

Revision of Higher National Certificates and Diplomas (HNC/Ds):

background to developments

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Introduction

This document sets out the background to the review of Higher National (HN) qualifications, which began in 1995 and is set to continue until 2008. The purpose of the review is to strengthen HNCs and HNDs as powerful instruments of lifelong learning. It will confirm their position in supporting occupations such as technician, technologist and first line management, but will also underline their ability to reach out into communities and bring new candidates to higher education for the first time.

To do this, we need to create a national consensus on what an HNC or an HND is — the fundamental Design Rules to which each HNC or HND should conform. Though the current rules for designing HN qualifications, which were introduced in 1988, are highly satisfactory in many respects, the new Design Rules of 1998 address some continuing concerns, particularly with regard to over-assessment and grading. The new Design Rules have now been used in five pilot areas and have been considered in 20 other areas of HN review. Now that all these activities and the feedback arising from them have been evaluated, this is the time to pause and reflect on the lessons learned and to proceed with consensus to the next stage of the review.

Current Design Rules for HNCs and HNDs

The current rules for devising HNCs and HNDs were established in 1988. (See Appendix 1.) Under these Design Rules, HNCs and HNDs are group awards consisting of HN Units (a minimum of 12 credits for HNC and 30 credits for HND). Most candidates take HN Units as part of an HNC or HND, but the Units may also be taken free-standing or as part of Professional Development Awards (PDAs).

Each Unit can be either 'passed' or 'passed with merit'. The Units are assessed in centres under a system of internal and external moderation. External moderation focuses on groups of Units related by subject ('moderation groups'), which means that there will normally be several moderators per HNC or HND.

Proposals for new HN Unit specifications, and new HNC/D group awards, are subject to scrutiny ('validation') by employers, professional bodies and universities, and colleagues from other colleges, to ensure that they are fit for purpose. Formally, that means that they meet the current SQA validation criteria. HNC/D group awards are normally validated for five years, with a phase-out period of three years for an HNC and four for an HND.

Various parts of the processes of HN Unit and/or group award development and validation may be carried out by SQA or by SQA in partnership with consortia of centres, or by centres with a quality contract with SQA.

Success of the current Design Rules

The current Design Rules have had considerable success. Centres have taken advantage of the flexibility of delivery of HNC/Ds to attract new groups of candidates to higher education (HE) — particularly adult returners and part-time students. Centres have also used the devolved processes of development and validation to produce or update an increasingly wide range of HN Units (currently some 5,600 HN Units attract candidates) and HNC/D group awards. There are currently over 1,000 group awards on the SQA system, of which about 180 were nationally developed by SQA. Centres devised the rest.

The HNC/Ds continue to be used by employers as a trusted training and development vehicle. Professional bodies and universities continue to give exemptions on the basis of HNC/D or HN Unit achievement. Indeed, some HNC/Ds were designed specially for these purposes. The bulk of HN holders progress to (or in) employment, but some progress to a degree programme. In a recent report from the Centre for Life Long Learning at Glasgow Caledonian University, Professor Jim Gallacher suggested that the proportions of students who progressed to later years of degrees ranged from about 8% in very vocational HNs (such as Care), to 34% in Social Science HNs.

At about the same time as ‘Unitisation’ (as the current Design Rules came to be called), HNCs and HNDs achieved SCOTCAT ratings — 120 SD1 points for HNCs and 240 for HNDs.

Continuing concerns

On the other hand, some issues have continued to concern centres and users.

Proliferation

The proliferation of Units and group award titles signals the great flexibility of HN provision, but it can also cause confusion to candidates and users. The diversity may be difficult to manage within colleges.

Over-assessment

The main issues of concern relate, however, to assessment. The process of unitisation allowed great flexibility in tailoring programmes to local or candidate needs. It has also led to some increase in assessment events and/or items. This is often commented on by candidates and centres. It may be partly a feature of the division of programmes into small chunks (Units), which has led to more, smaller, assessment events and incidents. The effect was, perhaps, magnified in those Unit specifications which used (under SQA guidance) detailed sets of performance criteria to specify standards. This was often seen as a further fragmentation of the assessment process, resulting in more assessment events for candidates.

