

THE HIGHER TECHNICAL QUALIFICATIONS (HTQ) APPROVAL PROCESS IN ENGLAND: A REVIEW

A REPORT TO THE GATSBY FOUNDATION

PROFESSOR ELIZABETH CLEAVER

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DISCLAIMER

The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily state or reflect those of the Gatsby Charitable Foundation.

SECTION 1: THE EVOLVING TECHNICAL EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

The English technical education sector is part way through a significant change journey, following the publication of three high profile reports: the Wolf Report (Wolf, 2011), the Sainsbury Review (Independent Panel on Technical Education, 2016) and the Augar Report (Wolf et al. 2019). The new direction of travel, confirmed in the Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth white paper (Department for Education, 2021), is based on a clear demarcation between academic and technical qualifications, with the latter firmly based on employer needs.

The resulting new suite of technical qualifications is now in place, with each addition to the portfolio now expected to align to an employer-created occupational standard which describes the knowledge, skills and behaviours (KSBs) that are needed for someone to be competent in the occupation's duties.

The most well-known of these new qualification types are apprenticeships—work-based training programmes, currently offered at Levels 2 to Level 7¹; and T Levels—a technical alternative to A Levels, offered at Level 3.

Arguably less well known, Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) operate at Levels 4 and 5, and recruited their first intake of learners in 2022/23. HTQs have been positioned as a vital part of the Government's drive to prioritise Level 4 and 5 technical education and address what has been termed the problem of the 'missing middle' of technically skilled individuals who are ready to undertake a range of contemporary workplace roles without having to commit to and complete a full undergraduate degree (Field, 2018). In contrast to apprenticeships at Levels 4 and 5, HTQs are classroom-based qualifications and require learners to find the funding (and time) to participate. As such, HTQ learners are eligible for student finance.

Since 2017, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) has played a pivotal role in the approval and regulation of each of these three new types of technical education. Initially established as the Institute for Apprenticeships, its role and title have expanded to cover the oversight of T Levels and HTQs.

It is important to note that an HTQ (despite its name) is not a qualification in its own right. The HTQ quality mark (see Figure 1) is awarded to extant and validated Level 4 or 5 qualifications.² To gain permission to display the quality mark, and to be added to the IfATE-maintained HTQ successful applicant list, a provider must evidence the following on a qualification-by-qualification basis:

- evidence of employer engagement and demand;
- a thorough mapping to the KSBs of a relevant designated occupational standard; and
- an assessment strategy or syllabus including content coverage, marking approach and standard setting and sample assessment materials.

¹ To note, at the time of writing, Government announcements indicate that Level 7 apprenticeships will be defunded (see Department for Education, 2024a).

² Eligible qualifications include but are not limited to BTEC Higher National Certificates (HNC), BTEC Higher National Diplomas (HND), foundation degrees and certificates or diplomas of higher education.

This approvals process must take place before an HTQ is advertised and can recruit using the quality mark (see IfATE, 2025 for the latest applicant guidance).

The HTQ approvals process has evolved over five cycles, and a range of new sectors and associated occupational standards has been absorbed into the HTQ portfolio over this period of operation (see Department for Education, 2025). The latest cycle application window (Cycle 5.2) was open during the data collection period of this project.

In September 2024 the new Labour Government announced the establishment of Skills England, an executive body charged with driving the upskilling of the economy. It is expected that Skills England will replace IfATE and take over functions during 2025 (Skills England, 2024). In January 2025, IfATE announced that from 1 March 2025, HTQ applications will be open on a rolling basis and that updated HTQ approvals criteria will be published in February 2025 (IfATE, 2025).



Figure 1: The HTQ quality mark logo

SECTION 2: ABOUT THE PROJECT

The Gatsby Foundation has supported the introduction of HTQs from their outset. At this critical juncture, it was judged to be important and useful to take stock of the experiences of providers that have successfully navigated one or more of the five cycles of the IfATE HTQ approvals process. It is hoped that these insights can be used to inform HTQ approvals work going forward, under the oversight of Skills England. To this end, Elizabeth Cleaver Consulting Limited was commissioned to undertake a short qualitative research project focused on institutions that had applied successfully for one or more of their Level 4 or 5 qualifications to become HTQs by November 2024.

The project was designed to explore experiences of the HTQ approvals process, with a particular focus on applicant institutions’:

- motivations and drivers for engaging with HTQs, often as early adopters;
- experiences of engaging with the IfATE HTQ approvals process and the aspects that they found most (and least) valuable;
- recommendations for potential enhancements to the HTQ approvals process.

The sampling approach taken was purposive, as the project wanted to engage with individuals and teams who had a) successfully completed the HTQ approvals process and b) did not overly represent one particular type of higher technical education provider. To this end, just under half of the sample organisations comprised higher education providers with full degree awarding powers, around a quarter was made up of college-based higher education providers with no degree awarding powers, and a further quarter included college based education providers with foundation or taught degree awarding powers. The sample also contained a small number of private validating organisations.

Interviews were conducted using an online meetings platform and involved 46 individuals from 17 institutions or institutional partnership groups. The numbers participating in each interview ranged from one to five, with the membership defined by the participating institutions.

Interviews covered up to six discussion areas listed in Table 1. The emphasis placed on each area was primarily driven by respondents, who were invited to lead the interview discussion in an open-ended way. Areas that were less covered were then picked up as required in follow up questions. Drawing on the principles of strengths-based approaches to organisational or project review (see for example Woods & Lythberg, 2024), respondents were encouraged to focus wherever possible on what was working well and to highlight any positive experiences they wished to relate and build on.

