

Consultation on new design principles for HNCs and HNDs: report to stakeholders

March 2003
Publication code: CE1846
ISBN: 1 85969 452 7

Published by the Scottish Qualifications Authority
Hanover House, 24 Douglas Street, Glasgow, G2 7NQ, and Ironmills Road, Dalkeith,
Midlothian, EH22 1LE

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Introduction

Background

The current design rules for HNs were agreed in 1988. Qualifications Committee agreed new design rules in October 1998 and approved three pilot developments in *Computing*, *Communication* and *Social Sciences*. These commenced in 1999. The use of the new design rules in these pilots was to be evaluated before they were finalised. The Scottish Agricultural College organised a national consortium to produce a framework for HNs in Horticulture and joined the Phase 1 pilots, as did Glasgow College of Nautical Studies with a plan to revise HNC/D Nautical Studies according to the new design rules. In 2001, a further 14 consortia who wanted early access to the new design rules, were designated Phase 2 Pilots.

Following five successful validations in the Spring of 2001, an evaluation was carried out by an independent researcher. The evaluation involved a questionnaire to all Phase 1 and Phase 2 pilot consortia, and structured interviews with key participants, SQA staff and focus groups on the emerging issues (namely SCQF levels, Core Skills and Integrative Assessments). In response to this, SQA produced a consultation document in August 2002.

One hundred and twenty eight responses were received, representing over 21% returns — an excellent response. Over 95% of HN approved centres made detailed corporate responses, as did most of the major representative agencies.

It was clear that a great deal of care and thought had gone in to these responses. The detailed comments will not only inform the nature of the new design principles but will also determine future work for SQA in providing guidance and staff development and in scheduling and managing HN development projects.

A statistical analysis of the responses was conducted. This included an analysis by category of respondents. HN Approved centres formed the largest percentage of respondents.

About this report

The report lists each question asked in the *Consultative Questionnaire*, together with a rationale for the pilot rule that question covers. It then gives summary statistical responses for that question and an outline of the issues raised in comment.

The final version of the design principle is then presented. The use of the term ‘design principles’ is meant to emphasise the flexibility and scope for interpretation in each rule.

Appendix 1 lists the respondents to the questionnaire.

Appendix 2 gives a summary of the proposed final design principles, together with further considerations for HN designers

We have tried to use SCQF terminology throughout (including SCOTCAT points) in preference to HN credit terms.

1 Design Rule 1: Credit value

Rationale

These pilot rules for credit values of HNCs and HNDs were introduced to ensure:

- ◆ that all HNCs were of the same challenge to candidates, as were all HNDs
- ◆ that all HNCs attracted the same SCOTCAT points, as did all HNDs
- ◆ all HNs could be managed and funded on the same basis

1.1a Credit value of HNDs: responses

Question 1.1 Do you support the proposal that HNDs consist of 30 credits (including the Integrative Assessments)

Yes	No	No answer
111 (86.7%)	5 (3.9%)	12 (9.4%)

Comments

There was overwhelming support for this proposal.

1.1b Final design principle

HNDs will be designed to be at SCQF level 8 and shall comprise 240 SCOTCAT credit points

1.2a Credit value of HNCs: responses

Question 1.2(a) Do you support the proposal that HNCs consist of 15 credits (including the Integrative Assessments)?

Yes	No	No answer
62 (48.4%)	32 (25%)	34 (26%)

Comments

There was also considerable support for this proposal, largely based on its simplicity and the ease of transition to an HND it would provide. Several centres reported that they

have been able to support part-time and day-release candidates through 15-credit HNC (or equivalent), and looked forward to exploiting credits for work experience or previous learning to enhance this provision. Additionally, current SCQF publications state that HNCs are composed of 120 SCOTCAT points (equalling 15 HN credits).

There was, though, considerable opposition (particularly from HN approved centres) to the barriers the additional three credits would put in the way of part-time and day-release candidates. Up to 25% more resources might need to be provided by centres. Given that the 12-credit HNC is currently well supported by candidates and employers, those centres with a high proportion of part-time students did not welcome the imposition of additional time and expense. Although those opposing were fewer than those supporting the 15-credit HNC, they saw the additional burdens as a significant threat to their market.

Many respondents suggested that full-time students or others who needed 15 credits for progression to an HND or degree could take three HN credits in addition to the 12-credit HNC. Some respondents suggested further that Integrative Assessments need not always form part of a 12 credit HNC. (This would be a major policy departure).

Question 1.2(b) Do you support the proposal that HNCs consist of 15 credits (including Integrative Assessments), except where a market case is made for a 12-credit HNC (including Integrative Assessments) for predominantly part-time or day release candidates?

YES	NO	No answer
34 (26.6%)	53 (41.4%)	41 (32%)

Comments

Many welcomed the possibility of flexibility in this rule, but many more felt that it would cause confusion to have varying credits in the HNC. The fear of a two-tier set of HNCs, with the perception of part-time HNCs as being inferior, was widely expressed

1.2b Final design principle

HNCs shall be designed to be at SCQF level 7 and shall comprise 96 SCOTCAT credit points.

This recognises the reality of the difficulties the pilot design rule posed for part-time and day-release candidates, given that practical arrangements are available for full time candidates who wish to prepare for progression to HNDs.

Please note that we have expressed this rule in terms of SCQF levels and SCOTCAT points. Strictly speaking, the consultation questions related to 12 and 15 credit HNCs, so we have made assumptions about their SCQF equivalents.

2 Design Rule 2: Integrative Assessments

Rationale

This pilot rule was introduced to:

- ◆ replace Unit-by-Unit ‘merit’ passes as a means of grading candidate achievement
- ◆ assess that candidates have met the aims of the HN group award
- ◆ make Integrative Assessments the focus of ‘group award’ external moderation of HNCs and HNDs (to replace Unit moderation by ‘moderation group’)
- ◆ reduce the external moderation of Units — relying on internal moderation would help discourage bureaucratic approaches to moderation and so encourage fewer, more holistic assessments
- ◆ align the grading (A, B and C) with methods used in other graded qualifications

2a Responses

Question 2

Do you support the proposal to confirm the rule that all HNCs should include two credits of Integrative Assessments at level 7 and all HNDs should include two further credits at SCQF level 8, with the clarification that Integrative Assessments will be of a minimum of one and a maximum of two credits?

