

**HIGHER  
NATIONAL**



# **NextGen: HN Employer Engagement Report**

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## Executive Summary

As part of an evaluation of the Next Generation Higher National (NextGen: HN) qualification proposals, this research aimed to capture the views of employers in sectors that align with piloted NextGen: HN subjects.

To update current Higher National qualifications for the 21st century, SQA have proposed and piloted the following changes:

- larger and fewer units, to reduce the assessment load for staff and learners
- incorporation of meta-skills
- mandatory project unit
- new grading model — the graded unit is being replaced by a whole qualification grading model
- incorporation of Learning for Sustainability (LfS)
- digital by design approach

This research explored the views of 14 employers from various sectors across Scotland in semi-structured interviews that took place in September 2023.

### Employer views on current HN learners

- Employers perceived employees who had studied or were currently studying HN qualifications to have a good knowledge of legislation, and have well-developed soft skills and problem solving skills.
- It was common for employers to say that HN learners or graduates lacked practical experience and that this could put them at a disadvantage in the workplace or job interviews.

### Employer views on NextGen: HN prototype

- Employers overall felt positively about the adaptations being proposed for NextGen: HN.
- The changes were felt to reflect 21st century society, and it was hoped they would help upskill the future workforce to fill the skills gap that was currently causing problems across sectors.
- Employers from different sectors had contrasting views on some aspects of the prototype. This indicates that a flexible approach with the proposals may be appropriate to allow qualifications to address different needs across different subject areas.
- Some employers felt that apprenticeships already addressed the needs that NextGen: HN was aiming to fulfil in their sector.

### Employer views on NextGen: HN proposals

Decoupling HNC and HND:

- Employers were supportive of the decoupling of HNC and HND, and felt that learners would benefit from this as it would save time, was felt to be more flexible, and allowed learners to upskill later in their career.

- Employers said that because the HNC/HND was historically viewed as a coupled qualification, there may be some confusion among employers about the qualifications when NextGen: HN graduates entered the workforce. It was felt that SQA should provide them with more information about the decoupling to aid their understanding.
- Additionally, employers expressed concern that if learners went straight on to do the HND, they would lose out on the foundation skills and training that are gained during the HNC.

#### Meta-skills:

- The incorporation of meta-skills into NextGen: HN qualifications was viewed positively by employers. It was felt that this would enable employees to articulate their soft skills better in interviews and in the workplace, and that it would benefit younger people who were more likely to change job often.
- On the other hand, employers said that awareness of meta-skills in the workplace was low and that this may be confusing or act as a barrier to engagement.

#### Digital learning:

- It was common for employers to say that young people entering the workforce lacked basic IT skills, such as using a computer, and that there was a need to digitally upskill the workforce
- While employers could see the benefits of digital learning being embedded in NextGen: HN, they expressed concern with moving away from face-to-face methods.
- The benefits they perceived were greater flexibility, breaking down of accessibility barriers, and a greater understanding of 21st century technology.
- However, employers were concerned that inequality would increase due to digital poverty if the qualifications went digital. It was also felt that there was less active engagement in online delivery compared to face-to-face, and that digital learning would cause more problems with security and privacy.

#### Learning for Sustainability:

- Employers were supportive of sustainability knowledge being embedded into NextGen: HN, but it was felt by some that the sustainability content did not go far enough in the qualification proposals and that SQA were already too late in implementing LfS into HN qualifications.

#### New grading model:

- The move to continued assessment was welcomed by employers, who felt that the approach allowed the focus to be on learning rather than assessment and would reflect the abilities of the candidate better.
- It was perceived to be beneficial to learners in that it would reduce stress.
- However, a common concern was maintaining the integrity of assessments and standardisation, and it was also felt that the graded unit was better suited to some subjects than continuous assessment.

# Introduction

This report is part of the Scottish Qualifications Authority's (SQA) evaluation of the development of its Next Generation Higher National (NextGen: HN) qualifications. SQA wanted to understand the views of employers regarding proposed adaptations to Higher National qualifications in sectors that were aligned with the NextGen: HN subject areas. SQA began the development of Next Generation Higher National (NextGen: HN) following a consultation with various stakeholders in Scotland, including colleges, sector skills bodies, Skills Development Scotland (SDS), the Scottish Funding Council, and others (including employers) with an interest in updating Higher National (HN) qualifications. The aim of this update was to equip learners with the skills and knowledge necessary to thrive in the rapidly changing 21st century society.

To achieve this aim, SQA have proposed the following adaptations to the HN qualifications:

- larger and fewer units, to reduce the assessment load for staff and learners
- incorporation of meta-skills
- mandatory project unit
- new grading model — the graded unit being replaced by a whole qualification grading model
- incorporation of Learning for Sustainability (LfS)
- digital by design approach

Given the substantial changes to the qualifications, an iterative design process has been adopted, which includes three key phases:

- development
- piloting (for one or two academic sessions in selected pilot centres)
- implementation

Since 2021, NextGen: HN has been piloted across centres in Scotland, including colleges and employer training providers. Following the pilot, several pieces of evaluative research have been carried out to understand the views of learners and practitioners of NextGen: HN. During this evaluation, a gap was identified in the existing literature on the views of employer stakeholders who had not been involved in the prototype development or delivery of NextGen: HN.

In keeping with SQA's pledge to make evidence-based decisions from a wider range of stakeholders, the aim of this research is to understand the views of employers in NextGen: HN-aligned sectors on the adaptations proposed to update the HN qualifications. Through this, SQA will be able to incorporate these views into the wider evaluative work to provide a holistic evidence base through which to make decisions about NextGen: HN delivery as the rollout of these qualifications progresses.

Employers' position as a stakeholder in the development and delivery of NextGen: HN is perhaps not as clearly defined as those of other parties in the development process. However, with HN qualifications being designed to meet the needs of employers, they stand

as important stakeholders in this process. Despite this, employers have existed on the periphery of the pilot. This contrasts with practitioners involved in the day-to-day delivery of pilot courses, or who have heard from colleagues about the process, or with pilot learners who experienced the NextGen: HN qualifications themselves.

By seeking in-depth employer stakeholder views on the NextGen: HN proposals, SQA will be able to:

- understand the issues facing the sectors that are aligned with NextGen: HN subjects
- understand what the impact of the NextGen: HN proposals may be on the employment landscape
- explore any support that employers may need from SQA in the transition to NextGen: HN.

In addition, this research will also be compared and contrasted to the data collected from pilot learners, and pilot and non-pilot practitioners, who have shared their views of NextGen: HN on:

- HNCs and HNDs as individual qualifications in their own right
- the pilot design, including the addition of meta-skills and Learning for Sustainability
- the introduction of larger and fewer units, and the impacts on student learning and assessment levels
- the qualification as a whole single graded unit
- a new system of support for external quality assurance
- digital technology as an embedded tool

Through triangulating data from different groups of stakeholders, SQA will be able to gain a comprehensive insight into the integration of NextGen: HN to Scotland and identify important gaps in knowledge, understanding and experience of the pilot. As a result, SQA will be able to produce a rigorous and well-rounded evidence base through which to inform the successful delivery of NextGen: HN.

# Methodology

## 1. Research aims and objectives

As part of the evaluation of the NextGen: HN pilot, the aim of this research was to understand employers' views on the proposed adaptations to Higher National (HN) qualifications in sectors that make heavy use of these qualifications. A review of the existing evidence gathered about NextGen: HN had identified a gap in the data regarding the views of employers who had not been involved in the development or piloting of the adapted qualifications. This research therefore aligns with the project aim of consulting extensively with external stakeholders during the design of the qualifications to make evidence-based decisions.

