



NextGen: HN Design Principles

Transition and Context

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1 Introduction

1.1 NextGen: HN evaluation

This document is one of four reports which aim to provide an evidence base for decisions on the suitability of NextGeneration: Higher National (NextGen: HN) design principles, and to inform next steps in the project.

The four reports on NextGen: HN design principles are:

- 1 NextGen: HN Employer Engagement Report
- 2 NextGen: HN Non-Pilot Practitioner Engagement Report
- 3 NextGen: HN Design Principles: Review of Evidence
- 4 NextGen: HN Design Principles: Transition and Context

These reports collate the evidence gathered from various NextGen: HN evaluative activities that have already taken place. The reporting and outputs from these activities have been scrutinised to determine how different stakeholders, including learners, practitioners, higher education institutions (HEIs), SQA centres and employers, perceive the proposed design principles for NextGen: HN qualifications, and what changes, if any, should be made to ensure a successful rollout in the next stages.

1.2 Report structure

From two separate qualitative research projects undertaken with employers and non-pilot practitioners with a stake in the development of NextGen: HN, common themes emerged relating to the transition to NextGen:HN in education and wider employability sectors. One research project aimed to gather the views of employers in sectors that aligned with piloted NextGen: HN subjects. The other research project focused on the perspectives of practitioners who had not yet been involved in a NextGen: HN pilot, but who had experience of teaching current Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and/or Higher National Diplomas (HNDs).

Section 3 of this report focuses on data gathered from these two research projects surrounding the context, or environment, that NextGen: HN will be implemented in and the barriers to the transition that may occur.

Section 4 of this report discusses the findings of these two research projects in conjunction with relevant findings from other sources of evidence in the wider evaluation regarding the context of and transition to NextGen: HN.

For a full description of each piece of evidence, please refer to the NextGen: HN Design Principles: Review of Evidence report.

2 Method

While the main aim of the Employer Engagement and Non-Pilot Practitioner Engagement research was to gather views on the proposed design principles of NextGen: HN, it was clear that participants were also concerned with the current climate and how NextGen: HN could respond to and interact with this. Data collected as part of the existing qualitative research was re-examined to explore related themes.

2.1 Research aims

As part of the evaluation into the NextGen: HN pilot, two research projects were carried out to understand the views of employers in sectors that make heavy use of Higher National (HN) qualifications, and practitioners of HN qualifications who had not been involved in the pilot. The aim of this research was to gather evidence on what the wider sector thinks about the proposed adaptations to the NextGen: HN qualifications. This would provide a holistic evidence base on which to make decisions about the future of NextGen: HN.

2.2 Research ethics

While there were no obvious sensitive issues that would require a more detailed review for these research projects, to mitigate the risk of harm to participants, any ethical concerns were considered carefully during the design of the research. This included ensuring that the research approach aligned with the [Code of Research Practice \(CoRP\)](#), which had been drawn up in consultation with the Research and Evaluation Team, the Equalities Team, the Sustainability Team, and colleagues across the Policy, Assessment and Standards Directorate. The CoRP was also subject to an Equality Impact Assessment

2.3 Research design

To address the research aims, two qualitative research projects were conducted, one with employers and one with practitioners. Following this, a review of secondary evidence related to perspectives on the NextGen: HN design principles was conducted. These sources are:

- ◆ Learner Engagement – Final Report 22/23
- ◆ change requests
- ◆ the review of Quality Assurance surveys
- ◆ change impact assessments
- ◆ Ashbrook HEI, College and Employer Research

To provide a holistic evidence base for further decision-making, this report brings together the primary evidence from employers and practitioners and the secondary evidence analysis as part of the evidence review.

2.4 Sampling

Employers

To capture a diverse range of experiences, a purposive sampling approach was used. As it was expected that the recruitment for this research would result in a small response rate, a

large number of employers were contacted across Scotland and in the UK. Several criteria were identified for selecting employers to interview. The main sampling criteria included:

- ◆ sector relevant to a piloted NextGen: HN qualification
- ◆ organisation based in Scotland or had branch(es) based in Scotland
- ◆ employers in a recruitment, skills development, education or manager role

Practitioners

Across 2022–23 and 2023–24, 14 NextGen: HN courses were piloted across Scotland, with some courses piloted across institutions at varying times. A practitioner was considered to be ‘non-pilot’ if their institution did not take part in a NextGen: HN pilot programme in the subject that they taught, or if the practitioner’s institution was piloting a NextGen: HN course but the practitioner did not deliver it. The research prioritised sampling non-pilot practitioners whose subjects were part of the pilot programme, in order to compare their views with pilot practitioners of the same subjects.