YES	NO	No answer
85 (66.4%)	27 (21.1%)	16 (12.5%)

Comments

There was widespread support (even among ‘No’ voters) for the introduction of Integrative Assessments, provided that a degree of flexibility was introduced (this related mostly to the possible 12-credit HNC — including two Integrative Assessment credits within this could threaten the vocational ‘fitness for purpose’ of some HNCs). Similarly, there was a fear that some forms of project Integrative Assessments might not be easily achievable by part-time candidates who were not in related employment. Examination-type Integrative Assessments would not usually be appropriate to highly skills-based HNCs. Flexibility was needed for course design teams to meet candidate and employer needs. Individual centres running nationally devised HNs also needed some flexibility to propose alternatives to Integrative Assessments in national frameworks. Market research among employers, and validation, could be used to ensure that the ‘flexibility’ would not be bought at the expense of confusion among users.

It may be difficult to organise Integrative Assessment on an Open Learning basis.

It has been suggested that the term ‘Integrative Assessment’ is unhelpful, or even confusing. To highlight their origins in existing project Units which can be graded, it is suggested that they be re-named ‘Graded Units’

2b

Final design principles

HNCs should normally include one Graded Unit of 8 SCOTCAT credit points at SCQF level 7.

HNDs should normally include one Graded Unit of 8 SCOTCAT credit points at SCQF level 7 plus 16 SCOTCAT credit points of Graded Unit(s) at SCQF level 8.

The purposes of Graded Units will be to assess the candidate's ability to integrate and apply the knowledge and/or skills gained in the individual Units to demonstrate that they have achieved the principal aims of the group award, and to grade candidate achievement.

As the credit value of an HNC has been reduced from 120 to 96 SCOTCAT points, its principal aims could be adequately assessed in one Integrative Assessment of 8 SCOTCAT points. In addition, Integrative Assessments could be made more flexible.

The simplicity of grading current successful project Units seems to have been somewhat obscured by some SQA technical jargon. It has been suggested that the term 'Integrative Assessment' may be partly to blame for this. We need to balance the advantages of adopting a simpler title (for example 'group award Graded Unit') with the disadvantages of changing a term that is coming to be used widely. We think 'group award Graded Unit' will be more easily understood by stakeholders.

These design principles may be subject to modification by SQA for a particular HN if market research among employers and candidates suggest a need for it.

3 Design Rule 3: Mandatory Section

Rationale

This pilot rule was introduced to:

- ◆ confirm existing good practice
- ◆ ensure that all holders of an HN met the aims of the group award
- ◆ assure users that all holders of an HN had a common set of achievements
- ◆ discourage the proliferation of slightly different HN titles (using options to accommodate differences)

3a Responses

Question 3 Do you support retaining this rule as it stands, with the clarification that the mandatory section can contain alternatives?

YES	NO	No answer
104 (81.3%)	3 (2.3%)	10 (7.8%)

Comments

The principle of the proposal was widely supported, though not always as it stands — many of those answering ‘No’ wished a larger mandatory section; others wished not to include Integrative Assessments in the mandatory section. The flexibility for course teams to exceed this was welcomed, with the caveat that mandatory sections should not become too constricting. On the other hand, the six credit mandatory section might be too large for a 12 credit HNC. Reservations related to the inclusion of Integrative Assessments in the mandatory section. There may be a need to accommodate ‘pick and mix’ HNs achieved in small centres where there were not enough candidates for one specialism in a multi-disciplinary area. There was also a proposal for a ‘general HN’ (based on credit accumulation, similar to an Ordinary Degree) — this would not require a mandatory section.

3b Final design principles

HNCs should normally include a mandatory section of at least 48 SCOTCAT credits points including a Graded Unit.

HNDs should normally include a mandatory section of at least 96 SCOTCAT points including Graded Units.

4 Design Rule 4: Position in the SCQF

Rationale

These pilot design rules were introduced:

- ◆ to confirm and strengthen the position of HNs as HE awards
- ◆ because SQA and the universities in Scotland have agreed to allocate all their qualifications to appropriate levels in the SCQF
- ◆ because the SCQF is becoming more and more central to national developments

4a Responses

Question 4.1 Do you support the proposal to allocate all Units, Integrative Assessments, and group awards, including HNCs and HNDs to an SCQF level?

YES	NO	No answer
115 (89.8%)	3 (2.3%)	10 (7.8%)

Comments

This was widely supported as providing clear reference points for candidates, employers and universities. Though the newness of SCQF terminology and processes was noted, SQA was urged to adopt the terminology when referring to the level and credit value of qualifications in preference to continuing with HN/SQA terms.

There was some concern that current SCQF level descriptors were easier to use for cognitive abilities than for occupational competence. There might therefore be a danger of introducing new barriers to achievement in HN Unit descriptors written with the level descriptors too firmly in mind. Rather HN Unit specifications should be written to meet employer needs and candidate aspirations. In this regard National Occupational Standards and SVQs might be the preferred reference points in most cases. Collaboration with Sector Skills Councils in allocating SCQF levels and SCOTCAT points would help balance forces in the direction of academic drift.

Question 4.2 **Do you support the proposal that all HNCs be designed to be allocated to SCQF level 7 and all HNDs to SCQF level 8?**

YES	NO	No answer
103 (80.5%)	12 (9.4%)	13 (10.2%)

Comments

This was widely supported. Most comment was targeted at the processes and rules for ensuring HNCs were properly designed as level 7 qualifications and HNDs as level 8 qualifications. Again, fitness for purpose as vocational qualifications should be the dominant consideration.

Question 4.3 **Do you support the proposal to adapt SCQF rules for the allocating of SCOTCAT points to group awards, including HNCs and HNDs?**

YES	NO	No answer
106 (82.8%)	6 (4.7%)	16 (12.5%)

Comments

This was widely supported in principle, though how this had been done in practice caused some concern. Several respondents pointed out that there were no finalised SCQF rules, merely illustrations and examples.

