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Consultation on HN Key Partners Group (HNKPG) Exit Strategy

**A report to HNKPG by Walter Patterson
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Executive summary

Almost all responding colleges expressed support for a partnership approach, recognising the clear benefits that it has provided for learners, employers and the colleges. As part of its exit strategy, they would wish to see HN Key Partners' Group (HNKPG) revisit its objectives and membership to establish clear roles and purpose going forward.

Colleges agree on the importance of guidance and support, but would wish to see the measures proposed in Theme 2 extended to include a centralised collection of assessment exemplars and learning packs. They would wish to retain, if possible, some or all of the current HN partnership team in recognition of the contribution that individuals with a good knowledge of the sector can make to help colleges. There was scepticism about the proposal for a co-ordinating committee (Theme 3), with colleges expressing confidence in SQA to make informed decisions about Group Awards and titles through its access to the sector knowledge of its Qualification Managers (QMs) and the experience and specialist knowledge of Qualification Support Teams (QSTs). All were confident that any matter of dispute would be resolved through the normal processes of dialogue between colleges and SQA.

Colleges would wish to see the strengthening of guidance on Group Award development and validation as proposed in Theme 4, but most thought that SQA could help further by publishing timelines for the key elements of its processes for development and validation. All colleges supported the proposed centralised technical editing of Graded Units. In this regard, both Scottish Further Education Unit (SFEU) and College Open Learning Exchange Group (COLEG) indicated that they could play a positive role in developing college capacity in devising and delivering Graded Units. While the proposed Annual Report (Theme 5) was welcomed, colleges agreed that there should be more frequent updates and a wider scope of information to meet their needs both as developers and deliverers of Group Awards.

Colleges were supportive of QSTs and of staff release to participate in their activities, but all noted that this could only be within college financial and staffing constraints. Some colleges expressed concern that QSTs may not always have the specialist knowledge to offer guidance, particularly in cases where the expertise resided only with the colleges making the Group Award proposal. Almost all colleges suggested that SFEU's subject networks might be harnessed to good effect to support the work of QMs and QSTs, but more importantly to ensure the dissemination to subject staff across all colleges of the delivery implications of decisions being made.

Some other issues of a more general nature were expressed through the consultation, including clarification of the relationships between SQA and colleges, and the need for a shared model for intellectual property ownership.

1 Remit

1.1 Background

The HN Modernisation Project is an ambitious five year project to modernise all HNC/HNDs, including their component Units. The project is on target to complete in December 2008. In preparation for this, and the return to 'steady state' mode, the HN Key Partners' Group (HNKPG) has drawn up proposals for an exit strategy for this project.

The HN Modernisation Project has been delivered through a strong partnership between SQA, Scotland's colleges and other related organisations, and has resulted in a reduction of the number of HN Group Awards and Units, and the sharing of resources across the further education (FE) sector to the benefit of all. The HNKPG proposals retain a number of the key features from this partnership model that has served the sector so well in the past four years. These are:

- ◆ a continued partnership approach, involving SQA, Scotland's Colleges, SFEU, College Open Learning Exchange Group (COLEG), the Association of Scotland's Colleges (ASC), Scottish Funding Council (SFC), employers and the Scottish Government to generate continuous improvement of the HN qualification throughout the sector
- ◆ non-proliferation of Group Awards (but recognising that some new areas may be introduced; and that if Group Awards become too generic, there may be a loss of support/input for colleges from industry)
- ◆ non-proliferation of Units and possible further reduction of the HN Unit catalogue (but recognising that if Units become too generic, there may be a loss of support/input for colleges from industry)
- ◆ keeping qualifications up-to-date on an on-going basis

The remit for this consultation was to ensure that the key stakeholders (Scotland's colleges and the support agencies of ASC, SFEU and COLEG) were made fully aware of the HNKPG proposals, and to seek their responses to the detailed proposal.

1.2 Consultation methodology

HNKPG wrote to the Principals of Scotland's colleges, explaining the background to its exit strategy proposals and setting them out in detail. The letter included a response form. In addition, a news article was placed on the SQA website, which provided links to the communication to Principals and also to an online version of the survey response form.

