



Monitoring Standards Over Time:

National Qualifications, Higher National Units and Scottish Vocational Qualifications in 2015 compared with previous years

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Contents

1 Introduction	1
About the monitoring programme	1
The 2015–16 programme	3
2 Findings: National Qualifications	5
Advanced Higher History	5
Higher English	6
Higher French	13
National 5 Administration and IT	17
3 Findings: Higher National Units	20
Electrical Engineering	20
Unit: Applications of Programmable Logic Controllers	21
Unit: DC and AC Principles	22
Unit: Three Phase Systems	23
Sports Coaching	24
Communication	27
Unit: Analysing and Presenting Complex Communications	27
Unit: Communication Practical Skills	28
4 Findings: Scottish Vocational Qualifications	30
Health and Social Care (Adults)	30
Health and Social Care (Children and Young People)	32
5 Conclusions	35
6 SQA's response	36

1 Introduction

SQA has been carrying out an annual standards monitoring programme since 1998. This plays a very important role in ensuring that we continue to offer qualifications of a consistently high standard. The purpose of this programme is to monitor and maintain standards over a longer period of time, including changes in arrangements and specifications. It complements the procedures which ensure year-to-year comparability of grade boundaries in external exams.

We greatly appreciate the role played by colleges and training providers in providing us with HN and SVQ evidence, and gratefully acknowledge the thorough work of all panel members who participated in the monitoring and analysed large amounts of documents and evidence.

This report brings together the main conclusions of the comparisons over time conducted in 2016.

About the monitoring programme

The monitoring standards programme aims to establish whether our qualifications have been comparable over time. For SQA, this means that a course has remained equally demanding over time, even when reviewed or replaced by an equivalent course — ie candidates in one year have been set tasks that were just as demanding as in another year, and similar evidence has received the same judgement.

We monitor qualifications by comparing a sample of National Qualifications and Higher National Qualifications from the current year with their equivalents from previous years. The sample is selected on the following bases:

- ◆ qualifications that have been monitored in the past — and for which we have archived evidence (which provides the ‘over time’ element)
- ◆ recommendations and suggestions from Qualifications Development colleagues
- ◆ recommendations arising from any previous year’s monitoring exercise

National Qualifications

The material we use is available centrally in SQA. Where possible, the results for internally-assessed components are provided. The material consists of:

- ◆ course arrangements documents (which describe the skills, knowledge and understanding, and grade related criteria, and specify the assessment)
- ◆ SQA external examination papers and marking guidelines
- ◆ grade boundaries and grade distributions
- ◆ candidates’ scripts for each of these categories:
 - closest to the minimum mark for a grade A (band 2)
 - closest to the minimum mark for a grade C (band 6)

Higher National Qualifications and Scottish Vocational Qualifications

Centres with candidates who have recently achieved one of the mandatory units in the sample of qualifications are asked to submit assessment material, marking guidelines, instructions to candidates, internal verification forms and the work of two candidates whose evidence exemplifies the standard for the qualification. The panel (see next sub-section) is then provided with the:

- ◆ specifications (which describe the standard)
- ◆ internal assessment instructions, instruments and marking guidelines
- ◆ candidates' scripts

Monitoring panels

Panels monitoring standards in National Qualifications are composed of a principal assessor (PA) and two senior markers (all usually practising teachers). For Higher National Qualifications and Scottish Vocational Qualifications, panels are composed of the senior verifier and two other verifiers (all usually practising subject experts).

How monitoring is carried out

Instructions for the panels, materials, and a questionnaire are made available in confidential web meeting rooms, one for each panel. The panel answers a series of questions about the following aspects:

- ◆ educational context
- ◆ course arrangements/specification
- ◆ assessment
- ◆ marking and grading
- ◆ overall judgement

They start by giving a description of major differences in the educational context of the years they compared, which might help to explain possible changes in attainment. Then they compare the demands set by course arrangements or specifications, as well as the demands set by assessment specifications. They analyse the demands set by the assessment instruments. (For National Qualifications these are the question papers. HN and SVQ assessment instruments are centre-devised, so for this type of qualification there would be various internal assessments of the same units in each year.) They also compare the rigour with which candidates' responses had been judged by comparing the two sets of marking instructions and the quality of scripts with the same grade. The panels report their findings in a form, indicating whether the aspects mentioned were more, no more, or less demanding in 2015.

The 2015–16 programme

This report covers the following comparisons:

National Qualifications

Advanced Higher History	2015 and 2008
Higher English	2015 and 2011
Higher French	2015 and 2013
National 5 Administration and IT	2015 and 2012

Higher National Units

Electrical Engineering	2015 and 2011
Applications of Programmable Logic Controllers	
DC and AC Principles	
Three Phase Systems	
Sports Coaching	2015 and 2012
Sports Coaching with Development of Sport: Graded Unit 1 Coaching and Developing Sport: Graded Unit 1	
Sports Coaching with Development of Sport: Graded Unit 2 Coaching and Developing Sport: Graded Unit 2	
Sports Coaching with Development of Sport: Graded Unit 3 Coaching and Developing Sport: Graded Unit 3	
Communication	
Analysing and Presenting Complex Communication	2015 and 2012
Communication Practical Skills	2015 and 2011

Scottish Vocational Qualifications

Health and Social Care (Adults)	2015 and 2012
Health and Social Care (Children and Young People)	2015 and 2012

Curriculum for Excellence qualifications

2015 was the first year of the new Higher qualifications and the second year of the new National 5 qualifications which were developed to support the Curriculum for Excellence initiative. The standards in Higher and National 5 qualifications in 2015 were therefore being compared with the standards of qualifications which were equivalent in terms of SCQF level but which may have had important differences in the balance of skills, knowledge and understanding being developed and assessed.

In general, qualifications developed to support Curriculum for Excellence might place a greater emphasis on skills development than previous courses although this will vary across courses.

In order to help make the transition to the new National Courses, teachers had access to a large number of documents on the SQA website. These included new course specifications, course assessment specifications, unit specifications and course and unit support notes, as well as specimen and exemplar question papers and marking instructions.

The Higher English, Higher French and National 5 Administration and IT panels had to take any differences in the requirements of the courses across the years into account when making decisions about comparability, and this will have increased the difficulty of their task. However, while describing the relevant differences, each panel has been able to come to a judgement and make a statement about comparability.

2 Findings: National Qualifications

Advanced Higher History

Overall judgement

Taking all factors into consideration, the panel judged that the level of demand of Advanced Higher History in 2015 was no different to the level of demand in 2008.

There has been an improvement in performance over the years. The SQA marking instructions and arrangements documents have been much more transparent in recent years and the updated website has had a significant impact as it allowed access for all.

Teachers and candidates should have a greater knowledge of the function of the assessment and, in the main, this is the case. Candidates seem to be more engaged with the historical debate and realise the importance of argumentation. Historiography is much more embedded and less of a bolt-on.

Educational context

Changes in population

Advanced Higher History continues to be one of the most popular choices amongst the social sciences. Year on year there has been a significant increase in the numbers taking this qualification, with presentations increasing from 1,057 in 2008 to 1,515 in 2015. There is no evidence of an age or gender trend here. In the main, candidates were 17 or 18 years of age and being presented by schools.

Changes in learning and teaching

The CFE reforms in approach to teaching and learning may have had an impact, but more so is the change of focus in assessment. Overall there is a greater alignment in approach.

There is a more overt statement of expectation in National 5 with the link in terms of source analysis and use of knowledge to back analysis in extended writing. Higher History now builds on this using the assessment mechanisms we have at Advanced Higher, particularly the use of a marking grid to direct essay expectations. Also, the sources mirror more closely what is expected at Advanced Higher. The use of historiography at Higher helps build the next step to Advanced Higher.

There has been an increase in candidates utilising SQA marking instructions online, and this has led to a greater understanding of what is expected in Advanced Higher History. Marking schemes have altered to be more transparent in terms of expectation of level of knowledge, analysis and historical interpretations.

