Next Generation Higher National Unit Specification

Research Skills: Academic Report Writing (SCQF level 8)

Unit code: J8LX 48

SCQF level: 8 (16 SCQF credit points)

This unit is available in a restricted delivery model from academic session 2025

This unit specification provides detailed information about the unit to ensure consistent and transparent assessment year on year. It is for lecturers and assessors, and contains all the mandatory information you need to deliver and assess the unit.

Published: August 2025 (version 1.0)

Contents

Unit purpose

This unit develops learners' knowledge and skills so they can propose, conduct and construct a small-scale academic research investigation on a topic of interest.

Learners use underpinning knowledge and areas of interest from their current academic studies to develop a proposal for a complex research investigation on a vocational topic. This gives them the opportunity to justify the rationale for their proposal and approaches to research.

Learners collect and collate the appropriate primary and secondary data to support their small-scale research investigation and present their findings through an academic report. Through the academic report, learners develop their analysis skills, while critically evaluating their findings and the impact of the research investigation.

The unit allows learners to broaden their knowledge on subject matters relating to their topic of interest, while helping them to develop their skills in researching, evaluating and presenting information. There may be an opportunity to integrate other units involving academic writing, investigation and analysis.

The unit benefits learners who wish to develop transferable skills appropriate to further academic studies or workplace progression.

Entry requirements and progression routes

Entry to the unit is at your centre's discretion. However, learners must have completed a Higher National Certificate (HNC) in their relevant subject area.

Before starting the unit, we recommend learners have one or more of the following:

- Research Skills at SCQF level 7, as part of their HNC or as a stand-alone unit
- the ability to use information and communication technology (ICT) independently
- knowledge, skills, experience and areas of interest from their current academic studies
- communication skills equivalent to at least SCQF level 6

You can deliver this unit as part of a Higher National Diploma (HND) or as a stand-alone unit.

Unit outcomes

Learners who complete this unit can:

1. develop a proposal for a complex research investigation on a vocational topic
2. conduct a research investigation to analyse, evaluate and select relevant complex data from a wide range of sources
3. present findings and conclusions in an academic report on the research investigation topic

Evidence requirements

The standard of evidence must be consistent with the SCQF level of the unit. For all outcomes, learners must produce evidence under open-book conditions.

Develop a proposal for a complex research investigation on a vocational topic (outcome 1)

Learners must provide evidence of their knowledge and skills by showing they can develop a detailed research proposal for a complex research investigation on a topic in their relevant subject area.

Learners must:

- propose a complex research investigation topic title relating to their subject area and ensure contextualisation
- provide detailed justification of the research or hypothesis aims and objectives
- discuss the range of research methodologies they will use
- identify a strategy to comply with statutory, ethical and voluntary controls that may have an impact on their investigation
- justify research approaches and resources that they will implement during the research investigation
- outline a data storage plan

Conduct a research investigation to analyse, evaluate and select relevant complex data from a wide range of sources (outcome 2)

Learners must provide evidence of their knowledge and skills by showing they can conduct their research and analyse, evaluate and select relevant complex data from a wide range of sources.

Learners must:

- apply valid and appropriate research investigation methods
- compile information from credible sources to support research objectives from a range of primary sources
- analyse and evaluate sources for reliability and relevance
- carry out a review of the literature
- collate information effectively
- maintain a referenced record of research activities

Present findings and conclusions in an academic report on the research investigation topic (outcome 3)

Learners must provide evidence of their knowledge and skills by showing they can construct an academic report and present their findings.