It has also been suggested that the ‘moderation group’ approach to external assessment encourages a more bureaucratic approach to moderation — specific bits of evidence sought for each performance criterion — than might be the case

with moderation by group award. Comments similar to these have been made about National Qualifications, and SQA has suggested that one hour only per National Unit (40 hours) should be spent on assessment, with perhaps one and a half hours for practical assessments.

These comments have, however, to be put alongside reports of considerable success in managing assessment, and of the value of continuous assessment to candidates who are returning to education after a break. A recent survey of further education (FE) lecturers carried out on behalf of SQA indicated a high level of satisfaction with SQA assessment processes for HNs. Of those surveyed, 83% were satisfied with assessment arrangements.

Merit

Grading of candidate performance has been another area of concern and comment. Units can either be passed (if the candidate presents evidence matching the requirements in the Unit specification) or passed with merit (if the evidence goes beyond this). This general definition of merit is simple and straightforward. Moreover, detailed merit requirements and guidance on how to assess them are included in each HN Unit specification, which allows the possibility that the requirements can be very specifically tailored to the subject in hand.

Again, considerable success has been reported. Candidates do strive for merit passes, and users (professional bodies and universities in particular, employers to an extent) do use the number of merit passes achieved to make decisions about entry and exemptions.

Nevertheless, this approach to grading can add yet another layer to the assessment process. In some areas, lecturers and moderators feel it is difficult to produce meaningful statements of merit performance. In others, candidates make incremental changes to evidence until it satisfies the merit requirements. Issues such as these have not strengthened confidence in Unit-by-Unit merit as a means of grading student performance.

Fragmentation

The processes of unitisation, specification by Performance Criteria, and Unit-by-Unit merit grading, may have led to a fragmentation of the student experience in some areas. There was widespread comment on this, resulting in a call for more 'integration'. This call is sometimes related to the transition of students from HN to universities, where assessment, at least summative assessment, may be in fewer, larger chunks.

The evidence is largely anecdotal, but there is no doubt that some HNC/D students who progress to university experience difficulties in making the transition, though there is an argument that transition 'difficulties' are more to do with social issues than of preparedness or assessment approaches.

Integration is built in to the design of an HNC or HND in much the same way that it is built into the design of a degree or professional body qualification. The Aims and Objectives of the HN programme determine the pattern and timing of the

Units taken. In many HN Unit specifications, opportunities to relate teaching and assessment to other Units are set out in detail. More obviously, project-based Units are often included in HNC/Ds with the specific aim of integrating across the programme of Units.

Nevertheless, however anecdotal the evidence, fragmentation seems to be fairly widely reported as an experience of students and remains a concern.

National reviews of qualifications

There were many national enquiries and reports on qualification frameworks in the early 1990s.

The Howie Report on school qualifications, *Upper Secondary Education in Scotland* (1992), identified the need for a more coherent body of qualifications for post-16 candidates. This resulted in the publication of *Higher Still: Opportunity for All* (1994) and the launch of the Higher Still Development Programme in 1995. The resulting National Qualifications prepare candidates for entry into work, HNs or universities.

Many of the issues of continuing concern in HNs — particularly those on assessment overload, bureaucracy and fragmentation — were addressed in the Beaumont *Review of 100 NVQs and SVQs* (December 1995). At the other end of the HN process, the Dearing report from the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, and the Garrick report of its Scottish Committee (July 1997), called for more coherence and progression between HNC/Ds and degrees.

There was, at the same time as all this activity, a growing call for a coherent national framework of qualifications for Scotland. The time seemed right in 1995 for (the then) SCOTVEC to begin a review of HNCs and HNDs to ensure their place in this framework. It was intended as a review which would maintain the features which had contributed to the success of HNs. It needed also to address the issues of continuing concerns. It would also have to respond to the call for a coherent national system — what was to become (in December 2001) the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF).

Need to upgrade HNCs and HNDs

Many HNCs were reaching the end of their validation period in the mid to late 1990s. This was the period of the merger that formed SQA. It was also a period of preparing for and implementing the new National Courses and Scottish Group Awards (SGAs) resulting from the Higher Still Development Programme. These processes resulted in the postponement of HN revision in favour of extending validation periods. Many HN Units and group awards are now in urgent need of upgrading.

National policy considerations

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)

One of the major national policy initiatives of the late 1990s was the SCQF. There was a need to confirm and strengthen the place of HNC/Ds within it. All HNCs would be SCQF level 7 and HNDs would be SCQF level 8. The allocation of each HN Unit to the appropriate SCQF level, on the other hand, would need to be achieved only after individual scrutiny (and revision if necessary) of each HN Unit.