The project used thematic analysis to engage with each interview narrative. The project’s coding framework developed and emerged inductively, and as each code emerged, previous interviews were revisited to ensure any elements relating to a new code were identified. However, it is important to note that the thematic analysis that is presented was not designed to prioritise insights based on the frequency with which they were mentioned, but to provide a rounded overview of a range of relevant themes that arose during discussions with respondents.

The themes discussed in the report are illustrated further using quotations from individual respondents. All potential individual and institutional identifiers have been removed or replaced. This includes the removal of institutional titles, regional identifiers including local administrative bodies, major employer partners, qualification subjects and HTQ application cycles. Quotations, where included, are linked to an interview using an anonymous numbering system (e.g. Applicant Institution 1 – AI).

Table 1: Indicative Interview Discussion Areas

HTQ APPROVAL PROCESS - INDICATIVE DISCUSSION AREAS
Context and decision making
Covering who and what drove the decision to apply for HTQs, hoped for benefits, application cycles, external funding awards and alignment to other qualifications/cohorts.
Application - process
Covering the approvals process, interactions with IfATE, interactions with employers, feedback received, any amendments to the application (or qualification) made during the process and, if applicable, the involvement of an awarding body.
Application - experience
Covering positive experiences during the approvals process, things that could have been improved, any particular sticking points and how they were resolved.
Application results
Covering the time it took to receive the application outcome, any interim or final feedback received from IfATE, what went well and what could have been improved.
Delivery and change
Covering delivery experiences, including feedback from learners, plans for new qualifications, any minor or major changes applied for and any likely withdrawals from the register.
Outcomes
Covering any differences that engaging with the HTQ approval (process) has made and what could be improved for outcomes to remain/become more positive and impactful.

Together, the qualitative nature of the project, the varied contexts in which interview respondents worked, and the different HTQ application cycles under discussion, mean that the review's findings are not intended to be representative of all HTQ applicant experiences. They nevertheless offer valuable user insights into the emerging and evolving HTQ approvals process.

In combination with the feedback that has been actively sought by IfATE from applicants over the five HTQ approvals cycles (discussed in Section 3 of this report), the findings and recommendations presented are intended to support the future success of HTQs as they transfer to the oversight of Skills England. It is also hoped that the rich and detailed stories told - of strategic intent, of adaptation and change, of expansion, of consolidation and of partnership - will contribute to and inform wider discussions in the technical education sector about the design, approval and delivery of HTQs in a range of regional and national settings.

SECTION 3: PROJECT FINDINGS

3.1 STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT AND PURPOSE

A. FIT WITH INSTITUTIONAL MISSION

The primary reason that respondents gave for the decision to engage with HTQs was their 'fit' with institutional mission and strategy. In most cases, decisions about whether to pursue HTQ approval with IfATE were noted to have been made at the executive leadership level, and were often associated with an executive sponsor who had prompted or given institutional backing to the endeavour (e.g. the Vice Chancellor, Principal or Deputy Vice Chancellor).

The majority of respondent institutions discussed alignment to two priority and complementary areas of their work: **widening participation** and **technical education portfolio growth**.

Widening participation, inclusivity and adult learning

While a small number of respondents directly mentioned their Access and Participation Plan (APP)³ during the interviews it was clear that the commitment to widening participation and social justice went far beyond this:

HTQs support [our] mission about making things inclusive for learners from all backgrounds (A7).

I have students on my programme who ... wouldn't have otherwise ... gone to university, and are thriving in the university environment we can give them (A13).

Some of the more regionally focused institutions in the sample spoke about 'local adult learning' as part of this endeavour, and the role that HTQs can play in offering a cheaper more flexible alternative to a full undergraduate degree. While the registration fees for a year of HTQ study may be set at the same rate as a year of study towards a degree, the commitment to one year (with the possibility of future top up years), rather than to three years (with undefined exit points), led to this being seen as more practical and affordable:

[We are interested in HTQs] to get people in who are already in employment and want to progress onto next steps ... adults that want to retrain and reskill but can't because [the options aren't] flexible. [By breaking it down into] stages for those who have additional challenges ... we can support them to gain really good qualifications and build their confidence (A14).

Around half of the sample additionally articulated the importance of raising the profile and reputation of HTQs amongst their external communities to ensure they were not associated with lower reputation and lower value learning:

The benefits of HTQs? Reputation ... we had hopes around the marketing with a focus on level 4/5 having greater kudos and recognition. Not just HNCs and HNDs and foundation degrees. So widening awareness of the Higher Technical value and brand [with] a defined purpose other than 'HE with a lower entry requirement' (A5).

³ All providers registered with the Office for Students in England are required to submit an Access and Participation Plan (APP) as part of their registration. This sets out risks to equality of opportunity identified as relevant to a provider's context, the actions providers will take to challenge risks to equality of opportunity and the outcomes they expect to achieve, how the provider plans to evaluate the impact of their work and the investment providers plan to make on access and participation work (see OfS, 2025).

Technical education portfolio growth

A second strategic theme that emerged during interview discussions was a commitment to providing employer-led and backed educational pathways into work and/or further study. HTQs were viewed as a key element of this strategic intent, adding market value to their existing technical education portfolio:

[We could see that HTQs would provide] ... the opportunity to have accreditation from an important body - the HTQ kite mark. It means we can express to students how industry-facing and up-to-date our programme is. It's marketable at the end of the day (A10).

The endorsement of the HTQ was important. We see it as a badge of honour – showing we offer effective employability skills (A11).

This provided an opportunity for KSBs to embed within other qualifications... The idea that our foundation degrees could have that employer and employment focus was really important and positive (A15).

