

# Review of Higher Mental Health Care

October 2010

## **Foreword**

I am pleased to recommend the following report to the Qualifications Committee of SQA. I would like to record my thanks to the staff of both SQA and Scotland's Colleges for their full cooperation in assisting the Group with its work. Likewise, I would like to thank the Group itself for their willingness to assist in reviewing the Mental Health Care Higher. We had access to a great range of diverse information in enabling us to come to our conclusions.

Early on we identified those factors which we considered would have been susceptible to change and then analysed each in depth while recognising overlap between them. The conclusion was clear though complicated. Briefly, we have confidence in the processes which took place in 2010 and were reassured that the standards applied were consistent with previous years. The surprisingly low set of results, which resulted in this review taking place, was considered to be near the mark and reflected the overall performance of candidates.

Nevertheless, we suggest a series of action points which we commend to both SQA and the Scottish Colleges. These reflect the complicated nature of the circumstances surrounding this particular qualification and note that the review was a timely reminder to continue to be vigilant at all levels so that we can continue to be assured of the maintenance of high standards for such important qualifications.

Ken Cunningham

Chair

## **Review of Higher Mental Health Care - October 2010**

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### **Background**

During the past academic cycle 2009 -10, an unusually low pass rate was identified across a number of presenting Centres in Higher Mental Health Care. SQA carried out a series of investigatory measures in an effort to better understand the reasons behind this exceptional case but was unable to identify any discrepancies in its processes or in the application of standards. Nevertheless, SQA and the Colleges were concerned and were committed to working together to identify the reasons behind the significant drop in pass rate.

SQA's Qualifications Committee, as part of its remit from the SQA Board, asked Scotland's Colleges to join them in undertaking a detailed review. An SQA Qualifications Committee member, Ken Cunningham, who had not previously been involved in this matter, was asked to Chair the group which would have membership of Principals of Colleges and an SQA Executive and would look at the assessment and quality assurances of the Higher Mental Health Care qualification. The Scottish government held a watching brief.

The Higher Mental Health Care course has been taught and assessed in its present form since 2004.

Some 18 Colleges, involving 423 candidates, delivered the Higher Mental Health Care qualification in 2010 with a total pass rate of 35.9% (pre-appeal) compared to 15 Colleges involving 405 candidates delivering this qualification in 2009 with a total pass rate of 63.7% (pre-appeal). Due to concerns raised, SQA fast-tracked the formal Appeals process during which there was another opportunity to verify marking procedures and to ensure that they met the high standards of existing quality assurance measures.

As a result of that process SQA were fully satisfied that the marking parameters were consistent with national standards and it confirmed that the process was carried out by an established examining team of professionals from the College sector.

Because the Appeals and quality assurance process did not bring to light any fundamental strategic or systemic reasons for this year's exceptionally poor pass rates, SQA decided that it should put in place an independent review process as outlined above.

Additionally SQA and Scotland's Colleges have agreed to work together to exemplify and share standards with all Centres involved in the delivery of this qualification.

### **The Review Process**

During the course of the review, the group considered a range of information which included:

- Course Arrangements for H Mental Health Care;
- Course Assessment information for H Mental Health Care;
- Draft External Assessment Reports for H Mental Health Care for 2010, 2009 and 2008;
- Feedback on the 2010 H Mental Health Care to individual Centres which had appealed;
- Central Marking Quality Model used for H Mental Health Care;
- Details about the Principal Assessor(s), the team leaders and the markers;
- Markers' reports for 2010;
- Results for H Mental Health Care for past 5 years (overall and by individual College);
- Profile of H Mental Health Care learners by age and gender for past 5 years;
- Comparison of estimates and results for 2010, 2009, 2008, 2007
- Other Qualifications taken by 2010 H Mental Health Care learners both this year and in previous years and information about their success in these;
- Performance of Colleges in other Care Qualifications in 2007 to 2010;
- Feedback from a series of private, confidential interviews with key selected personnel including the Qualifications Manager; the two Principal Assessors; as many of the marking team as were available; and some additional course deliverers from selected colleges.