The consultant wrote to Principals of centres with devolved authority (18 colleges) and to the senior manager in the three support agencies (ASC, SFEU, COLEG) seeking an interview to explore the views that they might have of the detailed proposals. The content of the interview schedule and the presentation to be made at the interview were agreed beforehand with HNKPG. In addition, three focus group meetings were held to allow any other interested colleges (and those with devolved authority unable to make an arrangement to meet with the consultant) to participate in a discussion of the exit strategy. Two focus group meetings were held in central locations while the third was held using video conferencing facilities (hosted by Perth College).

1.3 Responses to the survey form

Combining the responses, posted in by colleges with the online responses and the views expressed in interviews, produced 26 sets of responses. Of these, over 90% responded positively to the following questions: Q1 (partnership working), Q5 (mechanism to ensure cohesiveness), Q6 (providing SQA with information), Q9 (submission of Graded Units for technical editing), Q11 (are QSTs appropriate mechanism?) and Q12 (release of staff to attend QST). All respondents thought that more should be done to provide support for staff delivering HN qualifications (Q4). There was much less agreement however about the sufficiency of information to be provided by the proposed HN annual report (Q10), with some 61% suggesting additional information to be provided. For Q3 (measures provide good support), Q7 (proposals for co-ordinating committee) and Q8 (other measures to strengthen validation) the proportion providing a positive response was around two-thirds.

2 College contexts

It is not surprising that colleges should have differing views of the proposed exit strategy, given the significant differences that exist among the colleges themselves, both in terms of size, subject specialisms and balance of higher education/further education provision. For a few colleges, SQA provided the only means of 'branding' their specialist provision (usually meeting a niche market), while for two colleges SQA was viewed alongside other providers of qualifications such as EdExcel and City & Guilds.

Some colleges have had significant engagement in the process of modernising the HN Group Awards (one college had been actively involved in 33 Group Award developments), while others have only been beneficiaries of the modernisation work done by others. For more than a few colleges the proportion of their student activity in HN Group Awards was low.

Another difference among colleges was the extent to which senior staff had been involved in the work of committees such as HN Key Partners Group, HN Project Board and SQA's Qualifications Committee and Sector Panels. One result of this was that the consultation process was enhanced by college managers coming to the discussions with informed views of the issues addressed in the exit strategy.

Two responses to the consultation were different in kind from the rest. The most significant for the consultation was the response from UHI Millennium Institute, which operates as the single centre with devolved authority for all eight partner UHIMI colleges (Perth, Moray, Inverness, North Highland, Lews Castle, Orkney, Shetland, Sabhal Mor Ostaig). A common route to a degree in UHIMI is through a '2+1' format with the early years being SQA HN Group Awards. UHIMI operates rigorous processes for the design and development of new Group Awards across its partner colleges, and almost all developments are on a partnership basis within UHIMI. As a result, those colleges that are partners in UHIMI will have the opportunity for partnership working regardless of whatever national arrangements are put in place.

In the case of the second 'different' institution, the Scottish Agricultural College (SAC), its funding arrangements and specialised provision meant that it did not have access to support from national FE support agencies such as SFEU, and most of its work was in relation to single-centre Group Awards. The views of UHIMI and SAC will therefore be kept separate from the main analysis that follows.

A general issue that arose in consultation was that the themes of the exit strategy were not always easily separated from one another. As a result, similar responses occur in respect of several of the themes.

3 Theme 1: Consultation, dissemination of information and buy-in from senior management

Need to maintain HN catalogue

Colleges uniformly accepted the need to maintain a coherent and manageable HN catalogue. HN Group Awards were well understood across the sector and the present achieved level of coherence was proving to be beneficial to learners, employers and colleges. HN Group Awards were also seen as fundamental to an integrated Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) system.

