BiGGAR Economics

Evaluation of the Impact of the 2003 Higher National Design Principles

A final report to the Scottish Qualifications Authority by BiGGAR Economics

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1　Executive summary

This report presents an evaluation of the impact of the modernisation of Higher National (HN) qualifications. The primary research for this evaluation involved three components: a consultation programme, a web survey, and a student survey.

1.1　Progress against objectives

The themes of the Modernisation Project were: modernisation; rationalisation; improvement of quality and consistency; and the reduction of the assessment burden. Apart from the need to review the fitness for purpose of the qualifications, there was a need to address duplication and lack of consistency within the previous HN catalogue.

The 2003 HN design principles address: Core Skills; Graded Units; Mandatory section; and SCQF level and credit points.

Modernisation

The views across almost all subject areas is that modernisation of HNs has brought benefits, and that the Modernisation Project has delivered on its objectives. However, developing new Units and delivering untried material have presented colleges with considerable challenges and some frustrations, and these were reflected in the interviews provided by colleges for this report.

Rationalisation

The evidence collected during this evaluation demonstrates that the rationalisation of the HN catalogue has been successful and has been a positive achievement of the Modernisation Project. However, there is still work to be done to further rationalise Units, and there is a prevalent view across a number of subject areas that the process of rationalisation needs to continue.

There are Units in the HN catalogue from a range of design periods, and a number of redundant Units also remain. In addition, there is a role for continued maintenance of the HN catalogue, so that Units and Group Awards that become redundant in the future are dealt with consistently.

Quality, consistency and relevance

The web survey reports a majority agreeing or strongly agreeing that quality, relevance, links to other education and articulation are all improved under the 2003 HN design principles. During consultation, this positive view was reiterated, with discussions across a range of subject areas confirming an improvement in quality. Most consultees consider the new HNs to be a better product than before.

As the new HNs become established, there will be a need to continue to review quality. In particular, issues relating to the process of verification are causing some concern for quality of the HN. Also, a lack of consistency between Units across related subjects raises concerns about standardisation of quality.

Most of the consultees who expressed an opinion consider the new HN to be more relevant to the needs of employers and universities than what went before. This is supported by the fact that 63% of web survey respondents agree or strongly agree that this is the case.

HNCs and HNDs are increasingly providing an entry route to university degree programmes, as well as being focused on the needs of employers, with students choosing either to articulate to university, or to move to, or continue in employment. There is considerable evidence of there being tension between these two areas of focus. For some vocational areas the focus on academic assessment and articulation to higher education has made HNs less relevant to employers' needs than they could be.

Assessment

The Modernisation Project has not met its objective to reduce the 'burden' of assessment. While some report participants question the notion that assessment should be seen as a burden in the first place, there are still issues to be addressed. These include the fact that across many Units and awards assessment is not fit for purpose. There is a lack of parity in assessment load between awards, and a lack of clarity among colleges about SQA's expectations with respect to Evidence Requirements. In fact, in a number of areas there are problems in distinguishing between Evidence Requirements and Assessment Guidelines.

There is an appetite to work towards integrating assessments, but there are some considerable barriers to doing this, and the report recommends that SQA should consider what it can do to better facilitate integration. There is also a perceived tension between a desire to move towards holistic assessment and the prescriptive approach included in many Unit specifications. In addition to better communicating its position on holistic assessment, it is recommended that SQA considers providing case studies and other tools to support colleges, including the development of a National Assessment Bank (NABs).

1.2   Impact of the HN design principles

Core Skills

Views on Core Skills are very mixed. A minority of participants in this evaluation consider that the current approach to Core Skills creates a burden, with a higher proportion conversely considering that the approach is not rigorous enough.

Attitudes towards Core Skills and approaches taken to delivery vary considerably. Many consider signposting to be a compromise that relies on colleges making Core Skills development successful for their students. Despite a range of different approaches by colleges, there is a common view that colleges are having 'to sort out' the Core Skills shortcomings of those leaving school. Colleges have stressed the need to contextualise Core Skills, so that the learning is directly relevant to the Group Award. However, the resource requirements of this approach are significant.

Another important issue is the necessity to meet individual learner requirements. For some colleges a proportion of students may have significant support needs — in particular support to progress from National Qualifications. A number of colleges have developed specialist support packages to provide the skills required to make this transition.

The diversity of opinion suggests that there is no 'one size fits all' solution to the Core Skills issues raised by this report. However, there is a broad consensus that the priority is right, and some time should be given for the guidance to settle in.

Graded Units

In general, the introduction of the Graded Unit is a major achievement. It meets its objectives, and has provided opportunities for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and employers to value students' performance. There are some common issues and concerns which are worthy of note:

♦ There are concerns across the college sector, and among External Verifiers, that Graded Units do not reflect a national standard.

♦ The timing of the delivery of the Graded Unit in most HN awards is a concern.

♦ Lecturers in practical subjects repeatedly report that paper-based assessment (both of Graded Unit and other Units) favours those with good written skills so that, for example, many of the best chefs and beauty therapists appear less able in their subjects than those who can write well.

♦ There is a concern that students focus on the Graded Unit because the assessment will allow articulation to HE or be reviewed by employers, and this focus draws students' attention away from other Units and assessments.

Mandatory Units

On the whole, the introduction of mandatory Units has not had negative impacts, and is seen as 'a good thing' by colleges and employers. The web survey shows that opinions regarding the mandatory section are positive, with most respondents agreeing that they meet the needs of employers, they make articulation more effective and they allow enough flexibility to meet different needs.

SCQF

Respondents to the web survey generally agree that using the SCQF is a positive initiative. However, many consultees consider that it makes little difference to employers. It does provide a useful structure for students to understand the level they are working at. Many in the college sector consider that it works well, and has no adverse impacts. Many also consider that allocating SCQF credits and levels to Units does not impact on quality or consistency.

1.3   Conclusion

This evaluation has found that the HN Modernisation Project has achieved significant success.

There are a number of issues which warrant continued attention. This includes maintaining the relevance of Units and Group Awards to the differing needs of employers and HEIs, and continuing with the process of rationalisation, which is not complete. Particular attention needs to be paid to the issues surrounding assessment raised in this report. The challenges posed by the delivery of the Graded Unit across some subject areas need to be considered, as do the Core Skills issues discussed.

2 Introduction

This report presents an evaluation of the impact of the modernisation of Higher National (HN) qualifications, led by the development of the 2003 HN design principles. The five year Modernisation Project commenced in 2003 and is due to be completed in December 2008. SQA commissioned this evaluation to determine what impact the 2003 HN design principles have had and to what extent the objectives of the Modernisation Project have been met.

2.1 Evaluation method

The primary research for this evaluation had three components:

♦ consultation programme
♦ web survey
♦ student survey

2.1.1 Consultation programme

The consultation programme involved face-to-face discussions with a range of stakeholders, and aimed to determine whether the objectives of the HN design principles have been met from the perspective of different groups, and what their impacts have been. The interviews were semi-structured and covered the following issues:

♦ The extent to which the original project objectives have been met, and what still needs to be done.

♦ Whether the modernised suite of HNs better meet the needs of employers, learners and the economy, including a discussion of how this can best be evidenced.

♦ Whether there is evidence yet of better articulation with HEIs.

♦ Views on any changes in the learners' experience, and evidence for this.

♦ Evidence of changed attainment levels, and indications of what attainment might be expected in the future.

♦ In the light of the outcomes of the evaluation which was carried out in January 2006, an assessment of whether issues relating to Core Skills and Graded Units have had a detrimental effect, and whether these issues are being addressed.

