



# HN Conference 2006: Looking Forward, Reaching Further

## Conference Report

Published date: September 2006  
Publication code: FE3319

Published by the Scottish Qualifications Authority  
The Optima Building, 58 Robertson Street, Glasgow G2 8DQ  
Ironmills Road, Dalkeith, Midlothian EH22 1LE

[www.sqa.org.uk](http://www.sqa.org.uk)

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# Foreword

Dear Colleague

I am delighted to present the report of the HN Annual Conference, which was held on 23 March 2006.

The conference was designed to take stock of progress in the HN Modernisation Project, and to consider current and future implementation issues.

The strong support for the HN Modernisation Project was evident from the positive views given by the speakers, and from the large number of delegates who participated in the workshop discussions.

I would like to thank all those who gave of their time to make the conference a success. As the new Depute Director of Qualifications, I will ensure that the HN Modernisation Project continues to go from strength to strength, and I look forward to working with you in the coming year.



**John McDonald**  
Depute Director of Qualifications

# Introduction

The fourth annual HN Conference was held on Thursday 23 March 2006 at the Murrayfield Experience, Edinburgh.

One hundred and twenty-two delegates from all over Scotland, and beyond, participated in the conference. Delegates represented a wide range of stakeholders — from 11 universities, 29 colleges, the Scottish Further Education Unit, the Association of Scotland’s Colleges, the Scottish Funding Council, Colleges Open Learning Exchange Group, Sector Skills Councils, Regional Forums, the Scottish Executive, and other key stakeholders.

The theme of the conference was ‘Looking Forward, Reaching Further’ and its aim was to consider issues relating to the current and future implementation of Higher National Certificate and Diplomas (HNC/HNDs). Linda McTavish, Chair of the HN Key Partners’ Group and Principal of Anniesland College, opened the conference; and Anton Colella, Chief Executive of SQA, gave a welcome address on behalf of SQA.

Other presentations included: an update report on the status of the HN Modernisation Project from John Young, Director of Qualifications, SQA; an overview of how employability, sustainability and e-assessment/learning might enhance HN qualifications, from David Beards, Senior Policy Officer, Scottish Funding Council; and an insight into innovative approaches to HN/degree articulation from Julie McAndrews, Director of Centre for Lifelong Learning, University of Aberdeen.

Workshops provided participants with an opportunity to discuss some of these themes in more depth and included: Enterprise and Sustainability in HNC/HNDs; Verification of Graded Units; Essential tips for centres developing specialist HNC/HNDs; Subject Bridging; Implementing the revised HNC/HND; Before and beyond HNC/HNDs; Marketing HNC/HNDs; e-assessment and e-learning; and Digital Media and ICT Vendor Alliance (DIVA).

The following sections give a flavour of the day. This report can also be downloaded from: [www.sqa.org.uk/HN](http://www.sqa.org.uk/HN).



# Presentations

## Chair's address

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

In her capacity as Chair of the HN Key Partners' Group, Linda McTavish opened the conference and gave a warm welcome to delegates.

She said that the systematic review of HNC/HNDs had been successful in generating different approaches to learning and teaching, empowerment of students, and encouraging a new generation of curriculum networks. The review had also promoted strong links with industry and sector partners through the validation process, and revised HNC/HNDs were encouraging a focus on core and transferable skills, and on lessening the assessment load for students.



Looking forward, Linda noted that there were still some tasks and challenges ahead for everyone in the sector. There was a need to establish a closer relationship between strategic and operational networks, and staff would continue to need support in implementation.

In closing, Linda emphasised that the student should be the focus for activities, and she encouraged all those involved to ensure that the experience of students would be coherent and seamless.

# Chief Executive's address

## Anton Colella, Chief Executive, Scottish Qualifications Authority

On behalf of SQA, Anton Colella gave a personal welcome to delegates and congratulated the HN Key Partners' Group on its work, which he envisaged would be adopted as a model of good practice in other qualification areas.



He said that HNC/HNDs were, to some extent, an unsung success story but HNs were in a good place and partners should feel proud of this qualification. The 80th Anniversary activities and celebrations had raised awareness of the qualifications, and on his visits to centres he had received very good feedback from students, who felt privileged to be taking this qualification.

