



Guide for Validation Panel Members

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1 Introduction

These guidelines cover the validation of group awards and Higher National (HN) Graded Units. They apply when SQA manages the validation process, including where the centre involved does not have devolved authority.

Centres with devolved responsibility for validating HN Group Awards may also use these guidelines, or they may choose to use guidelines of their own.

The qualifications this guide covers are:

- ◆ Higher National Certificates (HNCs)
- ◆ Higher National Diplomas (HNDs)
- ◆ Professional Development Awards (PDAs)
- ◆ National Certificates (NCs)
- ◆ National Progression Awards (NPAs)
- ◆ Graded Units (HN only)

Validation of unit specifications

SQA will validate all new or revised unit specifications. Centres can continue to develop National and Higher National unit specifications for validation by SQA. Before starting any development, centres should submit a rationale for the development to SQA for consideration. Normally, only unique units from specialist centres will be considered.

Validation of graded unit specifications (HN only)

Graded units are specific to the group award, and reflect the principal aims of that group award. This means that they will also clearly reflect the uniqueness of the title of the group award. For this reason, graded units should be validated at the same time as the group award. Graded units can be validated as part of HNCs or HNDs by centres with devolved authority for validating SQA group awards.

2 Validation — an overview

2.1 The purpose of validation

Validation is the quality assurance process that SQA uses to ensure that all new, revised, or amended qualifications are valid, credible, and fit for purpose. It is a process of peer-group review that focuses on the justification for, and coherence of, a proposed qualification and its technical specification. It confirms that any new qualification fully satisfies criteria defined in SQA's quality elements. The criteria are:

- ◆ The qualification conforms to the SQA design rules and principles and other technical requirements which are current at the time of its validation.
- ◆ There is a demonstrable need for the qualification which fills a gap in the qualifications framework and makes a valuable and unique contribution to SQA's portfolio of qualifications.
- ◆ The qualification is accessible to all learners who could potentially achieve it.
- ◆ The qualification requires a learner to demonstrate significant, achievable outcomes in a recognised curricular or vocational area.
- ◆ The qualification is coherent and its title accurately reflects its content.

2.2 What happens before validation

To ensure SQA's portfolio of qualifications is inclusive, addresses progression needs, and reflects Scotland's economic, social, political and cultural needs, SQA scrutinises proposed developments to ensure there is a demonstrated need.

2.3 Establishing the need for a qualification

The decision on whether to develop a proposed qualification will be based on the findings of market intelligence gathered through an initial review of the proposal.

- ◆ Initial review of a proposed qualification — SQA will review existing market research to determine potential in terms of market and income. The findings are reviewed by SQA and a decision is made on whether to scope the proposal further.
- ◆ Scoping the potential — where a potential market has been identified, SQA will consult with stakeholders to gauge interest in the proposal and begin to identify and firm up its aims and structure. The findings are again reviewed by SQA, and a decision is made on whether to develop the qualification.

2.4 Confirming content and structure

Having established the need for a qualification, SQA will confirm the content and structure through more detailed consultation with stakeholders, including: centres, employers, higher education and professional bodies, and/or sector skills councils and standard setting bodies. This work is normally undertaken by a Qualification Design Team (QDT), who will evaluate feedback received and use it to finalise the qualification structure and produce writer briefs.

2.5 Validation of unit specifications

Units are validated through a series of quality checks:

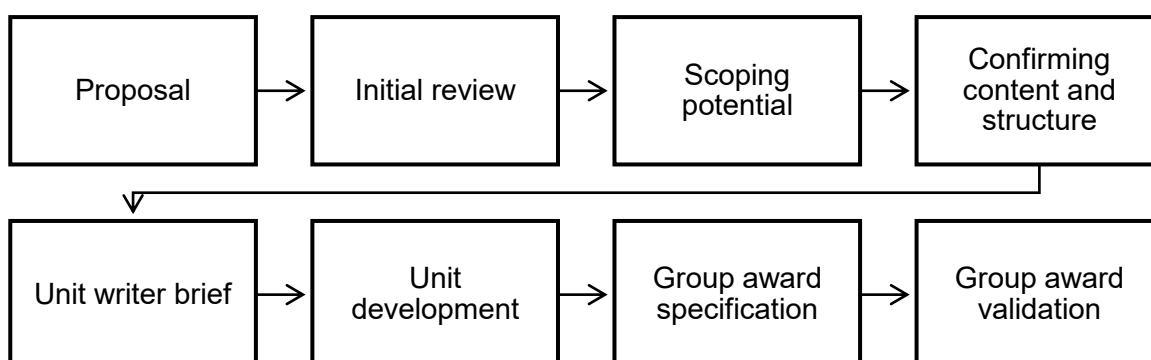
- ◆ Unit writer check — carried out by the writer before submitting the unit specification to SQA to ensure they have produced a unit specification that reflects the requirements of the initial brief and has been written in accordance with the unit writer guide.
- ◆ Technical edit — carried out by SQA to ensure that a unit specification:
 - meets the requirements of the brief
 - is consistent and coherent
 - is written in clear and simple English that will be accessible to all users
 - does not introduce any unnecessary barriers to achievement for certain groups of learners
 - conforms to SQA's technical requirements
- ◆ Subject specialist check — carried out by a subject specialist who has not been directly involved with the development to ensure that the content of the unit is technically accurate and ready to be used by practitioners.

2.6 Validation of graded unit specifications

Validation of graded units takes place at the time of validation of HN Group Awards.