To understand the perspectives of employer stakeholders on the NextGen: HN proposals and how well they fit into the employment landscape, a number of research questions were formulated:

- How do employers perceive HN learners in the workplace?
- What are the barriers for HN learners to entering the workforce?
- What benefits do employer stakeholders perceive from the NextGen: HN proposals?
- What concerns do employer stakeholders have about the NextGen: HN proposals?

## 2. Research ethics

As the research took place during the development period of the new Research and Evaluation Team at SQA, there was not yet an ethics panel in place from which to obtain ethics approval. Given that all participants were presumed to be non-vulnerable adults and that the topics being discussed were not sensitive, there were no ethical issues that would require a more detailed review for this project.

However, 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 \(CoRP\)](#) that 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.

## 3. Research design and sampling

To address the research aims and questions, a qualitative research study was conducted with employers in sectors that aligned with HN subject areas.

### Employer sampling and recruitment

#### Sampling

To ensure that a diverse range of experiences were captured by the research, 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

The sectors targeted were: social sciences, radio, television, accounting, physical activity and health, acting and performance, childhood practice, social services, computing and IT, engineering, agriculture, agricultural technology and horticulture.

## **Recruitment**

Lists of employers to recruit were drawn up using a number of sources. These included:

- SQA coordinators at colleges across Scotland, who identified employers that colleges had existing relationships with.
- NextGen: HN Product Portfolio Team, who identified a list of employers who had existing relationships with SQA. Some employers were omitted if they had been consulted during the development of NextGen: HN or the pilot.
- Employer association networks, who were invited to share the recruitment information with their members.
- Search engines, using search terms = HND/C/college qualifications + social sciences, radio, television, accounting, physical activity and health, acting and performance, childhood practice, social services, computing and IT, engineering, agriculture, agricultural technology and horticulture.
- Job vacancy sites using search terms = HND/C/college qualifications + social sciences, radio, television, accounting, physical activity and health, acting and performance, childhood practice, social services, computing and IT, engineering, agriculture, agricultural technology and horticulture.
- A LinkedIn advert was launched that targeted employers who met the sampling criteria given above.

An invitation email was sent to employers whose names had been collected from the sources above (Appendix B). The email included a participant information sheet and a link to an online expression of interest form. Of those employers contacted, 29 completed the online form, with 26 of these saying that they would be willing to take part in the research. Of these, 24 were contacted to arrange an interview. Some employers who completed the online form were not invited to take part as their response came after the field work period had ended.

Those who were contacted to arrange an interview were sent a NextGen: HN qualification information sheet and a consent form (Appendices C and A). To address potential gaps in knowledge and awareness about NextGen: HN among some participants, the qualification information sheet explained the proposed changes to HN qualifications.

Of the 16 interviews which were arranged, 14 took place. Table 1 shows the breakdown in participants by sector.



Table 1: Number of research participants by sector

| <b>Sector</b>  | <b>Employers (n)</b> |
|--|----------------------|
| <b>Social Services</b>                               | 3                    |
| <b>Engineering</b>                                   | 4                    |
| <b>Physical Activity and Health</b>                  | 2                    |
| <b>Childhood Practice</b>                            | 1                    |
| <b>Arts</b>  | 1                    |
| <b>Social Sciences / Construction / Horticulture</b> | 1                    |
| <b>Acting and Performance</b>                        | 1                    |
| <b>Computing and IT</b>                              | 1                    |
| <b>Total</b>   | 14                   |

In line with the qualitative approach of the research, it was important to gather the views of a wide range of employers. The sample group members were diverse in the sectors they came from, their experience of NextGen: HN qualifications, and their experience of working with employees who held current HNs. Some employers also worked in an Employer Training Provider (ETP) organisation and were thus able to provide unique insight as both an employer and training provider.

Some of the sectors that the employers came from aligned with subjects that had not been piloted. They were still invited to interview as it was felt that their views of the NextGen: HN proposals would be valuable. There were also employers who felt that they did not align with any of the piloted subjects, or who related to several subjects. These employers represented an important voice in the research as they could express views that were in the interests of HN learners not following a defined career pathway.

There were a number of sectors that had little or no representation in the research. These were agriculture, radio, accounting, television, horticulture and social sciences. These groups were hard to reach for a number of reasons. For employers in the agriculture sector, fieldwork took place at the peak of the harvest season, and one agriculture employer association identified this as a reason for the low response rate in this industry. For the accounting sector, members of the NextGen: HN team advised that employers may look towards professional bodies to ascertain the validity of qualifications, and would perhaps feel that they could not comment on the HNs themselves. There were no clear reasons why there were low response rates from the radio, television, horticulture and social sciences sectors; however, it may be because the route to these industries from HN qualifications is not as explicit as the other sectors and that HNs are therefore not as visible to these employers.

## **Conducting the research**

In line with the qualitative approach of the research, depth interviews were used to gather rich data about the perspectives and experiences of employer stakeholders. A topic guide was designed in consultation with members of the Research and Evaluation Team and the NextGen: HN Portfolio Development Team. The topic guide aimed to promote a semi-structured conversation between participant and researcher, which would be co-constructed in line with the CoRP's guidance to consider researcher positionality. - The flexibility of the topic guide also served to accommodate the diversity in knowledge and experience of the sample.

All qualitative interviews took place between 5 and 21 September 2023 on Microsoft Teams or by phone call. The interviews ranged between 25 minutes and just over an hour.

With consent from participants, interviews were recorded using Microsoft Teams and were transcribed using the same. Interviewers then checked and edited the transcripts by listening to the recordings to confirm their accuracy.

Recordings and transcripts were saved securely in a OneDrive folder that was only accessible by the research team.

## **Analysis**

All transcripts were imported into NVivo. Key topics and issues were identified by the lead researcher through familiarisation with the transcripts. An analytical coding framework was drawn up using the key themes and issues that had emerged from familiarisation with the data and the research aims. The research team then used this framework to code all the transcripts in NVivo. This allowed for all the data on a particular theme to be viewed 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.

## **4. 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. Firstly, participants were interviewed by a representative from SQA, so they may have been reluctant to be too critical of the NextGen: HN proposals, leading to overly positive feedback. To mitigate this risk, participants were invited to give their views on the benefits *and* the challenges they perceived with the proposed changes to the HN qualifications.

Secondly, it was challenging to recruit employer representatives from all sectors that aligned with NextGen: HN subject areas. A larger sample size would have provided SQA with richer data that explored the issues in more detail. However, a more extensive recruitment campaign was not possible within the time constraints of the research, so some sectors are not represented.

Finally, the research team had to consider carefully how to gather the views of employer stakeholders on the NextGen: HN proposals from participants who had little or no prior

knowledge of the issues, without influencing their views. To deal with this, a qualification information sheet was distributed to participants, giving them an overview of the NextGen: HN proposals using neutral and factual language. Participants were also told that reading the information sheet was not mandatory. However, while SQA tried as far as possible to limit bias, in sharing information with participants in this way, SQA did to some extent play a role in directing participants' understanding of NextGen: HN.

## 5. Findings

The data gathered as part of this research was rich and provided a range of views on the NextGen: HN proposals from a diverse variety of perspectives. As with any qualitative data, the purpose of this research is to provide a breadth of experience, rather than to find out how prevalent views may be or quantify experiences to any extent. Consequently, the findings of this research cannot be generalised to all employers across Scotland, or even all employers across a particular sector. However, this research does provide an in-depth insight into the range of issues facing the HN-aligned sectors and how employers perceive the NextGen: HN proposals.

### **What do employers think about current Higher National learners in the workforce?**

There was a wide range of experience among participants of working with those who had achieved an HN qualification. Some participants had worked extensively with those who had achieved, or were working towards achieving, HNCs or HNDs during their employment. Others said they had little to no direct experience of working with HN learners. It was felt that it was also important to explore the views of these employers to understand what the barriers to employment in these sectors were for those with HNC/D qualifications.

