Higher National Qualifications

Qualification Verification Summary Report 2018
English and Communication

Introduction

Two external verifiers visited 18 SQA centres in China during March 2018. A further 12 centres submitted evidence electronically for remote verification, carried out by three external verifiers. Workplace Communication in English was verified in 26 verification events, and Research Skills in 25 verification events. Three centres were verified for Communication: Business Communication.

Several centres made significant improvements to the quality of their assessment and verification activity, and it was noted that stable staffing and good working relationships were contributing factors to this improvement. Pass rates at the time of verification were sometimes very low (as low as 14%), but expected to improve with re-assessments by the end of the academic year.

Assessment and internal verification of Communication units showed signs of improvement. However, many candidates still struggle to achieve the level of accuracy in spelling, punctuation and grammar required for these units.

This was the second year that Research Skills has been a mandatory unit within the China frameworks. Some centres are still experimenting to find the best methods of assessing Research Skills to suit their candidates' needs. Some 16 of the centres verified adopted the standalone approach, and nine centres integrated Research Skills with graded units. There was still some evidence of centres expecting candidates to produce more complex research tasks than the standard requires, and clear guidance was given when this occurred.

Overall, it is clear that centres are adopting more student-centred approaches, and there is a growing trend in detailed analysis of results.

The following English and Communication units were verified:

♦ H8T2 33   Workplace Communication in English
♦ H7TK 34   Business Communication
♦ F60A 34   Research Skills

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 were found to be well qualified and competent. A few assessors were experienced IELTS teachers or qualified TESOL teachers, and students clearly benefited from their expertise.

Almost all CPD records were current and relevant, and included attendance at in-house training courses. A few CPD records contained reflection and forward planning. For some staff members, there was little evidence of subject-specific activity. Records show that where teachers had attended the SQA Professional Development Conference in Chengdu in August 2017, most shared formal feedback from the training with their colleagues.

In a few centres language teachers worked alongside the HND course team to give additional ESOL support to candidates. In one centre, assessors were supported by a teaching assistant who helped with tutorials.

In more than a few cases, there was evidence of collaboration with staff from different centres to share resources, either face-to-face or using QQ groups.

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

In all centres, pre-delivery meeting records showed that assessment environments, reference material, and learning and assessment materials were reviewed prior to the start of each semester. In addition, there were various checklists of library resources, IT equipment and classrooms reviewed each academic year.

In a few cases, parts of the quality documents, eg student handbooks, were not up to date.

Category 3: Candidate support

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

In almost all centres, candidates completed a foundation year prior to selecting their HND major to ensure that candidates were matched to the award requirements. The impact of raising the IELTs entry levels to 4.5 across all test categories was noticeable in some centres, with smaller class sizes and improved results. One centre set the IELTS entry score at 5.0, which is higher than expected by SQA, and achieved higher-than-average pass rates.

Student Personal Development Plans were almost always detailed, and included SWOT analysis and short, medium and long-term goal setting. Candidate learning support needs were generally identified early in the semester and addressed during the year in tutorials with assessors or with additional help from ESOL teachers or volunteer international students. In some centres, these additional classes were not mandatory, and some of the candidates who needed the help the most failed to take advantage.

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

In most centres, tutorial schedules and record forms provided detailed accounts of meetings between assessors and candidates, the topics discussed and follow-up actions. However, class sizes remain an issue in more than a few centres, with groups of over 40 students per class — one class contained 53 students. It is difficult to see how assessors can maintain meaningful contact with all candidates in these cases.

Various timetabling models were noted, with classes lasting from 45 minutes with additional tutorials, to three hours. In a few cases, detailed teaching plans show how classes were arranged to include a variety of student-centred learning activities to engage with candidates and maintain their interest. In a few centres, assessors spent an excessive amount of time on preparing for Workplace Communication Outcome 1 assessment, to the detriment of Outcome 2.

