

# NEXTGEN: HNC SOCIAL SCIENCES



## META-SKILLS IN PRACTICE

Practitioners' reflections and advice  
on incorporating meta-skills.

**HIGHER  
NATIONAL**



# NEXTGEN: HNC SOCIAL SCIENCES — META-SKILLS IN PRACTICE

We asked subject-specialist writers with experience of delivering meta-skills in NextGen: HN Qualifications to write a 'Meta-skills in practice' guide, giving us a sense of how they approach the integration of meta-skills within course delivery. In this way, practitioners could share insights, practical advice, and examples to course teams coming new to NextGen and meta-skills.

[Mary-Frances, a lecturer in Social Sciences, explains in their words how the course team at their college contextualise, integrate, and assess engagement with meta-skills within NextGen: HNC Social Sciences.](#)

## TOP TIPS

- **Reflect on your own experiences as a practitioner;** identify where meta-skills have helped you, and on experiences where you wished you had had stronger meta-skills
- **Have a detailed schedule of work** with multiple and diverse class activities, and some novel tasks that allow learners to develop meta-skills
- **Keep the conversation of meta-skills open** and on the table for learners
- **Have robust discussions and planning meetings** with your course team about your collective approach to meta-skills
- **Keep track of learners' progress** in developing meta-skills using a table with the grading criteria, your class list and details about what learners are doing and how well; use the traffic light system for simplicity
- **Prepare for push back from learners and colleagues.** Let learners express themselves and feel listened to. Ask them questions about the comments they are making about meta-skills and keep trying to see it from their perspective before responding. For colleagues, patience and honesty help most during discussions. Reflect on your own skillset to show how meta-skills have always been a part of your learning and development — just not expressed as explicitly — or discussed in the same language.

## META-SKILLS IN SOCIAL SCIENCES

Give us a general introduction to meta-skills within the context of your subject area.

Navigating social sciences, with its numerous theories and ideas, can be overwhelming for new learners. And when you add engaging with meta-skills development and self-reflection on top of academic skills, it can feel a bit too much. So, you should anticipate resistance and bewildered expressions as you start on this journey.

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Thankfully, social science subjects offer unique opportunities to integrate and apply a wide array of meta-skills. Your quest is to guide learners through the intricate maze of social sciences subjects, helping them to view meta-skills as useful navigational tools that will help them find their way through each of them.

If learners see meta-skills as helpful now and not just for future employment, then they may be more open and willing to engage with the process. Building and demonstrating meta-skills during their college experience challenges and stretches learners. It encourages them to see the course as an opportunity to develop their *whole selves*, and not just to fill their heads with content.

## META-SKILLS CATEGORIES IN CONTEXT

Explain the three meta-skills categories as they relate to your subject.

### SELF-MANAGEMENT

The self-management category for social science is about practical skills. These skills support the learners with the academic side of their day-to-day learning experiences. These are more concrete skills, and learners can begin to see results of their progress more quickly. For example, in politics, focusing is a key meta-skill because there is a lot of information to sort and filter. The key is to gently help learners bring this meta-skill to the

forefront of their mind and to use it regularly. This helps them to understand the course content. We found that learners began to recognise the positives of meta-skills when

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they felt the benefit in the here and now, rather than just for future employment. In the course of delivering the common core unit, we used many diverse activities and tasks to help learners see meta-skills in a different light, with less pressure during

the first 12 teaching weeks. We use the first teaching block to explore different topics or subjects they may consider for their report. It is crucial, however, to hold discussions around the links to the project, so that learners understand the rationale behind the activities and tasks.

## **SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE**

Social intelligence works as a personal investment section for learners. I think learners benefit from our support in building their confidence while also giving them appropriate challenges. It is about nurturing them while also helping them to create a balanced view of themselves and build a growth mindset rather than a fixed one. For example, feeling is an important meta-skill in politics. It's about learners developing a sense of confidence in their views, and a belief that their views matter. It's also about them building an awareness of the variety of views that can challenge their own as a natural part of political discussion, for example. The meta-skill of feeling is then reinforced in the common core unit, where learners do presentations on areas of interest, and we ask them to verbally reflect on, and link these experiences to, the goals they had set themselves.

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## **INNOVATION**

The final category of meta-skills is innovation, where we would hope to see higher order critical thinking skills develop. It's more difficult for learners to see immediate and obvious results here, because they need to have made progress developing the other

two areas already for this to work. In politics, critical thinking is a central skill, where learners move beyond knowing and understanding things. If they develop their self-management area then innovation will follow, as critical thinking and sense-making

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the workplace...”

are improved through self-management tasks.

Those learners who want to go into social science-based careers — like social work, teaching, research, journalism and psychology — will find

that the meta-skills within innovation — curiosity, creativity, sense-making and critical thinking — will serve them well. These careers require individuals to use a wide and narrow lens on society to propose solutions to complex problems. The more we can encourage innovation meta-skills at this level, the more natural they will feel when our learners move into their future careers. Our politics students could see very clearly that developing these innovation meta-skills supported the work they were doing in Politics A: Political Ideals, Politics B: Governance of Scotland and the United Kingdom, and the common core unit.

