



National Qualifications

Qualification Verification Summary Report 2022

Core Skills: Communication

Verification group number: 339

Introduction

This report covers external qualification verification of NQ Core Skills: Communication units during session 2021–22. External verifiers visited various centres including colleges, private training providers and community learning centres across Scotland.

The units listed below were verified:

F3GM 08 Communication: Listening (SCQF level 2)
F3GN 08 Communication: Reading (SCQF level 2)
F3GP 08 Communication: Speaking (SCQF level 2)
F3GR 08 Communication: Writing (SCQF level 2)
F3GM 09 Communication: Listening (SCQF level 3)
F3GN 09 Communication: Reading (SCQF level 3)
F3GP 09 Communication: Speaking (SCQF level 3)
F3GR 09 Communication: Writing (SCQF level 3)
F3GB 08 Core Skills: Communication (SCQF level 2)
F3GB 09 Core Skills: Communication (SCQF level 3)
F3GB 10 Core Skills: Communication (SCQF level 4)
F3GB 11 Core Skills: Communication (SCQF level 5)
F3GB 12 Core Skills: Communication (SCQF level 6)

Category 2: Resources

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

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a great impact on centres' ability to deliver Core Skills: Communication safely or to deliver it at all. All centres presented evidence of health and safety procedures in policy documents, pre- and ongoing delivery checklists and minutes of standardisation meetings. Some centres had Covid-specific procedures, and one centre had different sets of guidelines for working with different age groups in the centre.

Technology supported delivery through the pandemic. Some centres use learning management systems such as OneFile and Canvas whose automated systems support quality assurance practices by dating assessment materials for currency and time stamping learners' submissions to support authenticity. Online learning and using learners' own devices reduced risk, although traditional site and IT checks are still in place in all centres.

Some delivery teams continue to standardise assessment practices on a regular but casual basis by having conversations on learners' needs and points of practice. This often produces robust and individualised learning, but it is seldom supported by written records, which would strengthen practice in the greater team.

Category 3: Candidate support

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

All colleges and other learning centres have well developed induction procedures. These involve initial interviews, which can include checking learners' previous education on their certificates or through SQA Navigator/Connect, where learners' Core Skills profiles can be accessed and their Core Skills: Communication level for their current learning can be assessed. Where appropriate, a learner's Core Skills profile can be used to contribute towards the achievement of the Core Skills units through accreditation of prior learning (APL).

Some learning centres give their learners an initial assessment around the time of induction. This helps to decide the correct Core Skills: Communication levels for learners. It also can highlight learners' learning support needs that feed into learners' individual learning plans. All support for learners was provided by the centre staff.

Some community-based centres that offer Core Skills: Communication levels 2 and 3 bring learners into their centres for support with life skills. Non-vocational learners can take time to acclimatise to the learning environment. Some learners then choose to follow vocational attachments to Core Skills including Communication.

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

Most learning has moved online and, in many instances, into a blended model of delivery. Classes in some centres are in physical rooms and other classes are online in Microsoft Teams.

Technology, whether in physical classes or online, supports regular contact between learners and assessors in most centres. This is mostly on a regular, weekly basis, and evidence of this was recorded in centres' traditional documentation. This can be online in an electronic form in the centre's learning management system, or in a scanned version of a physical form from learners' portfolios.

One-to-one contact for learners' reviews can be achieved in classes over MS Teams, for example, in a private call, or outside of the class in the same way, as may suit both learner and assessor.

Category 4: Internal assessment and verification

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

Almost all centres presented evidence of quality documents including policies that were developed and robust. Almost all centres presented evidence of standardisation meetings,

some of these were Core Skills meetings in which Communication was discussed occasionally. Standardisation meetings take place with varying frequency in different centres, ranging from a monthly to a yearly basis.

Many centres employ the three-stage model of verification. 100% verification takes place in some centres. This figure reduces in some centres to 50%. In most, centres, there was little evidence of internal verification of assessment instruments. In one centre, assessment instruments used for Task 1: Reading were dated between 2009 and 2015. These assessment instruments lack currency.