2.5 Data collection

Both research projects made use of depth interviews to gather rich data about the perspectives and experiences of employer stakeholders and practitioners. The topic guides were designed in consultation with members of the Research and Evaluation Team and the NextGen: HN Portfolio Development Team; they were semi-structured so that the conversation between the participant and researcher would be co-constructed in line with the CoRP’s guidance to consider researcher positionality. The flexibility of the topic guides also served to address the diversity in knowledge and experience of the participants.

The participants included 14 employers and 18 practitioners. All interviews took place between 29 August and 21 September 2023 on Microsoft Teams or by phone call. Interview times ranged between 25 minutes to just over an hour.

2.6 Analysis

All transcripts were imported into and coded using NVivo. As active stakeholders in the NextGen: HN project, both employers and practitioners were concerned with how the adapted qualifications would be integrated into the current educational and employment landscape. Across the data collected from interviews, a recurring theme was barriers to the rollout; participants mentioned this either unprompted by interviewer questions, or in response to specific questions. This section describes in detail how data analysis was performed for the initial reports, before the secondary analysis outlined above was conducted.

Employers

The lead researcher identified key topics and issues through examining the transcripts. An analytical coding framework was drawn up using the key themes and issues that had emerged from the data and the research aims. The research team then used the analytical coding framework to code all the transcripts using NVivo. This allowed the team to view all the data on a particular theme together.

Through reviewing the coded data, the full range of employers' views and attitudes was analysed and emerging themes were identified. The accounts of different employers and groups of employers were compared and contrasted using the NVivo query tool.

Practitioners

Interview transcripts were read in full, and then coded based on the eight design principles listed in the full report, as well as 'Other'. The codes under the eight design principles were then sub-coded and analysed based on common themes that emerged across interview transcripts. 'Other' was also sub-coded into themes that reoccurred across interviews.

2.7 Limitations of the research

While care was taken to ensure that the research was robust, there were limitations that should be taken into account when assessing the veracity of the data:

- ◆ Interviewers were representatives of SQA, which may have impacted on respondents' answers to questions.
- ◆ The sample sizes of both research projects were small and did not include representatives from all relevant sectors, subjects or institutions.
- ◆ Fieldwork took place while practitioners were just back from summer leave or strike action, and were returning to heavy workloads. This may have contributed to a low response rate.
- ◆ SQA provided information about the NextGen: HN proposals to participants prior to interview to aid their understanding of the topic, which may have influenced their views.
- ◆ Practitioners from pilot institutions were overrepresented in the research and their views may have been influenced by pilot colleagues in their institutions.

A more detailed discussion of the methods of both research projects can be found in the NextGen: HN Employer Engagement Report and NextGen: HN Non-Pilot Practitioner Engagement Report.

3 Findings

3.1 Context

The further and higher education sectors in Scotland were dealing with a number of challenges at the time of fieldwork, including the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, a tight financial situation and ongoing industrial action. In the employment sector, many organisations were challenged by recruitment difficulties, the cost-of-living crisis and an ageing workforce. As such, SQA needs to consider these sectors' ability to cope with the introduction of NextGen: HN, and what, if anything, it can do to support the sectors during this stage.

Scottish education is also undergoing a number of important reform initiatives at the time of writing. There are organisational reforms, including the replacement of SQA with a new qualifications body, and proposals for reform of the skills delivery landscape and of qualifications and assessment.

What strengths do employers and practitioners perceive in their sectors?

Employers see strengths in wide-ranging areas of their sector. Because of this variation, the data were analysed for common themes across sectors. Table 1 illustrates strengths that employer stakeholders in different sectors expressed.

Table 1: Employer views on the strengths of their sector

Sector	Strengths
Childhood practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Interpersonal skills◆ Resilience◆ Empathy◆ Communication skills
Engineering	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Technical skills and knowledge◆ Steps to improve diversity
Social services	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Resilience◆ Empathy
Physical activity and health	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Common language across qualifications◆ Interpersonal skills◆ Tacit knowledge
Acting and performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Technical skills and knowledge
Social sciences	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Benefits society◆ Problem solving skills◆ Diverse range of roles

These strengths that employers identified mirror how non-pilot practitioners understood meta-skills to fit into their subjects. The majority of practitioners participating in the research believed that their subjects already develop these skills to some extent, such as empathy in the health and social care HN. Other strengths of the education sector that practitioners identified included a general openness to change and innovation.

What are the challenges facing the sectors?

