



# Guidance on the Implementation of Graded Units in Higher National Certificates and Diplomas

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 About this guide

This guide provides advice and information on the implementation of graded units in Higher National Certificates and Diplomas. Much of the content has been provided by staff from centres, experienced in the delivery and assessment of graded units.

The first three sections provide general information relating to implementation, and the final two sections give specific advice relating to the preparation for, and assessment of, project-based graded units and examination-based graded units.

## 1.2 Purpose of graded units

All HNCs and HNDs are assessed by a combination of unit and graded unit assessment. This allows differentiation of the standard to which learners achieve the principal aims of the group award and greater consistency of national standards of assessment in and across HNCs and HNDs.

The purposes of graded units are therefore to:

- ◆ assess whether learners have met the principal aims of the group award
- ◆ assess a learner's ability to retain and integrate the knowledge and/or skills gained in the units
- ◆ grade the learner's achievement

Graded units can provide a useful motivational tool for staff in encouraging learners to apply themselves **throughout** a programme of study. They also give learners the opportunity to show that they can make connections between the various strands of learning that they have come across in their programme of study.

## 1.3 Types of graded unit and assessment instruments

Graded units can be project-based or examination-based. Projects are used to assess the application of knowledge and skills. Examinations are used to assess theoretical knowledge and understanding under supervised conditions. As HNCs and HNDs are, in the main, designed to provide learners with the knowledge and skills required for entry into employment, it is anticipated that many graded units will take the form of a project.

### 1.3.1 Project-based graded units

Project-based graded units are designed to test the application of knowledge and skills in the planning, execution, and evaluation of a given task. The assessment instrument should provide details of the task and the evidence that learners are expected to produce. It should be flexible in terms of the way the project is taken forward so that it can fit both with centres' resources, and with learners' interests and personal strengths.

Learners would normally carry out the tasks involved in the project without close supervision. However, some of the tasks, eg producing a report, conducting a laboratory experiment, answering questions on a pre-researched case study, could be done under supervised conditions. These should only be used where the conditions of assessment contribute to the national standard and reflect the needs of end-users (such as professional body recognition requirements).

All project-based graded units require learners to plan, develop and evaluate — but there is a choice of three types of assessment instrument. These are:

- ◆ case study
- ◆ investigation
- ◆ practical assignment

#### Case study

If skills in gathering and interpreting information, analysing, decision-making, and planning for action are to be tested, a case study will be used. In this type of assessment instrument, learners are given an outlined scenario that involves (typically) an organisation, client, service, product, process, or system. The scenario consists of a description of a set of circumstances — this is usually in the form of text, video, picture, or role-play exercise.

This is followed by a series of instructions that prompt learners to use the information they have gathered to interpret, analyse, and respond to the scenario. They then have to put forward recommendations for follow-up action.

For this type of assessment instrument, learners must produce:

- ◆ a plan of action
- ◆ a case study report with conclusions and recommendations
- ◆ evidence showing evaluation/review of the case study

#### Investigation

If skills in research, analysis, evaluation, and reporting are being tested, an investigation will be used. In this type of assessment instrument, you can direct the choice of investigation, usually by providing learners with a topic or brief for

the subsequent investigation. Alternatively, learners can select a topic in consultation with you.

For this type of assessment instrument, learners must produce:

- ◆ a plan of action
- ◆ an investigation report with conclusions and recommendations
- ◆ evidence showing evaluation/review of the investigation

### **Practical assignment**

If what is being tested is the application of practical skills (and knowledge and understanding) to a situation that involves task management, a practical assignment will be used. This assessment instrument is not concerned exclusively with the practical activity. You should provide learners with a brief that allows them to demonstrate their creative, interpersonal, and/or management skills directly.

For this type of assessment instrument, learners must produce:

- ◆ a plan of action
- ◆ evidence of a product, organised activity/event, or performance
- ◆ evidence that documents the processes underpinning the practical hands-on activity
- ◆ evidence showing an evaluation of the practical assignment

## **1.3.2 Examination-based graded units**

Examination-based graded units are designed to test underpinning knowledge and theoretical understanding of a subject or occupational area. In the examination, learners are expected to use a wide range of cognitive skills. All examinations must be **supervised** and **unseen** (ie learners should not be given the questions in advance). This allows the examination to sample from the full range of subject/occupational content. Learners should be given ample notice of the examination date, and best practice would be to prepare learners for the examination by ensuring they are fully conversant with revision and exam techniques.

To ensure fairness and reliability of assessment, the content sampled in the examination should cover the critical knowledge and skills (the topics) specified in the graded unit specification in such a way as to provide direct evidence of attainment or to allow attainment to be inferred. The content of the examination should not be predictable, (ie learners should not be able to spot the questions in advance).

Examination-based assessment instruments that can be used are:

- ◆ closed-book examination

- ◆ open-book examination

### **Closed-book examination**

A closed-book examination tests the ability to recall, and apply, knowledge and understanding. Learners are given no information other than the question paper and script book, and are expected to answer examination questions without the aid of reference material.

### **Open-book examination**

An open-book examination tests the ability to apply knowledge and understanding. In addition to the question paper and script book, learners are allowed to use prescribed materials. Details of these materials must be included in the graded unit specification. Graded unit specifications also give details of any assessment conditions for examination-based graded units, for example a closed-book examination with a case study that the learner has **seen** before the examination. The conditions set in the graded unit specification must be followed.



## 2 SQA support and quality assurance

### 2.1 Graded unit specification

The graded unit specification, as with all other unit specifications, provides staff with the starting point for planning and preparation. The graded unit specification provides guidance on designing assessment tasks and states what the learner has to achieve and the evidence required in the assessment process. It identifies the standards to which the learner has to perform and provides guidance on teaching and learning approaches.

