

Conference Report HN: working two years on

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Foreword

On behalf of SQA and the HN Key Partners' Group, I am delighted to present the 2005 Annual HN Conference Report.

The distance travelled in the HN modernisation programme is considerable: two years into the programme is an appropriate time to take stock of things that have gone well — and to discuss what still has to be done. Participants expressed positive views on the progress we have made in the modernisation programme, and felt the day had been very successful.

The conference reflected on three themes:

- ◆ HN modernisation is working
- ◆ it has been achieved through partnership
- ◆ through this partnership, we are making good progress not just in the modernisation programme but on many fronts

Two major perspectives emerged. First, the new design of HNC/HNDs has improved the product to the benefit of students, staff, employers and higher education institutions. Second, the responsiveness of SQA and the support given through 'product surround', has been greatly appreciated, and delegates would like to see it continue.

I hope you will find this report useful in giving you a flavour of the day, and I would like to thank all the conference and workshop presenters, the delegates who participated, the SQA staff who organised the conference, and Linda McTavish, for her skilled chairing of the conference and the HN Key Partners Group.



Neil Robertson
Depute Director
Higher National and Scottish Vocational Qualifications

Introduction

Eighty-six delegates attended the annual HN Conference at BLCC, Dunfermline on 22 April 2005. Delegates represented a wide range of stakeholders, including:

- ◆ further education colleges
- ◆ higher education institutions
- ◆ Association of Scottish Colleges
- ◆ SFEU
- ◆ COLEG
- ◆ employers
- ◆ Scottish Funding Councils
- ◆ Scottish Executive
- ◆ Scottish Wider Access Programme
- ◆ Higher National Key Partners Group
- ◆ National Union of Students
- ◆ regional forums
- ◆ independent educational consultants
- ◆ SQA

Presentations were given by Linda McTavish, Chair of the HN Key Partners' Group, who spoke about the strong partnership in the modernisation process; Neil Robertson, Depute Director, SQA, who laid out the scope and scale of the modernisation process, the successes to date, and future plans; and John Kelly, of Reid Kerr College, who gave a first-hand account of the first year of implementation of the new HNC.

Participants attended three workshops from a choice of seven. All workshops were co-presented by a member of SQA staff and an external presenter including those representing SFEU, COLEG, Scottish Funding Councils, employers and independent consultants. Workshop topics covered: e-assessment/learning; Core Skills and National Occupational Standards; Progression to and from HNC/Ds; Sector Panels; Graded Units; Qualification Support Teams; and Staff Development.

Summaries of the presentations and overviews of workshops are given on the following pages.

Presentations

Chair's address

Linda McTavish, Principal, Anniesland College and Chair, HN Key Partners' Group

The conference was opened by Linda McTavish, who welcomed delegates on behalf of the HN Key Partners' Group. Linda spoke about the strength of HNC/HNDs as a product and brand, and about its importance to economic development in Scotland.

Linda acknowledged the substantial amount of work that had gone into the modernisation programme. She said that, collectively, we should be proud that we have rationalised the number of HN frameworks and that we now have in place the transparent agreement of people to work together — both of which are considerable achievements. Linda also introduced the theme of the conference, and the presentations and workshops, which all focused on the practical aspects of implementing HNs. This, too, was an indication that things had moved on in the modernisation programme.

Linda gave a brief update on funding from SFEFC. She emphasised that this was the sector's money, and that Anniesland College was only a broker. A Project Funding Board had been established and it was in the process of agreeing a methodology for distributing the funds. This would be agreed soon, and would be communicated to colleges as soon as possible. Linda asked participants to note that this was 'acceleration' money, in that it allows development to take place at a faster rate than if it were done as part of a 'normal' revision process, and that the funding was a contribution to the HN modernisation programme in addition to core funding.

In closing, Linda spoke with optimism about the future. She said that although there was still much to be achieved, the progress made over the past two years augured well for the successful completion of the HN modernisation programme and she looked forward to the coming year, which would celebrate the 80th Anniversary of HNC/HNDs in Scotland.