2.7 Group award specification

The group award specification is a dynamic document that evolves naturally as part of the product development process through building on information sourced at various stages of the process:



2.8 Validation of group awards

Validation happens at a meeting of subject experts. The meeting can be hosted either by SQA or by a centre that has devolved authority for validating group awards.

After each validation meeting, a validation report is produced.

After the validation meeting, a copy of the validation report is sent to the chairperson for signature and return.

Note: Centres can validate group awards made up of validated SQA units if they have devolved authority for validating SQA qualifications (that is, if they have been successfully audited against our validation criteria). These centres are responsible for organising and hosting validation meetings.

2.9 Validation outcomes

At the validation meeting, the panel will reach one of two possible decisions about the proposed qualification:

- ◆ validated
- ◆ not validated until conditions have been met

There is more information about validation outcomes in section 4.

2.10 Validation spans

The validation period for both units (including graded units) and group awards is open-ended. However, group awards should be reviewed regularly, with the frequency of the review reflecting the pace of change in the subject area and occupational sector.

2.11 After validation

Once the qualification has been validated, it will be entered onto SQA's system and the group award specification will be uploaded onto SQA's website. The qualification will be reviewed periodically to determine whether it should be revised, and if so, how. The review could result in one of the following conclusions:

- ◆ Take no further action and allow the qualification to lapse without replacement — this is rare and is usually the result of a change in industrial practice, for example, there is no longer an employment market in Scotland for graduates of HNCs and HNDs in Mining and Metallurgy.
- ◆ Take no further action because the qualification as it stands still satisfies current market needs.
- ◆ Re-validate the qualification with minor revisions.
- ◆ Undertake a major revision of the existing structure and/or units, update and re-validate.

3 Organisation of the validation panel

A new qualification, or extensive revisions to an existing qualification, will be validated by a panel of subject experts at a validation meeting. SQA will organise and host the validation meeting for consortium-devised qualifications. For collaborative developments, the validation meeting will normally be organised and hosted by a nominated centre involved in the development. For single-centre developments, the validation meeting will normally be organised and hosted by the centre.

Where SQA is not organising the validation meeting, SQA will have been consulted on the composition of the validation panel and will normally make at least one nomination to it. All the panel members attending a validation meeting are acting on behalf of SQA in assessing the qualification against SQA's criteria for validation.

3.1 Composition of the validation panel

A new qualification, or extensive revisions to an existing qualification, will be validated by a panel of subject experts at a validation meeting. Panel members must not have been members of the QDT.

A validation panel comprises:

- ◆ an experienced chairperson from education or industry — this can be one of the panel members below (or in addition to these members)
- ◆ educationist (at least one)
- ◆ industrialist and/or sector skills council representative (at least one)
- ◆ if the qualification is designed to articulate with degree programmes, a higher education representative
- ◆ an SQA officer
- ◆ a centre representative (if the proposal has been submitted by a centre or small group of centres)

All members of the panel are equal partners at the validation meeting. Their role is to act as independent judges of the qualification, and to make a validation decision at the end of the meeting.

3.2 Role of the chairperson

Panels are chaired by individuals who are independent of the QDT and of the centre or centres proposing the qualification. The chairperson has a pivotal role in ensuring the success of the validation meeting, and should display:

- ◆ knowledge of the validation process
- ◆ impartiality
- ◆ objectivity
- ◆ experience of chairing meetings
- ◆ experience of participating in the validation of higher education qualifications
- ◆ expertise in a field related to the qualification
- ◆ thoroughness of approach
- ◆ good communication and interpersonal skills

- ◆ diplomacy and tact

It is the chairperson's responsibility to ensure that the qualification is assessed comprehensively and objectively against the validation criteria. The chairperson will co-ordinate the drawing up of:

- ◆ any changes to the draft programme for the day
- ◆ an agenda of issues for discussion with the representatives from the QDT

As graded units relate to the principal aims of the group award, they should be addressed as part of the group award validation. A copy of the 'General Information' section of all the other units making up the group award should be made available to validation panel members, but validation panel members are not required to comment on these as they will have been validated (or be in the process of validation) separately. Validation panel members are, however, expected to comment on the units' suitability for inclusion in the group award structure.

The chairperson should ensure that all members of the panel are comfortable with educational terminology, and should be ready to provide explanations whenever necessary. The SQA officer will be able to help provide clear definitions of terminology and policy.

The chairperson should ensure that the work and the professionalism of the QDT are acknowledged, both formally and implicitly, in the conduct of the meeting.

If validation panel members are not convinced that the qualification addresses all SQA's validation criteria, or if they think that the evidence supporting the qualification is unclear or insufficient, the chairperson will agree the broad conditions that they wish to see addressed before final validation.

The chairperson should ensure that reasonable timescales for meeting the conditions, and the mechanism for meeting these conditions, are agreed with the QDT. It is very important that they ensure that the validation panel members do not attempt to re-write any aspect of the group award specification, including the structure of the qualification. The qualification structure has been devised after consultation with a wide and representative group to confirm its suitability in meeting the qualification aims. While helpful suggestions for improvements will always be welcome, the purpose of validation is to confirm (or otherwise) that the SQA validation criteria have been broadly met. Detailed suggestions for re-writing or changes to the qualification structure should not form part of any formal conditions for validation.

3.3 Role of the educationist

Educationists are selected for their expertise in validation and their specialist subject, and for their experience in the management and delivery of similar qualifications. Familiarity with further education qualifications in general, and SQA's qualifications in particular, is essential because the educationist may be called upon to explain issues to other members of the validation panel.