The graded unit specification will include:

- ◆ the type of assessment, ie whether it is a project or examination
- ◆ the proposed assessment instrument, ie whether it is a case study, practical assignment or investigation
- ◆ details of which principal aims of the group award are to be assessed
- ◆ recommendations on the underpinning knowledge and skills required, ie HN units that learners should have achieved or be in the process of achieving
- ◆ guidance on designing the assessment task
- ◆ guidance on assessing and grading learners
- ◆ any conditions of assessment to be followed
- ◆ support notes
- ◆ information for learners

The type of graded unit and instrument of assessment to be used in a particular HNC/HND are determined by the Qualification Design Team (QDT) and will have been subject to validation. Therefore, the type of graded unit and instrument of assessment can only be changed through validation. The QDT will have developed the specification for each graded unit and this is the first document that should be referred to when developing, administering, and assessing graded units.

The graded unit specification is a significant document which covers several purposes. These include:

- ◆ **Setting the national standard.** The graded unit specification gives the national standard for learner evidence. This applies to internally devised assessments and to SQA assessment exemplars.
- ◆ **Providing the basis for designing the assessment task.** Assessors must ensure that the assessment offers learners the opportunity to integrate and apply the knowledge and skills from all the units identified as underpinning the graded unit. If you are developing assessment tasks, eg examination

papers, project scenarios or practical activities, you must comply with the advice set out in the graded unit specification.

- ◆ **Internal verification.** Centres must use their internal verification systems to ensure that all instruments of assessment that are used by the centre are valid, reliable and practicable. The instrument of assessment should comply with the guidance given in the graded unit specification. The guidance on assessing and grading learners should also be used for internal verification purposes.
- ◆ **External verification.** External verifiers will use the graded unit specification to check the validity and reliability of the instrument of assessment and the criteria used for making judgements on learner performance.

## 2.2 SQA assessment support packs (ASPs)

Assessment support packs are available for many HNC/HNDs.

ASPs provide assessment and marking guidelines that exemplify the national standard for achievement. They are examples of valid, reliable and practicable instruments of assessment. Centres wishing to develop their own assessments should refer to the Assessment Support Pack to ensure a comparable standard. Assessment Support Packs are available on SQA's secure website. The assessment task(s) detailed in the ASP will correspond to the instructions for designing the assessment task outlined in the graded unit specification.

ASPs may be used in the following ways:

- ◆ as the actual assessment, providing centres ensure its integrity and security
- ◆ to exemplify the standard of performance expected of learners achieving the graded unit, ie as a benchmark
- ◆ to help centres develop an assessment for the graded unit
- ◆ as a staff development tool

It is important to ensure that the ASP is used in a context appropriate to the delivery of the graded unit and to the group award of which it forms a part. This means that if ASP is used, the instrument of assessment **and** the Marking Guidelines must be used. Centres should use the Marking Guidelines when preparing their own marking scheme. If any amendments are made to an assessment exemplar, it is strongly recommended that the amended version is submitted to SQA for prior verification.

Even when using an ASP from SQA's website, it is still the centre's responsibility to make sure that all the appropriate internal quality assurance procedures are satisfactorily completed. Although centres can use an ASP for the actual assessment, please be aware that ASPs may date and/or new ASPs may have been developed. It is each centre's responsibility to ensure the currency of any assessment materials it uses.

Copies of ASPs are stored on SQA's secure website. Availability of ASPs for specific subject areas can be checked through the subject pages on SQA's website ([www.sqa.org.uk](http://www.sqa.org.uk)). Within each centre there is an SQA Co-ordinator who will be able to access them.

## **2.3 Quality assurance**

### **2.3.1 Prior verification of assessments**

If a centre decides to devise its own instrument of assessment (or to amend an existing ASP), it is strongly recommended that the instrument of assessment (or amended ASP) is submitted to SQA for prior verification.

Prior verification involves submitting the instrument of assessment, along with Marking Guidelines and conditions of assessment, to SQA for verification. This means that SQA's external verifiers will check that the instrument of assessment satisfactorily meets the standards and requirements laid down in the graded unit specification.

Before submitting materials to SQA for prior verification it is essential that materials are processed through a centre's internal quality systems. It would be helpful if the centre's submission for prior verification included documentation on its internal verification systems and any decisions made in relation to the instrument of assessment.

It is essential that final dates for prior verification are checked with SQA. Normally, prior verification must be processed early in the session. SQA will write to centres each year to advise them of arrangements and deadlines for prior verification. If a centre fails to meet these deadlines, SQA cannot guarantee that instruments of assessment will be prior verified in time for use by the centre.

### **2.3.2 Internal verification**

Internal verification procedures should be followed when:

- ◆ using SQA-produced ASPs
- ◆ amending SQA-produced ASPs
- ◆ using centre-devised assessments

Internal verification of graded units in each centre should focus on:

- ◆ the validity of the instruments of assessment used
- ◆ the practicability of the instruments of assessment used
- ◆ the reliability of the assessment decisions made
- ◆ the consistency of the quality of assessment practices within the centre over time
- ◆ continuous improvement in the internal assessment process

In this way, the internal verification of graded units is no different from that carried out for other units. However, because of the integrative nature of graded units, centres may wish to review their internal verification system in relation to graded units to ensure it covers this aspect.

If centres put in place mechanisms for double-marking, this should not be seen as a substitute for internal verification. In some limited circumstances, eg where evidence is a performance, an internal verifier may independently assess a sample of learners' performances at the same time as they are being assessed by the assessor. The internal verifier is not marking the learners' performances. His/her role is to ensure that the judgements the assessor is reaching are valid and consistent. However, internal verifiers should also ensure that the assessment instrument is valid prior to use, that the assessment instrument has been applied correctly and consistently, and that the decisions that have been made as a result are reliable.

### **2.3.3 External verification**

External verification has three aspects:

- ◆ verification of the instrument of assessment (ie is it valid and reliable?)
- ◆ the sufficiency of learners' evidence
- ◆ the judgement of the assessor

Centres may be selected for external verification if:

- ◆ the centre is offering a graded unit for the first time
- ◆ the centre has not offered the graded unit in the previous two years
- ◆ there were issues arising from verification on the last occasion the centre was selected for verification
- ◆ the centre has not been selected for a specified period of time
- ◆ the centre requests verification and this has been agreed by SQA
- ◆ the centre is selected at random — the proportion of centres selected at random will be low where the national acceptance rates for the graded unit over a period of time are high, and vice versa

In the main, centres will be selected on their track record. If a centre has a good track record in a subject area, the likelihood is that SQA will select it for verification at suitable intervals. However, SQA may select a centre at random, regardless of its history. Therefore, no centre can predict with certainty whether or not it will be selected.

