



Higher National and Vocational Qualifications Internal Assessment Report 2013 Computing

The purpose of this report is to provide feedback to centres on verification in Higher National and Scottish Vocational Qualifications in this subject.

Higher National Units

General comments

Based on the external verification visit and other feedback from the computing team, it would appear that the majority of staff within centres have an accurate understanding of the requirements of the national standards. However, there are still a number of instances where this is not the case, and within some centres interpretation was not clear. All cases were discussed and agreed with centre staff as part of the External Verifier development role.

In almost all centres, the evidence seen against the quality assurance criteria was considered to be sufficient. Assessors were marking and making judgements to an appropriate and acceptable standard for the Units sampled. In only a few centres visited were standards considered not to have been met.

Unit specifications, instruments of assessment and exemplification materials

Overall, comments on actual standards being implemented by centres and in meeting the Outcomes, knowledge and skills, values, and Evidence Requirements were satisfactory.

Most assessors demonstrated a good working knowledge of the application of Unit specifications. However, there were several instances of incorrect interpretation of Unit specifications leading to preparation of invalid assessment instruments. This meant it could not be ensured that all candidates are meeting national standards.

In more than a few cases of Units seen, within the instruments of assessment, marking schemes lacked direct cross references to Unit Evidence Requirements which would have helped to ensure full and appropriate coverage.

There was also a tendency, as shown in assessment task instructions (ATIs) to candidates, to merely copy the text directly from the Unit specification rather than interpret and rewrite the ATIs in plain English.

Evidence Requirements

Feedback from External Verifiers still suggests that in some centres, assessment practices and interpretation of Unit specifications is not followed by all assessors. This includes, in particular, the need to adhere to Evidence Requirements.

There were a number of areas for concern during external verification, which mainly related to interpretation of Evidence Requirements, eg some centres did not have clear marking guidelines for the minimum detail required in candidate scripts/exercises/practical logs. This raises issues over reliability.

Examination of candidate evidence usually showed that candidate performance was being accepted at an appropriate level although it still raises issues around how consistency between assessors is assured.

Formal procedures for standardisation were not always apparent or being followed.

Administration of assessments

From the external verification reports, it appears that the internal verification systems within the centres sampled are well constructed, with appropriate strategies and good documentation taking place.

In most centres, the internal verification systems are being carried out effectively.

However, there were more than a few instances where internal verification activity had not been carried out by the time of the visit. In these centres it was viewed as a process carried out at set times of the year once all candidates had completed their Units, rather than as a continuous process. Interim internal verification was not being routinely practised, apart from for Units which had been selected for the external verification sample.

Where interim internal verification activity had taken place prior to visits, there was evidence of both second marking/internal verification. This was clear and systematic in most of the Units verified. This can only benefit both the process of internal and external verification, providing good feedback to the assessor and candidate.

Some centres had developed schedules for an internal verification sampling cycle which were being implemented.

Candidate materials and centre master packs were generally considered to be in very good order, well-documented and structured. It was good to see that most centres are now holding these online, some with hyperlinks to access required forms, etc.

General feedback

In most centres the feedback to candidates was generally good, including some instances of positive encouragement. However, it was again noted that there was a lack of formal written comments/statements on candidates' status and progress. Where personal learning support plans (PLSPs) were in place, excellent feedback on progress to candidates was shown.

Candidates interviewed were generally very positive about the level and quality of support and guidance provided by their centres. They were happy about the nature and content of their chosen Course/award. They were also fairly clear about the methods of assessment used, but not always clear about the rationale behind assessors' judgements.

Access to assessment was very well covered in all centres visited. Typically, any candidate with additional support needs or a disability would be referred through a centre's support for learning department. Suitable accessibility arrangements would then be made, eg use of scribes, additional hardware/software, etc.

Centres demonstrated a commitment to equal opportunities in relation to selection, induction, guidance, support and assessment of candidates. This was clearly evident in the policies and procedures, information on the candidate intranet, and instruments of assessment.