Educationists will play a major role in determining whether:

- ◆ the qualification represents a unique achievement worthy of separate certification
- ◆ there is any overlap with existing provision and, if so, whether this is acceptable
- ◆ the demands made on learners are reasonable and justify the SCQF level and credit value of the qualification
- ◆ the group award is at the appropriate SCQF level
- ◆ each unit is at an appropriate SCQF level to the group award
- ◆ each graded unit specification is at an appropriate SCQF level and conforms to SQA's criteria (HN only)

In making these determinations, educationists should consider only SQA's validation criteria. Issues such as learner demand and inter-centre competition for viable numbers are not relevant to the validation process.

Educationists should also comment on the opportunities for Core Skills development to ensure that they exist and meet the needs of the end-users of the qualification. This includes the way the qualification has taken account of the market research that has been carried out.

3.4 Role of the industrialist and sector skills council representative

Industry-based panel members are selected because of their subject expertise and knowledge of related employment sectors. Although they may have been consulted during the market research for the qualification, they should view the qualification objectively on its merits and without any sense of personal 'ownership'.

Industrialists are on the panel to represent the views of prospective employers. It is their role to determine whether:

- ◆ the qualification meets the short-, medium-, and longer-term education and training needs of employers in the targeted sectors, taking account of relevant elements from the National Occupational Standards or professional body requirements of the sector
- ◆ successful learners are likely to obtain employment in those sectors at an appropriate level

If industry-based panel members are unfamiliar with educational terms (for example, in regard to the SCQF or Core Skills), they should not hesitate to look to the chairperson for clarification.

3.5 Role of the higher education representative

Group awards at SCQF level 6 could facilitate progression to university programmes. Where group awards at SCQF level 6 are being validated, a higher education representative should be appointed as a member of the Group Award Validation Panel. They will be appointed based on their experience of the vocational area and articulation. In addition to general

comments relating to the validation of the group award, the higher education representative would also be expected to comment on:

- ◆ the way in which the group award will prepare successful learners for further study at a higher education institution
- ◆ the suitability of the content of the group award for articulation to a particular level of study at a higher education institution

3.6 Role of the SQA officer

The SQA officer will be appointed based on their experience of validation and knowledge of SQA policy. They will be someone who has not been directly involved in the development of the qualification and who therefore does not have a vested interest in its validation. The SQA officer should provide clarification and guidance on the validation criteria and design principles, and differentiation between recommendations and conditions and SQA policy. The SQA officer should be able to make a full contribution to discussions and help ensure that discussions focus on evaluating the group award against the validation criteria and that opportunities are given for the QDT to address any issues raised by the validation panel. In addition, the SQA officer should ensure comments on units are confined to relevance to the group award structure and not the units themselves.

Where the meeting is arranged and hosted by SQA, it is the responsibility of the SQA officer to complete and submit the validation report form. Where the centre hosts the validation meeting, the SQA officer will complete a summary report.

3.7 Role of the centre representative

Where the qualification has been submitted by a centre or by a group of centres, the validation panel should include a centre representative — normally someone with a management position in the centre. This person should not be or have been a member of the QDT, and should never be regarded (or regard themselves) as a spokesperson for the submission. The centre representative should be a fully participating member of the validation panel.

Where the meeting is arranged and hosted by a centre, it will be the responsibility of the centre representative to complete and submit the validation report form. The centre may provide secretarial support for its representative throughout the meeting. This has the great advantage of ensuring that an accurate note of the proceedings is kept while allowing the representative to participate fully.

4 Validation meetings

4.1 Preparation for the meeting

At least two weeks before the meeting, validation panel members will be sent a group award specification. Each panel member should read the document thoroughly, evaluating it against SQA's validation criteria. We recommend that panel members note any issues and/or comments they wish to raise with the representatives from the QDT and bring them along to the meeting. They will be used as a means of forming and communicating collective views based on individual comments.

Though broad suggestions for improvements to the group award specification will be welcome, detailed proposals for re-writing any aspect of it or highlighting any typographical or grammatical errors should not form part of the decisions of the validation panel members. The QDT will be expected to take account of any discussion of all aspects of the proposal, and the final group award specification will go through SQA's proofreading and editorial process prior to publication.

4.2 Format of the meeting

The chairperson should open the meeting by inviting members of the validation panel and the representatives from the QDT to introduce themselves. The chairperson should then provide an overview of the purpose and format of the meeting.

Once introductions have been made, the validation panel will have an opportunity to hold a private meeting, during which issues and/or concerns are discussed and collated. At this stage, panel members should confine themselves to identifying areas of concern which they wish to discuss more fully with representatives from the QDT, rather than trying to reach any conclusions about changes they may wish to make. Representatives from the QDT should always be given the opportunity to comment on the issues/concerns raised by the validation panel and expand on any information contained in the group award specification. The chairperson will collate comments under the section headings in the validation criteria checklist, and allocate issues/concerns to individual panel members who will lead the discussion with the QDT representatives. It is essential that all members of the validation panel contribute to a full discussion of the points to be addressed.

During the private meeting, the panel can re-arrange the draft programme for the day if they feel this is necessary. In this case, any changes should be communicated to the representatives from the QDT. The chairperson will endeavour to ensure that the programme is kept on schedule, but this should not be allowed to interfere with a full discussion of the qualification.

At the start of the formal meeting with the representatives from the QDT, the chairperson will inform them of the programme for the day and of the principal items for discussion. Further amendments to the programme may be made in the light of issues raised during the discussion with the representatives from the QDT.