If a centre is selected for verification, the purpose of such verification is to focus on the validity of the assessment instruments; the sufficiency of evidence; and the accuracy of the centre's assessment decisions.

In order to confirm the accuracy of such decisions, we need to see a sample of assessment decisions made by assessors. These decisions do not have to be the final assessment decisions. This means that where re-assessment is

necessary, centres do not have to have re-assessed learners before the date of external verification.

Specific details on what information should be provided to SQA for verification to be effective will be given when a centre is selected for verification. This will vary as project based graded units are usually quality assured by visiting or remote verification while examination based graded units are usually quality assured by central or remote verification, but it is expected that this will include some or all of the following:

- ◆ graded unit specification
- ◆ instruments of assessment used
- ◆ Marking Guidelines used for examination based graded units
- ◆ learners' responses, clearly marked
- ◆ assessment checklists for project based graded units showing all marks for each project stage, total marks gained, and grade awarded for all learners
- ◆ a clear indication to the external verifier where and why particular marks and grades have been awarded; this could be in the form of annotations on each learner's examination script/ project or on a separate marking/grading sheet
- ◆ verification sampling form, which shows details of learners selected for verification
- ◆ internal verification records including sample selected and evidence of verification activity on instruments of assessment

Appendix 1 contains a sample letter/form, which may provide a useful template when submitting materials to SQA for central verification.

### **2.3.4 Processing results**

Graded units should be processed in a similar way to other SQA units but instead of a pass, registers must record the grade given to learners — A, B or C. If a learner fails or is withdrawn this would be recorded in the usual way.

## 3 Centre staff

### 3.1 The course team

Teamwork is an essential element in the effective preparation of learners to undertake the graded unit. This is because graded units seek to assess how well learners have achieved the aims of a group award and how well they are able to integrate the knowledge and skills gained in a number of units. These units are likely to be delivered by different members of the course team. It is essential, therefore, that staff involved in the preparation for, and assessment of, the graded unit, and those involved in delivering key units, work together, communicate and support each other.

Integration in delivery and assessment may already be taking place both within and across some units in the group award. Where this is possible it has clear benefits in terms of saving time and other valuable resources and, perhaps more importantly, it allows the learner to see how the various parts of a group award are interconnected. Graded units take this a step further, as graded units assess learners' ability to retain and integrate the knowledge and/or skills gained in the key units within the group award.

All staff involved in the HNC/HND should be aware of, and be familiar with, the graded units for the group award. This is essential if the graded unit is to be seen as an integral part of the group award, and not as a 'bolt on' unit. Familiarity and knowledge of the graded units will mean that all staff can refer to, and deal with, questions which may arise throughout the group award in relation to graded units.

The course team must first identify the key units that underpin the graded unit. These units are listed in the graded unit specification and learners must have achieved, or be working toward achieving, these units before they can undertake the graded unit.

The course team should then agree on how to deliver the key units in a way that optimises integration and coherence, and then agree the best time for the graded unit to be undertaken by learners. There are many delivery strategies (see sections 4.2 and 5.2 on timetabling and resources) which may be considered, and these will vary greatly from group award to group award. However, it is worthwhile spending time on this as a non-integrated approach may have a negative impact on learner achievement. Project-based graded units may lend themselves more easily to involvement from course team members, as learners may need to consult different members of staff with specialist knowledge when carrying out an investigation or practical assignment.

## 3.2 The role of course team leader

Course team leaders may, or may not, be involved in preparing learners for, and assessing, graded units. However, it is highly likely that they will be involved in a co-ordinating role for the implementation of the graded unit. If the course team leader is not taking on this role personally then he/she needs to delegate this to a named member of staff.

This role of the course team leader (or delegated, named person) includes:

- ◆ Ensuring that all staff are aware of their exact roles and responsibilities in the implementation of the graded unit — from the delivery of units that underpin the graded unit through to the actual assessment of the graded unit.
- ◆ Ensuring that the arrangements and relevant paperwork for internal and external verification are in place. Depending upon the system in place at a centre this may be delegated to an internal verifier. However, the important point is that a named person is responsible for the management of verification — internally and externally.
- ◆ Informing all course team members of all important dates in relation to graded unit examinations and/or project submissions.

Remember, staff involved in the delivery of the key units that underpin the graded unit should see themselves as being part of the team implementing the graded unit. This means that the course team leader should provide the following information to all staff on the course team:

- ◆ details of the key units which learners should have achieved, or be in the process of achieving, before sitting the examination or starting their project
- ◆ a summary of what learners should know before sitting the examination or undertaking the project
- ◆ details of how learners will be assessed, eg details of venue, date, start time, length and format for examination-based graded units, and submission dates for project-based graded units
- ◆ details of any conditions under which the assessment will take place, eg closed-book examination
- ◆ arrangements for reasonable assistance, remediation and/or reassessment

In addition, for examination-based graded units, a named person will normally be required to:

- ◆ make all arrangements for the examination
- ◆ organise the production of the examination papers
- ◆ ensure the security of examination papers
- ◆ communicate the necessary information to all learners

These tasks may fall to a course leader, internal verifier, SQA Co-ordinator, exam administrator, or another appropriate person within the centre.

### 3.3 The role of assessors

The role of assessors is to assess the graded unit. However, he/she may also be involved in managing the graded unit and preparing learners for assessment. The assessor would normally be a tutor, or tutors, who are involved in the delivery of other key units in the group award. However, the model of tutor input will vary. For example, this might be:

- ◆ specialist assessors for key units also managing and assessing particular aspects of the graded unit
- ◆ one assessor managing and assessing all parts of the graded unit
- ◆ one qualified/experienced member of staff managing and assessing the graded unit, supported by another team member
- ◆ one qualified/experienced member of staff managing and assessing the graded unit, supported by another team member and including another marker at the time of assessment
- ◆ one qualified/experienced member of staff managing and assessing the graded unit, working with one or more less experienced assessors (this would build capacity within the course team)

Each centre will have to adopt a model that best suits their circumstances and resources. However, it should be remembered that if too many staff are involved, it may be difficult to identify clear responsibilities and may confuse learners, while too few or a lone member of staff could leave the centre exposed and learners unsupported should that member of staff be unavailable for any reason. The important point in choosing one of the models above is that responsibilities are clearly defined and staff can take ownership of the management and assessment of the graded unit.