Areas of good practice

The following were identified during session 2012–13:

All formal and informal assessment progress feedback comments to candidates were recorded on the Moodle virtual learning environment (VLE) making them readily available to candidates, staff and other interested personnel.

The detailed recording of internal verification meetings was positive to note and to be commended. It was easy to carry out an audit trail relating to the process and the outcomes of issues raised. An example of this process was evidenced on the day of the visit where an issue had been resolved following recorded correspondence which included a meeting between two assessors and the Internal Verifier.

The level and frequency of candidates' feedback was high. The individual feedback to candidates' closed-book assessment attempts is to be commended. This was evidenced in all of the Units sampled.

The centres' policies and procedures relevant to external assessment verification activity were easily available on the college intranet and were clearly written in plain English. This made checking implementation compliance straightforward, and also makes for better interpretation, and therefore application, of policy and procedure by staff.

Specific areas for improvement

The following areas for improvement were identified during session 2012–13:

One centre had prior-verified assessment materials but the SQA officially stamped copy was not included in the master control folder even though the document was held by the SQA Co-ordinator. The inclusion of this official document should be encouraged to ease future external verification visits.

There is a need to encourage Internal Verifiers to physically comment on candidate scripts. It was noted that in all cases, the official control folder documents had been completed. However, on several of the candidate materials externally verified, no indication of internal verification checks, feedback or comments could be found.

Assessment task instructions to candidates should be written in plain English and should not be just a copy of the text directly from the Unit specification. This will help candidates' understanding of what they are required to do and produce. It may also help in improving assessors' familiarity with Unit specifications.

A simple matrix of Unit instances/occurrences with the names of the assessor and Internal Verifier against each instance/occurrence would be useful for verification and other quality assurance purposes.

The names of assessors and Internal Verifiers should be clearly printed on all relevant forms for identification and tracking purposes.

Higher National Graded Units

Titles/levels of HN Graded Units verified:

DG0J 34 Computer Networking: Graded Unit 1
DP8G 34 Computer Games Development Graded Unit 1
DH36 34 Computing: Graded Unit 1 (Exam)
DV6D 34 Information Technology: Graded Unit 1 (Exam)
H1F7 34 Computing: Graded Unit 1 (Exam)
DN4N 35 Computing: Software Development: Graded Unit 2
DN4P 35 Computing: Technical Support: Graded Unit 2
DG0H 35 Computer Networking and Internetworking Technology: Graded Unit 2
F0NA 35 Information Technology: Graded Unit 2

General comments

The central verification event, which looked at examination-based HN Graded Units from selected centres, was reasonably successful. The quality of assessor marking and internal verification was an improvement on last session. It is hoped that this trend will continue.

The judgement of candidate performance by assessors was mostly in line with the standard required although there were still a few centres with candidates presented this year, whose marks required adjustment and grades changed. Otherwise, any marking disagreements were judged to be within acceptable boundaries.

The presentation of materials and actual content was also better than last session. However, a few centres had still made submissions without all required documents supplied, or with incomplete documents.

In a few cases, exemplars had been amended or submitted with changes which had not been raised with the Central Verification Event team. Some of these changes had affected the validity of individual questions and potentially the whole paper. Feedback was given to all centres involved.

The project-based Unit visiting verification took place mainly in May and June. Verification on projects can take place when the planning and developing stages have been completed and preliminary marks awarded.

Sufficient evidence was presented for the project-based Units seen. This indicated, in most cases, that there was a reasonably accurate understanding of the national standards.

There were several occasions where the candidates were being set tasks which were considered excessive, when judged against the Graded Unit criteria standard.

Unit specifications, instruments of assessment and exemplification materials

In the examination-based Units, almost all centres were using the SQA-published exemplars as their instruments of assessment. On a few occasions, it was apparent that the selected versions had not been fully checked by the assessor and Internal Verifier prior to candidates undertaking them, to ensure that candidates were able to cover the full scope from the instruments of assessment (examination paper). This raises some concerns about centres ensuring their validity.