All questions directed to the representatives from the QDT should be open-ended to encourage wide-ranging but focused discussion. The focus of the discussion will be the

evaluation of the qualification against the validation criteria. It is important to note that validation is about ensuring that the qualification and, where applicable, graded unit specifications, broadly meet SQA's criteria, and is not about the centre's ability to offer the qualification — that is dealt with through a separate process called 'approval'. Though that, with the exception of graded units, the units will have been validated or be in the process of being validated prior to the group award validation. Therefore validation panel members will only be expected to comment on their suitability for inclusion in the group award structure. It is also important to remember that the group award structure has been devised after consultation with a wide and representative group to confirm its suitability before either the units or the group award specification were written. Therefore, while helpful suggestions for improvements will always be welcome, the purpose of validation is to confirm (or otherwise) that SQA's validation criteria have been broadly met. Detailed suggestions for re-writing or changes to the qualification structure should not form part of any formal conditions for validation.

After the formal meeting with representatives from the QDT, there will be an opportunity for the validation panel to hold a second private meeting. At this meeting, panel members should decide whether or not all of the issues have been satisfactorily addressed during the discussion with the QDT. During this second private meeting, the validation panel will discuss and finalise its validation decision.

The panel should then reconvene with the representatives from the QDT where the outcome of the panel's discussion will be communicated by the chairperson. If the panel decides that conditions have to be met before validation is confirmed, the clarity of these conditions and the reasonableness of the timescales proposed should be discussed with the representatives from the QDT before finalisation.

4.3 Validation outcomes

Having considered all the evidence provided in the group award specification and the subsequent discussion with the representatives from the QDT, the panel will reach one of two possible decisions about the qualification:

- ◆ validated
- ◆ not validated until conditions have been met

Validated — where the decision is validated, meaning that the panel is satisfied that the qualification meets SQA's validation criteria and can now be operationalised to enable centres to offer it.

Not validated until conditions have been met — where the decision is not to validate until conditions have been met, all the conditions must be satisfied before the qualification will be validated, that is, before any centre can be given approval to offer it.

4.4 Validation conditions

Any conditions imposed by the validation panel should concern rectifying significant failures to satisfy the validation criteria. More minor issues should be dealt with by recommendations. The reasons for imposing conditions should be explained in the validation report under the appropriate heading.

If the validation panel wishes to set conditions on the validation of a qualification, it is important to recognise that these will need to be fully satisfied before the qualification can be validated. The clarity of these conditions and the reasonableness of the timescales proposed should be discussed with the representatives from the QDT before finalisation.

Meeting the conditions is the responsibility of the QDT. The validation panel should not attempt to re-write the group award specification, but should specify the changes that have to be made or the further development that must be undertaken before the qualification can be validated.

4.5 Lifting validation conditions

The validation panel should also agree, with the representatives from the QDT, the mechanism and estimated timescale for lifting the conditions. This might mean a revised group award specification being considered by:

- ◆ the SQA representative only
- ◆ the SQA representative and chairperson

Whatever the mechanism selected, it is important that the entire panel is in agreement and that it is specified in the group award validation report.

4.6 Recommendations

The validation panel may wish to make recommendations for the future development of the qualification. Recommendations are points that are not essential to the integrity of the group award but are suggestions for clarification or further information that might be incorporated into the final validated group award specification. They might include information on integration of assessment, flexibility of delivery or other aspects of learning, teaching and assessment.

Unlike conditions, these do not have to be met before the qualification can be validated.

4.7 Recommended review date

The validation span for group awards, graded units and units is open-ended, although the qualification will be subject to periodic review to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of learners and employers. The group award would normally be reviewed formally five years after validation. However, the validation panel may wish to recommend a shorter review period, especially in subjects where technology changes rapidly.

4.8 Appeals against validation outcomes

4.8.1 Grounds for appeal

Centres can appeal against a decision on the validation of group awards. When SQA gives its decision on validation, it will do so in writing and will give the reasons for taking the decision. The sole ground for an appeal is that SQA's decision, based on all the evidence available to SQA at the time, was wrong. To prove that a decision was wrong, the centre must prove either that the decision was unreasonable or that there was a breach of procedural requirements or maladministration by SQA.

A centre can appeal against validation decisions taken about its own qualifications. Where a qualification has been made by a consortium, the appeal should be made by the chairperson of the consortium.

4.8.2 How to appeal

If the centre disagrees with SQA's decision on validation of a group award, the member of staff in the centre who is responsible for this area should contact the SQA qualifications manager whose portfolio the qualification belongs to within ten working days to agree a time to discuss the matter. If, after this discussion, the member of staff is not satisfied, the head of centre can raise an appeal.

The appeal must be submitted to the director of qualifications, in writing, by the head of centre. It must be made within 15 working days of the date of the discussion with the SQA manager.

The letter should be sent to the Corporate Office at SQA's Glasgow office, and should be clearly marked as an appeal.

The appeal must include a written account of why the head of centre thinks that SQA's decision is wrong, and this account must address the reasons for the original decision given by SQA. Any evidence submitted to support this claim must be relevant to the case being made.

The director of qualifications will respond in writing, giving SQA's decision within 15 working days of receiving the appeal. SQA will give reasons for this decision.

SQA will deal with the appeal as quickly as possible. If, for any reason, the matter cannot be resolved within this period, SQA will keep the head of centre informed of progress.

If the director of qualifications does not change the original decision, the centre has the right to take the case to the SQA Appeals Subcommittee.

5 Group award specification

5.1 Content and format

Submissions for the validation of group awards should be presented in the form of a group award specification. The group award specification should give details of the group award and the support there is for it. It should also give all the information the validation panel needs to be able to judge whether the group award meets SQA's validation criteria.