There were several challenges that employers and practitioners across different sectors expressed.

A persistent issue among all employment sectors was recruitment. Generally, the employers interviewed believed this stemmed from a lack of suitably skilled and qualified candidates, and issues with attracting people to their sector due to low wages. Specifically, employers felt that new recruits to their sector lacked professional skills, such as communication, problem solving, leadership skills, time management, and work ethic. On top of this, some employers felt that although new people entering the industry were highly qualified on paper, they lacked practical experience.

I don't know whether it's to do with the pandemic when people didn't have as much interaction with other people, you know, and the young people that are coming in, they kind of missed out on that practical experience. [...] I am seeing more that young people are struggling with that kind of face-to-face contact a bit more than they used to. (Childhood practice employer)

Along with most care organisations in Scotland, we have got a large deficit. When it comes to employment, large numbers of people who- specific examples: we can advertise for the post of 10 applications, offer eight an interview, and if two turned up, we're lucky. (Social services employer)

Another common challenge that employers across all sectors perceived was a technical skills shortage among the workforce; however, the skills needed to fill this gap varied by sector. Table 2 summarises employers' views on the technical skills lacking in various sectors.

Table 2: Employers' views on shortage of skills by sector

Sector	Shortage of skills
Physical activity and health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ IT skills ◆ Software skills ◆ Business acumen
Acting and performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Stage etiquette knowledge ◆ Movement skills ◆ Audition self-taping experience ◆ Technical stage skills
Construction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Traditional building skills ◆ Health and safety compliance knowledge

Sector	Shortage of skills
Engineering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ IT skills ◆ Numeracy skills ◆ Green skills
Computing and IT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Design thinking

While employers had emphasised the need for upskilling among the workforce, they made clear that they knew their recruitment problems existed in a wider context. Employers in the social care sector (social services, childcare practice, and care) explained that there had been funding cuts at the local authority level to training providers, resulting in fewer qualified candidates for their organisations. In the engineering sector, employers spoke about the difficulties of attracting a more diverse workforce as the industry continued to have a majority-male employee base. Employers across different sectors mentioned that there was an ageing workforce, and that well-qualified and experienced employees would soon be retiring, leading to a skills drain.

We also need to have a wider base of diversity in the industry. For many, many years the auto industry has been a male dominated area. We are making large inroads to that, but we're not doing it quickly enough. (Engineering employer)

We have a skills shortage in the auto industry, something in the regions of 40 to 50,000 skilled technicians, people from my generation that are 55 upwards retiring early leaving the industry. (Engineering employer)

In addition, employers were asked about the challenges that they expected to develop in their sector in the coming years to understand how NextGen: HN can prepare learners for the future.

Employers expected that the recruitment issues they were currently facing would heighten if the skills gap in the workforce continued on the same trajectory, and this would have implications for wider society. For example, an acting and performance employer said that in five years' time, the theatre industry in Scotland could collapse due to a lack of skilled technicians. In the engineering sector, employers expressed that the lack of skills being developed in green technologies currently would become a barrier in the move towards 'Net Zero'. Since the time of interviews, the Scottish Government has scrapped the 2030 greenhouse gas emissions goal; however, this may highlight that employers in the engineering sector could require skills that are flexible to changing government policy.

Another common concern across industries was the rapid growth of artificial intelligence (AI) and the fear that these new technologies could replace jobs.

Digital skills shortage at the moment, right, specifically and of course that changes every six months or so is to do with, you know, AI knowledge and even ChatGPT, even something as simple as that 'cause everybody's using it, I use it. I use it to write bids. But everyone's using it. But there's kind of a fear factor to it as well. (Computing and IT employer)

Everyone's freaking out a bit about AI at the moment. Yeah, the scripting thing is a bit mind boggling. I can't quite understand how that happens but if you... I know that the film and television people are all a bit worried about that.

(Acting and performance employer)

Employers mentioned other challenges stemming from problems in wider society. These included:

- ◆ private care organisations losing staff to the National Care Service¹
- ◆ lack of investment in industry due to Britain leaving the European Union
- ◆ low wages and job cuts

Practitioners felt that a lack of resources and investment was a challenge within the college sector as a whole, with some practitioners commenting on issues such as staffing shortages, space shortages, and lack of investment in equipment.