For the majority of institutions in the sample, their first foray into HTQs (whether as early as Cycle 1 or as late as Cycle 5) was in portfolio areas of strategic value or strength:

We wanted to be an early mover, to get some qualifications in this space that matched with our portfolio and existing offer... So, the cycles we picked were in line with our areas of strength (A12).

B. FIT WITH REGIONAL SKILLS AND QUALIFICATION ECOSYSTEM

Respondents were also clear that their portfolios needed to address **regional skills training needs**. In practice this was characterised by aligning to Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs)⁴, working with local Institutes of Technology⁵ (IOTs), and building awareness and clarity of different progression routes in and out of their technical educational offer. This context further influenced decisions about which HTQs to apply for, with whom and when:

We were in the throes of putting bid in with other colleges to become IOT ... [and] HTQs were pushed to be part of it. Initially DfE put a limit on courses that would be recognised within the IOT, with Level 4 and 5 set as our focus (A5).

Our IOT director has heavily promoted HTQs to enable progression to Level 4 rather than current progression with [the local university] straight onto Level 5. The market research team were telling us it was a big commitment [for some students] to commit to 2 years ... this is a good flexible alternative for students who are not keen to commit to studying both Level 4 and Level 5 (A14).

We align to the Local Skills Improvement Plan and wanted early HTQ approval [as part of this contribution] (A11).

4 Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) were introduced in England in 2023 as a mechanism to place regional employers at the heart of post-16 skills planning. The Skills and Post-16 Education Act (2022), further required FE colleges to take local employers' priorities (through LSIPs) into account when planning their course portfolio.

5 IOTs are a national network of education providers and leading industry employers, working in close partnerships to deliver world-class technical education and training (Institutes of Technology, 2025).

As such, HTQs were seen as an important part of each region's **technical educational ecosystem** where further and higher education institutions worked together to ensure students could have access to the best and most accessible learning opportunities and pathways.

We've invested a lot in T levels and HTQs seen as a progression route.... The majority [of our students] are local and our priority is meeting needs of our local learners (A3).

We wanted to increase technical skills and ability in the region. That's where HTQs step in. Our original plan was to turn HNDs into HTQs where available, to meet regional skills needs and local schools' and colleges' needs (A13).

HTQs are a key part of HE [higher education] strategy. We want to address higher technical skills across the [region] and create training pathways aligned our T Level pipeline (A16).

However, some potential challenges were also noted. First, the educational ecosystem was seen by some to be becoming ever more complex and overcrowded:

There's a lot of talk in the press around Levels 4 and 5 becoming more of an FE area. But in the meantime lots of universities are moving into it. So it's a really interesting sector at the moment. We in some ways still compete against each other. A lot of competition between FE and HEIs and it is a shame. If we could collaborate more we could be pretty amazing (A5).

Further, the pipeline from T Levels into HTQs – something that had been understood to be part of the original Department for Education masterplan – was not always clear cut:

We thought we would have the full package for students who transition - but in reality students don't always go along columns of learning in this space. We thought they were about progression from T Levels and then on to a top up ... We went for ones that had greatest number of 18-19 year old learners - but some didn't fly (A1).

Respondents also noted that original Department for Education plans for HTQ learners to have opportunities to progress to a top-up Level 6 (degree) qualification appeared to have disappeared and some HTQs now led to potential learning dead ends; something cautioned against over a decade ago by the Wolf Report (Wolf, 2011):

What next for HTQ learners who want to get Level 6? That needs streamlining as well. If HTQs only align to a Level 4 standard but if they want to gain Level 6, then the HTQ is not so great. Alignment between Level 4, 5, and 6 standards would be useful (A4).

Not all standards have Level 5 ... where do [students] go after they finish at Level 4? The Government would want them to finish at Level 4, but often they are not employed at that point and are in the challenging space of trying to get a job or [if there are no jobs, trying] to continue their studies (A12).

Finally, respondents discussed the importance of flexibility, in order that HTQs could respond to local needs. Although not conclusively linked, respondents noted that some of the lack of take up of HTQs could be put down to their inability to flex:

Employers from time to time really need particular content. Shoehorning that in if [the qualification is] already accredited as an HTQ is hard ... what would we need to do to keep accreditation alongside responsiveness to our local employers? (A5).

These courses are supposed to be addressing local need and by their very nature should be reactive ... We know local need, we are experts in our fields and we are quality management experts. If they want HTQs to truly represent local areas they need to [allow for more flexibility] and trust us more (A 13).

Planning for and managing the market and demand for HTQs is explored further in Section 3.3.

C. FUNDING UNCERTAINTIES

Respondents noted the challenging financial circumstances that many higher education providers are now experiencing (OfS, 2024) and indicated that HTQs would need to fulfil their potential as income generating courses if they were to become a permanent part of their offer. While it was clear that most institutions in the sample were committed to continuing with their current HTQ portfolio, respondents intimated that future planning could be positively or negatively influenced by a number of possible but as yet unconfirmed funding scenarios.

First, that the apprenticeship levy fund might change its eligibility criteria: 'We're aware that Skills England is looking at the skills levy... Will HTQs get pulled into mix?' (A12). Secondly, that as T Level numbers grow, HTQs are promoted and backed as progression qualification of choice. Finally, that the new Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE)⁶ will offer modular funding opportunities for standalone 30 credit elements of HTQ programmes. With this in mind, a number of providers were actively working to create a module-by-module breakdown of their HTQs:

[To ensure we can deliver as short courses] knowledge gains needs to be explicit at modular level. What does each module bring from the Occupational Standard? (A3).