Other relevant changes

Advanced Higher History is one of the few subjects in which the exam is centrally marked, and this is a key feature. A large number of staff attend central marking which provides

valuable CPD. Teachers gain marking expertise then go back to their departments and share their expertise with other staff and their pupils. Specialist markers here are vital.

There have also been some Understanding Standards events. Advice has always been given, but there is a greater transparency of information and materials.

Overall

The statistics show that attainment has gone up: there was a 3.3% increase in A–C grades between 2008 and 2015. The marking grid for the dissertation has helped focus candidates and markers on the essay skills required. The marking grid for sources has reinforced the mark allocation for the three different types of question. It has allowed candidates to attain and embraces the best of the holistic and the specific approaches.

Course arrangements/specification

There was little change to the course specification in this time period. If anything the 2015 arrangements document was clearer, with slightly more instructions.

Assessment

There were no significant changes to the assessment between 2008 and 2015. There was a move from 9 to 8 questions in the exam paper, and the number of essay question choices was reduced from 6 to 5, however this has not had an impact on the level of difficulty. Marking was consistent and assessment was also consistent. The use of historiography has remained a consistent benchmark for assessing the analytical skills of candidates.

Marking and grading

Grade boundaries have been maintained at the notional values of 50% for a C and 70% for an A year on year.

The A grade candidates did produce answers which readily provided the knowledge and analysis expected. The source answers reflected an understanding of the technique.

The C grade candidates typically were writing much more of a narrative or a rehearsed answer. Candidate 1 had a better dissertation than exam. This was also true for 3 and 6.

Higher English

Overall judgement

Despite the number of changes to Higher English as a result of the introduction of the new National Qualifications, the panel judged that the level of demand in 2015 was broadly similar to the level of demand in 2011.

Educational context

Changes in population

In 2015 the new Higher English qualification was introduced, with local authorities and schools also having the option of presenting their pupils for the existing Higher if preferred.

A total of 21,150 candidates were presented for the new Higher English in 2015. The remainder sat the existing Higher (14,211). In 2011, a total of 35,361 candidates were presented for Higher English. The presentation total in 2015, combining both Higher English qualifications, was significantly higher than previous years, which could perhaps be attributed to the success of National 5 as an S4 qualification or because more pupils were staying on at school and, as a result, sitting Higher English.

The majority of new Higher candidates had been presented for National 5 in 2014, although a reasonable minority had previously studied Intermediate 2 and Higher English. Most candidates were from S5 classes in schools.

Changes in learning and teaching

The introduction of a Curriculum for Excellence (CFE) in August 2010 for Scottish pupils aged 3–18 was the most significant educational development in Scotland in recent years. While its influence in the senior phase of education would have been minimal by 2011, by 2015 the impact on teaching methodology and content was considerable.

In CFE the development of skills is very much at the forefront and heart of learning and teaching. In particular there is a focus on literacy skills across the curriculum which means candidates in 2015 would have experienced greater emphasis on the importance of literacy across other subjects than in 2011.

There has also been a growing trend to make much greater use of electronic devices both for learning and teaching. Almost every classroom now has a whiteboard with access to a wide range of educational websites — eg SQA marking instructions, Education Scotland, GLOW. And these websites can also be accessed by pupils from their tablets, Kindles and phones. As a result, pupils can become more independent learners. Teachers introduce a concept (use of a variety of registers, narrative voice, imagery), give examples and pupils can access much more on the topic for themselves.

There is a much greater openness about exactly what is required in order to pass or even achieve a grade A. This sharing of standards has led to a greater confidence on the part of candidates, because they know exactly what is expected of them. The materials circulated at Higher English workshops and produced as teaching materials by Education Scotland have provided a firm basis for a shared understanding by both teachers and pupils of the standard set.

There are now common 'signal words' in questions across a range of subjects and levels in new Highers, eg explain, identify, which allow candidates to recognise what is required in certain types of questions. In 2011 the skills required for Higher English, eg analysis, evaluation, were much more specific to that particular subject.

To support learning and teaching of the new Higher English course, a full specimen paper and a full exemplar paper (both covering papers 1 and 2) were made available on SQA's website, as well as additional support materials, comprising candidate answers on paper 1, with commentaries, and a selection of portfolio writing pieces, both broadly discursive and broadly creative, along with detailed commentaries.

Other relevant changes

The nature of the assessment at Standard Grade and at Higher in English did not dovetail in the way in which National 5 English and Higher now does. Candidates sitting Higher English are following a course which closely resembles National 5 and have engaged in close reading, Scottish text and critical essay activities which provide a natural progression for their Higher studies in English. The skills which they develop at National 5 lead on to their more advanced use at Higher. In 2011, Standard Grade at SCQF 5 did not necessarily correlate with Higher at SCQF 6. Traditionally taught over two years, the focus and pace in Standard Grade were very different and so the link with skills, knowledge and understanding required at Higher was not so apparent.

Course assessment specification

Despite the differences in the 2015 course arrangements and assessment specification, on the whole, they were judged to be as demanding as the 2011 course arrangements.

In 2015 the final course assessment was made up of three components: paper 1 (close reading/reading for understanding, analysis and evaluation), paper 2 (critical reading/critical essay) and the portfolio. These three components remained broadly consistent, although the weightings of the components changed with the introduction of the new Higher and the new Scottish textual analysis changed paper 2 significantly.

In paper 1 there were 30 marks worth of questions instead of 50 in 2011 but candidates were no longer only being assessed on their close reading skills but also their broader reading. Passage 2 was for comparison purposes only and had no questions to support candidates in their reading. This broadened the skills required.

The breadth of knowledge required was increased in paper 2 as candidates had to study a Scottish text — or texts in the case of poetry and short story — and be able to answer in detail across the text(s). This replaced the second critical essay in the 2011 paper which was essentially assessing the same skills twice.

In 2015 although candidates had to study a Scottish text in depth, they did not have to write two critical essays in sustained prose answers. The division of marks may have made the 2015 specifications slightly less of a challenge. In 2015 the portfolio increased from 20% to 30% of the marks — perhaps taking a little pressure off the question paper components. Also, some candidates struggle with close reading in paper 1 and this was decreased from 40% to 30% of the total.

The 2015 course comprised two mandatory units: Analysis and Evaluation and Creation and Production. Thus the course involved a wide range of skills: reading and listening, talking and writing, as well as awareness of audience and purpose. The course's added value focused on challenge and application, the ability to understand, analyse and evaluate

detailed and complex unseen written texts; to understand, analyse and evaluate detailed and complex texts in the contexts of literature, language or media, including Scottish literature; and to apply language skills in the creation of texts. Literacy and thinking skills were also built into the course.

The 2011 course comprised two units: Language Study and Literary Study, as part of an integrated programme of study. Candidates developed the skills of communicating and understanding, through spoken and written language. The course involved receptive skills: reading and listening, as well as productive skills: writing and talking. Its fundamental aims were to promote competence, growth and enrichment, in preparation for further study, the world of work and the future pursuit of linguistic and literary pleasure.

Assessment

On the whole, the assessment in 2015 was judged to be of a similar demand to the assessment in 2011.

The structure of the 2015 new Higher assessment was similar to that of the 2011 Higher, with some significant differences. One is the different weighting of the component parts, as demonstrated below:

Component	2011 Higher	2015 new Higher
Paper 1: Reading for understanding, analysis and evaluation	Marked out of 50 and converted into a mark out of 40% of total	Marked out of 30: 30% of total
Paper 2: Critical essay/critical reading	Two critical essays: marked out of 25 marks each. Converted into a mark out of 40% of total	One Scottish textual analysis (marked out of 20) and one critical essay (marked out of 20): combined, worth 40% of total
Component 3: Writing folio/portfolio	Two writing pieces: marked out of 25 each. Converted into a mark out of 20% of total.	Two writing pieces: marked out of 15 each. Combined, worth 30% of total.

