

Higher National Certificates and Diplomas (HNC/Ds): New Design Rules — Evaluation

July 2002

Publication code: CE1639

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

The information in this publication may be reproduced in support of SQA qualifications. If it is reproduced, SQA should be clearly acknowledged as the source. If it is to be used for any other purpose, then written permission must be obtained from the Publications Officer at SQA. It must not be reproduced for trade or commercial purposes.

© Scottish Qualifications Authority 2002

Contents

Executive Summary	1
1 Background and context	3
1.1 HN Design Rules evaluation	3
1.2 Background and context	3
1.3 The evaluation brief	4
1.4 Project methodology	4
2 Summary of evaluation data	6
2.1 The evaluation data	6
2.2 Broad themes	6
2.3 Design Rule 1	7
2.3.1 Level of support	7
2.3.2 Summary of data	7
2.3.3 Review of issues and Design Rule 1	8
2.3.4 Possible actions	9
2.4 Design Rule 2	10
2.4.1 Level of support	10
2.4.2 Summary of data	10
2.4.3 Review of issues and Design Rule 2	13
2.4.4 Further consideration	14
2.5 Design Rule 3	14
2.5.1 Level of support	14
2.5.2 Summary of data	14
2.5.3 Review of Issues and Design Rule 3	15
2.6 Design Rule 4	15
2.6.1 Level of support	15
2.6.2 Summary of data	16
2.6.3 Review of issues and Design Rule 4	17
2.7 Design Rule 5	18
2.7.1 Level of support	18
2.7.2 Summary of data	18
2.7.3 Review of issues and Design Rule 5	20
2.8 Design Rule 6	21
2.8.1 Level of support	21
2.8.2 Summary of data	21
2.8.3 Review of issues and Design Rule 6	22
3 Evaluation summary and recommendations	23
3.1 Summary of findings and recommendations	23
3.1.1 Broad themes	23
3.2 The Design Rules: findings and recommendations	23
4 Some initial reflections on the evaluation	26

Executive Summary

- 1 An evaluation of the use of new Design Rules in developing and implementing revised HNC/Ds was conducted on behalf of the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), from March to July 2002 (Sections 1.1 and 1.2).
- 2 Using structured interviews and a questionnaire, the opinions and perceptions of a range of participants — staff from further education (FE) and higher education (HE), SQA personnel, consultants, college managers and employers — in the pilot use of the new Design Rules were gathered and analysed (Sections 1.3 and 1.4).
- 3 The evaluation findings indicate wide support for both the six specific Design Rules and for the review process in general. However, respondents identified a range of concerns and reservations about aspects of the Design Rules (Section 2).
- 4 Six specific recommendations are made which relate the evaluation findings to the Design Rules (Section 3). The recommendations are:

Recommendation 1

Before confirming Design Rule 1, SQA should consider ways in which the concerns raised regarding the consequences for certain traditional 12-credit, vocationally-oriented, HNCs (Section 2.3) might be addressed without undermining the rationale and operation of the Design Rule.

Recommendation 2

Before confirming Design Rule 2, SQA should consider, and seek to alleviate, the concerns identified in this evaluation (Section 2.4) about the operational aspects of the Design Rule.

Recommendation 3

SQA should confirm Design Rule 3.

Recommendation 4

Before confirming Design Rule 4, SQA should consider, and seek to alleviate, the concerns identified in this evaluation (Section 2.6) about the restrictive nature of the pilot interpretation of the Design Rule.

Recommendation 5

Before confirming Design Rule 5, SQA should consider, and seek to alleviate, the concerns identified in this evaluation (Section 2.7) regarding the role of Core Skills in HE, delivering Core Skills in a vocational context and the procedures for validating/auditing Core Skills in HN programmes.

Recommendation 6

Before confirming Design Rule 6, SQA, with other partners in the development exercise, should consider the strategies for staff development, guidance and support which will be required for the successful implementation of this Design Rule (and the programme in general).

- 5 The consultant will produce, as a separate output from this project, a review of the evaluation and a discussion of the strategic issues raised.

1 Background and context

1.1 HN Design Rules evaluation

This report describes the process and outcomes of an evaluation which was conducted on behalf of SQA between March and July 2002. The evaluation focused on the use of new Design Rules in developing and implementing revised HNC/Ds. The report contains the following main sections:

- ◆ Section 1: Background and Context
- ◆ Section 2: Summary of Evaluation Data
- ◆ Section 3: Summary and Recommendations

1.2 Background and context

Government policy priorities highlight the importance of inclusion, and widening access to HE and lifelong learning. At the same time, modern employment demands a constant updating of skills and knowledge. In this context, HN Qualifications (ie HNCs and HNDs) have become increasingly significant features of the landscape of post-compulsory education in Scotland. They meet the needs and expectations of a very wide range of candidates and stakeholders. For individuals — many of whom have been disadvantaged in formal schooling — they facilitate entry to the labour market and access to HE.

The current Design Rules for HNC/Ds were introduced in 1988.

As part of a quality assurance mechanism, after a consultation exercise which began in 1995, new Design Rules were devised in 1998. These Design Rules were premised on a perceived need to monitor and renew provision to reflect:

- ◆ emerging national priorities for inclusion, widening access, and skill development
- ◆ changing demands in the labour market
- ◆ recent and rapid change in the FE and HE sectors
- ◆ concerns identified in established HNC/Ds including over-assessment, ‘merit’ grading, and fragmentation
- ◆ the developing SCQF

Since 1998, three SQA-led national consortia (Computing, Communication, and Social Sciences), one Scottish Agricultural College-led national consortium (Horticulture), and one development by Glasgow College of Nautical Studies (Nautical Science) have developed and validated revised HNCs and HNDs under the new Design Rules. All are fully validated qualifications, now subject only to maintenance, review and update, except in Social Sciences, where the consortium’s work was delayed because of SQA’s developing policy on Core

Skills. All the other validated frameworks have been implemented in colleges. The first candidates were certificated in August 2002.