Partnership working

Many colleges commented on the success of modernisation and the benefits that partnership had brought to the sector as a whole and to their own college developments. However, several were anxious that the development of HN Group Awards should continue, particularly with the need for the sector to support the Scottish Government Skills Strategy, and the increasing need to fit better with the Curriculum for Excellence principles that were shaping NQ-level provision. Many colleges cited existing subject networks and other informal partnerships as ways of continuing the work of development in a coherent manner. Several claimed that in a few subject areas partnership working was now ingrained as the preferred method for taking forward developments.

Almost all colleges wished, in principle, to continue to participate in partnership arrangements to maintain and manage the HN catalogue. They recognised that colleges working together on the curriculum could result in the best use of resources and prioritisation of effort. However, almost all also flagged up issues of concern about the nature of the relationships among colleges, with HNKPG and with SQA itself. This was clearly exercising senior managers in most colleges visited, and for many the current restructuring of SQA itself was raising anxieties about future relationships.

Two colleges saw themselves in a supplier/customer relationship with SQA for the bulk of their HN Group Awards, with the flexibility to choose Group Awards that fitted their markets from a range of providers. For these, the notion of the catalogue being maintained through partnership was not appealing. As an example, if SQA's e-assessment policy was failing to help a college achieve its e-learning targets, then the college would probably move to providers whose awards were fully e-enabled for delivery and assessment.

Arrangements for Group Award development in future

Almost all colleges wanted the future arrangements for Group Award development to be more clearly specified than it is at present. In particular, they made reference to clear protocols, processes and timescales. This timescales aspect was usually raised in the context of colleges having experienced slow response from SQA on important questions. They would also wish to see flexibility in the arrangements that would allow colleges to quickly respond to specialist or local needs.

Role of HNKPG or co-ordinating group

Six colleges held the view that HNKPG had been constituted for a particular purpose (that of modernising the HN catalogue) and should not just re-invent itself for a new set of purposes. They were, however, open to the formation of a new co-ordinating group, provided the terms of reference were clear and acceptable to the sector, and that membership provided good representation from colleges, support agencies, Principal's Forum, Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) and other stakeholders.

These colleges also expressed concerns about the accountability of such a group — they wished this to be explicit, perhaps within the arrangements for a unified sector support agency. Most colleges expressed a view that any co-ordinating group should not stifle, rather than support, developments or get in the way of direct contacts between colleges and SQA. One college warned of potential danger that the 'waters might be muddied' by a co-ordinating committee.

Funding

From a funding perspective, more than a few Principals made the point that HN provision is the least well funded of their government-funded activities. In an increasingly difficult financial context, it could hardly be expected that colleges would not only deliver HN Group Awards using this lower level of resource, but also contribute to developing and maintaining them.

These Principals would prefer that this kind of activity should be supported from SQA's core funding which was, after all, explicitly for such purposes. To this end they would wish clarification of the extent to which SQA's core funding would resource HN Unit and Group Award development, and the process whereby such development might be approved.

Theme 1 summary

Colleges were supportive of the continuation of a partnership approach to maintaining a coherent catalogue of HN Group Awards. Most wished to see HNKPG revisit its objectives and membership with a view to establishing clear accountability to the sector.

4 **Theme 2: Guidance and training and use of existing partnerships**

Proposed arrangements

Most colleges expressed concern that the arrangements proposed would not of themselves be sufficient to support college staff in the on-going work of maintaining existing Group Awards and developing new ones to meet market needs. Although most colleges responded positively to Question 3 (Will the measures suggested provide good support?) they also added comments about shortcomings in the proposed measures. A couple of colleges suggested that it would be appropriate for SQA to carry out a risk assessment of the impact of the exit strategy with particular reference to the Scottish Government's Skills Strategy.

HN Partnership team

Almost all colleges expressed surprise and regret that one of the most successful support measures over the past four years — the HN Partnership team — was to be discontinued. Most colleges requested that consideration should be given to retaining at least part of that team, or to ensuring that future support included people with experience of, and empathy toward, the realities of working in the FE sector.

Support

The Understanding Standards website was not as well known or as well used as the exit strategy suggests. A few colleges suggested that it was not an easy site to navigate, nor could it ever replace a dialogue with another practitioner. Several colleges noted that requests for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) by staff engaged in Unit/Group Award development did not prominently feature the use of this website. Most thought that the role of SQA Academy was not well understood in the sector, nor was its contribution to CPD sufficiently recognised.

