



Scottish Vocational Qualifications Internal Assessment Report 2014 Financial Services

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

SVQ awards

General comments

In the last year there has been an increase in the take up of SVQ awards in Financial Services.

This report is based on visits that were made to five centres, all based in Scotland, who are delivering the following awards:

Providing Financial Services SVQ Level 2 GH5R 22
Providing Financial Services SVQ Level 3 GH5T 23

There is a very good understanding of the requirements of the national standards in relation to these two awards. All the visits resulted in the outcome rating of 'Significant Strengths' for the centre.

All assessment activities reviewed were completed using the Employer Equivalent Training Model as defined in Assessment Strategy for the Providing Financial Services awards. There was evidence that this approach was leading to very positive partnerships being built between employers and those contracted to provide assessment and verification services and this was contributing to a higher level of take up of the awards and engagement with employers than had been seen in the recent past.

Unit specifications, instruments of assessment and exemplification materials

All centres have a very clear understanding of the requirements of the awards. Assessors and verifiers are very familiar with the Unit specifications and put this knowledge to good use, especially when combined with their knowledge of the operational procedures of the centres, to assist candidates identify appropriate evidence from their daily work outputs.

The assessors and verifiers occupational competence and in particular, their significant understanding of each centre's operational procedures has made a very significant contribution to the overall successful outcomes of qualification verification activities. Centres thinking about delivering these awards in the future and existing centres recruiting and/or redeploying assessors and verifiers, might wish to take this into account in their decision making process as issues are not arising because of this level of occupational competence.

Evidence Requirements

All assessors and verifiers have a good understanding of the Evidence Requirements of the Units. They are also very aware of the limitations imposed by the way that financial services organisations operate in terms of accessing evidence and retaining it outside the systems of the organisation. The solutions

that assessors have developed have been pragmatic, but importantly they have not compromised the integrity of the assessment decision-making process.

It is likely that there is much more evidence available in financial services organisations' systems than is being used at present and assessors and verifiers are encouraged to continue to develop an in-depth understanding of the systems, products and procedures of the organisations to identify appropriate evidence. Whilst the outputs of regulatory recognised assessments are being well used, the outputs from the e-learning systems of some organisations would present excellent evidence but this is not being fully utilised yet in all centres.

Administration of assessments

The administration of assessments in the financial services industry is not necessarily a straightforward process, particularly where candidates work in a call centre environment, but all the centres had been innovative and practical in how they worked around the issues that they can face.

Several centres used the challenges of administering assessments as a route to further engage the candidates' line managers in the assessment process. This high level of interaction, engagement and negotiation with line managers during the scheduling of assessments contributed to the success of the delivery of the awards in these centres.

Most centres have now realised that scheduling assessment observation of live calls generates only limited evidence due to the unpredictability of the call volumes and types and are focusing on listening to archive calls that candidates have signposted as being potential evidence for their Unit(s). This is something that all centres should consider doing. Not only does it lead to a far more efficient use of the assessor resources, it also places an appropriate level of responsibility onto the candidate to take ownership for identifying evidence.

Centres may wish to consider the extent to which they encourage candidates to identify evidence for all the Units in their award at the same time. Currently some centres are introducing candidates to some of their Units and then on completion of these Units are introducing the candidates to the remaining Units. Other centres are introducing the candidates to the Evidence Requirements of all the Units at induction. Whilst the former approach does help avoid information overload, candidates sometimes lose the opportunity to use some calls or products of work as evidence as they were not aware that they might have been appropriate for a later Unit until it is too late to access the material in their organisation's systems. Within the *Assessor's guidelines for the SVQ in Providing Financial Services at level 2* and *Assessor's guidelines for the SVQ in Providing Financial Services at level 3* (both updated in January 2014) there are examples of documentation that can be used to record the evidence across all Units in the award.

Most of the centres used e-portfolios to capture and retain candidate evidence and assessment decisions and documentation. This appeared to make a major contribution to a very high standard of internal verification in these centres and it

was noted that the centres themselves found the internal verification processes less problematic as all information was in a single place and could be managed remotely as required.

All centres undertake an appropriate level of standardisation to contribute to ensuring consistency of assessment decision making. These meetings were minuted but most centres did not maintain a Centre Decision Log. Whilst a new assessor could review the minutes over a period of time to identify if an issue has been discussed before, this is likely to lead to wasted effort and/or overlooking key decisions taken. All centres are encouraged to complete Centre Decision Logs to capture relevant outputs from their assessment and verification processes.

Several centres are expecting to expand the range of employers they work with the next year and they are reminded that they will need to standardise their early work in relation to the new centres' products and procedures to ensure consistency with their decisions taken elsewhere.

