher-level skills and their ability to synthesise knowledge.

What changes have been made to credit values for HNCs?

Under the 1988 design rules, the credit value of HNCs was a minimum of 12 HN credits, with a small percentage being more than 12 (15 HN credits in some cases). In this sense, there is no change in the minimum number of HN credits

required by the 2003 design principles. The current design principles confirm the credit value of an HNC as 12 credits (96 SCQF credit points).

HNCs developed under the 1988 design rules were allocated SCOTCAT points and, irrespective of the number of HN credits in the Group Award, all HNCs were allocated 120 SCOTCAT points. The 120 SCOTCAT points comprised 96 points for assessed learning and 24 points for work experience within the HNC.

Credit value is now expressed as SCQF points rather than as SCOTCAT points, and SCQF points can only be given for learning that can be quality assured, in this case learning that has been assessed.

One HN credit is equivalent to eight SCQF credits, making an HNC worth 96 SCQF credit points.

Although the SCQF credit rating differs from the SCOTCAT value, neither the content nor the quality of students' work has changed.

What are the new features of an HNC?

The new features are:

- ◆ a minimum mandatory section of at least 48 SCQF credit points
- ◆ the mandatory section must include one Graded Unit of eight SCQF credit points at SCQF level 7
- ◆ Graded Units (replacing Merit Statements)
- ◆ the remaining credits can be achieved from the optional Units
- ◆ HNCs should incorporate at least 48 SCQF credit points at SCQF level 7

What changes have been made to credit values for HNDs?

Under the 1988 design rules, the credit value of HNDs was a minimum of 30 HN credits, with a small percentage being more than 30 (31.5 HN credits in some cases). The 2003 design principles confirm the credit value of an HND as 30 credits.

- ◆ HNDs developed under the 1988 design rules were allocated 240 SCOTCAT points
- ◆ HNDs developed under the 2003 design principles have 30 HN credits, each worth eight SCQF credit points, making a total of 240 SCQF credit points

What are the new features of an HND?

The new features are:

- ◆ a minimum mandatory section of at least 96 SCQF credit points
- ◆ the mandatory section must include 16 SCQF credit points from Graded Units at SCQF level 8 and one Graded Unit of eight SCQF credit points at SCQF level 7
- ◆ Graded Units (replacing Merit Statements).
- ◆ the remaining credits can be achieved from the optional Units

HNDs should incorporate at least 64 SCQF credit points at SCQF level 8.

6 Links to further information

Scottish Qualifications Authority

www.sqa.org.uk

The Scottish Qualifications Authority website has details of developments in HN qualifications, the new design principles for HNCs and HNDs, descriptors of HN programmes and HN Arrangement documents and frameworks. The publications list contains useful follow-up documents.

How to access HN Arrangement documents and frameworks on the SQA website:

- ◆ go to www.sqa.org.uk
- ◆ click on HN icon on right-hand side
- ◆ use menu on left hand side and select ‘Lecturer’ from ‘Who are you?’ and the relevant subject from ‘Subjects’. There is useful information on contacts, Arrangement documents and frameworks. (Use Engineering — it’s a good example)

Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework

www.scqf.org.uk

The SCQF website has details of current development work, and electronic copies of SCQF publications. It also contains sections of the *SCQF Handbook*, including guidelines on credit rating and on credit transfer.

Scottish Advisory Committee on Credit and Access

www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/sacca.asp

The Scottish Advisory Committee on Credit and Access (SACCA) is a joint committee of QAA Scotland and Universities Scotland. SACCA advises on the SCQF and supports universities and colleges in their work on credit and access.

SACCA has oversight of the work on links between FE and HEIs, and the publication *Facilitating credit-based links in higher education: Guidelines to support colleges and higher education institutions* is available in an electronic version at www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/scottishadvisory/credit-based.asp.

Mapping, Tracking and Bridging Project

www.scqf.org.uk/college2uni

This web address gives access to the national website for Mapping, Tracking and Bridging (MTB) Project, with information on progression from HN qualifications to degrees.

Information is also available on the **Audit Toolkits** — one for institutions and another for learners.