A numerical formula indicating how many credits at level 7 should be included in an HNC and how many at level 8 in an HND would be useful. There was some suggestion that the current proposals for HNCs could be too constricting and would become more so for 12-credit HNCs. There would not be enough room for broadening. This becomes more pressing in the HND where practical areas often mean that the second year has some broadening as well as progression. It was felt that at least the majority of credits should be at the level of the award. For an HND this would mean the majority of the Units in the final year. Some people felt that requiring 90 SCOTCAT points at level 8 for HNDs might be too determined by considerations of progression to degrees.

On the other hand, despite the difficulties, the principle of a minimum of 90 SCOTCAT points at the level of the group award was very well supported in the pilot evaluation, so room needs to be found for programmes containing a higher number of level 7 units (for HNCs) and level 8 units (for HNDs). Candidates who wish to progress to universities or professional bodies could choose the appropriate number of level 7 or 8 Units from options. HNs which were specifically developed for progression to professional body qualifications or degrees could be designed to have about 90 SCOTCAT points at the level of the award.

There was some demand that the process of allocating group awards to levels should not be tied to numerical formulas.

On balance, the most acceptable way forward might be to require at least a majority of Units to be at the level of the award for HNC (or of the final year, in the case of HNDs), with the option to go beyond that minimum for those students who wish to progress in HE.

Question 4.4 **Do you agree that the minimum level for an HN Unit be SCQF level 5?**

YES	NO	No answer
88 (68.8%)	25 (19.5%)	15 (11.7%)

Comments

There was a great deal of support for this. Many comments, which suggested that level 5 was too low, nonetheless acknowledged the need for ‘beginners Units’, at similar levels, for HNs in areas likely to be unfamiliar to a significant number of candidates. Examples were modern languages, accounting, and information technology. Others felt that, given rules for the minimum number of Units at the level of the award, the ‘fitness for purpose’ of lower level Units could be safely left to validation.

4b **Final design principles: position in the SCQF**

HNCs should incorporate at least 48 SCOTCAT credit points at SCQF level 7.

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

The minimum number of level 7 credits in HNCs needs to be adjusted to accommodate the lowering of SCQF credit values required, but otherwise these rules have been confirmed. In view of the safeguards in other rules and validation, no minimum level for an HN Unit needs be set.

See Design rule 1 for two design principles related to credit values in the SCQF.

5 Design Rule 5: Core Skills

Rationale

This pilot design rule was introduced for the following reasons:

- ◆ The original consultation for this Review indicated a high demand across employers, colleges and HE for Core Skills to be a part of every HNC and HND.
- ◆ There is a similar high level of demand for Core Skills in other SQA qualification blocks (National Qualifications and SVQs), in other SCQF qualifications and in other parts of the UK (though other terminology is used).
- ◆ Centres may be accountable (to funding and other agencies) for Core Skills achievement. Centres' corporate responsibilities for encouraging Core Skills achievement can be more easily discharged and accounted for if Core Skills are incorporated at the design stage in qualifications such as HNC/Ds.

5a Responses

Question 5.1 Do you agree that the five Core Skills should be incorporated (at levels determined by the users of the HN) in every HNC and HND?

YES	NO	No answer
74 (57.8%)	42 (32.8%)	12 (9.4%)

Comments

There is considerable support for this, but with reservations among HN approved centres.

The importance of Core Skills was widely acknowledged, and there was widespread support in principle for incorporating them in all HNs.

'Employability' and 'learner autonomy' were also considered to be important considerations, as was comparability with other similar frameworks — particularly the 'Key Skills' of QCA and 'Transferable Skills' of QAA.

There was some scepticism that the SQA Core Skills framework properly matched the needs of employment, and some balancing scepticism that Core Skills were widely understood and demanded by employers and universities (though this probably refers more to the specific certification of SQA Core Skills than to the broader notion of 'soft skills' they undoubtedly demand). Some suggested that HN programme designers should be able to assume that Core Skills have been achieved by school leavers.

Question 5.2 Do you agree that, while opportunities for teaching and learning of all five Core Skills should be identified and signposted in every HN programme, formal certification should not be a requirement?

YES	NO	No answer
84 (65.6%)	31 (24.2%)	13 (10.2%)

Comments

The difficulties experienced by HN programme design teams in trying to incorporate aspects of the SQA Core Skills framework in Unit specifications or group award frameworks were widely acknowledged.

Some suggested that not all five Core Skills were required in every occupation, so design teams should be able to make a case at validation that the HN did not need a particular Core Skill. Others wondered what these occupations could possibly be, but agreed that some Core Skills could be assumed or be a requirement for entry.

The flexibility allowed by the ‘signposting’ approach was welcomed in many quarters, as was the opportunity for certification if wanted. In others it was felt that not requiring certification devalued Core Skills and this would lead to them being ignored. For many this was an unacceptable scenario.

5b Final design principles

HNC and HND programmes shall incorporate opportunities for candidates to develop Core Skills.

****HNCs and HNDs should clearly include opportunities for candidates to develop Core Skills to levels required by the occupations or progression pathways the HNs support. This would normally mean all five Core Skills should be developed in every HN programme.***

*If market research among employers suggests that an occupation does not demand a particular Core Skill at any level, or is demanded at an appropriate level of all candidates at entry to the HN programme, the design principle to incorporate all five Core Skills may possibly be amended in negotiation with SQA.

6

Design Rule 6: Use of the revised HN Unit specification

Rationale

Using the new HN Unit specification is an operational procedure and is required for validation. It was introduced in the pilots for the following reasons:

- ◆ The use of Performance Criteria has been found to be perfectly acceptable for specifying standards in practical performances, but less effective in other areas, especially knowledge and understanding.
- ◆ Their use may have encouraged fragmentation, and either reduced the knowledge and understanding required or increased the assessment load.
- ◆ The format of the HN Unit specifications has been revised to encourage a more holistic approach to assessment. The new HN Unit specification places the emphasis on assessing whole Outcomes or a combination of Outcomes rather than on Performance Criteria.
- ◆ It is hoped that this will reduce the assessment loading on both candidates and assessors, and help to improve credit transfer between HNC/D and degree programmes.
- ◆ With Integrative Assessments being used for grading, merit statements are no longer required.
- ◆ Information on SCQF levels and SCOTCAT points will have to be added to the specification.

