

Research and Information Services

Monitoring Standards Report



HNC Social Sciences (G86F)

Introduction

SQA has been carrying out an annual monitoring standards programme since 1998. The exercise plays a very important role in ensuring that we continue to offer qualifications of a consistently high standard. The process involves scrutinising candidate evidence, assessment material and marking guidelines for the current year and comparing these with archived evidence from a previous year's exercise where available, to judge if standards are being maintained over time. Centres with candidates taking the units in the current sample are asked to submit the work of two candidates who have been awarded a bare pass and whose evidence as far as possible exemplifies the standard for the qualification. HN unit specifications for both the current and comparator years are made available to the scrutiny teams. The panels are chaired by the Senior Verifier (mostly) and the other two members of each group are an experienced verifier and where possible an external specialist from Higher Education or an expert from industry or related sector. The Units scrutinised were:

- ◆ DP3R 34 Sociology A: Introducing Sociological Concepts and Theories
- ◆ DP3T 34 Sociology B: Application and Analysis of Sociological Theory to Sociological Topics
- ◆ DP59 34 Social Science: Research and Methodology
- ◆ DP43 34 Psychology A: History and Development of Psychology
- ◆ DP4G 34 Geography A: Introducing a Geographical Perspective

1 Source documents

The HN Social Science course has been reviewed several times since the initial 'pilot' course first introduced at the beginning of the HN modernisation process. Prior to session 2007–08 it was possible for centres to offer the 'pre-modernisation' Social Science HN; the 'pilot' course; the post-pilot revised course and/or the 'interim' Social Science Graded Units. Session 2007–08 is therefore the first year, in many years, that all colleges have been required to offer the Units identified above. However, some, if not most, are known to have offered the Units in previous sessions, making this the second or subsequent year of delivery for the majority. Therefore, a minority of the 24 colleges who submitted assessment material for the monitoring standards process were offering the Units for the first time.

Content of the Units was updated and revised as a result of sector feedback from the initial 'pilot' HN and subsequent revisions to the course. An assessment

strategy was implemented to introduce a standardised approach and level of demand to assessment across the discipline Unit choices. To comply with the HN design principles, Sociology A and B Units and the Psychology A Unit became mandatory Units within the HN Social Science in this final revision. Sociology and Psychology were chosen as the mandatory disciplines as most colleges offered these disciplines as options in the previous versions of the Social Science HN. The Research Methods Unit has been a mandatory Unit for many years. Geography A is an optional discipline choice which is offered by a small minority of Scotland's colleges. Four colleges submitted evidence for the monitoring standards activity.

Unit content remains broadly similar to the previous versions of the Units. However, it was acknowledged that some Units were very heavily content laden in previous versions and widely considered as requiring a reduction in content. The final review therefore reduced the breadth of Unit content in line with sector feedback.

More major changes are evident in the assessment requirements. The assessment strategy implemented across all Units requires all single, 'A' Units to be assessed by means of one closed-book assessment and the double, 'B' Units to be assessed by means of one closed assessment and one open-book assessment, word count guidelines and permitted time allocated to each Unit assessment are also provided. Sampling of content for assessment purposes is applied for all Units with the exception of the Research Methods Unit. Due to the nature of the content of the Unit, the Research Methods Unit sits outwith the assessment strategy. The assessment strategy is embedded within all Unit assessment Evidence Requirements. Exemplar assessment materials are available from SQA for all Units within the HN Social Science. The qualification design team (QDT) also provided the sector with a collation/bank of verified discipline-specific questions for summative Unit usage.

2 Assessment instruments

Most centres used assessment exemplars and marking instructions (MIs), therefore a degree of consistency was evident between centres, and assessments were generally fit for purpose. However, where modifications of the exemplar were used, MIs were not always provided, nor was the criteria for a pass mark.

There are some issues with the Psychology A Unit assessment requirements. One consequence of the new framework, which requires closed-book sampling to take place, is that the historical narrative of psychology (Psychology A Unit) is difficult to achieve within this type of assessment. This brings into question the validity of some responses, which ignore the title and first Outcome of this Unit. The level of demand was deemed to be appropriate for Unit assessments at SCQF level 7.