The establishment of the SCQF confirmed the SCOTCAT ratings of HN qualifications, but it also brought to light the anomaly of the 12 credit HNC. Although only requiring 12 HN credits, an HNC attracted 120 SCOTCAT points — half the 240 points that the 30 HN credits of an HND attracted. The rationale for this was that HNCs were largely part-time with relevant workplace learning contributing to the extra credits.

Further details on how to implement the SCQF still have to be worked out by the development partners in charge of the SCQF (SQA, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), Universities Scotland and the Scottish Executive). For example, Units can be allocated to SCQF levels according to how well they meet the level descriptors which were published in December 2001. This process is made easier where there are well-established benchmark qualifications at the same or adjacent levels. However, more guidance may be needed in specific vocational areas to make sure the integrity of the vocational approach is maintained. Similarly, more guidance may be needed on what proportion of Units at levels above or below the level of a group award (such as an HNC, HND or degree) can be included in the group award without changing its level.

Matching the SCQF's requirements remains a key factor in determining HN development policy.

Core Skills

Core Skills are a pervasive policy imperative — any survey of employers and other users of qualifications results in demands for Core Skills. In SQA these are designated Communication, Numeracy, Information Technology, Problem Solving and Working with Others. Other agencies may use slightly different designations, (eg transferable skills for QAA, or key skills in England, or personal planning competences in some universities) and the titles or groupings may vary, but there is universal agreement about their importance. Centres are accountable to a range of funders and users, not least to candidates, for the incorporation of Core Skills into programmes, including HNC/Ds.

In many cases, centres would prefer that SQA built Core Skills into the design for its qualifications. This would simplify centres' accountabilities. SQA currently uses two models for achieving this: either embedding Core Skills requirements in Unit specifications, or developing specialised Units for each Core Skill. In both cases, results are recorded in a Core Skills Profile. Both types of Unit can be

incorporated in a group award. Embedding requires very precise formulations to be incorporated into Unit specifications, which sometimes distorts the original (subject or occupational) intention of the Unit. On the other hand, the incorporation of up to five dedicated Core Skills Units in a group award can reduce the vocational content of the HNC or HND.

Despite the difficulties, Core Skills remain an inescapable policy issue for HNs.

New Design Rules for HNs

For all the above reasons — particularly the areas of continuing concern following unitisation; the SCQF; and Core Skills — SCOTVEC embarked in January 1995 on a process of consultation to revise the 1988 Design Rules for HNs. (See Appendix 2 for key dates). The consultation confirmed the importance of these key areas, and highlighted a pressing need to upgrade those HNs whose validation period had run out, or had been extended pending further review.

Design Rules would be needed to make sure that the diversity in HNs did not detract from users' confidence that every HNC and HND was broadly comparable in what it said about candidates who achieved them. The same is claimed when it is said 'a Higher is a Higher' or 'a degree is a degree' — however much users understand the diversity of these qualifications.

After three years of consultation and development, SQA's Qualifications Committee (at that time, the Higher National Qualifications Committee) and Board approved new Design Rules for Higher National Qualifications in October 1998 (See Appendix 3 for the revised Design Rules).

The new Design Rules included:

- ◆ ***A new HN Unit specification*** — this was designed to encourage more holistic assessment (especially using sampling in areas of knowledge and understanding).
- ◆ ***All HNCs to require 15 credits and all HNDs to require 30 HN credits*** — this would address the anomaly of the SCOTCAT ratings for 12 credit HNCs and to ensure all HNCs got the same level and points allocation in the SCQF (and similarly for HNDs). The additional three credits for HNCs could be made up of Integrative Assessments (see below) and credit for work experience via specially designed HN Units.
- ◆ ***Grading to be achieved using Integrative Assessments*** (replacing Unit-by-Unit merit passes). Two Integrative Assessments were to be achieved at level 7 for HNCs (forming part of the 15 credits); two at level 7 together with two at level 8 were required for HNDs (again forming part of the 30 credits). It was expected that Integrative Assessments would normally be based on the project-based Units used in many HNs (these include practical assignments, investigations and case studies). Examinations using Question Papers would also be possible where this had been the normal method of assessment in an HN.