6a

Responses

Question 6.1

Do you support the proposal to make the design rule that the HN programme designers should use the latest version of the HN Unit specification template and the Integrative Assessment template?

YES	NO	No answer
107 (83.6%)	6 (4.7%)	15 (11.7%)

Comments

This was widely supported, though many pointed out that several versions of HN Unit specification templates are always in use at any one time.

The new Unit specification was widely welcomed. Some commented that while a 'performance criteria' approach was not often suitable for knowledge based Units, they often served practical subjects very well. They hope that 'fitness for purpose' considerations and some flexibility would allow this approach to be incorporated in the new Unit specification.

There was a perception that the move towards 'holistic' assessment was, though very welcome, a new departure that would need significant staff development — particularly with regard to 'sampling'. There may even be some cause for confusion (especially in moderation) as the new and old Unit specifications continue side by side for some years.

The requirement that the latest version of the Unit and Integrative Assessment specification be used in developments would need to be applied with some common sense and flexibility.

Question 6.2 **Do you support the proposal to advise HN Unit designers the assessment takes up no more than 5% of the notional time of the Unit?**

YES	NO	No answer
80 (62.5%)	33 (25.8%)	15 (11.7%)

Comments

There was a lot of support for this, but also a lot of reservations on practical issues.

The intention — to reduce assessment — was welcomed. Enshrining it as a rule was more problematic especially in those Units which involved projects (that is, in Unit assessments, not to be confused with Integrative Assessments) or investigations, or continuous assessment (especially in practical subjects) or where the assessment strategy combined formative and summative approaches. There was a fear that a 5% maximum rule would drive these well-tested HN approaches out in favour of end-of-Unit examinations. Many felt that devoting only two hours was just not feasible, or even ‘ludicrous’. Some suggested a 5% – 10% maximum rule, others suggested a 5% minimum rule. Others questioned whether the 5% referred to the SQA HN credit (ie two hours) or the SCQF credit points (implying four hours assessment per SQA HN credit). Most suggested the assessment should be determined by the learning to be measured, without reference to artificial rules.

6b **Final design principles**

Given the support indicated, it will continue to be a requirement for HN designers to use the Unit specification (and other) templates. It would not, though, be appropriate to incorporate it in the final design principles.

Similarly, the suggestion to Unit designers that no more than 5% of time should be taken up by assessment was not meant to be a rule. In view of the amendments and reservations expressed, it is not proposed to make any general proposition on this. Rather, we will suggest to course designers that they produce an assessment strategy which will reassure themselves that the weight of assessment in and HN programme overall is not burdensome to candidates or staff.

7 Design Rule 7: Unit validation

Rationale

This was a general operational issue rather than a design rule, but it was introduced because:

- ◆ HN Unit specifications had to include SCQF levels and SCOTCAT points. National consistency in these matters would need to be maintained. Until centres are familiar with the process, it should not be devolved.
- ◆ There might be some scope for rationalising the number and diversity of HN Units.

7a Responses

Question 7

Do you agree that, for the medium term, SQA should validate all HN Unit specifications, allocating SCQF levels and SCOTCAT points?

YES	NO	No answer
108 (84.4%)	5 (3.9%)	15 (11.7%)

Comments

This was widely supported with (compared to responses to the other questions) relatively little comment. Such comment as there was underlined that this should be for the medium term only until knowledge of the SCQF and its procedures is more widely shared, when the process can once again be devolved to centres with quality contracts.

Meanwhile, the validation procedures should be done in partnership with colleges (particularly for college devised Units) and within a timeframe that allowed them to respond to local need. Good and early communication between centres and SQA on development plans would be necessary for this. The opportunity should be taken to try to reduce the complexity of the catalogue and rationalise the range of HN Units available.

7b Final design principle

Given the support shown in the consultation, SQA will validate all new or revised HN Unit specifications in the medium term. Once processes of allocating SCQF levels and SCOTCAT points are more widely understood, validation of Units will be returned to centres with the appropriate quality contract with SQA.

Centres may continue to develop HN Unit specifications for validation by SQA, but the timescales for this need to be negotiated prior to starting development.

Some respondents suggested that SQA validate all Integrative Assessment specifications as well as Unit specifications. However, as Integrative Assessments address the principle aims of a group award, and as these may be validated by centres, it would not be appropriate for SQA to validate the Integrative Assessments. We shall, though, produce extensive guidance on this matter.

8 Further comment

Many respondents took the opportunity to give further comment or to incorporate responses within a wider context.

There was a restatement that the underlying principles should be ‘fitness for purpose’ and ‘flexibility’.

There was a need for good communication and an effective partnership between SQA and colleges in the review and revision period.

Good communications with other stakeholders, particularly employers, professional bodies and universities would be needed.

Staff development, guidance, support and exemplar materials would be needed from SQA.

Resources would be needed to allow colleges to play their part in developments and to implement revised HNs (particularly with regard to Integrative Assessments). Comparisons were made with the level of resources available to the Higher Still Development Project.

The participation of employers, employers organisations, professional bodies and universities in development projects would be imperative.

There was a need to align developments with those in other parts of the UK — especially with Sector Skills Councils, QCA and QAA. Core Skills and Modern Apprenticeships might be important areas here.

The transition process would involve old and new Units running in parallel with moderation issues. This would need to be managed carefully.

Transition timescales would need to be agreed with HN approved centres.

There may need to be special information for university admissions tutors.

Data staff and MIS providers would need to be properly briefed.

Flexibility for HN designers

There was very little outright opposition to any of the proposed design rules. Those who voted ‘No’ in many of the responses did so sometimes because they wished some detail of the rule adjusted — often in the light of suggested adjustments to other design rules, particularly a possible 12 credit HNC. More often there was a desire to have some flexibility to be built in to make sure that the ‘fitness for purpose’ of any possible HN would not be artificially constrained by rigidly enforced ‘rules’. Those who had voted ‘Yes’ often made very similar comments.

On the other hand there was a desire for simplicity and coherence in the HNs, both to avoid confusion in the market place among candidates and employers and to prevent some HNs being perceived to be ‘better’ than others.

Certain principles seem (from the consultation) to require some flexibility — namely, Core Skills and Integrative Assessments. Flexibility would be required when market research among employers and candidates suggest the rule is artificially constraining the ‘fitness for purpose’ (as indicated by the principal aims) of the HN.

