



Higher National Qualifications

And

Scottish Vocational Qualifications

Internal Assessment Report

2008

Subject: HN Business Graded Unit (VG 390)

Date: 28 July 2008

The purpose of this report is to provide feedback to centres on verification which has taken place within Higher National and Scottish Vocational Qualifications in this subject.

HIGHER NATIONAL GRADED UNITS

TITLES/LEVELS OF HN GRADED UNITS VERIFIED

Insert details below

DE3T 34 HN Business Graded Unit 1
DE3V 35 HN Business Graded Unit 2
DE3W 35 HN Business Graded Unit 3

FEEDBACK TO CENTRES

Insert details relating to specific guidance which should be offered to centres based on the verification of centres. Include:

- *General comment*
- *Areas of good practice*
- *Areas for further development*

General comments:

For this first time verification for this session involved both visiting and central verification. The latter was undertaken for Graded Unit 2, the investigation Unit, while central verification covered the examination based Units, Graded Units 1 and 3. Each of the two types of Units will be covered separately but it is worth emphasising initially that the main conclusions from previous verifications continue to apply. In particular, while the Graded Units present a challenge for both students and deliverers, centres in general were able to apply the standards of SCQF Level 7 for Graded Unit 1 and SCQF Level 8 for Graded Units 2 and 3 to the marking of candidate work. There continue to be variations between centres but most centres seem to have worked out successful ways to prepare candidates for the Graded Units. As in previous years, there is encouraging evidence that centres who have encountered difficulties with the Graded Units are finding ways to address the problems in an effective manner. From a verification point of view, the Graded Units seem to be fulfilling their intended purpose of ensuring that candidates in the HN Business do reach a standard of achievement appropriate to awards at HNC and HND level and continue to help enhance the credibility of the awards. As noted in previous reports this is a reflection of the commitment and professionalism of staff at centres. Once again it was very apparent in all aspects of verification that staff had expended considerable time and effort in preparing candidates and marking and internally verifying the work produced.

It is pleasing to be able to report that in this session all centres were accepted for verification.

Graded Unit 2 [Investigation]

Verification was confined to the planning and implementation stages of the Unit. The visits confirmed that the general principles of business projects apply to this Graded Unit. Candidates who choose a specific issue involving an organisation with which they can establish good contacts generally manage better than candidates who opt for a large well known company where they can only gather general information. This does not preclude candidates from selecting well known organisations but it does suggest that this approach will be most successful if it is linked to a specific aspect of the organisation's activity e.g. related to a specific local outlet familiar to the candidate. Among other things this can help candidates overcome problems in obtaining suitable information since they can make use of alternative sources e.g. customers; residents of the local area; local press reports and so on.

Overall, centres had tried hard to apply the marking guidelines for this Graded Unit. Perhaps the planning stage was more generously marked than was justified and centres should pay careful attention to the award of additional marks. It is easy to forget that 14/20 is equivalent to 70% and represents the equivalent of an A grade pass. There were examples where marks had been awarded but it was not clear how they related to the marking guidelines. It is important too in the planning stage to carefully establish criteria for the

investigation as these affect both implementation and evaluation – this aspect of planning was often superficial. There is scope also to firm up the link between the investigation Graded Unit and the Units in the HND Business which contribute to it. There were more examples than there should be of investigations where it was unclear which units had been used to underpin the investigation.

Graded Units 1 and 3 [Examination]

The marking of examination based Graded Units was carried out effectively. In most cases, centres seem to be well aware of the standards required and are able to apply them. Centres in general now seem much more aware that marks can only be awarded when candidates provide some justification for the points that they make, usually in the form of a valid reason or example. Description does not usually warrant credit. It appears also that centres recognise the difference between Graded Unit 1 at SCQF Level 7 and the SCQF level 8 of Graded Unit 3.