In total 37 people were interviewed in a mixture of group and individual discussions. The consultees included:

♦ colleges and higher education institutions
♦ course co-ordinators
♦ heads of division
♦ lecturers
♦ External Verifiers
♦ employer representatives

A wide range of subject areas were covered during the consultation programme, including:

Agricultural Science	Countryside Management
Applied Science	Electronics
Art and Design	Health and Social Care
Beauty Therapy	Hospitality
Bioscience	Journalism
Business Management	Physics
Childcare	Photography and Printing
Computing	Social Sciences
Construction/Civil Engineering	Textiles

2.1.2   Web survey

A web-based survey was undertaken to gather information from course co-ordinators, lecturers, internal verifiers and other college and HEI staff, and those involved in HN delivery.

Our experience of conducting similar research with colleges suggested that a web-based survey was the most appropriate method, as it is relatively easy for the individual to respond to.

The survey was designed using Survey Monkey, a web-based survey tool, which BiGGAR Economics has used successfully on numerous previous occasions. A static link was created for the survey which was distributed to key contacts by SQA.

Almost 300 responses to the survey were received, of which 85% completed the whole survey.

The issues covered in the questionnaire included each of the HN design principles individually, the Modernisation Project as a whole, the rationalisation process, and HNs in general.

2.1.3 Student survey

One of the objectives of this evaluation was to understand how the modernisation of HN design principles has impacted on the learning experience. Although there is no benchmarking information to measure progress against, we believed that it would nonetheless be valuable to elicit feedback from the end-users of HNs.

This element of the evaluation was not designed to be a representative sample of the HN student population, which would require a major separate piece of research. Rather, it provides a taste of student views, testing the outputs of the rest of the evaluation.

A paper-based survey was designed to uncover students' views on certain elements of the HN, such as Core Skills, assessment and its usefulness for their future plans. Surveys were distributed to five lecturers and course leaders at two colleges across six subject areas: Civil Engineering; Quantity Surveying; Child Care and Early Education; Business; Hospitality Management; and Marketing. 95 surveys were returned.

2.2 Structure of this report

The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

♦ Section 3 sets out the background and objectives of the HN Modernisation Project and the rationale for the 2003 HN design principles.
♦ Section 4 reviews the extent to which the project has achieved its objectives of modernisation and rationalisation.
♦ Section 5 assesses the impacts of each of the 2003 HN design principles.
♦ Section 6 provides a student perspective on the issues raised during the research.
♦ Section 7 presents the evaluation's conclusions.

3   The Modernisation Project

This section covers the background and objectives of the HN Modernisation Project.

3.1   Background

SQA approved three pilot developments in Computing, Communication and Social Sciences, which commenced in 1999, with the intention that the use of the new design principles in the pilot schemes should be evaluated before they were finalised.

A national consortium was organised to produce frameworks for HN Group Awards in Horticulture and joined the Phase 1 pilots, and a single centre also joined to revise the HNC/HND in Nautical Studies according to the draft design principles.

In 2001, a further 14 consortiums who wanted early access to the draft design principles were designated Phase 2 pilots. Following five successful validations in the spring of 2001, an evaluation was carried out by an independent researcher which fed into the development of an SQA consultation document in August 2002, and following extensive consultation a new set of design principles was introduced in March 2003. SQA and Scotland's colleges then embarked on a five year programme to modernise all HNCs and HNDs to align them to the design principles starting in August 2003.

In January 2006, SQA undertook a preliminary evaluation. This took the form of a questionnaire followed by a series of visits and focus group discussions, based on a small number of HNC/HNDs that had been modernised and were being delivered by colleges at that time. Though there were areas that this initial evaluation did not fully consider, conclusions included:

♦ There was enough experience to support a realistic preliminary evaluation.
♦ 2003 HN design principles were widely accepted, and revised HNC/HNDs widely welcomed.
♦ Little regret for the old rules.
♦ Most concerns related to first-time implementation of Graded Units.
♦ Flexibility was not always apparent.
♦ Much work was still to be done everywhere, but Core Skills were the least resolved issue.
♦ Qualification Support Teams could help resolve most of the other issues.

3.2 Objectives

The 2003 HN design principles for Higher National Certificates and Diplomas include:

♦ SCQF level and credit points — all Units in revised HNC/HNDs will be allocated SCQF credit points and levels

♦ Graded Units — all HNC/HNDs designed according to the 2003 HN design principles contain one or more Graded Units

♦ Mandatory section — all HNC/HNDs will have a mandatory section of Units that every student will take

♦ Core Skills — all HNC/HNDs will provide opportunities for students to further develop the five Core Skills

The underlying themes of the programme were modernisation, rationalisation, improvement of quality and consistency, and reduction of the assessment burden. Apart from the need to review the fitness for purpose of the qualifications, there was a need to address duplication and lack of consistency within the previous HN catalogue.

The Modernisation Project sought to do the following:

♦ Bring all HNC/HNDs up to date technically, to align them more closely to National Occupational Standards and to include opportunities to develop all Core Skills to the SCQF levels demanded by employers and other gatekeepers

♦ Rationalise the number of HN Units and Group Awards, while not compromising responsiveness to particular local needs.

♦ Improve quality and consistency by benchmarking all HNC/HNDs against SCQF levels 7 and 8 and to ensure that they all represent a similar level of challenge to students.

♦ Reduce the assessment burden by encouraging a more holistic approach to assessment and increase consistency in the application of standards of assessment by providing centrally-produced Assessment Exemplars to all colleges delivering an HN qualification.

♦ Provide flexible programmes to suit individual needs by nesting of awards to allow a student to pursue another award within a wider programme of study.

♦ Offer a variety of ways to incorporate Core Skills including embedded Core Skills, named Core Skills Units, signposting and the Personal Development Planning Unit (SCQF level 7 Unit).

♦ Formally recognise work experience through the use of the Work Role Effectiveness Units (these Units allow HN students to be certificated for work experience).

3.3 Rationale

HNC/HNDs have played an important role in vocational education in Scotland since the late 1920s. Originally, they were a part-time route for people wishing to become technicians or technical managers in engineering, science and technology-related occupations, but they also offered major opportunities for full-time study in the business sector. Since then they have developed to serve the majority of sectors in the Scottish economy and have a high level of credibility with employers.

HNC/HNDs were reformed in 1988 to a Unit-based, internally-assessed system. This created a new flexibility to respond quickly and imaginatively to emerging economic needs. The reform resulted in a substantial increase in the range of qualifications on offer. Uptake of HN qualifications expanded to a level that was pro rata three times higher than the rest of the UK.

In the mid 1990s, the system for HN qualifications was reviewed to take account of the other major reviews which had taken place for the qualifications which provide progression to and from HNC/HNDs (National Qualifications, SVQs and degrees).