Employers that had experience working with HN learners identified a number of strengths that they felt these employees generally held. Compared with employees who had not studied up to this level, employees with HNC and HND qualifications were perceived to have a good knowledge and understanding of legislation and theory, which was felt to be particularly useful in the social services sector. An engineering employer also observed that HN learners tended to display more problem-solving and analytical skills than those who had gone straight into the industry.

*People who have studied HN qualifications have a wider range of experience from the academic side where they can actually sit back with a problem and analyse it, where people coming from industry tend to be more on the, well, not so much in the thought processes, but more on the physical side. They'll go in and try and fix things with their hands, where somebody who's done an HN will sit back and think the problem through first.*  
(Engineering employer)

Additionally, it was felt that, as HN qualifications were more structured around jobs than degree programmes, employees' development of soft skills and maturity was more evident.

*I mean, university you're left to your own devices quite a lot and, you know, it's all to do with you and HNs are a bit more structured around ehm, well should be a structured around jobs [...] when I interact with people, if*

*they've got an HN background, it sounds very general, but they tend to be kind of grounded.* (Computing and IT employer)

In terms of areas where it was felt that HN learners needed more development, it was common for employers to say that these employees lacked practical or industry experience. For some employers, it was felt that there was too much focus on academic study in the HN at the expense of applied learning.

*That's probably where the HNC is lacking. You know, speaking to employers, they're saying that the HNC students don't necessarily have that practical experience that they need when they're coming in [...] I certainly say like the HNCs will have a really thorough knowledge of everything that they need to know. [...] but they don't necessarily, they've not necessarily seen it in practice.* (Childhood Practice employer)

### **What are the barriers to employment that HN learners come up against?**

Both employers who had experience of working with people who held or were studying an HN qualification, and those who had no experience, were asked what barriers to employment they felt this group faced.

Employers said there was a lack of awareness and understanding among employers across industries of what HNs were and where they fitted into the qualifications landscape in Scotland. 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 taught in HNs was seen as too general, and that apprenticeships that offered technical knowledge alongside practical learning were preferred. Additionally, it was felt that there was an oversaturation of qualifications available for some subjects, and it was not clear to employers what the advantages of an HNC/D were 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)

Employers felt that the lack of practical experience that HN learners gained on their course also represented a barrier to employment. For example, one engineering employer stated that the absence of hands-on training in the workshop would put candidates at a disadvantage during job interviews.

### **What do employers think overall about the NextGen: HN prototype?**

Employers were enthusiastic about the proposed changes being made to the HN qualifications overall as they felt it was a fresh approach that would better serve the flexibility needed in a 21st century workforce, that it was an overdue change, and that it would benefit the learners themselves. It was common for them to say that they had no concerns about the proposals. An arts employer expressed that the changes to the HNs overall represented a new way of learning that would allow learners to adapt better to real life problems:

*It seems like a really exciting way of learning and I think it really chimes with where our thoughts are in creative learning and the ethos about developing yourself as a learner [...] It seems well aligned to like building learners' confidence because, actually, if you can do those things then you can apply them in other situations. Whereas I think with a more traditional route, you're given the theory as to why things should happen in a particular way, and I don't know whether there's always a robust learning opportunity around. What do you do if it doesn't go the right way? And as we know, in real life, things do often go the wrong way. So actually, this feels much better designed to equip whoever is taking it and to better deal with issues when they do come up.* (Arts employer)

While employers felt positively about the NextGen: HN prototype overall, there were some adjustments that they felt would be beneficial. For example, it was common for employers to say that there was not enough practical learning evidenced in the proposals and that work placements or work experience should be embedded in the qualification.

*What I'd like to see in some of these qualifications is as either work placements or mandatory time, you know with an employer, because the big challenge for me with the qualification piece is that people come out super skilled but with very little practical application. And that's my kind of underlying feeling of throughout all, is that practical application piece.* (Physical Activity and Health employer)

There were also some contrasting concerns expressed by employers in different sectors, indicating that a one-size-fits-all approach with NextGen: HN could present challenges. For example, a construction employer said that while they perceived innovation and flexibility to be very important facets of the NextGen: HN qualifications, they felt that digital learning would be challenging for some subject areas. This point was supported by an arts employer who felt that face-to-face interaction led to more meaningful connections. On the other hand, digital learning was felt to be more flexible and accessible by a Computing and IT employer.

On top of this, employers had conflicting views about the course content, although they commonly conceded that they did not know at this point what would be included. For example, some employers felt that the qualification content needed to be less general and provide more specific subject knowledge that would be needed on the job. In contrast, an engineering employer felt that the engineering HN needed to include more interdisciplinary knowledge across different engineering sectors to reflect a growing need for this in the industry.

### **What do employers think about the NextGen: HN proposals in detail?**

Prior to interview, participants were given a NextGen: HN qualification prototype information sheet (Appendix C) that provided information to employers about what some of the proposed changes to the qualifications would be. This document outlined to employers five out of the eight NextGen: HN proposals that it was felt were more relevant to them, as shown in Table 2.

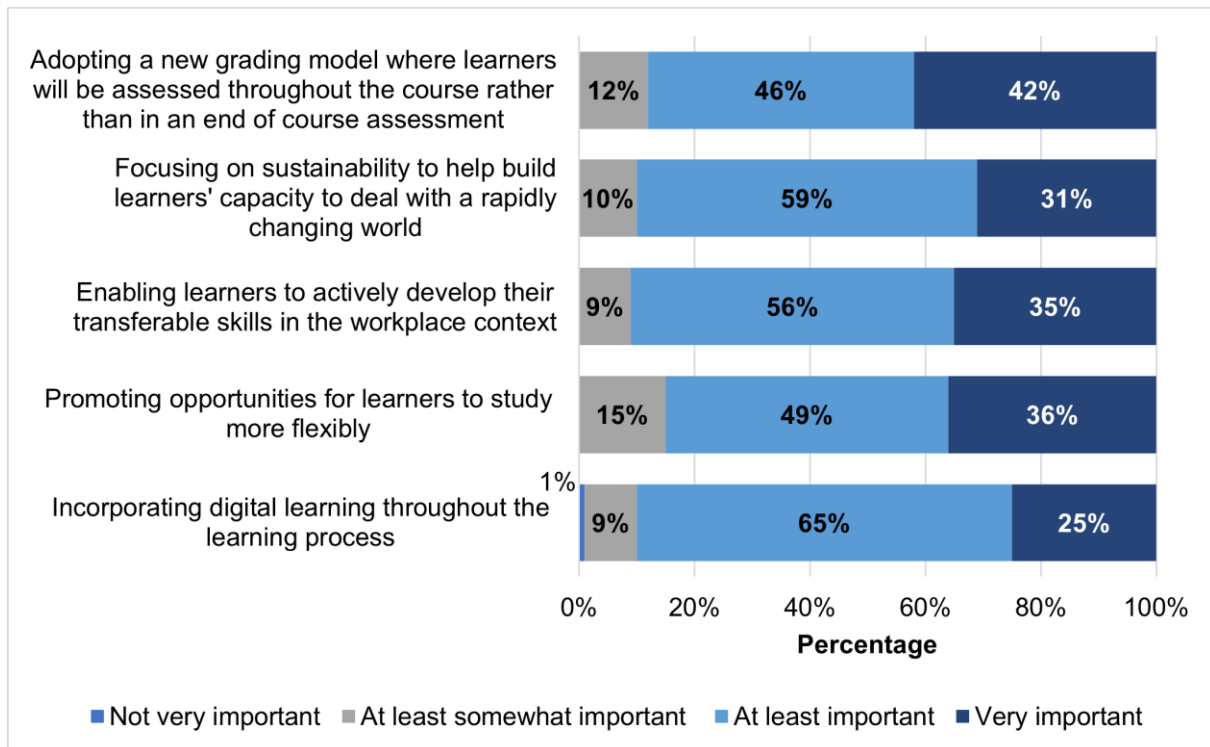
Table 2: NextGen: HN proposals by whether or not explained to participants

| <b>Proposals explained to employers</b>   | <b>Proposals not explained to employers</b>   |
|---|---|
| <b>HNCs and HNDs are each individual qualifications in their own right, comprised of 120 SCQF credit points at Level 7 and 8 respectively.</b>                        | They provide a new supportive approach to external quality assurance.   |
| <b>There are opportunities throughout for learners to develop meta-skills.</b>  | They are comprised of fewer, larger units, including a mandatory project-based unit worth at least 24 SCQF credit points (3 SQA credits). |
| <b>They adopt a digital by design approach — use of technology is embedded to enhance and support assessment, learning and teaching approaches where appropriate.</b> | The use of larger and fewer units should result in a reduction in assessment load, allowing more time for in-depth learning.              |
| <b>They incorporate opportunities to engage with Learning for Sustainability (LfS).</b>   |   |
| <b>They deliver a new grading model, focussing on the qualification as a whole instead of a single graded unit.</b>   |   |