The standard of paperwork was variable between centres with some providing clear, accurate and relevant paperwork which enabled third parties to clearly track the progress of the candidate and the associated audit trail. Others omitted paperwork or submitted incomplete paperwork which prevented third party viewers from being able to make confident statements about candidates' work — for example lack of MIs. Not all centres provided evidence of internal verification of the assessment instrument and/or candidates' work.

Conditions of assessment were variable between centres. Where assessment exemplars were used, an assumption was made that the conditions of assessment were as prescribed by the exemplar documentation. Many centres did not explicitly provide the conditions of assessment.

In most cases candidates were not given any explicit detail on the requirements for success on the instrument of assessment. However, given that in most cases the exemplar was used, Outcomes were linked to specific questions. From the evidence submitted, it appears that all centres followed SQA guidance and carried out an unseen assessment.

The issue of re-sit or remediation is problematic as there is a variety of definitions between centres — which clearly impacts on standards, in particular where an unseen assessment is concerned.

Integration between Unit assessments in general is not possible due to the differentiation between Social Science disciplines. Although under the previous HNC framework, integration was common between Psychology A and Research and Methodology, no centres currently use this opportunity. It is relatively easy to continue such integration, providing key features and strengths and weaknesses of one method which relates to Psychology is assessed in the Research and Methodology Unit.

3 Evidence of candidate performance

In the main, there was evidence of consistency in the standard of evidence. However, in some centres candidates were being asked to remediate on work which other centres would have clearly passed. Lack of consistency was also found in the level of remediation required and allowed. Some centres required remediation on minor errors or omissions which could have been passed holistically or orally clarified. Other centres permitted remediation on major errors and omissions where a new paper should have been attempted. Remediation on remediation was also allowed by some centres to achieve a pass. In some cases where re-sits were indicated by the centre, the candidate actually sat the same paper as the first attempt.

Some centres provided the candidates with assessment booklets, which generally led to a good quality of presentation of candidates' work. Generally presentation was of an acceptable standard for closed-book assessment conditions.

Assessor feedback to candidates was very variable between centres. Some centres provided excellent written feedback and feed-forward for candidates; some notated that oral feedback was given; others provided no evidence of feedback or marking other than 'pass' written on the front of the assessment. Some used centre-devised/or SQA-devised 'tick box' feedback sheets.

Evidence of internal verification was variable. A minority of centres provided evidence of internal verification of the assessment instrument and/or candidates' work. This may be due to centre selection policy (usually only 10–20% of candidates would be sampled internally) or lack of explicit requirements of the monitoring standards process reaching the appropriate staff member.

Variability in assessment decisions was noted in some Units, whilst not in others. In Sociology A and B Units, assessment decisions were generally accurate whilst in the Research Methods Unit, great variability was noted in assessment decisions, both within and between centres. In Psychology A the greatest variability was noted. This may be due to the assessment demands of the Unit not being appropriate to the title and learning Outcomes, as outlined above.

4 Comparing standards over time

Overall, several Units have less content than in previous versions of the Units/Course. However, due to the standardisation and amendments to the assessment requirements, candidates are now required to undertake a number of closed-book assessments. Unit content, whilst more appropriate, is less demanding than before, and assessment arguably more demanding than before. The monitoring standards team therefore recognised that a direct comparison on level of demand was difficult to comment on.

The Arrangements for the award, now making Sociology A/B and Psychology A mandatory Units, reduce the flexibility for candidates and centres in comparison to the previous awards. This may contribute to a marginalisation of some of the lower uptake Units and prohibit candidate choice, which can be vitally important for articulation purposes. The reduction in flexibility would also appear to be contrary to contemporary educational initiatives which emphasise choice and personalisation. Otherwise, the Arrangements were considered to be as rigorous as previous HN Social Science awards.

In the main, Evidence Requirements were interpreted with a degree of standardisation across centres. However, major issues were evident with the interpretation of remediation/re-assessment requirements. The variability of interpretation was regarded as having a major impact on the emergence of a 'National Standard'.

Many centres submitted evidence of 'bare passes'. Assuming all centres genuinely considered the evidence to be bare passes and no more, then

variability in the standard is evident. Previous comments regarding remediation/re-assessment issues are also applicable here.