Two years of HN modernisation

Neil Robertson, Depute Director, Higher National and Vocational Qualifications

Neil addressed the conference on behalf of SQA. He began by laying out the scale of the HN modernisation programme, which included 153 consortium developments, 68 collaborative developments, and 104 single-centre developments. He said that, to date, about one-third of consortium developments had been completed, with another third due for validation in 2005/06 and the remainder in 2006/07. Ninety-seven percent of consortium developments had started on time or earlier, 35% had validated on time, and a further 50% had validated within three months of the planned date. Neil also emphasised the scope of the project, which involved 47 colleges and numerous writers, vetters, consultants, members of Qualification Design Teams, sub groups, Core Skills teams, SFEU, COLEG, HMIe, SFEFC and HEIs.

This led onto a second theme — working in partnership. Neil said that more had been done together than could have been achieved by any one partner. He said that there were many instances of successful partnerships, and gave three examples:

- ◆ Qualification Design Teams, which harnessed the expertise of those with experience of HNC/HNDs and ensured the relevance of HN qualifications for today's economy.
- ◆ The Higher National Key Partners' Group, which provided a policy steer for HNC/HND development.
- ◆ The Qualifications Support Teams, which aimed to effect ongoing improvements to HN Group Awards and to exemplify national standards.

Neil said that the perception that HN modernisation was working was reflected in words and actions from external sources. For example, both SFEFC and ESF had supported the HN modernisation programme by allocating funds, which had allowed acceleration in areas such as e-assessment and learning. The ministerial letter to SQA had noted the 'significant progress that SQA has made to date in modernising its HN products' and Susan Bird's article in the *Scotsman* had said that 'the rest of the UK looks with envy at our HN qualifications'.

Looking ahead, Neil highlighted the plans for the development of National Certificates and the revision of Professional Development Awards, which had resulted from the recent Portfolio Review. He also spoke about support products such as the new *HEI Admission Tutors' Guide* and the *Guide to National Occupational Standards*, which would be published shortly, together with revised guidance on signposting Core Skills.

Finally, he reminded delegates that this was the 80th Anniversary of HNC/HNDs in Scotland, and that SQA's marketing department would be working with colleges and other stakeholders to mark this event with a range of activities.

Implementing success — a first-hand account of implementation of HNC/HNDs in colleges

John Kelly, Lecturer in Business subjects, Reid Kerr College

John Kelly, who has 20 years teaching experience, gave a first-hand account of developing, delivering and maintaining one of the new HN Business. He said that the process of revision had started with the Qualification Design Team, which looked at the old HN Business Administration.

The team identified areas that required development, including the need to:

- ◆ update the qualification
- ◆ make it more coherent
- ◆ prepare candidates for degree study
- ◆ meet employer needs
- ◆ link with professional bodies

The revised award was developed in accordance with the design principles and, this year, it had been offered in eight colleges with a full roll-out expected in 2005/06. From John's point of view the revised HN was a great improvement on the previous course.

The reasons for this included:

- ◆ The introduction of the Graded Unit, which ensured integration and meant that the HN was not simply a collection of Units.
- ◆ A reduction in the assessment load, which meant more time for teaching and learning.
- ◆ Better preparation for higher education because of the range of assessment methods, including exam-based assessment and the development of skills such as synthesis.
- ◆ Improved Assessment Exemplars, which help to exemplify national standards.
- ◆ Improved support from SQA through the setting up of the Qualification Support Team, which will help to solve problems and act as a link between centres implementing new awards and SQA.
- ◆ Updated Units, which ensured the relevance of the qualification.

These aspects had led to raised standards in the course. John said that improvements had been commented on by students from his college. They had said that: the assessment load was manageable; it was easier to organise course-work; and examination preparation and revision techniques had helped to bring the course together.

John also said the modernisation programme meant change for staff in colleges, and this presented a number of challenges for the future.