Anton said that SQA was charged with making products that were fit for purpose for the nation, the learner, the economy and employers. HNC/HNDs were getting the fit right, and he thanked all those involved for their contributions in making this happen.

# Update on status of the HN Modernisation Project

**John Young, Director of Qualifications, Scottish Qualifications Authority**

John Young gave a comprehensive overview of the HN Modernisation Project, highlighted the successes to date, and mapped out future work.

He said that the aim of the project was to produce a coherent catalogue of fit for purpose, up-to-date qualifications. Through partnership with Scotland's colleges, the previous 800 Group Award titles and 10,000 HN Units had now been successfully reduced to 289 Group Awards and 6,000 Units.



Partnership with Scotland's colleges and key agencies such as SFEU and COLEG, the use of holistic assessment, e-enabling projects such as SOLAR, and improved guidance and staff development had also ensured that the HN Modernisation Project was well on track.

An increase in funding had made a major contribution to the acceleration of the HN Modernisation Project, allowing it to be completed within a five-year timescale. Funding sources included the Scottish Funding Council, the European Social Fund, the Scottish Executive, and SQA.

John said that future objectives included: finding ways of ensuring smoother progression to and from HNC/HNDs; consolidating the place of HNs in the lifelong learning and employability agendas; and undertaking an evaluation of the design principles. A preliminary evaluation had already been undertaken and this would form the basis of a formal in-depth evaluation in 2008.

# Future-proofing HNC/HNDs

**David Beards, Senior Policy Officer, Scottish Funding Council**

David Beards gave an insightful presentation on the Scottish Funding Council's (SFC) support for HNC/HNDs and some challenges in future-proofing the qualifications. He said that the SFC fully supported the HN Modernisation Project, and was contributing £2,000,000 per annum to it through the HN Project Board, and by funding specific aspects of HN development, such as e-assessment.



He said that the challenges in future-proofing HNC/HNDs lay in four key areas: articulation; e-learning; enterprise and employability; and sustainability.

In supporting greater articulation from HNC/HNDs to degree programmes, the SFC was a key partner in Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SQCF). The Mapping, Tracking and Bridging Project; subject-level developments; and funding to universities to develop articulation links, were all important in this process.

The SFC had also supported e-enabling of HN qualifications. David said the Council was particularly keen to encourage this as it was good for learners, it supported reflective practice, and was cost-effective. Some examples of work in this area are: COLA (formative assessment), SOLAR (summative assessment), and e-Moderation.

The challenge in the area of employability and enterprise was 'How can institutions enhance the employability of students?' David said that colleges and universities should be asking key questions such as: how to have systematic employer input into course design; how pervasive are work experience placements; how do staff keep up-to-date with changing industrial practice; and how are employability skills developed and recognised?

Sustainability was also a key challenge. A baseline survey had shown that there was little recognition of sustainable development at institutional level, and interest from students, and the employers who recruit them, seemed low. There was a need to raise awareness on a range of practices such as procurement, waste, and use of energy, but David speculated on whether specific programmes were needed, or whether there should be signposting in all programmes.

Concluding, David said the HN success story needed to be maintained, and the good track record from colleges and SQA augured well for this. Updating content and approaches to delivery, and a coherent strategy involving all national bodies, were essential to ensure the qualification remained fit for purpose for its users.

# Innovative approaches to HN/degree articulation

**Julie McAndrews, Director of the Centre for Lifelong Learning, University of Aberdeen**

Julie McAndrews gave a positive view of HN to degree articulation and its importance to a smart, successful Scotland. She noted that although agreements between colleges and universities were in place, there was still a low level of progression.



Referring to the model used at the University of Aberdeen, Julie said it was important to get senior management support and to link articulation to quality enhancement, learning and teaching strategies, and student experience. She said that by aligning articulation issues with the strategic objectives of the university, getting the right people together, and using an holistic approach, Aberdeen had developed a successful model that was driven by the learner, rather than a deficit model approach.