The group met formally on two occasions with additional interaction by phone and e-mail. The group agreed to investigate across the following aspects highlighted below where it is possible change could have occurred. We report under these headings initially but recognise there is overlap on several occasions.

### **The Course and qualification**

The course comprises 2 Units: one mandatory on the Understanding of Mental Health and Illness (2 credits – 80 hours) and one optional (1 credit – 40 hours) from a choice of two covering either Caring for People with Dementia or Stress and Stress Management. In addition to having to pass the two Units, there is a project in the form of a Case Study which is completed during the summer term and is based on the subject matter of the chosen optional Unit. The nature of that exercise hasn't changed over the years and is assessed around three aspects: planning; developing; and evaluating the outcomes.

While the course has hardly changed since it started in 2004, repeated comments by the Principal Assessors, within the External Assessment Reports, over the last three years suggest that there are some issues around aspects of the management of the project and upon which the final pass marks are based. This was a theme mentioned in the interviews (see further below). SQA has made available grade descriptors and examples of candidates work to exemplify the standards at C to A. SQA should additionally exemplify below C candidate work to further help colleges to estimate more accurately.

### **Recommendation 1**

*SQA should extend its existing exemplification criteria (Grade Descriptors) to illustrate work below a C pass.*

## **The candidates**

One of the difficulties in comparing the course against others, as well as from year to year, is the nature of the candidature itself. Because of both the national total which has, for example, a range from 278 in 2006 to 423 in 2010, with significant variations in between, and the range of figures within individual presenting Centres, the statistics can be easily distorted. In addition, the responses to the Project are very susceptible to the nature of the annual intake. There does not appear to be any particular pattern to that (for example, typical age ranges would include over a quarter being over 30 and over a third being 18 or under) and while there is a putative entrance standard (though entirely at the discretion of the Centre) the range within that is also very diverse. Some candidates come immediately from school with a mixed range of qualifications which may or may not be appropriate for Higher level study. Many also come after a break from any formal education (for example only 61.5% of learners had previous recorded attainment between 2006 and 2009 that we could access from records). By definition then, there is not a coherent cohort which, as in the mainstream school setting, allows for easier comparisons and setting of standards from year to year. It is very much in the hands of the Professional Assessors and markers as well as the lecturers themselves responding to the diversity of learners' needs. There appears to be much the same variation with similar qualifications across Colleges. (For the record the overall pass rate for other Highers taken by the same learners was 43.8% - 324 entries.) Nevertheless some Colleges have a better degree of consistency in this regard than others. This would suggest there may be other factors at work as well in this year's lower results. However, there was statistical evidence to suggest an increasing divergence in estimates over the last four years at least. It appears that over the years, there has been a steady average estimate of around a 90% pass rate predicted by the Centres (variable, of course, within them). This has never matched the actual pass rate which has varied from 2006 (allowing for the first two years for bedding down) from 63.7% to 78.8% prior to the current one of now around 40% after appeal. Indeed over the last four years, the gap between estimates and results has widened. However, aside from that, there was a clear feeling among the markers that this year's candidates were not as able as previous years.

## **Recommendation 2**

*This has implications for the expectations of the central team at SQA as well as the training and development of College staff. There needs to be significant training on the issue of estimates to more carefully reflect the reality. This training should also incorporate raising awareness for lecturers when experiencing such a fluctuation of candidate experience and background both in study as well as basic skills. There would appear to be evidence from the External Assessment reports that on a number of occasions candidates struggled to communicate clearly in writing – the Optional Unit on Stress and Stress Management, for example, demands an extended essay as well as folio evidence. Perhaps colleges should consider some additional vetting prior to course uptake so that candidates are realistic about the skill set required to complete this optional unit successfully. SQA should consider additional entry requirement guidance to support this.*

### **The pattern of pass rates**

As indicated above there has not been a steady consistent pattern of percentage passes and that in itself should have caused more speculation on the part of the central team at SQA as well as the Colleges to ask some questions. One of the reasons why this has not happened has probably had to do with the diversity of candidates and Centres over the years. Because even the Centres themselves have had variable candidature, any deviations would probably be put down to local changes.