This set the context for the development of the 2003 HN design principles, which were based on a need to further renew provision to reflect:

♦ emerging national priorities for inclusion, widening access and skill development
♦ changing demands in the labour market
♦ recent and rapid change in the FE and HE sectors
♦ concerns identified in established HNC/HNDs including over-assessment, 'merit' grading and fragmentation
♦ the developing SCQF

In addition, the 2003 HN design principles sought to address the issues which the 1988 unitisation of HNC/HNDs had created. In particular:

♦ the need for rationalisation
♦ the need to improve quality and consistency
♦ the need to reduce the (perceived) assessment burden

There are four key features of the 2003 HN design principles. The rationale was considered in the interim evaluation undertaken in 2006. The four key features are:

♦ SCQF level and credit points were introduced:

— to ensure that all HNC/HNDs presented the same challenge to students
— to ensure that all HNCs attracted the same SCQF credit points, as did all HNDs
— to ensure all HNC/HNDs could be managed and funded on the same basis
— to confirm and strengthen the position of HNC/HNDs as higher education qualifications
— because the SCQF is becoming more and more central to national developments

♦ Graded Units were introduced to:

— assess the student's ability to retain, integrate and apply the knowledge and skills gained in the individual Units to demonstrate that they have achieved the principal aims of the Group Award
— replace Unit-by-Unit 'merit' passes as a means of grading student achievement
— make Graded Units the main focus of HN Group Award external verification
— reduce the external verification of Units — relying on internal verification would help discourage bureaucratic approaches to verification and so encourage fewer and more holistic assessments
— align the grading (A, B and C) with methods used in other graded qualifications

♦ The mandatory section was introduced to:

— confirm existing good practice
— ensure that all holders of an HNC or HND met the aims of the Group Award
— assure users that all holders of an HNC or HND with the same title had a common set of achievements
— discourage the proliferation of slightly different HN titles (using options to accommodate differences)

♦ Core Skills were introduced to:

— meet the needs of employers, colleges and HEIs, who had indicated in the original consultation for the interim review that Core Skills should be a part of every HNC and HND
— align HNC/HNDs with other SQA qualifications (NQs and SVQs) and other UK qualifications where there is a similar high level of demand for Core Skills
— address funding issues — for example, centres may be accountable (to funding and other agencies) for Core Skills achievement, and these corporate responsibilities can be discharged more easily if Core Skills are incorporated in qualifications at the design stage

4 Progress against project objectives

4.1 Introduction

The objectives of the Modernisation Project were modernisation, rationalisation, improvement of quality, consistency and relevance, and reducing the assessment burden. The progress made in each of these areas is reviewed in this section. Evidence is drawn from a series of face-to-face consultations with a wide range of individuals with a role in the new HN, and from the web survey (both described in section 3). It should be noted that their responses show a tremendous diversity of opinion. The analysis presented here has sought to accurately reflect the views of those who have participated, and perhaps illustrates the difficulties faced by the Modernisation Project in meeting a diverse set of expectations.

Overall, the External Verifiers consulted for the report consider that modernisation has been achieved, with positive impacts on quality, consistency and relevance. In a number of subject areas there is acknowledgement that many Units were out of date and needed to be modernised (eg in Computing). Good progress has been made across many areas, although in some there is still work to be done (this is considered later in this section).

The colleges have brought a different perspective to the evaluation. The view across almost all subject areas is that modernisation of HNs has brought positive benefits and that the Modernisation Project has delivered on its objectives. However, developing new Units and delivering untried material has presented colleges with considerable challenges and some frustrations, and these were reflected in the interviews provided by colleges for this report. The focus of this evaluation is on the *impact* of modernisation rather than the *process* of the programme, but there is no doubt that the challenges of the process have impacted on the outcomes of the Modernisation Project, so they are discussed in this section to provide opportunities to learn lessons for other similar programmes that SQA may wish to undertake in the future.

The sections that follow review the progress of the Modernisation Project, under the following headings:

♦ rationalisation
♦ quality, consistency and relevance
♦ assessment

4.2   Rationalisation

The Modernisation Project sought to:

♦   rationalise the number of HN Units and Group Awards, while not compromising responsiveness to particular local needs

♦   provide flexible programmes to suit individual needs by nesting qualifications to allow a student to pursue another award within a wider programme of study

The results of the web survey show that respondents generally feel that the rationalisation process has had positive outcomes. 50% of respondents consider that the HN catalogue delivers flexibility to meet the needs of employers, students and centres. In fact 44% disagree with the notion that the HN catalogue is now too restrictive. Most respondents (51%) agree or strongly agree that rationalisation has been a major achievement of the Modernisation Project. Only 14% disagree or strongly disagree with that.

Table 4.1: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the programme of rationalisation that has taken place?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The HN catalogue delivers the flexibility required to meet the needs of employers, students and centres?	6%	50%	27%	14%	2%
The catalogue of HNs is now too restrictive	2%	16%	33%	44%	5%
The delivery of a coherent and rationalised catalogue of HNs is a major achievement of the HN Modernisation Project	8%	43%	35%	11%	3%

The evidence collected during this evaluation demonstrates that the rationalisation of the HN catalogue has been successful. The views of External Verifiers expressed through interview are that the system is now much less confusing and that the majority of unfit Units have now been removed. The HN catalogue is considered more user-friendly, without having lost flexibility for the use of employer and employee. And the opportunity to undertake Unit-by-Unit professional development is considered very positively (eg in Early Years Education and Childcare).

However, there is still work to be done to further rationalise Units. For example, it has been suggested that there are still a number of 'poor' Units in the Computing HN, although with most centres now using new Units it is considered that the old ones will become redundant naturally. (This point was made through interview and comments on the web survey.) Similar concerns have been raised by External Verifiers in other areas, such as Art and Design. Indeed, a concern has been raised that there is evidence that the HN catalogue is expanding so that new Units are being created that cover similar areas, leading to different approaches to the same content in different HNs and causing problems for verification and quality standards.

Views on the impact of rationalisation from the employer perspective are mixed. There is a strong view that the Group Award is easier for the employer to understand now. Other consultees consider that the rationalisation project has not made the HN landscape clearer for employers. Reasons for this vary: for example it could be because of the need for them to be aware of optional Units chosen by the student, or because they are simply unaware of the changes made to the HN.

Most of those within colleges that expressed an opinion during interview agreed that rationalisation has been a positive achievement of the Modernisation Project. It has cleared old, constrictive Units out of the HN catalogue while maintaining flexibility to provide subject-specific Units. However, there is a prevalent view across a number of subject areas that the process of rationalisation needs to continue. This view is held by External Verifiers, college management, and lecturers. Indeed, most college staff consider that there are years of work left in the Modernisation Project before the process of rationalisation is properly finished. This is for a number of reasons:

♦ There are still a number of redundant Units in the HN catalogue that have not been written to the 2003 HN design principles.

♦ There is a view that SQA has not been prescriptive across all areas of rationalisation, so that Units remain in the HN catalogue from a range of different design periods.

♦ As new Units and awards 'bed in' there will be a need for further revision.

In addition, there is a continued role for the maintenance of the HN catalogue, for example to ensure that industry changes, such as updating British and European Standards, are reflected constantly.

There are also some negative views of rationalisation. There is a minority view that the Modernisation Project has adopted a 'one size fits all' approach across HNs that has not worked for centres that wish to maintain autonomy over the Units they deliver. This view has been expressed both at interview and in the web survey, in which one respondent provides an example where Fashion Units are restricted within the HND Textile Group Award as a result of the potential overlap with HND Fashion.

Comments included with web survey responses raise further concerns. These include concerns in rural areas, where one respondent suggested that 'rationalisation may make it more difficult to deliver HNs in rural areas due to a reduction in the flexibility of the mode of delivery in some programmes'. This means that the needs of employers and students in rural areas may not be met. In a similar vein, there are concerns that rationalisation has made it harder to

merge classes from different HNs because of the separation of content within Units (this point was made by respondents in the business and administration fields). There is a serious concern that this can make second year classes unviable.

4.2.1 Summary

While the rationalisation of the HN catalogue has been successful, there is still work to be done to fully meet the Modernisation Project's objective of rationalisation. SQA should consider concerns that Units remain on the HN catalogue from a range of design periods, and that a number of redundant Units also remain.

In addition, there is a role for continued maintenance of the HN catalogue to ensure that qualifications are kept up to date.

