Higher National Qualifications and Graded Units

Qualification Verification Summary Report 2018
English and Communication

Introduction

A team of four external verifiers visited ten centres during 2017-2018. The main focus for visiting verification was on HN Communication servicing units, principally H7TK 34 Communication: Business Communication, H7MB 34 Communication: Practical Skills and F60A 34 Research Skills. Other units verified were part of G9C0 15 and G9C1 16, Creative Industries: Media and Communication, including Graded Unit 1.

Units verified were as follows:

H7TK 34   Communication: Business Communication
H7MB 34   Communication: Practical Skills
F60A 34   Research Skills
DH49 34   Complex Oral Presentation
D7MB 34   Creative Writing for Vocational Purposes
F6V7 34   Creative Industries: Media and Communication Graded Unit 1

Category 2: Resources

Criterion 2.4: There must be evidence of initial and ongoing reviews of assessment environments; equipment; and reference, learning and assessment materials.

In all centres there were efficient systems in place to ensure that initial and ongoing reviews of resources were carried out. Policy documents, records of audits, checklists and minutes of meetings provided ample evidence.

Category 3: Candidate support

Criterion 3.2: Candidates' development needs and prior achievements (where appropriate) must be matched against the requirements of the award.

In all cases where units were offered as servicing units for HN awards in colleges, the necessary course entry requirements were set and monitored by the subject departments. In a very few cases, some learners were presented for awards without having achieved the suggested entry levels. Where candidates needed additional support to reach the required level, specialist staff worked alongside assessors to support their development needs. In a few cases communication skills induction exercises helped to establish learners' levels of competence, and support plans were devised as needed. In one centre, additional time was allocated to Communication units.

In all centres offering G9C0 Creative Industries: Media and Communication, recruitment processes were robust, with appropriate academic entry requirements being applied.

Criterion 3.3: Candidates must have scheduled contact with their assessor to review their progress and to revise their assessment plans accordingly.

Contact between assessors and learners was usually in timetabled classes, with a few centres facilitating additional student-led contact online to encourage learners to take responsibility for their own learning. Assessors reviewed learners' progress and referred learners to college learning support teams to aid progress. Most centres provided clear teaching and assessment plans.

Written feedback on learners' assessments and evidence of remediation opportunities also provided evidence of appropriate and constructive support being given by assessors. In a few cases feedback was minimal.

In a very few centres, units were delivered over 32 hours instead of SQA's notional 40 hours.

All graded unit candidates received detailed feedback for each stage of their projects, and candidates indicated that they had very much appreciated the level of support. In one centre a new timetabling innovation had been introduced to increase scheduled contact time. The two-semester timetable was adapted to front-load other units, creating a shorter third block which focussed almost entirely on the graded unit.

Category 4: Internal assessment and verification

Criterion 4.2: Internal assessment and verification procedures must be implemented to ensure standardisation of assessment.

In all centres, internal verification systems were robust and ensured standardisation of assessments. Clear policy documents on internal and external verification were, in almost all cases, updated annually. Detailed commentary was provided on internal verification forms in most centres. Paper-based and electronic master folders were almost always well structured and helped to make internal and external verification straightforward.

In some centres internal verification was on a three-year cycle, but flexible enough to accommodate any risks (such as new staff or new modes of delivery) if they arose.

Criterion 4.3: Assessment instruments and methods and their selection and use must be valid, reliable, practicable, equitable and fair.

SQA Assessment Support Packs (ASPs) were in use in some centres. Other centres had created locally-devised assessments based on the style of the ASPs and contextualised to suit a range of awards. These were internally verified prior to delivery. Very few centres submitted assessments to SQA for prior verification, although this is encouraged by SQA. Overall, assessment instruments could be seen to be valid, reliable, practicable, equitable and fair.

However, there were a few issues arising:

♦ In one centre, F06A 34 Research Skills was assessed using poster and video evidence, which although valid, resulted in assessment evidence which was technically poor and difficult to view.

♦ Over-assessment continues to be an issue in a small number of centres. For H7MB 34 Communication: Practical Skills, candidates were asked to identify the purpose and target reader of the Outcome 1 text, which is not required by the unit specification. Candidates should only be asked to evaluate the extent to which the text is suited to purpose and reader, which, as the unit specification states, 'may be self-evident or could be identified for learners.' The assessment also asked learners candidates to identify the writer's point of view, which is not required.