Regardless of the model used within a centre, SQA's policy is that assessors must be suitably qualified or experienced in the area in which they are assessing. Therefore, it is essential that assessment of graded units is carried out by staff with sufficient expertise to make a valid judgement on the learner's performance.

Depending on the number of assessors, they are likely to take on one or more of the following tasks:

- ◆ devising the instrument of assessment
- ◆ administering the assessment
- ◆ judging the assessment (different members of the course team may mark different questions in an exam or different parts of the project)
- ◆ collation of marks
- ◆ recording of marks
- ◆ providing feedback to the learners
- ◆ standardisation activities with other assessors

Ideally, there should be some form of rotation of staff involved in the assessment of graded units from year to year. This may not always be possible due to the size and staff complement within a centre, but if internal verification is to be



effective within the centre it will be necessary to have more than one qualified member of staff involved in the process.

### **3.4 Timetabling for centre staff**

As with any programme of study, consideration has to be given to the timetabling and resource implications involved in delivery. However, because of the integrative nature of graded units these are likely to require a different approach to that taken in the delivery of other units. Advice on timetabling project-based graded units can be found in section 4.2 and on timetabling examination-based graded units in section 5.2.

## 4 Project-based graded units

Project-based graded units will take the form of a case study, investigation or practical assignment (please see section 1.3.1 for more information). In each case it is likely that learners will require more support and advice at the beginning of their projects, and it is vital that learners are clear on what they have to achieve and the support that will be offered to them.

### 4.1 Graded unit introduction for learners

A project-based graded unit introduction for learners should contain at least:

- ◆ an introduction to the purpose or aims of the graded unit
- ◆ a list of the key units which learners should have achieved, or be in the process of achieving, before starting their project
- ◆ the task instructions or brief, including an outline of each of the stages of the project, their purpose and how they might be achieved
- ◆ an explanation of the grading process and the main factors that will influence grade, eg technical content, autonomous working, etc
- ◆ an outline of the percentage weighting of total marks for each stage and an explanation of how these marks relate to the quantity and quality of evidence
- ◆ an explanation of the need (and reasons) to pass each stage before progressing to the next stage
- ◆ identification of deadlines and completion dates
- ◆ information on the system for monitoring progress and providing support on the project — including tutor input, venues for meetings, and any necessary resources required
- ◆ information on group work for projects (provided that the graded unit specification allows for this) which must make clear that each learner must provide evidence that he/she has individually met the Evidence Requirements
- ◆ a clear indication that learners will not normally be working under close supervision, the degree of autonomy expected of the learner, and the level of support that will be given to the learner (see section 4.4 for further guidance on reasonable assistance)
- ◆ arrangements for remediation and re-assessment

It would be useful to give this information to learners as an oral presentation and in document form, and to build in time for a thorough discussion of the points so that learners can ask questions and seek clarification on any point.

### 4.2 Timetabling and resources

There are a number of factors that need to be built into the management and resourcing of project-based graded units. These include materials required (eg for practical assignments), space required, access to research materials (eg for investigations), and the amount of direct contact required for each class.

Although there is no new content in graded units, lecturer input will be needed to:

- ◆ ensure learners develop project management skills
- ◆ give learners information about the graded unit (see section 4.1 above)
- ◆ provide learners with support to choose a project
- ◆ provide reasonable assistance
- ◆ provide learners with on-going support in terms of progress interviews; this support is vital if learners are to complete projects within given timeframes
- ◆ provide remediation support
- ◆ assess each stage of the project to ensure learners can progress to the next stage
- ◆ assess and grade the final submission
- ◆ re-assess if required
- ◆ process results

To help lecturers with this it is recommended that:

- ◆ projects are started as early as possible, but centres must ensure that learners have all the required knowledge and skills (ie from key HN units) as laid out in the graded unit specification
- ◆ learners are given sufficient time to carry out their work independently, but with appropriate tutor support
- ◆ effective tools such as progress logs or diaries are used to motivate and monitor learners' work
- ◆ an appointment system for progress interviews with learners is identified in the early stages of the project

### **4.3 Managing project stages — planning, development and evaluation**

As indicated in the previous section, project-based graded units require effective management. While learners must work independently, they must also be supported throughout the process. It is the lecturer's responsibility to give learners clear guidance on what is expected of them. For example, will learners be assigned a topic, brief or activity, or will they have to select these on their own? (The graded unit specification will give details of this.) What are the key milestones and deadlines for each stage of the project, and the final submission date? Will the monitoring of progress be on an individual basis, or with small groups, or the whole class group? Clear guidance should ensure that learners fully understand the levels and amount of work to be carried out as the project progresses.

Centres must ensure that all learners are supported in developing the general skills needed for project work, and that individual learners are equipped with the specific skills and knowledge they may need for their own projects. Lecturers should provide feedback on the quality of learner work at any progress interview. Progress interviews also provide an important monitoring and authentication mechanism where lecturers can ensure that work produced is a learner's own.

In line with graded unit specifications, projects will be assessed at each stage and learners can only progress to the next stage if they have met the Evidence Requirements of the previous stage, ie learners must achieve the Planning stage before progressing to the Developing stage, and must achieve the Developing stage before progressing to the Evaluating stage. At the end of *each* stage there should be opportunities for remediation and re-assessment of learners on that particular stage. This includes the final Evaluation stage. Any re-assessment should be carried out in line with the centre's own assessment policy.

If, for some reason, a learner has not submitted evidence for each stage and submits a completed project, then the centre can accept this as a final submission provided that the centre and learner are clear that if the project fails to meet the Evidence Requirements, the whole project would have to be re-assessed using a substantially different project. It is the centre's decision when re-assessment takes place.