4.3 Quality, consistency and relevance

The Modernisation Project sought to improve the HNs' relevance, quality and consistency. It includes objectives to:

♦ bring all HNC/HNDs up to date technically, align them more closely to National Occupational Standards, and to include opportunities to develop all Core Skills to the levels demanded by employers and other key gatekeepers

♦ improve quality and consistency by benchmarking all HNC/HNDs against SCQF levels 7 and 8 to ensure that they all represent a similar level of challenge to students

The web survey generally shows positive views, with a majority agreeing or strongly agreeing that quality, relevance, links to other education and articulation are all improved under the 2003 HN design principles.

Table 4.2: The 2003 HN design principles have resulted in:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Improved quality of HNs	17%	54%	12%	13%	4%
HNs being more relevant to the needs of employers	15%	48%	21%	11%	5%
Knowledge and skills within the Units linking more effectively to other qualifications	11%	51%	23%	12%	3%
More effective articulation to higher education	12%	46%	21%	18%	3%

4.3.1   Quality and consistency

The web survey shows that 71% of respondents agree or strongly agree that the 2003 HN design principles have improved the quality of HNs, with 17% disagreeing with that statement. During consultation this positive view was reiterated, with discussions across a range of subject areas confirming an improvement in quality. Most consultees consider the new HNs to be a better product.

As the new HNs become established there will be a need to continue to review quality. In particular, issues relating to the process of verification are causing some concern for quality of the HN. Also, a lack of consistency between Units across related subjects (such as Maths, Engineering and Computing) raises concerns about standardisation of quality. This issue has also been raised in Hospitality.

Benchmarking against SCQF is considered by SQA's External Verifiers to be a good thing, with many considering that this has helped ensure consistency and quality. Views are that it seems to be working well and makes sense. However, there is also a view that SCQF will not impact on quality from those who question the role of SQA's processes (eg the verification systems). And there are others who consider that SCQF has had no impact on either quality or consistency.

4.3.2   Relevance

All of the consultees for this report who expressed an opinion consider the new HN to be more relevant to the needs of employers and universities than what went before. This is supported by the fact that 63% of web survey respondents agree or strongly agree that this is the case. Comments made on the web survey, and echoed in the interview programme, suggest that there is still some work to be done to make HNs properly relevant. The HN is increasingly providing an entry route to university degree programmes, as well as being focused on the needs of employers, with students choosing either to articulate to university or to move to, or continue in employment. These two comments from the web survey hint at some tension between what these two destinations might imply in terms of relevance:

♦   'In Applied Sciences, some core Units not relevant to those aiming for university entry' (90% of this respondent's students).

♦   'There is much less practical work in the new HN and this was always highly valued by employers. The work has become very academic, which often does not fit well with the students and their capabilities' (Biology and Environment).

Of course, there are subject areas where the requirements of employers and higher education are not mutually exclusive. For example, in Communication and Media, one respondent says that the area is 'a fast changing one and skills may have moved on since 2003; however where 2003 HN design principles included broader aims relevant to employment generally, the Units and awards are still useful stepping stones to higher education and employment'. But another respondent with an interest in Communication and Media says that most students are now going to degree courses and few go directly into employment.

There is a suggestion from some in vocational areas that the focus on academic assessment and articulation to HE has made HNs less relevant to employers' needs than they could be. For example, web survey respondents have said:

♦   'The simplification of the assessment loading has made HNs more achievable by a greater number of students, but whether they are as well prepared for the vocational areas is less clear' (Social Sciences).

♦   'The Units have been designed to suit articulation into higher education… Our team of lecturers, all practicing engineers, agree that 80% of the Units bear no resemblance to the industry — we have students who might know how a laser assembly on a CD works and not having a clue how to solder an XLR cable' (Sound Production/Music).

This tension is succinctly summarised by a respondent to the web survey, who has stated that for Science 'being aligned more closely to National Occupational Standards precludes alignment to HE and makes articulation more difficult since HE courses are not similarly aligned'. In fact, a range of concerns about meeting the needs of *both* employers and higher education have been raised.

A number of consultees and web respondents have raised concerns that the reduction of credit rating from 120 points to 96 points has disadvantaged students articulating to degree programmes. This has been particularly stressed in Early Education and Childcare, Health and Social Care, but also commented on in other areas, including Management.

Although the difficulty in articulation has been raised for Health and Social Care, it should be noted that it is regarded as having taken major steps forward in responding to employer need and regulatory compliance. According to the Scottish Social Services Council it is a 'benchmark qualification', very highly regarded across the sector.

4.4   Assessment

The Modernisation Project sought to 'reduce the assessment burden by encouraging a more holistic approach to assessment and increase consistency in the application of standards of assessment by providing centrally-produced Assessment Exemplars to all colleges delivering a HN qualification'.

Half the respondents to the survey believe that the assessment burden for colleges and students has not been reduced.

Table 4.3: The revised Unit specification was intended to reduce the assessment burden for colleges and students. Has this been achieved?

Yes	37%
No	50%
Don't know	13%

The survey responses and consultations have provided for an in-depth view of a wide range of issues relating to assessment within the HN.

4.4.1 Is assessment a burden?

This is a fundamental question. The need to reduce the 'burden of assessment' formed part of the rationale for the HN Modernisation Project, yet for a number of those involved in delivering HNs there is a question over whether assessment should be viewed as a burden in the first place.

The premise that assessment is a burden causes concerns in areas as diverse as Accounting, Dance, Early Education and Childcare, Computing, Music and the Social Sciences. Indeed, one respondent to the web survey considered the survey question relating to the assessment burden to be 'presumptive, leading and inappropriate'. At the same time there are concerns from others in these areas that assessment in HNs *is* an intolerable burden. The diversity of opinion among and between subject areas highlights the challenges faced by a Modernisation Project that covers such a huge area.

As one survey respondent said, 'assessments generate the evidence to demonstrate competence to assessors and verifiers. They also force students to study and learn'. Without assessment, it is suggested, students will not have enough incentive to learn, and there is a danger that reducing the assessment load will lead to the qualification becoming diluted. Another concedes that the assessment burden is huge, but comments 'who can argue that the students do not leave with an excellent qualification as a result'.

Respondents in Computing, Multimedia, Music and Sound Production have all questioned whether it is necessary to reduce the assessment burden. In the Social Sciences, another respondent considers that the assessment load is 'appropriate', and suggests that an increase in closed-book assessment would improve the standard.

4.4.2 What are the assessment issues?

These comments remind us that assessment is a necessary part of the HN qualification, and that in some areas the assessment load is appropriate. However, the consultations and survey have highlighted a range of issues of concern. In fact, the web survey asked for comments on this issue through an open question, and received 3,500 words of comments in response. The consultation programme underlined that assessment issues in HNs remain unresolved by the 2003 HN design principles.

The issues include the following:

♦ There appears to be a lack of parity in assessment load between Group Awards. Some appear to be heavier than required, with Evidence Requirements that are too restrictive and rely on what many consider to be inappropriate instruments of assessment (eg heavy use of essays).

♦ There is a concern among tutors that they might not have assessed all the Evidence Requirements, and so they compensate for this by maintaining a high assessment load. This view is supported by reports of verification visits that have questioned the level of assessment where it has been reduced, and this has resulted in a very cautious approach by college staff. Therefore, both college culture and SQA's verification processes are strong drivers of the assessment approach currently in place.

♦ There are reported problems in describing and understanding the difference between Evidence Requirements and Assessment Guidelines — in some Units they are mixed, making delivery difficult.

♦ Pass marks are unduly high across Units in many subjects. This has been raised across many subject areas, with one science lecturer saying that 'trying to explain to students who have achieved 70% in a test that they have to re-sit part of it can be extremely difficult'.