A common theme in college responses was that, in the absence of the HN Partnership team, college staff will require better access to their subject QMs than they have had in the past (although a few QMs were singled out for praise in that regard). This access should be supported by better channels of communication between SQA and staff in colleges. While blogs and wikis can help with communication of information, it would not be sensible to rely too heavily on channels that required college staff to proactively access a website.

Another way in which SQA might help support college staff was to provide a period of stability in which it did not change guidelines and procedures. SQA should streamline the processes of Unit and Group Award validation, and provide colleges with a Service Level Agreement on turnaround times for Units and Assessment Instruments submitted. College staff would also welcome a greater level of consistency in the guidance they received from the various teams within SQA.

Several colleges explicitly requested that SQA should still continue to offer developmental visits to colleges as a means of supporting both development and delivery. The role of the External Verifier was seen as important in this regard. Almost all colleges noted that SFEU's subject networks had the potential to provide support for staff developing or maintaining Group Awards, or making changes to Units. It was noted that QSTs might themselves also contribute to this role.

There was a view from most respondents that support for staff in the delivery and development of HN Group Awards should include good quality teaching materials, exemplars of good practice, and pre-moderated assessment support packs (ASPs). To achieve this would require contributions from agencies other than just SFEU. Colleges suggested that the proposed unified support agency for the sector could play a key role in providing this training, guidance and support for staff, and ensure that there was synergy with other sector developments.

Several colleges indicated that more support was required in the delivery and assessment of the Graded Unit. One solution suggested by a few colleges was for SQA to compile a database of moderated assessments (and learning packs) and make this available to colleges. Better support was also requested to assist colleges that wished to move towards e-learning and e-assessment in their HN delivery. For a few colleges the provision of ASPs was taken to be part of the support and guidance to staff and there was concern that funding was 'drying up' for these.

College staff

Finally, almost all colleges indicated that they would expect that among their own staff there were people with the 'know how' about HN development and delivery to provide mentoring support for others who required it. However, the bulk of this will be in delivery and assessment of HN Group Awards, rather than in developing them, so knowledge and experience of this latter aspect would probably decline.

Theme 2 summary

Colleges agree with the proposed measures. But these alone will not meet the requirements of colleges and staff and effective support arrangements must include people with a good knowledge of the sector, retaining if possible at least part of the HN partnership team. A centralised collection of assessment exemplars and learning packs would also help, and subject networks might be harnessed to good effect.

5 Theme 3: Sector support/co-ordinating committee

Consulting with SQA

Responses from colleges indicated that they fully supported the principle of having some mechanism to ensure the cohesiveness of the landscape to safeguard the gains from the HN modernisation effort. None of the colleges expressed any desire to go out and develop awards on their own. They were positive that any Group Awards that they might develop should have the SQA 'HN brand', and consequently had no thought other than to always engage with SQA about the title and proposed content of any new Group Awards. It was important to the sector that the hard-won nationwide currency of HN Group Awards should be protected.

All colleges were clear that they had an obligation under present devolved authority conditions to consult with stakeholders, including the SQA, about new developments. They indicated that they would normally engage in dialogue with SQA officers (particularly the QM) that goes beyond the proposed providing of information about Group Awards. In any case, all colleges had robust internal procedures to assess the viability of any new Group Award proposals prior to bringing them forward to SQA.

Responding to employers' needs

Most colleges stressed that employers should have access to Group Awards with unique titles and well-defined content. What colleges did not want however, was a centralised or bureaucratic approach to determining what the HN developments might be. Colleges were of the view that subject expertise and direct contacts with employers and industry bodies were rooted firmly in the operations of FE colleges and, more often than not, it would be the colleges themselves who were best placed to identify and address a market need. It would be unhelpful to have complex administrative processes to slow down or hinder a college in its response to employers. One challenge for the sector in moving forward was how best to harness the existing body of knowledge and experience about creating coherent and fit-for-purpose Group Awards.