These challenges included:

- ◆ the management of Graded Units
- ◆ staff development on new aspects of the curriculum
- ◆ new teaching methods for delivering blended and e-learning
- ◆ continued funding and resources
- ◆ improved marketing of the HN product

In concluding, John said that ‘HNs are a vast improvement on what went before’. He reflected the optimism of the previous speakers for the future of HNs, but said that this positive future would only be possible through the commitment of college management and continued SQA support.

Workshops

There were seven workshop themes at the conference:

- ◆ The Qualification Support Team
- ◆ Grading students
- ◆ Changing content and contexts: staff development and support
- ◆ The future is 'E': e-assessment and e-learning materials for HNC/Ds
- ◆ Core Skills and National Occupational Standards
- ◆ Ensuring the relevance of HNC/HNDs
- ◆ Progression to and from HNC/HNDs

The Qualification Support Team

Facilitated by Robert Quinn, Development Manager, SQA and Linda Mieke, Consultant

Robert and Linda outlined the concept of the Qualification Support Team (QST). They told participants that QSTs were being piloted in two curricular areas — Business and Engineering — and it was hoped these could be rolled out over the coming year. The key aims of a QST were to affect on-going improvements and to exemplify national standards. The QST acts in an advisory capacity, and works with the SQA Qualifications Manager who has ultimate responsibility for all decisions relating to the shape of a particular Group Award or suite of Group Awards.

Some of the advice given by a QST might include: recommendations on minor changes to the HN award; updating the Arrangements Document; advise on, and prioritise, support requirements; advise on developments in National Occupational Standards; establish mechanisms for sharing good practice; and assist the Qualifications Manager with dissemination of information.

In the workshop discussion, four key points emerged. These were that:

- ◆ QSTs should be as open and inclusive as possible, eg more information on SQA's website on the work and membership of the QST.
- ◆ QSTs should provide databases of available resources.
- ◆ Further education colleges should be encouraged to release staff to serve on QSTs — this needs to be marketed in colleges to ensure involvement from a range of colleges.
- ◆ A strategy for centres to communicate with QSTs and QSTs to liaise with stakeholders needs to be developed.

Grading students

Facilitated by Bob Robertson, Consultant and John Lewis, Development Manager, SQA

Bob and John began by giving a brief overview of the Graded Unit. This included the number of Graded Units in HNC/HNDs — one in HNCs and three in HNDs — and the difference between exam-based and project-based (Practical Assignment or Investigation or Case Study) Graded Units.

Workshop delegates then discussed the challenges that face students and staff undertaking the new Graded Unit. For students this included preparation, exam techniques and time management. For staff it was the need for advanced planning, timetabling, course team involvement, re-assessment, and internal and external moderation.

John and Bob stressed a number of points in relation to delivery. These included:

- ◆ The need for staff to take advantage of staff development sessions offered in-house or by SQA and SFEU.
- ◆ Ensuring that experienced staff are allocated to key tasks, eg internal moderation of Graded Units.
- ◆ Ensuring that these key tasks are undertaken at an appropriate time, eg that Graded Unit delivery and assessment dovetails with the delivery and assessment of Units.
- ◆ Dual or course team marking.
- ◆ Delivering project-based Units to small groups, given the amount of guidance and supervision that is needed.

Delegates also raised three issues that they felt needed further discussion. These were: a quicker turn around time for prior moderation (currently this stands at eight weeks); centralised exam setting; and a maximum C grade for re-assessment in the same session.

Changing content and contexts: staff development and support

Ann Hackston, Development Manager, SQA and Marie Morrison, Lead Specialist, SFEU

In this workshop, Ann and Marie outlined the staff development and support offered by SQA and partner organisations in relation to HN modernisation. This included a number of staff development workshops that had been commissioned by SQA and delivered by SFEU, generic workshops by SFEU, and tailored workshops for centres and Qualification Design Teams offered by SQA Development Managers.

Feedback from delegates was that support had been good, with SQA providing a lot of underpinning support prior to validation, and SFEU providing generic support at the implementation stage.