Each scenario, separately or in combination, was noted to have influenced institutional thinking and planning, although it was noted that the final one was, based on experience, far from the reality of employer skills training requirements:

⁶ The Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) has been designed to transform the post-18 student finance system to create a single funding system, replacing higher education student finance loans and Advanced Learner Loans. Learners will be able to apply for LLE funding for the first time for courses and modules starting from January 2027 onwards (Department for Education, 2024b)

There's a disconnect between what IfATE and DFE think is modular and what an employer wants.... If you're saying the minimum is 30 credits, that's 300 hours of learning. No employer is going to lose their staff for 300 hours for a short bit of CPD. They are thinking 50 to 100 hours tops (A10).

With this strategic context in mind, respondent institutions had entered into the HTQ approvals process in varying ways: some with new qualifications and others with repackaged and/or adapted qualifications; some with just one or two and others with multiple applications. The next section of this report recounts their experiences of navigating the approvals process and, in particular, what they learned and perhaps also changed as a result of this.

3.2 THE HTQ APPROVALS PROCESS

As stated at the very beginning of this report, the HTQ approvals process has iterated over five cycles, with feedback sought and changes made throughout. Respondents were universal in their acknowledgment of the reflective and responsive approach that IfATE had taken as it built, reviewed and rebuilt the process. One respondent noted that IfATE appeared to have reached peak-responsiveness in Cycle 5 – the first cycle to be split into two application windows – as learning from the first window had fed into the second.

The strengths-based approach employed in the project interviews led to the identification of a number of process aspects that have worked well. In particular, respondents were keen to highlight **approval activities that have added value** to their own institutional programme design and approval activities. Of course, respondents were also able to identify a number of **challenging aspects of the approvals process**. However, as noted above, many of these had already been, or were currently being, addressed by IfATE. This provided respondents with confidence that, if the process were to continue on a similar trajectory under Skills England, further improvements and enhancements could and would follow.

A. PROCESS BENEFITS AND ADDED VALUE QUALITY MANAGEMENT AND PROGRAMME DESIGN

Engaging in the HTQ approvals process was seen to have had a number of positive impacts on institutional quality management and associated programme design processes. Respondents were almost universally positive about using the nationally-approved and recognised lens of the occupational standard to check the skills-based currency of their qualifications:

It was a useful grounding exercise and sense check. It connected [our programmes] to something bigger (A2).

It enabled us to look at our current qualifications and think about whether they were fit for purpose to meet the skills shortages. So it was really useful (A17).

Others communicated the added value the process has brought to the effective development and recording of evidence; a point that is further explored in the *employer engagement and evidence* section below. In turn, this had prompted the redesign of aspects of their in-house quality management processes including

curriculum validation⁷ and annual⁸ and periodic review⁹ paperwork, processes and events:

[At the point of the HTQ approval, one] programme was up for periodic review as part of our institutional processes, so we tied the two processes together. As part of periodic review we mapped against the occupational standards - so our occupational competencies and employer endorsements were up to date in the programme and fed into indicative content in programme and module specifications. It helped shape the design of the curriculum (A11).

For HTQs, KSBs had to be a golden thread evidenced in course learning outcomes, indicative content, sample assessment materials (A12).

A number of respondents had adopted a project managed and/or team-based approach to curriculum design and review as a practical response to the requirements posed by the process including the identification of repetitive, non-specialist information that could be written once and shared:

We have a training space when people come to write their programmes and we now ask them to talk about the KSBs that they meet. The HTQ and the standards have brought that into our community of practice (A10).

We met regularly to share experiences, knowledge and resources... Working with others doing the same things at the same time was certainly helpful (A16).

Employer engagement and evidence

Embedding 'employability skills' in the higher education curriculum, with the purpose of preparing graduates as they enter and build successful onward careers, has been a priority focus for well over two decades (see for example, Knight and Yorke, 2004). Given recent development in higher technical education and the evolution of institutional missions to align with this, it is perhaps unsurprising that for some respondent institutions the HTQ approvals process was seen simply to endorse and hone existing **employer engagement** and **evidence-gathering activities**:

Our process [already] includes a lot of stakeholders at the point of validation. They are in attendance in the meetings, and scrutinise everything against the LSIP and local needs. There's a strong commitment across the institution to the vocational space. Programmes have to be fit for purpose (A9).

For others, the HTQ approvals process had been a catalyst for positive development and change. One institutional respondent related how a large national business had not only engaged with them to support their application, but had subsequently become part of the expert teaching team. In turn, this has led to additional opportunities for student work experience within the employer-partner. Positive changes were also noted in relation to internal quality management events:

7 Validation (or programme approval) is a process where new programme is developed and then assessed by an expert panel. Successful approval allows a provider to advertise a programme, recruit students and offer an associated academic award.

8 Annual programme review is a cyclical quality assurance event where members of programme management and delivery teams review and enhance programme content, delivery and assessment. The outcomes of this event are recorded and may lead to annual modifications to the programme and/or its modules.

9 Periodic review (or revalidation) is a process that takes place after a period of award operation. This can range from circa. two years for new curriculum, to circa. five years for established programmes. During the process an expert panel assesses its currency for ongoing delivery and may make enhancement recommendations.

We've introduced new processes in our validation to allow for employer engagement to be better collated, with better records of the relationships. That all stems from questions in the application for HTQs (A8).