Prior verification activity had taken place on most instruments of assessment for the project-based Graded Units. This helps ensure familiarity and proved most useful when visits were taking place both for centre staff and the External Verifier.

Most centres used the SQA exemplar for assessments or the centre devised their own, based on exemplars.

In summary, Graded Unit assessors showed a high familiarity with the Unit specifications, instruments of assessment and exemplification materials.

Evidence Requirements

In project-based Graded Units, generally the technical content of the candidates' work was considered to be appropriate, acceptable and in most cases well done. However, in more than a few cases, there was some evidence of a lack of clarity in marking candidates' work, with few annotations or comments to provide information and feedback as to where and why marks were awarded.

Direct contact and discussion with assessors was required in some Units, where no detailed marking scheme had been provided, to ascertain what potential grades candidates would be awarded and the assessor's rationale for grading. The outcome of these discussions would be an agreement on interpretation and application of grading statements and minimum Evidence Requirements.

Checks on the application of the marking system/schemes and checks to establish the method of grading took place. Overall, candidates demonstrated a good grasp of requirements and demonstrated skills at an appropriate level to potential grades awarded. This indicated that most assessors had a good understanding of the Evidence Requirements.

Administration of assessments

The central verification event indicated that the judgement of candidate performance by assessors was generally in line with the standard required.

Presentation of materials this session had shown an improvement over last year. However, this session only a few centres had correctly completed all submission forms. Names of assessors and Internal Verifiers were not clearly stated either on

candidate scripts or on supporting forms submitted. Sometimes initials were seen but not formally printed names.

Almost all centres were using the published SQA exemplars. It was also noted that only a few centres had made any assumptions about the exemplars included in the documentation supplied. The inclusion of such deliberations and quantification of assessor judgements would be helpful when carrying out the central verification process and would save further clarifications with submitting centres.

In the majority of submissions, there was an improvement in internal verification in the form of double-marking taking place. The practice of clearly showing internal verification activity should be encouraged.

Once again, a major point to note is that in more than a few of the submissions, there was a lack of clarity in identifying precisely where and why marks were awarded against responses on candidate scripts.

This session, for the project-based Graded Units seen, most had been subject to internal verification procedures, when visits took place, on the completion of the first two stages. This helped clarify the candidate's position when moving through the stages.

General feedback

In a few centres, positive feedback comments to candidates were particularly detailed, both in general and for remediation purposes. These were noted on progress forms and on candidate scripts. They provide a good level of support for candidates.

In particular, in project-based Graded Units, eg Computer Games and Software Development, candidates demonstrated the games/software application they had developed to the External Verifier. This was a positive aspect of these visits and allowed the External Verifier to judge the standards directly and discuss all aspects of the Unit and award with groups of candidates. This activity is to be encouraged for future visits.

Interviews with candidates showed that the majority of centres were operating an effective induction process onto the Graded Units and those candidates were aware of what they needed to do to achieve the different grades.

In most centres, candidate responses indicated that staff support their candidates in a professional and appropriate way when delivering these Graded Units. Comments relating to the use of external clients were mentioned, with candidates indicating that 'it brought everything together'. It became apparent that almost all candidates interviewed were positive in relation to the assessors and the support/feedback they provide.

Areas of good practice

The following areas of good practice were identified during session 2012–13:

For the examination Graded Units, the additional internal verification form supplied had a grid covering all questions for each candidate. The form was well laid out, incorporating the assessor's rationale for marks awarded and agreements/disagreements of the second marker, and then checked by the Internal Verifier. Any disagreements with the assessor were clearly noted with justifications. All forms seen were suitably completed. There was also clear evidence of internal verification activity on candidate scripts including use of different colour inks by the assessor, double-marker and Internal Verifier. Names were clearly stated.

The F8VG 34 Computer Games candidates demonstrated the games they had developed, thereby allowing judgement of level of performance. This also, provided an opportunity for the assessor to discuss performance with them in a less formal setting.