In addition, multiple practitioners mentioned industrial action; several of them mentioned industrial action as a characteristic of their sector. Union activity was not the aim of the research so these mentions in interviews were unprompted. Some participants mentioned unions in passing; for example, one practitioner used how union representatives are given time to work for the union as an example of how external verifiers (EVs) could work better. Other lecturers mentioned unions in regards to a potential challenge of rolling out NextGen: HN; for example, one practitioner mentioned that industrial action over the past year demonstrates that it is 'not a brilliant time' in the sector. Another lecturer indicated that industrial action is something SQA may need to think about when moving forward with NextGen: HN, because they did not expect industrial action to stop:

...we've been out on strike seven of the last eight years. So you know we are always out. And it's not the SQA at all. It's nothing really SQA related, but... yeah, it's the nature of being a lecturer unfortunately. And... we don't want to disrupt classes, but the nature of industrial action is disruption, honestly. And so that is the purpose. So we do our best to support when we're back, we make sure that it contains contents covered and we have conversations about why we do it and things like that. But yeah, it... until changes are made on a government level, it's going to continue.

3.2 Identified barriers to implementation

Practitioners and employers were asked about the barriers they perceived to the rollout of NextGen: HN. Broadly, the identified barriers include:

- ◆ college and practitioner resources
- ◆ student additional support needs
- ◆ college industrial action
- ◆ college campus sizes

¹ The Scottish Government (2023b) is working to establish a National Care Service which will deliver community health and social care across Scotland.

- ◆ lack of knowledge among employers

'Barriers' did not necessarily indicate negativity towards NextGen: HN from participants. However, recurring themes across interviews showed that some participants, particularly practitioners, questioned whether the current environment was conducive to NextGen: HN working as designed. Some practitioners expressed positivity towards elements of the pilot in theory, but expressed scepticism about realising the theory in practice. For example, one practitioner said the idea of meta-skills 'sounds good' but questioned whether or not it was 'realistic' for practitioners to assess skills such as integrity. However at the time of the interviews, non-pilot practitioners did not have access to developments in meta-skills assessment planning, so in this case, worries about the pilot not working as intended also reflected a lack of access to detailed assessment plans.

Resources

Practitioners expressed that the college sector may need a number of additional tools or commodities to support the successful transition to NextGen: HN. As shown in Table 3, practitioners believed that colleges would need more funding, staffing, space and access to virtual learning environments. The practitioners interviewed also felt that practitioners themselves would need more time, information and subject specialists. They expressed that the implementation of learning for sustainability would need to be supported by an investment in equipment,. They also felt that implementing digital technology would need this too, alongside IT support for learners and staff. To support the rollout of meta-skills, there should be more support for learners and a greater investment in learning and teaching materials.

Table 3: Resources that colleges would need for NextGen: HN implementation

Resource areas	Resources needed
Colleges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Funding ◆ Staffing ◆ Space ◆ Virtual learning environments
Practitioners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Time ◆ Information ◆ Subject Specialists
Learning for sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Investment in equipment
Digital technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Investment in equipment ◆ IT classes for students ◆ IT support for staff
Meta-skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Support departments for learners ◆ Investment in materials

Of the resources practitioners identified, college funding seemed to be the main common resource. Another practitioner explained that their college had virtual learning environments cut, which could be a common requirement across several aspects of NextGen: HN.

Additional support needs

Across various parts of interviews, over half of the participating practitioners mentioned additional support needs for learners who need extra resources in order to achieve. Practitioners identified the following areas of learning support that would be needed to roll out NextGen: HN:

- ◆ IT support
- ◆ inclusive learning support
- ◆ mental health support
- ◆ support for disabled learners
- ◆ support for autistic learners
- ◆ support for dyslexic learners
- ◆ support for care experienced learners
- ◆ support for learners with varying social backgrounds

Resources and flexibility were the main concerns when identifying areas where learners may need additional support. Some practitioners questioned whether or not resources were in place to meet additional support needs. Flexibility was also an important factor; practitioners expressed that NextGen: HN would need to be flexible in assessment methods for learners with additional support needs. This concern could reflect a gap in practitioners' knowledge and lack of awareness of NextGen: HN's intended flexibility.

One practitioner raised the issue of entry to HNs in general, explaining that since overall entrance into HNs is broadly accessible, NextGen: HN would need to reflect that:

... [it's] not like we have a reserve list because everyone gets a place and with that, as you can imagine, there's a big difference between the best student and the worst student in that class... it's going to be a real challenge with, you know, NextGen, which again is more set up for... individuals to take more responsibility over their work and do that sort of self-management and things like that and maybe and less handheld ... how are they [learners]going to sort of get through it?