B. PROCESS CHALLENGES

Complexity

By far the most common issue identified across all applicant institutions and all cycles, was the **complexity of the approvals mapping process**. As part of each HTQ application, institutions are required to map their qualification against the KSBs of its relevant occupational standard. Respondents' experiences of undertaking this mapping were easy to recall, even if this had taken place in earlier cycles:

The administration, and connecting with bits of the application process was one of the worst things I have ever done in education. You literally get a spreadsheet the size of my office wall and every box needs to be filled in. It took a week in summer of 2022. I cleared my diary and filled nothing but this spreadsheet in ... It took me 30 hours to map to the standard (A10).

Mapping was seen to be particularly complex where programmes and/or occupational standards encompassed multiple pathways:

Our foundation degree programme in science has multiple pathways. I had to do separate mapping documents despite the fact only seven modules across the three pathways were different. So I had to have three documents open and ensure the bits that needed to match did (A15).

Others noted the difficulties of demonstrating subsequent changes to their programmes to IfATE once initial mapping had taken place:

What we have ended up doing last few times is created a wraparound summary of what have we changed so we can identify it in the mapping document, explain where it is and why we've done it. It seemed a more helpful way of doing it (A12).

As noted above, while some positive steps had been taken by respondents to adapt internal processes to reflect the needs of HTQs, some elements of the process were, nonetheless, seen to add unwarranted burden and complexity. To provide context to this, respondents recounted the **multiple layers of internal and external quality and standards assurance** that just one HTQ may have to navigate, each of which can ask for similar and new evidence, in different formats, at different times and with a different lens and emphasis. These might include: university validation or revalidation processes including alignment to sector Subject Benchmark Statements (QAA, 2025), one or two independent PSRB (Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body) accreditation events, and/or quality processes associated with applying to use the Pearson trademark licence for a higher national qualification:

It is really very hard to keep the curriculum compliant to all the expectations of the occupational standard - we have professional bodies, benchmark statements, then the professional profiles that IfATE provide – couldn't we have something a bit more unified: one set of requirements rather than trying to justify what we do against so many? (A7).

Just looking at our change process [as an example], if we change our programme assessment methods we have to run it by our internal quality office, and use external examiners [to confirm the changes]. And then we have to send to IfATE. Its doubling up and doubling the time (A13).

If you look at the occupational standards webpage, they say they have support from [the PSRB]. If the professional body requirements are mapped to the standard ... you could ideally have two recognitions in one process... They could be merged in a meaningful way (A4).

These multiple internal and external expectations and processes were noted by one respondent to feel like an ‘uncoordinated jigsaw’, creating a situation that had led others to keep some of their portfolio of programmes outside the HTQ brand:

There are PSRB accredited programmes we wouldn't consider putting through this process (A16).

A small number of institutions in the sample also noted negative experiences with PSRBs who did not endorse or recognise the HTQ versions of their qualifications:

In addition to these multi-layered and multi-agency processes, respondents also highlighted the detailed application, reporting and potential funding clawback requirements associated with a series of dedicated pump-priming funding calls¹⁰. Those that had received funding noted some of the elements of bureaucracy (and with potential clawback, the jeopardy) that this added to the already precarious and competitive context in which HTQs operate. While not directly connected to the IfATE approvals process, these funding streams were nevertheless seen as significant in supporting HTQ engagement per se:

Without the funding that came with the HTQs, would we have been as committed? Would we have lost momentum? (A11).

The complexity of the approvals process was seen to be further exacerbated by the fact that there appeared to be ‘**no standards about standards**’ (A5). While it was noted that IfATE had been working to create greater consistency, a significant number were still of varying shape, size and quality. The key issue noted here was the variable **number of KSBs**; with some standards including significantly more than others:

Occupational Standards are a great thing - but they are all very different. I'd like to see a level of consistency across the board – some have loads of KSBs and that has a knock on effect on qualifications ... it reduces the levels of optionality (A4).

Further, the number and format of KSBs could change significantly as a standard reached the point of review, thereby impacting on earlier mapping work:

¹⁰ A number of competitive capital funding initiatives have been released to support the development of HTQs:

- **HTE growth fund** launched in 2021, and invested £14.5 million to support HTQs in occupational routes from cycle 1 and 2
- **HTE skills injection fund 1** launched in 2022, and invested £21 million in level 4 and 5 HTQs in cycles 1, 2 and 3
- **HTE skills injection fund 2** - for financial years 2023-24 and 2024-25 offered £29.8 million capital funding and £19 million resource funding, available for providers intending to deliver HTQs.

We got an email from HTQ approvals noting that [an occupational standard] had been updated ... the old standard had eight knowledge and eight skills ... expectations. Now it's something like 23 and 24 ... If we wish to maintain the badge we need to recreate the mapping exercise.... Given there aren't masses of [subject] students, is it worth it? (A5).

And on those standards where KSB numbers might appear lower, they sometimes contained hidden complexity:

A lot of the KSBs are quite wide. [One includes] written and verbal communication to expert and non-expert audiences. That is four different skills points (A15).

Another respondent highlighted the practical issues posed by transposing the work-based language and expectations of an occupational standard designed for an apprenticeship into their classroom-based foundation degree:

It's ... sometimes like pushing a square peg through a round hole (A8).

Flux

A point raised consistently during interviews was the challenge of **occupational standards coming in and out of scope**, often at relatively short notice. Given the lead time needed for validation processes, a significant number of respondents recalled how they had prepared for HTQ approval and/or made amendments, and had even bought capital items using SIF funding, only to find out that the relevant standard was under review:

We applied for a minor amendment to our programme to have a site added and change the title. If ATE were absolutely fine and did it reasonably quickly. But they admitted that ... they expected the standard would change and after that everyone would have to do a major amendment. Great! It's not even run yet and we're already planning to change it (A10).