♦ Where assessment delivery, and the instrument of assessment used, can impact negatively. For example, in Social Care, the college-based assessment burden may have been reduced, but the introduction of SVQs in the Care HNC/HND have had impacts on students — they are considered not to be in a placement long enough to complete four mandatory Units with any competence. And in Civil Engineering, total volume of assessment is reduced but the amount of classroom-based assessment has increased, giving students less flexibility.

♦ The assessment method can impact on teaching time. For example, where there is a requirement for in-class closed-book assessments, the burden is transferred to college staff, who need to set up assessment and re-assessment opportunities for students. This is difficult where students need up to three hours to complete an assessment. Previously, open-book assessments were done in students' time. One web survey respondent says 'now we have to teach the same amount but leave time for assessment and re-assessment. This creates a tension that is difficult to deal with'.

♦ Supervised in-class assessments take little account of the needs of distance-learning students, an important cohort of students for many colleges, particularly in the light of dwindling HN uptake figures.

♦ The Unit specifications often include what verifiers and colleges consider to be unreasonable assessment loads, with many pointing to specified word counts for essays that exceed what would be expected of degree students, and inflexible statements about the length of in-class examinations. These specifications create barriers to integrating assessments. There is evidence of Qualification Design Teams specifying holistic assessment, but being asked to include specific assessment loads (word counts) at validation — so there is also an issue here about SQA's Unit development process.

♦ A number of consultees across subject areas suggest that where assessment is unreasonably high there is often a relationship with subject specialists appointed to write Units, who are each keen to have their area assessed. On the other hand, one centre explains that because it is delivering its own single centre development it has been able to achieve holistic assessment — Units

are not assessment-driven, and the assessment load is appropriate. This centre's experience of consortium developments contrasts starkly with subject specialists on the consortium each keen to assess their area.

♦ In craft and other practically-based HNs, assessment sometimes leans heavily towards paper-based assessment, which can significantly disadvantage less academic students.

♦ Some college consultees have expressed concern about the removal of merit statements from individual Units, which they consider encourages superficial learning by removing the incentive to achieve merit.

Section 4.4.3 to 4.4.6, below, consider how these issues might be addressed in the future.

4.4.3   Unit design

The design of Units forms the basis of their assessment. The unitised approach means that there are tensions between the evidence required by different subject specialists. Although this is somewhat radical, there are consultees and web respondents that have suggested the unitised approach is removed altogether, and others that suggest the number of Units be reduced.

There is certainly a need to achieve consistency between Unit specifications within each Group Award to ensure that methods of assessment and re-assessment are consistent, and that the language and style used in the Unit is transparent.

Unit specifications have tended to prescribe assessment. Although this aims to achieve consistency, SQA may wish to consider revisiting specifications to allow opportunities for integration and to evaluate Evidence Requirements (it has been suggested this is a role for the Qualifications Support Teams). In fact, there have been calls for the relaxation of Unit specifications, to allow lecturers the freedom to make assessment decisions themselves. This is a request for a cultural change, with more authority being given to colleges, including a suggestion that SQA 'improve the Prior Moderation process to remove nit-picking and contradiction for colleges who prefer to prior moderate their own devised assessments'.

There is no process by which SQA can ensure that assessment is fit for purpose. SQA could consider clarifying assessment guidance and setting limits to assessment — particularly limiting word counts and the times set for individual exams. It has been suggested that there should also be one assessment per Unit and one Graded Unit, set at the right SCQF level. Also that a notional delivery time for the 'standard' learner is recognised and incorporated into the Unit specifications, and that assessment activity take up no more than 10% of Unit delivery time.

4.4.4   Integrating assessments and sampling

An obvious method for reducing the assessment load in the Group Award is for centres to integrate assessments across Units. This is already being done in a number of areas. However, it is not a straightforward process. Colleges report

that that the work involved in integration is time-consuming, complex and onerous, and this time is not funded. Also, the Evidence Requirements presented in the Unit specifications rarely lend themselves to integration, as described above.

So while there have been calls for integration from almost every subject area that has responded to this report, and a real appetite to achieve integration, the barriers that exist mean that any progress is unlikely without intervention by SQA. There are a number of areas for action.

Firstly, the Unit design issues described above will need to be addressed with the aim of allowing opportunity for integration.

Secondly, a greater use of sampling could be introduced for some areas. A number of qualifications do not use sampling, and in some awards the assessment regime is very much based around written evidence and each knowledge and skill assessed. Sampling would also ensure that Graded Units do not re-assess what's been assessed in other Units (more sampling has been suggested for Accounting and Finance, Economics, Administration and IT, Business, Tourism and Care).

Thirdly, SQA (through the Qualification Support Teams) could provide guidelines on integration, or provide a grid of integration for each Group Award that SQA would find acceptable. In many areas colleges have asked for a clear view from SQA about how assessments could be integrated and still meet SQA requirements. This varies from SQA signposting integration opportunities, to requests for SQA to provide integrated exemplars.

4.4.5   Holistic assessment

There is an apparent tension between the desire to achieve more holistic forms of assessment and the approach prescribed by the Unit specifications. This tension is a cultural one too, with many colleges and External Verifiers urging a move towards holistic assessment, and others reporting verification visits that have criticised the colleges for taking such approaches. There is a need for clarity about SQA's position in this respect.

As an example, a web respondent in Administration and Business suggests that a holistic approach should be taken 'not just to the writing of an assessment but also the marking of an assessment by the assessor. We are still restricted by needing to ensure that every element is covered when the student may have produced an excellent piece of work but not all criteria are fully met. Having to give this back for re-submission is a nonsense when the work is more than satisfactory'. Similar concerns come from both academic and craft areas.

Even where new Units have been produced with the intention of a more holistic approach to assessment, it is reported that 'the mindset of the writers was of old style Units where every PC (performance criterion) has to be met; this has not changed with new Units'.

Finally, a number of colleges have agreed that holistic assessment is relatively new in the sector. It has been suggested that SQA could develop case studies and exemplars on holistic assessment, and engage subject specialists on design teams so that the approach is agreed and understood. If SQA wishes to take this approach, the magnitude of the task should be acknowledged.

4.4.6   Assessment culture and methods

This evaluation has generated a wealth of comments, suggestions and recommendations from individuals with a role in designing, verifying and delivering HNs. The subject-specific detail precludes their involvement in this report, which would otherwise make an onerous read, and they will be provided to SQA separately. However, some of the suggestions made warrant consideration here, and are provided below.

Firstly, much of the 'burden' for college staff could be relieved with the development of a national bank of assessments, drawing together the many assessment tools currently sitting within centres and over a thousand Assessment Exemplars produced by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and European Social Fund (ESF) funded modernisation studies. The suggestion to develop such a bank has been raised across the college sector during interviews and through the web survey.

There are a range of assessment strategies that college staff would like to have considered within their Group Award:

♦ Introduction of multiple choice to test knowledge/skills (Administration and IT).
♦ Extending the use of online testing methods, either in-house or through SQA (IT).
♦ Centrally-devised and moderated assessment instruments, primary and re-assessment.
♦ Consider the development of a centrally-devised and marked exam at the end of each Unit (Economics, Accounting, Statistics, Management).
♦ The removal of quantitative assessment requirements where these are not relevant (Art and Design). This means ensuring assessment is fit for purpose.
♦ Create consistency in marking schemes — some set a pass at 60%, some at 70%, some at 100%, some sample, others delimit specific knowledge and understanding which must be passed.