For graded units, assessment guideline booklets provided clear information to candidates about scheduling, deadlines and grading criteria. In all cases, candidates were given a choice of assessment topics.

Criterion 4.4: Assessment evidence must be the candidate's own work, generated under SQA's required conditions.

All centres had clear policies on plagiarism. Measures to ensure authenticity included signed authenticity declarations for candidates, and drafting of final assessments being completed in class. A few colleges used Turnitin for students' assessments. In one centre, an induction unit was presented to learners on the subject of plagiarism and penalties were explained. In a few

centres where evidence was submitted via Moodle, candidates were required to tick a declaration of authenticity.

For graded units, regular tutor mentoring throughout the project contributed to ensuring that candidates' work was authentic.

Criterion 4.6: Evidence of candidates' work must be accurately and consistently judged by assessors against SQA's requirements.

Judgements were accurate across all centres. SQA marking checklists from the SQA ASP were being used to ensure standardisation. In the very few cases where there were inconsistencies, internal checks and cross-marking had identified and addressed them.

A few issues caused concern:

♦ In Outcome 2 of the servicing units H7MB 34 Communication: Practical Skills and H7TK 34 Communication: Business Communication, in a very few cases the approach to judging accuracy in spelling, punctuation and grammar was inconsistent.
♦ Candidate video evidence for the DH49 34 Complex Oral Presentation unit was not always easy to view due to the quality of the recordings.

Criterion 4.7: Candidate evidence must be retained in line with SQA requirements.

All assessment materials and evidence had been retained in line with SQA requirements. In all centres, details of the retention policy were to be found within quality manuals.

Criterion 4.9: Feedback from qualification External Verifiers must be disseminated to staff and used to inform assessment practice.

In almost all cases, meetings were held to discuss findings from external verification reports and their recommendations. In many cases, minutes were made available which recorded actions taken in light of previous reports.

External verification reports were, in some cases, uploaded to shared drives or other digital platforms. In some centres, it remains common practice for several assessors to attend the external verifier's feedback sessions to use the opportunity to ask questions and confirm their understanding of best practice.

Areas of good practice reported by qualification external verifiers

The following examples of good practice were reported during session 2017–18:

Higher National units

♦ The use of diagnostic exercises to ascertain level of communication skills

♦ Quick turnaround of marking and feedback appeared to have a beneficial effect on learners' motivation and sense of progress

♦ Regular meetings in person or via Skype were used to ensure standardisation across the campuses and faculties

♦ Assessors responded to learner feedback in the delivery of F60A 34 Research Skills by moving from a holistic assessment to outcome-by-outcome assessment; although the holistic approach is viable, reacting to the needs of learners is good practice.

♦ Use of tracking software (eg Turnitin) to ensure original work

♦ Cross-marking to facilitate standardisation and support new assessors

Graded units

♦ Timetabling innovation to increase scheduled contact time

♦ Assessment guideline booklets provided clear information to candidates

Specific areas for development

The following areas for development were reported during session 2017–18:

Higher National units

♦ Detailed and constructive feedback from assessor to candidates should be noted on checklists, particularly on oral assessments when they have not been recorded.

♦ There should be more liaison between Communication assessors delivering different units, in different faculties and on different campuses, through cross-faculty meetings to spread good practice and identify standardisation issues.

♦ Some H7MB 34 and H7TK 34 Outcome 1 assessments used texts which were quite dated and/or generic and would benefit from an update and/or a more tailored approach to reflect more closely the needs of candidates.

♦ Centres should standardise the use of checklists for recording assessment results.

♦ Research Skills learners should be allowed adequate time to develop efficient systems of recording their plans and log sheets for their investigations.

♦ Centres may wish to examine how the quality of the videos presented for verification can be improved.

♦ More use of cross-marking exercises at standardisation meetings to ensure consistent application of standards.

Graded units

♦ Use of contextualised graded unit checklists for different project types (video, audio, journalism, events etc) to enable assessors to allocate marks more clearly.

♦ Candidates should submit all Stage 2 evidence, including article drafts, raw footage, unedited work, etc, rather than only finished project elements. This will make it easier for assessors to allocate marks for process as well as product, and add additional clarity to assessment decisions.