### **Recommendation 3**

*In the future, where candidature is diverse in nature and fewer in number some additional scrutiny would be helpful.*

### **The marking system**

The marking system itself would appear to be secure in terms of process and quality control. Actual procedures do not appear to have changed substantially even with the change of PA where you might expect a degree of change of emphases. There is evidence that any deviant markers are uncovered, retrained or, in extremis, removed from the team and any scripts remarked. It should be noted that markers are encouraged to raise any particular issues either with the PA direct or indeed with the SQA personnel. This year no particular matters were raised beyond the usual discussion of individual pieces. At that level the system seems to work. The consistency both in senior personnel, the Principal Assessor and two Examining Team Leaders, as well as the central marking meeting is to be commended and any potential issues in the current group have been addressed to ensure the maintenance of standards. However, although the team is supported by a Qualification Manager, over the years, the involvement tends to have been more in the early stages and thereafter, the PA, who is the key professional, is largely left to manage the remaining process. Nevertheless, the PA was well supported by the Qualification Manager in this instance especially around some difficulties over marker discrepancy.

### **Recommendation 4**

*SQA's qualification managers should consider as appropriate providing additional support to small examining teams such as this and notably at a time of change-over from one PA to another to build confidence. They should also continue to support fully in quality assuring the markers especially where there are doubts. While standards have been maintained, additional enhancements to SQA's approach to the marking process should be considered including, for example, blind marking of the candidates' work without sight of the Centre's estimate; ensuring that the time and markers' resource allocated is appropriate; encouraging*

*more colleges to volunteer staff to take part in the marking – this would have the double benefit of easing the difficulties in getting adequate numbers of markers and more colleges being represented on the marker team while also taking that understanding of marking back to the Centre.*

In addition, there is in place a penalty for exceeding the word limit in the Project. This appears to us to be unduly harsh and could actually be the difference between a pass and fail.

### **Recommendation 5**

*While we can understand the original rationale behind this requirement, this practice should be reviewed by SQA and appropriate warnings around excessive or insufficient words put in place. This would most likely be self penalising by blurring the key message on the one hand or not providing sufficient detail on the other – easily illustrated through exemplars.*

Likewise, over the years the nature of the case study has never changed. This potentially can lead to candidate and lecturer complacency as well as plagiarism. In addition, while the current assessment instrument has served the qualification well, it would be helpful if SQA, in consultation, reviewed its continued fitness for purpose.

### **Recommendation 6**

*SQA should review these aspects of the qualification.*

The Appeal system used this year was identical and as rigorous as previous years and it seems to have worked effectively. However, it should be noted that in response to the review of the actual candidates' papers on this occasion, the above point on word count was investigated. It was not, on this occasion, impinging on the margin of pass and fail.

### **Personnel (Principal Assessor; examining team; markers; colleges' personnel)**

As indicated above, the team is fairly stable and there have only ever been two Principal Assessors since 2004. The quality of the team of around 10 markers, is as would be expected for such a diverse group with small numbers, a bit variable. It does mean though that discrepancies are spotted fairly quickly and, in extremis, markers can be removed despite attempts at reaching a common, consistent standard. Any graded at 'B' (consistently high or low) have their scripts watched carefully for discrepancies – especially so if there was an appeal. As with any qualification it is disconcerting, of course, when any marker or markers are unable to achieve the accepted standard since it raises the question around what actually is being taught within the class setting. When the numbers are low, as in this case, the impact on a Centre's performance could be significant. Even at the level of the External Assessment reports, one wouldn't expect to see the repetition of significant points for action e.g. '*...candidates seemed unable to identify aims and objectives and missed out parts of the project at the planning stage..*'; '*...the identification of needs was particularly*

*poor...'*; etc. These reports are helpful and constructive documents. There is an expectation that teachers and lecturers read and understand these reports and where the message is not clear then they should be encouraged to talk to a Head of Department or the SQA relevant personnel for such clarification without fear. The majority do appear to take cognisance of them but that is erratic and there was a suggestion that tying these more clearly into marking guidelines would be helpful to Centres.