There are also a range of cultural changes suggested. These reflect a considerable diversity of opinion, often mutually exclusive:

♦ 'Trust the teaching staff more' (Business Management).
♦ Build assessor knowledge and understanding and confidence.
♦ Move towards project/industry-based delivery with continuous assessment and development with verifiers/industry (Creative Industries).

4.4.7   Summary

There remain considerable issues to be addressed with respect to assessment. These include:

♦ The need for a mechanism to ensure that assessment of each Unit within each Group Award is fit for purpose.
♦ A lack of parity in assessment load between Group Awards.
♦ A lack of clarity about SQA's expectations with respect to Evidence Requirements.
♦ Problems in distinguishing between Evidence Requirements and Assessment Guidelines in some Units.
♦ Work required by SQA to better facilitate the integration of assessments.
♦ A need to address the tension between a desire to move towards holistic assessment and the prescriptive approach included in many Unit specifications. In addition to better communicating its position on holistic assessment, SQA should consider providing case studies and other tools to support colleges.
♦ An opportunity to create a national assessment bank, providing a resource to reduce the duplication caused by colleges each developing their own assessment tools.

5   Impact of 2003 HN design principles

This section of the report assesses the impacts of each of the four design principles: Core Skills; Graded Units; the Mandatory Section; and alignment to the SCQF. It also considers the wider outcomes of the introduction of the 2003 HN design principles, including the impact that the process of development has had.

5.1   Core Skills

The web survey shows that views on Core Skills are very mixed. Respondents were reminded that the 2003 HN design principles aimed to provide opportunities for students to develop all five Core Skills. This involves signposting rather than the mandatory embedding of Core Skills, although embedding is a possibility.

A minority of respondents (22%) think that the current approach to Core Skills creates a burden, with a higher proportion (33%) saying that there is not the rigour required for developing Core Skills. In fact, 40% of respondents agree that signposting has resulted in Core Skills being treated with less priority than they should be.

Furthermore, only 40% of respondents said that they had seen SQA guidance on Core Skills development for centres, and 28% said that further guidance was required.

Table 5.1: The 2003 HN design principles provide *opportunities* for students to develop all five Core Skills. This involves signposting rather than the mandatory embedding of Core Skills. What do you think has been the impact of this?

This approach creates a heavy burden within Units and Group Awards	22%
Because they are no longer embedded, the new design does not deliver the rigour required for developing Core Skills	33%
Signposting has resulted in Core Skills being treated with less of a priority than they should be	40%
Other	5%

The set of statements set out in table 5.1 prompted a wealth of comments from respondents, some of whom felt unable to agree with any of them. The web-based comments and the opinions of consultees have provided a number of themes for analysis. It is clear that the current design for Core Skills works for some colleges and some subject areas. However, for others there are areas of concern, and a number of suggestions for the future. So while for some this area is a major barrier to progress and to employment, for others it is an extra hurdle.

5.1.1 Signposting Core Skills works for some

External Verifiers agree that signposting Core Skills makes them more meaningful for the learner. Discussions with colleges suggest that Core Skills are taken seriously by all those who have been interviewed, although their approaches and attitudes vary considerably.

The principle of signposting allows centres to take responsibility for developing relevant components as required by the individual for personal and vocational needs. For some subject areas, such as Child Care, the impact of this design principle is that it is now easier to track Core Skills. Core Skills at entry to this HN are considered carefully using the SQA diagnostic, with progression tracked through Units, followed by an exit profile.

Other subject areas also find that signposting has resulted in Core Skills being covered well within the Units and that students are learning them in an applied way. This includes Administration and Information Technology, Biology and Environment, Business and Tourism, and Information Technology. A web respondent in Social Care suggests that if students meet the Evidence Requirements for HNC Units, then they must have a level of Core Skills that develops and improves as they progress through their HNs.

5.1.2 Issues and concerns

There has been some frustration that, over the course of the modernisation process, the rules on assessing Core Skills had become tighter, then relaxed again. However, there is a view from External Verifiers that the priority is just about right now, and should not be changed again.

The balance of Core Skills within Units causes some concern. It has been suggested that it is difficult for writers to put Core Skills into Units when the priority should be the subject matter — there is a pressure to build Core Skills in, but not enough guidance, and a lack of awareness that there is no 'one size fits all' solution.

Many consider signposting to be a compromise that relies on colleges making Core Skills development successful for their students. Despite a range of approaches by colleges, there is a common view that colleges are having 'to sort out' the Core Skills shortcomings of those leaving school. Those college teams that have found successful routes in this respect have stressed the need to contextualise Core Skills, so that the learning is directly relevant to the Group Award. For example, the Construction and Civil Engineering field includes many male adult returners who are challenged by Units on IT. The Qualification Design Team focused on skills rather than assessment and developed a Unit on Construction Technical Communication Skills which has been popular and successful. At a college level, similar approaches to contextualisation have been developed in areas such as Beauty Therapy and Social Care.

The need to contextualise Core Skills provision is vital so that students can develop Core Skills that are specific to their subject area. This means that centres need to invest time to develop delivery of Core Skills on a subject-by-subject basis. There are good examples across the college sector of communications teams and IT specialists devising teaching options that meet the

needs of diverse learners' needs, from writing skills that are specific to beauty therapists, to Excel spreadsheets for the use of Social Care students. Without contextualising Core Skills there is a real risk that students won't participate. However, the resource requirements of this approach are significant.

Another important issue is the necessity to meet individual learners' requirements. For some colleges a proportion of students may have significant support needs — in particular for support to progress from National Qualifications to the HN programme. A number of colleges have developed specialist support packages to provide the skills required to make this transition.

In addition to these generic issues, there are a number of particular issues of note:

♦ The level of Core Skills to be acquired is not clear to some (for example, Accounting, Taxation, Business) and signposting is therefore ineffective. In these areas there is experience that External Verifiers never ask centres to demonstrate how Core Skills are delivered in the course.

♦ There are a number of views that Core Skills are an overly bureaucratic tool that should be reduced in emphasis even further, if not eliminated altogether from the frameworks.

♦ Others consider that Core Skills should occur naturally within the main teaching and not be identified as special or distinct.

5.1.3   The future

A number of External Verifiers would like to see more external verification of Core Skills, with suggestions including the creation of a 'report card' with evidence assessed through interaction. There is currently little verification of Core Skills, and this is considered to be an issue by a minority of report participants.

The diversity of opinion suggests that there is no 'one size fits all' solution to the Core Skills issues raised by this evaluation. There is no doubt that the changing approach to Core Skills within SQA has been challenging for implementation. However, there is a broad consensus that the priority is right, and some time should be given for the guidance to settle in. And although SQA's guidance on Core Skills has only been seen by a minority of those within centres, there is no great appetite for further guidance.

5.2   Graded Units

The majority of respondents to the web survey agree that Graded Units ensure retention and integration of knowledge and skills, that central production of Assessment Exemplars assists implementation, and that the exemplars ensure consistency and liberate time for teaching. Respondents on the whole disagreed that Graded Units restricted the flexibility of colleges to address particular issues of concern, but a significant minority agreed with this statement. A further question regarding the scope and flexibility of delivery of Graded Units suggests that again, whilst the majority feel that flexibility is adequate, a significant minority have concerns in this area.

Table 5.2: Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree that Graded Units have delivered the following:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
They ensure the retention and integration of knowledge and skills acquired through the HN Units	19%	54%	8%	13%	6%
The central production of Assessment Exemplars has helped colleges implement Graded Units	21%	54%	5%	14%	6%
The Assessment Exemplars have ensured consistency of the national standard	16%	40%	15%	21%	8%
Time saved by not producing individual college assessments has been better spent on teaching	15%	41%	13%	21%	10%
The introduction of Graded Units has restricted the flexibility of colleges to address particular issues of concern	7%	25%	25%	36%	7%

For assessment of Graded Units, respondents favoured a project-based assessment, with 42% stating this should be used for their subject area. Just under one third of respondents stated that both an exam and a project could be implemented, with only 13% believing that only an exam should be used.