A survey of 200 employers across Scotland indicated that employers felt that different aspects of the NextGen: HN proposals were important. In this survey, employers were asked to indicate how important they felt different attributes of NextGen: HN were. As shown in Figure 1, almost all employers (99–100%) felt that the following attributes were important to some extent:

- adopting a new grading model where learners will be assessed throughout the course rather than in an end of course assessment
- focussing on sustainability to help build learners' capacity to deal with a rapidly changing world
- enabling learners to actively develop their transferable skills in the workplace context
- promoting opportunities for learners to study more flexibly
- incorporating digital learning throughout the learning process

Figure 1: Employers' views on the importance of different attributes in developing NextGen: HNs



However, some attributes were felt to be more important than others. As shown in Figure 1, 42% of employers felt that adapting a new grading model was 'very important' compared with 25% of employers who felt the same for incorporating digital learning throughout the learning process. The following sections provide insight into why employers may have found some aspects to be more important than others and explores employers' views on the proposals outlined in column one in table 2 in more detail.

### Views on decoupling the HNC and HND

The following definition was given to respondents before the interview about decoupling the HNC and HND:

*The HNC/HND will be decoupled so that they both become qualifications in their own right, comprising 120 SCQF credits each. This has been designed to make the qualifications more flexible for learners and to promote opportunities for returning to further study and training.*

(Appendix C)

Overall, employers were generally supportive of this proposal. They mentioned several perceived benefits of decoupling the HNC and HND, particularly for learners. Employers were excited about this possibility, especially as they felt it would save a lot of time for learners. Additionally, it was also perceived to be more flexible and less restrictive than the previous HN. Employers indicated that it removed barriers to progression for learners, as it was felt that it provided an opportunity for learners to upskill later in their career. Employers

also thought that this would make lifelong learning more accessible for learners and those that have been out of education for a while.

*I could pick up the credits to go straight into the HND course rather than essentially waste some time. So, I think it's a really, really useful tool and probably the most exciting one that I saw in the development, is that piece.*  
(Physical Activity and Health employer)

*But we do have a lot of people that have come up that have NCs or HNCs and has been a long time in between. So, I think anything that you know is not an obstacle or is an encouragement, for them to go back and further study is a good thing.*  
(Social Services employer)

Furthermore, decoupling was also viewed as a means to encourage learners to gain industry insight and experience of the area they were studying during their HN qualification. For example, an engineering employer explained that between studying the HNC and the HND, a learner could spend a few years in the industry building up knowledge and experience in order to be better equipped for the workplace:

*But now, and looking forward, they're not going to be relevant tying them together, because if somebody completes an HNC, they need to then get into industry to find out more, particularly, if they've never been in employment. They need to find out more and gain more experience of what's happening in that industry and then possibly three to five years later do the HND when they have built up knowledge skills possibly done the CPD courses in other areas to develop the knowledge. I could see where decoupling them, yes, that would be a good idea.*  
(Engineering employer)

However, there were also some employer concerns regarding the decoupling of the HNC and HND. Although employers had an understanding or awareness of the HND, employers' knowledge of HNCs was more varied, depending on the industry. It was suggested that any more information about what the individual qualifications would look like would be beneficial in aiding employers' understanding of what decoupling involves.

Additionally, some respondents were concerned that there may be confusion about how the NextGen: HN would work in terms of decoupling the HNC and HNDs from each other. This is illustrated by the quote below.

*I'll possibly see being an issue with it, if you say to somebody, I've gotten a HND in a year, they might say no, it takes two years to do an HND, a misunderstanding around what the qualification is kind of thing.*  
(Engineering employer)

Another concern raised by an employer was about how the decoupling would change the baseline knowledge and skills of students entering the HND, as students would be coming from a variety of backgrounds and experiences, leading to inequality among learners.



*I think potentially if you've got lots of different students coming from different areas to then go into HND is not having the same experience. So, there might be some knowledge or ways of working potentially from older qualifications that aren't quite aligned, so there might be some challenges just around how students maybe adjusted to that, or they might feel like they've not covered some of the content.*

(Physical Activity and Health employer)

Similarly, employers also expressed concern that learners would lose out on the foundation skills and training that are gained during the HNC, if they went straight into doing the HND. Apprehension was also expressed around ensuring that some learners are not left behind and excluded.



### **Views on meta-skills**

Employers were presented with the following information about meta-skills:

*Meta-skills are transferable and generic skills that can be adapted by individuals to promote success across work, study and in life. NextGen: HN will include the development of meta-skills as part of its core content with the aim of allowing learners to actively develop and articulate their career-ready skills in a workplace context.* (Appendix C)

At the time of writing, SQA are considering how best to incorporate assessment of meta-skills into the NextGen: HN qualifications. In light of this, employers were asked how they currently assess soft skills or meta-skills in the workplace. There were a number of ways in which employers indicated that they carried this out, as shown below:

- feedback
- 1-2-1s
- e-learning modules
- staff training sessions
- competency gaps analysis

When employers were asked about the incorporation of meta-skills into the NextGen: HN qualifications, participants were broadly positive about this change; however, they did highlight several potential challenges. Both the potential benefits and challenges are outlined below.

Employers said they hoped that a potential benefit of the incorporation of meta-skills in NextGen: HN would be that employees would be more aware of and better able to talk about soft skills. For employers, greater knowledge of meta-skills would mean that young people entering the workforce would already have the skills that employers need them to have. It would also mean that when applying for positions, young people would be able to articulate the skills that they have in reference to what employers are looking for.

*All of these skills that come into the communication and meta-skills are key towards any job in the sector.* (Computing and IT employer)

Some employers felt that in a rapidly changing world, a greater focus on meta-skills would benefit the next generation of individuals, who they felt would be more likely to change roles and business areas more frequently than previous generations. They believed that the inclusion of meta-skills in NextGen: HN would mean that they had a transferable skill set.

*The skills that they will require will be different because they'll need to be more transferable...What we can look at in specific industries are developing the skills you'll need for those industries so they'll take the base meta-skills that they develop and build on that.* (Engineering employer)

Participants believed that the inclusion of meta-skills would lead to NextGen: HN graduates being more well-rounded individuals. Employers felt that young people would have better communication, leadership, team working and organisational skills. Others also mentioned that proficient meta-skills would help to future proof their employability against changes, such as AI.

*So by building on the meta-skills, I think what you're doing is building a more grounded, rounded person, which I think will add value to any organisation...* (Physical Activity and Health employer)

In addition, employers noted that it would be beneficial for them to know that students had developed their soft skills. One employer noted that the knowledge that graduates possessed was beneficial, but so was 'student attitude', by which they meant meta-skills like initiative, adaptability and self-management.