SQA has drawn on these developments to produce a range of guidance material on the use of the new Design Rules in validating revised group awards; Core Skills; and Integrative Assessments. Over 200 Units in the new format have been produced, along with exemplar assessment packs for revised Units and the new Integrative Assessments. A programme for the review, revision and implementation of all Units and HN group awards, to be completed by 2008, has been drawn-up.

1.3 The evaluation brief

The project brief was to evaluate the use of the new Design Rules in developing and implementing revised HNCs/HNDs.

The specific objectives were to:

- ◆ review the evaluation report on the development phase of the pilots to identify key issues
- ◆ carry out a structured interrogation of key SQA personnel regarding the implementation phase of the Design Rules
- ◆ carry out a structured interrogation of key college and other personnel in the implementation of revised HNC/Ds in computing
- ◆ confirm issues identified by reference to colleges implementing the HNC/Ds in Communications, Horticulture and Nautical Science
- ◆ produce an evaluation report for wider consultation
- ◆ recommend the final form of the new Design Rules for HNC/Ds
- ◆ suggest work that should ensure the success of the new Design Rules for HNC/Ds

1.4 Project methodology

The consultant commissioned to undertake the project negotiated and agreed a project methodology with senior SQA personnel responsible for the HN programme. The methodology was designed principally to canvass, as widely as possible, the perceptions and opinions of those who had participated in design, development and implementation activities using the new Design Rules.

Data sources

The major source of data was to be structured interviews and questionnaires. The interviews were to be with participants — including SQA lead officers, consultants, and college staff (lecturers and managers) — who had been involved in design or implementation activities using the new Design Rules. Since there was a finite timescale, and the focus of the evaluation was the use of the Design

Rules, it was decided to restrict data collection to those who had actual experience of applying the new rules. The views of candidates and other stakeholders were therefore not sought at this stage.

Why not candidates and stakeholders?

The first cohort of candidates would not complete 'new rule' programmes until June 2002. This was too late for the systematic data-gathering for this project. In any event, for purposes of this evaluation, students were not in a position to comment on the use of the new Design Rules as compared to other rules. Pilot teams are gathering their own evaluation data from first cohort candidates. With regard to other stakeholders, SQA is committed to a major consultation exercise with all other stakeholders in autumn 2002, into which this evaluation report is designed to feed.

Interviews and questionnaires

In the event, 37 structured interviews were conducted with individuals who have participated in design, development or implementation activities in the HN review/pilot programmes. Interviewees included SQA lead officers, consultants, college staff (lecturers and managers), and staff from HE, private agencies and employers.

In addition to the structured interviews, a questionnaire was designed and sent to all who had participated in the HN consortium activities. In total, 217 questionnaires were distributed, and 56 completed questionnaires were returned. This is a response rate of 25%, which is slightly higher than might have been expected. It is also significant that a number of responses extended to several pages and clearly had been the product of systematic and considered reflection by individuals and small groups of people. The questionnaires were transcribed into a single database that amounts to more than 30,000 words.

There was some overlap in the questionnaire and interview respondents, although the majority of questionnaire responses were received from members of qualification design teams. Interviews sampled a slightly wider range of opinion, involving some college managers, SQA personnel, HE staff and employers.

The questionnaire and interview data were processed using simple content analysis procedures.

Other sources

The consultant also had access to a wide range of documentation and guidance material produced by SQA associated with the HN review programme, including the report produced in October 2001, of an evaluation of the development phase of the first three pilot programmes.

In addition, the consultant participated in the National Seminar for Computing, which focused on the use of the new Design Rules; two seminars (involving SQA lead officers, consultants and staff from FE and HE with experience of the Design Rules); and a range of informal meetings with participants and interested parties.

2 Summary of evaluation data

2.1 The evaluation data

The primary focus for this evaluation has been the application and impact of the six new HN Design Rules. The data relating to each Design Rule is summarised below under three headings.

Level of support

In the questionnaire, the first item under each Design Rule asked participants whether they supported the Design Rule. Yes/No responses are reported as raw numbers.

A summary of data

Data gathered mainly from open questionnaire items and interviews is reported under each Design Rule. The purpose here is to provide a summary of the nature and range of the opinions and perceptions which were gathered.

Review of issues and the Design Rule

Broad issues and themes which arise from the data are outlined under this heading. There is wider and more strategic discussion of the data and the issues arising in Section 3.

2.2 Broad themes

Two broad and pervasive themes emerge from the evaluation data.

HNC/Ds are important vehicles for key national priorities

Responses to the evaluation confirm that HNC/Ds are highly successful and highly regarded products; they meet the needs and expectations of a wide range of candidates and end-users; and they are increasingly recognised as vehicles for current government policy priorities of inclusion, widening access, lifelong learning, and labour force development.

There is strong general support for the new Design Rules

There is strong ‘in principle’ support for the new Design Rules based on a general recognition of the need for HNC/Ds to develop in response to changing employment and educational circumstances. The evaluation was designed to highlight difficulties and concerns, and respondents did this. Some argued, often vigorously, for modifications to the Design Rules. It is, however, important to set these responses into the context of the strong general support both for the need for change and for each of the six new Design Rules.

2.3 Design Rule 1: Credit value

Without exception, the credit value of HNCs and HNDs will be 15 and 30 credits respectively (HNCs were previously 12 credits). This means that in future all HNCs will be the same size, as will all HNDs.

2.3.1 Level of support

The questionnaire evidence indicates very strong ‘in principle’ support for this Design Rule.

In favour of the rule:

Yes	50
No	1

2.3.2 Summary of data

Reservations and concerns

Respondents accepted without further comment that all HNDs should be 30 credits. However, a number of questionnaire and interview respondents indicated reservations and concerns about the application of the Design Rule, particularly with regard to the impact on HNC programmes.