We had planned five ... [but] we're only submitting three ... we found out that standards were being revised so there was a danger we'd have to do it all over again (A11).

Further, in order to meet the compliance expectations of the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA, 2023), students are expected to continue to work to the occupational standard that was in place at their point of enrolment. Yet if major changes have taken place during the approvals and study period, this could lead to the KSBs associated with the award becoming outdated.

Resource requirements

Respondents raised the need for dedicated or project-specific **resource and time allocation** in order to engage effectively and successfully with the approvals process:

[The whole process might have been easier] ... if I had a huge team of people, but it was just little old me (A5).

I always remember, I took students to the sea life centre – and had to ask if I could use a room. And I sat there with a laptop. I sat in a tiny child's chair tapping away to get the mapping done (A15).

The use of application windows for each HTQ cycle was also viewed as challenging when academic colleagues are 'creating HTQs on top of the day job' (A12) and trying to balance competing priorities:

[When the windows opened we were] coming up to end of year and our priority is not mapping new qualifications. And then in September we are getting new cohorts in - we didn't have capacity to fit with the windows. In the summer staff are [taking leave] (A3).

Those who had managed to navigate the windows successfully and had a number of HTQs approved, acknowledged the benefits that temporary (project-based) or more permanent staff resources brought. Put simply:

If we didn't have [dedicated] resource we wouldn't have as many HTQs (A11). How did smaller organisations manage? We had teams working separately and coming together for a project board (A1).

However, for a number of respondents, extra resources had been tricky to source as the business case for HTQs could be difficult to model in a convincing way:

Going forward - you have to justify the resource to build the product. [So far we've found] the numbers aren't big; there aren't massive returns. Is investing the resource to wait two years, to get viable cohort, worth it? (A12).

In some institutions this had been overcome by institutions creating efficiencies by combining HTQ and apprenticeship or other related cohorts:

Recruitment on one [HTQ] is quite constant. [Another] is more up and down. It meets viability numbers because it sits on top of existing curriculum [and students are taught together]. A bespoke qualification wouldn't return the numbers ... It's not at the size we can sustain (A7).

Interviewees also discussed the **increased expectations** that HTQs placed on **their employer partners**, beyond the activities embedded in normal institutional processes (i.e. attending industrial boards and programme validation events). In some cases these expectations were referred to as 'idealistic', 'double-layering' and 'overkill'. This was particularly stark when institutions needed to manage and prioritise the expectations placed on small to medium-size enterprises (SMEs) who often had limited pro-bono capacity and training budgets:

We keep having to go out to employers and asking questions – about T Levels, the move from frameworks to standards, HTQs – there's been a huge demand on employers and some are saying '[we don't have capacity] we just want you to do what you do' (A5).

At the other end of the spectrum the difficulty of engaging employers from high value industries where ‘time is money’ was raised. The possibility of paying for employer time had been broached, but this was balanced by awareness of the ethical on-costs of this approach. To address this, one institution had hoped to use their own in-house finance, estates and digital technology departments - all sizable regional sources of employment - to evidence employer need, but they were informed that this would not be accepted as independent evidence.

C. SUPPORT NETWORKS, MATERIALS AND MECHANISMS

IfATE support and responsiveness

Respondents were universal in the view that the support offered by IfATE had been key to their successful HTQ approval. While the very first cycle was noted as a ‘*a learning experience for us and IfATE*’, respondents were extremely positive about the ways in which their in-process experiences and post-process feedback had been used by IfATE to make improvements. These had emerged, for example, in the development of off-line guidance and documentation for what had originally been created as a purely online application process, changes to the technical set up of the mapping spreadsheet, the creation of a table for recording interactions with employers, and changes to the types of evidence required:

The overlapping and unnecessary evidence that was asked for in early cycles seems to have been resolved in Cycle 5 - we still submit an application per programme, but the questions you need to answer are very focused on the standard and employer input and less so on institutional policies and procedures ... [previously] we had to write a lot of content on sustainability and EDI.... That’s all gone (A11).

Those who had been involved in the earlier approvals cycles also noted that as application numbers increased, and IfATE guidance materials grew, the more personalised support that had been previously offered had reduced. For some, this meant that when hurdles were encountered, it was now more challenging to get a swift resolution:

The first thing to point out, in [the early cycles] the level of support from IfATE was fantastic. There was a dedicated named point of contact ... but we don’t have those named contacts any more so it’s harder to ... sort out queries and log changes (A3).

The level and type of support could also depend on who was involved from the IfATE team:

Some of the people we spoke to were a little subjective; different people wanted different things; some were more educationally-focused and understanding (A15).

That said, the general view of those that had taken part in multiple cycles and seen the evolution of IfATE’s support was extremely positive, with Cycle 5 being noted as ‘*the strongest yet*’ (A11), with support geared towards ‘*trying to stop as many conditions and trying to get everything right in the first submission*’ (A12).

The importance of applicant expertise and support

In parallel to the process improvements documented so far, increasing time and experience on-task has resulted in **growing applicant institution familiarity and expertise** with the HTQ approvals process. **In-house or within-partnership support** was facilitated in a range of ways. In addition to working together to learn from one another (see also Section 3.2A), applicants also discussed the importance of local guidance designed to connect institutional quality assurance with the IfATE approvals processes:

We've found it gets easier the more you do it ... We've pulled together some guidance - sometimes is not clear what you need to say or what IfATE want. From doing this a few times we have a wealth of advice we can give (A9).

The first thing I did, I mapped a university process and how that would work - I made a flow diagram and you apply for an HTQ within that process (A13).