Paper 1: Close reading/reading for understanding, analysis and evaluation

The timing of paper 1 in 2015 was shorter than in 2011: 1 hour 30 minutes instead of 1 hour 45 minutes in 2011. However, the content of the paper was also reduced. In 2011, paper 1 comprised two passages, with questions on each, including a 5-mark question on both passages, totalling 50 marks. In 2015, there were specific questions on only passage 1, worth 25 marks. Candidates read passage 2 independent of the prompts of specific questions, seeking key ideas and evidence for a 5-mark comparative question on both passages. Thus, although there was less time in 2015, there were fewer questions for candidates to answer in the time allowed. The level of challenge in the unseen non-fiction passages was consistent: all four passages were taken from broadsheet newspapers. The paper 1 questions in 2015 and 2011 were similar in content. In 2015, command words were used specifically, consistently and clearly. These were: 'identify', 'explain', 'analyse',

‘summarise’ and ‘evaluate’. In 2011, the command words ‘explain’ and ‘show’ were used for a variety of questions.

The following table represents the skills assessed for both years:

Skill	2015 (with % of paper total)	2011 (with % of paper total)
Understanding	9/30 : 30%	16/50 : 32%
Analysis	14/30 : 47% (approx.)	26/50 : 52%
Evaluation	2/30 : 6.6%	3/50 : 6%
Comparative questions. On both passages	5/30 : 16.7%	5/50 : 10%

It can be seen that, broadly, the percentage of paper 1 assessing understanding and evaluation skills has remained consistent, whereas the analysis element was greater in 2011 and the comparative question on both passages — while worth the same number of marks in each — represents a higher percentage of the total marks in 2015. Despite the similar wording in the question, the comparative question was a different kind of task in 2015, relying as it does on independent breaking down of passage 2 into key ideas and evidence, without the support of questions to take the candidates through this passage. As such, it is an investigative reading task, in line with CfE.

Paper 2: Critical essay/critical reading

The timing of this paper remained consistent from 2011 to 2015: 1 hour 30 minutes. 2015 saw the introduction of the compulsory Scottish literature element in the form of the Scottish textual analysis, worth 20 marks. Candidates read an extract or shorter text, previously studied in class, from a selection of fourteen. The analysis involved a series of shorter questions and one longer question. In the three or four shorter questions on the text, worth 10 marks in total, candidates demonstrated their understanding and, especially, analysis skills. The final question, worth 10 marks, required candidates to link the extract or shorter text with the rest of the text/s studied by exploring an element of the writer’s work. This might be thematic, character-based or technique-based. There was no equivalent to this task in the 2011 Higher: instead the candidates were required to write two critical essays.

In the second part of the critical reading paper of 2015, the candidates chose one critical essay from a selection of genres: drama, prose fiction, prose non-fiction, poetry, film/ TV media and language. This part of the paper was very similar to the critical essay paper of 2011, in which the candidates were required to choose two essay questions, on different genres, from the same selection of genres as in the 2015 paper. In the 2011 paper, there were four questions per genre in all but the prose fiction section (five questions) and prose non-fiction (three questions). In the 2015 paper, there were three questions per genre. The guiding principle in the 2015 paper was that, across any genre section, there should be scope for candidates to answer on any text studied for Higher, and that the questions should be open and accessible. This does not mean that they were easier than in previous years. In both papers, the essay questions were typically about features such as a key character, theme, technique or episode and allowed the candidates to demonstrate their knowledge

and understanding of the text and their analytical and evaluative skills, as well as their ability to construct a coherent line of argument in consistently accurate English.

Component 3 (portfolio)

The portfolio in 2015 was very similar to that from 2011. In both years, candidates were required to submit two pieces of coursework, one broadly discursive and one broadly creative. The writing folio is already established in centres.

Marking and grading

On balance, it was judged that the combination of grade boundaries, question paper and marking instructions was no more demanding in 2015 than in 2011.

In the 2015 paper 2, the Scottish text section boosted candidates' marks, particularly the awarding of three marks for quotation in the final question. The portfolio, completed without time constraints, was also a higher proportion of the assessment (30% rather than 20%) in 2015. Having more time to complete fewer questions in paper 1 is also likely to have worked to the candidates' advantage. The combination of these factors meant the 2015 examination was no more demanding than before. A very slight reduction in demand in a couple of areas has been offset by the grade boundary decisions.

The impact on a candidate whose work is technically inaccurate was reduced. In 2011 inaccuracies would have significantly affected 40% of their paper (ie two critical essays), whereas in 2015 the impact was reduced to 20% because of the changes to paper 2.

In addition, the new marking strategy for the 5-mark comparison question in paper 1 allowed candidates to gain up to 4 marks for identifying two key areas with evidence, whereas in 2011 such a candidate would not have been awarded any more than 2 marks. It must be noted though that this question, although similar in appearance, was changed significantly in terms of requirements.

The marking instructions for 2011 and 2015 had many similarities. However, there were significant differences. In paper 1, half marks were awarded in 2011 but not in 2015. There were required, 'formulaic' approaches to marking certain questions in 2011 which were replaced in 2015 with a more open approach, in line with CFE. In the comparative question on both passages, in both years, 3 out of 5 marks were awarded for key ideas and the remaining 2 marks for evidence. However, in 2015, marks could be awarded for evidence even if the candidate had not scored the total of 3 marks for key ideas; in 2011, the 3 marks for key ideas were a 'gateway' to the final 2 marks. In paper 2, the critical essay was assessed holistically using criteria which related to key aspects of critical writing. In 2011, the marks, out of 25, were 'pegged' at 25, 23, 21 and so on. In 2015, the critical essay was marked out of 20 and every mark could be awarded. In the writing folio, each piece was marked holistically, using criteria which related to key skills of discursive or creative writing. In 2011, the marks, out of 25, were pegged at 25, 23, 21 and so on. In 2015, each portfolio piece was marked out of 15 and all marks could be used. The maximum word limit in the folio writing was 1,300 words, with pieces exceeding this (in 2011) to be referred to the principal assessor for possible penalty. In 2015, there was a tolerance of 10% over the maximum, beyond which pieces were to be referred to the principal assessor for penalty. In 2011, markers were instructed that any folio piece of fewer than 650 words was to be

awarded a maximum of 11 out of 25; in 2015 there was no such instruction, though very short pieces were likely to be self-penalising.

The grade boundary decision for 2011 placed a C at 47% and A at 64%. In 2015 the decision placed C at 56% and A at 74%. The 2015 decision reflected the fact that the 2015 assessment proved slightly less demanding than intended, in both papers. Both papers 1 and 2 proved to be 3 marks less demanding than intended, raising the C boundary from notional 50% to 56%.

It must first be noted that in 2011 there was no equivalent to the paper 2 Scottish textual analysis which formed 20% of the 2015 paper, so comparisons can be only of limited accuracy. Similarly, in paper 1, the comparative question on both passages was very different in 2015 and 2011, both in the nature of the task, the level of support and the time available in the exam to accomplish it. It should also be noted that the three components assessed different skills. The standard components which contribute to a C or A candidate's overall performance need not be consistent and, indeed, often were not so. For example, a C candidate might have a folio which is of a high standard and a paper 1 performance which is of a much less confident standard.

In general there were no discernible differences in terms of the quality of the scripts, candidate approaches to assessment, and the nature of the responses to the various tasks. It must be noted that not all elements were at the same level, eg in some scripts the candidate scored very highly in one element but poorly elsewhere, whereas another candidate scored equally across all three papers. It was felt that, from looking at the scripts provided, candidates with a similar quality of scripts had been assessed equitably and in a consistent manner.

Higher French

Overall

Taking all factors into consideration, the panel judged that the level of demand of Higher French in 2015 was broadly similar to the level of demand in 2013.