There was general support for the rationale for a 15 credit HNC. It would be:

- ◆ half of a 30-credit HND
- ◆ equivalent to the first year of study in a university degree
- ◆ a mechanism to help secure parity within the SCQF

In the vast majority, possibly all, HNCs that are currently delivered as the first year of a full-time HND programme, candidates already have to achieve three credits in addition to the 12 required for the HNC.

However, a significant number of respondents qualified their support by identifying difficulties and concerns for part-time and day-release HNCs. Some feared that the new Design Rule would result in:

- ◆ an increase of 25% in the length of part-time and/or day-release programmes, from two years to two and a half years — this would have resource implications for colleges (at a time of stand-still budgets), and increase costs for candidates and, in many cases, their employers
- ◆ an increase in the ‘demands’ of the programmes, resulting in higher non-completion rates; reduction in candidate motivation; decline in recruitment
- ◆ ‘academic drift’ where the focus shifts from practical/vocational skills that candidates are capable of undertaking, to more ‘theory’ and ‘writing about’ these skills
- ◆ employers and candidates looking for alternative awards/qualifications

Many of those interviewed from areas with a strong vocational orientation, eg horticulture, hairdressing, sport and leisure development, and hospitality, claim that the traditional part-time/day-release HNC programmes have been very successful and attractive products.

These programmes have been developed over many years to meet the particular practical and vocational needs of a large number of candidates and employers. Most candidates in these programmes have no intention, in the short term, of proceeding to HND or any other form of HE. Therefore, it is argued, there is no compelling need for these HNCs to equate exactly to 50% of an HND.

A part of the concern surrounding this Design Rule stems from a perception that it will disadvantage a group of students, many of whom have already struggled with the more academic patterns of formal schooling. Such students have found in the practical focus of vocational HNC programmes opportunities to develop work-related and practical skills in which they can succeed — although many find it more difficult to perform at the same level when it comes to ‘writing about’ these skills.

Many respondents who worked on these vocationally-oriented programmes argued that enforcing this Design Rule would have damaging consequences for these programmes.

2.3.3 Review of issues and Design Rule 1

Full-time HNCs/Year 1 HNDs

Design Rule 1 will have no significant impact on the operation of full-time HNCs, or on programmes where the HNC is undertaken as the first year of an HND. Such programmes almost invariably have a credit value of 15 at present.

Part-time/day-release HNCs

Some of the evidence gathered in this project suggests that there are likely to be damaging consequences for part-time/day-release programmes if an increase of 25% in the length of programmes results from the rule being enforced. The consequences will impact on students, colleges, and employers, and on skill levels in some employment sectors. There will, it is claimed, be a significant incentive for some to seek alternative routes to an award.

Articulation and progression

The case for the Design Rule is that it will provide a more consistent currency for HNCs, and that it will establish parity, thus enhancing the value/place of HN awards in the SCQF. It is clearly important to strengthen articulation routes for students to universities and other HE programmes. However, although accurate figures are difficult to obtain, it is suggested that only a minority of students undertaking HNC programmes intend to/actually progress directly to another HE Course.

Costs and benefits

There are cost/benefit questions to be considered with regard to Design Rule 1. For those candidates (overall a minority) using HNCs as a route to HE, are the possible benefits of consistency, parity and enhanced articulation sufficient to justify the disadvantages accruing for those using the award for more immediate vocational or personal development purposes?

Parity?

The issue of parity is complex and unclear. The intention of Design Rule 1 is said to be to establish parity with the demands of the first year of a university degree course. Those who argue for the flexibility to retain a 12-credit HNC for vocationally-oriented programmes, point to apparent inconsistencies in credit values. For example, students who leave university programmes after one year with a Certificate in Higher Education require the acquisition of 90 SCOTCAT points at SCQF level 7.

The successful completion of a 12-credit HNC programme would accumulate 96 points, and a 15-credit HNC would generate 120 points within the SCQF at level 7. It is therefore claimed that the Design Rule alone will not achieve parity of award within the SCQF at this level. It also appears, in the eyes of the critics, to disadvantage those working for awards at this level in the FE sector by establishing more demanding requirements.

Competing claims

HNCs are the victim of their own success. They have developed very effectively to meet the needs of a diverse group of candidates and stakeholders. It may be difficult to reconcile the competing claims within a single Design Rule. Undoubtedly, there is strong support for the aims of Design Rule 1 to establish parity and enhance the place of HNC/Ds within the SCQF. There are, however, also genuine fears for the survival, or fitness for purpose, of a number of 12-credit vocationally-oriented programmes.

2.3.4 Possible actions

The suggestions gathered for resolving the problem included:

- ◆ recognising HNC awards as between 12 and 15 credits, with vocational HNCs at 12 credits and HNCs as preparation for HND or admission to other HE programmes at 15 credits
- ◆ re-badging/reformatting 12-credit HNCs as PDAs, Ungraded HNCs, or some other appropriate name (though retaining the name is regarded as important for marketing the qualifications, especially with employers)
- ◆ recognise the credit value of experience gathered in employment and/or at Higher/former NC level

2.4 Design Rule 2: Integrative Assessment

All HNCs will include two mandatory Integrative Assessments, and all HNDs will include four mandatory Integrative Assessments, each of one credit. This will be included in the 15 and 30 credits required for HNCs and HNDs. The purpose of Integrative Assessments is 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 the group award.

2.4.1 Level of support

The questionnaire evidence indicates strong 'in principle' support for this Design Rule. Approximately 18% of respondents did not support the Design Rule.

In favour of the rule:

Yes	43
No	8

2.4.2 Summary of data

Support

There was strong support for the rationale for Integrative Assessments and for their 'potential' to significantly improve the quality of the learning experience for candidates (and lecturing staff). Respondents welcomed Integrative Assessments as a mechanism for breaking away from a perceived over-emphasis on assessment, a 'PC (performance criterion) driven' model of working. In particular, respondents expressed support for opportunities to adopt more holistic and integrated approaches which would create a better balance between learning and assessment. In a practical sense some also welcomed the abolition of Unit grading and what was described as the 'merit lobbying' associated with it — where students sought to 'negotiate' for a merit grade or a re-assessment.

