Higher National Qualifications
Internal Assessment Report 2013
Management Skills

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

All centres verified during 2012-13 have considerable experience in delivering Higher National Units and, as a result, they have a good understanding of the principles of Unit specifications which they apply to Units in this verification group. Where available, centre staff are using the support materials and the assessment exemplars which help in interpreting and maintaining standards. In addition, centres generally have well-established systems and procedures for assessment and internal verification which ensure that the Units and the execution of the Units are well supported.

Most staff delivering Units in this verification group are very experienced but, where less experienced staff were involved, centre systems — particularly those designed to support new staff — were generally robust and ensured that standards were maintained. The number of verifications within this group remains low. However, it is hoped that the revision of some of the Units, exemplars and assessment materials will go some way to reversing this trend.

Unit specifications, instruments of assessment and exemplification materials

As indicated above, centres appear to be thoroughly familiar with the relevant Unit specifications. Their quality assurance systems through verification and standardisation ensure that the current Unit specifications are in use and assessment instruments have been checked in this regard.

Centres are also familiar with associated SQA exemplar assessments. In the main, when these are available for a Unit, they are used. Where these are not available, the majority of centres have robust systems to ensure that assessment instruments developed are appropriate. In one case, prior verification had been used which is a clear example of good practice.

Most centres have developed systems which entail the use of master files or packs which contain relevant material for a Unit, such as Unit specification, assessment instruments and notes of internal verification meetings. Sometimes the packs also contain learning and teaching material, including SQA support material where this is available. Some centres prefer to keep this separate so that the packs focus exclusively on assessment and internal verification. The creation of such packs helps in maintaining standards and makes verification — both internal and external — an easier process. However, centres should ensure that they are referring to the most up-to-date Unit specification as incremental review of awards can result in SQA making minor changes to Unit specifications without changing the code number.

Evidence Requirements

External verification confirmed, as has been commented upon in previous reports, that centres understand the role of Evidence Requirements. SQA exemplar assessment packs have an important role in providing instruments of assessment and assessment checklists and guidelines which help to ensure that Evidence Requirements are met. Also, Units in this group associated with SQA management awards are accompanied by specially-developed SQA support materials. Particularly when taken in conjunction with exemplar assessments, these help to clarify the interpretation of Evidence Requirements.

With respect to Units in management awards, there was a general feeling that there was a potential issue of over-assessment and inflexibility in the assessment approaches used. The re-writing of these Units, the assessment exemplars and support materials should provide centres with the flexibility desired while still maintaining the standards required. Centres now have assessment options for these Units which enable conventional (traditional) assessment as well as web 2.0 assessment approaches and it would appear that this has been well received.

Administration of assessments

The development of assessment exemplars for most of the Units verified helps to ensure that assessments are administered in line with the Unit specification. It also helps to ensure that the instruments of assessment are appropriate and enables candidates to generate sufficient evidence of an appropriate standard. The guidance or checklists provided help to support the assessment decision.

As stated earlier, centres also have well-established internal verification procedures which ensure that the Unit specification and the assessment instrument being used, including those provided in the exemplars, are current and, in the case of the exemplar, appropriate in that they enable candidates to generate sufficient evidence in order to meet the Evidence Requirements. These procedures also ensure that assessment decisions are checked as part of a sampling process and corrective action taken where required.

As in previous years, verification during this session has highlighted that the main issue with Units in this verification group is ensuring that assessment judgements reflect the SCQF level of the Unit. Whilst centres recognise the importance of this, and the need to establish and follow marking guidelines, these cannot cover every possibility and, as a result, assessors and Internal Verifiers do not always find it easy to set a suitable standard.

It is worthwhile reiterating the consequences of this, as stated by my predecessor in last year's report:

'It can lead to making more demands on candidates than is warranted by the SCQF level but it can also result in work being accepted which is not fully up to the standard set by the SCQF level attached to the Unit.

It can also lead to some inconsistency in assessment judgements — this is particularly the case where an assessment consists of a number of discrete questions: responses to some questions clearly meet the relevant SCQF level, but responses to others raise doubts as to whether the appropriate level has been achieved.'