There is no need to have separate documents for a suite of group awards in the same subject area (for example, HNC Computing; HND Computing: Software Development; and HND Computing: Technical Support).

The group award specification should follow this format:

5.1.1 Introduction

This section of the document should provide a brief rationale that provides:

- ◆ a justification for the title of the qualification that reflects the sum of the competences of the qualification and where it fits in the SQA framework of qualifications in the same or a similar area
- ◆ details on the range of learners the qualification is suitable for
- ◆ possible employment opportunities for learners who gain this qualification
- ◆ details on whether the qualification is designed to articulate with degree programmes
- ◆ any professional recognition

5.1.2 Qualification structure

This section of the document should give information on:

- ◆ how the qualification meets the design principles
- ◆ conditions of award — what learners need to do to achieve the qualification
- ◆ a list of units and the graded units, with their associated unit codes, SCQF credit points, SCQF level, and SQA credit value
- ◆ details of the mandatory or mandatory/optional structure
- ◆ an explanation of how the group award structure meets the appropriate SCQF level, including: information on which units are building units (where a specific unit should be completed before starting another), which units reflect the competence level of the group award, and how the graded units contribute to the level of the group award

Mandatory or mandatory/optional structure

Units in a group award structure can be categorised as:

- ◆ **Mandatory** — Units which cover those aspects of the group award that refer to skills and knowledge that is essential to the purpose of the qualification and, therefore, must be achieved by all learners.
- ◆ **Subject-related optional** — Units which cover those aspects of the group award that are discipline-related and are important but not critical — the successful learner needs to have a range of skills and knowledge in this category.

- ◆ **Broadening optional** — Units which cover skills and knowledge that are useful for employment in any sector, and for progression to other education programmes. These should be included where possible, though choice may be restricted by the need to include sufficient subject-related provision.

The advantage of a mandatory/optional structure is that it allows a degree of choice to learners, and makes it possible to meet the different needs of employers, higher education and professional bodies.

The structure of the group award should provide opportunities for learners to take different routes through the qualification to meet their exit aspirations (such as further study for degree programmes and/or professional body qualifications or employment). The different needs of these exit pathways can be met by including optional units. For example, articulation to a degree programme may require theoretical knowledge that is not normally required by employers.

It is particularly important that validation panel members ensure that the mandatory/optional structure does not allow for widely varying routes to the same qualification. In general, the mandatory units should normally form the largest part of the qualification, and contain the significant occupational competences. Above all, the qualification should be coherent and balanced, and evidence will be required to show that all possible routes to the qualification achieve its aims.

It is also important that the representatives from the QDT and validation panel members ensure that the structure of the qualification does not impose unnecessary barriers to access. For example, where the inclusion of a unit in the mandatory section rather than the optional section might be a barrier to disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs accessing the group award.

Graded units (Higher National Group Awards only)

HNCs and HNDs are assessed by a combination of unit assessments and integrative assessment of the group award by means of graded units. The purposes of the graded units are: to assess the learner's ability to retain and integrate the knowledge and/or skills gained in the units; to assess that the learner has met the principal aims of the group award; and to grade the learner's achievement.

This section should provide an explanation of how the graded units integrate the aims of the qualification. This should include the type of graded unit chosen (that is, project and/or examination) and why it is appropriate to the qualification.

It is important that validation panel members ensure that where an HND incorporates an HNC, the graded units reflect the distinct aims of the group award at each level; that is, the graded unit at SCQF level 7 should reflect the aims of the HNC, and the graded units at SCQF level 8 should reflect the aims of the HND.

As graded units relate to the principal aims of the group award, they should be addressed as part of the group award validation. The group award specification will also include the 'General Information' section of all the other units making up the group award but validation

panel members are not required to comment on these as they will have been previously validated.

5.1.3 Aims of the qualification

The aims of the qualification should identify both the general and vocationally-specific competences that a successful learner will achieve, and should show a clear relationship to the title of the group award. The aims should be realistic and commensurate with the type of qualification and its SCQF level. If there are two different SCQF levels (that is, an HNC and an HND), the HNC should be a valid qualification in its own right and not just the first part of the HND. The aims of each qualification should be clear.

The QDT should identify the aims of the group award under the three headings of 'principal aim', 'general aims', and 'Specific aims'.

Principal aim

The principal aim should be a statement on the main purpose or focus of the qualification.

General aims

General aims reflect the broad knowledge and skills that will be developed as learners undertake the qualification. Examples include:

- ◆ developing learners' knowledge and skills, such as planning, analysis and synthesising
- ◆ developing employment skills related to the National Occupational Standards or other professional body requirements and so enhancing learners' employment prospects
- ◆ enabling progression within the SCQF
- ◆ developing study and research skills
- ◆ developing transferable skills, including Core Skills, to the levels demanded by employers and/or progression in higher education

Specific aims

This section should state the specific knowledge and skills that learners have to attain to be deemed competent in the subject and occupational area. For example, in the case of IT and Computing, specific aims might include:

- ◆ preparing for employment in an IT or Computing-related post at technician or professional level
- ◆ developing a range of contemporary vocational skills relating to the use, support and development of IT systems
- ◆ developing options to permit an element of vocational specialisation
- ◆ preparing learners for progression to further studies in Computing or related disciplines

The aims section should provide an explanation of how the general and specific aims:

- ◆ are met in the structure and content of the qualification
- ◆ meet the needs of the relevant employment sector and/or higher education and/or professional body
- ◆ represent a significant achievement by the learner

5.1.4 Recommended entry to the qualification

All group award specifications should include an access statement that outlines the knowledge and skills that learners should ideally bring to their programme of study. This is normally presented as a list of qualifications and/or relevant experience which, in the view of the QDT, provide learners with a suitable preparation for the group award. For example, the entry platform for an HNC should normally recommend a group of qualifications at around SCQF level 6, such as a programme of National Units at SCQF levels 5 and 6, or one or two National Courses at Higher (SCQF level 6).