However, one of the potential issues that participants foresaw was that there may be a low level of awareness or understanding of meta-skills among employers. This could cause issues for NextGen: HN graduates as the terminology may be unfamiliar to employers. Similarly, there was some concern that meta-skills terminology could confuse employers and act as a barrier to engagement.

*I think they're there might be people that feel that don't really fully understand it or think that it's just like some fancy badge and don't have the trust in it. So I think that would probably be the only barrier that I could see is just the lack of knowledge.* (Physical Activity and Health employer)

*Everything that's within the meta-skills is a good thing, but we're just using another name to describe something that's been around for years... I don't think giving them yet another bit of terminology is helpful because you're going to come to, you'll come to employers and say I'm developed meta-skills and most employers are going to say what's that?* (Engineering employer)

One employer noted that a potential issue with the inclusion of meta-skills could be that some learners may struggle with this aspect of the qualification, which could lead to them falling behind in their studies.

*But there might be somebody that can't grasp that, and then all of a sudden, they're playing catch up because people may be ahead of that.*  
(Social Services employer)

Further, participants were concerned that the focus on meta-skills could be to the detriment of subject or technical knowledge taught in NextGen: HN. They were concerned that given the finite amount of time in a qualification, students of NextGen: HN qualifications may not learn everything they need to be compliant with certain regulations or to succeed in the industry.

*So my concern would be how is it gonna be done and how is that going to integrate with the current sort of, you know, the current module... my concern is more about how it's incorporated and how it's going to be done and how, you know, I wouldn't want it to have an impact like they would have less knowledge in sector specific skills because we were focusing too much on the meta-skills, you know.* (Childhood Practice employer)

Broadly, some of the employers were worried about how meta-skills would be included in the new NextGen: HN qualifications. One participant was concerned that attempts to formalise innate skills, such as meta-skills, could have a negative impact upon students.

*My worry about formal is that then we start to measure it and we start to standardise it and then, 'cause nothing grew by being measured.*  
(Social Services employer)



## **Views on digital learning**

Prior to interview, participants were presented with the following information about the digital learning approach that had been proposed for NextGen: HN:

*To support the success of learners in the 21st century workplace, digital technologies will underpin all stages of the learning process in NextGen: HN qualifications.*

*This means that different forms of assessments will be completed and assessed online, course information and content can be accessed digitally, and course content will be updated to reflect 21st century digital knowledge and skills.* (Appendix C)

### **What digital skills are needed in HN-subject industries?**

Employers were asked to explain the digital skills that they felt were required in their industry. There were some recurring themes that were expressed across different sectors. For example, it was common for employers to say that while young people entering the workforce were comfortable using their mobile phones to carry out digital activities, they struggled with basic IT skills, such as using a computer, using Microsoft Office programmes like Word or Excel, creating an email address, or using a search engine.

*We have a lot of kids coming into years who have great IT skills on a phone. But if you ask them to type anything out in a Word document... No.*

*Probably never use, you know, so we need to develop that more.*  
 (Computing and IT employer)

*There's a weakness with a lot of people joining the workforce now, whereby it's actually surprising me a bit. They don't really know how to use computers to do fairly basic tasks.*  
 (Engineering employer)

Participants emphasised that there was an assumption that employees should have basic Microsoft Office skills but that this was not always the case. Additionally, employers across multiple sectors felt that it was important for employees to have knowledge and understanding of how to use communication and collaboration software, especially in the post-pandemic working culture.

There were also a number of digital skills that employers said were required that were specific to their industry. These skills are listed by sector in the following table.

| Sector                       | Skills required  |
|------------------------------|--|
| Engineering                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AI</li> <li>• cybersecurity</li> <li>• data analysis</li> <li>• software programming</li> <li>• research</li> </ul> |
| Social Services              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• cybersecurity</li> <li>• data management and confidentiality</li> <li>• digital archiving</li> </ul>                |
| Physical Activity and Health | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AI</li> <li>• automation</li> <li>• virtual reality</li> </ul>  |
| Social Sciences              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• virtual reality</li> <li>• 3D digital scanning</li> <li>• drones</li> </ul>   |
| Computing and IT             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AI</li> <li>• data analytics</li> <li>• software programming</li> <li>• UX design</li> </ul>                        |
| Childhood Practice           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• automation</li> <li>• internet safety</li> <li>• digital archiving</li> </ul>                                       |

**What do employers think about the inclusion of digital learning in NextGen: HN?**

Employers were generally positive about what they saw as the greater flexibility and convenience that the digital learning approach in NextGen: HN would bring. It was felt that the change reflected a shift in working culture that had developed during the pandemic:

*You still have to embrace a lot of remote stuff because people will, people are changing. They will not physically come in, I don't think, and do it. You have to give them an option that they can work sometimes from home.*

(Computing and IT employer)

Employers expressed that in the workplace, the move to remote and hybrid working cultures meant that a wider range of candidates could apply for a job as geographical barriers were removed. It was felt that the same trend could apply to learners taking up NextGen: HN, leading to more diversity. Additionally, courses that were delivered digitally were felt to be more flexible for those who were working while studying, as they could attend classes in the evening after work.

In the same vein, the move to digital-based learning was also felt to be more equitable as it was perceived to be more accessible to learners with disabilities, who might find face-to-face learning more challenging.

*One of our sports, Boccia, it's the disability, kind of, para sport; a lot of people who've varying disabilities quite often take part in those coaching courses. So we've got people who can't read or write, they're blind, they might not be able to communicate, [...] but they could use the online platform to still be able to participate and to learn and to be assessed.*

(Physical Activity and Health employer)

In addition to these benefits, employers also expressed that the inclusion of 21st century knowledge and skills would benefit their sector as it would lead to a better base of understanding of technology and systems among the work force. It was felt that this would lead to increased productivity as processes could be simplified to, as one Physical Activity and Health Employer said, 'allow the time to be focussed on the big box stuff.'

Despite these benefits, employers had a number of concerns about the 'digital by design' approach of NextGen: HN qualifications. A prevalent concern among employers in regards to the implementation of digital learning was accessibility. Employers said that they had experienced a disparity in access to digital technology among staff and that this could be a barrier to learning for HN students. This lack of access to digital technology included lack of suitable digital devices like laptops, or a poor or absent internet connection.

*Getting them connected to the internet was almost impossible at times. Sometimes on their phones they could do things, but particularly during lockdown, we had a lot of kids who didn't have access to IT. They were- we were having meetings with them. We were doing classes online, but they were taking these classes on their phone, because you didn't have access to proper digital equipment, laptops or tablets. So that's a major issue really is.*

(Engineering employer)

Additionally, one social services employer explained that some of the people they worked with had criminal convictions which meant they were not allowed to use IT and that this would make digital learning courses very challenging for them to undertake.

Employers also felt that technology could be unreliable and that an overreliance on digital platforms could lead to failures in a number of areas.

Another challenge that employers spoke about was the resistance to adapting to new digital ways of working among some groups; specifically, older groups. Some people, they said, found it difficult to learn to use technology or did not want to go digital.

*Making assumption that people find technology easy or that they like, you know, to engage with technology. That's not always the case.*

(Social Services employer)

A recurring theme among employers was the perception that people were more engaged with face-to-face delivery than online methods. Employers felt that some people found online delivery less enjoyable and preferred to work face-to-face.

*Obviously everything was online learning for them and it actually didn't seem to suit some of them. They found it difficult to be motivated and to engage the same. They actually wanted to be in a classroom with a lecturer. And so in terms of learning sometimes digital perhaps doesn't suit everybody.*

(Engineering)

*We've felt as an organisation and have sort of heard back from organisations that we work with that actually delivering face to face has worked a lot better.*

(Arts employer)

One social services employer that worked with disadvantaged groups had found that these groups had only been able to work through online modules during the pandemic when someone had called them and clicked through the programme with them. This demonstrated that a move to online, self-directed learning may put some groups of learners at a disadvantage.