Learners must:

- demonstrate effective selection, analysis and synthesis of relevant information
- select relevant secondary research to support academic writing
- analyse and critique primary data
- present objective, reliable results
- develop and justify conclusions based on accurate analysis and evaluation of data collected
- demonstrate effective use of language, format and structure
- reference materials efficiently
- compile a referenced record of research activities and appendices

Knowledge and skills

Knowledge	Skills
Outcome 1 Learners should understand: • the contribution of research studies to their occupational sector • research aims and objectives • approaches to research, including primary and secondary data collection • how to access resources, including online publications • models of research relating to their academic studies • current local, national and international investigative initiatives relating to their occupational sector • ethical and legal considerations affecting research into their occupational sector • personal and practical project management skills	**Outcome 1** Learners can: • identify and access resources, including online publications and podcasts • identify aims and objectives for a research topic • identify appropriate methods of research • justify appropriate research approaches
Outcome 2 Learners should understand: • how to identify and access resources useful to research investigations (information retrieval skills) • primary and secondary sources of information • research techniques and methods, including electronic methods • electronic information access and retrieval • statistical concepts • qualitative and quantitative data	**Outcome 2** Learners can: • use appropriate research methods • access and use appropriate contacts and networks to enhance their research investigation • analyse and critically evaluate relevant primary and secondary source data • access and select data relevant to research objectives from a range of deliberate and inadvertent primary sources and secondary sources • collate information effectively

Knowledge	Skills
Outcome 2 (continued) Learners should understand: • sampling techniques • interview skills • survey methods, including use of digital applications or social media channels • analytical and evaluative skills • accuracy and precision in recording data • efficient storage of notes and drafts	**Outcome 2 (continued)** Learners can: • reference materials efficiently • compile a record of research activities • demonstrate research management skills
Outcome 3 Learners should understand: • approaches to structuring an academic report • comprehensive writing skills • effective use of referencing • analytical and evaluative skills • selection of relevant, accurate information • effective organisation of information and ideas • effective use of vocabulary, register and style	**Outcome 3** Learners can: • write a comprehensive report • understand and apply accurate, effective and ethical citation and referencing • analyse the impact of data on the development and outputs of the investigation • analyse and evaluate findings • effectively organise information and ideas • effectively use vocabulary, register and style • structure ideas for impact

Meta-skills

You must give learners opportunities to develop their meta-skills throughout this unit. We have suggested how to incorporate the most relevant ones into the unit content, but you may find other opportunities.

Self-management

This includes focusing, integrity, adapting and initiative. The most relevant are:

- focusing:
    - filtering out information that is not appropriate (outcomes 1 and 2)
    - identifying relevant data and literature appropriate to the research investigation (outcomes 1 and 2)
- integrity:
    - understanding ethical and legal considerations appropriate to the research investigation (outcome 1)
- adapting:
    - being resilient to circumstances that may arise through the process appropriate to the research investigation (outcomes 1, 2 and 3)
    - reflecting on new knowledge to gain a deeper understanding appropriate to the research investigation (outcomes 1, 2 and 3)
- initiative:
    - selecting a topic and approaches that are appropriate to the research investigation (outcomes 1 and 2)

Social intelligence

This includes communicating, feeling, collaborating and leading. The most relevant is:

- communicating:
    - understanding and mentally processing verbal or written communication received during data collection and discussions (outcomes 2 and 3)
    - presenting information in the report and proposal (outcomes 2 and 3)

Innovation

This includes curiosity, creativity, sense-making and critical thinking. The most relevant are:

- curiosity:
    - questioning understanding and the data gathered (outcomes 1 and 2)
    - acknowledging what impact this has on current or previous research (outcomes 1 and 2)
- creativity:
    - exploring various ways to gather and present data in the research report (outcomes 2 and 3)
- sense-making:
    - analysing complex data (outcomes 1 and 2)
- critical thinking:
    - identifying, analysing and evaluating primary and secondary data, while also breaking down any problems or challenges before addressing them (outcomes 1 and 2)

Learning for Sustainability

Throughout this unit, you should encourage learners to develop their skills, knowledge and understanding of sustainability.

