



**Higher National Qualifications
Internal Assessment Report 2016
English and Communication**

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

Higher National units

General comments

The main focus for visiting verification in 2015–16 has been on graded units (see next section). However, with new specifications in place for two of the main servicing units — H7TK 34 (formerly DE3N 34) and H7MB 34 (formerly D77G 34) — there has been an opportunity to look at early understanding and implementation of the revised standards. All centres should be delivering the new units in the forthcoming session. Assessment support packs for both units have been developed to support the change and provide exemplar material.

Assessment materials generated by centres to support the new units generally show accurate understanding, though careful checking is required. There are significant differences, and centres need to take careful note, especially of changes in Reading and Speaking outcomes.

Most further education colleges in Scotland have now become larger, merged centres. This has necessitated a fundamental review of quality systems, internal verification procedures, teaching and learning materials, and standardisation measures. There is still an element of mismatch between old and new teaching, learning and assessment materials but this is being addressed.

Generally, visiting verifiers have reported robust quality systems following merger, though this continues to be work in progress.

Unit specifications, instruments of assessment and exemplification materials

Most tutors are conversant with new unit specifications for H7TK 34 (Business Communication) and H7MB 34 (Practical Skills). Some of those centres visited had begun to deliver the new servicing units in the second half of 2015–16. Others, however, had not yet made the change and were unaware of new assessment support packs available in the secure area of the SQA website.

Most assessment tasks, for new and for old units, were relevant to learner needs and contextualised to the specific vocational award. Communication writing tasks were often integrated with outcomes for other units in the same programme. Learners interviewed during external verification visits commented appreciatively on the consequently reduced assessment burden.

Some centres are using the SQA prior verification service to support validation of new centre-designed materials. This continues to be an option in the coming session. The recently published SQA assessment support packs for the new units provide exemplification, as well as assessment checklists matched to evidence requirements. These can easily be modified to suit the needs of individual centres.

Evidence requirements

Most centres have clear understanding of the evidence requirements for units in this group, though some concerns persist. For example, there continues to be sporadic misunderstanding over evidence required in Speaking outcomes, especially written records of meetings. Such records must be individually compiled. Visiting verifiers still report on instances of group records.

There is also still a degree of over-assessment in Reading. Most centres assess Reading outcomes with restricted response questions — in some cases a large number of questions (our exemplification suggests only a few questions are necessary). Questions requiring learners to justify their identification of purpose and readership with detailed textual reference are unnecessary and constitute over-assessment. We hope the new units and the exemplification of new support packs will provide a clear guide to centres of what is expected.

It is now frequent practice in large centres to use electronic systems for uploading assessment material in both draft and final form. This provides a useful means of tracking and secure storage.

All centres visited had a clear plagiarism policy, and measures to check authenticity often took advantage of relevant software, such as Turnitin. This is clearly important where written work is completed outside the classroom, and in some cases in a remote location. Tutors were confident that they knew the work of their own students and could identify authenticity issues.

Administration of assessments

Centres generally control the conditions of assessment effectively, whether assessment is classroom-based or more flexible.

SQA evidence requirements in the specifications, as well as exemplification in support packs, provide a framework and focus for standardisation. However, the traditional standardisation meeting for assessors is increasingly hard to schedule in large centres. New methods of standardising are being explored, sometimes using new technologies to support shared practice and ideas.

Marking guides and schemes are invaluable tools in standardising assessment between assessors in different locations.

The work of the internal verifier in a large centre may be extremely demanding. Some centres have taken the decision to pair all assessors in a cross-sampling role, so that each assessor is also an internal verifier. However, an overview of the whole picture is indispensable, and this should not be forgotten in such a system.

Internal verifiers' decisions, agreements and required actions are generally well documented, though sometimes only shared with individual assessors and not the entire team.

General feedback

Learners continue to be well prepared and supported across all units in this group. Support systems are generally put in place early in the year if there are skills gaps. Second language speakers experiencing difficulty have good support, though in some cases they have significant difficulty in reaching the required level. Occasionally there is an issue with access: some learners who are accepted on courses do not possess the required entry level skill.

It is essential for tutors to make the distinction between support and 'correction'. Learners must reach the required level unaided. They may, however, be redirected to areas of weakness during the drafting process. They should not be disadvantaged by running out of time.

Generally, tutors are confident about appropriate support, but there are instances of well-meaning, albeit misguided, direct correction. Such intervention invalidates the achievement.

Areas of good practice

Relationships between learners, tutors and support staff are good, and staff in general should be commended for the dedication and hard work that goes into sustaining quality teaching and support.

Many merged centres have organised useful development meetings to review common practice and to address consistency of approach. Increasingly, staff are working across different campuses, and coping with new pressures of time and workload, exacerbated by the need to travel greater distances.

However, movement between campuses has resulted in some benefits in terms of working relationships. The level of goodwill among colleagues is high. New challenges have been met with professionalism and determination.