Concluding, Julie said there were a number of factors that would impinge on both sectors of the HN–degree axis. These included: demographic changes that would result in a different student profile; the merging of the Scottish Funding Councils; and the demand for a flexible curriculum by the next generation of students. The hope was that by the college and university sectors working closely together, current opportunities and future challenges would work to the benefit of all.

# Workshops

## Enterprise and sustainability in HNC/HNDs

Gordon Rodgers, Business Manager, SQA, facilitated this workshop. Its main aim was to consider how enterprise and sustainability (E&S), two key planks of Scottish Executive policy and education strategy, could be addressed through HNC/HNDs.

The Enterprise and Culture Committee Report, published on 14 March 2006, said that sustainable economic growth is the Scottish Executive's number one priority, and that it is important that such growth should be environmentally sustainable. Gordon said this provided a useful illustration of the interconnections between educational, economic and environmental policy, and supported the rationale for combining enterprise and sustainability in the one workshop.

The workshop then moved on to consider a number of drivers for including E&S in SQA's qualifications. Some of the drivers discussed were:

- ◆ Determined to Succeed
- ◆ Smart Successful Scotland
- ◆ Framework for Economic Development
- ◆ A Curriculum for Excellence
- ◆ Choosing our Future
- ◆ Scottish Funding Council
- ◆ UN Decade of Education

Examining enterprise in education, Gordon said that there were several key points. Enterprise in education was not only about developing entrepreneurial skills, but also about encouraging a range of positive attitudes and behaviour. In terms of sustainable development, the Scottish Executive's strategy had identified three key points for education. One was that learning for sustainable development is a core function of the formal education system. A second is that there are lifelong opportunities to learn. The third was that the sustainable development message is clear and easily understood.

Looking to the future, Gordon informed participants that SQA had established a cross-cutting group with a remit to look at E&S, and that SQA's strategy for enterprise and sustainability in relation to HNC/HNDs would seek to involve partners to explore ways of integrating E&S into these qualifications.

## Verification of Graded Units

This workshop was facilitated by Sue MacFarlane, Qualifications Manager, SQA, and, until recently, a Senior Verifier with experience of verifying Graded Units. The aim of the workshop was to explore standardisation, quality, and good practice in assessing Graded Units.



Two of the three workshops comprised delegates from the further education sector, and one also included delegates from higher education institutions, who raised particular issues regarding the role of Graded Units in articulation from HN to degree programmes.

The results of last year's verification of exam-based Graded Units from the business area were discussed by Sue. This included Senior Verifiers' recommendations and examples of good practice. Participants then discussed a number of points relating to delivery, marking, and internal and external verification, and it was noted that clarification and development were still required in a number of areas.

Discussion and feedback included: how to standardise approaches to re-assessment and ensure fairness between different types of Units; how to indicate whether achievement is on first attempt or re-assessment; whether visiting verification was more helpful to colleges than central verification; whether there should be centrally-produced papers to be taken on specified dates; ensuring the quality of exemplars; and the importance of early notification and details of central verification.

Sue said that points from the discussion would be fed back to the appropriate people within SQA for action for future guidance, support and policy development.

## Essential tips for centres developing specialist HNC/HNDs

The aim of this workshop was to focus on 10 essential tips for those developing Higher National Certificates and Higher National Diplomas. The workshops were delivered by Development Managers from SQA — Douglas Dickson, Ann Hackston, Kath Parkin and Alison Plummer — who collectively form the Partnership Team, working with Scotland’s colleges on single centre specialist and collaborative developments.

Participants in each session included practitioners actively developing HN Group Awards, those considering the development of HNC/HNDs, quality managers, SQA contacts, and senior managers within colleges.

The first part of the workshop took the format of a presentation, which focused on:

- ◆ the role of SQA Higher National Toolkit
- ◆ importance of market research
- ◆ reason(s) for developing the qualification
- ◆ role of the Qualification Design Team (QDT)
- ◆ role of the chairperson for a QDT
- ◆ role of the HN Development Manager in the development of a qualification
- ◆ management of the development timelines
- ◆ issues in managing a QDT
- ◆ interaction of the QDT with college quality personnel
- ◆ internal tracking of the development of qualifications by colleges

The presentation was followed by a discussion that allowed participants to work through scenarios that might be encountered when developing a qualification.

