



**Higher National and Vocational Qualifications
Internal Assessment Report 2016
Management Skills**

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

The number of centres selected and visited during 2015–16 within this verification group increased significantly from the previous year. It is pleasing to report a high level of success with qualification verification reflecting the experience of most centre staff in delivering and presenting Higher National awards. Staff in the main have a strong understanding of the units and the assessment approaches within this group and where support materials and assessment packs are available these are used and centres find these to be of considerable help. It is also good to note that centres are using prior verification for additional materials or where no assessment materials have been centrally developed.

The impact of regionalisation in the FE sector is beginning to settle and generally centres have well-established systems and procedures for assessment and internal verification which ensure that the units and the execution of the units are well supported.

Despite the revision of some of the HNC Management and Leadership units, exemplars and assessment materials, uptake of the HNC and Diploma in Management and Leadership Award continues to be very low and only two graded unit verification visits took place. The Management verification visits that did take place generally fell within other award frameworks including two PDA awards. The latter are worthy of note due to the very high standard of approach to the delivery and assessment of the units. Findings from and discussions arising during the qualification verification visits have been used to inform a review of the HN Management portfolio.

Unit specifications, instruments of assessment and exemplification materials

As indicated above, centres appear to be thoroughly familiar with the relevant unit specifications. The majority of centres conduct pre-delivery internal verification which works well and ensures that the current unit specifications are in use and assessment instruments checked.

Assessment exemplars are in place for a number of units which work well for candidates and staff alike. Where these are not available centres generally have robust systems in place to ensure that assessment instruments developed are in line with the unit purpose and the evidence requirements. Prior verification is used to ensure the assessments being used are appropriate, which is a clear example of good practice and centres are reminded that this facility is available to them.

The development of master files or packs which contain relevant material for a unit such as the unit specification, assessment instruments, notes of internal verification meetings and any items arising are commonplace and more often

than not are now held electronically. These packs work well and make assessment, internal verification and external verification a much easier task, and where held electronically lend themselves well to remote qualification verification.

Learning and teaching materials, including SQA support material for those units where they are available, are now often found on VLEs such as Moodle. A few of the centres visited delivered the unit/award online and it was good to see some excellent examples of online delivery and assessment.

Evidence requirements

Centres generally have a clear understanding of the evidence requirements in each of the units that were externally verified. This understanding is supported by the SQA exemplar assessment packs which provide instruments of assessment, assessment checklists and assessment guidelines — all of which help to ensure that the unit evidence requirements are understood and met. Many of the units in this verification group are further supported by specially-developed and recently updated SQA support packs which when taken in conjunction with the updated assessment support packs, help to clarify the interpretation of unit evidence requirements. Overall, the packs and the exemplars are well received.

One centre assessed Behaviour Skills for Business (F84L 35) alongside Business Culture and Strategy (F7J7 35) as part of the Business pilot through a combined single assessment. This worked well and the centre staff managed the assessment process well with good results. The mechanistic approach often seen in candidate responses was less so and candidates tended to express terms and ideas in their own words fulfilling the purpose and evidence requirements of the unit.

As highlighted in previous reports, the requirement for candidates to demonstrate their understanding through interpretation and application of theories and models continues. The tendency for many candidates to merely regurgitate models in their responses, as commented in previous years, remains. Centres, therefore, need to continually stress that mere repetition of models/theories is rarely sufficient to pass and this is particularly so at higher levels SCQF 8 and 9. Where candidates are expected to use a framework, eg a CPD model or project submission, the responses should reflect the level and depth stated in the evidence requirements.

Consistency in assessment approaches and the interpretation of standards across different sites, different teams and different staff delivering the same unit(s) can be a challenge. Often the assessment exemplar solution is quite wide-ranging and cannot cover every possibility and requires a degree of interpretation. As a result, assessors and internal verifiers do not always find it easy to set a suitable standard. Standardisation meetings, decision logs and master packs, such as those described above, play a key part here in ensuring that standards and evidence requirements are fully met and that staff are fully supported in this process.