These circumstances could be confirmed at validation. However, the validation panel needs to be sure it is addressing agreed SQA principles, however modified they might be. In order to ensure this, we suggest that design teams always work with SQA to develop solutions to perceived constraints in the design rules for Core Skills and Integrative Assessments. An agreed amendment to the ‘Guidance for Validation Panel Members’ could then be used confidently at validation. This would also mean that amendments and reinterpretations were adopted in a coherent manner throughout the system. This dialogue with SQA would be very important where changes might amount to a major policy change — such as ignoring a particular Core Skill or introducing ungraded HNs. These would, in normal circumstances, only be agreed after widespread consultation among all stakeholders. If, as is anticipated in many of the comments, these would only apply in limited circumstances, limited consultation among those affected would seem to be the most effective way forward.

Flexibility for centres

Centres currently have the flexibility to choose which aspects of the optional part of a framework they would deliver. They can also suggest additions to the optional section.

Flexibility for candidates

Candidates can participate in the same flexibilities as centres. There may be an issue where a candidate wishes to take an Integrative Assessment (for progression purposes) but is unable to in a particular centre.

Credit value/credit transfer

The clear feedback from the consultation is that the 24 SCOTCAT points for work experience included in the 120 which HNCs currently attract cannot always be assumed. Practical difficulties of delivery to part-time or day-release students have led us to reinstate the 12 credit HNC instead of the 15 proposed to match the 120 SCOTCAT points.

The implications of this will need to be discussed more widely with stakeholders. It may be that the 120 SCOTCAT points currently allocated to 12 credit HNCs has to be reconsidered.

There are and will be clear guidelines in place to effect credit transfer from unreformed HNC/Ds to their revised versions. What the change in SCOTCAT points for current HNCs (from 120 to 96 points) might mean for credit transfer to degrees etc may need to be explored, though in most cases this is not likely to cause a problem.

Integrative Assessments

Stakeholders supported Integrative Assessment in a ratio of 3 to 1, and the pilots reported increased motivation and achievement among candidates. The HN approved centres also had a majority in favour. This was, however, only a small majority. Once again most who voted 'No' supported the principle but wanted adjustments (particularly with regard to two Integrative Assessments in a 12 credit HNC). Others wished to allow some flexibility to ensure 'fitness for purpose' in some HNs. (These HNs were not named, but some stakeholders wanted room to adjust to future contingencies. SQA has already commissioned work to broaden the flexibilities of Integrative Assessments.) There were some suggestions on how to ensure an integrated experience for students (mostly by course structure) and some indications of alternative methods for grading students. There were very few suggestions that we retain 'merit', but student profiling and transcripts were mentioned.

The major issues raised related to staff development and the resources needed to deliver Integrative Assessments. We did not expect major staff development or resource issues. It may be that SQA has over-complicated this, and that we need to return to original conception.

On the other hand, these issues may relate more to examination-based Integrative Assessments. This might be because it has been thought that they are requirements, even in areas where they are not appropriate. Alternatively, even when they are welcomed, the processes associated with developing and administering them might be unfamiliar to staff, and so there is a demand for staff development. In either case, SQA's (two-way) communication in this area has been somewhat ineffective.

SQA has commissioned staff development workshops on the design and delivery of Integrative Assessments. We have commissioned further work to simplify Integrative Assessment specifications and to ensure that the original intention — to have graded project Units — is not lost in overly complicated guidance. Some work on 'assessment strategies' has also been commissioned. This will allow HN design teams to get an overview of assessment, and in particular allow a more managed relationship between Unit assessments and Integrative Assessments.

Nonetheless, given the newness of the concept and the clear steer towards flexibility in the consultation we suggest that this principle be able to be modified in agreement with SQA if market research and fitness for purpose considerations require it.

We may need to go further. A framework including Integrative Assessments may be broadly agreed but a particular centre does not feel its staff has had adequate time to develop the skills, or there may be too many initiatives at a particular time to bring all aboard at the same time. In these instances, we may have to agree to the Integrative Assessments being optional for the time being.

Core Skills

The majority of stakeholders — overwhelmingly so on the part of employers and professional bodies — accepted the need to incorporate all five Core Skills in all HNs. Those who opposed it did so on practical grounds, though it was clear many did not appreciate the option of ‘signposting’ as a solution. This is understandable, as SQA has not provided clear guidance on what this might mean. It is difficult to think of an occupation which would not need all Core Skills at some level. However, it may be that one or other Core Skill will be so much a requirement at entry or be so embedded and pervasive in a course that even ‘signposting’ would be artificial. For these reasons we suggest that the principle of incorporating all five Core Skills should be applicable in all cases, but that it could be amended for any HN.

SQA has commissioned a comparison of Core Skill approached in higher education (including Core Skills in HN; Key Skills in higher level NVQs; and Transferable Skills in degrees). We have also commissioned a pilot HN Unit in Personal Development Planning (PDP) with associated guidance. It is hoped this will provide a framework both for developing the ‘autonomy’ in candidates which is so important at this level. We will also be investigating whether this would be a mechanism whereby candidates identify opportunities to develop aspects of Core Skills, including certification where desired. This will be piloted next year.

10

Timescale for implementation

Appendix 3 gives the key dates in the review of HNCs and HNDs.

According to the HN Strategy, approved in 2001, all HNs will be within the SCQF by 2008. A timetable to achieve this for nationally-devised HNs will be agreed with stakeholders by August 2003. All these HNs should be incorporated in the SCQF by 2006. For college-devised HNs, timescales will be agreed with the college who will lead developments by December 2003. All these HNs should be within the SCQF by 2008.

In order to achieve these dates, no existing HNC or HND should be revised according to current (1988) design rules with a validation date that takes them beyond July 2008.

HN developers are already aware of this milestone and have been planning either to adopt the new design principles or to agree short validation periods, to allow them to revise in accordance with the new design rules. A two-year development period should be planned for major revisions, though those HNs which need only minor adjustments to remain fit for purpose would take much less time than this.