This includes:

- a general understanding of social, economic and environmental sustainability
- a general understanding of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
- a deeper understanding of subject-specific sustainability
- the confidence to apply the skills, knowledge, understanding and values they develop in the next stage of their life

Delivery of unit

The unit provides learners with the knowledge and skills they need to propose, carry out and construct an academic research investigation. You should encourage learners to generate original ideas as they analyse and evaluate findings relating to the aims and objectives of the research investigation.

You should encourage learners to use a wide variety of resources throughout the unit. These include, but are not restricted to:

- published academic journals
- occupational journals
- academic books
- professional bodies
- broadsheets
- social media
- academic websites
- consensus statements
- government sources or resources
- podcasts
- other appropriate resources

The amount of time you allocate to each outcome is at your discretion. However, you should consider all outcomes together when you deliver the unit. The overall unit delivery time is a notional 80 hours of contact time for delivery and assessment. We expect learners to commit a further 80 hours of self-directed study.

Articulation agreements

Articulation agreements with higher education institutions can allow learners to draw on the knowledge and skills they gain in this unit to ensure a smooth transition for any future research. They consider the UK Quality Code for Higher Education. You can find the code on the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education website.

Additional guidance

The guidance in this section is not mandatory.

Content and context for this unit

Develop a proposal for a complex research investigation on a vocational topic (outcome 1)

Learners explore topics of interest related to their relevant subject area to develop a written research investigation proposal. You may wish to present learners with examples of research investigation topics or develop activities that allow them to identify specific areas of interest, based on their learning in their chosen occupational sector.

Learners develop their written proposal, identifying aims and objectives for investigative research, while identifying methods and approaches to researching their chosen topic. You may wish to discuss the difference between primary and secondary data collection, with specific examples of each and how they can positively contribute to research. Understanding the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches to research allows learners to justify the approaches they decide to use. You may also wish to establish the differences between quantitative and qualitative data.

When teaching the outcome, you could include time for learners to receive one-to-one discussions and feedback with you, to discuss ideas for their research investigation topic and approaches to collecting information. Formative tasks may also include learners preparing and delivering short presentations to their peers on their investigation proposal ideas, to receive peer feedback.

Outcome 1 requires learners to identify and justify approaches to gathering data. You should show them how to collect and gather secondary data and have discussions centred around credible sources of data.

You may wish to invite library staff into the classroom to discuss the resources that their specific centre has access to.

Learners may benefit from discussion or tasks centred around the skills required when conducting research. They should pay particular attention to time management and developing an appropriate timeline, to ensure they stay on track and manage workload appropriately.

You may wish to present learners with various academic research, so they can critically reflect on the approaches and methods of data used in the literature. This develops their understanding and justification for research approaches.

Conduct a research investigation to analyse, evaluate and select relevant complex data from a wide range of sources (outcome 2)

Outcome 2 focuses on learners gathering a range of primary and secondary data. You should show them the skills and techniques of data collection. If learners have completed Research Skills at SCQF level 7, then it may be appropriate to briefly recap their skills and knowledge of research and data collection and focus on advancing their skills for this unit. You should develop learners' understanding of specific limitation of data collection and resources used, as well as detailing permissions and the appropriate protocol to follow, to ensure that primary research is accurate and ethical.

As learners develop a review of literature in outcome 3, you may wish to start teaching outcome 2 by introducing secondary data and how to analyse it for relevance and reliability, as this may support or contribute to the approach learners use for primary data collection.

While collecting data, you should expose learners to inadvertent data sources. Inadvertent sources include any information learners come across that supports or adds depth to the research project, but was unknown or not thought about. This may occur during observations, interviews or focus group discussions.

Learners may benefit from regular one-to-one support to track progress of data collection and to ensure they are working to an appropriate time frame.

Learners should be aware of the various platforms available for data collection, and they can generate surveys or questionnaires to practise these techniques before potentially distributing them.

Learners can practise designing interview questions and questionnaires in small groups. You can use peer discussions to evaluate the relevance of primary resource design, purpose and practicality. You can explain how to collate tables or diagrams to summarise results and present numerical data effectively.