These points can be seen in particular in Unit DE3L 35 *Behavioural Skills for Business* and in DW71 34 *Engineering: Teamworking and Continuing Professional Development*. In the latter case, there tended to be a significant difference between the CPD Outcome and the rest of the evidence provided with the CPD evidence, with the evidence more often than not being on the 'thin' side.

General feedback

Consistently, external verification reports referred to the commitment and enthusiasm of staff involved in assessment and internal verification, and particularly the effort they had put in to ensure that all aspects of the assessment process were fully covered. This was particularly evident in one centre where the assessor had spent considerable time in providing detailed feedback to help candidates in their preparation for year 3 HE study.

Most centres used checklists as a guide to marking. Often these were taken from exemplar assessment packs and in some cases supplemented by centre feedback sheets. In the main the feedback given was accurate and appropriate. However, there are still a few examples of limited feedback being given.

Candidates interviewed during external verification visits were unanimously positive about the learning experience they had received and the support they had been given by staff. All candidates interviewed indicated that their centre had clear procedures and processes in place for re-submissions, authenticity and complaints.

Areas of good practice

There were a lot of examples of good practice, several of which have been referred to above. With some repetition of earlier points and previous reports, the following list summarises the main areas of good practice identified during external verification visits:

♦   The commitment and conscientiousness of staff involved in assessment and internal verification.
♦   Strong centre processes with clear, transparent evidence (eg completed forms, minutes of meetings) that standardisation and internal verification procedures were in place and working.
♦   Master folders/files containing all requisite information for assessment and internal verification.
♦   In the majority of cases, detailed comments from assessors on assessment checklists and, in some cases, further comments on each script. In one case the Unit feedback was being used not just for remediation purposes but to help candidates prepare for further study while still maintaining the integrity of the Unit Evidence Requirements.
♦   Specific attempts by assessors to relate feedback comments to the marking guidelines in the exemplar. This helps to explain the assessor's thinking, which, as well as being helpful during internal and external verification, also gives good advice to candidates.
♦   One centre has a strong distance learning programme for HNC Management in which correspondence between assessor and candidates

indicated that good feedback is delivered. In addition, candidates are enthusiastic about the programme.

♦ Integration of SQA support packs into learning.

Specific areas for improvement

Overall, external verification confirmed that centres generally deliver Units in this verification group well. Where there were specific issues they were covered in the development or action points for the particular visit. Hence centres should be aware of things they can do which might address the situation.

However, the good practice outlined above may help centres to think about their practice and consider whether they could make changes which might enhance the delivery, assessment and internal verification of Units in this verification group.

Centres can also review their practice in the light of improvements suggested to others. The following list shows some of the suggestions for improvement, some of which were made in last year's report but which are still valid:

1 Through standardisation meetings, develop extended marking guidelines reflecting the SCQF level (basing them on the guidelines in the exemplars, where these are being used) to emphasise exactly what would and would not be acceptable in a response.

   This would:

   ♦ make it easier to differentiate more precisely between candidates who had provided an acceptable response and those who had not
   ♦ enable candidates requiring remediation to be given a very clear indication of where their response had fallen short of the standard
   ♦ guide questions for oral re-assessment in cases where a very small amount of re-assessment is required
   ♦ contribute to consistency among assessors and in the nature and amount of evidence provided by candidates.

   This 'fleshing out' of marking guidelines can incorporate decisions made at internal verification meetings, although centres need to make sure that the full process is followed and marking guidelines are actually amended after a meeting.

2 Encourage candidates to provide answers at the appropriate level, particularly SCQF level 8 where this is required by the Unit. In part, this requires making use of relevant management theory. In responses to case studies at SCQF level 8, describing theory is frequently not necessary and quite often a mere repetition of theory can lead to problems of plagiarism. Candidates can demonstrate their understanding of the theory by their choice of example and the reasons they give to support it.

   This could involve:

   ♦ choosing a suitable theory, approach or technique

- ♦ giving a precise example from the case study
- ♦ giving a reasoned justification why the theory/technique was appropriate in this instance

This should help make candidates aware that in a case study at SCQF level 8 it is an understanding of the theory that is being sought. This approach can be incorporated in the extended marking guidelines recommended in point 1 above.