A minimum change for a Unit specification would be to allocate an SCQF level and a SCOTCAT credit value. The merit statement may be removed, but only if the Unit appears in no other framework. The minimum change for an HNC group award would be to add grading assessments to a Project (or composite skills) Unit, which has been allocated to SCQF level 7. For an HND, you would need to add grading assessments to a two credit Project (or composite skills) Unit, which had been allocated to SCQF level 8. Otherwise, new group award Graded Units would need to be developed. This would be in addition to the level 7 Graded Unit devised for the HNC.

A further year needs to be allowed before the first certification of candidates under the revised HNC or HND. Developers should therefore plan for a three-year project leading up to the revalidation date. In other words, every HNC and HND should either have been revalidated, or be under review by 2005.

There are several Phase 2 pilot developments, which have been using the pilot design rules and are nearing completion. These are attached as Appendix 4. They may wish to take advantage of some aspects of the finalised new design principles. It is suggested that they may do so from 1 April 2003.

Appendix 5 outlines the HN Review Project business plan, indicating next stages. The business plan is based on the HN Business Strategy, approved by Qualifications Committee in November 2001.

Materials already available

During the pilot developments SQA produced the following materials:

- ◆ *Guidance for Validation panel members using the draft new design rules*
- ◆ *Guidance on devising and implementing Integrative Assessments*
- ◆ *Guidance on incorporating Core Skills in HNCs and HNDs*
- ◆ *Guidance on writing HN Unit specifications*

These will be re-written in the light of pilot experience and to take account of changes to the pilot design rules. We have commissioned projects to examine flexibility in Integrative Assessments, in producing Assessment Strategies for HNs and in using Personal Development Planning to help students achieve sign-posted Core Skills. New materials should be available from September 2003.

The pilot development teams produced detailed validation documents, including Unit specifications and Integrative Assessment specifications. These are available for use in other frameworks or as examples for other developments.

Forthcoming materials

SQA has built on the pilot experience to produce an operational handbook for SQA officers leading developments. A version of this will be produced for use by college-led developments. This should be available by December 2003.

The pilot developments commissioned exemplar Unit assessments (usually for key Units in the mandatory section) and exemplars for Integrative Assessments. COLEG helped greatly in this work. SQA will continue to commission such exemplars for all nationally-led developments. We will work closely with COLEG to identify the most appropriate areas for which to produce assessment materials.

The pilot developments also help updates and workshops to aid the implementation of the revised HNCs and HNDs. SQA has taken this work a step further and has commissioned and piloted a range of Staff Development workshops — these are listed in Appendix 6. We will work with SFEU to refine and finalise the workshops in the light of feedback, and plan to make these available from September 2003. National Staff Development seminars will be held to disseminate the materials to those in colleges responsible for staff development. The materials will also be used by individual consortia as they progress through their development work. We will, meanwhile, work with SFEU to take the materials into colleges or to hold appropriate events to make the materials available to as wide a range of HN approved centre staff as possible.

Further work has been commissioned to identify and address the staff development needs of non-curricular staff, such as Quality or Data Managers.

We will work with the FE Professional Development Forum to examine the possibility of producing HN Unit specifications associated with each of the workshops. These would allow the possibility (though never the requirement) of workshop participants applying their learning in real developments and have it recognised as part of their Continuous Professional Development.

SQA support for development teams

A nationally-led development will normally be governed by a consortium of colleges which deliver the HN. Normally, a steering group will be formed to take operational decisions in the light of advice from the consortium. An SQA Qualifications Manager (or other officer) will provide policy advice, staff development and administrative support for the work of the steering group. Usually, a senior subject specialist is seconded from a college to lead the development and members of the consortium are commissioned to write Unit specifications, Integrative Assessment specifications (now group award Graded Units) and associated assessment materials.

College-devised HNs are normally developed by a single college, where the expertise for specialist HNs reside. All the materials mentioned above, including the Staff Development Materials and SQA advice, will be available to college developers. So also will all nationally-devised Unit specifications, group award Graded Unit specifications and the associated assessment materials. In addition, SQA has established a small team of HN Development Officers, whose main function will be to support college staff engaged in college-led developments.

12 Quality assurance

The quality of HNCs and HNDs as HE qualifications is maintained in a number of ways, but most particularly by a proper balance between HN approved centres' understanding of the national standard, and SQA external moderation processes helping centres enhance their quality processes.

SQA's contribution to the 'understanding standards' part of the equation will include:

- ◆ clearly expressed HN Unit and group award Graded Unit specifications, validated by major stakeholders
- ◆ examples of good Unit and Graded Unit assessment materials (including marking instructions etc), vetted by major stakeholders
- ◆ guidance materials for course developers, validators and implementers
- ◆ staff Development materials and events for the above
- ◆ prior moderation of assessment materials produced by individual centres
- ◆ development visits to centres with particular problems

SQA's contribution to the 'quality enhancement' part of the equation will be:

- ◆ clear guidance on SQA requirements and processes associated with HN quality assurance, including the internal moderation of HN Units and group award Graded Units.
- ◆ supportive visits by Customer Relations Managers to explain SQA requirements and processes
- ◆ visits by Systems Verifiers to comment on the appropriateness of quality processes applied in centres
- ◆ SQA approval of the centre as having appropriate quality processes
- ◆ feedback from subject specialist External Moderators on the appropriateness of the standards applied in centres
- ◆ SQA approval of the centre as applying appropriate national standards
- ◆ seminars and other quality networks to share best practice

For nationally-developed HNs, we expect the consortium steering group to reconstitute itself first as an implementation group and thereafter as a monitoring group to keep the HN under review. This group would advise SQA of any action, activities or events that thinks might enhance the quality assurance of its HN. As well as its own monitoring activities, it will be supplied with appropriate statistics and other information from SQA.

13

Marketing HNCs and HNDs

SQA has a range of materials, activities and events designed to promote the benefits of HNCs and HNDs to:

- ◆ candidates and potential candidates
- ◆ employers
- ◆ professional bodies and admissions tutors in universities

We work with the marketing units of colleges and other approved centres and with other bodies concerned with the promotion of lifelong learning.