The following key points provide a useful reminder of what is required to manage project-based graded units effectively:

- ◆ maintain effective records on each learner
- ◆ ask learners to use log books/diaries
- ◆ put arrangements in place for progress interviews with learners
- ◆ at progress interviews, discuss tasks completed, identify any incomplete tasks, and agree next steps
- ◆ monitor milestones in the project
- ◆ explain assessment requirements and give feedback to learners at each stage

## **4.4 Reasonable assistance in project-based graded units**

Project-based graded units are designed to test the application and integration of knowledge and skills in the planning, execution, and evaluation of a given task. In carrying out a given task, learners are required to display the ability to work independently to meet the Evidence Requirements and standards set out in the graded unit specification. At the same time, learners need appropriate support to enable them to complete the project-based graded unit.

This is demanding on the learner as integration is based on content/topics taken from units delivered across the group award.

'Reasonable assistance' is the term used by SQA to describe the difference between providing learners with some direction to generate the required evidence for assessment and providing too much support which would compromise the integrity of the assessment. Reasonable assistance is part of all learning and teaching processes.

In relation to the assessment of project-based graded units, assessors may provide advice, clarification and guidance during the time between the distribution of the project instructions and the completion date, ie at each stage of the project.

As with all assessment, learners must be capable of meeting the Evidence Requirements, and evidence must be the learner's own work. In addition, skills in planning, developing and evaluating are being assessed in the project-based graded unit, and these skills include autonomous working.

It is not possible to provide a definitive list of 'reasonable assistance' for every possible project, but examples are given below to show the range of assistance that would be considered reasonable.

| <b>Type of reasonable assistance</b>                                                     | <b>Example and further guidance</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Selection of a task for a practical assignment, or topic for investigation or case study | Lecturer input and advice on the selection of a task/topic is appropriate before the learner actually embarks on the task, unless the unit states that the learner has to select the task/topic without assistance. Once work on the assessment begins, the learner should be working more autonomously.                                                                                                                                                       |
| Advice on alternative sources                                                            | If resources for a project are unavailable it may be appropriate for the lecturer to discuss a series of options on alternative sources.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Clarification                                                                            | Clarification may be sought by learners because of the wording of a brief or specification. The assessor could discuss the parameters of what would be acceptable.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Exploring options with a learner                                                         | A learner is working on a practical assignment and is faced with more than one possible solution to a problem. The assessor could ask the learner to discuss each option available and the pros and cons of each and then ask the learner to decide on a solution based on the discussion. In this way the lecturer is not telling the learner what to do but is facilitating the thought process to enable the learner to work towards an appropriate choice. |
| Asking learners to re-read or check something previously taught                          | A learner is working on a case study, which involves analysing and interpreting and making decisions on the information given. The learner is having difficulty analysing the information in the case study. The lecturer may refer the learner back to a previous part of the learning programme, which covered relevant material or skills that would help in the analysis.                                                                                  |

|                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Drawing out or teasing out points without leading learners      | This is broad guidance which lies somewhere between clarification and exploring options. Learners sometimes get stuck at a particular part of a task. In such cases, an assessor could assist by raising other questions that make the learners think about the original problem, so giving them the opportunity to answer their own questions without supplying the actual answers.                                                              |
| Arranging introductions, access, proof of identity              | It may be that centre staff will need to set up initial contacts to provide access for a learner to a workplace.<br><br>For example, learners carrying out a practical assignment need access to a workplace environment. It may be that because of health and safety requirements, the initial approach can only be made by the assessor. He/she may have to set up the initial contact but thereafter all arrangements are made by the learner. |
| Arranging access to facilities, workshops, specialist equipment | Learners may need access to specific facilities or specialist equipment within the centre. This may have to be arranged by the assessor.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Appropriate supervision                                         | It may be the case that for health and safety reasons etc, an assessor may need to be present when a particular room or piece of equipment is used. This does not mean that the assessor should interfere or offer guidance on the on-going work the learner is undertaking.                                                                                                                                                                      |

In all these examples, it is clear that the learner is being supported by the lecturer through such techniques as prompting, questioning and clarification, but that the learner is not being given answers. The learner will have to provide the lecturer with evidence that they are capable of carrying out the project on their own in order to satisfy the requirements of the graded unit.

## 4.5 Assessing, marking and grading project-based graded units

The course team should agree an approach to assessing and marking the project-based graded unit and grading learners' work. The project-based graded unit may be assessed by:

- ◆ a sole assessor
- ◆ more than one assessor assessing all stages
- ◆ different assessors assessing each stage

- ◆ one assessor assessing one stage, eg planning or evaluation, but different assessors assessing the development stage, according to their specialisms
- ◆ some other approach not covered here

Assessors should work to a marking scheme, which has been agreed by all those involved in the assessment and which, in turn, must be based on the minimum Evidence Requirements and grading criteria laid out in the graded unit specification. If an assessment exemplar is available, this will also provide guidance on assessing the project.

To achieve a graded unit, learners must meet all the minimum Evidence Requirements and achieve at least 50% of the available marks. Assessors will then assign a grade to the learner based on the following grade boundaries:

A = 70% – 100%

B = 60% – 69%

C = 50% – 59%

When devising marking schemes for project-based graded units, whole marks rather than half marks must be used. Marks must be allocated on the basis of achievement rather than omission. If content or format (eg syntax, spelling, etc) is essential to meeting the standard, this should be clearly stated in the Evidence Requirements and grading criteria, and learners should be awarded marks for what they have achieved.

Also, there may be a temptation to assign individual marks to specific points, eg one mark for making a point, one mark for giving one strength, one mark for giving one weakness. However, if marks are divided too finely, this can constrain assessors if they are trying to take a more holistic view of a learner's work. It may be preferable, therefore, to allocate a greater number of marks to a wider category, which leaves more scope to take account of the quality of an assessment rather than quantity of information. The point here is that it is Evidence Requirements and the standard of evidence that should be the driver rather than a simple allocation of marks, which can lead to mechanistic assessment. This should be an integral part of the discussion at internal verification meetings.