Transparency in new developments

Some colleges also requested that a previous arrangement of 'protecting' a new Group Award for a year should be reinstated. This would help colleges to be transparent about new developments without

the fear that a perceived market lead ('competitive advantage') might be eroded.

Co-ordinating committee

The proposal for a co-ordinating committee was the least well received proposal in the exit strategy. Even in the 65% of colleges who replied 'Yes' to Question 7 (Are you happy with proposals for a co-ordinating committee to advise SQA on new developments?) there were anxieties about the size, composition and effectiveness of such a committee. And around one-third of respondents felt strongly that such a function was not required. In any case, many pointed to the existing SQA Qualifications Committee, which has a remit similar to that proposed for the co-ordinating committee. A couple of colleges took the line that, since they had devolved authority from SQA, then at best a co-ordinating committee could only offer advice.

The strong message here was that colleges had confidence in SQA and its officers (particularly QMs) to make sensible decisions regarding college applications for new/modified Group Awards and titles. The QMs would know their sector better than any group of individuals brought together in a committee, and colleges would find it more effective to have a dialogue with SQA about any proposals they might make, rather than through an administrative procedure. And they noted that the generic QST in a subject area (as proposed in Theme 6) should also be able to provide advice to SQA.

Theme 3 summary

Colleges were agreed that SQA was itself capable of performing the role of ensuring cohesiveness in the landscape using the sector knowledge of its QMs and perhaps also through its QSTs. Colleges expressed little appetite for yet another administrative layer in this process.

6 Theme 4: Strengthening aspects of proposed development/validation

Enhanced guidance on processes

Colleges welcomed the moves to strengthen guidance on titles and content, and recognised the value of re-using existing Units rather than writing Group Award-specific Units.

Almost all colleges had confidence that their existing internal processes for Group Award approval were robust enough to ensure that any proposed development would be well researched, supported by evidence of market need, and fully costed for both development and delivery. Also, the current difficult funding context for FE, and the rules for allocating funds, would be a further driver for colleges to produce proposals that were both feasible and economic.

However, around 60% of colleges felt that more should be done to strengthen this aspect of HN Group Award processes. Most comments were aimed at securing a more reliable and uniform service from SQA officers with respect to responsiveness to queries and/or submissions from colleges. Several colleges requested that SQA establish a timetable and framework for dealing with Unit and Group Award development and validation, and that this should set out clear expectations for colleges and for SQA. Colleges recognised that clarity in the criteria would help consistency in practice, although a few warned against an over-prescriptive approach.

A few colleges made mention of the key role that SQA staff could play in the strengthening of these arrangements, stressing the importance of colleges having access to SQA officers who could make decisions. Given that individual members of college staff only infrequently had to engage with SQA procedures and guidelines, it would make better sense for them to directly access help from an individual rather than trawling a website.

Graded Units

There was a wholehearted approval of the proposals in respect of technical editing of Graded Units, with most colleges assuming that this process would include an element of benchmarking of level of demand across Group Awards in a subject area. Most colleges expressed the expectation that the processes would involve dialogue between the technical editors and the Unit authors, rather than a top-down process. Their expectation was that the technical edit processes would provide transparent evidence of uniformity of standards.

A few colleges expressed the view that this proposal ought to have been implemented from the start and would have helped to avoid the current problems with Graded Units. They hoped that the review would cover all existing Graded Units, not just those to be written in the future. A few colleges were conscious that Graded Units also needed to be audited for 'Equalities' and did not feel they had sufficient expertise, whereas SQA officers would probably have developed skills in this area.

There was a good level of interest in how a bank of technically edited and validated Graded Units might be assembled. This was seen as being potentially very helpful to colleges, mainly for the delivery of Group Awards, but also to inform standards in future developments. An alternative view from a couple of colleges was that colleges might work together in formal or informal networks to 'trade' validated Graded Units.

Theme 4 summary

Colleges would like to see guidance strengthened as proposed, but most thought that some additional measures would be required to help maintain the cohesiveness of the landscape. These lay mainly in making SQA's procedures more responsive and accountable to adhere to a set of published timescales. All supported the proposed centralised technical editing of Graded Units.