Finally, employers felt that a move to digital learning would cause more problems with security and privacy concerns, particularly in specific sectors. For example, one social services employer mentioned that during the pandemic, there were instances where unsolicited photos were being taken, and that home addresses could be found out from the backgrounds in online video calls.



## **Views on learning for sustainability**

Prior to interview, employers were presented with the following information about Learning for Sustainability (LfS):

*Learning for Sustainability (LfS) is a core component of all NextGen: HN qualifications, and it addresses global citizenship, sustainable development, social justice, human rights, climate change, biodiversity loss, and equality. The approach builds learners' capacity to deal with the unpredictable social, economic, and environmental challenges facing our rapidly changing world.*

*By embedding LfS into NextGen: HN qualifications, learners and educators can work towards building a socially-just, sustainable, and equitable society, interact with the world in a socially responsible manner, and actively change the way they live and work for the future of our planet.*

(Appendix C)

While employers were supportive of sustainability knowledge being embedded into NextGen: HN, some felt that the sustainability content did not go far enough in the qualification proposals and that SQA were already too late in implementing LfS into the HNs. On the other hand, some employers felt that it wasn't relevant to their industry.

### **Environmental concerns**

Employers were asked what environmental concerns were relevant to their sector or organisation. In answer, many framed their environmental concerns as an area of potential growth for the future and felt that the next generation of HNs would address this. For example, an employer mentioned the push for more awareness of recycling within construction:

*I have a few friends in the construction industry and in FE and that is really being pushed in the last few years for them. But there are some areas where they don't have proper awareness of sustainability. What is recyclable? How can we recycle it? Some industries need to be more proactive in what they actually explain to their employees. That, again, is part of the HNs, I can see that being a massive part of HNs next generation.*

(Engineering employer)

Many other employers referred to a similar push for sustainability in their industries, acknowledging that their sustainability efforts could be improved.

*We have employed Net Zero project managers to try and build the organisation's awareness and knowledge... so I'd say personally not the best, but from an organisational perspective, we're definitely taking strides ahead.*

(Childhood practice employer)

Some employers felt that, although they would like to be more sustainable, there were barriers, such as funding, preventing their organisation from doing this. In the acting and performance sector, it was noted that providing paper scripts and adequate lighting was unavoidable.

In addition to a lack of sustainable technical knowledge, other concerns included movement towards sustainability being too slow, and the widespread occurrence of greenwashing. Some also felt that there were valuable knowledge and skills around sustainability which would not be passed on from older generations to the incoming workforce.

### **Benefits of including Learning for Sustainability (LfS)**

Employers were asked what benefits they saw in including LfS goals in the NextGen: HN qualifications. Reflecting their concerns about the overall lack of sustainable technical

knowledge, employers spoke of the benefit that the NextGen: HN LfS goals would have on wider knowledge and awareness of sustainability:

*I think by training more people and educating them around sustainability and with some real, tangible ideas of what can be done as well. Because I think sometimes, particularly sustainability, it just feels really difficult to know what to do. So I think building in the idea early on into that education will help organisations to find the answers in the future.*

(Engineering employer)

Employers felt that wider knowledge of sustainability and sustainable practices encouraged more cooperation with local communities, leading to a more circular economy, as illustrated by this example within tourism:

*We're starting to look at: How can we do it responsibly? And how can we do it with our local community? So they're not having thousands of people trampling through there, you know, and just destroying their local environments, as can happen in the likes of Skye in the fairy pools. So there is a big push for responsible tourism and again it's that circular economy, it's sustainable travel. How do we support thinking about net zero in terms of the experience that people get, the stories that we tell.*

(Horticulture employer)

Moreover, employers felt that engagement with sustainability at the local level also touched on issues related to social justice. However, there was some uncertainty around how the NextGen: HN qualifications would address this:

*At the end of the day, the heritage sector should represent everybody. And there's a lot of work being done at the moment in terms of educating but also, you know, to look out for processes, the way that we do things that might continue to exclude people. But would that be in a qualification? I'm not sure. I'd be interested in seeing how that is addressed.*

(Social Sciences/Heritage employer)

In general, employers supported LfS as a core component of NextGen: HN and felt that doing so was 'future proofing' and would lead to more transparency from industry.

### **Challenges of Learning for Sustainability**

In addition to the benefits of including LfS goals in NextGen: HN qualifications, employers were asked about the challenges. In general, employers found it difficult to think of concerns that they had about implementing LfS in NextGen: HN. When asked about the challenges specifically, comments were mainly limited to operational concerns, as listed below:

- Some organisations may be slower to adapt to significant changes.
- Time management may be a challenge in terms of incorporating all the elements of the NextGen: HN proposal.
- Some employers felt LfS was less relevant to their industry or more difficult to incorporate.



- Some learners may not find the subject matter engaging.
- Learners returning to education or older generations of employees may not place importance on sustainability or may struggle to adapt to changes.

Despite the challenges, it was felt that the LfS goals reflected the direction of movement of society and any resistance to this movement would be detrimental.

*I don't think there is much of a downside here. I think the risk is that if you don't keep up to date with these things, you know, employers will find themselves marginalised.* (Engineering employer)



### **Views on the new grading model**

Employers were given the following details on the new grading model proposals:

*Some of the key drivers for updating the HN qualifications have been to reduce assessment load, to make qualification delivery more valid, and to ensure that final grades are a true reflection of the learner's achievement.*

*NextGen: HN qualifications have therefore moved to a new grading approach, which will mean that the whole qualification content will contribute towards learners' final grade. Learners will be assessed on their performance throughout the course, and across the content — rather than solely on one or two end of course assessments (the current 'graded units').*

*The pilot has tested different versions of this grading approach (different 'grading models'), but each one has the same principle of whole qualification grading, and will result in a final grade of either Achieved, Achieved with Merit or Achieved with Distinction.*

*Learners will only be able to be awarded a grade once they have met all the evidence requirements in the qualification units — if they do this, they will receive an Achieved grade. If the standard of their work across the course is above the requirement for Achieved, they can receive an Achieved with Merit or Achieved with Distinction grade.*

(Appendix C)

### **How important is academic achievement to employers?**

Employers were asked how important academic achievement was to recruiters within their organisation. Responses varied by sector and organisation. For some employers, academic achievement was considered very important, while for others practical experience was more important. There were also employers who felt that both academic achievement and practical experience were equally important:

*Academic achievement is very important, particularly for the younger generation, coming out of secondary school or coming out of FE. They*

*have to have the knowledge. We can show them the skills.*  
(Engineering employer)

*But the most important is always can they do the job? Bottom line is that's what they [employers] care about. You don't see a lot of that, saying you must have a degree.*  
(Computing and IT employer)

*The experience part as well is important too and sometimes, if you've got experience, it can be seen as an equivalent to an academic qualification but if you were recruiting somebody, it's the whole picture you would look at. There's definitely certain levels of qualification that would be necessary and expected.*  
(Engineering Employer 2)

### **Benefits of the new grading model**

Overall, the move to continuous assessment was welcomed by employers, who felt that this new grading model represented the best approach to assessment. Employers said that the approach focused on learning more than assessment, and promoted lifelong learning:

*In terms of the new grading model, it's much better than the old one. It gives a much better indication of the skills and abilities of the candidates.*  
(Engineering employer 3)

*You should be encouraged with that continuous learning. So I think actually having that, it also helps the students themselves in terms of what they know, what they don't know, but also developing lifelong learning and those lifelong learning skills.*  
(Horticulture, Social Sciences and Construction employer)

Employers also felt the new grading model would reduce learner stress and create a more equitable experience by removing some of the barriers. The new grading model was seen to ensure a fairer process and better reflect learners' capabilities, including learners who may have difficulties with the graded unit:

*Some people just do really well with exams or you might have a cold on the day of the exam and it reduces your ability to achieve... [it's] levelling the playing field to give a better indication of what the candidate is like overall, rather than a system that really only [targets] a certain group of people.*  
(Engineering employer)

Employers added that the new grading model presented a more flexible, equitable and accessible system that, in their opinion, would be easier for colleges to deliver. Employers also felt the new grading model allowed for greater linkage with professional standards, which are informed by employers' needs, and would better prepare learners for how they would be evaluated in a performance review.