The following description of concerns should be read in the knowledge that the vast majority of respondents supported the Design Rule.

Opposition

Those who did not support this Design Rule offered a variety of reasons including:

- ◆ Integrative Assessments are not used by universities (in their own programmes or in selection procedures in Social Sciences)
- ◆ Integrative Assessments will re-test students on learning they should have been tested on already
- ◆ Integrative Assessments are not suitable for all subjects — especially those including modern languages or discrete disciplines in Social Sciences

- ◆ four Integrative Assessments is too large a proportion of programme, as this will take time from the main (subject/vocational) focus and will limit opportunities for students to take ‘broadening options’
- ◆ different grades for the four ‘separate’ Integrative Assessments, gained over two years, will be confusing to employers and other end-users
- ◆ grading that depends on Integrative Assessments will disadvantage some students who have good practical/vocational skills and perform well in Units but poorly in Integrative Assessments — especially where Integrative Assessments are ‘formal’ examinations
- ◆ Integrative Assessments which draw on a number of disciplines will not be able to be marked by all lecturers (Social Sciences)
- ◆ Integrative Assessments place too much emphasis on formal exams

Concerns

Amongst the respondents who supported Design Rule 2 in principle, there were a significant number who had reservations about particular aspects of the rule, or they wanted to ‘flag-up’ potential difficulties. These included:

Reducing the assessment load — a change of culture

Integrative Assessments represent a major shift in assessment practice in HN programmes (and FE more generally). In different ways this was reflected in the comments gathered. Some people were not sure exactly how Integrative Assessments would work in their own programmes. There were some natural fears about the task of communicating the purpose and nature of the changes to all colleagues working in the area. For many respondents, staff development would be the major requirement for successful implementation — winning hearts and minds would be essential.

If the staff development needs, and the requirement for a ‘culture change’, were not addressed, some feared that the Design Rule could become counter-productive and mean an increase, rather than a reduction, in assessment. There is a danger that Integrative Assessments could become additional to, rather than an alternative or complement to, Unit assessments.

Double-credit Integrative Assessments

Some claimed that to restrict Integrative Assessments to a single and separate credit reduced their usefulness as assessment instruments and required unnecessary duplication of tasks. This view was expressed strongly by those working in subject areas where two-credit projects are a feature of current programmes. The Computing pilot and Engineering design team were prominent among those who argued for a reconsideration or relaxation of this Design Rule.

Standards and quality assurance

For a large group of respondents, maintaining ‘standards’ across the sector, together with quality assurance issues were the priorities associated with Integrative Assessments. In interviews and questionnaires, they commented that

current assessment and grading procedures (Unit ‘merits’) were inconsistent and variable. Many claimed that this inconsistency would undermine (or had already undermined) the credibility of HN awards in the eyes of universities, employers and other end-users.

Current moderation procedures, it was alleged, did not ensure consistent standards between colleges across the country. In this evaluation it was not possible to gather evidence to test these claims, but there was a common feeling that there is ‘a college’ — unnamed in different locations but ‘down the road’ — where ‘everybody knows’ that it is easier than it is in ‘our’ college, to secure a ‘merit’ grade, or an opportunity to re-submit a piece of work to improve a grade. (Such suspicions exist, of course, between HE institutions, but the criteria for comparison are less transparent.)

Centralisation vs autonomy: the place of exams

HN awards sit between two very different models of assessment. On one side there is the National Qualifications (NQs) framework — with a tradition of school examinations which have been centrally devised and managed and externally marked. On the other side, universities have always exercised a great deal of autonomy in the content, nature and operation of their assessment and awards processes. This tension has been evident in the responses gathered for this evaluation.

In some programmes a very vigorous case was made, especially by lecturing staff, for centrally-devised and centrally-organised examinations. Some claimed that the credibility of their award depended on central, not college-based, examination procedures. This was particularly the case where the award carried some exemption from, or comparability with, industry or professional body assessments.

In the extreme, some wanted to impose very strict conditions on assessment arrangements. They argued that all colleges offering the same award should be required to use the same centrally-administered examination and not be allowed the flexibility to opt out and use locally devised assessments.

Others argued that the process of creating valid and reliable assessment instruments — especially in the context of new Integrative Assessments — was a complex and time-consuming activity. They also supported the case for central examinations. The most cost-effective way of doing this, it is claimed, is to have it done centrally.

The assessment and development model used by the Higher Still Development Programme was seen by many, again particularly by lecturers involved in programme delivery, as the most appropriate way of proceeding. One questionnaire response summarised a more general view.

‘The ideal system would mirror the NQ system, ie exam timetable throughout Scotland, papers set and marked by SQA examiners; exemplar assessments and solutions.’

Mature and autonomous institutions?

Others were less comfortable with the centralised and prescriptive frameworks that characterise NQ arrangements. Such an approach would, in the view of these respondents, be a regressive step that would remove flexibility and autonomy from individual centres and the FE sector as a whole.

College managers, in particular, expressed major reservations. In addition to highlighting concerns about the loss of autonomy — the ability to make decisions about the assessment arrangements for local students at a local level — they pointed to major logistical and resource implications. A national examination diet and timetable could not be imposed easily on a sector where organisational arrangements — teaching blocks, terms, semesters — now varied dramatically across the country.

College managers, however, often recognised the advantage of collaborative and consortium working, on this and other matters, as a way to achieve cost-effective programme development and assessment. At a time of scarce resources, however, the funding of collaborative working would need to be carefully considered nationally and at college level.