There remain some examples where marking was more lenient than would be considered acceptable and this suggests that it is important for centres to be careful that they do apply standards appropriate to the level of the Graded Units. As noted above, centres do seem to have developed effective ways to prepare candidates for Graded Unit examinations and candidates themselves seem to have recognised what is required of them and are responding accordingly. However, there is a danger for centres in that preparing candidates for examinations is open to abuse. There is a fine line between providing advice and assistance to candidates to enable them to prepare properly for the examination and giving them direct hints which will give them an advantage in tackling the questions which actually appear in the examination. Rather worryingly, this year's verification suggested that there might be occasions where some centres might have overstepped the mark.

Overall, though, verification confirmed once again that good practice with respect to Graded Units continues to develop and to spread across centres. This is entirely due to the efforts of those who deliver Graded Units and those involved deserve praise for the effort which they have put in. There is scope for further progress but there are now strong foundations in progress on which to build.

Advice on good practice and areas for further development:

Good practice

Since the inception of the Graded Units, there has been much good practice in centres. This was confirmed this round of verification where, once again, there was evidence that most centres have established good procedures for dealing with the Graded Units. It is clear also that, with the help of networking events, good practice is spreading. There are aspects of good practice in the Graded Units for HN Business which apply regardless of the type of Unit. Many have been highlighted in previous reports but it is worth mentioning the most important again. This is for two main reasons. Firstly, not all centres have yet adopted all aspects of good practice. Secondly, it is easy to by-pass some aspects of good practice [particularly since many are time consuming] but doing this may jeopardise the maintenance of standards. Good practice which applies to all three Graded Units includes:

- Cross marking of student work – for external verification some centres supplied detailed explanations of the procedures adopted which is very helpful indeed to the verification process
- Rigorous application of internal verification procedures – this is often very comprehensive and detailed e.g. notes on meetings; explanation of how differences between markers were resolved. As centres become more experienced, internal verification is often combined with cross marking. Strictly, internal verification does not require a re-marking of scripts but doing this does help to highlight differences in the way marking schemes have been applied, especially where several markers are involved.
- Use of individual marking sheets for each candidate – these have proved very effective in ensuring that candidates are not given marks for merely identifying a relevant point or example and that marks are related to the marking guidelines. Encouraging markers to justify where marks have been awarded also seems to have a positive knock-on effect on how students are prepared for Graded Units as it can help deliverers explain more clearly to students what is required of them. The marking sheets have proved

invaluable in the investigation where they can help to ensure that additional marks are related to the criteria set out in the marking scheme.

Other examples of good practice applied more specifically to the two different types of Graded Unit, each of which will be taken in turn.

Graded Units 1 and 3 (Examination)

Many of the points made below have been mentioned in previous reports. Good practice in examinations is mostly about the marking of scripts and how the marks are recorded. It includes:

- Clearly indicating on student scripts where marks had been awarded e.g. making sure that the number of ticks matched the number of marks given; providing total marks for each question or part question on the student script at the end of both a part and the full question. Both of these help external verifiers – and internal verifiers - to check that appropriate assessment judgements have been made.
- Using different coloured pens – or a different system (e.g. ticks or numbers) – to distinguish between different markers.
- Use of marking conventions – these are not obligatory but they can help markers to indicate why a mark has been awarded e.g. for development; for an example and so on. They have the advantage of helping internal and external verifiers see where marks have been awarded and why.
- Preparing candidates for the examination – this can only be an indirect observation since external verification does not cover the way in which candidates are prepared for the examinations. However, it is noticeable that in the some centres in particular candidates have clearly been made fully aware of exam techniques (such as adjusting the length of answer to match the number of marks available) and of how to answer questions e.g. the importance of providing reasons, examples and so on.

Graded Unit 2 (Investigation)

Again good practice here related to preparing students for the investigation. It included:

- Encouraging candidates to start thinking about the investigation as early as possible in the second year
- Encouraging candidates to set clear boundaries for their investigation – this covers things like dissuading candidates from choosing wide topics involving international organisations where it is often hard to gather anything other than very broad general information.
- Encouraging candidates to spend as much time as possible planning their investigation – as noted in last year's report, candidates who developed a clear, structured brief for their investigation generally coped well with the implementing stage.

Further development

There are two aspects of this. The first is about adopting good practice. The comments in the previous section may suggest possible actions that centres could take. There is no doubt that centres which exhibited good practice found it easier to apply appropriate standards. This applies to all three Graded Units.

