Higher National Qualifications
Qualification Verification Summary Report 2021

Counselling

Verification group number: 369

Introduction

G8H6 15 Higher National Certificate in Counselling and GM4H 46 Higher National Diploma in Counselling

Higher National Units

F1EK 34 Counselling: Group Counselling Skills
F1EV 35 Counselling: Understanding Addictive Behaviours
HL9P 35 Counselling: Psychopathology for Counsellors

HN Graded Units

F1M4 34 Counselling: Graded Unit 1
HN8V 35 Counselling: Graded Unit 2

GP7H 04 Diploma in Relational Counselling

J260 04 Intimate Relationships
J25J 04 Fundamentals of Counselling Practice
J25N 04 Self Awareness and Reflective Practice

The units listed above were subject to external verification during session 2020–21. All qualification verification activity took place in the latter part of the session due to the constraints of COVID-19. Qualification verification activities took place within the further education and private training sectors. All centres were appreciative of the requirement by SQA to undertake verification activities in session 2020–21 and were fully supportive of the virtual process. All virtual evidence was made available via the SQA Centre and Evidence Hub and alternatively in some cases evidence was sampled using centre-devised internal systems and procedures.

Almost all external verification reports and feedback to centres reflected external sampling in Higher National Units from the HN Certificate in Counselling (G8H6 15) and the Higher National Diploma in Counselling (GM4H 46).

Some qualification verification activity and reporting feedback was provided for the Customised Award Diploma in Relational Counselling (GP7H 04).

Verification sampling identified three units:

J260 04 Intimate Relationships
J25J 04 Fundamentals of Counselling Practice
J25N 04 Self Awareness and Reflective Practice

External verification activity in session 2020–21 indicated high confidence across all qualifications sampled. However, some centres were made aware of key development points for future delivery which are highlighted in this report as well as good practice.

Category 2: Resources

Criterion 2.1: Assessors and internal verifiers must be competent to assess and internally verify, in line with the requirements of the qualification.

Assessors and internal verifiers across all centres were competent to assess and internally verify the HN Certificate in Counselling, the HND in Counselling and the Diploma in Relational Counselling. All assessors and internal verifiers undertook appropriate CPD in line with the requirements of the qualification and all undertook the required practice hours in line with BACP requirements. Staff in almost all centres were aware of the BACP requirements for the HND Counselling. All staff CPD documentation was made available and indicated those registered and accredited members of BACP and working within the current BACP Ethical Framework for Counselling Professions. Further evidence of assessor and internal verifier qualifications and ongoing CPD activities were made available. Almost all centres had made appropriate adaptations to the assessment delivery, for example virtual online classes and holistic and/or combined assessment in line with SQA and BACP requirements (where applicable). All staff maintained currency with up-to-date recorded CPD competence in line with the assessment strategy requirements where appropriate.

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

All centres provided documented evidence of initial and ongoing reviews of the assessment environments; equipment; and reference, learning and assessment materials. Some centres had taken steps to comprehensively adapt learning and teaching materials extensively to reflect the virtual mode of delivery and this was commended. Initial and ongoing reviews were conducted adhering to professional etiquette in terms of confidentiality and with greater sensitivity in the virtual mode. Some face-to-face delivery took place, but this was limited due to COVID-19 restrictions. All centres were commended for the adjustments they made to deliver professional qualifications whilst adhering to the professional principles and practice requirements for the qualifications and for both candidates and clients.

Category 3: Candidate support

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

Candidate development needs and prior achievements were matched against the requirements of all awards in Counselling. All centres had gone to great lengths to ensure that support was made available to candidates and that their development needs and prior achievements were being met, for example online tutorials; group and one-to-one tutorial support; application support/one-to-one interviews; and relevant induction course programmes. Feedback from candidates in one centre revealed a ringing endorsement for online delivery as support was much more readily available and accessible. Candidate development needs were being met throughout all Counselling qualifications through applied professional practice and adherence to qualification standards.

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

Almost all centres went 'above and beyond' the programme scheduled contact with candidates as timetabled adjustments were made to the learning and teaching and assessment delivery of Counselling qualifications. Virtual online learning provided the

opportunity for centres to be able to communicate with candidates on a day-to-day basis and as and when there was an identified need. Access to IT equipment and facilities was deemed a priority to communicate with candidates using Zoom, MS Teams and Google classroom. Other social media platforms were in use to provide ongoing formative support, for example WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Candidate evidence revealed a wealth of support to revise assessment plans and to review progress through face-to-face and virtual meetings with the assessor; written and/or oral feedback; email; reports and assignment feedback; and professional diary/logbook entries.

Category 4: Internal assessment and verification

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

Internal assessment procedures were fully fit for purpose and utilised SQA assessment support materials or internally devised assessment instruments in all centres. Whilst internal verification was robust and fit for purpose in almost all centres, some need to be more robust where assessment instruments are combined across more than one unit. Combined assessment instruments need to adhere to the same SCQF level, for example an SCQF level 6 unit should not be combined with an SCQF level 7 unit. If a combined assessment approach is undertaken, then all centres must seek prior verification of the new assessment instrument.

All centres provided robust evidence of internal quality assurance policies and procedures and qualification verifiers were able to see how these were applied, for example: standardisation meetings/minutes; pre-delivery checks; sampling; internal verification records; assessment instruments and marking guidelines; assessor feedback and assessment decisions/grades.