In some centres, there was a lack of marking guidance for Task 1: Reading. Sets of suggested answers or exemplar learner responses are useful for maintaining a consistent approach to assessment at the level, and across different sites of the same centre. In some centres, learners' work did not present clear evidence of Core Skills: Communication standards. However, one centre included a folder in its VLE of level-specific responses to Task 1: Reading assessments as a training resource for assessors.

Evidence of feedback between internal verifier and assessor, in some centres, was vague because there was little or no record. This is sometimes because feedback is given in emails, in phone calls and/or in Teams calls. Records of this feedback were not made.

While, in a few centres, these details seemed inconsequential, the effect of non-standardised assessment practice is to jeopardise not only this criterion but also 4.3 and 4.6, which could affect learners' overall success.

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

Most centres presented evidence of assessment materials that related well to SQA standards. However, there were a few examples of centre-devised materials that showed an inconsistent approach. Assessment checklists, for example, did not reflect SQA standards in some centres. Centre-devised assessment material is acceptable, and often produces contextualised learner work, but centres should be careful to include all unit standards; and if these are reworded, they must retain the sense of the originals.

In some other centres assessment checklists were presented as evidence with some Core Skills: Communication tasks, but not all. And although some centres used assessment checklists directly from SQA Core Skills: Communication ASPs, there was inadequate or no referencing of where standards were located in learners' work. Close referencing of standards in learners' work is an important part of assessment practice, and the absence of this can lead to poor practice, particularly when new assessors are trained in centres. It can also make the external verification process difficult.

Some centres struggled to make assessment instruments for Task 1: Reading meet standards. This led to over-assessment. In a very few centres, Planning Sheet A from Core Skills: Communication ASPs was used as a template for summative assessment. This is not a legitimate approach. This led to over-assessment because the planning sheets are for formative practice that encourages wider learning around Core Skills: Communication standards. All the Core Skills: Communication standards that learners must achieve in

summative assessment in all Core Skills: Communication tasks are found in assessment checklists in ASPs. These alone should be used to judge learners' success in summative assessment.

In some centres, reading texts for Task 1: Reading far exceeded the suggested word range for each level. This led to over-assessment. The correct word range for Task 1: Reading assessment instruments can be calculated by taking the minimum word count for Task 2: Writing, as the lower range and adding 300 words as the top of the range. So, for example, level 5 Task 1: Reading texts should be in the range of 500 to 800 words in length. The length of reading texts is important at each level because it matches the requirements of the task. This enables learners to succeed at each level.

One centre devised an integrated task for Task 1: Reading. It is good practice to combine more than one unit into one task, where it is possible, to save the learner needless repetition of assessment tasks. However, the centre devised a task that combined English Literary Analysis and Core Skills: Communication Task 1: Reading assessments. Performance criteria for the different assessment tasks were drawn from the same piece of work.

While there might be some crossover in understanding and analysis, this is not an acceptable approach because the intentions of these two assessments are fundamentally different. That is:

- ◆ In Literary Analysis, the context of the assessment is the literature; in the Communication Task 1: Reading, the context of the assessment is the document that includes the literature.
- ◆ Literary Analysis demonstrates the effectiveness of (the writer's) meaning; Communication Task 1: Reading demonstrates the effectiveness of (the learner's) skills.
- ◆ Literary Analysis examines the ability of the writer whereas Communication Task 1: Reading examines the ability of the learner.

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

Almost all centres have robust authenticity procedures. In almost all centres, the learners' induction process includes understanding policies that apply to their learning, including policies on plagiarism and malpractice. Almost all centres require learners to sign a disclaimer at induction to show their understanding of these policies.

Most centres require learners to sign and date their summative work, although this is not always labelled as an authenticity disclaimer. A few centres ask their learners to submit summative work through Turnitin. However, most centres explain that they work closely with learners and this best generates confidence that their learners' work is authentic. This is good practice, particularly when it is supported by records that indicate learners' recognition of authenticity requirements.