Administration of assessments

The development and use of assessment exemplars for most of the units verified helps to ensure that assessments are administered in line with the unit specification. This also helps to ensure that the instruments of assessment are appropriate, thus enabling candidates to generate sufficient evidence of an appropriate standard. The guidance and/or checklists provided in these exemplar packs help to support the assessment decision. Where no exemplars have been developed, a number of centres, as indicated earlier, have used the prior verification process. As a result nearly all centres organised and assessed candidates in accordance with the requirements set out in the unit specifications.

Pre-delivery verification/standardisation meetings are now held in the majority of centres. These meetings, as described earlier, help to ensure that the unit specification and the assessment instrument being used are current, valid and fair. It is encouraging to see that centres through their own procedures check the exemplars provided to verify that they do meet the standards and are appropriate. Centre assessment and verification procedures are generally strong ensuring that assessment decisions are checked and appropriately sampled. Feedback is provided from assessors to candidates and from verifiers to assessors and where corrective action is identified it is appropriately actioned.

Discussions with candidates confirm that planning and support for assessments is of a high standard and that any requirements as outlined in specific units are complied with. It is good to see in centres that assessment planning is managed well, avoiding overload and helping candidates to be well prepared for all assessments.

Arrangements for remediation or resubmission of assessments appear to be strong and the evidence made available during this year's visits confirms that this is the case. It is important that where remediation has taken place that this is clearly indicated and sufficient evidence to demonstrate that it meets the requirements is provided. Discussions regarding the use of draft submissions arose on a few visits. There is a danger that a draft submission may introduce an additional assessment opportunity as well as create an unfair assessment advantage for some candidates. If drafts are to be used, and it could be argued that they have their place in certain units, there is a need for the centre team to have a clear understanding of their role and how they may be used. However, the use of pre-project submissions, eg PIDs, in project-based assessments work well and there were some excellent examples of these coupled with strong assessor feedback designed to support candidate development.

All centres visited had in place policies and procedures relating to malpractice, plagiarism and cheating. Candidates were aware of these policies and the associated penalties through induction procedures and student handbooks. In most cases candidates are generally required to sign a declaration that the work submitted is their own. However, there were a few occasions where the application of the requirement to sign or provide declarations was variable. Centres should ensure through their assessment and verification processes that these procedures are adhered to and to comment appropriately in their feedback

to assessors. There is an increase in the use of packages such as Turnitin to help staff identify plagiarism but the judgement of staff in their knowledge of the subject and, in particular, of their candidates plays a key part.

General feedback

Once again, it is important to comment on the commitment and enthusiasm of staff involved in assessment and internal verification. Visit reports confirm that staff put a lot of effort in and give a lot of support to candidates in preparing them for assessments and in ensuring that all aspects of the assessment process are fully covered. It is encouraging to see very good examples of assessor feedback where the assessor had taken time to provide a high level of supportive and developmental feedback, which provided clear direction and advice to candidates. In one particular online case there was an excellent use of formative assessment materials with detailed feedback from the assessor designed to build candidates towards a fairly complex end assessment.

Discussions with candidates this year, as in previous years, highlighted very positive learning experiences. Almost all candidates were very complimentary about the teaching and support that they had received which is testimony to the hard work and commitment of centre staff. All candidates who were interviewed indicated that centres had clear procedures and processes in place for resubmissions, authenticity, appeals and complaints. All of which helps to clarify expectations.

Centres work very hard to ensure equality of access to assessment for candidates and most have excellent support systems in place. These support systems include in all cases, subject support provided by delivery staff, quite often outwith class, to central support for learners where access to equipment and other specialist resources is available. Discussions with candidates confirm their awareness of the support available and there was sufficient evidence to demonstrate that these support arrangements do work.