Integrative Assessments would be graded A, B and C according to detailed grading and marking instructions in an Integrative Assessment specification. They would assess the aims and objectives of the HN group award across a number of Units; external moderation would concentrate on Integrative Assessments, making the group award the focus of moderation. Units would be subject to much lighter moderation — perhaps in time only to internal moderation. This would be further encouragement to centres to reduce fragmentation in their assessment processes.

- ◆ ***All HNCs and HNDs to have mandatory sections of required Units and Integrative Assessments*** — the mandatory section needed to reflect the aims and objectives of the group award. It was also confirming good practice, and it was hoped that it would limit the proliferation of Units and titles — once a mandatory-plus-options framework had been validated, variations could be accommodated using the option section
- ◆ ***All HN Units, Integrative Assessments and group awards to be allocated to an appropriate level in the SCQF*** — this is a policy requirement later laid down by the SQA Board in March 1999 for all SQA qualifications. The SCQF says that HNCs are level 7 and HNDs are level 8. These aspects of levelling are not substantially negotiable. However, the balance of levels of the Units in a group award can be revisited.
- ◆ ***All HNCs and HNDs to have a recommended Core Skills Entry Profile and a mandatory Core Skills Exit Profile.*** This was the most highly supported aspect of the new Design Rules at consultation, and resulted in the requirement of all five Core Skills for the Exit Profile. However, to counter the possibility of group awards being distorted, this was later revised, and only *Problem Solving* at SCQF level 6 and a minimum of another two Core Skills (established by market research among the users of the proposed HNC/D) at SCQF level 5 or above are required. The achievement of further Core Skills, or of Core Skills at higher levels, would be encouraged through the design of teaching and learning. A mapping of these opportunities could be presented at validation.
- ◆ ***All HN Unit specifications to be validated by SQA*** — this was to ensure a consistent application of the new Design Rules (especially the rules for allocating Units to SCQF levels), and the validation of Core Skills claims. It was also an attempt to reduce proliferation. Units could continue to be developed by centres for validation by SQA. Centres that had a quality contract with SQA could continue to develop and validate HN group awards and Integrative Assessment specifications, using SQA-validated HN Unit specifications.
- ◆ ***HNCs and HNDs would no longer have a validation period***, but would be subject to regular monitoring, and updating when the need arose.

Implementing the new Design Rules

The implementation of the new Design Rules was delayed by the introduction of National Qualifications and the difficulties associated with that. Starting in spring 1999, SQA had agreed to lead the implementation of the new Design Rules in

major national revisions and developments for HNC/D Computing, Social Sciences and Communication. SQA intended to use these revisions and developments to refine guidance and produce examples of the new Unit and Integrative Assessment specifications, and supporting assessment exemplars. Procedural and staff development issues would also be addressed. Glasgow College of Nautical Studies also wished to use the new Design Rules to revise the HNC/D Nautical Science, and the Scottish Agricultural College agreed to lead a consortium of colleges using the new Design Rules to develop a national framework for HN group awards in the horticultural sector.

All five proposals were successfully validated in 2001. (From the middle of 2000 they had begun to be referred to as 'pilots', because of their pathfinder status, but they are fully validated HNC/Ds.) Twenty colleges agreed to implement the revised HNC in Computing in August 2001 and one college implemented the revised HNC Communication with Media. The Scottish Agricultural College and another college implemented HNCs in Horticulture and Garden Design, and Glasgow College of Nautical Studies implemented the HNC/D in Nautical Science. The Core Skills issue had held up the other validation, which made it difficult for centres to implement the group awards in that area.

Initial feedback from this stage was that the principles behind the new Design Rules were acceptable, but there remained a range of issues: Core Skills; the 15-credit HNC; and allocating Units, Integrative Assessments, and group awards to SCQF levels. Other issues related to the management of national consortia and the model used for validating Units.

Finalising the new Design Rules

The lessons learned from the introduction of National Qualifications (particularly Scottish Group Awards), needed to be fully appreciated and absorbed. In consequence, it was agreed with key stakeholders (in the summer of 2000) that a process of evaluating the leading projects would be carried out prior to finalising the new rules in the Spring of 2003. Only thereafter would a programme of revision be negotiated with centres for the revision of nationally-developed HNC/Ds (of which there are about 180) and for college-devised HNC/Ds (of which there are about 500 titles, with a similar number of variations).