For project-based graded units, it is a requirement that learners must pass the Planning stage before progressing to the Developing stage, and must pass the Developing stage before progressing to the Evaluating stage. This means that assessors must be satisfied that learners have met the minimum Evidence Requirements for each stage before progressing to the next. However, it is important that assessors manage learner expectations and do not make irrevocable decisions on grading until the final stage is complete and assessors have had an opportunity to view the work as a whole. The final grading given must reflect the quality of the learner's evidence at the time of completion of the graded unit. Learners must be awarded the highest grade achieved, whether through any reasonable assistance, remediation and/or reassessment provided.

## 4.6 Feedback to learners

Feedback to learners will be part of the on-going monitoring process to ensure learners have passed the stages necessary for progression.

After the final stage of the project has been assessed and learners' work has been graded, centres should ensure that internal verification has taken place before learners are informed of their final grades. Learners should also be made aware that these grades may be subject to external verification and that there is a possibility that they may be re-graded.

It is good practice to discuss each grade with each learner, explaining the reasoning behind his/her grading. This will help learners to identify areas for further development, whether this is in further study or employment.

When giving feedback to learners, it is highly recommended that it is grading that is discussed and not individual marks.

## 4.7 Remediation and re-assessment

Remediation allows an assessor to clarify the learner's responses, either by requiring a written amendment or by oral questioning, where there is a minor shortfall or omission in evidence requirements. In either case, such instances must be formally noted by the assessor, either in writing or recording, and be made available to the internal and external verifier. In relation to Higher National graded units, learners must be given the opportunity for remediation at each stage of the project.

The evidence for a Higher National project-based graded unit is generated over time and involves three distinct stages, each of which has to be achieved before the next is undertaken. This means that reassessment of stages must be undertaken before proceeding to the next stage. The overall grade is derived from the total number of marks *across all* sections and should reflect the ability of the learner to work autonomously and the amount of support required. Learners who have failed any stage of the project and have been unable to provide the necessary evidence through remediation must be given the opportunity for reassessment of that stage.

Any learner who has failed their graded unit or wishes to upgrade their award must be given a reassessment opportunity, or in exceptional circumstances, two reassessment opportunities. This must be done using a substantially different project.

This means learners would have to start from scratch using a:

- ◆ different case study
- or



- ◆ different product  
or
- ◆ different investigation

In these circumstances, a centre's policy should be followed to determine:

- ◆ when re-assessment will be offered, for example, in the same academic year or in a new academic year
- ◆ the processes for registering learners, for example, they could be withdrawn from a current entry and then re-entered
- ◆ whether learners will be charged for re-assessment

In light of this, centres should consider arrangements for re-assessment as early as possible, and learners should be made aware of these arrangements, as necessary.

## 5 Examination-based graded units

Examination-based graded units will be closed-book or open-book. Details of the examination should be brought to the attention of learners as early as possible. This will raise their awareness of the examination and encourage them to think about the importance of revision and preparation for the examination. Also, it cannot be assumed that learners will be familiar with examination technique, and support will be required to help learners with this, as well as the integration and application of knowledge and skills. An early introduction to the graded unit will ensure that they retain all necessary notes and materials required for revision purposes.

### 5.1 Introduction for learners

Graded unit specifications include a section with information for learners. This information can be used as it is or supplemented with other details. The type of information that could be given to learners includes:

- ◆ an introduction to the purpose or aims of the graded unit
- ◆ a list of the key units which learners should have achieved, or be in the process of achieving, before sitting the examination
- ◆ an outline of a course plan containing topics to be covered (see Appendix 2 for a sample plan)
- ◆ an explanation of how learners will be assessed including details of venue, date, start time, length and format of examination (see Appendix 3 for an example of a formal communication)
- ◆ a clear explanation of the conditions under which the examination will take place along with any arrangements specific to the graded unit, eg closed-book, or closed-book with seen case study
- ◆ an explanation of the grading process and main factors that will influence grade, eg degree of integration, drawing strong conclusions, etc
- ◆ arrangements for re-assessment

It would be useful to give this information to learners as an oral presentation and in document form, and to build in time for a thorough discussion of the points so that learners can ask questions and seek clarification on any point. As recommended above, the introduction could be given to learners at the start of the programme of study and then returned to as the programme progresses. In this way, it can provide a trigger for learners to seek clarification on relevant areas of study as they progress through their key units.

### 5.2 Timetabling and resources

Examinations normally last three hours, but a notional 40 hours of structured learning has been allocated to a single-credit graded unit. This should be used:

- ◆ to ensure learners are prepared for the actual examination
- ◆ for revision of topics
- ◆ to learn exam techniques
- ◆ to undertake a mock examination
- ◆ for re-assessment

Appendix 2 gives an example of how these activities might be implemented.

Below are two possible models that can be considered in terms of timetabling. Both models have their merits and demerits, therefore each centre should choose a model that best suits their local situation and the resources available to them.

### **Model A**

Model A follows the normal blocks/semesters and timetable for other units, for example 12 weeks at 3 hours per week, or 18 weeks at 2 hours per week. This model is a traditional approach, which may be easier to timetable, and results in a concentrated timeframe once learners have achieved, or nearly completed, the key units that underpin the graded unit. This model has some drawbacks in that time will be very tight, bearing in mind that revision along with examination technique has to be built into the programme. (Appendix 2 gives an example of a plan using this model.)

### **Model B**

Model B spreads the delivery over a longer period of time with a smaller number of hours each week, for example 36 weeks at 1 hour per week. This model may be more difficult to timetable compared to Model A, but may offer greater opportunity for a more integrated approach as learners progress through the key units that underpin the graded unit. Using this model, the early part of the graded unit delivery could focus on examination and revision techniques and the latter part could be set aside for revision and integration of topics. If this model is used, it is important that the momentum of the class is maintained from the start of the graded unit through to the examination.

It may be useful to try different models in alternative years and compare the benefits.

Centres should note that timetabling and resources need to cover assessment/ marking of examinations, internal verification, and perhaps external verification. Centres need to plan for these activities to optimise the successful assessment and grading of learners within allocated timeframes.

## 5.3 Managing the graded unit examination event

Effective management of the examination event is vital. As with all assessments, the examination event has to be conducted fairly and in accordance with a centre's internal procedures and SQA requirements.