In a handful of institutions the creation of a dedicated support role (temporary or permanent) was deemed key to ensuring connectivity and continuity across multiple applications:

The saving grace was a project manager - who had patience and consideration and staying power. They got us there with it (A2).

I take a heavy role in application side - we work with partners to do the KSB mapping. I go through every part of the application with them and submit on [their] behalf. With the last ones I was hands on and helped with the process of mapping (A9).

3.3 RESULTS, DELIVERY AND THE MARKETPLACE

A. AN AGILE AND TIMELY PROCESS?

A concern highlighted universally by respondents was the time lag between initial process submission to IfATE, the date of the HTQ quality mark award, and the start date for the first HTQ cohort. While delays were noted to have reduced over the five application cycles, respondents continued to note that this led to a **lack of agility and loss of momentum**:

It is too slow. We're trying to move quickly to meet the demands of industry and it becomes quite cumbersome ... it can take 18 months [and then] ... another year after approval before you can run it. So three years from the idea to getting students on it (A3).

We need to adapt more quickly in line with industry ... HTQs are instantly out of date if you take account of validation and approval and lead time to delivery (A8).

I really noticed the difference between [the slow speed HTQ process] and the weighting we put our agility to respond quickly to students' and employers' needs. It ... did seem to be the opposite of our direction of travel (A14).

Respondents noted that any changes that resulted from the initial IfATE assessment were often communicated at the very end of the waiting period. This delay was seen to generate a number of challenges: from getting IfATE feedback at difficult times of year (the beginning of semesters when onboarding was the key priority), via having to untick the HTQ box on UCAS and remove the quality mark from the institutional website during a key recruitment period to, in the worst case, having to delay delivery:

When the results came back [IfATE told us they weren't] granting this because 'you haven't evidenced final approval for the course'. [By the time we had evidenced this] we then missed our marketing slot ... So we had to wait another year to build up the marketing machine (A6).

Ideas for improvement included the development of in-process communications – perhaps as an application dashboard – which would allow required changes to be made as soon as they had been logged.

The general delivery time-lag between the granting of the quality mark and the arrival of the first cohort (often over a year) was also seen to impact negatively:

If the lead time could be reduced, recruitment could be more effective. Some teams are ready to deliver straight away or in three to six months' time (A4).

Although, for those badging long-standing qualifications, this appeared to be less of an issue:

It wasn't like we had created a new product and had to sit on it before we delivered it. It just didn't have the [HTQ] badge attached to it. But that's not really important. We recruited as ever to our courses (A5);

B. THE HTQ MARKETPLACE

Understanding, recognition and value

As noted in Section 3.1A, a number of institutions had entered into the approvals process with hopes and expectations about the added-value that the HTQ quality mark would bring. However, experience across the sample showed that brand awareness amongst prospective students was low:

Students come for the academic award - HNCs, HNDs or Foundation degrees. We've tried to raise awareness but it doesn't make any difference. The content of programme is what they are interested in. So we're working on how we make the HTQ part more explicit (A3).

There's no knowledge and understanding [of HTQs] in our communities - we're operating in a weird space at the moment ... no-one knows what they are (A5).

We've never had an HTQ question or comment in any student or applicant feedback. That links to the fact there's not much brand awareness (A11).

Explanations for this were put down to the complicated nature of the technical education market place:

It's difficult to come up with a simplified marketing strategy - we have HNCs, HNDs, FDs, cert HEs etc. It's difficult for students and employers to navigate that. HTQs muddy the water even more (A16);

often aligned with the (understandable) wish of students to invest their time, and in some cases money, in qualifications with established and recognised value:

Our outreach teams say that learners don't understand HTQs in an already complicated market. They want things that are really well understood (A12).

This also extended to those offering destinations for HTQ graduates – regional employers:

Four years on and we're still not finding that understanding from employers. There's always a conversation about the difference between HTQs and apprenticeships (A8).

The issue is developing confidence in the HTQ brand. Not enough people know about them and they're still quite obscure to employers (A17).

Of course, respondents noted the fact that HTQs were still relatively new and, while for those involved in the approvals process they are part of the everyday discourse, until they become an established brand, this is unlikely to extend beyond the provider context:

We live and breathe qualifications. They don't. It's not permanent enough [yet] in their knowledge of education (A10).

We can only really talk about HTQs with other education providers (A11).

This aside, due to the fact that HTQs require different forms of assessment to apprenticeships, one provider had considered a new way of communicating the HTQ message to employers:

We're thinking of creating a workbook to track KSBs in assessment - to make knowledge, skills and behavioural gains more explicit for them (A3).

Providers also discussed the ways they had actively advertised their HTQs – with school and college careers advisers, on open days and on web sites - and how they were continuing to promote the value of HTQs once students had enrolled:

Our students are really pleased about the work focus of the HTQ programmes - the fact we have mapped them to the HTQ the student can demonstrate that they can meet employers' requirements ... it was wonderful to see the engagement a mature student had because it was aligned to employer-designed KSBs. He was looking to change career (A15).

However, it was also noted that changing an employment sector's view on qualifications and branding can be a slow burn, and that the value of HTQs may remain variable in some areas:

In certain sectors like construction and engineering, the HN [Higher National] is the trademark they recognise. We've tried over years, when foundation degrees first rolled out, and there was no recognition of it in those fields (A5).

I am having a lot of conversations with industry at the moment in terms of digital finance. There are currently lots of internships. They're going down the route of broad skills base recruitment and wanting to develop skills directly (A8).

