



# **Higher National Qualifications Internal Assessment Report 2015 Information Technology**

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

# Higher National Units

## General comments

In almost all centres visited, following scrutiny of a wide range of evidence presented and discussions between External Verifiers (EVs) and centre staff, assessors and internal verifiers, we found that:

- ◆ The evidence seen against the quality assurance criteria was considered to be sufficient.
- ◆ Internal assessment activities were consistent with documented centre procedures and in line with SQA requirements.
- ◆ Assessors were marking and making judgements to appropriate and acceptable standards for the Units sampled.
- ◆ Candidate work has been generally assessed accurately, consistently and fairly. Only a few discrepancies were identified.
- ◆ Suitable assessment systems were in place and were being implemented.

Centres have been able to demonstrate a generally clear and accurate understanding of the requirements of the national standards within this subject area.

## Unit specifications, instruments of assessment and exemplification materials

Through visits to centres and prior verification activity during the session, the EV team found that centres have a good general understanding of the Unit specifications.

Professional discussion took place with assessors regarding acceptance criteria.

Assessors are in general, aware of the detail of Unit specifications and are familiar with SQA exemplar and assessment support pack materials.

Overall, comments within reports on actual standards being implemented by centres, in meeting the Unit Outcomes, Knowledge and Skills Values and Evidence Requirements were satisfactory.

In most centres the most recently published ASPs/exemplars are used as models for assessment.

The instruments of assessment seen were valid and reliable — assessments were a mixture of online assessments (eg on VLE, SOLAR), modified assessment exemplars/ASP and centre-devised assessments.

## **Evidence Requirements**

Evidence Requirements for the HN Information Technology Units are generally well understood.

Assessment tasks were relevant and well designed to challenge candidates at an appropriate level.

Assessments were in many cases contextualised and in keeping with current industry/professional practice and where appropriate, in line with vendor qualifications.

The supporting documentation seen, eg marking schemes and checklists, indicated that there would be sufficient coverage and checking of all Evidence Requirements.

Feedback from External Verifiers suggests that in the majority of centres, assessment practices and interpretation of Unit specifications are followed by assessors including, in particular, the need to adhere to Evidence Requirements.

Marking decisions by assessors were judged to be sufficiently accurate and consistent across candidates.

## **Administration of assessments**

The quality assurance criteria approach is now adopted by centres. This requires External Verifiers to check that centre assessment and internal verification procedures are being implemented effectively.

Many centres had documented procedures for the conduct of EV visits. Although not all staff were aware of the nature of QA visits and what evidence would be examined.

During visits, EVs found that most centres had well documented assessment and internal verification procedures, which provided a clear and accessible audit trail through the assessment and internal verification processes. The procedures and processes were being implemented appropriately.

Some centres are undergoing major organisational structural changes — including the integration of systems. Here, through discussion and observation of systems, we considered that there was sufficient evidence that the criteria were being met.

Materials presented for external verification were, in the main, well organised, well presented and accessible for scrutiny.

It was good to see that most centres are now moving to holding master control packs online, some with hyperlinks to access required forms etc. This is most useful for standardisation, particularly across different sites.

Authentication is an issue which is being very well addressed in centres. The following are all being employed effectively:

- ◆ the use of plagiarism-checking software
- ◆ use of candidate disclaimers to give a sense of ownership
- ◆ assessor vigilance in looking for any similarity in submissions
- ◆ scrutiny by assessors which is backed up by Q&A sessions on the topic

Where interim internal verification activity had actually taken place prior to visits, in most centres there was evidence it was clear and systematic for most of the Units verified. This can only benefit both the process of internal and external verification, providing good feedback to the assessor and ultimately the candidate.

### **General feedback**

Ongoing learner development needs are usually identified through discussion with the assessor and followed up.

Accessibility arrangements, additional support needs and disability requirements were met through centres' equality policies and were clearly embedded in their systems procedures.