There has been a significant increase in online assessment with controlled conditions through the COVID-19 pandemic. For Core Skills: Communication, this has altered practice in Task 1: Reading, which is an open-book assessment without time restriction, but which traditionally requires live invigilation to ensure authenticity. Clearly, it is more difficult to know that learners are not colluding or plagiarising. Various methods have been used by centres

to counter these concerns. For example, for Task 1: Reading, some centres, make online assessment instruments and surround these with quality assurance measures such as:

- ◆ Cameras on.
- ◆ The immediate submission of learners' work at the end of a session.
- ◆ In some cases, the use of Turnitin for authenticity checking.
- ◆ Random interviews with a sample of learners after the assessment to ensure authenticity.
- ◆ Electronic statements of authenticity sent as emails to learners to which they must reply 'I agree'.
- ◆ One centre devised what they call 'Burner' assessments, which are devised for one cohort only so that news of the assessment contents cannot be spread to other learners who take assessments at different times.

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

Most centres produced work that accurately and consistently reflected SQA unit specifications. Learners were well placed at levels. Standards for tasks were clear in most learners' work and assessors' feedback was supportive and positive. Some centres included drafts of learners' written summative assessments.

However, there were issues of over-assessment in many centres. A few centres did not represent SQA standards in their learners' work. In these cases, centres were asked to improve their learning materials and re-assess their learners. One centre, which produced high quality work did so using early versions of Core Skills: Communication unit specifications and assessment support packs. These versions are still available on the internet. However, the latest versions are on SQA's Core Skills website. Centres should use these versions only.

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

All centres have retention policies that are in line with SQA requirements. Some centres keep evidence for longer than this to meet requirements set by some of their other stakeholders.

Some centres offer learners their work at the end of the retention period. If this offer is not accepted, learners' work is disposed of securely.

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

Both in policy and practice, all centres receive external verifier reports that are shared with management and then the wider team in a meeting. This can be online. Mostly, issues in the reports are discussed in meetings where action plans are made. In some centres, external verifier reports are shared by email. One centre shares highlights from reports on the centre's 'Bulletin Board', which is an email newsletter. Reports are often stored in a shared online resource, for example a SharePoint folder, with access given to the delivery team.

Areas of good practice reported by qualification verifiers

The following good practice was reported during session 2021–22:

- ◆ All centres responded appropriately to the COVID-19 pandemic by moving their work online where it was possible. This year, many centres continue with a blended model of face-to-face and online learning.
- ◆ Some learning centres that deliver lower-level Core Skills: Communication, place learners on non-vocational attachments to the centre to give them time to acclimatise to the learning environment. They then work with learners to help them decide on a learning plan if they wish this.
- ◆ Technology was used to effect in blended models of delivery. Online learning and using learners' own devices increased health and safety and reduced risk for learners.
- ◆ Induction procedures in centres are well developed, and a variety of processes here produces well supported, individualised learning thereafter.
- ◆ There is regular support and contact with learners, particularly with the addition of online methods of contact between assessors and learners.
- ◆ Feedback to learners about their Core Skills: Communication work is individualised to learners and always positive.

Specific areas for development

The following areas for development were reported during session 2021–22:

- ◆ There were concerns about some centres' standardisation processes this year.
- ◆ Informal standardisation took place between members of assessment teams in many centres but there were no written records of this presented as evidence. Centres should develop methods of recording and sharing the strategies in these conversations with the wider team.
- ◆ There was insufficient evidence of internal verification of assessment instruments in some centres.
- ◆ Records on forms of feedback from internal verifier to assessor were few. Communication between members of the assessment team was not clear in some centres.
- ◆ While there was evidence of standardisation in centres' meetings, there was little evidence of centres developing resources that addressed standards in tasks specifically.
- ◆ Some centre-devised learning materials such as assessment checklists did not reflect Core Skills: Communication standards.
- ◆ Core Skills: Communication Reading assessments were not supported well by marking guidance. This seemed to mean that many learners' summative assessments were not standardised, particularly in the area of evaluation. More focus on the effectiveness of presentational features in reading texts should be encouraged by assessors to broaden learners' appreciation of non-verbal conventions in good communication.
- ◆ In some centres, reading assessments encouraged over-assessment by using reading texts that were too long, given the level of the unit.