Some assessors were experimenting with different ways to support candidates, such as examining the IELTS scores of each candidate and tailoring tutorials to match their needs. In one centre, the assessor had an effective model comprising focused English language support for candidates during lessons, individual and group tutorials, and highly effective study groups. Together these interventions contributed to a very high pass rate.

Almost all assessors continue to support candidates using social media platforms — WeChat or QQ. Students tended to favour this method. In a few cases this is highly organised, with candidates and assessors participating in QQ group chats to discuss issues about preparing for assessment, setting and marking homework, tracking whether students have done their homework, and sending reminders.

A few centres have recently appointed support staff to work directly with students to monitor attendance and help with motivation and behavioural issues. This is proving effective and is a valuable support to assessors and coordinators.

One centre phased the delivery of units from this verification group over three years to allow for consolidation of learning and progression: 1st year (foundation) — Workplace Communication in English; 2nd year — Business Communication; 3rd year — Research Skills.

In a few centres, candidates kept a written record after each lesson to note what they had learned and to highlight any issues for later discussion at scheduled tutorials. This encouraged them to reflect on the learning process and take more responsibility for their own learning.

It was noted across most centres that pass rates at first attempt were generally very low for the Communication units. This created a backlog of re-assessment, excessive marking and internal verifying workload for staff, and was demotivating for students. Centres should pay greater attention to how candidates are prepared for assessment, and whether they are ready to sit assessments. Introducing more focused formative work and adjusting assessment schedules may help to reduce these problems.

Category 4: Internal assessment and verification

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

Internal verification almost always follows the SQA recommended cycle of pre-assessment, during assessment and sampling, followed by post-assessment. Most centres prepared well for external verification visits with documentation arranged according to SQA QV criteria. Various quality manuals/handbooks outlined processes for planning, teaching, assessment and internal and external verification.

Records of internal verification and standardisation meetings sometimes noted good-quality discussion and decision making. In many cases, they included SMART action points arising from discussions.

However, in more than a few cases, the minutes failed to note some important issues that had been discussed. Minutes are an important source of information during external verification and staff should feel comfortable recording key points from discussions and details of professional judgements made.

Sampling tended to be random. It would be more useful if candidates' assessments selected for internal verification were based on very good passes, average and borderline passes.

Post-delivery review forms, assessment summary records, or other forms of end-of-unit analysis were used in many centres to reflect on the assessment experience, outcome by outcome, and examine positive or negative features of candidates' performance and unit results. Where they were used, they helped assessors and internal verifiers to better understand students' assessment needs, and adjust teaching plans for future delivery.

Where Research Skills was integrated with graded units, internal verification records sometimes failed to make any mention of Research Skills. Centres should note that both units must be addressed during the internal verification process, as they belong to different verification groups and are subject to separate external verification.

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

H8T2 33 Workplace Communication in English and H7TK 34 Business Communication
In almost all centres assessors used SQA's Assessment Support Packs (ASPs) for assessment and re-assessment. One centre alternated ASPs from year to year to ensure candidates from the previous year could not share information about assessment. They also alternated between Outcome 1 Option A and Option B questions. Very few centres used their own assessment instruments which had been prior verified by SQA.

The following points relating to Outcomes 1, 2 and 3 should be noted.

Outcome 1
A very few centres administered Outcome 1 as a closed-book assessment, which is incorrect. All assessments are open-book and this should be made clear to students.

If Outcome 1 is assessed or re-assessed orally, the assessor must take a note of candidates' responses, and assessment checklists must be completed.

Outcome 2
Almost all centres were mindful of the advised word counts to encourage concise and more accurate writing, and to reduce the marking workloads for assessors. Word counts should be noted on the cover page of reports.

Most centres adopted the portfolio approach to collecting evidence for Outcome 2. Sometimes the more able candidates who could manage the minimum word count in the report alone were encouraged to do so.