Three areas for future staff development were identified through workshop discussion. One was the need for workshops dealing with planning and monitoring projects — particularly project-based Graded Units — undertaken by students. The second was internal moderation and, in particular, how models of good practice could be used to inform the sector. Finally, it was felt that all parties could improve links and communication. Participants suggested some of the ways this might happen: Qualifications Managers' letters could be posted on the website; there could be hyperlinks from the SFEU website to SQA's website; and better internal communication within colleges.

The future is 'E': e-assessment and e-learning materials for HNC/Ds

Martyn Ware, Business Manager, SQA; Lorraine Syme-Smith, COLEG; and Graeme Clark, SOLAR Project Manager, SQA

The workshop began with a contextualisation of e-assessment and e-learning, which included: the need to modernise delivery methods; the increase in demand for e-learning and e-assessment from centres and learners; and SQA's increasing focus on e-assessment. Martyn and Lorraine then gave an overview of recent initiatives — the COLA project (the development of formative e-assessments) and SOLAR (the development of summative e-assessments) — which would support the delivery of HN qualifications in further education colleges.

Participants heard that 100 formative e-assessments were currently available, and this would rise to 500 in 18 curricular areas by December 2005. Summative e-assessments were also being produced in 11 curricular areas including: Computing, Communication, Multimedia, Office Administration and IT, Travel and Tourism, Languages, Hospitality, Engineering, Hairdressing and Beauty, Care and Construction.

The benefits of e-assessment, and some of the challenges colleges would face, were explored by the group. In particular, the technical infrastructure and staff development were highlighted as areas that needed more work.

More information on these projects can be obtained from:
graeme.clark@sqa.org.uk — for SOLAR Project
and
lorraine.syme-smith@coleg.org.uk — for COLA Project

Core Skills and National Occupational Standards

Doreen Kedzierska, HN Project Manager, SQA, and Brian Keegan, Educational Consultant

Participants in this workshop were given an overview of two key aspects of HNCs and HNDs — Core Skills and National Occupational Standards. The workshop focused on how these could be signposted in HN awards in a way that emphasised their significance.

Outlining SQA's position on signposted Core Skills, Doreen said that, although there was broad agreement on signposting as the most appropriate way to develop Core Skills in HN awards, the guidance on this had been interpreted unevenly. Existing measures to ensure the quality of signposting included: scrutiny of Units by the HN Unit Quality sub-group; the SQA Guide on Core Skills in HNC/HNDs; the Validation Panel's responsibility to ensure the inclusion of Core Skills; and other gatekeepers such as centre managers, course leaders, SFEU, Core Skills subject groups and HMIe. However, several measures were being taken to improve the quality of signposting and to ensure consistency across HN Units and Group Awards.

These include:

- ◆ A revision of the documents *Guidance on Core Skills: using the design principles for Higher National Certificates and Diplomas* and *Validation panel members' guide using the design principles for Higher National Certificates and Diplomas*.
- ◆ An expanded Unit writing guide.
- ◆ Workshops on signposting and further staff development activities in conjunction with SFEU, the Core Skills subject network and Qualification Support Teams.
- ◆ The Personal Development Planning Unit, which has been designed to allow candidates to plan and develop Core Skills.

The workshop then moved on to look at the place of National Occupational Standards (NOS) within HNC/HNDs. Brian outlined the key features of NOS and why they are important and useful in HNC/HNDs. For example, NOS set out a statement of competence which brings together the skills, knowledge and understanding a person requires to do a particular job and they reflect best practice in that field. In this way, they form the basis of what employers would expect of a candidate completing an HNC/HND, and ensure that the qualification meets specific skill requirements.

Brian said that the challenge for those developing and delivering HNC/HNDs was to establish the way the qualifications should relate to NOS, and what terminology should be used to describe these links. For example, words such as ‘based on’, ‘linked to’, ‘reflect’, ‘relate to’ or ‘underpinned by’ mean different things to different people. It was therefore important to reach a common understanding in the sector and between others, such as other awarding bodies.