General feedback

When conducting qualification verification activities in financial services organisations it can be difficult to meet with candidates on every occasion and the centres are to be thanked for the significant efforts that had to be made in some instances to facilitate this.

Where feedback was received, there was universal, very positive feedback from all candidates. They were particularly positive about the support they had received from their assessors and were surprised how their job roles naturally generate evidence. All candidates felt the award was very relevant to their current and future roles in the financial services sector. Many candidates also indicated that they viewed their employer in a more positive light since resources were being devoted to their development, something that some had, for whatever reason, believed might not happen in their role or circumstances.

Feedback was also offered on several visits by line managers some of whom were previously either unfamiliar with, or ambivalent to, vocational qualifications. Without exception, all were extremely positive about the awards, the relevance of the Units, the positive impact they were having on their staff and the extent to which workplace outputs naturally fitted the requirements of the awards.

Areas of good practice

Several areas of good practice were observed during visits. Five areas have been highlighted below but it should be noted that these were the most significant and that all centres were displaying evidence of good practice to a greater or lesser extent.

The five areas of good practice were:

1. **Good use being made of technology** particularly audio evidence and e-portfolios.

This was a vocational qualification that historically had issues as candidates were attempting to collect evidence from secure financial services systems and in addition, the layout and operations of most places of work were such that evidence folders could not be securely stored.

The use of e-portfolios has removed the physical storage issues and has helped with the level of reuse of evidence across Units and the removal of duplication of assessment. As mentioned earlier, it has also led to very high standards of internal verification in those centres using e-portfolios.

Two centres are making very good use of audio recordings, stored as audio files on e-portfolios, to capture details of the evidence seen in observation activities. This removes the need for the assessor to spend a lot of time writing up notes after visits. Their activity post-visit is mostly in matching file times/counters to the performance criteria and knowledge and understanding statements to signpost the evidence for internal and external verifiers.

2. Induction processes were very detailed and all centres made **good use of pre-induction screening** to either select Units or identify issues with employer chosen Units.

The retention rates on the awards are generally very high and to some extent this is due to the fact that candidates do not face an impossible task to generate evidence.

There were several examples of very good diagnostic instruments being used with candidates, and importantly line managers, to assist in the Unit selection. There is good practice in one centre where the diagnostic also looks at likely future roles to ensure the award supports future development activities and career plans.

3. **Very good relationship management** is delivered by assessors particularly with the candidates' line manager and other key stakeholders in the employing organisation. This relationship management removed many of the issues that might have arisen in the assessment process.

Providing candidate support can be difficult under the Employer Equivalent Training Model and the assessor has to respect the line manager/employee relationship whilst dealing with sensitive issues and raising matters if required. By the use of regular scheduled three-way meetings between the candidate, the line manager and the assessor at the beginning or the conclusion of an assessment session, centres that use this approach are getting the best out of the relationship and are finding it easier when issues do arise, to raise them in an open and constructive way.

4. **Internal verification activities are developmental.** The financial services industry now has a strong culture of feedback and continuous improvement/development and it is good to see in several centres that the internal verification activities reflect this. Those centres place as much emphasis on providing development feedback to the assessors (even if it is just to encourage more of the same high standards of assessment) as they do to reviewing the validity of the assessment decisions.

5. One centre now has a **mentoring programme** in place and other centres might wish to consider this now they have been delivering awards over longer periods. In the centre, successful candidates from the previous years are allocated to this year's candidates. The role of the mentor is to provide additional support and guidance based on their own experience. This support ranges from encouragement and empathy when required in difficult or challenging situations through to helping signpost evidence opportunities based on their knowledge of the organisation's systems and the requirements of the award. Therefore, the assessor has another person assisting them when they are not in the organisation resulting in meetings being able to focus on the assessment of evidence rather than the resolution of issues arising from a lack of evidence. The employer also reported that the mentoring programme helped them develop more junior employees' mentoring skills in a safe environment.

Specific areas for improvement

The following is a minor comment but one that centres must keep a watch on if they are to maintain the high standards that they deliver just now.

Financial services is a fast changing industry and this impacts significantly on the products and processes of candidates' employers. To maintain the validity of assessment activities, assessors and verifiers have to keep their industry knowledge up to date. The completion of regular updating activities, both in relation to the industry as a whole and employers in particular, is extremely important and these have even greater significance in the Employer Equivalent Training Model and should not be overlooked.

There is no evidence that this is not happening, however, what was seen this year was that very few assessors and verifiers were maintaining and updating their CPD records accordingly. This is something centres should keep in mind in the future.