

Quality assurance of BTEC Higher Nationals

The quality assurance system for BTEC Higher National qualifications, as higher-level vocational qualifications at Level 4 on the NQF, will comprise three main components.

- **approval process** — a control measure to confirm that individual centres (and programme teams) are appropriately resourced and competent to deliver a BTEC Level 4 programme of study.
- **monitoring of centres** — a method of monitoring centres' internal quality systems to ensure ongoing fulfilment of initial requirements and, where appropriate, enhancement of those requirements to accommodate new qualifications.
- **independent assessment** — a measure that provides independence within the assessment process, so that the certificated outcomes for each learner are not reliant on determinations by individuals or groups with a vested interest in the outcome. This measure should be consistent and reliable over time, and should not create unnecessary barriers.

Centre and programme approval

Approval to offer the BTEC Higher National qualifications will vary depending on the status of the centre. Centres that have a recent history of delivering BTEC Higher National qualifications and have an acceptable quality profile in relation to their delivery will be able to gain approval through an accelerated process. Centres that are new to the delivery of BTEC Higher National qualifications will be required to submit evidence to demonstrate that they:

- have the human and physical resources required for effective delivery and assessment
- understand the implications for independent assessment and agree to abide by these
- have a robust internal assessment system supported by 'fit for purpose' assessment documentation
- have a system to internally verify assessment decisions to ensure standardised assessment decisions are made across all assessors and sites.

Such applications have to be supported by the head of the centre (principal, chief executive, etc).

We communicate all approvals in writing to the head of centre in the form of a qualification approval letter. The approval letter will also contain a programme definition for each qualification approved. The programme definition clearly states to the centre all units that comprise the qualification for which the centre is approved.

Monitoring centres' internal quality systems

Centres will be expected to demonstrate ongoing fulfilment of approval criteria across all programme areas. This should include the consistent application of policies affecting learner registrations and appeals, together with the effectiveness of internal examination and standardisation processes.

Centres may opt for a review of their provision under the quality verifier/quality reviewer arrangements, which already apply to all further education centres. Alternatively, centres may present evidence of their operation within a recognised code of practice, such as that of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. Edexcel reserves the right to confirm independently that these arrangements are operating to our satisfaction.

Independent assessment: the role of the external examiner

Supporting consistency and appropriateness of centre assessor decisions

For all BTEC Higher Nationals accredited at Level 4 on the NQF, Edexcel will appoint appropriately qualified subject-specific external examiners to the programme in each centre. Edexcel will define the selection, appointment and training process, together with the roles and responsibilities of the external examiners and will communicate the details to centres in a centre handbook.

The function of the external examiner will be objectively to review and evaluate the assessment process and standards of learner attainment by independently reviewing, in the first year of the programme, a sample of learner work, (including the centre designed assignments upon which the samples are based), selected by the external examiner, from across the programme.

When they visit centres, external examiners must be afforded reasonable access to the assessed parts of the programme, including evidence of learner performance on placement. They are required to:

- verify that standards are appropriate for the award and its elements
- assist institutions in the comparison of academic standards across similar awards nationally.

Should any disparity occur between the judgement of centre assessors and that of the external examiner, this will be reported to the centre and to Edexcel by the external examiner. The centre will be required to agree appropriate corrective action as a result of this report.

Independence in confirmation of certificated outcomes

In the final year of the programme, the external examiner will revisit the centre in order to independently assess learner work and to evaluate centre assessor decisions on final outcomes. This process of evaluation may focus upon work in units, selected by the external examiner, that present the most appropriate evidence for this exercise. The work of all learners not already sampled in the first year of the programme will be reviewed.

Resolution of assessments will normally be handled at the centre's final programme review board. The external examiner will be expected to endorse the outcomes of assessment before certification can be authorised. Should the external examiner be unable to provide such endorsement, certification will be withheld until appropriate corrective action has taken place. (The senior subject examiner may become involved in such instances.)

The external examiner will be required to prepare a written report after each visit. The report will include comments from the external examiner upon:

- academic standards and programme specification
- academic standards and learner performance
- academic standards and assessment
- the assessment process
- assessment meetings
- physical resources
- comments of learners
- meetings with staff
- external examiner practice
- issues arising from previous reports
- details of sampling
- general points, areas of good practice and major issues

- action points.

The external examiner report provides the mechanism by which the external examiner independently verifies learner ability, endorses the validity of the assessment process and releases certification for a cohort.

The report is a confidential document between Edexcel, the appointed external examiner, and the centre to use for internal/external quality assurance processes. It provides the centre with feedback on the external examining process and on the judgements that determine the external examiner's decisions on endorsement, or otherwise, of learner outcomes.