Outcome 2 requires learners to collate information correctly and present it in their academic report. You may wish to demonstrate or provide examples of how to present various types of primary data sources, including generating interview transcripts. In-class tasks may provide learners with the opportunity to practise these skills and gather feedback before applying them to their own research data.

As learners must maintain a referenced record of research, you should discuss and demonstrate various ways to store research and data, paying attention to general data protection regulation (GDPR) and data protection protocol. You may also wish to spend time with learners on developing their knowledge and skills of using an appropriate referencing style, using supporting websites and the Microsoft Word referencing tool.

Present findings and conclusions in an academic report on the research investigation topic (outcome 3)

Outcome 3 involves learners presenting the information and data they have gathered in the form of an academic report. Learners should understand ways to structure their report and the various sections that a report should contain.

Their report headings could include:

- Title page
- Contents
- Abstract or summary
- Aims and purpose of the research investigation.
- Literature review
- Method of data collection
- Statement of results (including tables and graphs or charts)
- Analysis and discussion
- Conclusions
- Bibliography or references
- Appendices

You can show learners how to correctly format a document when writing an academic report, using appropriate text fonts, text size, text alignment, double line spacing and correctly referenced secondary sources.

For practice, you can provide learners with a body of text and ask them to correctly format it within the requirements of the academic report.

Learners may benefit from one-to-one support with you throughout the process of writing the report. This can be as often as time and availability allow, but still allowing for learner autonomy.

Approaches to assessment

Experiencing a range of assessment methods helps learners to develop different skills that should be transferable to work or further and higher education. It is important that the language used in the assessment instruments reflects SCQF level 8 in each type of task.

Develop a proposal for a complex research investigation on a vocational topic (outcome 1)

You can use a range of assessment methods to gather evidence for outcome 1, including:

- an open-book written proposal
- an oral presentation

If learners use a written research proposal on their investigation topic, we recommend that the research proposal is a minimum of 1,000 words.

If you use an oral presentation, we recommend that the presentation is 10 minutes long.

Learners' research proposals must include a research topic title, their research aims and objectives, and the methodology of research. The proposal must also include which data collection approaches they intend to use, with justification for their choices.

You could generate an assessment template with headings covering the evidence requirements for learners to complete. Alternatively, you could develop an assessment brief for learners. An assessment brief could outline in bullet points the evidence requirements that learners should cover, allowing them to write the report in their own style. The assessment template or brief may break down and suggest the number of words learners should write for each evidence requirement. This helps them to meet the target word count across the six evidence requirements.

Conduct a research investigation to analyse, evaluate and select relevant complex data from a wide range of sources (outcome 2)

You can assess outcomes 2 and 3 holistically through an academic open-book written report. The target word count (2,500 words) does not include:

- references
- reference page

- bibliography
- appendices

Outcome 2 requires learners to use appropriate research methods, including primary data responses across one, or a range of, deliberate or inadvertent primary data sources. Should learners' research projects require practical experiments, then we encourage them to include a minimum of six participants in the data-gathering process. Learners must also use a range of secondary sources, and we encourage a minimum of six resources across the various secondary data sources used. A 'range of sources' is defined as at least three types of sources.

Primary sources of data collection could include:

- interviews
- surveys
- experiments
- focus groups
- personal observations
- meeting records
- transcript recordings
- field work

This list contains examples only and is not exhaustive.

Present findings and conclusions in an academic report on the research investigation topic (outcome 3)

You can assess outcomes 2 and 3 holistically through an academic open-book written report that is approximately 2,500 words. The target word count does not include:

- references
- bibliography
- appendices

You may wish to develop an assessment brief outlining the structure in which learners should write the report, with some guidance of what the word count for each section should contain to achieve the target 2,500 word count. You may wish to develop separate assessment briefs for each of the stages leading up to writing an academic report.