Campus sizes

Some practitioners identified campus sizes as a barrier to NextGen: HN standardisation. Practitioners expressed that there should be flexibility in how different campuses could deliver NextGen: HN, particularly in colleges that operate across more than one campus. For example, there was a concern that one campus would lead on NextGen: HN and other campuses would have to follow suit. This concurred with a general need for flexibility in NextGen: HN, where some practitioners expressed the value of being able to adapt courses, or elements of courses, to suit different learners and circumstances.

Lack of knowledge among employers

Employers expressed there is a limited awareness and understanding of what NextGen: HNs are and where they fit into the qualifications landscape in Scotland. However, this appeared to be an issue with HN qualifications in general, as some employers expressed a lack of understanding of where HNCs and HNDs sat in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). Others indicated that the content they believed to be taught in HNs was too general. Apprenticeships appeared to be preferable to employers, as they believed apprenticeships to offer technical knowledge alongside practical learning. Additionally, some employers suggested that there was an oversaturation of qualifications available for some subjects, and they were uncertain of the advantages of an HNC or HND compared to other qualifications, such as degrees, SVQs, or apprenticeships.

we don't necessarily use [HNC/HNDs] at the moment and actually if it's changed then it might become more useful and we might use them. But I think there needs to be some alignment with other existing qualifications that are used to show what's the difference, you know. (Social sciences employer)

Some employers would like SQA to communicate more with them about NextGen: HN throughout implementation, so that they could prepare for the incoming NextGen: HN graduates. Survey research showed very low levels of awareness of NextGen: HN amongst employers without a connection to the project. Ensuring that this group develops a wider and more in-depth understanding of NextGen: HN is something that SQA should consider as the qualifications continue to roll out.

3.3 Identified support needs

Based on the knowledge provided to them on NextGen: HN, practitioners and employers expressed that the implementation of these qualifications could be bolstered with the right kind of support from SQA. These support needs were related to the delivery of NextGen: HN as a whole and specific aspects of the qualifications. The support needs identified were:

- ◆ getting information on the pilot
- ◆ time to learn about and develop NextGen: HN courses
- ◆ communications on pilot experiences
- ◆ communications with employers on NextGen: HN rollout

Getting information on the pilot

The Non-Pilot Practitioner Engagement research showed that practitioners received information on the pilot through varying sources: word-of-mouth, the SQA NextGen: HN website, SQA webinars, and through participating in the research. However, some practitioners indicated their preference in some methods over others; preferred communications and methods of getting information on the pilot were:

- ◆ additional webinars
- ◆ additional support packs
- ◆ regular updates on qualification material
- ◆ face-to-face information sessions
- ◆ communications from SQA on pilot experiences

Several participants also mentioned face-to-face support as key; although they did not offer detailed reasons, one practitioner mentioned that it was more difficult to get the 'true information' through digital materials. Methods considered impractical or inconducive to getting information were emails and SQA's website in particular, which some practitioners said were easy to ignore, difficult to navigate, and took time to understand.

Time to learn about and develop NextGen: HN courses

Some practitioners indicated they might need several months to a year to learn about NextGen: HN and prepare for the rollout. This indicated a perception that NextGen: HN would involve a large development and learning curve. While SQA does not determine practitioners' work schedules, SQA could provide extra support, information, and resources in order to help decrease development and learning curves moving forward, as well as limit potential workload anxieties about the pilot or wider rollout.

Yes, think if they could release somebody for a day for three months ... to be able to write resources that could be used all throughout Scotland for all the colleges that are delivering Healthcare which I believe is many. Again it would be that standardised approach.

Communications on pilot experiences

Over half of the practitioners participating wanted to know more about pilot experiences from colleges and practitioners moving forward. These comments were unprompted, and tended to be made towards the beginning of interviews when practitioners were asked how they were finding information on the pilot currently, what they would like to know about NextGen: HN before its complete rollout, as well as what kind of support they might want.

This suggested that while practitioners had a general awareness that NextGen: HN pilots were happening, evidence and publications would be a valuable resource in easing anxieties about the rollout and encouraging buy-in.

...just need to see about the design principles and understand that a bit more and the kind of, people that have delivered it before in similar areas like social care and childcare, what's their feedback? What they felt...It would be good to get a publication out so we can read it

...I would certainly be interested in talking to people who have been through the process of implementing HN NextGen and learning from their experience.