In a few cases, written feedback to candidates after first assessment attempts in Communication units was minimal or vague. At this level candidates need clear written feedback in order to re-work assessments successfully.

Where candidates fail to achieve Outcome 2 after the allowed number of attempts, the assessor may identify an appropriate piece of writing from another unit to use as a writing assessment, and ask the candidate to make improvements prior to submission. It must be marked according to the assessment requirements for Outcome 2. Such re-assessments must always be internally verified and clearly noted in the minutes of internal verification meetings.

Outcome 3
If an individual within a group does not meet the evidence requirements during the first attempt, they may be re-assessed in a new group with the assessor or internal verifier acting as chairperson. There is no need to expect the whole group to be re-assessed.

F60A 34 Research Skills
Some 16 centres chose the stand-alone approach to assessing Research Skills. Most of them used the new SQA ASP from July 2017, and a few used centre-devised assessment instruments which had been prior verified, sometimes with templates from the new ASP to record achievement.

Research Skills was integrated in nine centres, and most assessment instruments gave candidates clear instructions and stated the requirements of Research Skills and the graded units using the 2016 'Guide to the Planning, Delivery and Assessment of the Research Skills Unit (F60A 34) with SQA HND Frameworks in China'. Assessment checklists recorded achievement of both units. Most centres successfully combined the requirements of both units, but when integrated with Financial Services, in a very few cases, the integration presented

challenges for candidates, as opportunities for using primary sources of information do not fit naturally with this graded unit remit.

Many assessors had adjusted expectations since the previous year's external verification visits and set tasks at the appropriate level for this unit. Most centres gave candidates a choice of investigation topics, leading to interesting reports. In a few centres, staff had discussed the positioning of Research Skills within the timetable to offer the most valuable support to candidates as they prepared for graded units.

However, in a few cases, candidates were still struggling with research tasks which were too demanding for this level. It is important for assessors to check candidates' plans after Outcome 1, and again after Outcome 2, to ensure that planned investigations are realistic, before they proceed to writing up their research investigation.

In a few centres, assessors were advised to carry out more formative work to prepare candidates to devise questionnaires/surveys. Devising mainly closed questions will make it easier for the candidates to analyse the results.

It should be noted that there is no need to use separate tasks for re-assessment of Research Skills, as candidates should be allowed to re-work their failed attempts using their original investigation material. (This applies to Research Skills only, as the unit is designed for ongoing development of a candidate's skills.)

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

Quality handbooks for staff and students contained sections on plagiarism and malpractice, and in some cases there were separate policies dealing with exam violations and cheating. There was ample evidence that centres were taking steps to ensure that assessment evidence was original:

♦ Staff participated in a CPD event on methods to identify and prevent plagiarism.
♦ Assessment Cover Sheets were used incorporating declaration and statement of authorship.
♦ Candidates signed general commitment letters stating that they would abide by all assessment regulations.
♦ Turnitin statements were sometimes attached to submitted candidate reports.

For Research Skills, the fact that candidates choose their own topics for research investigations, and use their own primary sources, helps to guarantee originality of candidates' work.

A few centres had identified instances of plagiarism and dealt with them according to their policies.

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

Assessment judgements were consistent with SQA standards, and assessors made consistently reliable judgements when returning assessments to candidates for re-working. Detailed marking schemes helped to ensure consistency and staff were, in most cases, confident in their understanding of assessment requirements.

H8T2 33 Workplace Communication in English and H7TK 34 Business Communication

Most centres provided detailed, constructive and encouraging feedback after marking which helped to motivate the students by pointing out what they had done well, as well as supporting them with advice on how to improve.

Outcome 1 was almost always assessed well, though occasionally candidates' responses lacked detailed reference to the text during evaluation.

There were more than a few occasions when assessors were a little lenient in judging whether spelling, punctuation and grammar were consistently accurate in Outcome 2 written work. Closer attention should be paid to teaching formal business writing, perhaps encouraging candidates to practise commonly used phrases and sentence structures.