It was interesting to see a greater candidate involvement in resource review and provision, through staff–student liaison meetings. These also provided indications that students are satisfied overall with the support they receive in addressing development needs.

A growing practice is for students to be able to view their ongoing progress on the centre's VLE on a Unit-by-Unit basis, both for formative and summative assessments.

Formal feedback provided to candidates continues to be encouraging and supportive in all centres, with guidance given on any further development requirements.

However, in some centres we found there was a great deal of verbal feedback, but little in the way of formal written feedback, even on Candidate Assessment Records where it would be expected.

There were, of course, some instances of clear, high quality constructive comments given to learners.

Overall, there was good evidence that candidates are being well prepared and supported for assessment across all Units.

## Areas of good practice

Previous reports have commented on the good practice shown by centres. It is encouraging that external verification during 2014–15 confirmed that these continue. Good practice noted in EV reports during this session included:

- ◆ We discussed the use of the extensive and robust internal verification system and how the move to electronic submissions had aided or hindered the process of internal verification. From the discussions it became apparent that the centre had foreseen many of the possible problems and had policies in place to ensure that internal verification did not become cumbersome and unwieldy.
- ◆ A questionnaire is issued to students three times per year. This provides feedback on all aspects of the student experience including course/Unit feedback.
- ◆ For Unit H177 34 Troubleshooting — Candidates undertook troubleshooting of computer problems for a wide variety of real problems and clients. The assessor issued an e-mail to all staff requesting computers to repair. This provided a real troubleshooting environment and experience of dealing with user clients. A database was constructed to track all jobs. This was very professional and provided candidates with a great learning environment. The assessor is to be commended.
- ◆ The centre has an External Verifier quality assurance folder which documented the centre's assessment arrangements, pre-delivery planning and standardisation procedure, IV sampling procedure and equalities policy, in line with SQA requirements.
- ◆ Observations and candidate electronic signatures along with assessor recording all confirm that the work is the candidate's evidence/work.
- ◆ Comprehensive quality improvement discussion notes were maintained with actions to notify SQA of issues for support and clarification. This process will help inform improvements to future Unit specifications and assessment exemplars for all SQA centres.
- ◆ One assessment was integrated effectively with another three Units to produce a more holistic assessment within a suitably contextualised scenario. This was combined with assessment task instructions to candidates. These were well developed and included a pro forma for candidates to check that all content to be provided was present to meet the Evidence Requirements across all four Units.
- ◆ The use of annotated screenshots to show activities was most useful, particularly combined with a pro forma. It allows candidates, assessors and verifiers to identify where particular responses/assessment evidence is presented, to meet knowledge and skills values and Unit Evidence Requirements. It also helps to reinforce candidates' knowledge and understanding.
- ◆ The centre has an internal verification policy that works on a three-year cycle, unless a Unit is being delivered for the first time or a Unit is being delivered by a new assessor. The internal verification system is fully electronic and triggers when a Unit needs to be internally verified. The internal verifier is

notified automatically and internal verification can take place while an assessment is ongoing or once it is finished. This was explained and printed evidence was available. The IV system seems very efficient and effective.

- ◆ The assessment material cover sheet for each candidate includes Unit details, candidate details, assessor name, internal verifier name, internal verifier recording of sampling with feedback if required, candidate signature and declaration of own work. It also contains: grade boundaries, remediation and resit policy, right to appeal against assessor decision and who to contact. This is a most useful approach to consolidating required information.

### **Specific areas for improvement**

The following summarises some of the recommendations or suggestions that were made as a result of external verification during 2014–15. They may not apply to all centres but may provide scope for reflection on current practice. The main areas for improvement were:

- ◆ There was inconsistency regarding where the internal verifier recorded the verification outcome of the sample work. This depended on who the IV was. Although the work had been correctly carried out the point regarding consistency of where the judgement is recorded needs to be raised.
- ◆ Although assignment checklists indicated a suitable level of complexity and contextualisation, there needs to be a mapping to the Unit Evidence Requirements. Structured Candidate Assessment Record checklists are required in line with Unit specification requirements.
- ◆ Centres have to provide a formal assessment instrument with clear mapping to the Unit Evidence Requirements.