3 Ensure that where candidates are providing a practical document such as a CPD record/action plan, there is sufficient depth to the document either through a supporting narrative and/or other supporting documents.
A completed table with brief entries is not sufficient at SCQF level 7 or 8.
In addition, candidates should maintain the action plan over a period of time and, as such, centres may wish to consider the order of delivery in their lesson delivery plans.

4 In a few centres there is a need to ensure through their assessment and verification procedures that assessment decisions are at the appropriate level and that feedback given to candidates is sufficient and appropriate.

Higher National Graded Units

Titles/levels of HN Graded Units verified:

HNC Management Graded Unit (DW2X 34)

General comments

There were very few verification visits for this Graded Unit. It is difficult, therefore, to draw general conclusions. As such, this report has little change from reports of previous years.

Previous external verification has shown that centres have a good understanding of the requirements of the Graded Unit and this still seems to be the case. Also, as centres become more familiar with the Unit, they are becoming much more effective at administering and organising it. For example, experience has shown what are likely to be suitable topics for the Graded Unit. As a result, candidates are being guided towards them and are thus in a position where they can tackle the Graded Unit confidently and perform well. Centres have helped considerably in this through the management of the three stages of the Graded Unit.

Unit specifications, instruments of assessment and exemplification materials

Centres seem thoroughly familiar with the Unit specification and with the advice given in the exemplar assessment pack. This is reflected in the work provided by candidates. However, it is important to ensure that the work produced is fully supported. In a few cases, the project tended to be a little 'sterile' in that there was little evidence to support part of the candidates' submissions and, in some cases, assertions.

Evidence Requirements

Judging from candidates' work and the assessment decisions made by centres, there is a good understanding of the Evidence Requirements. Candidates are clearly being asked to respond to the task in a way which enables them to generate appropriate evidence.

Administration of assessments

From the very limited evidence from verification, centres appear to be administering the Graded Unit well. Centres seem to be making use of the marking checklist and associated guidance on marking in the exemplar assessment pack, and assessors continue to make comments to explain the reasoning behind the mark awarded. This greatly helps internal verification and contributes to ensuring that a suitable standard is achieved.

As indicated earlier, the management of the three stages helps candidates through clear target setting and the provision of feedback. For example, feedback at the planning stage helps to inform the development stage, and so on, which helps to ensure that the Evidence Requirements are met.

General feedback

Candidates continue to find the Graded Unit a challenge. However, with the guidance and support provided by centres most candidates do well. The management of the stages is a key aspect of this, as is the support and advice given *vis-à-vis* the choice of project. Candidates are encouraged to use the Units studied to help them choose their project so that their studies may inform a real issue/situation in their workplace.

The importance of the planning stage and the feedback given at this stage has a positive impact on the project and the candidates' likelihood of success.

Areas of good practice

The commitment and conscientious approach of staff involved in assessment and internal verification is itself good practice and deserves another mention. Other specific examples of good practice were noted at verification visits this session. Some have been mentioned before and they include:

♦ the use of assessment checklists taken from the SQA exemplar, which ensures the requirements of the Unit are fully taken into account when making assessment decisions
♦ detailed comments made by assessors to explain the marks awarded
♦ careful approach to internal verification, again with detailed comments
♦ the use of a formal standardisation meeting to resolve discrepancies between assessors/Internal Verifiers
♦ comprehensive advice given to candidates at the start of the Graded Unit process, in their choice of project and at the planning stage
♦ continued support to candidates as they worked on their submission

Specific areas for improvement

The overall conclusion is that this Graded Unit is working well, albeit there is very little activity from which to draw conclusions. Areas for improvement should, then, be seen as things which centres might like to consider when reflecting on their practice.

Centres can encourage candidates to:

♦ clearly specify (eg in the opening section of the planning stage) which Units, or parts of Units, from HNC Management contribute to the Graded Unit topic they have chosen
♦ provide specific reasons to support statements they have made, eg by explaining exactly why a particular method was used
♦ make explicit use of ideas from HNC Management, eg by using them as reasons to support statements made — this can help to ensure that projects have a theoretical basis
♦ ensure that evidence during the development stage supports their actions and is used through evaluation (this is obviously a balancing act with the previous point)
♦ use headings from the marking guidelines to focus and structure their work