In a few centres high-quality video recordings were available for Outcome 3. Assessment judgements were occasionally a little generous regarding body language. Different strategies could be used to engage reluctant students and help them to be more comfortable with using video — eg encouraging them to use their own phones to record themselves during their rehearsals, and follow up with a self-assessment checklist to evaluate their own performance. If candidates feel more confident with the assessor's presence, the assessor may join the groups or even choose to chair meetings. Candidates should be made more aware of the importance of good body language, and the importance of eye contact when speaking and also when listening actively.

F60A 34 Research Skills

In a small number of cases, centre-devised assessment checklists were unnecessarily detailed and could have made it more difficult for candidates to pass Research Skills. Centres were reminded that the focus of this unit is on developing skills, so it is important that candidates are allowed to remediate their assessments further if they are not successful after the first re-do. For this unit, a complete new assessment is not practical.

In a very few centres, candidates were expected to do far more than was required in their identification of primary sources of information. Some had attempted to gather data from 100 people or more, creating an unnecessarily large workload, and an overly complex analysis task.

One centre made use of an online survey platforms which provided opportunities for detailed statistical data to use within the report.

In most cases where Research Skills was integrated with the graded units, Research Skills evidence was readily identifiable within the research investigations, making it easy to check

candidates' work against SQA requirements. This was achieved by good layout and format, clear headings, in-text citation and relevant appendices. However, it was sometimes difficult to trace where candidates had met all the Research Skills evidence requirements within lengthy GU investigation reports. Tables of contents and sub-headings were not helpful as they only referred to GU knowledge requirements. Candidates could be instructed to signpost Research Skills evidence more clearly. Or the assessor could write comments on the candidates' reports to show where evidence was found. This difficulty in finding evidence is not conducive to effective standardisation, as it is very time consuming to check entire reports to confirm whether assessment decisions are correct during internal or external verification.

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

All centres had clear retention policies stating that evidence will be retained for at least one month after candidate graduation, and more typically for three years, which exceeds SQA requirements. Some centres keep evidence for up to six years after graduation.

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

In most centres the management handbooks/quality manuals stated how coordinators ensure all findings from external verification are shared through meetings, and how actions are recorded. During discussions with staff, it was clear that previous external verification reports had been disseminated and have had an impact on teaching and assessment practices. Pre-delivery meetings referred to findings from previous external verification reports demonstrating that the centres disseminated feedback to inform future practice. In addition, in some cases, distribution checklists were used to record who had received copies of external verification reports.

Actions had been carried out for most of the recommendations made by external verifiers. In a very few cases, recommendations from the previous year's external verification reports had not been followed up or discussed.

Areas of good practice reported by qualification verifiers

The following examples of good practice were reported during session 2017–18:

♦ Internal seminar to highlight what should be done to improve standardisation of results through more rigorous internal verification procedures.
♦ Staff networking with other universities via QQ to share teaching and assessment material.
♦ Staff participating in a CPD event on coursework authenticity covering methods to prevent plagiarism.
♦ Candidate Learning Support Surveys used to identify individualised needs and students' preferred method of support (eg face-to-face, e-mail, QQ etc).
♦ Verification Evidence List stating all SQA qualification verification criteria and available evidence, making it easy to find relevant documents during visiting external verification.
♦ Encouraging candidates to take more responsibility for their own learning by completing a daily record of their learning. They reflected on the day's lesson and summarised what they had learned.
♦ Assessors taking advantage of many of the features of QQ social media to support candidates in creative ways.
♦ New appointment of support staff hired to work with students on attendance and motivation issues.
♦ Learning summaries written by candidates gave students an opportunity to reflect on their learning experiences, and provide valuable feedback to assessors.
♦ Own Work Declarations acknowledging the importance of referencing and citation skills.