Educational context

Changes in population

2015 saw the introduction of the new Higher French examination for the first time. As the previous Higher was still on offer to candidates, the number of presentations was split between the two qualifications. As a result, the number of candidates presented for the new Higher in 2015 showed a significant decrease from the number of candidates presented in 2013 (2,751 compared to 4,239 in 2013). However, 1,821 candidates sat the previous Higher French in 2015 so the number of candidates taking a Higher in French went up between 2013 and 2015 (4,572 in 2015).

Changes in learning and teaching

The new Higher was benchmarked against the previous Higher, which meant the general approach to learning and teaching and the standard expected of candidates in the final exam had not changed. The four skills of listening, reading, writing and talking were still assessed through the Higher course at the end of units as part of the learning and teaching process. Changes to the course included the introduction of the four contexts of society, learning, employability and culture. This was to ensure that there was a hierarchical progression from National 5 and to ensure that candidates could build more easily on prior learning. In order to support this change, teachers were provided with a list of suggestions for context development to reflect the rationale of Curriculum for Excellence; to allow more personalisation and choice in learning and teaching; and to make topic areas more relevant and meaningful to candidates.

There is more flexibility in the marking of unit assessments in the new Higher which allows teachers and lecturers to use their professional judgement. A holistic approach is now encouraged especially in unit assessments.

In order to help make the transition to the new Higher, teachers had access to a large number of documents on SQA's website. These included Higher course specifications, course assessment specifications, unit specifications and course and unit support notes. These documents outlined the changes and expectations, and gave guidelines on how to approach learning and teaching.

SQA also produced a specimen question paper which exemplified the expectations of the new qualification. An exemplar question paper, based on the previous Higher was also made available to teachers to demonstrate these expectations further. In addition, a document entitled *Guidance on the use of past paper questions for Higher French* demonstrated how past exam papers from the previous Higher could be used to prepare candidates for the examination. SQA also held a series of subject implementation events across the country to

support teachers in delivering the new qualification. All of the above helped ensure that teachers were well placed to deliver the new qualification.

Overall

Overall, the effect of these changes should have had little impact on the ability of candidates to meet the demands made by both the syllabus and question paper.

Course assessment specification

On balance, the course specification and course assessment specification in 2015 were judged to be as demanding as the course arrangements in 2013. The depth of skills, knowledge and understanding expected from candidates in 2015 was similar to the expectation in 2013.

Candidates were still assessed in the same listening, reading, talking and writing skills throughout the year and at the end of the year. The three recommended themes present in the previous Higher French were transformed into the four contexts of society, learning, employability and culture.

The overall purpose questions in listening and reading papers were a new element in the 2015 external and internal assessments.

The 2013 course arrangements were more prescriptive regarding unit assessments. They recommended that the reading assessment was completed within one teaching period and that the listening assessment was played up to three times. No such required elements appeared in the 2015 course specification and course assessment specification. This enabled the teacher/lecturer to use their professional judgement to conduct the assessments referring to the assessment guidelines. The optional unit (extended reading and viewing or language in work) did not appear in the 2015 specifications. The extended reading and viewing element was integrated in the film and literature element of the course and the language in work was an integral part of the employability element.

Assessment

On balance, the assessment in 2015 was judged to be no more demanding than in 2013.

The structure of the 2015 course assessment was different to the structure in 2013. In 2013 the written papers accounted for 75% of the total examination, whereas in 2015 they accounted for 70% of the total examination. The assessment of speaking in 2013 contributed to 25% of the overall course assessment and the performance of talking in 2015 was 30%. The additional 5% was for sustaining performance. Although this was not a characteristic of the 2013 assessment of speaking, there was no change to the format of the task which required candidates to do a presentation and then a follow-up discussion. Therefore the level of demand remained the same in this component.

Within all the 2015 papers (in the new Higher) all four contexts were covered.

The 2015 reading and listening paper had an overall purpose question which was a new element compared to 2013.

The overall purpose question in listening was supported with a choice of three answers. The candidates did well in this question as the options were clear to the candidates. Despite changes to the structure of the paper and the introduction of optionality, the level of language remained the same and in both 2013 and 2015 the number of marks available was broadly similar. Candidates in both years were required to give detailed answers to questions to gain the available marks. The structure of the listening paper saw a marked change from 2013 as the listening element of the paper now had two items — a monologue worth 8 marks and a dialogue worth 12 marks — as opposed to one dialogue worth 20 marks in the 2013 paper. Candidates in 2015 performed better in listening than they had in the 2013 paper and they related well to the topic of technology in learning and preparation for work experience abroad.

In both 2013 and 2015 the level of language and the number of marks available for reading questions was broadly similar. In the 2013 reading paper the number of lines that candidates needed to refer to in each question was significantly larger than in the 2015 paper. Candidates may have spent more time on each question, thus allowing for less time to check their work at the end. The layout of the 2015 reading paper was different. In the previous Higher the layout of the text was over two columns rather than a single column in the new Higher.

In the reading and directed writing paper, the topic of mobile phones was one to which candidates related well in comparison to the topic of owning a second home in the country in 2013, which was perhaps less accessible. A number of the comprehension questions had optionality in the 2015 paper which meant there were several ways of gaining the available marks. This was not a characteristic of the 2013 paper. Candidates tended to do better in these types of questions than in questions which demanded a greater level of detail. As a result, candidates performed better overall in the comprehension questions in 2015 than they had done in 2013. Most candidates also gained full marks for the new overall purpose question.

In directed writing, the reduction in the number of bullet points from six in 2013 to four in 2015, and the fact that candidates had a choice of scenarios in the 2015 paper, made the paper more accessible to candidates and resulted in candidates achieving slightly higher marks in this element than they had done in the 2013 paper. The weighting of this paper had also changed from 2013 as it was now worth 10% and not 15% of the total examination. Candidates seemed to have coped well with the element of choice in directed writing in the new Higher.

Based on the evidence, one member of the panel felt that the 2015 paper was slightly less demanding than before, due to the fact that the format of the questions meant that only 10% was awarded for the directed writing question rather than the maximum 15% in previous years. They felt that it would be easier for candidates to pick up the extra 5% in an oral exercise rather than a written exercise. Also there was a greater degree of optionality in the answers to the reading paper questions which meant that candidates had more ways of gaining a point.

Marking and grading

The number of candidates who achieved grades A and B increased in 2015 while the number achieving grades C, D and No Award decreased.

- ◆ Grade A passes increased from 43.1% in 2013 to 46.0% in 2015.
- ◆ Grade B passes increased from 20.8% in 2013 to 24.8% in 2015.
- ◆ Grade C passes decreased from 19.1% in 2013 to 16.9% in 2015.
- ◆ Grade D passes decreased from 7.3% in 2013 to 5.0% in 2015.
- ◆ No Awards decreased from 9.8% in 2013 to 7.3% in 2015.

In terms of the number of marks available for individual reading and listening questions, these were broadly similar across both papers, but the level of detail required in answers in 2013 was greater than that required in 2015. Five out of ten questions in the 2015 reading paper had alternative answers and three of the ten questions had optionality. Only one question in the 2013 reading paper allowed a range of answers.

Listening was similar, although the 2013 marking instructions allowed more alternative ways of getting the marks than the reading paper. There were more 1-mark questions in the 2015 paper which made it more accessible to candidates.

The marking instructions in both years were detailed and markers were given clear examples of unacceptable and acceptable answers.

Candidate performance in the translation question was better in 2013 than in 2015. The allocation of fewer marks to directed writing resulted in candidates performing slightly better in this element than they had done in the 2013 paper. If taken as a percentage of the paper, the best performance was in 2015 but only marginally so.

On the whole, the 2015 paper showed the best candidate performance across all components. The difference in the structure of the 2015 paper had a positive impact on candidate performance but the fact that the grade boundary was adjusted in 2015 by 2 marks to take account of the difference in weighting of components, meant that the 2015 paper was no less demanding than that of 2013.

