

Qualification Design Principles (June 2025)

Higher National Qualifications

Rationale

Every Higher National Qualification must have a clear rationale that:

- justifies the need for the qualification and its uniqueness
- provides evidence of demand for the qualification
- explains how it fits with other qualifications
- identifies the progression opportunities into and from the qualification
- outlines the aims, purposes and intended learning outcomes of the qualification, and explains how the award structure enables them
- gives information about who the course is for

Qualification design

Higher National Certificates (HNCs) must include a mandatory section of at least 48 SCQF credit points. This must contain a graded unit of 8 SCQF credit points at SCQF level 7.

Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) must include a mandatory section of at least 96 SCQF credit points. This must contain one graded unit worth 8 SCQF credit points at SCQF level 7, and one or more graded units totalling 16 SCQF credit points at SCQF level 8.

SCQF level and credit points

HNCs are at SCQF level 7 and worth 96 SCQF credit points. Of these, at least 48 SCQF credit points must be at SCQF level 7.

HNDs are at SCQF level 8 and worth 240 SCQF credit points. Of these, at least 64 SCQF credit points must be at SCQF level 8.

Assessment

The purposes of graded units are to:

- assess candidates' ability to integrate and apply the knowledge and/or skills gained in the individual HN Units to show they have met the principal aims of the group award
- grade candidates' achievement

Units within a Higher National Qualification are internally assessed.

Award of qualification

To gain a HNC or HND, candidates must achieve the required unit assessments and graded units within the group award.

Grading

HNC and HND graded units are graded A–C.

Skills

HNCs and HNDs should clearly include opportunities for candidates to develop Core Skills to levels required by the occupations or progression pathways they support. This means all five Core Skills should be developed in every HN programme.

Equality

Higher National Qualifications must take into consideration the needs of all candidates. These qualifications should be as accessible and inclusive as possible to candidates who will achieve in different ways and at a different pace.

Further considerations for Qualification Design Teams

HN Unit and graded unit specifications

Qualifications Scotland produces guidance on how to write HN Unit and graded unit specifications. These include templates and examples of how the specifications should be laid out. Always use this guidance when developing new or revised HN Unit or graded unit specifications.

Validation of HN Unit specifications

A key part of validation is to confirm the proposed allocation of SCQF levels and SCQF credit points to each unit, and this needs to be done consistently. Until the process of devolving this to centres is fully worked out, Qualifications Scotland will validate all new or revised HN Unit specifications. Centres may continue to develop HN Unit specifications for validation by Qualifications Scotland.

Validation of HN Group Awards and graded units

Group award validation may continue to be carried out by centres with devolved powers to do so. As graded units relate to the principal aims of a group award, they can also be validated by devolved centres as part of group awards.

Validation periods

Design teams must keep HN Units, graded units and group awards under review to make sure they are still fit for purpose. Normally, reviews take place every five years. However, validation panels may recommend more frequent reviews. Specific time periods of validation will not be specified.