The following is an example of how the report can be written and presented. However, you may choose your own particular structure, as long as the evidence requirements are met.

Learners must write and present their report in an academic style. This includes the use of third person writing, cohesive language, and correct grammar and punctuation. They should present their report in a coherent format. Centres may wish to specify their own format criteria. This may include text font, text size, double line spacing and text alignment.

A report structure could include:

Topic title

The topic title page can contain details of the research topic title, the learner's name, the department, the educational institute or centre's name and the submission date. You may wish to develop a template to help learners to meet the standards required for this page.

Contents page

The contents page should provide a table of contents, including a list of all the chapters and page numbers. This provides the academic report with an overview of the report structure and how it is presented.

Abstract

In most cases, an abstract is required. It can be quite difficult to say in a few words what the research sets out to do, the methods employed and what conclusions were reached. Learners should get into the habit of looking at abstracts, which are usually placed at the beginning of journal articles.

Aims and purpose of the research

This should be a short explanation of the purpose of the research, explaining the research problem in a few sentences. Provide any background to the research to place it in context.

Learners should draw attention to any limitations of the research, as they cannot do everything in a small-scale research investigation.

Review of literature

Learners should conduct secondary research to develop a literature review. They must use a range of secondary sources and include a minimum of six resources across the various secondary data sources. A range of sources is defined as two or more types of sources.

Learners should use the literature review as the theoretic framework that may address gaps in literature or research and build on existing knowledge and new data, while advancing a theoretical debate.

Secondary sources of data collection could include:

- websites
- academic books
- professional journals
- government publications

The literature review can normally be written first. If learners have structured their writing sufficiently, they may be able to write up sections and sub-sections as they have completed them. Much of the work of this section will be ready for revision before learners begin to collect data. Learners may find that they need to adapt their original version as they progress through their small-scale research investigation.

Methods of data collection

In the methodology, learners discuss how they conducted their research. This section should include their approach and method of primary data collection (accounts of the procedure, size of sample, method of selection, choice of variables and controls, and statistical analysis, if they should provide any). It should also include details of where, when and how they conducted their research, and detail why these approaches were the best to answer the research question.

Statement of results (including tables and graphs or charts)

Where research is of a quantitative nature, producing data, learners can present their results in a separate section. Learners may present the data through graphs, tables or charts.

Where research is based on qualitative research approaches, they can integrate their results with the discussion.

In their discussion, learners should explore the meaning or impact of their results in relation to their research question.

Analysis and discussion

Learners should begin this section by restating the problem before discussing how the results affect existing knowledge of the subject. If the research aims to test a certain hypothesis, then this section should demonstrate whether it was or was not supported by the evidence. In most instances, it makes sense to write the following sections

(review of literature, methods of data collection, analysis and discussion) in sequence to ensure continuity and logical progression.

Conclusion

Learners should draw upon all their findings and answer their research question. They should only make conclusions that they can justifiably draw from the findings. The conclusion is also an opportunity for learners to reflect on what they did and how they did it.

Before learners write this section, they should read the whole report and make a note of the key points.

Bibliography and references

A bibliography is required if learners consulted sources they did not directly cite in their report.

Learners must fully reference their assessment, listing all sources in a bibliography or reference list, in a recognised standard format. There is a wide range of suitable styles available, such as Harvard, American Psychological Association (APA), and Modern Languages Association (MLA). This list is not exhaustive. You should guide learners to choose one relevant to their subject area.

Bibliographies and references are not included in the academic report word count.

Appendices

Learners should include copies of any data collection instruments (questionnaires, interview schedules) in the appendices, unless they have been instructed otherwise. If learners conducted an interview, they may add interview transcripts to the appendices.

Appendices are not included in the academic report word count.

These approaches to writing allow learners to develop transferable skills appropriate for future academic and workplace progression.

The written report should contain a declaration of validity that the content submitted is the learner's own work, unless cited otherwise, and learners should sign and date their submissions. You should encourage digital submission through your centre's virtual learning environment (VLE) using anti-plagiarism software.