5.2.1   Issues

In general, the introduction of the Graded Unit is a major achievement. It meets its objectives, and has provided opportunities for higher education institutions and employers to value students' performance. Comments received through the web survey and during interviews support this positive view. There are some common issues and concerns that are worthy of note.

Firstly, there are concerns across the college sector, and among External Verifiers, that Graded Units do not reflect a national standard, with considerable variability in standards being reported within and between Group Awards. This may undermine coherence and standards. Many participants have called for more input from SQA to maintain a national standard. This includes suggestion that verification should be central, including from the following areas: Administration, Business, Retail, Tourism, Social Science, Science, Early Education and Childcare, Management, and Law.

Secondly, the timing of the Graded Unit in most HNs is a concern. Because many Units have to be completed before the Graded Unit can begin, it must be fixed at the end of the course, so that there is little time to remediate students. This is a

particular issue if the Graded Unit is project-based, since re-submission needs to be in a different topic — it is impossible to complete a re-assessment because the project has to begin again from the planning stage. It has been suggested that if the project was a rewrite of the one submitted, students would learn more about the process and would have better developed skills and knowledge.

Timing is also an issue with exam-based Graded Units. These exams impose a very heavy burden on students in the middle of their last phase of study, while they still have coursework and assessments to do for other Units. Tutors would prefer to examine students at the end of their course, after they had completed their studies. One web respondent said, 'expecting students to survive studying for an exam which is based on all core subjects, then come back to continue being assessed in their last phase Units is too heavy a burden'.

Thirdly, lecturers in practical subjects repeatedly report that paper-based assessment (both of Graded Unit and other Units) favours those with good written skills, so that many of the best chefs and beauty therapists, for example, appear less able in their subjects than others. Often the highest marked students are far from being the most able therapist/chef or other in their subject.

Finally, students focus on the Graded Unit because the assessment will allow articulation to HE or be reviewed by employers. Many colleges think that this focus draws students' attention away from other Units and assessments, and therefore skews the learning across the Group Award.

5.2.2   Assessment Exemplars

Assessment Exemplars are, on the whole, seen as a success and there is recognition of the achievement of their production. However, there are some concerns in some subject areas.

In one college, the Assessment Exemplars in Multimedia and Computing have rarely been seen in time to be useful. Many colleges have developed and delivered assessments without the use of the Assessment Exemplars. In other areas the quality of the Assessment Exemplars has been questioned (for example, Hospitality, Beauty Therapy, Bioscience), and in some areas there are no Assessment Exemplars (for example, 3D Design).

As with other Units, many report participants have suggested the SQA facilitate the development of a national bank of assessments for Graded Units, in recognition of the likely numbers of assessments that will be sitting within colleges currently.

5.2.3   The future

Many consultees agree that the Graded Unit ensures that the Group Award makes more sense to students, allowing them to see the relevance of the Units already completed. Many see this as a major achievement of the Modernisation Project. It is also considered by many to have achieved standardisation across Scotland. The Graded Unit is important for articulation to HE and for employers. In fact, Scottish Engineering has highlighted this as a key success of the new HN.

For the future, there is a need to consider the verification issues discussed here and, in particular, to address the concerns of colleges regarding scheduling, which have been expressed during every interview conducted for this evaluation. Qualification Support Teams should be open to the concerns of some colleges about the balance of project and exam work within the Unit. Finally, a review of the quality and coverage of Assessment Exemplars across a number of subject areas should be considered.

5.3   Mandatory Units

On the whole, the introduction of mandatory Units has not had negative impacts, and is seen as 'a good thing' by colleges and employers. The web survey shows that opinions regarding the mandatory section are positive, with most respondents agreeing that they meet the needs of employers, they make articulation more effective and they allow enough flexibility to meet different needs.

The majority of respondents disagree that the mandatory section is too restrictive. However, a significant minority believe that it is restrictive, and comments on mandatory Units seemed to imply that flexibility is inconsistent across subjects and is not sufficient in several areas.

Table 5.3: Do you agree or disagree that the introduction of mandatory Units has had the following impacts:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The mandatory structure ensures HNs meet the needs of employers	12%	53%	20%	13%	2%
Mandatory Units have made articulation to HE more effective	8%	51%	22%	16%	3%
The mandatory structure allows enough flexibility to meet different customer needs	8%	47%	16%	23%	6%
The mandatory section is too restrictive	8%	26%	15%	44%	7%

The mandatory Units have made the HN more relevant to the needs of industry. However, some consider that there is still work to be done to narrow options. Others believe that options are too narrow, for example in those HNs whose Units are predominantly mandatory. For example:

♦ In Child Care there is a general consensus that the mandatory section has built a sound foundation, is a 'huge success' and has 'made everything clearer'.

♦ In Business and Management there is a negative view of the high number of mandatory Units in three related HNs. This removes flexibility for the college to meet local requirements. There is a linked concern with Administration and IT that the extent of mandatory Units makes combined evening delivery with other HNCs (like Business) impossible, which affects viability of delivery and means restricted opportunities for students. This issue has been raised a number of times, and includes additional concerns with small group sizes in rural colleges.

♦ But in Accounting, the mandatory section is considered essential to ensure consistency in delivery of the award nationally, and similarly, in Creative Industries it has led to consistency of delivery.

5.4   SCQF

Respondents to the web survey generally agree that using the SCQF is a positive initiative, with 29% saying that its effects included improving consistency.

Table 5.4: What effect has the introduction of SCQF credit rating had?

Improved quality of Units and Group Awards	15%
Improved consistency of Units and Group Awards	29%
More effective progression of students to HND	20%
More effective progression of students to HE	23%
None of the above	13%

There were, however, many comments about the design of the SCQF, and how Units and Group Awards were designed to meet specific SCQF levels and credits. Several statements were made that there was considerable variation in how Units were given SCQF credits and levels, and that there was not enough experience in Unit writing to ensure consistency across all subjects. Unit specifications were also cited as being too vague to allow them to be appropriately scored against SCQF.

Furthermore, several comments were made that there was a lack of understanding of the SCQF, and that while it is a useful tool for comparing HNs against other qualifications outside the area and indeed outside Scotland and the UK, its relevance internally was not widely recognised because it was not understood.

Progression was also believed to be limited due to a lack of understanding of the SCQF both inside and outside colleges, and that more interaction between colleges and universities was required to ensure that this was remedied. However, it was also said that it may just take time for the benefits of the SCQF to become more apparent.

Allocating SCQF credits and levels to Unit specifications has an impact on the facilitation of articulation to higher education. It provides a 'currency' for discussion with HEIs, and is building a foundation on which more work on articulation can be built. There is still some way to go before the transition between colleges and universities can be achieved smoothly, for a wide variety of reasons. One web respondent puts this succinctly, suggesting that they 'still consistently have students who have completed their studies at SCQF level 8, then go on to university, but have to enter in at 1st or 2nd year (SCQF levels 7/8). Not exactly a smooth progression'.

Most consultees consider that it makes little difference to employers. It does provide a useful structure for students to understand the level they are working at.

Many in the college sector think that it works well, and has no adverse impacts. Many also think that allocating SCQF credits and levels to Unit specifications does not impact on quality or consistency.

6 The students' perspective

The students' views on the emerging conclusions of this report have been gauged through a survey of 95 students across two colleges. This is by no means a representative sample of students.