National 5 Administration and IT

Overall judgement

Despite a number of differences in the qualifications, overall the panel judged that there was no discernible difference in the level of demand of National 5 Administration and IT in 2015 compared with Intermediate 2 Administration in 2012.

Educational context

Changes in population

Compared with Intermediate 2 in 2012 the number of presentations for National 5 Administration and IT in 2015 rose from 3,585 to 5,619 in 2015; an increase of 57%.

In 2012 a number of candidates from S3 were presented for Intermediate 2, but this number fell dramatically to almost zero in 2015. This was due to S1–S3 broad general education demands. The number of candidates from S4 more than doubled over the time period; and this is probably because S4 candidates would have been sitting Standard Grades in 2012.

Compared with Intermediate 2, the number of candidates from S5 sitting National 5 Administration fell by half between 2012 and 2015. This could be due to the accessibility of the new Higher for candidates with no previous knowledge. In 2012, S5 candidates with no previous knowledge would have been advised to sit Intermediate 2.

Changes in learning and teaching

There is now more emphasis on skills-based learning within classrooms and there is more active learning in line with CFE methodologies. In 2015, teaching and learning included more in-depth development of problem solving skills whereas in 2012 there was less focus on developing these skills. The improved problem solving skills of candidates helps to prepare them better for the world of work. A broader range of ICT skills is now being delivered within the curriculum, most of these skills being related to real-life scenarios; again developing transferable skills.

Other relevant changes

Candidates would have been more confident in searching for information on the internet in 2015 and using the internet in a wider context.

Course assessment specification

On the whole, the course specification and the course assessment specification in 2015 were judged to be more demanding than the course arrangements in 2012 in terms of the breadth and depth of skills required.

Candidates were expected to demonstrate a greater breadth of skills from a range of software applications in the external course assessment. The course assessment in 2015 assessed skills from all three units, whereas in 2012 skills were only assessed from one of the three units in the practical paper and one of the three units in the written paper.

In 2015, candidates were required to use a wide range of problem solving skills throughout both the internal and external course assessment, but in 2012 instructions were provided in list format and were more prescriptive.

Assessment

The 2015 paper was more demanding in terms of the problem solving aspect of the way questions were asked. The skills required were no more demanding than in 2012. Though a greater breadth of applications was assessed in 2015, there was no greater depth of the skills assessed. In 2015 the paper was more demanding because the paper had a highly integrated approach covering the whole course, whereas in 2012 there were two separate papers assessing theory and IT. The 2012 IT paper had three specific tasks each one focusing on one piece of software, but the 2015 paper had 14 tasks which assessed more software applications in a random order.

The problem solving aspect had increased in 2015 because candidates were required to use information from previous tasks to complete other tasks within the paper. Although the theory section in the 2015 paper had fewer questions than the 2012 exam paper, they were worth fewer marks, thus requiring candidates to have a greater breadth, rather than depth of knowledge as was previously required.

However, the 2015 paper was completed within 4 hours outwith the examination diet, whereas the 2012 paper was completed as two papers — paper 1 (theory) in 1 hour and paper 2 (IT) in 1 hour 20 minutes — within the examination diet. There was less theory in the 2015 course, however as it was integrated into the IT paper this increased the challenge of the theory in the 2015 paper.

The 2015 National 5 course had less keyboarding in the paper and had a greater focus on IT skills.

Marking and grading

The combination of grade boundaries, question paper and marking instructions was no more demanding in 2015 than in 2012.

In 2012 the IT paper was worth 60 marks and theory worth 40 marks. In 2015 the course assessment was worth 100 marks of which a maximum of 11 marks were theory. Although the number of marks for the IT paper in 2012 was lower than the 2015 paper, the additional marks were awarded to the additional software which was being assessed.

In 2015 there was a more equal spread of marks across each software application than there was in 2012.

The distribution of candidates across the grade range was as follows:

Year	A	A–B	A–C	A–D	NA
2012	14.2%	40.5%	71.0%	80.7%	19.3%
2015	26.4%	55.4%	78.5%	86.1%	13.9%

This shows that in 2015 a greater percentage of candidates attained higher grades than in 2012; this percentage becomes a smaller increase at lower grades.

The grade boundaries in 2012 were 82, 69, 59, 49, 44, and in 2015 they were 83, 70, 60, 50, 45.

There were no noticeable differences in the quality of the candidate evidence looked at from each year.

3 Findings: Higher National Units

Electrical Engineering

Educational context

Changes in teaching practice

Teaching practices remained relatively unchanged between 2011 and 2015, although in 2015 there was, and continues to be, an increased emphasis in involving candidates in:

- ◆ the reviewing, planning and delivery of their learning and class activities
- ◆ using ICT resources and college virtual learning environments
- ◆ developing responsibility for their learning; and
- ◆ developing skills for learning, life and work through a variety of activities such as peer mentoring and participation in external competitions

New programmable logic controllers which possess new technologies became available between 2011 and 2015, which might have been expected to have led to some changes to teaching content and approaches.

Changes related to candidates

The diversity of candidates has continued to increase, and some centres have seen an increase in students whose first language is not English. Technical language and descriptive materials can sometimes be more challenging for these candidates. However, there is no evidence of national standards being compromised in the assessment of these Engineering units.

With competition for university places being greater in the STEM subjects more candidates with Higher passes in Mathematics and Physics at grades C or B are taking the HNC and HND in Electrical Engineering. Thus, the number of candidates with better Higher passes might have been greater in 2015 compared with 2011. This would also have been reflected in the number of candidates passing units in the group award HNC and HND Electrical Engineering.

Other relevant changes

In 2014, the Mathematics unit within the HN Electrical Engineering award that provides the underpinning mathematics knowledge and skills for candidates undertaking units FY9E 34 and DN47 34 was replaced by a revised version. It is too early to gauge whether this has had any impact on the standards of candidate performance in any of the Electrical Engineering units.

All the units were included in SQA's quinquennial review of the HN Electrical Engineering award in 2010. For the units DG31 34 Applications of Programmable Logic Controllers and DN47 34 Three Phase Systems, the unit specifications have remained unaltered since their initial publications in 2004 and 2005 respectively. Although unit FY9E 34 was revised in 2011, the only change which resulted was to the title and number of the unit.

Unit: Applications of Programmable Logic Controllers

Overall judgement

The level of demand was judged by the panel to be the same in 2011 and 2015. The unit specifications, statements of standards, instruments of assessments, and quality and judgements of evidence were of the same standard for both years.

Specification

The Applications of Programmable Logic Controllers unit did not change between 2011 and 2015 and therefore all unit requirements remained the same.

Assessment

Instruments of assessment were considered to be equally demanding in 2015 and 2011. Centres continued to use a mix of the SQA-produced assessment exemplars and their own internally devised assessments. Where centres had created their own assessments, the exams and assignments were judged to be of the same standard as the SQA exemplars, and in most cases they were found to be very similar to them. The SQA assessments in both 2011 and 2015 were based on a 1 hour 30 minutes test paper which covered the knowledge and understanding requirements set out in outcomes 1 and 2, and an eight hour assignment for outcome 3. The assignment required the candidates to develop a program for a programmable logic controller to solve an engineering problem, enter the program into a programmable logic controller and test the operation of the program. Candidates were also required to produce a report covering various aspects of outcome 3 including safety. Assessment instruments were either identical or similar in content and standard in 2011 and 2015.

Quality and judgement of evidence

The sample of evidence showed that centres were marking accurately, in line with the marking schemes provided with the assessment instruments. Some evidence of internal verification could be seen on assessment instruments and candidate work from some centres. Marks allocated to parts of questions were clearly visible. There was reasonable written feedback to candidates on where they had performed well and where they had gone wrong in questions. Some candidate drawings, particularly block diagrams, were poorly presented (it would be normal to expect Engineering candidates to produce drawings of at least a reasonable quality). Some candidates written answers were hard to read.