The access requirements of the group award should define only the skills and competences that learners are expected to have at the start. Access statements for individual units may also refer to lower level units that would prepare learners for progression. The access statement for the group award should be compatible with the individual units' access statements and vice versa.

Access statements should not present unnecessary barriers to prospective learners but they should ensure, as far as possible, that those selected have a realistic chance of achieving the qualification within the normal teaching/learning programme. The access statement for the group award should clearly define the level, and areas, of competence and knowledge and understanding expected of learners joining the course of study.

Learners embarking on any programme of learning will require a level of competence in one or more of the Core Skills in order to be able to cope with assessment requirements. As part of the recommended access statement, the QDT will propose a recommended Core Skills entry level for each of the five Core Skills. The Core Skills are: Communication; Numeracy; Information and Communication Technology (ICT); Problem Solving; and Working with Others.

Core Skill levels

The definition of each of the Core Skills is set out in SQA's Core Skills Framework (which can be accessed on [our website](#)). The framework defines each Core Skill at all five levels, from SCQF level 2 to SCQF level 6.

- ◆ **SCQF level 2:** when using a Core Skill at this level, the learner will carry out, with guidance, a few familiar tasks under supervision.
- ◆ **SCQF level 3:** when using a Core Skill at this level, the learner will carry out some familiar and routine pre-planned tasks, often under supervision.
- ◆ **SCQF level 4:** when using a Core Skill at this level, the learner will have some responsibility for taking decisions about putting the skill into action. Often the Core Skill will be used in a managed environment, but sometimes the learner will need to use the skill without close supervision.
- ◆ **SCQF level 5:** when using a Core Skill at this level, the learner will need to take decisions about how to select and apply the skill to meet the demands of activities, which might sometimes be complex. This is the highest level (Standard Grade at Credit level) of Communication, Numeracy, and ICT expected of the ablest students after 11 years of compulsory school education. It is adequate for all but specialist business, technical or educational tasks. Setting Core Skills at levels above this would imply very specialist areas indeed. Most progression is not in Core Skills, but in applying this level of Core Skill in increasingly complex tasks or situations.

- ◆ **SCQF level 6:** when using a Core Skill at this level, the learner will have responsibility for making decisions about how to use the Core Skill within the context, which will often be a challenging or unfamiliar one. The learner will analyse, plan, and manage their own use of the Core Skill in complex activities.

The Core Skills entry level should reflect the needs of the appropriate market and occupational sector, and should specify what learners would need:

- ◆ as preparation for beginning the group award
- ◆ to have a reasonable chance of completing the group award
- ◆ to be prepared for the broad range of activities required by the group award

Validation panel members should ensure that the recommended entry level adequately prepares learners for study in the group award area but that, just as importantly, it is not set unnecessarily high so that it creates a barrier to entry.

The relative importance of the five Core Skills will vary across areas. For example, one group award might require a high level of Numeracy and ICT but a low level of Communication and Working with Others, while another group award might require a completely different set of Core Skills.

Learners will naturally use and develop aspects of some of the Core Skills as they work through the assessment requirements of the units making up a group award. These development opportunities should be mapped across the group award and included in the group award specification in section 5.1.5 — Mapping of Core Skills development opportunities across the qualification.

5.1.5 Additional benefits of the structure in meeting employer needs

This section of the document should contain information to exemplify the additional benefits of the structure in meeting employer needs.

Mapping of qualification aims to units

This section should identify how the units making up the group award map to the aims of the qualification.

Mapping National Occupational Standards and/or trade or professional body standards

Group awards are normally designed to meet the needs of an occupational sector by developing the knowledge and skills that have been identified in the relevant National Occupational Standards, and which learners will need for entry into employment.

This section should provide an explanation of the links with National Occupational Standards and/or trade or professional body requirements. Information should identify the standards and the extent to which the qualification is aligned to them; for example, whether it provides underpinning knowledge or whether it relates closely to a particular National Occupational Standard.

Mapping of Core Skills development opportunities across the qualification

Group awards should clearly include opportunities for learners to develop Core Skills required by the occupations or progression pathways the group award supports. These development opportunities should equip learners for progression into employment or further study in the area.

The Core Skills required by occupations or progression pathways should be established by market research. Validation panel members must ensure that the development of Core Skills is commensurate with the findings from the market research. Other factors, such as future employability and development of the individual, should also be taken into account.

The group award specification should include a map showing:

- ◆ the Core Skills that will be developed in each unit
- ◆ whether the Core Skill and/or Core Skill components are:
 - embedded within the unit, which means learners who achieve the unit will automatically have their Core Skills profile updated on their certificate
 - signposted, which means learners will be developing aspects of Core Skills but not enough to attract automatic certification

In summary, you should determine whether the mapping of Core Skills development opportunities:

- ◆ meets the needs of the occupational sector
- ◆ meets the possible aspirations of learners
- ◆ allows progression into employment and further study

Mapping of assessment strategy for the qualification

This section should provide information on the main assessment methods that learners may encounter, including:

- ◆ the recommended assessment method(s) for each unit
- ◆ the conditions in which the evidence must be produced — for example, open or closed book, length of time for assessment (if appropriate)

5.1.6 Remaining sections

With the exception of the appendices, the remainder of the information in the group award specification focuses on delivery of the qualification, which goes beyond the remit of the validation panel. A brief description of what appears in each section is given below. Panel members are invited to review the information and provide suggestions for improvements. Please note that any suggestions for change to this part of the document should be recorded as recommendations.