Areas of good practice

With some repetition of earlier points and previous reports, the following list summarises a collection of areas of good practice identified during external verification visits:

- ◆ Strong centre processes with clear, transparent evidence (eg completed forms, minutes of meetings) that standardisation and internal verification procedures were in place and working
- ◆ Master folders/files containing all requisite information for assessment and internal verification
- ◆ Detailed feedback from assessors on assessment checklists and scripts which relate to the assessment guidelines provided and help candidates to deepen and further their learning
- ◆ The use of decision logs/action notes to capture on-going assessment/verification decisions

- ◆ In two non-FE centres, the development of delivery materials and formative and summative assessment materials that meet both unit requirements and organisational requirements

Specific areas for improvement

Overall, external verification confirmed that centres generally deliver units in this verification group well. Where there were specific issues raised these are covered in the action points given for that particular visit. As a result, centres should be aware of things they can do which might address their particular situation.

However, the good practice outlined above may help centres to think about their practice and consider whether they could make changes which might enhance the delivery, assessment and internal verification of units in this verification group.

Centres can also review their practice in the light of improvements suggested to others. The following list shows some of the suggestions for improvement, most of which were made in previous reports but which are still valid:

1 Through standardisation meetings, develop extended marking guidelines reflecting the SCQF level (basing them on the guidelines in the exemplars, where these are being used) to emphasise exactly what would and would not be acceptable in a response.

This would:

- ◆ make it easier to differentiate more precisely between candidates who had provided an acceptable response and those who had not
- ◆ enable candidates requiring remediation to be given a very clear indication of where their response had fallen short of the standard
- ◆ contribute to consistency among assessors and in the nature and amount of evidence provided by candidates

2 Continue to encourage candidates to provide answers and go beyond mere repetition of theory which can lead to issues of plagiarism. Candidates can demonstrate their understanding of theories by their choice of example and the reasons they give to support it.

This could involve:

- ◆ choosing a suitable theory, approach or technique
- ◆ giving a precise example from the case study and
- ◆ giving a reasoned justification why the theory/technique was appropriate in this instance

This approach can be incorporated in the extended marking guidelines recommended in point 1 above.

3 Centres should continue to encourage candidates to utilise an accepted form of referencing and citation to further support their work. While this not a mandatory requirement, good referencing and citation can help candidates focus on the application of theories (see 2 above) as well as preparing them for future study.

Finally, the level of work produced by candidates is generally of a very high level which reflects the good work of everyone concerned. Ensuring that the awards continue to meet the needs of candidates relies on good robust partnerships. The EV team feels that this has been strong over the years and looks forward to this continuing in future.

Higher National graded units

HNC Management Graded Unit (H1KT 34)

General comments

There were two visits for this graded unit and as a result it is difficult to draw too many general conclusions.

Overall, centres appear to have a good understanding of the requirements of graded units in general and this seems to be the case for this graded unit. There is a good understanding among delivery staff as to what are likely to be suitable topics for the graded unit which helps to support candidates in undertaking the task. The staged model as outlined in the unit specification should also help candidates progress and enable candidates to achieve the maximum grade they can. Where the stages are adhered to the resultant candidate product tends to be of a high standard.

With limited uptake, few centres and no material changes to the unit, the comments and suggestions are similar to those highlighted in previous reports and are still valid.

Unit specifications, instruments of assessment and exemplification materials

Centres are familiar with the unit specification and with the advice given in the exemplar assessment pack. However, it is important to ensure through centre staff development procedures that new staff are fully aware of the requirements of project-based graded units. The management of the graded unit is quite different from the other units in the award and staff should be cognisant of this.

The three stages, ie planning, developing and evaluation, are critical to the successful completion of the graded unit and this is fully reflected in the graded unit specification and the exemplar. The stages allow assessors and the candidate the opportunity to stop and reflect on the evidence provided at each stage and then to move forward, hopefully arriving at a much improved final product. It is important to note that a failure to follow the staged procedure is likely to result in an unsuccessful qualification verification result.