### **Challenges of the new grading model**

Employers were also asked what challenges they felt the new grading model would present. The most common responses concerned preserving the integrity of assessments,

standardisation, and ensuring centres were adequately prepared for the change. Employers supposed that some centres may face challenges in making sure their staff are equipped to handle the change:

*Well I would imagine colleges might say staffing resource will be a challenge. Because obviously it's a different way... people are used to the current way of assessing and obviously there's a structure around that. So that structure will have to change and it might mean they need a different staff with different skills.*

(Horticulture, Social Sciences and Construction employer)

Employers wondered how the new system would approach assessment integrity and standardisation. However, employers implied that these issues were not unique to NextGen qualifications and were unlikely to pose significant challenges.

*As long as there's a consistent approach, I don't see it as being a barrier. It would need to be... the integrity would need to be right. But I'm sure that's the case in all university scenarios.*

(Engineering employer)

Some employers were concerned that the descriptors 'Achieved,' 'Achieved with merit' and 'Achieved with distinction' would be viewed as similar equivalents to an A, B or C grade. Furthermore, there was concern about whether continuous assessment would accurately reflect the abilities of learners who have poorer grades or difficult personal circumstances at the start of their course, and what impact this would have on standardisation:

*But then it starts to become prescriptive and then you have to ask what happens if they did have a really bad start? Does that mean they can only ever achieve a merit? If you fail, how do we structure that? It brings with it a lot of issues that I think removing the graded unit leaves you with, so if I get somebody with distinction out of Glasgow Clyde and somebody with distinction out of Fife do I get two similar peas out of a pod? Or is one college more understanding than the other?*

(Social Services employer)

Some employers said they were sorry to see graded units replaced. Some commented on potential pushback from lecturers who were well accustomed to graded units. Some subjects were believed to be better suited to graded units, such as catering, hospitality and performing arts.

## Conclusion

NextGen: HN learners will enter the employment market at a time of great social uncertainty and change. The responses of employer stakeholders in this research showed they felt the real pressures of an aging workforce, climate change, and the cost-of-living crisis, alongside the exponential growth of new technologies and a changing work-life culture since the pandemic. The effect of these pressures was evident in the way that they frequently underpinned discussions with employers.

In the interviews some employers expressed the hope that NextGen: HN would help relieve the recruitment challenges they faced by upskilling learners with modern technical and soft skills that would be transferrable across organisations. Likewise, the decoupling of the HNC and HND was viewed as a flexible way to encourage more industry training at the same time as formal learning. The new grading model was also seen to assist with flexibility in the post-pandemic working culture, while also giving a truer reflection of a candidate's ability.

The move to incorporate Learning for Sustainability into NextGen: HN qualifications was felt to be badly needed by employers in several industries. They said that spreading knowledge and awareness of sustainable living and manufacturing would lead to a fairer and more just society.

The implementation of digital learning into NextGen: HN was perhaps the most controversial of the new proposals, with employers indicating their wariness of adopting digital technologies for a number of reasons. These included inequality across social class, age and geographical region; the lack of engagement in digital environments; and security and privacy concerns.

Overall, employers welcomed the NextGen: HN proposals and called on SQA to share more information on the next steps so that they could prepare for the influx of NextGen graduates in the coming years.

## Appendix A



### CONSENT FORM

Title of research: NextGen: HN Employer Engagement Research

#### Please tick as appropriate

- I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Form for the above research and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
- I understand all names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised.
- I understand the material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.
- I understand the material will be destroyed once the project is complete.
- I acknowledge the provision of a [Privacy Statement](#) in relation to this research project.
- I agree to take part in this research study.

Name of Participant .....

Signature ..... Date .....



### **PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FORM**

#### **Title of research: Higher National (NextGen: HN) Employer Engagement Research**

**Researchers:** Rachel Whitford, Ayla Rosales, Maggie Mroczkowski, Pooja Marwaha, and Colin Moore

Hi, my name is Rachel Whitford and I am a Research Analyst at the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). I am interested in finding out your views on the new HNC and HND qualifications (NextGen: HN) that will replace the current HNC/D in the near future. You are being invited to take part in an interview. This information sheet will tell you everything you need to know about the research and how you can take part. Before you decide if you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information very carefully.

If there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information, you can ask me at any time, and I will be happy to answer any questions via the email address below.

#### **1. What is the purpose of this research?**

SQA is currently in the process of adapting our current HNCs and HNDs to give learners the skills they need to thrive in the 21st century workplace. Some new key features of our NextGen: HN qualifications are detailed below:

- Incorporation of meta-skills to enable learners to adapt their learning for the workforce
- HNC and HND will become standalone qualifications in their own right
- Incorporation of digital technology across learning, teaching and assessment
- Opportunity to build knowledge and understanding of Learning for Sustainability
- Larger and fewer units of learning
- New models of grading

Since 2021, the NextGen: HN has been piloted across a selection of colleges in Scotland. Some learners who have taken part in the pilot have already entered the workforce. The purpose of this research is to find out what employers of HND/C graduates think about the issues currently facing their sector, their views on the current HNC/D and the new HNC and HND proposals.

#### **2. Why have I been chosen?**

You are being asked to take part because your views will be essential to shaping the future workforce in your sector.

It is important that we listen to the perspectives of key stakeholders in your industry to find out whether the proposed changes to the NextGen: HN are appropriate for your sector and what the impact of these changes may be.

### **3. Do I have to take part?**

You do not have to take part in this research. Participation in the research project is voluntary. If you do not wish to take part, you are not obliged to do so. If you change your mind after the research has started, you do not need to explain why but please let me know as soon as possible so I can remove your data and any personal details.

### **4. What does taking part involve?**

You will be asked to take part in an interview. We will ask you some questions about what you think about what you think about the issues currently facing your sector, your views on the current HNC/D and the new HNC and HND proposals. You do not have to answer any question that you do not want to. This will take about 30-60 minutes. Interviews will take place over Microsoft Teams or by phone. We will record and save the answers on Microsoft Cloud/SharePoint so that afterwards we can listen carefully to what was said. You will be asked to complete a Consent Form. After you have signed this form, you are still free to change your mind.

### **5. Will the information that I give you in this research be kept confidential?**

I will keep all the data I collect in a secure online location that only specific colleagues involved in the research project who need it will have access. All personal identifiers will be removed from the data. All research and personal data will be erased on project completion. When I write about what I have found, your name will not be mentioned. Instead of the name, if this is used, I will use a pseudonym or code to ensure anonymity.

You have a right to ask for personal information we hold about you. This is commonly known as a Subject Access Request (SAR). This gives you the right to receive a copy or summary of your information. If you wish to make such a request, please contact [data.protection@sqa.org.uk](mailto:data.protection@sqa.org.uk).

If I discover anything which makes me worried during the data collection that you might be in danger of harm to self or others, I might have to inform relevant agencies of this.

### **6. What will happen to the results of this research?**

I will analyse the data I collect from participants and present this in a report that may be published externally. I will destroy the data at the end of the project.

### **7. What about research ethics?**

This project has been developed in accordance with SQA's Code of Research Practice (CoRP) which lays out a framework for conducting ethical, equitable and sustainable research. For more information on the CoRP contact the Research and Evaluation team on [researchandevaluation@sqa.org.uk](mailto:researchandevaluation@sqa.org.uk).