Appendix 1: Organisations which responded to the consultation

Aberdeen College
Angus College
Anniesland College
Ayr College
Banff & Buchan College
Bell College
Borders College
Cardonald College
Central College of Commerce
Central College, Department of Business Studies
Chartered Institute of Bankers in Scotland
Church of Scotland Education Committee
Clackmannan College
Cleveland Open Learning Unit
Clydebank College
Coatbridge College
Colleges Open Learning Exchange Group
Consortium For Development of Multimedia Computing & Web Development
Construction Industry Training Board
Cumbernauld College
Dumfries and Galloway College
Dundee College
Edinburgh's Telford College
Education & Research Committee — Royal Incorporation of Architects In Scotland
EIS, The Educational Institute of Scotland
Elmwood College
Falkirk College of Further and Higher Education
Falkirk Council Education Services
Fife College of Further and Higher Education
Glasgow Caledonian University
Glasgow City Council
Glasgow College of Building and Printing
Glasgow College of Food Technology
Glasgow College of Nautical Studies
Glasgow Colleges Group Ltd
Glenrothes College
Heriot-Watt University
HN Engineering Steering Group
Advisory 11 — Engineering and SQA staff in the sector
Hospitality Training Foundation
Hotel and Catering International Management Association
Institute of Applied Technology
Institute of Clerk of Works
Institute of Food Science and Technology
Institute of Leisure & Amenity Management (ILAM)
Institution of Electrical Engineers
Inverness College
James Watt College of Further & Higher Education
Jewel & Esk Valley College
John Wheatley College
Kirkland Community College
Langside College
Lauder College
Leisure Studies Department, North Glasgow College
Lews Castle College

Motherwell College
Motor Industry Training Council.
Napier University
NHS Education for Scotland
North Glasgow College
North Highland College
Oatridge Agricultural College
Perth College
Police Skills & Standards Org.
Professional Association of Teachers
Quality Design Team For HN Review In Administration and Information Management
Reid Kerr College
SACCA/ASC FE-HE Working Group
Scotland & Northern Ireland Financial Services NTO
Scottish
Agricultural College
Scottish Funding Councils for
Further and Higher Education
Scottish Further Education Unit
Scottish Further Education Unit Core Skills Steering Group
Sector Skills Alliance Scotland (SSASCOT)
Skillfast-UK,
Skillsmart
South Lanarkshire Council
Stevenson College
Stow College
The Association of Building Engineers
The Association of Scottish Colleges (ASC)
The Scottish FE Network Modern Languages.
The University of Edinburgh
Tourist Board Training Ltd, 22A Eglinton Street, Irvine, Ayrshire, KA12 8AS
University of Aberdeen
University of Abertay
University of St Andrews
University of the Highlands and Islands Millennium Institute
West Lothian College
North Atlantic Fisheries College, Port Arthur, Scalloway, Shetland, ZE1 0ON
Perth College, Crieff Road, Perth, PH1 2NX
Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
SFEU
SQA QM x 5
Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
University of Strathclyde, Dept of Electronic & Electrical Engineering

Appendix 2: Design principles for developing HNCs and HNDs

HNCs and HNDs have supported technician, technologist and first line manager occupations for over 75 years, including progression in professional qualifications and other higher education awards. More recently, some HNs have been specifically designed to support progression from Modern Apprenticeships and to degrees.

In order to continue serving these occupations, HN programme designers should adhere to the following design principles. Design teams must always conduct market research, particularly among candidates and employers to ensure the continuing fitness for purpose of the HNs. Where this clearly indicates that any of those design principles marked with an asterisk needs to be re-interpreted or modified, SQA will work with the design team to develop alternatives, which are coherent with the other principles.

The validity of the market research and the fitness for purpose of the proposed alternatives will be confirmed at validation.

Further considerations for design teams are also indicated.

a Design principles

SCQF Level and SCOTCAT points

1. HNCs shall be designed to be at SCQF level 7 and shall comprise 96 SCOTCAT credit points
2. HNDs shall be designed to be at SCQF level 8 and shall comprise 240 SCOTCAT credit points
3. HNCs should incorporate 48 SCOTCAT credit points at SCQF level 7
4. HNDs should incorporate 64 SCOTCAT credit points at SCQF level 8

Core Skills

5. HNC and HND programmes shall incorporate opportunities for candidates to develop Core Skills
6. *HNCs and HNDs should clearly include opportunities for candidates to develop Core Skills to levels required by the occupations or progression pathways the HNs support. This would normally mean all five Core Skills should be developed in every HN programme

Mandatory Section

7. HNCs should normally include a mandatory section of at least 48 SCOTCAT credits points including a Graded Unit. (See Principles 9 and 10 *under 'Graded Units (formerly Integrative Assessments')* below.)
8. HNDs should normally include a mandatory section of at least 96 SCOTCAT points, including Graded Units.

Graded Units (formerly Integrative Assessments)

9. *HNCs should normally include one Graded Unit of 8 SCOTCAT credit points at SCQF level 7.
10. *HNDs should normally include one Graded Unit of 8 SCOTCAT credit points at SCQF level 7 plus 16 SCOTCAT credit points of Graded Unit(s) at SCQF level 8.

The purposes of Graded Units will be to assess the candidate's ability to integrate and apply the knowledge and/or skills gained in the individual HN Units to demonstrate that they have the principal aims of the group award, and grade candidate achievement.

b Further considerations

HN Unit and group award Graded Unit Specifications

SQA produces guidance on how to write HN Unit and group award Graded Unit Specifications. These include templates and examples of how the specifications should be laid out. This guidance should always be used in developing new or revised HN Unit or group award Graded Unit Specifications. The minimum change to current Unit specifications would be to remove the merit statement and to add an SCQF level and SCOTCAT credit points.

Validation of HN Unit Specifications

A key part of validation is to confirm the proposed allocation of SCQF levels and SCOTCAT credit points to each Unit, and this needs to be seen to be done consistently. Until the process of devolving this to centres is fully worked out, SQA will validate all new or revised HN Unit specifications. Centres may continue to develop HN Unit specifications for validation by SQA.

Validation of HN Group Awards and group award Graded Units

Group award validation may continue to be done by those centres with devolved powers to do so. As Graded Units relate to the principle aims of a group award, these too may be validated by devolved centres as part of group awards.

Validation periods

HN Units, Graded Units and group awards will be kept under review by design teams in order to ensure continuing fitness for purpose. Normally, these will be reviewed every five years or more frequently if recommended by validation panels. However, specific time periods of validation will not be specified.