5 Conclusions

In 2005 the conditions of assessment were quite different. Most centres took the opportunity to use open-book assessment. This gave rise to more fluent, comprehensive, well resourced answers in comparison to 2008. In 2008 answers are closed-book and this limits the responses given. However, closed-book assessment prepares candidates better for articulation to university which is one of the aims of this course. Reliance on closed-book assessments, as laid down in the assessment strategy, is limiting in terms of developing 'other' skills required for candidates either in the work place or for a university experience. Such a strategy also limits innovative developments in assessment practice.

6 Recommendations for SQA

- ◆ SQA should consider the need for further guidance on remediation/re-assessment requirements.

Initial Response

The issue of remediation/re-assessment has now been addressed. Further guidance has been developed by our QST for Social Sciences and will be posted on our web site. In addition, we are holding a staff development seminar on 18 November where there will be a presentation and discussion on this with the Senior Verifier plus other verifiers. Printed guidance will also be issued at this event.

- ◆ SQA should re-visit the HN Social Science assessment strategy, embedded within the Unit assessment Evidence Requirements with an aim to increase the flexibility of permitted responses, taking into account Unit requirements to enable a variety of assessment methods to be used where appropriate and to facilitate innovative assessment practice.

Initial Response

The QST has already begun to discuss the assessment strategy. We undertook a consultation exercise with centres earlier this year and gained some valuable feedback in relation to this. We have some recommendations for revision but review of the assessment strategy will take place as part of the overall review of the HNC/D Social Sciences which will take place between April 2009 and March 2011.

- ◆ Based on the team's knowledge that lecturers tend to use and/or conform to exemplar assessment materials, innovative 'alternative' exemplar assessments would greatly assist innovative practice.

Initial Response

We have produced a vast amount of exemplar support for this award. In addition we have been working with E-assessment and learning team and SFEU to set up an SQA assessment exemplar "bank". This will consist of exemplars developed by centres and sent in to SQA for sharing with other centres. All of these exemplars will first of all be prior verified by SQA.

7 Recommendations for centres

None

Appendix: Unit report

1 The Units

Unit	Main Purpose	Candidate Profile	Uptake
<p>DP3R: Sociology A: Introducing Sociological Concepts and Theories</p>	<p>The Unit introduces candidates to a range of basic concepts and theories and their application to social life. The area of social life is at the discretion of the centre. Candidates should be taught nine concepts and four categories of theory. The assessment should sample four concepts and two theories, with application to one area of social life.</p>	<p>The majority of candidates from the centres sampled are undertaking HNC Social Science. There were a few candidates undertaking HNC Social Care.</p>	<p>As these are core Units, uptake will be in line with the uptake of HNC Social Science as a whole.</p>
<p>DP3T : Sociology B: Application and Analysis of Sociological Theory</p>	<p>Candidates are introduced to (or develop their knowledge of) a minimum of three theories and three studies applied to each of three topic areas. Centres may choose both topic area, theories, and studies as relevant. Assessment samples all three theories and studies for the open-book topic and two theories and two studies for the closed-book topic. Only two of the topics studied are sampled in assessment.</p>	<p>The majority of candidates from the centres sampled are undertaking HNC Social Science. There were a few candidates undertaking HNC Social Care.</p>	

<p>DP59: Research and Methodology</p>	<p>The Unit aims to introduce candidates to the role and importance of research in the social sciences. The Unit is one of six core mandatory Units. On completion of the Unit, the candidate should be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ explain the importance of research in social science ◆ apply data handling techniques and interpret key information ◆ describe the basic research process model as used in the social sciences 	<p>From the sample provided, it would appear that all candidates were from HNC/HND Social Sciences.</p>	<p>As a mandatory Unit, all HNC/HND candidates must successfully complete this Unit to achieve the Group Award.</p>
<p>DP43: History and Development of Psychology</p>	<p>This Unit is designed to develop candidates' knowledge and understanding of the historical development of psychology and its methodologies. On completion of this Unit, the candidate will be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ explain the development of psychology since the 19th century ◆ explain the methods of research used in psychology. 	<p>From the sample provided, it would appear that all candidates were from HNC/HND Social Sciences.</p>	