Specific areas for improvement

Assessing Reading skills

As mentioned earlier, some over-assessment continues to be reported in evidence for Reading outcomes. The new unit specifications represent an opportunity for all centres to review approaches.

Assessing Writing skills

Integration with other units and written/oral work can be advantageous in minimising the assessment burden where learners already possess good skill in writing. For some groups of learners, a portfolio approach for writing evidence, where it is an option, may be more manageable.

Assessing Oral Communication skills

A detailed observation checklist should be used to record achievement, with precise comments and feedback based on evidence requirements. Some

recording of evidence is advised if at all practical. This can be used to support internal verification and standardisation.

The new units H7TK 34 and H7MB 34 have allowed centres more flexibility in their choice of oral interaction for outcome 3. Some written record is required in all cases, though this will vary considerably depending on the chosen assessment instrument. Even if a formal meeting is chosen, however, the record should not normally be full narrative minutes. A briefer, action-style record, consistent with contemporary business practice, is expected. However, each learner must draw up this written record individually and without assistance from others.

Higher National graded units

Titles/levels of HN Graded Units verified:

F6V7 34 Creative Industries: Media and Communication (Graded Unit 1)

F6V8 35 Creative Industries: Media and Communication (Graded Unit 2)

General comments

Most centres have a clear and accurate understanding of national standards for the graded units. Where delivering for the first time, they have worked together with other more experienced centres or requested SQA development visits. Tutors are exceptionally motivated and committed, in terms of inspiring and supporting learners across a range of media specialisms.

Unit specifications, instruments of assessment and exemplification materials

Tutors in all centres are familiar with the unit specifications and instruments of assessment.

Virtual learning environments are widely used to hold and track assessment materials, as well as marking guides and additional information. Staff and learners use these systems expertly.

Evidence requirements

The specifications for these units give detailed description of evidence requirements. These are used carefully by centre staff to inform student guides and marking processes.

Administration of assessments

In recognition of the importance of the grade awarded there is scrupulous attention to cross-marking, with recourse to internal verifier advice where there is uncertainty.

General feedback

Although the emphasis in portfolio building is on autonomy and independence, especially in year 2, constructive and relevant support is offered to learners in personal interviews and reviews. This process is clearly documented.

Learners interviewed are enthusiastic about the benefits of the course programmes.

Areas of good practice

Selection interviews are successful in ensuring that learners have the required entry qualifications and are able to tackle the challenge of independent research and skills development.

Close working with higher education partners is effective and valuable in securing learner progress where appropriate.

Staff teaching in this area actively cultivates links with contacts in the creative industries or staff themselves often continue to work part-time in specialist creative areas. This gives invaluable insight into current practice and means learners have highly expert support in relevant skills development.

Retention and progression rates are impressive. Information on retention, progression, and tracking to destinations is particularly useful for quality review and audit.

Specific areas for improvement

F6V7 34 Graded Unit 1

Visiting verifiers reported on some instances of over-generous grading this year. It should be remembered that the evidence requirements detailed in the project stage pages of the specification are minimum requirements. To achieve A or B grades, the learner must exceed these significantly.

The SQA specification allows a breakdown of marks per stage (planning = 25; developing = 60; evaluating = 15). It does not offer guidance on how to allocate a share of these marks to separate items of evidence (eg diary, portfolio, presentation in developing). Centres should, however, agree an allocation in order to maintain internal consistency of standards.

There was some misunderstanding about how minimum word requirements might be achieved. Word counts for a written product in stage 2, excluding research and diary records, must be a minimum of 1500 words.

Drafts of all products should be retained to support authenticity.

The quality of research findings and research methods should be 'comprehensive' to achieve grade A. The research contribution is sometimes sketchily achieved and may show little contribution to the product. For learners who will progress to graded unit 2, understanding of the importance of relevant and well-focused research is essential.

The oral presentation for stage two is designed to 'present, exhibit, launch, promote or pitch the project materials to an audience'. Its underlying purpose, therefore, is promotional and this should be obvious from the way it is delivered. It should not normally last longer than five minutes, unless it is extended to ten minutes to overtake outcome 2 of Unit DH49 34, Complex Oral Presentation (in this case the audience must consist of at least six people, not the three required

for F6V7 34). Even where the presentation is extended to meet the evidence requirements of both units, it should not significantly exceed ten minutes. Working within constraints is an essential aspect of skills development.

F6V8 35 Graded Unit 2

Some learners had not sufficiently evidenced a strategy for managing the project in the planning stage. It is suggested that centres allocate a portion of the marks specifically to this aspect of planning to ensure it is fully addressed.

Generally, it is good practice for allocations of marks (inside stages) to be agreed by assessors and internal verifiers, to ensure everything is covered and appropriate value placed on each necessary aspect. Most centres work in this way.

Visiting verifiers reported on some instances of over-generous grading this year, usually corrected during internal verification. Each stage and component of the project is important. The value placed on both process and product should be evenly balanced.