It would be nice to actually hear more about how pilots are progressing rather than it being that kind of closed off, sealed. I think it builds some anxiety for some lecturers that are perhaps very used to how things are run at the minute and, you know. Yeah, I think that could possibly be...further considered ...I'd love to hear from lecturers that are actually participating in [NextGen]. What are the upsides in doing it? Have they found any positive impact for students? But also it shouldn't be a kind of PR piece. What are some of the things that we need to be aware of as assessors? Is there anything, any potential pitfalls, or, what have they done to kind of rethink these things? Sharing lessons that they've done. That student side of it too, and I think...as I say, there are some anxieties

about it, these types of stories will be able to then allow us to be inspired, which is really important moving forward, gives us some ideas.

Some colleges or practitioners were planning to seek out evidence of pilot experiences themselves in order to build understanding of it:

... like more coming out and finding more information about [NextGen], isn't it like...manager's kind of go to the things, rather than the staff that are actually delivering it. ...I think they're going to plan to go to a few of these [colleges] that are [piloting] NextGen. So I think that's going to happen as well. So, that would be good if we could get out and see it in practise and speak to staff [who] delivered on it I think.

Practitioners' answers also indicated that they had not received updated information about the NextGen:HN project, which may have had an impact on positive perceptions.

I don't know how robust the evaluation of each of the pilots centres has been, because it's my understanding it's only been 2 pilot centres [being piloted in Childhood Practice] and they're both taking a very different approach to teaching it.

...Not sure because I don't think, even when I've seen the SQA release some feedback documents, it's not clear whether...there is an academic rigour and it's not really clear [what] the feedback is. "Oh, everyone's enjoying it" well...I questioned that and it's not enough. Not enough information, is what I mean to know the answer to that question.

Lastly, some practitioners also expressed concern that the pilot development was more focused on preparing learners for employment rather than university. Practitioners also said that universities were not involved in accepting the pilot design, which could make it harder for learners to be offered a place or succeed in university if the skills they learn in NextGen: HN are at odds with the skills needed at university. However, these views could change once HEIs increase communications on articulation; confidence could also grow once learners with NextGen: HN qualifications evidence their transition to HEIs.

Overall, it is clear that providing up-to-date evidence from the pilots and practitioner experiences of the pilots could help practitioners move forward in the rollout of NextGen: HN; this mode of support could mitigate any unease that is based on outdated practices.

Communications with employers about NextGen rollout

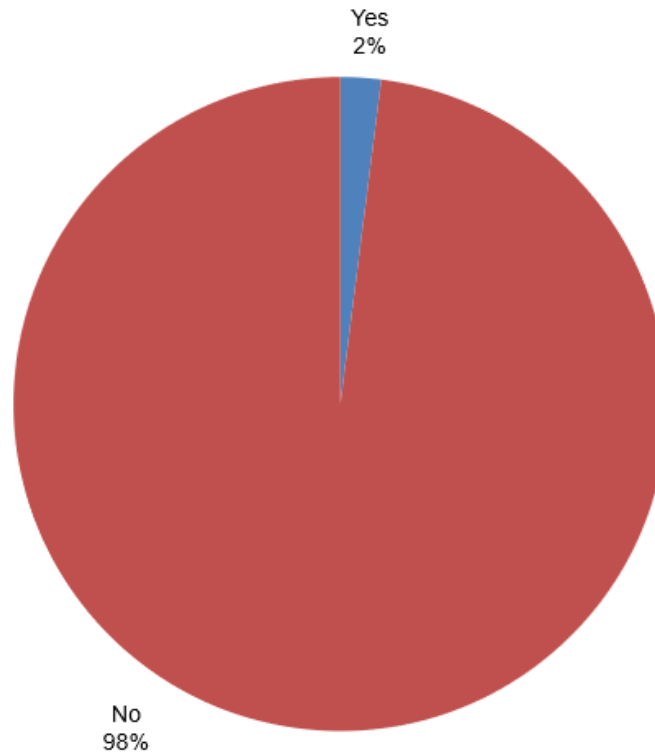
Similar to practitioners, a recurring theme among employers was the desire for SQA to expand its efforts in reaching out to stakeholders in the development of NextGen: HN. Employers would like SQA to communicate more widely and more in depth with different stakeholders in the employment sphere to build understanding of NextGen: HN in Scotland.