2.4.3 Review of issues and Design Rule 2

Support for Integrative Assessments

There is considerable support for the introduction of Integrative Assessments. They are generally regarded as a positive step, though they are seen as a fundamental change — a culture change. There is a consensus that if they are to realise their potential they will require considerable staff development support and guidance.

Double-credit Integrative Assessments

A number of design teams claim to be frustrated by the restriction that requires two single and separate credits at both levels — HNC and HND. In programmes where there has been experience of double-credit project Units, they regard this aspect of the Design Rule as regressive and unhelpful. They argue that the assessment of programmes would be more effective if the Design Rule were relaxed to accommodate double-credit projects.

Examinations and Integrative Assessments

The role of examinations in Integrative Assessments has revealed a wide divergence of opinion. In some programmes, design teams and a wider body of lecturers have argued strongly for centralised examination procedures, along the lines of NQs. Others are opposed to extending the use of examinations on the grounds that they are simply ineffective and often damaging as assessment instruments. A growth in examinations would, in their view, be a serious regression. College managers were also opposed on grounds of logistics and because it is thought to undermine the position of centres as mature and autonomous institutions.

2.4.4 Further consideration

The Design Rule is strongly supported, but the evaluation evidence suggests that a significant number of respondents would like consideration given to:

- ◆ how ‘hearts and minds’ can be won through staff development, guidance and exemplar materials
- ◆ the relaxation of the Design Rule to permit double-credit Integrative Assessments
- ◆ the role of examinations in Integrative Assessments
- ◆ ways of collaborative working which would share the tasks of developing valid and reliable IA instruments

2.5 Design Rule 3: mandatory section

All HNCs and HNDs will have a mandatory section which every candidate for the group award will take. For HNCs, this will be a minimum of six credits, including the two Integrative Assessment credits. For HNDs, it will be a minimum of 12 credits, including the four Integrative Assessment credits.

2.5.1 Level of support

The questionnaire evidence indicates strong ‘in principle’ support for this Design Rule. Just under 8% did not support the rule and a further 6% were unsure. The majority of the responses in the latter two categories were from two groups: those working in Social Sciences and those working in Modern Languages.

In favour of the rule:

Yes	44
No	4
Unsure	3

2.5.2 Summary of data

Size does matter

There was almost universal support for the idea that employers and other end-users, in any field, should be able to know that the key elements would be present in any HN programme offered in any college across the country. Those who did not support the Design Rule typically expressed concern about the size of the mandatory section, not about the principle of having one.

On the matter of the size opinion was divided

A number of respondents, from different programmes, suggested that the Design Rule requirement — of six credits at HNC and 12 at HND, including Integrative Assessments — was too small. Design teams have generally gone for more than

the minimum. Some individuals, however, still felt that they would have wished to add to the mandatory section in their particular programmes.

These responses demonstrate that individuals frequently do not distinguish between the consequences of the Design Rule and the consequences of decisions taken by a particular qualification design team.

Mandatory elements in Social Sciences

Only from within the Social Sciences development was serious concern expressed that the requirement was too large. The difficulties arose because of the multi-disciplinary (rather than inter-disciplinary) nature of the programme. The traditional pattern of HN programmes in social sciences have also offered students a range of discipline-based electives and 'broadening options' (eg Geography, Psychology or Sociology). In this context, and because the mandatory section might, in some centres, reduce the scope for options, a number of respondents thought the new Design Rule was too prescriptive and limiting.

2.5.3 Review of issues and Design Rule 3

The evaluation data suggests that Design Rule 3 is generally acceptable in principle and practice. The differences of opinion regarding the optimum size of the mandatory section for any particular programme are probably best resolved within individual qualification design teams.

2.6 Design Rule 4: position in the SCQF

All HN Units will be allocated to a level appropriate to their position in the SCQF to confirm and strengthen the position of HNCs and HNDs as HE qualifications and to maintain and improve progression to degree programmes. Units and Integrative Assessments will be allocated to a level during the development or review process, and this will be subject to validation.

2.6.1 Level of support

The questionnaire evidence indicates 'in principle' support for this Design Rule. Just under 18% did not support the Design Rule.

In favour of the rule:

Yes	39
No	9
Unsure	3

2.6.2 Summary of data

General reservations and concerns

The majority of responses indicate general support for the concept of the SCQF and the allocation of programmes to levels. The potential benefits — including better articulation, credit transfer, and comparability — are acknowledged.

The 17.6% of questionnaire respondents who did not support the rule were matched by at least a similar proportion of those interviewed who either did not support it or had major reservations about the interpretation of the rule.

The reservations and concerns identified include:

- ◆ uncertainty about the SCQF itself, and how (and by whom) the levelling process will be completed
- ◆ an acknowledgement that levelling will have benefits within programme/subject areas, and even between similar or related areas, but there were doubts that it is even ‘possible, let alone meaningful’ across very different areas; in what sense are disparate HN programmes, eg Electronics, Social Sciences and Hospitality, to be levelled?
- ◆ levelling will cause ‘academic drift’ by reinforcing ‘academic’ priorities and minimising vocational priorities
- ◆ levelling all Units is the problem — levelling should apply only to mandatory Units and Integrative Assessments

Will HE play ball?

A number of respondents thought that the success of the framework would depend principally on reaction and support coming from Scottish universities. Some were not optimistic that the university sector would be enthusiastic about the framework and expressed a fear that FE would be required to ‘jump through the hoops of levelling’ HN programmes, but that first and second year programmes in universities would remain largely untouched by the exercise.

‘I doubt whether all university first year modules would meet level 7 requirements, especially where it cannot be assumed that students have prior experience at Higher in the subject.’

Another questionnaire response claimed:

‘The major flaw in the Design Rules is the requirement to achieve 15 credits (ie 120 SCOTCAT points) at level 8 to gain an HND. This compares unfavourably with the requirements for DipHE where only 90 of the 240 SCOTCAT points must be at level 8.’