Good practice specific to H8T2 33 Workplace Communication in English and H7TK 34 Business Communication

♦ In-depth, end-of-unit analysis of errors in candidates' responses, to better understand their weaknesses, and adjusting teaching content to focus on the weaknesses.
♦ The combination of tailored classes, formative work, tutorials and structured study groups, all combining to ensure a high level of language support for candidates.
♦ Weekly English language classes to encourage students to improve their language skills.
♦ Workplace Communication in English candidates watched playback of their Outcome 3 assessments after the group meeting to help them to improve their performance before undertaking Outcome 3 assessment for Business Communication.
♦ Candidates were given relevant formative reading articles on the subject of Customer Care to familiarise them with concepts and vocabulary in preparation for Communication Outcome 1 assessments on the same theme.
♦ Teaching candidates about appropriate body language for Communication Outcome 3 assessments.

Good practice specific to F60A 34 Research Skills

♦ Candidates choosing their own research topics to help motivation in Research Skills.

♦ Candidate research projects on themes related to university life, such as analysis of graduation rates of students, evaluation of teaching quality, or analysis of international student recruitment. This provides useful information to the course team and gives candidates a real audience for their findings.

♦ Research Skills assessors writing constructive comments on candidates' scripts offering suggestions for future improvements, which helped them when undertaking their graded units.

♦ Integrated Research Skills reports being well presented, with clear contents pages, making the identification of Research Skills evidence requirements straightforward.

Specific areas for development

The following areas for development were reported during session 2017–18:

♦ Assessors and internal verifiers should meet to discuss the contents of the annual Qualification Verification Summary Report for China as soon as it becomes available, to supplement subject-specific CPD.

♦ Students to be encouraged to keep their own records after each lesson to highlight any issues to be discussed at tutorials with their assessor.

♦ Minutes of internal verification and standardisation meetings to be sufficiently detailed to include summaries of important issues that have been discussed, especially on issues where staff are unsure.

♦ Harvard Referencing — As almost all candidates use websites for researching secondary sources in Research Skills or selecting information for Communication reports, assessors could produce a simple one-page handout which shows how to do this, with examples.

Areas for development specific to H8T2 33 Workplace Communication in English and H7TK 34 Business Communication

♦ Assessors and internal verifiers to use the Communication resource handbook first produced in 2015 to access additional formative material for students to prepare them for summative assessments.

♦ Assessors and internal verifiers for Communication to focus more on specific borderline candidates during internal verification meetings, and record conclusions and decisions reached in the minutes of the meetings to strengthen standardisation.

♦ Assessors to give more detailed written feedback to help candidates be better prepared for re-do or re-assessment.

♦ Centres to consider whether large class sizes allow sufficient time for assessors to effectively support all candidates for Communication units.

♦ Assessors to consider which assessment instruments taken from SQA ASPs give candidates the best chance of success at the first attempt.

♦ Preparation for Communication Outcome 3 assessment to pay closer attention to developing candidates' awareness of their body language, such as eye contact.

- ♦ Weaker candidates should attend mandatory additional English language classes to support their studies.
- ♦ More detailed and constructive feedback should be noted on checklists for oral assessments when they have not been recorded. These checklists are the only evidence that standards have been met, so they should describe candidates' performance more fully.
- ♦ More use of end-of-unit internal verification records to analyse results and errors in candidates' responses in-depth, to better understand specific weaknesses, instead of generalising the issue as 'poor English'. This should be followed by reflection on what could be done to improve the pass rates of each assessment outcome. Findings should inform actions for the following academic year.
- ♦ Centres to ensure that assessment checklists focus on evidence requirements only, and not question numbers or specific tasks which contribute to overall assessment.

Areas for development specific to F60A 34 Research Skills
- ♦ Clear guidance and support to Research Skills candidates after completion of Outcome 1 to ensure that appropriate topics are chosen. Over-ambitious research plans should be revised.
- ♦ Clearer signposting of Research Skills in internal verification records when they are integrated with the graded unit.