In the master pack, the availability of industry standard templates for software/IT projects was useful for helping candidates to define terminology and give them a basis for presentation.

The project marking guide form was useful for standardisation purposes and contained brief outline diagrams and content to indicate typical points for awarding marks, ie it fleshed out the minimum Evidence Requirement solutions.

Good use was made of screenshots, some with annotations to show test results in situ. This practice is to be encouraged in other Units where it can be applied as a method of providing evidence, hardcopy or electronic, which can be compiled in a document/folio.

A full list of candidates with interim marks for the planning and developing stages was provided. This had been prepared on a colour-coded spreadsheet which also contained an outline projection for the final grade.

Specific areas for improvement

The following areas have been identified:

For the examination-based Graded Units, centres should review all questions systematically prior to delivery, and record this on an internal verification form. If they have done an internal verification check on the exemplar then that should be sent. Any assumptions made and deviation from the exemplar should have been documented and supplied. All requested documents should be sent with the candidate scripts.

In some instances internal verification activities had not been applied, eg lack of indications of double marking, clear indications on scripts, resolution of disagreements and follow-through actions.

Assessors must clearly indicate in candidate evidence where marks are awarded and how many for each section/element. This would also provide a basis for feedback to candidates and Verifiers.

Names of assessors and Internal Verifiers were not clearly stated either on candidate scripts or on supporting forms submitted. Sometimes initials were seen but not formally printed names. Identification is important for quality assurance sampling and reporting purposes. Printed names should be supplied.

The Graded Unit should be an example of a standalone project — it should not cross-reference evidence from other previously marked individual Units.

For all Graded Units, both examination and project-based, it is strongly recommended that centres take note and implement processes and procedures based on the SQA publication *Guidance for the Implementation of Graded Units*, (publication code: CA4405).

SVQ awards

General comments

Centres seemed fully aware of the National Occupational Standards (NOS) and the assessment strategy as stated by the Sector Skills Council (SSC) and were generally complying very well.

Although some centres were delivering the new SVQs for IT Users, the SVQ for IT Professionals showed a greater increase in candidates this session. Centres running these awards had quickly grasped the requirements and standards and were applying these appropriately.

Unit specifications, instruments of assessment and exemplification materials

Assessors were overall very familiar, and in most cases very knowledgeable, about the Unit specifications and related portfolios, the NOS, and the SQA supporting documentation/publications such as the *SQA Assessment Guidelines*.

Most kept in touch with SQA and e-skills UK (Sector Skills Council) for updates on developments.

Evidence Requirements

All indications from visit reports are that assessors and Internal Verifiers are quite clear about the Evidence Requirements for the awards.

Centres were generally using standard SQA/NOS-derived portfolio sheets, some of which were being maintained online by the assessor, with hyperlinks to evidence contained in candidates' disk folders. These were being completed correctly and were all in order.

There was a continued use by many centres of e-portfolio systems which contained the NOS or SQA portfolio sheets, thus restating the Evidence Requirements and helping to ensure adequate coverage. Utilisation of the e-portfolio facilities was very well done.

There was a good range of types of evidence in use, including observation records, candidate statement, screenshots and printouts. Knowledge and understanding were incorporated where appropriate and were recorded.

Administration of assessments

Centres were mostly using standard SQA portfolio sheets either electronic or paper based. These were being completed correctly and were all in order.

Tasks were undertaken in appropriate circumstances, including the use of industry standard software and hardware. The tasks, based on real work situations, were being set at appropriate levels of complexity and scope for the

Units undertaken. Internal verification systems and processes were well designed to meet the needs of both the SQA awarding body and the Sector Skills Council. These were being implemented well by centres.

Rules for the Mandatory Units were followed.

Overall, assessors' judgements of candidate performance were agreed with and there were clear indications that candidates were achieving tasks at an appropriate level.

Centres continue to employ suitably robust assessment practices. A high level of assessment planning was taking place.