Equality and inclusion

This unit is designed to be as fair and as accessible as possible with no unnecessary barriers to learning or assessment.

You must consider the needs of individual learners when planning learning experiences, selecting assessment methods or considering alternative evidence.

Guidance on assessment arrangements for disabled learners and those with additional support needs is available on the assessment arrangements web page.

Information for learners

Research Skills (SCQF level 8)

This information explains:

- what the unit is about
- what you should know or be able to do before you start
- what you need to do during the unit
- opportunities for further learning and employment

Unit information

In this unit, you carry out a complex small-scale research investigation, producing an academic report on a topic of interest relating to your studies.

The unit allows you to build on knowledge and understanding you have developed with your studies. You explore a topic area of your choice, conduct primary and secondary research in your chosen area, and present this through an academic report.

Before starting the unit, we recommend that you have one or more of the following:

- Research Skills at SCQF level 7, as part of your HNC or as a stand-alone unit
- the ability to use information and communication technology (ICT) independently
- knowledge, skills, experience and areas of interest from your current academic studies
- communication skills equivalent to at least SCQF level 6

In outcome 1, you develop a research investigation proposal on a topic of your choice. The topic should be from an area you are interested in and one that allows you to gain further insight to develop your knowledge and skills.

You develop an understanding of the following:

- research or hypothesis aims and objectives
- methods of research
- approaches to research
- the various methods of gathering primary and secondary data (including their benefits)

In outcome 2, you conduct your research investigation, where you analyse, evaluate and select relevant complex data from a wide range of sources. You develop the knowledge and skills of data collection and how to use various resources to gather data in preparation for analysis.

Outcome 3 allows you to gain the knowledge and skills you need to write an academic report. You learn how to correctly structure your report, analyse, reflect and reach a conclusion. You should reference the materials used to compile your report.

Meta-skills

Throughout this unit, you develop meta-skills that are useful for your chosen sector.

Meta-skills are transferable behaviours and abilities that help you adapt and succeed in life, study and work. There are three categories of meta-skills: self-management, social intelligence and innovation.

Self-management

This meta-skill includes:

- focusing:
    - filtering out information that is not appropriate (outcomes 1 and 2)
    - identifying relevant data and literature appropriate to the research investigation (outcomes 1 and 2)

- integrity:
    - understanding ethical and legal considerations appropriate to the research investigation (outcome 1)
- adapting:
    - being resilient to circumstances that may arise through the process appropriate to the research investigation (outcomes 1, 2 and 3)
    - reflecting on new knowledge to gain a deeper understanding appropriate to the research investigation (outcomes 1, 2 and 3)
- initiative:
    - selecting a topic and approaches that are appropriate to the research investigation (outcomes 1 and 2)

Social intelligence

This meta-skill includes:

- communicating:
    - understanding and mentally processing verbal or written communication received during data collection and discussions (outcomes 2 and 3)
    - presenting information in the report and proposal (outcomes 2 and 3)

Innovation

This meta-skill includes:

- curiosity:
    - questioning understanding and the data gathered (outcomes 1 and 2)
    - acknowledging what impact this has on current or previous research (outcomes 1 and 2)
- creativity:
    - exploring various ways to gather and present data in the research report (outcomes 2 and 3)
- sense-making:
    - analysing complex data (outcomes 1 and 2)
- critical thinking:
    - identifying, analysing and evaluating primary and secondary data, while also breaking down any problems or challenges before addressing them (outcomes 1 and 2)

Learning for Sustainability

Throughout this unit, you develop skills, knowledge and understanding of sustainability.

You learn about social, economic and environmental sustainability principles and how they relate to your chosen sector. You also develop an understanding of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Administrative information

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Superclass: MA

History of changes

Version	Description of change	Date

Please check SQA's website to ensure you are using the most up-to-date version of this unit.