But even some of the staff at [Car Dealer] and in our organisation don't know what meta skills are. Yet these and this interviewing people from school, 16/17 years old, who may be coming with meta skills. And then they say 'What does that mean?' So we need to get that message across. So getting out SQA, getting

*out into industry, talking to managers and business, small business associations.
That would definitely help.* (Engineering employer)

Limited awareness and knowledge of NextGen: HN was prevalent among the wider employment sphere. In a survey of 200 employers across Scotland, the vast majority (98%) said that they were not aware of NextGen HN Qualifications (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Employers' awareness of NextGen HN Qualifications



Base: All employers

The employer interviews carried out as part of this research identified four main areas where SQA should provide further support to raise awareness, understanding, and buy-in of NextGen: HN. These were:

- ◆ more communication from SQA to employers regarding what the NextGen: HN proposals meant and how they may impact the sector so that organisations can fully understand them and prepare accordingly
- ◆ ensuring better understanding of where the adapted HNC and HND fit in to the qualifications landscape in Scotland
- ◆ training of new digital platforms that will be used to teach NextGen: HN
- ◆ a demonstration of consideration that the proposed changes to the HNs may result in a different base of learners with different needs, such as juggling work and family alongside study

4 Conclusion — impacts of NextGen: HN

The following sections bring together primary evidence from the non-pilot practitioner and employer engagement research, alongside the other evaluation pieces of work that has taken place since 2022, to examine the evidence of NextGen: HN's overall impacts to the education sector and SQA. It is important to note that these pieces of work have taken place throughout the development and early implementation of NextGen: HN, and the iterative nature of the process means that changes have been made in response to feedback. Therefore, some of research discussed may appear out of date at the time of writing, but where possible, information on actions taken by the NextGen: HN Team in response to findings has been included.

For a more detailed description of each piece of research discussed, please refer to the Review of Evidence Report.

4.1 Impact on the sector

From the evidence collected, a prominent theme that emerged was that SQA should be aware of how the transition to NextGen: HN may impact the education and employability sectors in the next stages of rollout. Considering the data gathered from learners, HEIs, SQA centres, practitioners and employers, this section seeks to answer the following questions:

- ◆ How will NextGen: HN interact with current demands faced by the sector?
- ◆ What are the obstacles that stakeholders perceive in the transition to NextGen: HN?
- ◆ What has SQA done to mitigate obstacles to the transition?

How will NextGen: HN interact with current demands faced by the sector?

In the Non-Pilot Practitioner Engagement research carried out in autumn 2023, practitioners identified industrial action as a potential barrier to the rollout of NextGen: HN. When considered alongside the increased workloads that NextGen: HN may bring, there could be a danger of NextGen: HN being conflated with problems in the sector as a whole if not managed effectively.

When considering the impact of NextGen: HN on the employment landscape, some employers in the employer engagement research were optimistic that the adapted qualifications could help resolve a number of issues they were facing. These included:

- ◆ helping to resolve recruitment issues by allowing people to get qualified more quickly and more flexibly
- ◆ enabling the sector to be better placed for the future by upskilling learners with 21st century skills and knowledge
- ◆ implementing better communication and links between professional standards and qualifications through the push to involve employers in the development of NextGen: HN

I think they would be set up for, you know, what the industry in 10 years, 15/20 years' time are going to need. You know, we spoke before about things like artificial intelligence, for example, sustainable jobs, the green jobs, in five or ten years' time, this is what employers are going to be looking for and going to be needing. (Social services employer)

On the other hand, some employers doubted that the NextGen: HN qualifications would make a difference to their sector. For example, a heritage employer felt that apprenticeships already served the need in the workforce for upskilling that NextGen: HN was trying to address, but that apprenticeships went further in offering learners practical training in a specific field.

What are the obstacles that stakeholders perceive in the transition to NextGen: HN?

Articulation

A research paper published by Ashbrook in April 2023 explored the views of HEIs on NextGen: HN; it found significant concern in the HEI sector with the impact of NextGen: HN on successful articulation and articulation agreements with further education partners. The main concern was whether articulation arrangements would sufficiently demonstrate that NextGen: HN qualifications are comparable with a degree course, through providing information and data. HEIs were not confident that they would be able to match NextGen: HN qualification for articulation purposes, due to a lack of information that was available at the time.

In 2022 and 2023, SQA carried out change impact assessments (CIAs) with stakeholder groups at SQA centres that were piloting NextGen: HN. These CIAs revealed the need for articulation meetings to be held with universities to ensure that the new NextGen: HN qualifications were recognised. Pilot centres also highlighted the need for clarification as to whether learners who had studied NextGen: HN qualifications as part of the pilot would be able to articulate as usual.

Assessments

The CIAs carried out in 2022 found that centres in the first stages of the pilot were devising their own assessments as they lacked assessment plans. While this presented an opportunity to carry out assessments in a different way, stakeholders felt that assessment planners at the time may have lacked the confidence to create new assessments. This was a problem that was unique to the pilot, as SQA will continue to provide assessment support for NextGen qualifications in the later stages of rollout.