A full student survey could provide useful research outputs. However, the research resource requirements for such a major piece of work go beyond the scope of this report. Instead, our more limited approach provides an opportunity for the student voice to be heard, in particular on those issues raised by the consultation programme and survey work. It is intended to provide a brief snapshot of some student experiences of the modernised HNs.

A paper-based survey was designed to uncover students' views on certain elements of the HN such as Core Skills, assessment and its usefulness for their future plans. Surveys were distributed to five lecturers and course leaders at two colleges across six subject areas: Civil Engineering; Quantity Surveying; Child Care and Early Education; Business; Hospitality Management; and Marketing. 95 surveys were returned.

Three-quarters of respondents (77%) are HNC students and the remainder are studying for an HND. A majority (58%) stated that they intended to progress to further study, be that an HND or university.

6.1 Preparation for the future and Core Skills

In line with the view expressed more broadly that their course is preparing them well for they want to do in the future, (only 2% disagreeing), the vast majority of respondents (91%) believe that their course is helping develop their Core Skills: Communication; Numeracy; Problem Solving; IT; and Working with Others.

6.2 Graded Units

Respondents think that Graded Units are helping them join up knowledge from other Units — 81% either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. A similarly high proportion, (78%) agreed or strongly agreed that learning in other Units has prepared them for the Graded Unit.

Views on the timing and format of Graded Units are broader but still positive. A slim majority (52%) agreed or strongly agreed that Graded Units come at the right time of the year, with 23% disagreeing. Few believe that Graded Units should include an exam (only 14% agreed or strongly agreed), while a majority considered that Graded Units should include a report/project (51% either agreed or strongly agreed).

6.3   Assessment

There was strong agreement that Unit assessment provides an incentive to learn, with 86% either agreeing (70%) or strongly agreeing (16%). However, a significant minority felt that assessment of Units placed too much pressure on them (31% either agreed or strongly agreed).

The grading of assessment does not seem to be an overriding driver for choice in where students put their effort, as only a quarter do not put as much effort into Units that were not graded (24% agreed or strongly agreed). There was not, however, a strong appetite for a single assessment across a number of Units. 22% agreed or strongly agreed that they would prefer one assessment across a number of Units, while 62% disagreed (47%) or strongly disagreed (15%).

7   Conclusions

The Higher National Modernisation Project has set ambitious objectives. The programme's delivery has involved countless individuals from across the education sector in Scotland. The impacts of the Modernisation Project are diverse, and they are perceived in different ways by the HNs' many communities of interest.

7.1   Progress against objectives

7.1.1   Rationalisation

The evidence collected during this evaluation demonstrates that the rationalisation of the HN catalogue has been successful. The HN catalogue is considered more user friendly, without having lost flexibility. However, there is still work to be done to fully meet the Modernisation Project's objective of rationalisation.

SQA should consider how best to address concerns that Units remain on the HN catalogue from a range of design periods, and that a number of redundant Units also remain.

In addition, there is a role for continued maintenance of the HN catalogue, so that Units and Group Awards that become redundant in the future are consistently dealt with.

7.1.2   Quality, consistency and relevance

The Modernisation Project sought to improve the HNs' relevance, quality and consistency. Over 70% of respondents to the web survey agree or strongly agree that the 2003 HN design principles have improved the quality of HNs. During consultation this positive view was reiterated, with discussions across a range of subject areas confirming an improvement in quality. Most consultees consider the new HNs to be a better product.

As the new HNs become established there will be a need to continue to review quality. In particular, issues relating to the process of verification are causing some concern for quality. Also, a lack of consistency between Units across related subjects raises concerns about standardisation of quality.

All of the consultees for this report who expressed an opinion consider the new HN to be more relevant to the needs of employers and universities than what went before. This is supported by the fact that 63% of web survey respondents agree or strongly agree that this is the case.

The HN is increasingly providing an entry route to university degree programmes, as well as being focused on the needs of employers, with students choosing either to articulate to university or to move to/continue in employment. There is considerable evidence of there being tension between these two areas of focus. For example, there is a suggestion from some vocational areas that the focus on

academic assessment and articulation to higher education has made HNs less relevant to employers' needs than they could be.

7.1.3   Assessment

The need to reduce the 'burden of assessment' formed part of the rationale for the HN Modernisation Project, yet for a number of those involved in delivering HNs, there is a question over whether assessment should be viewed as a burden in the first place.

However, the consultations and survey undertaken for this report have highlighted a range of issues of concern, and the consultation programme underlined that assessment issues within HNs remain unresolved by the 2003 HN design principles.

This report concludes that there remain considerable issues to be addressed with respect to assessment. These include:

♦   A need for a mechanism to ensure that assessment of each Unit within each Group Award is fit for purpose.

♦   A lack of parity in assessment load between Group Awards.

♦   A lack of clarity about SQA's expectations with respect to Evidence Requirements.

♦   Problems in distinguishing between Evidence Requirements and Assessment Guidelines in some Units.

♦   Work required by SQA to better facilitate the integration of assessments.

♦   A need to address the tension between a desire to move towards holistic assessment and the prescriptive approach included in many Unit specifications. In addition to better communicating its position on holistic assessment, SQA should consider providing case studies and other tools to support colleges.

♦   An opportunity to create a national assessment bank, providing a resource to reduce the duplication caused by colleges each developing their own assessment tools.

7.2 Impact of 2003 HN design principles

7.2.1 Core Skills

The diversity of opinion suggests that there is no 'one size fits all' solution to the Core Skills issues raised by this report. There is no doubt that the changing approach to Core Skills within SQA has been challenging for implementation. However, there is a broad consensus that the priority is right, and some time should be given for the guidance to settle in.

7.2.2 Graded Units

The introduction of Graded Units has been a major achievement for the Modernisation Project. However, a range of issues have been raised in relation to Graded Units. There is a need to consider the verification issues and, in particular, to address the scheduling concerns of colleges. Qualification Support Teams should be open to the concerns of some colleges about the balance of project and exam work in the Unit. Finally, a review of the quality and coverage of Assessment Exemplars across a number of subject areas should be considered.

7.2.3 Mandatory section

The mandatory Units have made the HN more relevant to the needs of industry. However, some think that there is still work to be done to narrow options. Others believe that options are too narrow, for example in those HNs whose Units are predominantly mandatory. The impact of allocating SCQF credits and levels to Units falls on the facilitation of articulation to higher education. It provides a 'currency' for discussion with HEIs, and is building a foundation upon which more work on articulation can be built. There is still some way to go before the transition between colleges and universities can be achieved smoothly, for a wide variety of reasons. Most consultees consider that it makes little difference to employers. It does provide a useful structure for students to understand the level they are working at.

7.2.4 SCQF

Respondents to the web survey generally agree that using the SCQF is a positive initiative, with 29% stating that its effects included improving consistency.

Many in the college sector think that it works well, and has no adverse impacts. Many also consider that allocating SCQF credits and levels to Units does not impact on quality or consistency.

7.3　Conclusion summary

The underlying themes of the HN Modernisation Project were modernisation, rationalisation, improvement of quality and consistency and the reduction of the assessment burden. Apart from the need to review whether qualifications were fit for purpose, there was a need to address the duplication and lack of consistency within the previous HN catalogue. This evaluation has found that the HN Modernisation Project has achieved significant success.

There are a number of issues which warrant continued attention. This includes maintaining the relevance of Units and Group Awards to employer and HE requirements, and continuing with the process of rationalisation, which is not complete. In addition, particular attention needs to be given to the issues around assessment raised in this report. This includes also reviewing the challenges still posed by the delivery of the Graded Unit across some subject areas.