# Higher National Graded Units

## **Titles/levels of HN Graded Units verified:**

H1J8 34 Computing: Graded Unit 1

H48X 35 Computing: Technical Support: Graded Unit 2

H48V 35 Computing: Networking: Graded Unit 2

DH0H 35 Computer Networking and Internet Technology Graded Unit

## **General comments**

The central verification event which looked at examination-based HN Graded Units from selected centres was overall successful. The quality of assessor marking and internal verification was again an improvement on last session.

The judgement of candidate performance by assessors was mostly in line with the standard required. Any marking disagreements were judged to be within acceptable boundaries.

For many centres this was the first delivery of the new Graded Unit 2. The project-based Unit visiting verification took place mainly in May and June. Verification on projects can take place when the planning and developing stages have been completed and preliminary marks awarded. Sufficient evidence was presented for the project-based Units seen. In most cases this indicated that there was a reasonably accurate understanding of the national standards.

## **Unit specifications, instruments of assessment and exemplification materials**

SQA ASPs were used as instruments of assessment for the H1J8 34 examination Unit. On most occasions, it was apparent that the selected versions had been fully reviewed by the assessor and internal verifier prior to candidates undertaking them, to ensure that candidates were able to cover the full scope from the instruments of assessment (examination paper). This provides evidence about centres ensuring their validity.

Assessors appear to have a high level of familiarity with the Graded Unit 2 projects:

- ◆ Centres were assessing the Units using the correct method — project scenario.
- ◆ The assessors correctly provided the appropriate level of support to each candidate, ensuring that no unfair advantage was gained.
- ◆ Assessment instruments were in line with the stated Unit guidelines.
- ◆ The ASPs were used to provide a basis for their marking scheme.
- ◆ Appropriate sub-marking schemes had been developed and applied consistently across the candidates sampled.

Supporting documentation indicated that there had been appropriate standardisation activities prior to delivery.

In summary, Graded Unit assessors showed a high familiarity with the Unit specifications, instruments of assessment and exemplification materials. Only one case was found of a centre misinterpreting the guidelines for remediation within the project-based Graded Units.

### **Evidence Requirements**

The evidence seen was marked accurately and consistently across the Units to SQA's required standards.

The marks awarded all reflected the standard of work produced and assessors' judgements of candidate performance were appropriate.

Assessor comments were usually written on the candidate scripts to explain why marks were deducted.

Assessment checklists gave a detailed breakdown of where marks were awarded.

When verifying the project-based Units, we checked the application of the marking schemes to establish the process of grading. We found that candidates had sufficient understanding of the assessment task requirements and demonstrated knowledge and skills at an appropriate level to the grades awarded.

The assessed work was considered to have been judged in a consistent and fair manner. Marks awarded and therefore projected grades were in line with the overall grade related criteria.

Overall, there were clear indications that most assessors had a good understanding of the Graded Unit Evidence Requirements. Only two instances were reported of a centre misinterpreting the Minimum Evidence Requirements of a project-based Graded Unit.

### **Administration of assessments**

For central verification of the examination Unit, almost all required documents were submitted by centres. These had been fully completed in line with requirements.

Presentation of materials and actual contents were generally good. But a few centres still had made submissions without all required documents fully completed (eg overall lists of candidates' marks and grades).

There was some evidence of double-marking taking place in addition to internal verification sampling.

There was an improvement in the internal verification taking place in the majority of submissions. The practice of clearly showing IV activity should be encouraged.

A recurring point is that names of assessors and internal verifiers were not clearly stated either on candidate scripts or on supporting forms submitted. Sometimes initials were seen but not formally printed names.

Once again a major point to note is that, in more than a few of the submissions, there was a lack of clarity in identifying precisely where and why marks were awarded directly against responses on candidate scripts.