Raising the level of demand

The Design Rule will allocate every HN Unit and Integrative Assessment to an SCQF level and require that a majority of Units be at the level of the award (level

7 for HNC and level 8 for HND). It is feared by some that this will significantly increase the levels of performance required of students on HN programmes. The same would also be true in many first and second year university courses — especially where the subject/discipline is not studied to Higher level prior to entry. Staff working in modern languages expressed particular concern about the consequences of the Design Rule for their work in this area. They argued that to level all of the components rather than whole awards according to exit outcomes or student performance at the conclusion is a particularly limiting and unhelpful approach.

Academic drift

Some, especially those in areas with a stronger vocational orientation, expressed fears that SCQF levelling is a ‘back door way of cranking-up the academic’ requirement of their programmes. Several wanted to resist what they saw as ‘academic drift’ on the grounds that current products, at HNC level in particular, were successfully meeting the needs of a large number of students and employers.

Levelling of Units and the delivery of programmes

The consequences of levelling to the SCQF on the practical aspects of timetabling and flexibility in the delivery of programmes will, according to some respondents, also be dramatic. The principal objection to the Design Rule is that to insist that a majority of Units be at the level of the award is restrictive and inflexible. It means, for example, that the current practice of timetabling some optional Units so that they are available to students in either the first and second years of an HND programme — helping the centre to ensure viable group size and offering students some element of choice in their programme — will disappear. In some areas, Social Sciences for example, there have traditionally been opportunities for students to undertake ‘broadening’ options; and, in other areas students and employers have valued opportunities to undertake basic foreign language programmes. Many fear that such opportunities will not be available under the new Design Rules.

These constraints on timetabling and student choice in HN programmes will become a significant problem in most centres. They will be felt most acutely in the smaller colleges.

2.6.3 Review of issues and Design Rule 4

In principle support

There is general support for the concept of levelling to the SCQF, but the evaluation has identified a strong lobby for reconsidering the way in which the Design Rule has been interpreted for HN programmes.

It is understood that SQA believes that the rules adopted for the ‘pilot’ HN developments have been more restricting than those adopted for other awards at levels 7 and 8. Adoption of a more flexible interpretation of these Design Rules may help to alleviate many of the concerns and anxieties identified in this evaluation

2.7 Design Rule 5: Core Skills

To meet employment and progression needs, all HNCs and HNDs will have:

- ◆ a recommended Core Skills profile for entry to the group award
- ◆ a mandatory exit Core Skills profile (for which evidence of achievement is required) of at least three Core Skills. These will be Problem Solving at SCQF level 6, plus a minimum of two other Core Skills at SCQF level 5 or 6 — to be selected following market research with users of the qualification

The entry and exit Core Skills profiles will be subject to validation.

2.7.1 Level of support

The questionnaire evidence indicates general ‘in principle’ support for this Design Rule.

In favour of the rule:

Yes	37
No	14

Just over 27% of respondents did not support the Design Rule as described. This is the highest number of ‘no’ responses of any of the six Design Rules.

2.7.2 Summary of data

Different perceptions

Reactions to the Design Rule reflect differing perceptions of the nature and purpose of Core Skill elements in HN programmes.

There is support for the view that Core Skills are important for purposes of employment and progression. However there are differing views about what should be regarded as Core Skills in HE. A significant number of respondents had reservations about either (or both): the suitability of the SQA Core Skills framework for HE; or the mechanisms necessary for developing, validating or auditing Core Skill coverage in HN programmes.

Some thought that for HN programmes there should be less emphasis on ‘basic skills’ — Communications and Numeracy — as defined in the SQA framework. These, it was claimed, are developed and demonstrated anyway working on an HE programme. A further criticism raised by a number of people was that meeting the requirements of the Core Skills framework and Core Skills audit made coverage artificial and it often distorted the ‘main’ purpose of the Unit/award.

Some claimed that in HE there should be an emphasis on different core or ‘transferable’ skills, eg study skills and research skills.

Entry profile

The recommended entry profile for each group award was generally welcomed. However, some respondents claimed that pressures to extend access and competition to recruit well-qualified candidates meant that the recommended entry profiles may be difficult to achieve.

A number also questioned the extent to which it was reasonable to expect a one-year or two-year HN programme to dramatically improve performance in Core Skills where twelve years of formal schooling had not done so.

Role of Core Skills

A majority of respondents welcome the fact that the exit profile now requires evidence of achievement in only three of the five Core Skill areas. Even on this point, however, there were a small number who expressed the diametrically opposite view and thought the requirement should be for all five Core Skill areas.

Core Skills in a vocational context

In the development teams there was a strong lobby to stress the importance of ‘contextualising’ Core Skills. They argued that in terms of student motivation, and supporting meaningful learning, Core Skills must be developed in the vocational context of the group award. They expressed a strong preference for ‘embedding’ Core Skills in vocational Units as a delivery mechanism, rather than for discrete Core Skill Units.

Others who were less enthusiastic about the contribution of Core Skills to HN programmes, as defined in the SQA framework, claimed that attempts to embed Core Skills in vocational Units had distorted those Units and had taken away important time from the primary focus of the group award.

What do employers mean by Core Skills?

Sometimes linked to expressions of doubt or opposition was a suggestion that the ‘alleged’ support of employers for ‘Core Skills’ was misleading. It was suggested that most employers had a fairly ‘basic’ view of what constituted Core Skills — ‘they want employees to be able to read, write, count and get on with other people’. This is not ‘the de-conceptualised view of Core Skills which has developed recently in colleges, where we now have Core Skill specialists, who compete for time in programmes and resources’. According to this view, if employers were asked whether they wanted time to be spent on vocationally-focused elements or on Core Skill elements, they would want to emphasise the vocational elements.

Core Skills as a specialism

A number of respondents from design teams who had recent experience of grappling with the Core Skill issues regretted the fact that the delivery and assessment of Core Skills had become a separate specialism.