Unit: DC and AC Principles

Overall judgement

The level of demand was judged by the panel to be the same in 2011 and 2015. The unit specifications, statements of standards, instruments of assessments, and quality and judgements of evidence were of the same standard for both years.

Specification

The only difference between the Single Phase AC Circuits unit and the DC and AC Principles unit was the change in title. All other requirements remained the same.

Assessment

Instruments of assessment were considered to be equally demanding in 2015 and 2011. Centres continued to use a mix of the SQA-produced assessment exemplars and their own internally devised assessments. Where centres had created their own assessments, the exams and assignments were judged to be of the same standard as the SQA exemplars, and in most cases they were found to be very similar to them. There had been no changes made to the assessment requirements in the statements of standards since the units were first validated in 2004 and 2005.

The assessment papers in both 2011 and 2015 were based on a single test taken by candidates under closed-book, supervised conditions. The duration of the test was 1 hour and 30 minutes. The variation in standard of assessment papers between 2011 and 2015 was minimal. Some centres used the assessment exemplar papers repeatedly which was not what they were designed for (ie only to be used the first time the centre delivers the unit). The external verification team has actively encouraged centres to develop alternative assessments for the DC and AC Principles unit. However, with staffing levels in FE colleges being tight it is proving difficult for college staff to produce alternative assessments.

Quality and judgement of evidence

The sample of evidence from 2015 was considered to be of the same quality and to have been judged the same as that from 2011. No evidence of second marking of candidate scripts was observed in the sample of candidate scripts provided for the monitoring exercise. While marks allocated to parts of questions were clearly present there was only limited written feedback to candidates on where they had gone wrong in questions. This is slightly disappointing as an opportunity to help candidates learn is being missed, although it is accepted that feedback may have been given to candidates verbally.

Unit: Three Phase Systems

Overall judgement

The level of demand was judged by the panel to be the same in 2011 and 2015. The unit specifications, statements of standards, instruments of assessments, and quality and judgements of evidence were of the same standard for both years.

Specification

The Three Phase Systems unit had not changed between 2011 and 2015 so all unit requirements remained the same.

Assessment

Instruments of assessment were considered to be equally demanding in 2015 and 2011. Centres continued to use a mix of the SQA-produced assessment exemplars and their own internally devised assessments. Where centres had created their own assessments, the exams and assignments were judged to be of the same standard as the SQA exemplars, and in most cases they were found to be very similar to them. There had been no changes made to the assessment requirements in the statements of standards since the units were first validated in 2004 and 2005.

The assessment papers in both 2011 and 2015 were based on a single test taken by candidates under closed-book, supervised conditions. The duration of the test was 2 hours. The variation in standards of assessment papers in 2011 and 2015 were minimal. Some centres used the assessment exemplar paper repeatedly, although it was designed to only be used the first time centres deliver the unit.

The external verification team has actively encouraged centres to develop alternative assessments for the Three Phase Systems unit. However, with staffing levels in FE colleges being tight it is proving difficult for college staff to produce alternative assessments.

Quality and judgement of evidence

The sample of evidence from 2015 was considered to be the same quality and to have been judged the same as that from 2011. No evidence of second marking of candidate scripts was observed in the sample of candidate scripts provided for the monitoring exercise. While marks allocated to parts of questions were clearly present there was only limited written feedback to candidates on where they had gone wrong in questions. This is slightly disappointing as an opportunity to help candidates learn is being missed, although it is accepted that feedback may have been given to candidates verbally.

Sports Coaching

Units

- ◆ Sports Coaching with Development of Sport: Graded Unit 1 (DT4P 34)
- ◆ Coaching and Developing Sport: Graded Unit 1 (FW68 34)
- ◆ Sports Coaching with Development of Sport: Graded Unit 2 (DT4R 35)
- ◆ Coaching And Developing Sport: Graded Unit 2 (FY00 35)
- ◆ Sports Coaching with Development of Sport: Graded Unit 3 (DT4T 35)
- ◆ Coaching and Developing Sport: Graded Unit 3 (FY01 35)

Overall judgement

Although fundamentally many principles remained the same in terms of judgement of candidate evidence, the quantity of evidence required for, and therefore the demand of, graded units 1 and 2 was greater in the units archived in 2015 (FW68 34 and FY00 35) than in those archived in 2012 (DT4P 34 and DT4R 35). This was the result of a full review of the group award and changes to the relevant National Occupational Standards.

The graded unit 3 that was archived in 2015 (FY01 35) however, experienced less of an impact in terms of change and as a result more or less remained the same as the graded unit 3 that was archived in 2012 (DT4T 35) in terms of assessment demand.

Educational context

Changes in teaching practice

While not identifying any changes in teaching practice as such, the panel indicated that the HNC/D group award and the associated graded units had been revised prior to 2015. The revised group award, Coaching and Developing Sport (GD5R 16) contained new graded units FW68 34, FY00 35 and FY01 35, hereafter referred to as 'the new graded units'. The graded units for the old group award, Sports Coaching with Development of Sport (G81P 16) were DT4P 34, DT4R 35 and DT4T 35, hereafter referred to as 'the old graded units'.

Although the new group award (GD5R 16) started in 2011, the old group award was still in use in 2012. Examples of assessed work for the old graded units were therefore archived in 2012 for future monitoring purposes. The old group award lapsed in 2011 and finished in 2015. Examples of assessed work for the new graded units were archived in 2015 in order to compare with those archived in 2012.

The panel indicated that the new graded units were now better aligned to the graded unit design and incorporated clearer guidance on assessment. The panel also indicated that the new graded unit 1 and graded unit 2 required a greater amount of evidence to be gathered in comparison with the old graded units. This was related to changes in National Occupational Standards as mentioned below. The panel was clear that these changes had been well supported by SQA in terms of support events and guidance material.

Changes in the workplace

The panel indicated that prior to 2015 there had been some changes in the workplace with the development of new National Occupational Standards and further development in governing body coaching methodology. Coaching had become more centred on the needs of the person or group being coached and in the way that learning occurs rather than the 'standard' method of delivery. Codes of conduct had also moved on in some sports requiring assessors to ensure that they kept up to date with the pace of change. The panel indicated that the new graded units in 2015 were aligned to these new National Occupational Standards and as a result there was an increase in the required evidence criteria for graded unit 1 and graded unit 2.

Changes in candidates

The panel was not able to identify any changes in the characteristics of candidates entering for these graded units. Entry criteria to the awards remain the same as does the associated SCQF levelling.

Other relevant changes

Other relevant changes mentioned were specific changes made to the actual sport, conduct and ethics, or delivery mode used by the candidate; and changes to legal requirements such as EDI and confidentiality may be more specifically related to graded unit 3.

Overall

There was little evidence to suggest that the 2015 candidate group was more or less able than previous year groups. The clarification and changes to the SQA marking guidance ensure that candidates' abilities are being more clearly assessed. Assessment is better focused on the unit and the demands of the tasks. Candidates achieving success will be better placed to contribute in the workplace as the knowledge and skills acquired are more tightly focused on the needs of the industry. However, although the grade related criteria have not changed, 2015 candidates were required to generate more evidence to meet these criteria.

Specification

Panel members were asked to rate differences between the old and new specifications in terms of whether the changes made the new specifications more, no more or less demanding than the old specifications. All panel members rated changes to knowledge and skills, performance criteria, assessment guidelines, and guidance on delivery and assessment as making the new specifications more demanding than the old specifications. No changes were rated as making the new specifications less demanding.

In their subsequent comments members of the panel expressed the view that additions to the new specifications had clarified requirements and should lead to more consistent assessment judgements. However, it was again mentioned that the new graded units 1 and 2 required a greater amount of evidence to be generated compared with the old specifications.

Assessment

Panel members were asked to rate differences between the old and new assessments in terms of whether the changes made the new assessments more, no more or less demanding than the old assessments. The general approach in the assessment instrument and the coverage of the standards were consistently rated as making the new assessments more demanding than the old assessments. No changes to the assessment were rated as making the new assessment less demanding.

