

## Specialist Paper 9

# Use of Time Constrained Assessment Activities. A guide for External Examiners and Centres

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*Throughout this paper the word test is used to describe any type of time limited assessment activity.*

The widespread use of time limited assessment activities (e.g. tests) is not encouraged within the QCF Level 5 assessment system, but appropriate limited use is permitted. Where tests are used, the unit team should ensure that their use can be justified and that they are valid for the purpose stated. External examiners, when reviewing this type of assessment, should consider the following four aspects:

- Is the test an integral part of an overall unit assessment plan?
- Is the test structured so as validly to satisfy the targeted learning outcomes and assessment criteria? If used, are grade descriptors appropriately contextualised?
- Does the unit (and programme) have an appropriate spread of assessment activities?
- Is the test assessed according to Higher National QCF assessment procedures?

### Integration within a unit assessment plan

All units should have a unit assessment plan, indicating where assessment and grading opportunities are available within the various assessment activities of the unit. An individual assessment activity should show which of the learning outcomes, assessment criteria and/or grading descriptors are being targeted. From the context and learner tasks a judgement can then be made regarding the validity of the assessment in terms of the grading opportunities.

The same principles apply to a test. A test should clearly specify which assessment criteria and grading descriptors are being targeted. The action verbs/ contextualised grading descriptors used in each of the questions can then be attributed to individual assessment criteria/grading descriptors and thus confirm that the test is valid in terms of content and level.

The test should also be valid in terms of purpose. Tests provide a high level of certainty where authenticity is an issue. As such, a test could be a valid method of assessment, where the principal requirements are confirmation that a student has an 'on-demand' factual knowledge of an aspect of a subject and if necessary, the ability to apply or explain it.

- Tests could be constructed to address only selected assessment criteria or to include material relating to contextualised grading descriptors and so discriminate between Pass, Merit and Distinction levels of performance. However, since the grade descriptors relate mainly to methodology, it is likely that M1 (identify and apply strategies to find appropriate solutions), M3 (present and communicate appropriate findings), D1 (use critical reflection to evaluate own work and justify valid conclusions) and D3 (demonstrate convergent/ lateral/ creative thinking) most readily lend themselves to a test format. However, in some disciplines, it may also be possible to assess M2 (select /design and apply appropriate methods/techniques) and D2 (take responsibility for managing and organising activities), using certain forms of time-limited activities.

## Spread of assessment activities

A holistic view of the programme should be taken to ensure there is an appropriate spread of assessment activities within and across the units. The units making up the programme should collectively allow learners opportunities to develop, and be assessed in, higher level skills, such as analysis, literature searching, teamwork, management responsibilities, effective communication etc. Where tests are used, they should not be so numerous as to skew the balance of skills that can be best developed through written assignments, case studies, experimentation, investigative activities etc.

## Structure of a test

Where a test relates only to the pass criteria of learning outcomes, each question relating to the targeted assessment criteria should:

- Be identified and clearly annotated on the test paper. (Centre teams may wish to use the notation 1.1, 2.2 etc., to indicate the first and second listed assessment criteria for outcomes 1 and 2 respectively)
- Have 'sufficiency' in terms of unit content
- Be set at the appropriate level
- Use valid action verbs that address the demands of the assessment criteria

The duration of the test should be clearly stated.

Where a test is used to distinguish merit and distinction performance, ie. contextualised grading descriptors are being assessed, then the different grading components of the questions should be identified so that it is clear which grading descriptors are being targeted. (Centre teams may find it convenient to use the notation M1, D2 etc for this purpose). It is essential that the questions are appropriately contextualised so as to satisfy the demands of the respective grading descriptors.

In addition to the overall duration of the test, there should be clear guidance to students on recommended times to be spent on answering pass, merit and distinction items in the paper.

## Higher National assessment procedures

It is not acceptable to use numbers to assess individual questions or to aggregate numbers to arrive at a final grade. Within the HN assessment system there is no system of compensation or transference of credit whereby a relatively poor performance in one aspect of unit achievement can be offset by a good performance in another aspect. These fundamental features of outcome-based assessment must be taken into account in test-based assessments.

Each question relating to a contextualised grading descriptor should be assessed as a single entity with a final decision of 'grading descriptor achieved' or 'not achieved' based on the sufficiency, level and factual correctness of the answer. Where several assessment criteria are covered, then each criterion must be separately assessed and the final assessment must clearly state which assessment criteria have/have not been achieved. Where more than one question is used to cover an individual assessment criterion then all questions must be answered at an acceptable level before 'criterion achieved' is recorded. No compensation is permissible.

The final assessment should clearly state which outcome(s), assessment criteria and grade descriptors have been achieved. Where applicable any necessary remedial action should also be listed. No overall grade of Pass, Merit or Distinction should be given for a test that covers only part of a unit.