The overriding view across respondents was that individual institutional networking, advertising and brand awareness-raising activities can only achieve so much. If HTQs are to become a recognised and valued national quality mark, this will require **a national marketing campaign and support** that matches the air-time, campaigns, ambassador networks and promotional and celebratory weeks that are already in place for T Levels and apprenticeships.

SECTION 4: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

HTQs will be a big loss if taken away. Keep the brand and kitemark. Initiatives like this can come and go ... It's so easy to have a new broom and not see the project to its end (A9).

The rich and detailed responses collected as part of this project indicate that getting the HTQ approvals process right or - in recognition that processes should always enhance - as right as it can be at this point in time, is crucial. Creating these conditions for success will ensure that HTQs not only play their part in addressing the 'missing middle' of technical expertise but, in doing so, offer valued and visible step-by-step learning opportunities for those seeing alternatives to apprenticeships or full undergraduate degrees. The final section of the report presents two focused discussion points and associated recommendations, each made to support the ongoing successful design, approval and delivery of HTQs.

4.1 CONNECTIVITY AND EFFICIENCIES

If any approvals process is to become smooth and swift it is important that all parties and stakeholders work together to identify the minimum touch points and requirements necessary to achieve a quality outcome. Many of these improvements can be achieved by forging greater alignment of processes and avoiding undue duplication. IfATE has clearly been responsive to and acted on feedback from applicants as each approvals cycle has progressed. Some institutional quality management processes have, in turn, adapted to reflect the requirements of the HTQ approval process. However, there remain ways in which the consistency, connectivity and efficiencies of these processes could be further improved.

Recommendation 1: Built in not bolted on. Higher education awarding bodies should be guided to adapt their quality management frameworks and processes to become HTQ-ready. While the work of some awarding bodies in this area is noted and commended, this nonetheless remains localised and inconsistent. An IfATE-endorsed toolkit of pre-application expectations and templates would help to reduce replication and reinvention activities across awarding bodies. It could also ease the within-institution governance and administrative hurdles that often accompany the introduction of new quality assurance process elements. Crucially, this would not replace the independent scrutiny offered by the HTQ approvals process, but would create process efficiencies by facilitating programme HTQ-readiness. This integrated approach has the added potential to encourage and enable institutions to expand skills- and market-readiness into wider aspects of their programme portfolios beyond HTQs. IfATE should draw on the experience and practice of institutions that have already begun this integration journey, working in partnership to create clear guidance, templates and expectations for the wider sector.

Recommendation 2: Professional partnerships. In a similar vein, IfATE should work with PSRBs to support and guide them to adapt their accreditation processes to provide opportunities for professional recognition to be embedded with HTQ awards. This has the potential to add value to the HTQ brand and would also help to reduce the current disconnect (both perceived and experienced) between IfATE and professional body expectations and processes.

Recommendation 3: Digital transformation. There is a need to streamline and improve communication between IfATE and applicant institutions. IfATE should build an online HTQ platform and dashboard to facilitate the submission of applications and information exchange. This has the potential to create single and consistent points of contact at IfATE and within applicant institutions, ensuring reduced administrative touch points. It would additionally offer opportunities for auditing and data analysis, removing the use of inconsistent and poorly targeted emails to gather data.

Recommendations 4: Evidencing market demand. Evidence such as trend data on jobs in local sectors and evidence of engagement with Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) should be permitted as an acceptable additional or alternative source of evidence of employer demand. This is particularly salient where occupational standards have recently been created or updated and their very existence proves current employer engagement and endorsement.

4.2 BUILDING THE BRAND

Ultimately, the benefits of these connections and efficiencies will not be felt if the HTQ enterprise stalls. Evidence so far indicates that the current - largely grassroots - approach to embedding and promoting HTQs has had limited traction. While building the relevance and resonance of HTQs in the regional marketplace clearly remains important, this cannot and should not replace national endorsement and promotion. In short, if HTQs are to take their place as the recognised 'middle' element of the English technical education offer, they need to become a valued and recognised national brand. Without this, the middle is likely to remain 'missing' (Field, 2018).

Further, if the market for and value of HTQs remains intangible, it is doubtful that awarding bodies will continue to resource engagement with the HTQs approvals process - whether built in or bolted on (see Recommendation 1). Given the widely recognised financial challenges currently at play in the higher education sector (OfS, 2024), gaining institutional permission to validate or promote programmes that have limited brand awareness and associated low market value may become increasingly difficult.

Recommendation 5: Brand awareness. The *what?* and *why?* of HTQs and how they fit with and differentiate from other higher technical education qualifications should be communicated to key stakeholders (i.e. schools, colleges, PRSBs, trade associations and employers) via a national promotions campaign.

Recommendation 6: Brand infrastructure. To support this, broader investments should be made to support HTQs, in line with the infrastructure that is in place to support T Levels and apprenticeships. These could include - but are not limited to - funding and building an HTQs ambassadors network and the creation of an annual HTQs promotional and celebratory week.

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GLOSSARY

APP	Access and Participation Plan
EPA	End Point Assessment
HN	Higher National
HNC	Higher National Certificate (Level 4)
HND	Higher National Diploma (Level 5)
HTQ	Higher Technical Qualification
IfATE	Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education
IOT	Institute of Technology
KSB	Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours
LSIP	Local Skills Improvement Plan
OfS	Office for Students
PSRB	Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body
SIF	Skills Injection Fund
SME	Small to Medium sized Enterprise

The Gatsby Charitable Foundation
The Peak, 5 Wilton Road, London SW1V 1AP
T +44 (0)20 7410 0330 www.gatsby.org.uk
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