## INTRODUCING AND UNDERSTANDING META-SKILLS

### How do you help learners to buy in to meta-skills and understand their relevance?

It's important to understand the way our learners have been taught to focus on learning the content of various subjects until this course: by developing subject-related skills and passing exams. Now, with meta-skills, we are asking for something quite different, and some learners will be inexperienced and/or unwilling. We are asking them to reflect on themselves in a very meaningful way, to build their self-awareness. This can make learners feel uncomfortable: they might not know how to write reflectively, and often they don't *want* to look at themselves ('that's not what I came here for...'). Build a relationship with your

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group before delving into meta-skills in any depth. Get to know them and let them get to know you. I found many more learners engaged more effectively with meta-skills when they heard concrete stories from my own life: as a learner, as a volunteer, as a lecturer — stories of my successes and failures.

Stories are a useful tool for learning and building trust. In my second year of delivering meta-skills, via the common core unit, I introduced meta-skills in around week 6 of a 12-week block for the units, and would take this approach next academic year too.

Delivering both the politics and the common core units gave me more time to consolidate my approach to embedding meta-skills into my teaching, and it allowed me to build up more of a rapport with the learners to help them grasp and engage with meta-skills.

## DEVELOPING META-SKILLS

[Tell us about your experiences, hindsight, and future plans. Where do meta-skills fit most naturally in your course delivery?](#)

It's not enough to simply present meta-skills to learners; we need to show and encourage genuine buy-in. We can do this by being willing to use our own experiences as examples of

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supporting meta-skills, or experience of lacking in certain skills at different times of our lives. For me this helps the learners to see the authenticity of the skills and, therefore, encourages a greater willingness to try building their own specific meta-skills. So, appropriate disclosure can be a helpful

approach to begin with, and something to lean back into if learners start drifting. This usually happens around assessment time, when learners prioritise their academic work over meta-skills, especially if they still haven't fully made the connection that one supports the success of the other. Keep in mind the way learners view education at the moment, as well as their level of emotional maturity and understanding themselves in, what is — for many — this new educational context.

We found it invaluable to have a well-organised schedule of work with a variety of class-based and home-based activities and tasks.

For example, in Politics B: Governance of Scotland and the United Kingdom, independent reading addresses many of the self-management skills: focusing, integrity, adapting and initiative. You follow up this reading

with an interactive activity in class that allows the learners to work on some of the Social Intelligence skills: communicating, feeling, collaborating and leading. In completing both activities, some learners will also work on some of the Innovation skills: curiosity, creativity, sense-making and critical thinking. To solidify the knowledge of the political topic and *gently* work on the meta-skills, I give learners reflective questions to complete. These questions can also be used as the basis for a discussion, which I find is a useful tool to help learners internalise the skills. The goal is to integrate meta-skills naturally into their learning.

We also recommend novel class activities and tasks; for example:

- Speed dating-style revision questions — learners make up their own questions with answers and use them to test a few different people, one after the other.
- Jigsaw approach to reading — learners read a chapter, then discuss a topic or task on the chapter with another person, then join another pair for further discussion. The groups increase in size each time until you are back at a plenary session.

In these exercises, your role is to brief, teach, facilitate, and debrief the subject matter at hand, gently weaving meta-skills throughout. Do take into account the time required to develop meta-skills, as this can be a challenging addition to your workload. And don't

“...take into account the time required [...] meta-skills can be a challenging addition to your workload...”

discuss too many meta-skills at any one time, as the cognitive bandwidth of learners is often already nearly at capacity with academic content.

A crucial aspect of this style of working is communication with your learners but also with your own course team. Our learners told us that there was ‘too much on

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meta-skills'. It's important for the course team to work together on how often each member is discussing meta-skills, or giving specific work related to meta-skills. Too much and the learners feel saturated, too little and it feels like something just added on for the sake of it. This is still a work in progress to achieve the right balance.

## **GENERATING ASSESSMENT EVIDENCE**

[We've produced guidance around the assessment of meta-skills. There's quite a lot of flexibility around assessment evidence. Can you give us a sense of what you've been doing in this space?](#)

Learners have shown some resistance to the assessment of meta-skills. They find it challenging that assessment is not about how well they perform specific meta-skills, but about how they engage in developing these skills, and reflect and deepen their self-understanding. The difficulty seems to stem from experience of education as being content driven.

We used PDF or Word documents to capture the baseline and action plan components of the portfolio, and recorded learners' reflections on class activities and their impact on meta-skills development goals. To make things easier for the first two years, we relied on familiar tools whilst teaching and recording new elements of the Next Generation course. It's probably wise not to take on too many new approaches or tools when you first deliver this course.

## **IN-HOUSE META-SKILLS TRACKING APP**

In future sessions, we plan to use Meta Performance Tracker (MP Tracker), our college-designed digital platform. Learners can access this even after they complete their qualification, and agree in-app to share their details with their lecturer. The app allows them to set academic or personal goals, then reflect on their performance. Learners click on a relevant meta-skill and comment on what they have done to progress this skill, then click 'Submit for checking' for their lecturer to review. They revisit their goals at the middle and end of each teaching block, reflecting on whether these goals are still the most appropriate for them. Lecturers can use the app alongside having



one-to-one discussions with learners. They can comment on learners' reflections, ask them to revisit them, or sign them off as a 'skill progressed'.

Learners found that many learners lacked the self-awareness and self-esteem to find setting appropriate goals for themselves and writing reflectively straightforward. This led to them sometimes setting random, generic or unrealistic goals. We found a few ways to help them:

- One-to-one discussions on their goals
- Breaking their goals down into manageable and tangible achievements, and recording this on a Word document
- Inserting some examples of reflective writing into learner's recording document (via MS Teams)

## **SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDED RESOURCES AND APPROACHES**

- Reflective questions on a Word document (academic and meta-skills mix)
- Small group discussion
- SQA Meta-skills Development Log
- Reflection log with prompts