Course teams must ensure that all conditions of assessment are met, as per the graded unit specification. All examinations will be supervised and unseen, and will normally last three hours. Failure to meet the conditions of assessment will invalidate the assessment process.

Supervision may be carried out by a member of the course team or by external individuals contracted by the centre. The management of the examination is the responsibility of the centre and it is recommended that all aspects should be carried out by a clearly identified person from each centre, eg the examination co-ordinator or SQA co-ordinator. The roles and responsibilities of supervisors will include:

- ◆ receipt and security of examination papers at the examination event
- ◆ distribution of examination papers to learners
- ◆ overseeing examinations to ensure that examination regulations and conditions are complied with
- ◆ reporting back, especially where incidents of malpractice occur
- ◆ collecting learners' papers and returning them to the examination co-ordinator/SQA co-ordinator or other named person

When making arrangements for examination-based graded units, centres should consider the following points:

- ◆ the number of learners
- ◆ accessibility issues
- ◆ the size of room required to allow the examination to be carried out and the conditions of assessment to be met
- ◆ appropriate room selection, ie taking account of external factors such as noise and interruption
- ◆ the number of desks required
- ◆ any conditions of assessment, eg closed-book, open-book, restricted open-book, consideration of case studies prior to exam and/or during examination, formulae sheets, statistical tables
- ◆ answer books/paper — if using answer books, make sure that there are enough of them and that they contain sufficient pages for learners to answer at length, if they wish.
- ◆ checking the number of examination papers and answer books/paper required
- ◆ agreeing a process for copying the examination paper and ensuring security of examination papers
- ◆ the number of supervisors required

- ◆ training of supervisors in their responsibilities, eg issuing papers, supervising the examination, collecting papers and delivering to the examination co-ordinator
- ◆ early communication to learners of date, time and venue for examination (see Appendix 3 for an example of a suggested form of communication)
- ◆ identification of marker or markers
- ◆ identification of internal verifiers

## 5.4 Assessing, marking and grading examination-based graded units

The course team should agree an approach to assessing and marking the examination-based graded unit and grading learners' work. The examination-based graded unit may be done by:

- ◆ a sole assessor assessing all questions
- ◆ more than one assessor assessing all questions, ie double-marking
- ◆ more than one assessor assessing different questions, ie double-marking different questions
- ◆ different assessors assessing different questions
- ◆ some other approach not covered here

The approach taken will be influenced by the size of course teams. For example, if resources allow, a centre could have at least two members of staff for each key topic. A system can then be devised and managed where staff double-mark the questions that relate to their key topic. It should be noted that the use of double-marking does not take the place of internal verification. If a number of staff have expertise in key topics, this also helps with internal verification as there will be ample qualified and experienced staff available to discuss and agree standards, and ensure that all papers are marked consistently and reliably.

However, many centres will not be in this position and as a result will have to think about the best and most effective approaches to marking.

If centres do adopt a system of double-marking, the following approach could be used:

- ◆ each assessor independently judges learners' evidence and assigns marks
- ◆ assessors meet to compare marks and discuss any discrepancies
- ◆ after discussion, assessors agree on final marks
- ◆ a record should be made of these discussions and the rationale for the decision arrived at

Double-marking may also offer a useful opportunity for staff development for new or less experienced members of staff/assessors, and it is a useful means of including course team members in the whole process of assessing graded units.

Assessors should work to a marking scheme, which:

- ◆ has been internally verified
- ◆ has been agreed by all those involved in the assessment
- ◆ must be based on the level of demand and grading criteria laid out in the graded unit specification

If an assessment exemplar is available, this will also provide guidance on marking the examination and should be used by centres when preparing their own marking scheme or guidelines. This scheme should make clear where marks will be assigned. However, note that learners may introduce information that is not contained within this scheme and, providing it is appropriate, learners should not be penalised for this and the marking scheme should allow for credit to be given for appropriate content.

Remember also that if changes are made to an assessment exemplar, including changing the Marking Guidelines, it is strongly recommended that the changes are submitted to SQA for prior verification, once it has been through the centre's own internal verification systems.

When devising marking schemes for examination-based graded units, whole marks rather than half marks must be used. Marks must be allocated on the basis of achievement rather than omission. If content or format (eg syntax, spelling, etc) is essential to meeting the standard, this should be clearly stated in the Evidence Requirements and grading criteria, and learners should be awarded marks for what they have achieved.

Also, there may be a temptation to assign individual marks to specific points, eg one mark for making a point, one mark for giving one strength, one mark for giving one weakness. However, if marks are divided too finely, this can constrain assessors if they are trying to take a more holistic view of a learner's work. It may be preferable, therefore, to allocate a greater number of marks to a wider category, which leaves more scope to take account of the quality of an assessment rather than quantity of information. The point here is that the level of demand should be the driver rather than just a simple allocation of marks, which can lead to mechanistic assessment.

To achieve a graded unit, learners must meet all the minimum Evidence Requirements and achieve at least 50% of the available marks. Examinations will be marked out of 100. Markers will aggregate the marks achieved by the learner to arrive at an overall mark for the examination. Markers will then assign a grade to the learner for this graded unit based on the following grade boundaries:

A = 70% – 100%

B = 60% – 69%

C = 50% – 59%

For any marking system to operate effectively it is essential that assessors use clear, agreed notation and comments to mark scripts. In particular, it has to be clear why and where particular marks have been awarded. This is important, as reasons for allocating particular marks must be clear to other assessors, internal

verifiers and External Verifiers — the internal verifier and External Verifier should not have to re-mark a script or guess the reasons for an assessor allocating particular marks. It will also allow assessors to summarise points when giving feedback to learners. For example, where a number of marks are allocated to part of a question, then the assessor might want to indicate the number of marks allocated to explaining a concept, developing the concept, and giving an example.

Marks and comments can be made on the examination book/answer paper and for this reason it is worthwhile ensuring that book/paper contains a margin to allow comments to be made clearly. A front sheet that allows scoring for individual questions and totals to be displayed is also useful. Another method is to have a marking sheet for each answer book/paper or a marking sheet for each question. This approach may give more room to expand comments although it does mean switching between the exam script and the comments sheet.