In their subsequent comments panel members again expressed the view that changes made to the graded units were intended to clarify requirements and lead to greater consistency in assessment judgements. However, it was also mentioned that, although fundamentally many principles remained the same in terms of judgement of candidate evidence, the quantity of evidence required has risen as a result of the nature of the new assessment tasks.

Quality and judgement of evidence

Panel members indicated that the quality of the evidence archived in 2015 was higher than in 2012 but had been judged in the same way.

Communication

Educational context

Changes in teaching practice

The Communication units have a 'servicing' function, providing skills development across a wide range of HNC/D awards. Several of these awards have been reviewed and revalidated in recent years, with changes to the frameworks and to other units. This could have potentially affected demands on candidates and influenced teaching practice. These Communication units were reviewed and rewritten in 2014, at which time some centres may have decided to offer only the newer versions. By 2018, it should be possible to comment on the effect (if any) of the new units. As Communication Practical Skills is mandatory in only one framework there has been an overall reduction in delivery of this unit.

Other relevant changes

The restructuring and merger of colleges over recent years has had a significant impact on management and delivery of the subject area. A corresponding reduction in external verification events has resulted in less direct SQA contact with every campus site. There have been no College Development Network central events for HN Communication. Several assessment support packs for the units have, however, been developed by SQA in recent years and are available on the secure site.

Overall

Colleges are still adapting to the effects of mergers that have affected cross-campus delivery, particularly of Core Skills. Although a number of useful, contextualised assessment support packs for the units have been made available, some centres have continued to use older assessment materials. The imminent lapsing of these units and uncertainties over cross-campus quality assurance standardisation issues may have led to some conservative approaches during 2015.

Unit: Analysing and Presenting Complex Communications

Overall judgement

Although it was difficult to make judgements on the candidate evidence available, taking all evidence into account the level of demand for the unit was judged by the panel to be broadly the same in 2011 and 2015. However, on the limited candidate evidence available there may be cause for concern in relation to unnecessary assessment burden in both years, despite SQA exemplars exemplifying briefer and more straightforward approaches.

Specification

The unit standards were no more demanding than before. The unit specification was unchanged during this period.

Assessment

In general, the instruments of assessment were considered to be equally demanding in 2015 and 2011. However, although the majority of candidates seem to be meeting the evidence requirements of the units, the context and content for skills development may be interpreted according to vocational needs and intended destination. Thus, there continues to be a certain variation between centres in the demands of tasks set. In 2015 as in 2011, some candidates were being challenged more than others in the context of the award being undertaken. Centres that were over-assessing in 2011 continued to do so in 2015. It may be that in some local areas the entry qualifications of candidates are higher than in others, encouraging centres to aim beyond the achievement of basic competence and focus on skills enhancement.

Recent SQA advice and exemplification has focused on interpretation of standards contextualised for the vocational award, and on assessment tasks that may be perceived as relevant to current business issues. A number of colleges are still using original (2000 and older) assessment materials — these are broadly valid but outdated.

Quality and judgement of evidence

The evidence from both years was judged to be of the same quality and as having been judged the same.

Unit: Communication Practical Skills

Overall judgement

Although it was difficult to make judgements on the candidate evidence available, taking all evidence into account the level of demand of the unit was judged by the panel to be broadly the same in 2012 and 2015. However, on the limited candidate evidence available there may be cause for concern in relation to unnecessary assessment burden despite SQA exemplars exemplifying briefer and more straightforward approaches.

Specification

The unit standards were no more demanding than before. The unit specification was unchanged during this period.

Assessment

In the sample of evidence provided for 2015 there were examples of centres requiring too much in terms of the length of texts being used and the number of questions being asked. As for the unit Analysing and Presenting Complex Communications, the context and content for skills development may be interpreted according to vocational needs and intended destination, and so there can be variation between centres in the demands of tasks set.

Quality and judgement of evidence

On the basis of the sample of evidence provided, the 2015 evidence appeared to be of a higher quality and was judged less leniently than in 2011.

4 Findings: Scottish Vocational Qualifications

Health and Social Care (Adults)

Overall

The qualification standards did not change between 2012 and 2015, however as SQA Care provided centres with more specific guidance on the requirements of the standards, the panel judged that the quality of evidence being presented was higher.

SQA Care and Care SVQ external verifiers have emphasised the importance of assessors and internal verifiers ensuring their knowledge of legislation and current best practice in social care was kept up to date. This has led to assessors identifying inaccuracies in candidate evidence when assessed against the standards in relation to knowledge of legislation, Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) codes of practice and National Care Standards. Consequently assessment decisions were more accurate in 2015 than in 2012.

Educational context

Changes in teaching practice

There was evidence within the 2015 portfolios that there has been more emphasis on candidates demonstrating knowledge of legislation and theory and better integration of this to practice. Assessor knowledge in relation to legislation, codes of practice and National Care Standards has been emphasised as an area for development by SQA Care and this has led to greater accuracy in assessed evidence in recent portfolios. Assessor guidance is also clearer and better able to support candidates to complete the awards holistically.

Changes in the workplace

The Regulation of Care Scotland Act 2010 and the requirement for all social care workers to register with the SSSC are paramount in all organisations. This has had an impact on centres and the numbers of staff who now require the qualifications to be able to continue working in the care industry. Centres therefore are demonstrating more knowledge in practice as a requirement and this has impacted on the learning needs of individuals. It has also highlighted a need for the CPD of assessors and internal verifiers.

Changes in candidates

With the legal requirement for all staff in social care work settings to hold a registrable qualification within specified timescales the criteria for selecting candidates is based on them being in a relevant job role rather than being based on their ability to undertake a qualification. Many of the more recent candidates did not put themselves forward to undertake the qualification in the past due to lack of confidence in their academic ability or due to having additional learning needs that they are reluctant to disclose. Consequently assessors are seeing an increase in the level of support candidates require to present their written work.

Other relevant changes

Previously, candidates had been provided with protected work time in which to complete assessments and longer completion timescales which relieved pressure from candidates. However, with the publication of deadlines for staff to achieve registrable qualifications with the SSSC, organisations were aware this required staff to achieve the qualification within shorter timescales. Consequently, tighter completion timescales have been introduced along with the expectation that candidates complete written assessments outwith work time. Funding streams available to organisations and individuals are scarce which has led to candidates self-funding or organisations tightly managing staff achievement targets due to having invested in staff undertaking the qualification. In addition, there is another qualification better suited to the needs of the NHS which means a lower uptake of these awards from that sector.

Unit standards

The unit specifications and standards for this award did not change between 2012 and 2015; however, the expectations of the level of underpinning knowledge required to be demonstrated by candidates increased. SQA Care provided centres with customer support events where assessors were provided with support and guidance so that they were clear about what was required in order for candidates to meet the National Occupational Standards. Centres were advised of the importance of candidates being provided with underpinning knowledge guidance to inform their practice and written work.

Assessment

The level of knowledge and understanding to be demonstrated has increased and there is evidence in the later portfolios that assessors have enabled this to take place. The standard of work integrating theory to practice and demonstrating a holistic approach to the awards is evident in the 2015 portfolios. Assessors have developed their own knowledge and understanding of legislation, SSSC codes of practice and National Care Standards as they relate to the candidate's social care job role. This in turn has informed their assessment of candidate evidence which has ensured that more accurate assessment decisions are made. Consequently, the standards have been assessed with greater accuracy thus increasing the standard of evidence overall.

Quality and judgement of evidence

The sample of evidence from 2015 was considered to be of a higher quality and to have been judged less leniently than that from 2012.

Health and Social Care (Children and Young People)

Overall

Overall, the differences between 2015 and 2012 were minimal. Candidates undertaking the SVQ Health and Social Care Children and Young People have benefited from significant underpinning knowledge inputs and training resources available as a result of investment to support registration with the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC). Consequently, the standard and quality of evidence presented in 2012 and 2015 was at the required level. This was consistently and appropriately judged as being the required standard by assessors.