The final part of the workshop focused on general issues relating to developing HNC/HNDs. These issues included enhancing communication processes and developing HN qualifications beyond the timeline of the HN Modernisation Project. In addition, a number of questions were raised regarding the practical issues involved in revalidation or development.

Issues and questions were noted by the Partnership Team for future action.

## Subject Bridging — HN to degree study

Margaret Dundas, National Co-ordinator for Widening Participation, led this workshop with support from staff from the SFC Bridging Project. The first two sessions had a good mix of college and HEI staff, with the third workshop comprising college staff only.



The presentation and update from staff on release to support the Bridging Project generated considerable interest. From the subsequent discussion, the following key points were noted:

- ◆ Many of the subject lecturers and programme leaders were unaware of the existence of the wider access regional forums and their work. Those who were aware of the forums were mainly from the West Forum region and were participating in the ‘On Track’ Project, which helps prepare students for the HN to degree transition.
- ◆ College staff were, in the main, unaware of the excellent information available on the HE Academy website ([www.heacademy.ac.uk](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk)), which holds extensive information on both generic and subject network areas (24 subject networks). University staff were informed of the SFEU website and subject networks. These two resources were seen as important to the Subject Bridging Project, as one of the project’s aims was to promote joint staff working across the SFEU and HE Academy subject networks.
- ◆ Better communication is required between, and within, forum institutions to capitalise on what has already been produced, and spread good practice. Every Scottish college and HEI is a member of a forum and has a nominated representative who is able to attend meetings.
- ◆ The focus on subject-specific progression was welcomed and, in particular, the intention to involve professional bodies in Psychology, Law and Engineering along with both sectors and SQA.

Margaret agreed to forward more details on the project, including the names and contact details for the subject-specific staff on release. She also informed participants that the information was available on the Scottish Wider Access Regional Forums (SWARF) website ([www.swarf.ac.uk](http://www.swarf.ac.uk)) under ‘Subject Networks’. Reports would also be posted on this site as they became available in the summer. Links to the four forums and details of their projects could also be found on this site.

## **Implementing the revised HNC/HND — a lecturer and student perspective**

A member of staff and a student from Reid Kerr College — John Kelly and Peter Khawli — delivered this workshop, which looked at the rationale behind the revision of the HNC/HND in Business, and the impact of this on staff and students.

The main changes to the award had been the introduction of three Graded Units, the updating of all previous subject Units, change in focus of a number of subject areas and improved integration between Units.

The presenters provided a largely positive view of the revised HNC/HND in Business. Both recognised that the revised course was more challenging than the previous version and, in particular, the Graded Units were demanding for students, though, as Peter told the participants, the experience of the first year Graded Unit had been valuable as preparation for degree study. For staff, one of the challenges was the increased integration across subjects, which had an impact on teaching and learning, and the need for students to use research skills more than in the past. Formal exams had also added to the student experience, although staff now had an additional area to be taught — exam skills.

Lively discussion took place in all of the workshops. It was noted that colleges would have to recognise that the new course would require additional support in terms of staff development, and that management of three Graded Units, including two exams and a project, was a challenge for staff. A number of participants were unsure whether staff had the experience to manage these courses and were looking for support. Some participants also expressed concern about new delivery techniques, problems for timetabling, and integration between other HNC/HNDs such as Accounting and Administration and IT.

Positive views were expressed regarding the role of SQA, as it now appeared to be offering not only a certification service, but also a more pro-active and participative maintenance role for new qualifications. A number of people commented on the positive impact of Qualification Support Teams (QST), although it was noted that not all disciplines had a strong and supportive QST.

Overall, the message from the workshop was that the revised modernised course did meet the various stakeholders' requirements more effectively.

## Before and beyond HNC/HNDs

Robert Quinn and John Lewis led this workshop, which gave a summary of work to date of two exciting projects that look at the development of vocationally related SQA Group Awards pre- and post-HN.