### **Recommendation 7**

*This would point again to SQA working supportively together with the Colleges either through central or on-line training to encourage as much consistency year on year as possible. It is important this information is then acted upon. Colleges, however, also need to be alert to new staff and their own needs in this regard especially with courses like this and ensure the ready availability of all the relevant documentation.*

### **Conclusion – the ‘perfect storm’!**

We often use the phrase these days of the ‘perfect storm’ to describe those events that bring together a series of effects which taken individually would not be a problem but taken collectively can cause significant upheaval. Despite best efforts it catches people unaware often when it is too late to respond quickly. On a smaller scale this seems to be what has happened here. The nature of the qualification in the marketplace - its construct, entrance requirements and difficulty; the way it is assessed; a diversity of candidature; a sense of ease and familiarity developing over time; fewer available meaningful statistical comparisons; no easily identifiable possible warning signs and so on, have together brought about a pass figure this year which on first glance seemed well out of sorts. However, while significantly less than any previous year, it is actually near the mark and has helped to highlight the deviations across the range of results over six years as well questioning the predicted pass rates over time. The raising of the question in the first place has been very timely indeed and a number of key actions, suggested above, can be taken to reassure colleges and students, past, present and future, of the high standard of such a valuable qualification. It would probably be helpful if both the Colleges and SQA reflected on other similar qualifications so that when such variations do occur they can be sure it is due to the performance of the candidature sitting that year and not the qualification, teaching or assessment systems.

### **What now?**

In summary, the following action points were noted.

- 1. SQA should extend its existing exemplification criteria (Grade Descriptors) to illustrate work below a C pass.*
- 2. There needs to be significant training on the issue of estimates to more carefully reflect the reality. This training should also incorporate raising awareness for*

*lecturers when experiencing such a fluctuation of candidate experience and background both in study as well as basic skills. On a practical basis reinforcing when estimates can and should be submitted should be clarified to achieve the greater consistency noted above. Colleges might consider some additional vetting prior to course uptake so that candidates are realistic about the skill set required to complete the optional unit successfully. SQA should consider additional entry requirement guidance to support this.*

- 3. In the future, where candidature is diverse in nature and fewer in number some additional scrutiny of these qualifications would be helpful.*
- 4. SQA's qualification managers should consider as appropriate providing additional support to small examining teams such as this and notably at a time of change-over from one PA to another. They should also continue to support fully in quality assuring the markers especially where there are doubts. There should be transparency in appointment procedures. Additional enhancements to SQA's approach to the marking process should be considered. Colleges should actively encourage staff to volunteer to mark which will bring several benefits both to the assessment process and the colleges.*
- 5. The practice of rigidly penalising word count should be reviewed by SQA and appropriate warnings around excessive or insufficient words put in place. The importance of this could be illustrated through exemplars.*
- 6. There was a suggestion that the illustrative nature of the case study should change, at least fairly regularly, if not every year. In addition, while the current assessment instrument has served the qualification well, it would be helpful if SQA, in consultation, reviewed its continued fitness for purpose.*
- 7. SQA should continue to work supportively together with the Colleges to deliver appropriate assessment training. This should be signalled clearly and well planned with early warning given so as many as possible can attend. A check should be kept as to who was unable to attend. Colleges should be alert to new staff and their own needs in this regard especially with courses similar to this in take-up and ensure all appropriate documentation is available and is being used. This should be especially so where the lecturer is the only qualified subject specialist and who may need additional reassurance on standards.*

We recommend the actions noted above for the attention of both the SQA and the Colleges in consultation and thank both them and individuals involved for full access to information. Everyone was keen to see a resolution to the issues raised and gave their full cooperation.