There was also clear evidence of the internal verification procedures taking place, suitably recorded and backed up by printed schedules of activity. Staff within centres were knowledgeable about the individual awards and kept up to date by referring to the e-skills UK website.

General feedback

Feedback to candidates was generally very good. Regular visits by assessors, and contact by e-mail prior to visits, provided opportunities to highlight issues which could be discussed during the visit. Candidates will normally discuss with the assessor when they are ready to undertake assessments and negotiate actual times.

Candidates interviewed were very aware of the centres' activities concerning them and particularly praised the level of personal support provided by centre staff. All seemed clear about the nature and needs of the awards undertaken. They were also well informed about the structure of the award and credit points.

Interviews with candidates also showed that they had a choice in the component Units of their individual award. Overall they were very satisfied with the awards undertaken and were kept well aware of their progress through feedback received from their assessors on their performance

With regards to access to assessment, candidates are normally interviewed prior to starting the award and any additional support needs are identified. Centres will liaise with employers to provide accessibility tools and additional support, where needs are identified and where any other resource is required.

Most centres had procedures for additional support needs and disabilities. Following identification of candidate need, centres will provide appropriate facilities. Assessments take place when opportunities arise, including in work placements, by arrangement with the assessor.

There was a good range of evidence types in use, including observation records, candidate statements, witness testimonies, screenshots and printouts. There was useful commentary on evidence portfolios, providing direct and clear feedback to candidates on any additional requirements still needing to be met.

The construction of portfolios was good and there is continued greater use of online storage and links to evidence. Clear indexing is being applied within individual portfolios and candidate evidence was well laid out and easy to follow. There is further evidence of increased use of electronic portfolio generation and recording software.

Generally, detailed assessment visit records were in use showing Units covered, method of assessment, feedback, the ongoing assessment plan, and a monitoring report on health and safety, appeals and grievances signed by the candidate, assessor and supervisor.

Areas of good practice

The master folder prepared for the visit was well thought out and constructed, containing pertinent evidence of meeting the SQA quality assurance criteria. This greatly assisted in facilitating the visit.

The use of annotated screenshots to show activities is very useful. It also helps to reinforce knowledge and understanding.

Level 3 candidates were obtaining a good level and depth of IT skills which should hopefully improve their prospects when moving on to other jobs.

Using level 3 to monitor/advise/supervise level 2 candidates is a good idea in order to give them experience in line with award aims.

Candidates interviewed felt centre support had been very helpful and that the award would help with future employment prospects. Feedback on assessment methodology was good. Overall, candidates were very positive in their statements about the working experience and the level and quality of support given to them throughout.

Observation reports had a high level of detail. Particularly good use was made of witness testimony (professional discussion) within the Unit. The reports were well written and signed by all parties.

Assessments involved both product and candidate 'documentaries' which describe in great detail how the products were developed.

There was good use of assessment 'storyboards'. These are narrative, personal statements containing screenshots/pictures of products working, and commentary annotated by candidates about their actions when carrying out a set task. This neatly combines evidence of both knowledge and understanding, and practical skills within a single portfolio item.

Specific areas for improvement

Standardisation between assessors was a specific issue. On a few visits, it was noted that there were significant differences between the approaches and procedures adopted by different assessors within the same organisation

(including even the use of different forms). Whilst the standards were still being implemented, concerns were raised as this practice could increase risks of inconsistency.

Centres should review their continuous professional development (CPD) activity for assessors and Internal Verifiers to ensure they are up to date with current technical IT practices and products, and attendance at training events, etc are formally recorded.

Although not strictly speaking an area for improvement, centres should note that the use of witness testimony need not only be for expert witnesses. Where a candidate has performed an IT-related piece of work or provided a service, then this can be acknowledged by the person for whom the product/service was provided. For example, a statement (e-mail) from a user acknowledging that they are satisfied with the job the candidate has carried out. It may be the candidate's manager, colleague or client. Where the piece of work is a technical repair, network server installation, software upgrade deployment, etc then that would require a technically competent witness with their details held on a register.