The key dates are laid out in Appendix 2, indicating a projected final date of 2008 when all HNs would have been incorporated into the SCQF according to the Final New Design Rules. (This date was chosen because any HN validated under current rules in 2003 would have a maximum of a five years validation period. We hope to improve upon the 2008 date by negotiation).

An HN Review Key Partners Group was established in April 2002 to steer the finalisation and implementation phases of the HN review. Linda McTavish, Principal of Anniesland College, convenes it. Members include other college principals and senior staff, SQA, the Association of Scottish Colleges (ASC), the Scottish Further Education Funding Council (SFEFC), the Scottish Further

Education Unit (SFEU), the Wider Participation Project (reporting to the Funding Councils for FE and HE), COLEG, and the Scottish Executive.

A seminar of senior staff of HN centres was held in April 2002 to begin the process of establishing an interacting network of HN contacts with which SQA can collaborate over management issues in the finalisation and implementation phases. SFEU has agreed to form a steering group for this network (called the HN Forum) to help formulate precise concerns or demands for staff development, resources, etc.

The Scottish Executive Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Department (SEELD) has kindly agreed to fund the development of FE staff development materials to support the implementation of the final Design Rules. SEELD is also supporting an HN marketing project targeting potential candidates, employers and HE (universities and professional bodies).

An evaluation of the leading developments was commissioned in April 2002. This drew upon an earlier evaluation of the development phase, structured interviews with key college and SQA players in the national and college consortia (including a range of so-called 'Phase 2 pilot reviews'), questionnaires and visits to implementing and non-implementing centres, and implementation steering groups, launches and seminars. It also drew upon internal SQA seminars on Core Skills, Integrative Assessments, SCQF levels and the 15-credit HNs.

Staff Development materials are being developed and piloted in all the above areas. These will be finalised once the Design Rules are fully agreed. We will work with SFEU to roll out staff development over the remainder of the review period. This will be initially through the consortium groups involved in HN development, but it will also involve direct development for centres delivering HNs.

We have had requests (and some strong demands) for SQA to take the lead in organising national examinations for HNs. We have had equally strong representations that examinations are not appropriate for all, or even most, HNs, and that central organisation of these would be contrary to the distinctive approaches of HN and other HE qualifications. Most importantly, it would represent a drastic reduction in centres' ability to respond to the local needs of their students — a key feature of HNs.

As well as the intrinsic worth of any proposals, resources required to implement them have to be considered. These will be significant — though most will relate to the normal upgrading of HNs and additional SCQF levelling processes. Resources will be needed for: developing the HNs and associated assessments and guidance; staff development for implementing centres; implementing assessments for the new Unit and Integrative Assessment specifications; and managing these changes. SQA is working with partners — particularly ASC — to scope the resources needed to upgrade all HNs, incorporate them within the SCQF and introduce improvements such as Core Skills, Integrative Assessments and holistic Unit assessment. The timescales — which will depend on the availability of

resources — will be negotiated with centres most closely concerned with each HNC or HND.

The consultation period on these recommendations will last until the end of December this year. During this time a series of focus groups, arranged in partnership with the ASC, will address further the issues connected to the use of SCQF levels, Core Skills, HNC credit values and Integrative Assessments. SQA will encourage responses to the questionnaire by visiting key partners. We will support meetings called by centres or others to formulate their own responses to the recommendations.

Final recommendations for the Design Rules for HNs, and a development plan for their implementation, will be presented to the HN Review Key Partners Group and the SQA Qualifications Committee by March 2003. Depending on the outcome of the consultation and focus groups, and the deliberations of the Key Partners and Qualifications Committee, we would wish to have an agreed timetable for upgrading all nationally-devised HNs by August 2003 and for all centre-devised HNs by December 2003.

Appendix 1: Current Design Rules for HNCs and HNDs introduced in 1988

- 1 An HN credit will equate to roughly 40 hours of direct teaching.
- 2 All HNCs and HNDs will consist of HN Units.
- 3 HNCs will have a minimum of 12 credits.
- 4 HNDs will have a minimum of 30 credits.
- 5 HN Units can be passed or passed with merit.
- 6 All HN Units and HNC/Ds will be subject to validation.
- 7 Validation will be by peer review.
- 8 HNC/Ds may be validated for a period of up to five years.