Evidence requirements

The evidence requirements are clearly stated in the unit specification and further enhanced by the assessment support pack. Centres are aware of these requirements. The standards require some degree of interpretation and judgement by the assessor as each candidate project will be different. Centres appear to be aware of this and there is a good understanding of the evidence requirements in this respect. As noted earlier, the evidence requirements are provided in three stages and it is important that these are adhered to. One of the

objects of the stages is to enable candidates to learn and develop as they progress, reflecting on how well they met the evidence requirements at each stage — this is particularly important for the evaluation stage.

The development stage requires that candidates provide an account of the implementation of the project such as how resources are obtained. On a few occasions the candidate evidence provided was no more than a general description of the resources obtained without any substantiating evidence to show that they had been obtained. The graded unit is a practical project whereby candidates undertake a real task and it is expected that evidence of this would be provided if not in the report certainly in the appendices, eg e-mails, letters, photographs.

Administration of assessments

Centres are making use of the marking checklist and associated guidance on marking in the exemplar assessment pack. It is good to see that, in the main, assessors continue to make comments to explain the reasoning behind the mark awarded. This greatly helps internal verification and contributes to ensuring that a suitable standard is achieved.

The application of the three stages is not always being followed. As indicated earlier, the management of the stages is critical to success and helps candidates at each stage through clear target-setting and the provision of feedback, eg feedback at the planning stage helps to inform the development stage and so on, which helps to ensure that the evidence requirements are met.

A failure to follow all three stages impacts considerably as it undermines the premise upon which the graded unit is based, but more importantly it prevents the candidate from having fair opportunity to meet and achieve the evidence requirements to the best of their ability. Adherence to the stages also provides a good base for interim internal verification which helps to quality assure the work being undertaken.

The use of draft submissions for each of the stages arose in discussions. There is a danger that a draft submission may introduce an additional assessment opportunity as well as creating an unfair assessment advantage for some candidates. If drafts are to be used, and it could be argued that they have a place, there is a need for the centre team to have a clear understanding of their role and the how they may be used. Marking of the graded unit may reflect the level of assistance provided and there should be clarity within the team as to how this should operate.

The use of a pre-project submission to highlight the nature of the project being chosen by the candidate has shown itself to be useful. Such a submission while not part of the marking frame allows the assessor to explore the project with the candidate ensuring that there is sufficient depth and access to information to allow it to proceed.

General feedback

Candidates continue to find the graded unit a challenge and the management of the stages is a key aspect of this, as is the support and advice given vis-à-vis the choice of project. Candidates are encouraged to use the units studied to assist them in how their studies may inform a real issue/situation in their workplace to help them choose their project. The use of a project submission in the form of a pro forma, eg PID, may allow the candidate the opportunity to explore some project issues and creates the opportunity for formative supportive feedback to support later stages. The importance of the planning stage and the feedback given at this stage is critical and has a positive impact on the project and the candidate's likelihood of success.

Areas of good practice

The commitment of staff involved in assessment and internal verification and the support provided is itself good practice and deserves another mention. This is evident in the quality of feedback provided to candidates, and when matched with the graded unit stages this feedback helps candidates develop further and gain the benefits anticipated from the graded unit.

Specific areas for improvement

Areas for improvement are similar to those made in previous years and include:

- 1 Adhere to the stages, assessing in line with the guidelines — candidates complete and are assessed at each stage before progressing to the next.
- 2 Centres should encourage candidates to:
 - ◆ Submit a project proposal document.
 - ◆ Clearly specify (eg in the opening section of the planning stage) which units, or parts of units, from HNC Management and Leadership contribute to the graded unit topic they have chosen.
 - ◆ Provide specific reasons to support statements they have made, eg by explaining exactly why a particular method was used.
 - ◆ Make explicit use of ideas from HNC Management and Leadership — one way of doing this is to use them as reasons to support statements made. This can help to avoid projects becoming atheoretical.
 - ◆ Ensure that evidence during the development stage supports their actions and is used through evaluation. This is obviously a balancing act with the previous point.
 - ◆ Use headings from the marking guidelines to focus and structure their work.
- 3 Include the stages of the graded unit within the verification sampling plan.