<p>DP4G: Introduction to a Geographical Perspective</p>	<p>The Unit introduces candidates to the contribution of Geography in understanding the world and its role within the social sciences, enabling examination of poverty and deprivation from a geographical perspective.</p>	<p>These are candidates undertaking elements of, or the entire HNC Social Science course.</p>	<p>As an optional Unit on the HNC Social Sciences, there is smaller uptake than for core Units. Candidates work was submitted from four centres.</p>
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2 Assessment instruments

DP3R: Sociology A: Introducing Sociological Concepts and Theories	
Fitness for purpose/ integration	The Unit gives scope for centres to adapt to their own needs and preferences. The assessment and Unit are fit for purpose, although attention is drawn to the over complexity of the demand in the post-modern approach. The concepts provide a clear introduction to the subject area in terms of the inclusion of CW Mills and the Sociological Imagination and the comparison of Sociology and common sense.
Quality of presentation	<p>The candidate work requested was for ‘bare pass’ or ‘not yet achieved’, thus quality is skewed toward the lower end. However, there was evidence of potential with most candidates. Worthy of note was that in most cases candidates showed some degree of A and E skill sets. Also worthy of note is the area of citizenship — significant numbers of candidates, although at the border in terms of theoretical understanding, showed an excellent level of understanding and development in the areas of equity, justice and rights issues.</p> <p>Some centres had a clearly presented pack of work from candidates with paperwork which indicated a clear audit trail of the candidates’ work and related assessment and IV work.</p> <p>Some centres provided little in the way of this and it was difficult to see how decisions had been arrived at or on what basis.</p>
Level of demand	The level of demand was judged to be appropriate. However, in one case an internally-devised assessment, which had been internally verified but showed no evidence of prior verification via SQA, presented a level of demand in excess of that required with the questions — although as no marking scheme was submitted, it was not possible to fully verify the extent of this.
Conditions of assessment	Most centres failed to note the conditions of assessment on the assessment documents. However, the format of candidates’ responses indicates that correct conditions of assessment were used.
Guidance on criteria for pass and validity to PCs and range/summary	<p>In terms of the exemplar marking scheme and descriptor, the criteria for a pass were appropriate and the performance criteria were fully covered where centres used SQA materials or prior verified materials. There was a clear degree of flexibility allowing for a range of correct responses.</p> <p>The issue of resit or remediation was problematic as there was a variety of definitions between centres, which clearly impacts on standards, in particular where an unseen assessment is concerned.</p>

DP3T : Sociology B: Application and Analysis of Sociological Theory

<p>Fitness for purpose/ integration</p>	<p>There is a clear link and progression between this and the preceding Unit Sociology A. The ability to build up more in-depth knowledge on a topic already introduced and then move on to two different topics gives a stepped approach. There is a range of flexibility in what centres may select to deliver. There is clear progression in terms of demand.</p>
<p>Quality of presentation</p>	<p>As material seen was ‘bare pass’, the quality was skewed toward the lower end of ability or effort. In nearly all cases the work showed clear progression from that submitted at Sociology A, potential for improvement and again some very clear evidence of positive attitude formation around citizenship areas.</p> <p>In some centres all candidates correctly referenced material and provided bibliographies. Some candidates partially referenced and in a few cases there was no evidence of any references or bibliography. Whilst not mandatory, it is good practice — in particular as a defence against plagiarism, for preparation for higher level study, and for employability.</p> <p>The standard of paperwork was variable between centres with some providing clear, accurate and relevant paperwork which enabled third parties to clearly track the progress of the candidate and the associated audit trail.</p>
<p>Level of demand</p>	<p>The level of demand is appropriate. All assessment documents appeared to meet the correct standard although it is not possible to be confident of this in cases where the marking scheme was not submitted.</p>
<p>Conditions of assessment</p>	<p>Although not all instruments of assessment had conditions of assessment noted, it was apparent that conditions of assessment were appropriate in so far as judgement can be made by a third party in retrospect.</p>
<p>Guidance on criteria for pass and validity to PCs and range/summary</p>	<p>The published guidance was appropriate and in nearly all cases correctly interpreted.</p> <p>The issue of re-sit or remediation was problematic as there were a variety of definitions between centres, which clearly impacts on standards, in particular where an unseen assessment is concerned.</p>