The second aspect is about avoiding pitfalls which may lead to inappropriate standards being applied. These vary between the examination Units (Graded Unit1 and Graded Unit 3) and the investigation Unit (Graded Unit 2). The following comments take each of the two types in turn and highlight some of the points which arise at verification. In conjunction with the good practice listed above, they could provide further guidance to centres on how to develop the Graded Units in the HN Business.

Examination Units (Graded Unit 1 and 3)

Most centres do apply appropriate marking standards but there remains a minority which is still coming to terms with marking at SCQF Levels 7 and 8 and particularly with the distinction between Graded Unit 1 at SCQF Level 7 and Graded Unit 3. In part the differentiation is achieved by the greater complexity and length of the case study in Graded Unit 3 and by the level of the Units associated with it. However, it also requires a higher standard of overall answer. The use of words such as 'Assess' and 'Evaluate' in question is important and answers which provide a descriptive response cannot be said to be fully answering the question.

The verification report for 2007 gave a detailed list of marking issues and only the most significant will be mentioned again here. One reason for this is improved marking overall by centres, which is good to see. The key factors which arose in this year's verification are given below. They apply in general terms to both Graded Unit 1 and Graded Unit 3.

- Marks should not be awarded for statements which are vague or imprecise – to gain a mark it should be clear from what the candidate has said that s/he has made a valid point. This can be particularly problematical for candidates for whom English is not their first language [and/or where the marker recognises the candidate script and knows the candidate to be hard working and deserving]. Some centres make use of anonymous marking which is now widely used in higher education and is perhaps something that those who do not adopt this practice could consider.
- Marks can only be awarded when candidates answer the question asked – in other words marks should be awarded as far as possible in accordance with the marking guidance. It can be tempting to award marks for sensible, but irrelevant, points, but this is a temptation that should be resisted. Similarly, accurate theoretical explanations should not be rewarded beyond the indications in the marking guidelines. Where questions ask for an evaluation for example, then candidates should only get credit if they attempt to do this.
- Marks cannot be given for repetition of what amounts to the same point – this is often hard to identify especially when candidates provide long, general answers. The use of individual marking sheets where comments are made on marks awarded can help to reduce the possibility of giving marks for repetition.
- Marks should not be awarded for merely stating a point - candidates should offer some justification for what they say. This justification should be valid i.e. it should be realistic and linked to the situation of the company in the case study. Speculative justification does not warrant marks. It is quite possible that candidates may gain several marks if they provide a number of different reasons to support points that they make. As noted above, it appears that centres are encouraging candidates to do this.
- Development marks should be given only where there is a clear development of a point i.e. the candidate has added something extra to her/his original justification. An example on its own may not be sufficient as it may not be clear exactly what it adds to what has already been said.

Finally, centres may find it helpful to extend the marking guidelines by adding notes to them. This was not much in evidence during the verification this year but it has been apparent in the past. Doing this helps to record how discrepancies between markers have been resolved and as a result contributes to consistency in marking across a cohort and over time.

Investigation Unit (Graded Unit 2)

Centres may wish to consider some of the following:

- Encourage candidates to set their work out in the format suggested in the Graded Unit exemplar – this not only makes it easier for centres to mark but it ensures that candidates cover all aspects of the planning and implementing stages.
- Make a more direct link to Units in the HND Business – this is a requirement of Graded Unit 2 but often the Units used were not closely linked to the investigation. This can help candidates focus on specific topics and thus help them to undertake a manageable investigation.

- Making sure that marking reflects that fact that the investigation is at SCQF Level 8 – the lenient marking of the planning stage has been referred to above for example.

Overall, however, the external verification for this year confirms that, generally, assessment for the Graded Units in HN Business is being carried out effectively. Once again, it was apparent that centres are becoming more aware of the standard expected and are better able to help candidates to show that they can meet the standards. There was evidence too that centres which have experienced difficulties with assessment have been able to overcome them. It is important though that these improvements continue to be consolidated and that good practice is maintained across all centres delivering the HN Business. The Graded Units do require substantial commitment, effort and time from staff in centres and they should be praised for the work they have done.