Here are some other useful points to consider:

- ◆ Some markers prefer to complete batches of answers at a time, ie they mark all answers for question one, then question two, and so on. This has the advantage of producing consistency in marking answers to the same question for different learners.
- ◆ It is good practice to read through an answer once before marking it, then read it again and start to actually 'mark'.
- ◆ Assessors should check marks for each answer or parts of questions and the total for all questions. Totals need to be distinguished from contributing marks and be clearly displayed.

Once all answers are marked, the learner's marks for the full paper should be totalled. This mark should be reviewed and compared with the guidance in the graded unit specification on grading. At this stage, consider whether there is agreement with the grade reached through marking.

If using a double-marking system, marks should be compared. Discrepancies and borderline decisions should be discussed, ie where close to one of the grade boundaries, which might affect a grade. Agreed conclusions should be reached and the rationale behind decisions should be noted.

## **5.5 Feedback to learners**

Once examination scripts have been assessed, graded and internally verified, learners should be informed of their performance and grades. However, learners should also be made aware that these grades may be subject to external verification and that there is a possibility that they may be re-graded.

It is good practice to discuss each grade with each learner, explaining the reasoning behind his/her grading. This will help learners to identify areas for further development, whether this be in further study or employment. With

examination-based graded units, this may involve highlighting particular questions that they answered well or poorly. In any feedback to learners, it is highly recommended that it is grading that is discussed and not individual marks.

The decision to give learners access to their marked scripts is a matter for individual centre policy.

## 5.6 Re-assessment

SQA's policy is that learners should be offered the opportunity for one reassessment and in exceptional circumstances two reassessment opportunities.

All re-assessments must comply with each centre's policy on re-assessment. Therefore, it is up to centres:

- ◆ when re-assessment will be offered, for example, in the same academic year or in a new academic year
- ◆ the processes for registering learners — for example, they could be withdrawn from a current entry and then re-entered
- ◆ whether learners will be charged for re-assessment

Points to note when planning re-assessment:

- ◆ Consider arrangements for re-assessment as early as possible and make learners aware of these arrangements, as necessary.
- ◆ Build in at least one re-assessment into the programme of study/assessment schedule — best practice would be to do this when planning the initial assessment date.
- ◆ Leave sufficient time between date of initial assessment and any re-assessment. Remember there needs to be enough time to mark learner scripts, provide feedback, and allow time for further revision by learners. Failure to provide enough time will put undue pressure on both staff and learners.

Also remember, if a learner does not achieve a pass or if a learner wishes to upgrade, this must be based on a substantially different examination from that given originally.



# Appendix 1: Sample letter for submitting examination evidence for verification

At XYZ College, 10 learners sat graded unit 3: Planning and Design this session. The HND Planning and Design started this session with 11 learners and one learner withdrew from the Course. The sample submitted represents all of the learner work for graded unit 3.

The following documents are included here:

## **Graded unit 3: Planning and Design**

1. Completed verification sample form with details of all 10 learners.
2. Learner responses for the assessment, which learners sat on 25 May 2017
3. Internal verification records
4. Instrument of assessment — pale green document.
5. Marking Guidelines — pink document.
6. Sample Marking Sheet — blue document (a marking sheet is contained within each learner response).
7. Assessment Checklist containing all learner marks per question and grades.

Mr John Smith

XYZ College

Note that it may be helpful to colour code documentation for submission. This may help verifiers when dealing with large amounts of documentation.

# Appendix 2: Plan for graded unit examination

The following plan is based on 12 x 3-hour sessions.

| <b>Week Number</b> | <b>Topics to be covered</b>                                        |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1                  | Introduction to graded unit and resources available                |
| 2                  | Introduction to examination and preparation for examination        |
| 3                  | Revision techniques                                                |
| 4                  | Revision of topics                                                 |
| 5                  | Revision of topics                                                 |
| 6                  | Examination techniques                                             |
| 7                  | Mock examination                                                   |
| 8                  | Feedback on mock examination. Further input on techniques/revision |
| 9                  | Revision                                                           |
| 10                 | <b>Examination</b>                                                 |
| 11                 | Revision                                                           |
| 12                 | <b>Examination re-assessment</b>                                   |

# Appendix 3: Sample letter notifying learner of examination

XYZ COLLEGE  
Main Road  
XYZ

Dear Ms Jones

## **HNC Planning and Design — graded unit 1**

This letter provides details of the examination for graded unit 1, Planning and Design.

You should note these details and keep this letter for reference purposes.

You will sit the Planning and Design graded unit 1 examination on:

Date: (insert date)

Time: (insert time, eg 9.30 – 12.30)

Location: (insert room, building, college)

The graded unit will be in the form of an examination. The questions will be unseen and will be provided on the day of the examination. You are not permitted to take any material into the exam. The examination will take place under supervised conditions.

- ◆ The examination paper will be in one section
- ◆ You will be required to attempt all questions
- ◆ The examination paper will cover aspects of all four content topics (integration) and problem solving
- ◆ Questions may be split into several parts and each part given a separate mark
- ◆ Some questions will be integrative (cover more than one of the four content topics)
- ◆ You should submit your script(s) and question paper at the end of the examination
- ◆ Start your answer to each question on a new page ensuring you clearly identify the question (and part of the question)

The questions in the exam will be based on the following four units that you have studied in terms 1 and 2:

- ◆ Insert unit title and code
- ◆ Insert unit title and code
- ◆ Insert unit title and code
- ◆ Insert unit title and code

The questions you will be given on the day of the exam are designed to allow you to demonstrate your ability to integrate and make connections between the subject content of the units listed above.

### **Grading**

If you successfully pass the examination, you will be graded based on the marks you obtain on the day of the examination as follows:

A = 70% – 100%

B = 60% – 69%

C = 50% – 59%

### **Re-assessment**

If your mark is below 50%, you have the opportunity for re-assessment. This will be a substantially different examination; this will take place on:

Date: (insert date)

Time: (insert time, eg 9.30 – 12.30)

Location: (insert room, building, college)

Yours sincerely

Ms J Smith

Course Co-ordinator