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

Assessment instruments were valid, reliable, practicable, equitable and fair in all centres. Great care was taken in almost all centres to check SQA course frameworks for approved adaptations and BACP updates, and guidance for approved practice in the light of the impact of COVID-19. A few centres had 'gone the extra mile' to ensure adaptations were clear and did not impact adversely on the programme delivery or candidate progress. The learning and teaching and varied methods of delivery were exemplary across all qualifications and revealed a high standard of candidate performance. In one centre, the assessment instrument and the assessment tasks did not fully reflect the unit specification requirements for F1EK 34 Counselling: Group Counselling Skills. Advice and support were provided by the external verifier to allow the centre to submit a revised assessment instrument for prior verification.

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

All centres authenticated candidate evidence in line with SQA's required conditions using candidate disclaimers. In addition, course work generated under SQA's required assessment conditions revealed a wealth of authenticated documentation, for example: signed and dated induction checklists, unit assessment checklists, direct assessor/candidate observation; self-

reflection, assessor feedback including mentoring sessions, candidate assessment evidence including personal logs/journals, and signed candidate statements.

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

High confidence was recorded against all qualification verification activity in session 2020–21. All centres accurately and consistently judged candidate work against SQA requirements. In addition, all assessors with accredited BACP membership were working to professional counselling requirements.

All centres recorded accurate and consistent assessment judgements against unit and/or course assessment requirements and, where applicable, the assessment strategy.

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

Candidate evidence was retained by all centres in line with SQA revised requirements during session 2020–21. External verification activities confirmed all centres were effective at retaining candidate assessment evidence in accordance with current SQA amended requirements and in response to qualification verification activities.

All centres had taken the necessary internal steps to adjust internal procedures in line with the retention of candidate evidence using a variety of different formats, for example: written/oral; direct observation; witness testimonies; electronic/written portfolios; personal journals; virtual evidence using MS Teams, Zoom and Google classroom.

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

Virtual verification enabled feedback from qualification verifiers to be disseminated to a wider audience of staff in attendance in almost all centres. QV feedback sessions focused on the report criteria 2.1–4.9 and compliance levels. Although the overall outcome ratings revealed high confidence across all centres there was detailed discussion regarding subject-specific areas for development. Specific areas for development have been listed in this report.

The recent changes to working methods (mainly due to the impact of COVID-19) and the increased reliance on virtual communication helps to promote the wider dissemination of feedback to staff within all centres using, for example: MS Teams; Zoom; internal SharePoint platforms; increased access to candidates online; and virtual meetings.

All centres disseminated external verification reports to relevant staff and implemented the feedback given. All centres discussed and recorded the report at team meetings and agreed on the completion of any actions within an agreed timescale. Assessors were also present for the external verification verbal feedback session. One centre had clearly implemented all the recommendations made during a previous verification visit.

Areas of good practice reported by qualification verifiers

The following good practice was reported during session 2020–21:

♦ Strict adherence to SQA qualification standards and BACP regulatory requirements whilst following SQA published guidance on the adaptations to conditions of assessment.

♦ The depth of analysis and self-reflection in candidate journals.

♦ The advanced level of candidate knowledge and understanding developed through cross-referencing/research in essay writing at HNC/HND levels.

♦ Staff in one centre engaged in the required 30 hours of CPD training on an annual basis. However, over and above this they are developing a range of training courses for LGBT, Mental Health and Family Skills.

♦ One centre is currently in the process of devising an academic support document which will be available to candidates as a video presentation/tutorial. This document will support candidates to reference direct and indirect quotes and to understand how they evidence critical analysis.

Specific areas for development

The following areas for development were reported during session 2020–21:

♦ Centres must submit centre-devised changes to assessment instruments using SQA's prior verification service. This is especially important where centre-devised assessments are planned and where adaptations are being made to combine assessments across HN units. Prior verification should be sought at the earliest opportunity and preferably before the new assessment instrument is in use within centres.

♦ It is *not* acceptable to combine assessment instruments across different SCQF levels. For example, trying to combine assessment tasks for HN Units F1EK 34 Counselling: Group Counselling Skills and F1EW 35 Counselling: Working with Addictive Behaviours will lead to an invalid assessment instrument as one unit is levelled at SCQF level 7 and the other unit is levelled at SCQF level 8. The SCQF levels are different, but the units are not compatible either. The Group Counselling Skills unit is about developing counselling skills in a personal development group context where the candidate is a group participant and facilitator. The Working with Addictive Behaviours unit is not compatible with the requirements of the Group Counselling Skills unit.

♦ There was evidence of inconsistent remediation feedback to candidates. Assessment feedback must be consistent to all candidates by all assessors and internal standardisation must be proactive in this respect.

♦ Centres should consider qualification verification feedback where some HN assignments, for example essay assessment instruments, are over-complicated and particularly lengthy in their format. These should be revised, for example broken up into more manageable assessment tasks and therefore made clearer and more simplified for candidates.

♦ The need to fully understand the differentiation that exists between Graded Units 1 and 2 (F1M4 34 Graded Unit 1 and HN8V 35 Graded Unit 2).

♦ The instrument of assessment for HN Unit F1EK 34 Counselling: Group Counselling Skills should be clear to candidates that all the knowledge skills and applied theory must relate to candidate participation in a personal development group. Assessment evidence

across outcomes 1.2 and 3 must apply the knowledge of group dynamics and group theory to participation within the personal development group. Centre-devised checklists must support and evidence candidate participation, for example tutor observation, peer checklists and reflective accounts.