7 Theme 5: HN Annual Report

Need for an HN Annual Report

Colleges agreed that it was important that there should be a regular exchange of information between colleges and SQA. In this respect, an HN Annual Report should provide an opportunity for the colleges to receive comprehensive information about the HN landscape. It should not be 'glossy', but rather a collection of information that was useful to decision makers in colleges, and should be published at a time that fits with college decision cycles.

Report content

Most took the view that the proposed report was insufficiently comprehensive. Colleges variously expressed a desire for information on:

- ◆ Group Awards being presented in non-FE centres (eg in Scottish higher education institutions, in training providers, in centres outwith Scotland)
- ◆ statistical data on trends in Group Award uptake and results, and data on equality strands, such as ethnicity, gender
- ◆ statistical data on Unit entries and results (to help with benchmarking)
- ◆ SQA performance against its published service standards (eg time to respond to Graded Unit submissions)
- ◆ time limits for expiry of existing Group Awards and forward programme of developments
- ◆ general matters, such as the information provided by the partnership team to colleges about changes, new awards etc

Other channels of communication

However, most colleges would prefer more regular updating of key information about HNs. The proposed annual update would only serve part of their information needs. SQA should be making use of multiple channels, such as regular updates through its website or through its engagement with QSTs. A useful channel could be opened up to the Quality Managers' Forum or SFEU's Quality Community of Practice.

A few colleges with specialist provision expressed concern that they may have started preliminaries on a Group Award development that was 'commercial in confidence'. They would be reluctant to have such

information published to the sector, unless SQA wished to return to the 1-year moratorium on a Group Award being offered by other centres.

Theme 5 summary

Colleges generally thought that SQA could provide more frequent and comprehensive information than that proposed for the HN Annual Report. But colleges also recognised that the value of information lies in its timeliness, and this report would be an important aspect of the proposed reporting mechanisms.

8 Theme 6: Enhanced role for QSTs

Remit and membership of QSTs

All colleges were agreed that QSTs provided a means for SQA (and its QMs) to be well-informed about the fitness for purpose of Group Awards. They recognised that colleges benefited from the operation of QSTs, and that QST members generally brought a good measure of creativity to their role. However, a few colleges noted that the 'volunteer' nature of QST membership might not always result in the best balance of expertise.

More than a few colleges expressed concern about the nature of the communications from QSTs back to the sector at large. Their view was that, for some areas, this communication was insufficient to keep the sector well informed about developments and reinforced the notion that information was known only by an 'inner circle'. In parallel with this, some colleges expressed concerns about the processes whereby members were recruited to QSTs. Several colleges would wish to see this process much more transparent, and for QST membership lists to be published.

Specialist Group Awards

Colleges with specialist or niche Group Awards found difficulty with the role of a generic QST in dealing with such Group Awards (eg Printing, Agriculture, Furniture Making). While accepting that a generic QST might offer general support and advice to colleges, they did not believe that for such Group Awards the QST could make informed decisions. They did, however, offer solutions, such as making use of existing informal and formal networks, including SFEU Subject Networks.

Staff release

Almost every college cautioned that their support for any particular member of staff being released to work in a QST would be dependent on availability of resources within the college, the nature of the engagement with the QST, and the importance of the subject area for the college. Given the benefits that QST participation brings to a college and to the member of staff in personal development, colleges would mostly be inclined to say 'Yes'. But HNKPG and SQA should recognise the difficult funding position of colleges in the next few years.

Theme 6 summary

Colleges were supportive of QSTs and staff release to participate, within college constraints. But there is concern that QSTs do not offer a 'one size fits all' solution, and SQA should consider a range of models of engagement to ensure that Group Awards stay current and valid.