This was linked to a wider concern, and strongly expressed criticism, that the procedures for validating the Core Skill elements and the Core Skill audit processes for HN programmes were too ‘remote’ from the vocational/programme context; too prescriptive in the interpretation of the substance and context of Core Skills; and too bureaucratic in their requirements for documentation. A number of people, from different programmes, claimed that a consequence of this had been that Core Skills had skewed or were skewing the vocational purpose of their Units and/or the whole group award.

Levelling Core Skills

Levelling of Core Skills was an area where there was considerable uncertainty. Some argued, in theory, for a higher Core Skill requirement, claiming it ‘did not make sense’ to have a group award at levels 7 and 8 but Core Skills two levels below.

Others thought that at levels 7 and 8 HN programmes usually offered opportunities for candidates to demonstrate Core Skills in more challenging vocational or learning contexts. They were not sure that the skills required were at a higher level or whether it was simply that the context was more demanding.

Core Skills Frameworks — SQA and SCQF

It was also pointed out that there is a potential contradiction in the two — slightly different — interpretations of Core Skills in circulation. One interpretation was offered in the SQA framework; a second was contained in the level descriptors in the SCQF.

2.7.3 Review of issues and Design Rule 5

Level of support

Of the six Design Rules, the ‘Core Skills’ rule received the lowest level of support from questionnaire respondents. However, it was still supported by the vast majority of those who returned a questionnaire.

Core Skills issues

The other evaluation data suggest:

- ◆ a considerable level of uncertainty and disagreement about the nature and purpose of Core Skills in HN programmes
- ◆ a fairly general perception that the procedures associated with meeting the Core Skill requirements associated with programme development, validation and ‘audit’ are at best difficult and at worst ‘remote’ ‘prescriptive’ and ‘bureaucratic’
- ◆ a concern, on the part of some of design teams, that Core Skills might ‘skew’ the wider purpose of Units and/or the award

2.8 Design Rule 6: revised HN Unit specification

The format of HN Units 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 encourage a more holistic approach to assessment and reduce the assessment loading on both candidates and assessors, and that it will help to improve credit transfer between HNC/D and degree programme.

2.8.1 Level of support

The questionnaire evidence indicates very strong support for this Design Rule. Only one respondent did not support it.

In favour of the rule:

Yes	50
No	1

2.8.2 Summary of data

Strong Support

There is almost universal support for the rationale for the new HN Unit specification. A couple of the questionnaire responses provide a flavour of the opinions offered.

‘Since 1985 the FE system has been enslaved by assessment and its associated paper-based recording and quality systems — all to the detriment of student understanding. This may now improve. It is quite easy to design and implement more holistic assessments, but it may not be so easy to change the FE system assessment culture.’

‘The revised Unit specification format is a vast improvement on the old specification as it makes specifying evidence and assessment much easier and permits sampling while retaining transparent assessment.’

However, a number of responses in the questionnaire and interviews highlight the fact that the new Unit specification is a significant departure from current practice. Another questionnaire response illustrates the general points:

‘This will mean a culture change for lecturers who have assessed PC-by-PC. Lecturers will need guidance on what SQA means by “sampling”.’

A number of respondents make the point that, if the Design Rule is to encourage a more holistic approach to assessment and reduce the assessment load for

candidate and assessor, this will require a major shift — a culture change — in current practice. All users — Unit writers and lecturers — will require significant levels of staff development, guidance and practical exemplar support, if this process is to succeed.

2.8.3 Review of issues and Design Rule 6

There is strong support, and in some cases genuine enthusiasm, for this Design Rule. Strategies for establishing staff development, guidance and practical support would appear to be priority requirements.

3 Evaluation summary and recommendations

3.1 Summary of findings and recommendations

This section provides a summary of the evaluation evidence that has been set out in greater detail in Section 2, together with six recommendations.

3.1.1 Broad themes

Two broad themes emerged from the evaluation evidence:

- ◆ HNs are highly successful and valued awards that have become important vehicles for the delivery of government priorities of inclusion, widening access, lifelong learning and labour force development
- ◆ There is general support for the new Design Rules and recognition that change in the HNs is necessary as a response to changing circumstances and demands in education and employment.

3.2 The Design Rules: findings and recommendations

Design Rule 1: credit value

The evaluation evidence described in Section 2.3 indicates that:

- ◆ Design Rule 1 — establishing a uniform size for all HNQ awards, HNC 15 credits and HND 30 credits — is supported very strongly.
- ◆ The rationale for the rule — facilitating articulation and progression between HNs and university and other HE programmes — is endorsed.
- ◆ A number of respondents, especially those working in vocationally-oriented programmes, argue for a modification/relaxation of the rule to prevent damaging consequences for some traditional, vocationally oriented, 12 credit HNCs.

Recommendation 1

Before confirming Design Rule 1, SQA should consider ways in which the concerns raised about the consequences for certain traditional 12-credit, vocationally-oriented, HNCs (Section 2.3) might be addressed without undermining the rationale and operation of the Design Rule.

Design Rule 2: Integrative Assessment

The evaluation evidence described in Section 2.4 indicates that:

- ◆ The Design Rule — introducing Integrative Assessments — is supported very strongly.
- ◆ The rationale for Integrative Assessments — to assess the candidate’s ability to integrate and apply knowledge, and as a mechanism to redress current over-emphasis on assessment — is endorsed by the vast majority of respondents.
- ◆ The evaluation evidence suggests that a number of respondents are concerned about operational aspects of the Design Rule and would like consideration to be given to:
 - how ‘hearts and minds’ can be won through staff development, guidance and exemplar materials
 - a relaxation of the Design Rule to permit double-credit Integrative Assessments
 - the role of examinations in Integrative Assessments
 - ways of collaborative working which would share the tasks of developing valid and reliable IA instruments.

Recommendation 2

Before confirming Design Rule 2, SQA should consider, and seek to alleviate, the concerns identified in this evaluation (Section 2.4) about the operational aspects of the Design Rule.