Appendix 2: Key dates

June 1988	Current Design Rules introduced.
January 1995	Consultation on new Design Rules starts.
March 1996	Report on Consultation published. SCOTVEC Board approves development plan for HNs.
March 1997	SQA formed.
October 1998	New Design Rules approved.
March 1999	First developments under new Design Rules begun.
May 2000	ASC request further consultation on the implementation of the new Design Rules to take account of lessons learned from the implementation of the National Qualifications.
September 2000	New timescales for implementation agreed with key partners in light of ASC request and SQA difficulties relating to National Qualifications.
Spring 2001	First validations (now called ‘pilots’) under new Design Rules completed.
August 2001	First candidates enrolled under new Design Rules.
October 2001	Twenty Phase 2 pilots begin reviewing their HN programmes in the light of new Design Rules.
December 2001	Launch of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework.
March 2002	Evaluation of pilot experiences begun.
April 2002	Launch of HN Key Partners Review Group to monitor finalisation and implementation. Seminar of HN centre contacts to launch HN Forum to guide implementation.
August 2002	First certifications under new Design Rules.
September 2002	Launch of Evaluation Report on pilot experiences and Consultation Document on finalising new Design Rules for HNs.
December 2002	End of consultation period.
March 2003	Finalisation of new Design Rules.
August 2003	Timescales for revision of nationally-devised HNs agreed with centres.
December 2003	Timescales for revision of centre-devised HNs agreed with ‘home’ centres.
June 2008	All revised HNs incorporated within the SCQF.

Appendix 3: Draft new Design Rules for HNCs and HNDs

The principal changes are:

Credit value:

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

Integrative Assessment:

All HNCs will include two mandatory Integrative Assessments, and all HNDs will include four mandatory Integrative Assessments, each of one credit. This will be included in the 15 and 30 credits required for HNCs and HNDs. The purpose of Integrative Assessments is to assess the candidate's ability to integrate and apply the knowledge and/or skills gained in the individual Units to demonstrate that they have achieved the principal aims of the group award.

Mandatory section:

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

Position in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF):

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

Core Skills

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

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

(*Originally all five, but changed in 2000 to accommodate pilot difficulties.)

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

Revised HN Unit specification

The format of HN Units has been revised to encourage a more holistic approach to assessment. The new HN Unit specification places the emphasis on assessing whole Outcomes or a combination of Outcomes rather than on performance criteria. It is hoped that this will encourage a more holistic approach to assessment and reduce the assessment loading on both candidates and assessors, and help to improve credit transfer between HNC/D and degree programmes.

Appendix 4: the proposed finalised new Design Rules for HNCs and HNDs

- 1 HN group awards (HNCs and HNDs) will consist of HN Unit and HN Integrative Assessment credits.
- 2 The minimum value for an HN Unit will be 0.25 HN credits (2 SCOTCAT points); the minimum level for an HN Unit will be SCQF level 5.
- 3 HN Integrative Assessments may be of 1 or 2 HN credits (8 or 16 SCOTCAT points); the minimum level for an HN Integrative Assessment will be SCQF level 7. Each Integrative Assessment will be graded A, B or C.
- 4 EITHER*
An HNC will be composed of 15 HN credits (120 SCOTCAT points), incorporating at least 90 SCOTCAT points at SCQF level 7.
OR
An HNC will be composed of 12 or 15 HN credits (96 or 120 SCOTCAT points), incorporating at least 90 SCOTCAT points at SCQF level 7.
- 5 An HND will be composed of 30 HN credits (240 SCOTCAT points), incorporating at least 90 SCOTCAT points at SCQF level 8.
- 6 All HNCs and HNDs will contain a mandatory section, which all candidates for the award must achieve. For an HNC this will consist of a minimum of 6 HN credits (48 SCOTCAT points), including the Integrative Assessments, and for an HND it will consist of 12 HN credits (96 SCOTCAT points), including the Integrative Assessments.
- 7 An HNC will contain two Integrative Assessment credits at SCQF level 7; an HND will contain 4 Integrative Assessment credits, two of which will be at SCQF level 8.
- 8 For each HNC and HND recommended entry and exit Core Skills Profiles will be required.

In designing HNC or HNDs according to these rules, the latest SQA guidance on writing HN Unit and Integrative Assessment specifications should be used.

SQA will organise the validation of all HN Unit specifications, in partnership with centres.

* This will be decided after consultation.