9 Other issues raised by colleges

Not surprisingly, colleges took full advantage of the opportunity to raise particular matters about which they had concerns or frustrations. These are only mentioned briefly here, and included:

- ◆ The need to continue to rationalise Units and Group Awards to help learners have a clear picture of what is available.
- ◆ The feeling that colleges should have some control over those Group Awards that they have designed and developed.
- ◆ The use by institutions in other countries of Group Awards developed by Scottish colleges.
- ◆ The assumption by HNKPG in Q2 that it will continue after its initial purpose has ceased.
- ◆ The increasing importance of Sector Skills Councils to the process of developing fit-for-purpose Group Awards.
- ◆ Lack of recognition in consultation that there is a changing landscape with more emphasis on Professional Development Awards (PDAs) and industry-recognised Group Awards.
- ◆ Lack of recognition in consultation that a new single support agency for the sector is about to come into being.
- ◆ Ownership of Intellectual Property Rights (IPR). This is currently part of discussions between SQA and Scotland's colleges.

These issues form part of the wider engagement between SQA and colleges and are not included in any of the recommendations to HNKPG.

10 Views from FE sector support agencies (SFEU, COLEG and ASC)

The national support agencies are currently in a period of transition and some uncertainty about specific roles and responsibilities was evident. However SFEU, COLEG and ASC all expressed a keen interest in the consultation and wished to contribute their views based on their previous experience in support of HN modernisation.

ASC

ASC noted that Scotland was moving towards a strategic agreement with Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) to ensure that National Occupational Standards were safeguarded in college Group Award offerings, while allowing colleges flexibility to work with SQA. SSCs had access to important labour market information that would be helpful to Scotland's colleges.

ASC also noted that it is within the powers of colleges to credit rate their own provision and have this included within the SCQF.

COLEG

COLEG noted that college practitioners were central to the processes that underpinned Group Award development and delivery. They helped review qualifications, design new Group Awards, and write Units and Assessment Support Packs and deliver them. They were also the writers of content to support delivery. However, COLEG noted that it was sometimes difficult for practitioners to see the links between these various aspects of HN development and delivery, and suggested that this was a role that could be taken on by support agencies. The agencies could also help staff with embedding aspects of equalities, sustainability and employability.

COLEG also noted that it might be possible to strengthen the links between QSTs and its own operation by appointing a practitioner in each QST to have a 'COLEG hat' and identify areas where COLEG might prioritise its efforts.

SFEU

SFEU's role in support of the sector goes much wider than HN development, and concerns curriculum renewal across all levels. It is also concerned with wider issues, such as blended learning, and developing capacity for 'professional learning' in college staff.

SFEU agrees that its subject networks have the potential to provide additional support to college staff in the development and implementation of new and modified Group Awards. One further way of helping would be for SFEU to promote innovative approaches to assessment and strengthen 'assessment literacy' across the sector.

11 Recommendations to HNKPG

HNKPG — terms of reference

HNKPG should revisit its terms of reference and membership to ensure its continued effectiveness in its oversight of curriculum development, and its promotion and facilitation of partnership between colleges, employers, Scotland's Skills Development Agency and SQA in developing and maintaining a catalogue of qualifications that is coherent and fit for purpose.

Model for sharing of development cost

HNKPG should consider a model for making the costs of Group Award development more transparent, including the costs borne by SQA through its processes, procedures and staffing. This would help the sector to recognise and quantify the contributions made by college practitioners and SQA.

Guidance and Support

HNKPG should promote liaison between sector support agencies and SQA to ensure that training and advice in the design of Group Awards and the writing of Units, and the delivery and assessment of Group Awards to agreed standards, form a coherent whole. There should be particular focus on assuring the quality and level of demand of Graded Units.

Function of a co-ordinating committee

SQA should strengthen its guidance for colleges regarding on modifying existing Group Awards and developing new Group Awards (including the re-use of existing Units). There is no requirement for HNKPG to take on any functions that might intervene between colleges and SQA directly agreeing new or modified Group Awards and Units.

Publication of information

HNKPG should determine the most effective publication schedule to ensure that SQA keeps the sector informed on an on-going basis of key information about HN Group Awards, including the proposed HN Annual Report.

Role of practitioners

HNKPG should explore possible linkages between SFEU subject networks and SQA Qualification Support Teams to ensure that all college staff have access to key information about developments in their subject, particularly those affecting delivery and standards.