In 2022 CIAs, pilot centres implied that their staff had been gradually becoming used to more holistic approaches to assessment in the previous two years. SQA has since developed NextGen: HN's assessment strategy further in collaboration with pilot centres and is providing greater support to centres through various platforms as part of the rollout process.

The CIAs in 2023 also highlighted concerns among stakeholders about significant impact on delivery staff and delivery leads, as time and resources would be needed to train staff in new assessment areas. As a result, pilot centres requested adequate time for delivery staff to liaise with one another for the fully integrated assessment implementation and mapping

required. Similarly, in relation to the amount of time stakeholders felt was needed for the perceived larger assessment instruments, the CIAS showed a need for substantial case studies.

Finances

The perceived financial challenges of implementing NextGen: HN was a recurring theme that underpinned several pieces of the evaluative research on NextGen: HN development. In the 2022 CIAs, it was noted that moving from a 12-credit HNC to a 15-credit HNC in some subjects, such as social services, could have an impact on finance in terms of student funding and staffing. Pilot centres were also concerned that changes in time management and volume of workload for learners may impact on retention. This indicated that centres would benefit from more clarification on the support for 15-credit HNCs, particularly in terms of the support for learners who may struggle to achieve 15 credits in one academic session. This support has since been developed.

The Employment Engagement Research carried out in autumn 2023 also highlighted concerns from employers that colleges finances would be impacted by the introduction of NextGen: HN. One employer felt that colleges relied heavily on learners undertaking two years of study for an HND, and may lose income if there was a shift towards standalone HNs. Another employer expressed that the transitional period to NextGen: HN could be an additional expense for colleges and that, due to lack of funding, the NextGen qualifications may not be implemented properly.

In a similar vein, in the research carried out with non-pilot practitioners in autumn 2023, participants described how colleges lacked resources and funding for appropriate digital technology or student support services with the current HNs. Practitioners felt that this lack of funding could also have an impact on the successful rollout of NextGen: HN.

Time and workload

The review of Quality Assurance surveys undertaken between 2022 and 2023 showed that pilot centres and delivery staff felt they needed additional time to cope with the change in assessment. They felt that the time needed to understand the changes with the NextGen qualifications would increase the demand on the sector. This is likely to be an issue that is also relevant as SQA moves into the next stage of wider NextGen rollout.

In the 2023 Non-Pilot Practitioner Engagement research, some practitioners expressed certainty that time would be needed to prepare NextGen: HN courses and practitioner understanding prior to the rollout of their subjects. A lack of time could exacerbate other issues in the sector as a whole such as workloads. Practitioners showed concerned about increased workloads, saying that increasing workloads are inevitable in the rollout of a new qualification. The Student Records Team also expressed concerns of increased workload in the CIAs and what the changes could mean.

What has SQA done to mitigate obstacles to the transition?

The evaluative research into the transition to and context of NextGen: HN has highlighted some issues relating to communications, qualifications delivery and articulation that SQA has been addressed through changing ways of working in adapting the continued roll out of these new qualifications. The iterative nature of the NextGen: HN project means that some

changes suggested from in the research have already been introduced and the action taken is noted, where relevant. As of March 2024, SQA has received 52 change requests.

A major theme in the suggestions of various stakeholders who participated in the research examined in this report is that SQA need to communicate more with them about NextGen: HN so that they can prepare accordingly.

Through the 2022 and 2023 CIAs, pilot centres expressed the need to know when course frameworks and units will be finalised for further rollout. This suggests that more guidance and on-hand help will be needed both in initial meetings and training with delivery staff and the Student Records Team; this would allow SQA to communicate live changes and provide ongoing support for delivery leads. They also highlighted that more work is needed to ensure that HEIs are fully aware of the new grading model. The articulation and progression strand at SQA has reflected this by adding direct links on the NextGen: HN webpage for requesting articulation and progression support from the NextGen: HN Team.

The 2022–23 External Quality Assurer survey, as part of the review of Quality Assurance, raised that guidance and suggested agendas for touchpoint meetings would be beneficial. These have since been introduced.

The April 2023 Ashbrook report showed that HEIs felt SQA had failed to engage with them sufficiently during the early developmental stages of NextGen: HN. They also felt that SQA provided information too slowly and too late, resulting in a lack of trust and confidence in SQA at the time. HEIs stated that learners must be supported and sufficiently prepared for entry into university. In response, SQA provided more support by adding direct links on the NextGen: HN webpage for requesting articulation and progression support from the NextGen: HN Team.

5 References

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