Design Rule 3: mandatory section

The evaluation evidence described in Section 2.5 indicates that:

- ◆ The Design Rule — establishing a minimum size for mandatory sections at HNC and HND levels — is supported strongly, although there is some disagreement about the preferred size of the mandatory element.
- ◆ The rationale for a mandatory section — to establish a clear and uniform award — is endorsed by the vast majority of respondents.
- ◆ Differences of opinion about the size of the mandatory element for any particular programme are probably best resolved within qualification design teams.

Recommendation 3

SQA should confirm Design Rule 3.

Design Rule 4: position in SCQF and levelling

The evaluation evidence described in Section 2.6 indicates that:

- ◆ The Design Rule — which would allocate all HN Units to a level in the SCQF — is supported strongly.
- ◆ The rationale for allocating HNs to a position in the SCQF — to confirm the place of HNCs and HNDs as HE awards — is endorsed by the vast majority of respondents.

- ◆ A number of respondents have significant concerns about the restrictive consequences of the SCQF. A more flexible interpretation of this Design Rule would help to alleviate some of the problems identified.

Recommendation 4

Before confirming Design Rule 4, SQA should consider, and seek to alleviate, the concerns identified in this evaluation (Section 2.6) about the restrictive nature of the pilot interpretation of the Design Rule.

Design Rule 5: Core Skills

The evaluation evidence described in Section 2.7 indicates that:

- ◆ The Design Rule — which would introduce a recommended entry Core Skills Profile and a mandatory exit Core Skills profile, with evidence of achievement in at least three Core Skills — is generally supported.
- ◆ The rationale for the Core Skills elements — to meet employment and progression needs — is generally endorsed.
- ◆ A number of respondents expressed reservations about the role and definition of Core Skills in HE programmes, about delivering Core Skills in a vocational context, and about the procedures for validating/auditing Core Skills in the HN programme.

Recommendation 5

Before confirming Design Rule 5, SQA should consider, and seek to alleviate, the concerns identified in this evaluation (Section 2.7) about the role of Core Skills in HE, delivering Core Skills in a vocational context, and the procedures for validating/auditing Core Skills in HN programmes.

Design Rule 6: revised HN Unit specification

The evaluation evidence described in Section 2.8 indicates that:

- ◆ The Design Rule — revising the HN Unit specification — is supported very strongly.
- ◆ Almost all respondents endorse the rationale for a revised HN Unit specification — to encourage a more holistic approach to assessment and reduce the assessment loading for candidate and assessor.
- ◆ The Design Rule represents a culture change in practice, and will require significant levels of staff development support, guidance and exemplar materials.

Recommendation 6

Before confirming Design Rule 6, SQA, with other partners in the development exercise, should consider the strategies for staff development, guidance and support which will be required for the successful implementation of this Design Rule (and the programme in general).

4 Some initial reflections on the evaluation

The primary purpose of the evaluation was to gather opinions and perceptions regarding the use and impact of the new HN Design Rules. A number of general issues arise from the evaluation exercise. Four of these are explored below.

Do people know about the success and importance of HNC/Ds?

One college manager commented during an interview that it was time ‘we’ (the FE sector) stopped apologising and started explaining to everyone, including (perhaps especially) the government, what an excellent and cost-effective product HNC/Ds are.

To paraphrase the claim, HNC/Ds have grown to satisfy the needs and expectations of an amazingly diverse set of candidates and stakeholders. Many of the candidates have been disappointed or disadvantaged in the formal schooling process; and the stakeholders range from small employers with very specific vocational requirements, through to professional bodies, universities and others. HNC/Ds are already playing a key role in helping the government to address its policy priorities such as inclusion, wider access, lifelong learning and economic development. They are also doing this at a fraction of the cost of some other HE provision.

The point the college manager wanted to make was that those involved, in colleges, SQA and elsewhere, were so busy ‘doing it’ that they seemed to forget that it was also important to tell others about it.

A shortage of information for decision making

A difficulty identified during the evaluation was the absence of recent and accurate national data on key elements of the operation and outcomes of HNC/Ds. For example, it would have been helpful for this exercise to have had access to data with which to answer questions such as:

- ◆ How many candidates take each group award?
- ◆ What are their entry qualifications?
- ◆ What are their destinations?
- ◆ What is the predictive validity of performance on HNC/Ds for HE?

Questions of this kind are important to many stakeholders including the government. There is a strong case for such data to be gathered and made accessible. How could this be done? Who might fund and/or undertake such work?

Different perspectives

In reviewing the data gathered for this project, three different ‘perspectives’ on the issues and priorities emerged. Respondents from qualification design teams and consortia tended to want to focus on delivery issues. They were typically enthusiasts for the subject/discipline, and their priorities were often expressed in terms of the development of learning and teaching. (They were the product champions!) Those from college management tended to want to place individual HN developments in a wider college context, and their role required them to highlight the resource implications and strategic objectives. A third perspective was that provided by SQA personnel who had, as their primary responsibility, facilitating and managing the individual developments within the wide framework of HN awards and SQA protocols.

Each perspective is a legitimate reflection of a particular set of priorities arising from slightly different but complementary roles. It might help the development process if the different perspectives and priorities were explored and shared more explicitly. A better understanding of the perspectives and priorities we each bring to the development exercise helps collaborative working.

The development model

HNC/Ds, as educational awards, are a bridge between traditional school formats (now NQs) and patterns of assessment and accreditation in HE. A tension is also evident between the more directive approaches to assessment and development typical of the school sector, and the traditional approaches in HE which tend to emphasise academic/professional autonomy.

The HN developments involved staff who have been used to each of the different traditions. Again, it might facilitate the whole development exercise if some of the assumptions of each tradition were explored and shared. It would be helpful if a distinctive HN model could be developed — which is hopefully built on the strengths of the others.