Guidance on approaches to delivery and assessment

This is probably the most important section to those involved in delivering the qualification and, as such, should give as much information as possible on good practice and models for delivery.

This section should include guidance on:

- ◆ content and context
- ◆ sequencing and integration of units
- ◆ recognition of prior learning
- ◆ articulation and/or progression
- ◆ professional recognition
- ◆ transitional arrangements (if the qualification is a revision of an existing qualification)
- ◆ credit transfer (for any revised units)
- ◆ opportunities for e-assessment
- ◆ support materials
- ◆ resource requirements

General information for centres

This is a standard statement.

Glossary of terms

This is a glossary of key, common terminology referred to in the group award specification. This should be updated to include any terminology specific to the subject area of the qualification.

History of changes

This table is updated by SQA as any changes are made to the existing qualification(s).

General information for learners

The information in this section should provide learners with a brief overview on:

- ◆ what the qualification is about
- ◆ the knowledge and skills they will develop and how they will be assessed

It should also provide information on possible routes of progression in education or to types of employment available for learners who achieve the qualification. This is particularly relevant if the group award comprises a mandatory/optional structure — guidance should be given to assist learners in making appropriate choices.

Information in this section should be written in plain, user-friendly language that learners will understand.

6 Validation of graded units (HN Group Awards only)

6.1 Introduction

6.1.1 Purpose of graded units

The purposes of graded units are to:

- ◆ assess learners' ability to integrate and apply the knowledge and/or skills gained in the individual HN Units
- ◆ demonstrate that learners have achieved the principal aims of the group award
- ◆ grade learner achievement

Assessing integration of knowledge

Graded units assess knowledge and skills at the level of the group award. HNCs require learners to demonstrate knowledge and skills at SCQF level 7, so the graded unit in an HNC (or first part of an HND) should, mostly, assess the retention and integration of the knowledge and skills developed in SCQF level 7 units. Similarly, HNDs require learners to demonstrate knowledge and skills at SCQF level 8, so the graded units in the second part of an HND should assess (predominantly) the retention and integration of knowledge and skills developed in SCQF level 8 units.

Demonstrating achievement of the principal aims

Graded units would normally assess retention and integration of knowledge and skills developed in most, but not necessarily all, of the mandatory units, and could include assessment of knowledge and skills developed in a range of the optional units.

Grading achievement

Each graded unit should be designed to enable distinction of the achievement of learners of differing abilities. Learners' achievements will be assessed as C (competent), A (highly competent) or B (somewhere between highly competent and competent).

The graded unit specifications will then form part of the mandatory section of the validated HNC and/or HND.

6.1.2 Types of assessment

There are two types of assessment that can be used in graded units — a project or an examination.

- ◆ Projects should be used to assess the application of knowledge and skills.
- ◆ Examinations are used to assess theoretical knowledge.

As HNCs and HNDs are, in the main, designed to provide learners with the knowledge and skills required for entry into employment, we envisage that most graded units will take the form of a project.

6.1.3 Project-based graded unit

Project-based graded units should be used to test the application of the knowledge and skills required to plan, carry out, and evaluate a task in which the learner does significant work without close supervision. The graded unit specification should provide details of the assessment task and the evidence that learners are expected to produce. It should also allow a degree of choice in the way the project is taken forward so that it fits centres' available resources and learners' interests and personal strengths.

The assessment task would normally take the form of a case study, an investigation, or a practical assignment.

- ◆ A **case study** tests and reinforces skills in gathering and interpreting information, analysing, decision-making, and action planning.
- ◆ An **investigation** tests and reinforces skills in research, analysis, evaluation, and reporting.
- ◆ A **practical assignment** tests and reinforces the application of practical skills, and knowledge and understanding, to a situation that involves task management. The practical assignment is not concerned exclusively with practical activity — the assessment should be based on a combination of the end result of the activity (the product or performance) and the carrying out of the activity (the process).

The learner would normally carry out the tasks involved in the project without close supervision. However, some of the tasks, such as writing up a report, could be undertaken under invigilated conditions. Validation panel members should confirm that the conditions of assessment being proposed are appropriate.

Conditions of assessment

This is a standard statement detailing the conditions in which assessment should take place. Additional, contextualised information may be given by the QDT provided it does not contradict the information in the standard statement. Normally, HN learners would be expected to carry out the work involved in the project without close supervision. However, there may be reasons for some of the project work being done under invigilated conditions (such as writing the evaluation report or conducting a laboratory experiment).

Invigilated conditions should 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. They should not be used solely as a means to authenticate learners' work — there are many other ways to do this, such as a short personal interview or witness testimony. Validation panel members should ensure that proposed conditions of assessment, and in particular the use of invigilated conditions, are necessary, meet the requirements of end-users of the qualification, and do not present any unnecessary barriers to achievement.

Instructions for designing the assessment task

A standard SQA statement is provided. This specifies the minimum design requirements of any project-based assessment task, whether it is a case study, investigation, or practical assignment, that is, each project must contain the stages of planning, development and evaluation.

In addition, the QDT should provide further instructions specific to their HNC and/or HND, such as instructions for writing the project brief. Validation panel members should ensure that the instructions are adequate and do not place unnecessary restrictions on choice.

Evidence requirements

This section should detail the minimum evidence requirements for each of the three stages of the project — planning, developing, and evaluating for the group award subject area.