DP59:Research and Methodology	
Fitness for purpose/ integration	<p>The majority of centres relied on the SQA exemplar for the first sitting of this assessment. Little modification is possible given the lack of sampling of assessment in this Unit. Variations of the exemplar were used for re-assessment. Those centres which wrote their own assessments had followed the exemplar and descriptor to produce appropriate instruments of assessment.</p> <p>Given the above statements, all assessments were fit for purpose.</p>
Quality of presentation	<p>This varied between centres. Instructions to candidates were often limited, which was possibly due to the lack of information provided in the exemplar. Not all centres provided evidence of internal verification of the assessment instrument and/or candidates' work. This may be due to centre selection policy (usually only 10–20% of candidates would be sampled internally) or lack of explicit requirements reaching the appropriate staff member.</p>
Level of demand	<p>The level of demand for all assessments was appropriate for SCQF level 7.</p>
Conditions of assessment	<p>There was variable information given to candidates. Time allowed was often not indicated on the instrument of assessment. It has been assumed that closed-book conditions were applied given that exemplars were generally used.</p>
Guidance on Criteria for pass and validity to PCs and range/summary	<p>In most cases candidates were not given any explicit detail on the requirements for success on the instrument of assessment. Given that the exemplar was used, Outcomes were linked to specific questions.</p>

DP43:History and Development of Psychology

<p>Fitness for purpose/ integration</p>	<p>The majority of centres relied on the SQA exemplar for the first sitting of this assessment. Variations of the exemplar were used for re-assessment. Those centres which wrote their own assessments had followed the exemplar and descriptor to produce, in most cases, appropriate instruments of assessment.</p> <p>Given the above statements most assessments were fit for purpose.</p>
<p>Quality of presentation</p>	<p>This varied between centres. Instructions to candidates in the exemplar are that 2–3 hours should be given for this assessment. However, many assessments did not indicate how much time was given. Some centres indicated that 2 hours was permitted with others giving 3 hours. Others stated that 2–3 hours was available without indicating which they had used. Not all centres provided evidence of internal verification of the assessment instrument and/or candidates’ work. This may be due to centre selection policy (usually only 10–20% of candidates would be sampled internally) or lack of explicit requirements reaching the appropriate staff member.</p>
<p>Level of demand</p>	<p>The level of demand was mostly appropriate to SCQF level 7. However, some assessments were demanding skills above level 7.</p>
<p>Conditions of assessment</p>	<p>Variable information was given to candidates. Time allowed was often not indicated on the instrument of assessment. It has been assumed that closed-book conditions were applied given that exemplars were generally used.</p>
<p>Guidance on criteria for pass and validity to PCs and range/summary</p>	<p>In most cases, candidates were not given any explicit detail on the requirements for success on the instrument of assessment. Given that in most cases the exemplar was used, Outcomes were linked to specific questions.</p>

DP4G: Introduction to a Geographical Perspective

Fitness for purpose/ integration	<p>In three cases the exemplar assessment and associated marking scheme were used. In one case a slight adaptation to the exemplar was used. This adaptation met the criteria and standard, however there was no evidence of prior verification via SQA.</p> <p>The instruments of assessment appear to be fit for purpose.</p>
Quality of presentation	<p>Candidates' work submitted appears to be of a similar standard between centres.</p>
Level of demand	<p>The level of demand appears to be appropriate.</p>
Conditions of assessment	<p>Not all centres noted the conditions of assessment on assessment documents, however, from the evidence submitted it appears that all centres followed the SQA guidance and carried out an unseen assessment.</p>
Guidance on criteria for pass and validity to PCs and range/summary	<p>This appears to be appropriate.</p>