Robert gave a detailed presentation on the development process and design principles for National Qualification Group Awards (National Certificates and National Progression Awards). This included information on current work on mapping the needs of occupational sectors and the plan to build a detailed schedule of NQ Group Award developments, which will be shared with all key stakeholders.

A presentation on a two-year project that will explore the development of Professional Development Awards (PDAs) at SCQF level 9 in specialised areas was then given by John. Level 9 PDAs would be designed to develop and enhance the vocational skills for employees prior to, and during, employment, and would provide continuing professional development on behalf of professional bodies. John emphasised that the key driver behind this initiative was the needs of industry, and that SCQF level 9 PDAs would only be developed where evidence from industry was that a programme was needed to fulfil gaps that would benefit both employers and Scotland's economy.

The workshop concluded with some discussion on a range of issues. Delegates were supportive of the developments and emphasised the need to keep the principles behind the design of the new Group Awards as flexible as possible so that Qualification Design Teams could create qualifications that were fit for purpose and enhance the skills capability of all candidates.

Delegates welcomed this work and expressed a keen interest in becoming involved in the development process. In particular, they were reassured that the approach to project management and communication would be based on the successful HN modernisation process.

## Marketing HNC/HNDs

This workshop was facilitated by Ian Wason, Marketing Manager, SQA, and Caroline Hunter, Qualifications Officer for Science, SQA. The aims of the marketing workshop were to:

- ◆ share some of SQA's recent market research findings and discuss opportunities for delegates to get involved
- ◆ provide information and updates on the HN 80th Anniversary celebrations and activities, particularly the forthcoming HN Showcase event
- ◆ discuss SQA's future HN promotional plans and possible opportunities for partnership activities
- ◆ seek informal feedback on the content and use of the HN pages of SQA's website
- ◆ share SQA's plans for the proposed HN Science campaign and seek feedback on draft marketing materials

Delegates discussed SQA's market research programme and welcomed the chance to take away a prepared handout for further analysis and to contribute to future questionnaires. Many delegates were already aware of the HN 80th Anniversary activities, and Ian was delighted to receive firm offers of assistance with the Showcase event on 31 May/1 June. One example of this was an offer from the Scottish Agricultural College to install a display garden.

The discussion about the website and the HN Science proposal also proved to be fruitful, and Ian and Caroline were pleased with the very useful comments received on both topics. Ian told participants that comments, feedback, and proposals would be incorporated in future activities wherever possible.

## E-assessment and e-learning

On behalf of SQA, George Herd, Consultant, presented an overview of the range of e-assessment and e-learning projects and initiatives being undertaken in relation to HN.

Whilst there was a range of interests amongst those attending the workshop, most had a direct interest in projects that sought to identify ways in which e-learning and e-assessment could improve the teaching, learning, and assessment experience for learners in further education.

There was some discussion of the degree to which the findings and outcomes of specific projects could be generalised across the sector, and about the specific conditions that needed to exist to allow real benefits to be achieved through increased use of e-approaches.

Participants noted that they found the workshop a valuable overview of the range of projects currently underway, and very helpful in identifying those that were likely to be of most direct relevance to them. As most of the projects were still in progress it was suggested that a further update along similar lines may be helpful for next year's conference, with an increased focus on how the project outputs may complement and support each other.

## Digital Media and ICT Vendor Alliance (DIVA)

This workshop was facilitated by Bob McGonigle, SQA Consultant for the DIVA Project, and staff from lead centres involved in the project. Bob introduced the project, which involved working in partnership with vendors such as Apple, Avid, Cisco, CompTIA, Macromedia, Microsoft, and Oracle to ensure the relevance of HN qualifications to particular aspects of vendors' skill requirements.



The presentations looked at each vendor in relation to four areas:

- ◆ Curriculum Relevance
- ◆ Learning Support
- ◆ Roll Out
- ◆ Looking Forward

Delegates then participated in discussion with Bob and other staff to explore issues and plans for the future. Bob indicated that the next steps were to expand partnerships and to explore the possibility of new developments.

Further information and news about this project can be found at:  
**[www.sqa.org.uk/diva](http://www.sqa.org.uk/diva)**.