Validation panel members should ensure that the evidence requirements are sufficient to demonstrate that learners meet the group award aims that the graded unit has been designed to assess.

Guidance on grading learners

Learner achievement will be graded as C (competent), or A (highly competent), or B (somewhere between highly competent and competent). The QDT should adapt and contextualise the generic Grade Related Criteria for the group award area and include it in this section of the graded unit specification. (Note: Grade C must meet the minimum evidence requirements.)

6.1.4 Examination-based graded unit

Examination-based graded units should be used to test underpinning knowledge and theoretical understanding of a subject or occupational area. Learners will be expected to use a wide range of cognitive skills, such as recalling, explaining, distinguishing, estimating, exemplifying, interpreting, inferring, solving, calculating, analysing, evaluating, appraising, synthesising.

All examinations used for graded units will be unseen. They can be either closed-book or open-book, and should always be conducted under invigilated conditions.

In a closed-book examination, learners are given no information other than the question paper and script book, and are expected to answer questions without the aid of reference material.

In an open-book examination, learners are allowed to use prescribed materials. Details of the prescribed materials must be included in the graded unit specification.

Decisions about whether to use closed-book or open-book examination should reflect:

- ◆ what is expected of learners in real-life working situations in the subject or occupational area
- ◆ what information we can reasonably expect learners to know without the aid of reference material
- ◆ the knowledge and understanding which learners are being required to retain

Conditions of assessment

This is a standard SQA statement detailing the conditions in which the assessment should take place. Any changes to the standard statement should be discussed and confirmed during the validation process. The QDT may have provided additional information specific to their HNC and/or HND.

Length of the examination

Examinations should be a single event of three hours' duration. However, there may be some circumstances where the examination is divided into a number of separate events. This could be where totally different skills are being tested, for example, when assessing the listening and written comprehension of a foreign language or undertaking part of the assessment online. The reasons for holding a number of separate examinations, or having examinations which are of less or more than three hours' duration, should be discussed and approved by validation panel members. Validation panel members should ensure the integrative aspect of the graded unit is not compromised.

Type of examination

The QDT should have specified whether the examination is to be closed-book or open-book. If open-book, the QDT should specify all the materials to which the learner will have access.

Instructions for designing the assessment task

This section asks QDTs to specify:

- ◆ The topics, that is, the critical knowledge and skills, to be covered in the examination. This should not be a repetition of unit titles but should specify the topic from within or across the units on which examination questions will be based.
- ◆ The level of demand for each topic; for example, description, explanation, analysis, application, calculation, and so on.
- ◆ Whether the examination must have a set number of questions, such as three extended response questions. If this is not given, then centres devising graded unit assessments can decide on the appropriate number of questions, providing they adhere to other requirements in the graded unit specification. In these cases, the mark allocation for each topic will be important, as the weighting for each topic will be the same irrespective of the number of questions which cover that topic.
- ◆ The relative weighting or mark allocation to be given for each topic within the examination; for example, 40% of the marks should be allocated to Topic A, 20% to Topic B, 30% to Topic C, 10% to Topic D.
- ◆ Further allocation of marks within each question, if appropriate. This might include such things as technical detail, development, analysis, drawing conclusions and integration. Where marks are allocated to integration of knowledge and understanding, the nature of integration needs to be clear as this may be different for each group award.

Guidance on grading learners

The examination will be marked out of 100. Assessors will aggregate the marks achieved by the learner to arrive at an overall mark for the examination. Assessors 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%

These grade boundaries cannot be changed.

Success in the examination will be based on achievement of 50% of the overall marks. Validation panel members should confirm the validity both of the assessment instrument and any marking criteria.

6.2 The role of the validation panel

The validation panel will decide on the appropriateness of the:

- ◆ proposed type of assessment for the graded unit
- ◆ chosen assessment task
- ◆ conditions of assessment
- ◆ instructions for designing the assessment task
- ◆ evidence requirements
- ◆ guidance on grading learners

Once it is validated, assessors will use the graded unit specification to develop the assessment instrument to assess whether learners have met the principal aims of the group award, and to grade learner achievement.

7 Glossary

SCQF: This stands for the Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework. The purpose of the SCQF is to:

- ♦ make the relationship between the various qualifications clear
- ♦ make progression and transfer between qualifications easier

SCQF levels: They are a measure of how demanding a qualification is. The SCQF covers 12 levels of learning.

SCQF credit points: They are based on how long an 'average learner' at a particular level, will take to achieve the qualification. One SCQF credit point equates to 10 hours of learning.

For further information on the SCQF visit the [SCQF website](#).

Subject unit: Subject units contain vocational or subject content and are designed to test a specific set of knowledge and skills.

Signposted Core Skills: This refers to opportunities to develop Core Skills in learning and teaching. Signposted Core Skills are not automatically certificated.

Embedded Core Skills: This is where the assessment evidence for the unit also includes full evidence for a complete Core Skill or Core Skill components. A learner successfully completing the unit will be automatically certificated for the Core Skill. (This depends on the unit having been successfully audited and validated for Core Skills certification.)

Qualification Design Team: The QDT works in conjunction with a qualifications manager or development manager to steer the development from its inception or revision through to validation. The group is made up of key stakeholders representing the interests of centres, employers, universities and other relevant organisations.

Consortium-devised qualifications: They are developments or revisions undertaken by a group of centres in partnership with SQA.

Specialist single centre and specialist collaborative devised qualifications: They are developments or revisions led by a single centre or small group of centres that provide knowledge and skills in a specialist area. Like consortium-devised qualifications, these developments or revisions will also be supported by SQA.