3 Evidence of candidate performance

Overall	
<p>Examples of good assessment practice/summary</p>	<p>For DP3R there was accurate and appropriate practice in most centres, but nothing which was above and beyond appropriate — although some centres are clearly using the obvious leads that the subject affords to cover a range of citizenship and personal development issues in a naturalistic integral way, ie the way that works!</p> <p>One centre appeared to be engaging in good practice with an internal verification form which contained the statement ‘...reflect the diversity and changing nature of modern British society’ — the statement had been noted as being met. However, neither the candidates’ work nor any of the materials submitted showed any efforts to source studies, examples etc other than those provided in the generic material. Thus, it is a statement without any supporting evidence or substance, rendering it meaningless.</p> <p>One college had excellent paperwork for DP3T.</p> <p>In many cases good written feedback was given for DP59.</p> <p>One centre required candidates to complete a self-reflection questionnaire directly after completion of the DP43 assessment. The questionnaire asked them to reflect on attendance, activities undertaken for assessment preparation, and to comment on how well they felt they had done.</p>
<p>Comparison over time</p>	<p>In 2005 the conditions of assessment for DP59 were quite different. Most centres took the opportunity to use open-book assessment. This gave rise to more fluent, comprehensive, well-resourced answers in comparison to 2008. In 2008, answers are closed book and this limits the responses given. However, closed-book assessment prepares candidates better for articulation to university, which is one of the aims of this course.</p> <p>There has been a reduction from three Outcomes to two, and a change to specific from non-specific form of assessment.</p> <p>Certainly the amount of work submitted under the previous Unit 7470734 was considerably more for nearly all candidates. However previous work was done under open-book conditions and this would account for some differentiation. Current instructions give a word limit of 1500 words whereas the previous instructions had no word limit.</p> <p>Current delivery tends to utilise the exemplar, whereas previous candidates show each centre delivering a different assessment.</p> <p>For example, in 2005 one centre assessed Outcome 1 as a 1.5 hours closed-book assessment and Outcome 2 as a supervised 1.5 hours plus an open-book project, compared with one supervised assessment of 2–3 hours.</p>

	<p>Additionally, the 2008 candidate work is 'bare pass', thus does not suffer direct comparison with 2005, which is 'pass'.</p> <p>There is great variety of assessment method and form in 2005, thus the fact that currently centres are using the exemplar assessment means that standards are more likely to be similar between centres than previously.</p>
DP3R: Sociology A: Introducing Sociological Concepts and Theories	
Accuracy of assessment decisions	In six cases the assessment decision 'Pass' was not agreed and should have been 'Pass-', although all cases showed potential and it is likely that they would have achieved with support and a re-sit.
Consistency of application of standards	With the exception of the issues around remediation/re-sit, standards were applied consistently.
DP3T : Sociology B: Application and Analysis of Sociological Theory	
Accuracy of assessment decisions	With the exception of the two cases previously mentioned, all assessment decisions appear to be accurate.
Consistency of application of standards	With the exception of the issues around remediation/re-sit, there is consistency.
DP59:Research and Methodology	
Accuracy of assessment decisions	The requirements for a pass in each Outcome varied greatly between centres. In some centres candidates were asked to remediate on work which other centres would have clearly passed.
Consistency of application of standards	Centres should note that if exemplar marking instructions are used, then they should be applied consistently, eg candidates were often passed without meeting key marking instruction requirements.
DP43:History and Development of Psychology	
Accuracy of assessment decisions	The requirements for a pass in each Outcome varied greatly between centres. In some centres candidates were being asked to remediate on work which other centres would have clearly passed. Lack of consistency was also found in the level of remediation required and allowed. Some centres required remediation on minor errors or omissions which could have been passed holistically or orally clarified. Other centres permitted remediation on major errors and omissions where a new paper should have been attempted. Remediation on remediation was also allowed by some centres to achieve a pass. In some cases where re-sits were indicated, the candidate actually sat the same paper as the first attempt.
Consistency of application of standards	Lack of consistency in time allowed for this assessment may lead to the variability found in responses for this Unit. The variability in application of

	remediation/re-assessment is also leading to inequality across centres.
DP4G: Introduction to a Geographical Perspective	
Accuracy of assessment decisions	All centres provided evidence of feedback to candidates. Assessment decisions appear to be in line with SQA recommendations.
Consistency of application of standards	There appears to be consistency across centres and between candidates. The above remarks carry the proviso that the writer is not a geographer and has not taught the Unit.