Educational context

Changes in teaching practice

in order for residential childcare workers to meet the registration requirements with the SSSC, a significant number of candidates undertaking the SVQ Health and Social Care Children and Young People were also required to undertake the HNC Social Care. These qualifications were often delivered concurrently due to three units within the HNC Social Care being core units within the SVQ. Consequently, candidates were provided with taught inputs for the underpinning knowledge required for the HNC which also matched underpinning knowledge requirements for the SVQ. This ensured candidates had a strong foundation of knowledge to draw on for the remaining units within their SVQ. Assessors have benefited from additional input from the Care team and external verifiers to explain the requirements for putting knowledge and theory into practice.

These assessors have also benefited from the investment in resources and training available to ensure their knowledge and understanding of best practice within the sector is current. The culture of learning and development within the sector has been cultivated over previous years due to investment in preparing staff for the first phase of registration with the SSSC. Therefore, there has been significant time spent embedding best practice within service delivery to ensure it is congruent with the requirements of the National Care Standards and SSSC codes of practice.

SQA Care has provided customer support events which have served to reinforce the importance of assessors ensuring their knowledge of best practice is current. These events have also emphasised and reiterated the importance of candidates making links between legislation, National Care Standards and SSSC codes of practice.

It should be noted that this additional resourcing did not affect the candidates from the NHS who undertook this award. As noted, there is a vocational qualification now available to candidates working with young people in the clinical arena which is more suitable.

Changes in the workplace

Candidates are predominantly from residential child care — the first group of workers that required to register with the SSSC and obtain a registrable qualification. As a result of the Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act 2001 the first phase of social care workers who were legally required to register with the SSSC were those working in residential childcare settings. Consequently, the culture of learning and development, of adhering to National Care Standards and SSSC codes of practice has been embedded in practices within

residential childcare settings from very soon after 2001. This sector has had a longer time to develop a learning environment for support workers and this is evident in the work presented.

Changes in candidates

Candidates have had significant investment in their knowledge and practice development in the workplace to ensure they were appropriately equipped to undertake the SVQ to meet SSSC registration requirements. This underpinning knowledge training was financially supported by the Scottish Government through SIRCC to ensure success for the first phase of registrants with the SSSC. Therefore candidates undertaking the SVQ Health and Social Care Children and Young People have had a background in knowledge and practice development prior to undertaking the qualification.

Other relevant changes

As there have been more enquiries into safeguarding, these are reflected in the written evidence of candidates. SQA has provided development opportunities for external verifiers and all centre staff at which assessment decisions and the appropriateness to meet the requirements of the standards were discussed. The introduction by SQA of examples of how assessors and candidates can gain and demonstrate knowledge in practice in the form of workbooks, assignments and projects should see this area continue to be fully covered. The funding mentioned above has enabled residential childcare workers to have access to resources to underpin the awards. In addition, a vocational qualification is now available to NHS workers which is better suited to the clinical area and has resulted in a decrease of candidates from this sector.

Unit standards

The unit specifications and standards did not change between 2012 and 2015; however, the evidence produced was becoming more targeted to the requirements of the units. Holistic assessment appeared to be increasing in 2015. The standard of evidence presented by candidates was consistently at the required standard and met the unit specifications. This is due to the additional learning and development materials made available to candidates who undertook this qualification.

Assessment

Assessments were carried out to a consistent standard across centres in 2012 and 2015. Candidate evidence made effective and appropriate references to legislation, National Care Standards and SSSC codes of practice in the context of their work role and responsibilities. Candidates were assessed in a holistic way ensuring integration of knowledge and practice was evidenced in accordance with the requirements of the assessment strategy. There have been minimal improvements to the evidence produced due to the experience gained by the assessors. The coverage of the standards (in 2015) appear to have more evidence which should have more volume as is appropriate at this level as consistency of practice needs demonstrated.

Quality and judgement of evidence

One member of the panel felt that the quality of evidence in 2015 was higher, while the other two believed it to be the same as that from 2012. Similarly, one panel member thought the 2015 evidence had been on the whole judged less leniently while the two others felt it had been judged the same.

5 Conclusions

The panels looked at the specifications, assessments and evidence of a selection of National Qualifications, Scottish Vocational Qualifications and Higher National Units and compared 2015 with a previous year.

Standards were judged to be comparable in all the National Qualifications looked at. With Higher English, Higher French and National Administration and IT, the new versions of the qualifications were being compared with the previous versions.

In HN Sports Coaching, it was noted that the level of demand in graded units 1 and 2 had increased as a result of a recent review of the Sports Coaching award and changes to the relevant National Occupational Standards. A result of this review there has been an increase in the volume of evidence needed to meet the requirements of the unit. It was noted that changes have been well supported by SQA events.

In SVQ Health and Social Care (Adults) it was noted that the quality of the evidence has improved between the two years looked at, and this has been a result of more specific guidance on the requirements of the standards being provided to centres.

6 SQA's response

The following table summarises our responses to the conclusions of the monitoring standards panels.

Advanced Higher History: 2015–2008	
Conclusion	Action
It was judged that the overall demand of Advanced Higher History between 2015 and 2008 was the same.	No action necessary as standard remained constant.
Higher English: 2015–2011	
Conclusion	Action
It was judged that the overall demand of Higher English between 2015 and 2011 was broadly similar.	No action necessary as standard remained constant.
Higher French: 2015–2013	
Conclusion	Action
It was judged that the overall demand of Higher French between 2015 and 2013 was broadly similar.	No action necessary as standard remained constant.
National 5 Administration and IT: 2015–2012	
Conclusion	Action
It was judged that the overall demand of National 5 Administration between 2015 and 2012 was broadly similar.	No action necessary as standard remained constant.

Electrical Engineering: 2015–2011	
Conclusion	Action
Unit: Applications of Programmable Logic Controllers	
It was judged that the assessment demand between 2015 and 2011 was the same.	No action necessary as standard remained constant.
Unit: DC and AC Principles	
It was judged that the assessment demand between 2015 and 2011 was the same.	No action necessary as standard remained constant.
Unit: Three Phase Systems	
It was judged that the assessment demand between 2015 and 2011 was the same.	No action necessary as standard remained constant.
Sports Coaching: 2015–2012	
Conclusion	Action
Unit: Graded Unit 1	
It was judged that the assessment demand in 2015 was higher than in 2012.	We note the content of the report which makes a link between the 'greater amount of evidence to be gathered' and an increase in assessment demand. We will continue to review evidence requirements, but an increase in amount of evidence does not always equate to an increase in assessment demand. We also note that the introduction of new NOS necessitated a different approach to the nature of graded units 1 and 2 in particular. We will continue to monitor the implementation of the new graded units in an attempt to provide additional guidance and support to centres to ensure a holistic — rather than a granular — approach is taken to assessment. Where the assessment approach is

	granular, then by default the volume of evidence and the perception of assessment demand might be inflated.
Unit: Graded Unit 2	
It was judged that the assessment demand in 2015 was higher than in 2012.	As above.
Unit: Graded Unit 3	
It was judged that the assessment demand between 2015 and 2012 was broadly the same.	No action necessary as standard remained constant.
Communication	
Conclusion	Action
Unit: Analysing and Presenting Complex Communication: 2015–2012	
It was judged that the assessment demand between 2015 and 2012 was broadly the same.	No action necessary as standard remained constant.
Unit: Communication: Practical Skills: 2015–2011	
It was judged that the assessment demand between 2015 and 2011 was broadly the same.	No action necessary as standard remained constant.
Health and Social Care (Adults): 2015–2012	
Conclusion	Action
It was judged that the standards between 2015 and 2012 have remained broadly the same.	No action necessary as standard remained constant.
Health and Social Care (Children and Young People): 2015–2012	
Conclusion	Action
It was judged that the standards between 2015 and 2012 have remained broadly the same.	No action necessary as standard remained constant.