The discussion raised some concern that this was yet another new aspect of development for staff and about whether this was really needed. In response, the presenters said that HNC/HNDs had to be up-to-date and meet the skills requirements of particular vocational areas. For this reason, HNC/HNDs had to have a basis in recognised standards.

Doreen said that SQA would issue further advice to centres on these developments, and a full guide to National Occupational Standards in HNC/HNDs was in production. This was welcomed by participants.

Ensuring the relevance of HNC/HNDs

Martin Chisholm, SVQ Manager, SQA and Bill Gold, MBE, formerly of NEC

Martin and Bill gave an overview of Sector Panels, which were being established to provide advice and support in broad vocational areas. Three areas were being piloted this year — Land-based; E-skills; and Engineering, Science and Maths. Participants heard that the broad aims and remit of Sector Panels were:

- ◆ To ensure that SQA officers are supported in their sectoral areas by allowing key occupational stakeholders to advise, inform and guide them through operational plans.
- ◆ To assist SQA officers in making decisions about qualifications in the development stage, as well as throughout their lifespan, and to advise on work to be undertaken in the occupational areas.
- ◆ To offer feedback on priorities for development, and to advise on the impact on the occupational sector of NOS under development or review.
- ◆ To contribute intelligence on new and changing skills being introduced to the occupational areas, and to contribute updates on developments and issues in members own areas of interest.

Participants also heard about the first meeting of the Sector Panel for Engineering, Science and Maths, which had been held in March. This first meeting had explored several issues including getting buy-in from the members; what sort of information SQA would typically provide; and sector/panel members' needs. Martin said that the next steps of the pilot process would be a second round of meetings in the autumn, continuous feedback from panels, an evaluation exercise, and then a phased roll-out across other sectors.

The workshop discussion generated some specific issues for Engineering and some general issues.

In terms of specific issues, it was noted that the first meeting of the Engineering Panel had focused on operational matters and that there was a need to make this more strategic. Also, 'Science' covers several areas which are used in a wide variety of industrial sectors, so would Science be better represented through 'Tap-in' groups in the various sectors?

At a more general level, participants felt that clarification was needed on the reporting relationship of the Sector Panels within SQA — how would the outcomes from the Panels be publicised? There was also substantial discussion on Sector Panel membership and cohesion. For example, what level of 'employer' input was expected — eg from CBI, SSCs, and individual employers? Should panels have an input from students? Should there be a place for Careers Scotland and what about links with universities and professional bodies?

Progression to and from HNC/HNDs

Joe Wilson, Business Manager, SQA; Gordon Rodgers, Business Manager, SQA; and Margaret Dundas, National Co-ordinator for Widening Participation, Scottish Funding Councils

In this workshop, participants were asked to consider some of the challenges that faced the sector in ensuring smooth transitions to and from HNC/HNDs. These challenges included:

- ◆ the autonomy of Higher Education Institutions
- ◆ local ‘deals’ between colleges and HEIs
- ◆ the jump from non-advanced qualifications to HNC/Ds
- ◆ the low uptake of Scottish Group Awards
- ◆ ensuring candidates have appropriate Core Skills and other skills to be able to progress to the next level of learning
- ◆ retention and achievement

Participants heard about some of the responses from the sector to these challenges. These included:

- ◆ the Portfolio Review, which included a fresh look at National Certificates
- ◆ the HN modernisation programme, which included revised Units, Group Awards, the introduction of Graded Units, and assessment exemplars
- ◆ Core Skills profiles
- ◆ new and continuing links with HEIs

The presenters also spoke about other factors that were acting as drivers for change. For example: the Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework; the merger of the Scottish Funding Councils; increased joint FE-HE activity; the new Sector Skills Councils; the introduction of Sector Panels; Qualification Support Teams; and the development of qualifications at SCQF level 9 and above.

Workshop participants then discussed how these responses and drivers for change offer new opportunities for improving transition and progression to and from HNC/HND. They agreed that all transition and progression opportunities should continue to be promoted.