This session for the project-based Graded Units seen, most had been subject to internal verification procedures when visits took place on completion of the first two stages. This helped clarify the candidate's position when moving through the stages.

### **General feedback**

In most centres, candidates' responses indicated that staff support their students in a professional and appropriate way when delivering these Graded Units.

Candidates we interviewed said they are satisfied with the support provided.

Generally, detailed and constructive feedback is being given to candidates.

Interviews with candidates and checking documentation showed that a majority of centres were operating an effective induction process for the Graded Units and those candidates were aware of what they needed to do to achieve the different grades.

Induction on the Graded Unit project included: methods of marking and grading, rules regarding submission of work, access to learning and reference materials, and use of assessment materials.

### **Areas of good practice**

There was considerable good practice noted in EV reports during this session, this included:

- ◆ A standardisation meeting pre-delivery, use of an SQA exemplar (which is a valid and practicable assessment) and digitised materials (producible in a variety of formats to suit candidate needs) together with internal verification activity, provide evidence that assessments are valid, reliable, equitable and fair.
- ◆ The course structure had been modified to ensure that prerequisite Units were taught in a natural sequence, culminating with the Graded Unit. This was discussed with the team and assessors who indicated that this was in response to student feedback.

- ◆ The centre has adopted 12 individual scenarios which are allocated to the candidate in a totally random manner. This ensures that in an average year only approximately four candidates are involved in the same project. This makes identification of plagiarism manageable.
- ◆ The assessment material cover sheet for each candidate includes Unit details, candidate details, assessor name, internal verifier name, internal verifier recording of sampling with feedback if required, candidate signature and declaration of own work. It also contains: grade boundaries, remediation and resit policy, right to appeal against assessor decision and who to contact. This is a most useful approach to consolidating required information for verification.
- ◆ Candidate project reports that are in keeping with industry practice.
- ◆ Candidates had provided word-processed answers to sections 2 and 3 of the examination. They had been clearly marked by the assessor and internal verifier writing on the printed scripts presented. This helps in both the assessor/marker and verifiers' reading of responses and would help in avoiding ambiguity due to poor handwriting. (Note that centres providing candidate scripts by electronic means should take cognisance of SQA's requirements for e-assessment and associated published guidelines.)

### **Specific areas for improvement**

The following summarises some of the recommendations or suggestions that were made as a result of external verification during 2014–15. They may not apply to all centres but may provide scope for reflection on current practice. The main developments suggested were:

- ◆ Where there were small differences in marks between markers and internal verifier, these were documented but there was no indication of how the markers and internal verifier arrived at the final marks. However, the grades awarded were fully concordant with the central verification activity.
- ◆ Records were completed with a breakdown of the marks allocation for each stage. A further breakdown of marks on the checklist for the developing stage would be useful to identify where marks are allocated for this.
- ◆ There was a discrepancy between the Minimum Evidence Requirements and the marking scheme. Marks had been incorrectly redistributed within sub-items. It was recommended that the assessment instrument be revised and then submitted for prior verification.
- ◆ Marking checklists were seen that contained actual marks together with feedback comments to the candidate. However, it was unclear how the marks were distributed.
- ◆ Where changes are made to an HN assessment support pack used as an instrument of assessment, any changes must be justified, documented and included in the submission.
- ◆ Assessors must clearly indicate where marks are awarded in candidate evidence and how many marks there are for each section/element. This provides a basis for feedback to candidates and verifiers.

- ◆ Names of assessors and internal verifiers were not always clearly stated — either on candidate scripts or on supporting forms. Sometimes initials were seen but not formally printed names. Identification is important for quality assurance sampling and reporting purposes. Printed names should be supplied.
- ◆ For all Graded Units, both examination and project based, it is strongly recommended that centres note and implement processes and procedures based on the SQA publication *Guidance for the Implementation of Graded Units* (publication code CA4405).