Appendix 3: Key dates

Current design rules approved	June 1988
Start of initial consultation	September 1995
New design rules approved	October 1998
Pilot developments initiated	April 1999
Phase 2 pilots initiated	October 2000
Pilots validated	March — June 2001
Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) launched	December 2001
Pilots evaluated	March — July 2002
First certifications	July 2002
Consultation document launched	September 2002
New design principles agreed	March 2003
New design principles launched	May 2003
Guidance finalised	June 2003
Staff Development workshops finalised	June 2003
Timescales for national developments agreed	August 2003
Staff development workshops launched	September 2003
Timescales for college developments agreed	December 2003
All HNs revalidated or under review	September 2005
All nationally-devised HNs within SCQF	December 2006
All college-devised HNs within SCQF	December 2008

Appendix 4: Phase 2 Pilots

Plans for the Review, Revision and Implementation of HNC/Ds – April 2002 onwards

SQA Development Division Unit	Industry Sector	HNQ	Session 2001/02	Details
Business and Languages	Modern Languages	HN Units	Review	Major revision required — Phase 2 Pilot
	Accounting	HNC/D	Review	Major revision required — Phase 2 Pilot
	Administration and Information Management	HNC/D	Revise	Major revision required — Phase 2 Pilot
	Business Administration	HNC/D	Revise	Major revision required — Phase 2 Pilot
	Financial Services	HNC/D	Review	Major revision required — Phase 2 Pilot
	Enterprise	HNC	Review	Being lapsed with consensus of centres
	Management	HNC	Review	Validation extended until review of Occupational Standards complete
	Marketing	HNC/D	Review	Validation extended until review of Occupational Standards complete
	Legal Services	HNC/D	Review	Review to be conducted during Session 2002/03
Science	Child Care and Education	HNC	Review	Major revision required — Phase 2 Pilot
	Occupational Therapy Support	HNC	Revise	Revision required — current design rules
	Working with Communities	HNC	Review	Validation extended until review of Occupational Standards complete
	Countryside Recreation and Conservation	HNC/D	Review	Validation extended
	Horticulture	HNC/D		Pending Validation — Phase 1 Pilot
	Biotechnology	HNC/D	Develop	Major revision required — Phase 2 Pilot
	Sciences	HNC/D	Review	Outcome of review expected by end of June
Services and Social Subjects	Catering and Hospitality	HNC/D	Review	Major revision required — Phase 2 Pilot
	Consumer and Management Studies	HNC/D	Review	Major revision required — Phase 2 Pilot
	Social Sciences	HNC/D	Revise	Validated Phase 1 Pilot
	Social Sciences with...	HNC/D	Revise	Validated Phase 1 Pilot
	Retail Management	HNC/D	Review	Outcome of review expected in May
	Travel and Tourism	HNC/D	Review	Revision required — current design rules
	Beauty Therapy	HNC/D	Review	Major revision required — Phase 2 Pilot
	Hairdressing	HNC/D	Review	Major revision required — Phase 2

SQA Development Division Unit	Industry Sector	HNQ	Session 2001/02	Details
				Pilot
	Fitness and Health	HNC/D	Review	Revision required — current design rules
	Leisure Management	HNC/D	Review	Revision required — current design rules
	Sports Coaching and Development	HNC/D	Review	Major revision required — Phase 2 Pilot
Technology	Painting and Decorating	HNC	Develop	New development — current design rules
	Engineering	HNC/D	Review	Major revision required — Phase 2 Pilot
	Nautical Science	HNC/D	Implement	Validated Phase 1 Pilot

Appendix 5: Extract from SQA's Business Plan 2003 – 2007

Project No. 7 — HN Review

Description — This project will devise new design rules for developing HNCs and HNDs, review all (5400) HN Unit specifications and (1,000) group awards and revise them in the light of the new design rules (including incorporating them within the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework — SCQF)

Duration — this project started in 1995, was revived in 2000 and is expected to end in 2008

Objectives

- ◆ finalise revised design rules for HNCs and HNDs in line with the needs of stakeholders
- ◆ upgrade all HN programmes to ensure they remain fit for purpose
- ◆ enhance the quality assurance processes for HNCs and HNDs
- ◆ further develop support and guidance mechanisms for college delivery of HNCs and HNDs
- ◆ increase understanding and recognition of HNCs and HNDs in key stakeholder groups
- ◆ explore ways of enhancing flexibility in the delivery of HNCs and HNDs

Significant milestones

- | | |
|--|----------------|
| ◆ agree new design rules for HNs | April 2003 |
| ◆ finalise guidance and staff development materials | June 2003 |
| ◆ agree revision timescale for SQA-led revisions | August 2003 |
| ◆ agree revision timescale for college-led revisions | December 2003 |
| ◆ first certification according to new design rules | September 2004 |
| ◆ all SQA-led revisions complete | December 2006 |
| ◆ all college-led revisions complete | December 2008 |
| ◆ last certification under old design rules | December 2012 |

Targets for March 2004

- | | |
|--|----------------|
| ◆ agree new design rules for HNs | April 2003 |
| ◆ finalise revised guidance and staff development materials | June 2003 |
| ◆ complete first phase of marketing campaign and plan next phase | June 2003 |
| ◆ agree revision timescale for SQA-led revisions | August 2003 |
| ◆ complete training/ briefing of SQA lead officers | September 2003 |
| ◆ launch staff development workshops | September 2003 |
| ◆ agree revision timescale for college-led revisions | December 2003 |
| ◆ agree partnership model for supporting colleges | December 2003 |
| ◆ quality assurance and data management systems finalised | March 2004 |

- ◆ validate first tranche of nationally-led developments March 2004
- ◆ train moderators in group award moderation based March 2004

Appendix 6: Staff Development Workshops

1. Developing HNs according to the new design rules
2. Writing HN Unit Specifications
3. Developing and Writing HN Integrative Assessments
4. Internally moderating HN Integrative Assessments
5. Incorporating Core Skills in HNC/Ds
6. Allocating SCQF levels to HN Units and group awards
7. Managing the implementation of the revised HNs

In addition, materials will be developed for non-curricular staff such as Quality and Data Managers.