### **8. Who can I contact for further information?**

If you have any questions about this research, please contact me at [rachel.whitford@sqa.org.uk](mailto:rachel.whitford@sqa.org.uk). If you wish to make a request for the information we hold about you, please contact [data.protection@sqa.org.uk](mailto:data.protection@sqa.org.uk).

Thank you for taking the time to read this form. If you would like to participate, please complete the following webform: <https://forms.office.com/e/BnssTrFFmf>

## Appendix C

### NextGen: HN - Qualification Guide

#### What are Higher National qualifications?

Higher National qualifications, commonly known as HNCs (Higher National Certificates) and HNDs (Higher National Diplomas), have been specifically developed by SQA to meet the needs of employers, providing learners with the practical working skills and theoretical knowledge that employers need.

SQA is now adapting our Higher National qualifications to give learners the skills they need to thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These are called Next Generation: Higher National Qualifications (NextGen: HN).

#### What has been piloted so far?

In 2022/23, the following NextGen: HN qualifications were piloted in several colleges across Scotland:

HNC in Computing, Accounting, Childhood Practice, Social Services, Agriculture, Agricultural Technology, Horticulture, Television, Radio, Engineering, Physical Activity and Health and Social Sciences.

HND in Television, Radio.

#### What subjects will be available in the future?

In addition to the qualifications piloted in 2022/23, we will soon begin piloting:

HNC in Computing Science.

HND in Engineering, Data Science, Computing Science, Networking and Cloud Infrastructure, Software Development, Accounting, Physical Activity and Health, and Social Sciences.

#### How will NextGen: HN be different?

Our NextGen: HN qualifications are being designed to:

- Be adaptable and flexible to respond to the needs of a constantly changing and employment environment
- Support life-long learning and multiple career options
- Integrate essential 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and meta-skills
- Develop critical industry and subject-specific technical skills

To meet these aims, all our NextGen: HN qualifications will incorporate the following key design principles:

- Meta-skills
- Decoupling of the HNC and HND
- Learning for Sustainability
- Digital Learning
- New grading model

**You will be asked questions about your thoughts on these design principles and the impact you think these may have on your organisation or sector. You may find it useful to read the following descriptions before interview, but this is completely voluntary.**



### Meta-skills

[Meta-skills](#) are transferable and generic skills that can be adapted by individuals to promote success in any context, including work, study and life. Employers will probably be familiar with the concept of transferable skills and how they can be applied and adapted in the workplace.

Skills Development Scotland (SDS) has created a [framework](#) that aims to formalise a standardised approach to assessing meta-skills across different learning stages. Broadly, meta-skills can be broken down into three categories:

- Self-management: focusing, integrity, adapting, initiative
- Social intelligence: communicating, feeling, collaborating, leading
- Innovation: critical thinking, sense-making, creativity, curiosity

NextGen: HN qualifications will include the development of meta-skills as part of their core content. This will allow learners to reflect on how the theoretical and practical work they have carried out as part of their qualification has promoted the development of these transferable skills.

By formally including meta-skills within the course content and activities, the concept of meta-skills will become much more visible, and learners will be able to actively develop and articulate their career-ready skills in a workplace context.

### Decoupling of the HNC and HND

Currently, to complete an HND, learners must complete an HNC first. Those who have completed HNCs historically, and want to upskill, currently need to complete the HNC again in order to study the HND.

The NextGen: HN proposals outline the separation of the HNC and HND so that they are standalone qualifications, worth 120 SCQF credits each, at SCQF level 7 and 8 respectively.

These new proposals provide more flexibility for candidates and increases opportunities for them to return to education and training. With the uncoupling of the HNC/D, a candidate with a historic HNC will be able to go directly onto the HND without repeating the HNC year. It also means that a candidate with no HNC but with relevant experience or comparable qualifications in the field will be able to enter the qualification at a higher level.

### Learning for Sustainability

[Learning for Sustainability](#) (LFS) is a core component of all NextGen: HN qualifications, and it addresses global citizenship, sustainable development, social justice, human rights, climate change, biodiversity loss, and equality. The approach builds learners' capacity to deal with the unpredictable social, economic, and environmental challenges facing our rapidly changing world.

By embedding LFS into NextGen: HN qualifications, learners and educators can work towards building a socially-just, sustainable, and equitable society, interact with the world in a socially responsible manner, and actively change the way they live and work for the future of our planet.

The expectation is that all NextGen: HN learners will exit their studies with:

- a general understanding of sustainability
- a good grounding in subject-specific sustainability and;

- the confidence to apply the knowledge, skills, and values developed through their learning in the next stage of their lives.

By integrating LfS as a core component, learners will be better prepared for the increasing demand for green skills, jobs, and careers, as Scotland transitions to a net-zero economy.

#### Digital Learning

To support the success of learners in the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace, digital technologies will underpin all stages of the learning process in NextGen: HN qualifications.

This means that different forms assessments will be completed and assessed online, course information and content can be accessed digitally, and course content will be updated to reflect 21<sup>st</sup> digital knowledge and skills.

#### New grading approach

Some of the key drivers for updating the HN qualifications have been to reduce assessment load, to make qualification delivery more valid, and to ensure that final grades are a true reflection of the learner's achievement.

NextGen: HN qualifications have therefore moved to a new [grading](#) approach, which will mean that the whole qualification content will contribute towards learners' final grade. Learners will be assessed on their performance throughout the course, and across the content – rather than solely on one or two end of course assessments (the current 'graded units').

The pilot has tested different [versions](#) of this grading approach (different 'grading models'), but each one has the same principle of whole qualification grading, and will result in a final grade of either Achieved, Achieved with Merit or Achieved with Distinction.

Learners will only be able to be awarded a grade once they have met all the evidence requirements in the qualification units – if they do this, they will received an Achieved grade. If the standard of their work across the course is above the requirement for Achieved, they can receive an Achieved with Merit or Achieved with Distinction grade.

## Appendix D

Employer engagement topic guide draft

Introduction (2 mins)

(Read out)

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research to understand your view on the NextGen: HN proposals. A number of new NextGen: HN qualifications in different subjects have already been piloted across several colleges and education centres in Scotland. The aim of this research project is to understand what employers of HNC and HND graduates think about the adapted Higher National qualifications (NextGen: HN) that have been piloted; the issues facing the sectors that align with different NextGen: HNs; and what they think the impact of introducing these adapted HNs will be. As a key stakeholder in the sector, we are interested in hearing what you think of the proposals, even if you have not taken part in the pilot.

The data gathered from this interview will be used to help make decisions at SQA about the design of the NextGen qualifications moving forward.

The interview should take between 30 minutes to an hour. Our conversation will be digitally recorded so that I can accurately capture your thoughts. The recording and transcript will be deleted on completion of this project. Your name and organisation will not be shared in any published report or presentation of the findings. If there is anything you say in your interview that you do not wish to be recorded, please let me know.

You are free to stop the interview and withdraw your consent at any time. If you have changed your mind after the interview and wish for your data to be deleted, please let me know as soon as possible. It will not be possible to delete your data once the report has been published.

Can you confirm that you have read the Participant Information Form?

Can you confirm that you consent to take part in this research and that you have signed the Consent Form? (If you have not yet signed this, please ensure that you do after the interview).

Can you confirm that you are happy to be recorded?

(The following sections can be more flexible, some questions may not be applicable to some participants, depending on their answers. Prompts have been added to help aid the conversation — not all need to be asked)

Participant information (5 mins)

1. Can you tell me what your job is and what you do in your role? (Prompts: what is the organisation? How long have they worked there? Do they do recruitment/skills development as part of their role?)

2. How much experience working with people who have completed HNC/Ds do you have? (Prompt: What subjects do employees tend to study? What is the educational background of your workforce? Do employees tend to work with them while completing study?)
3. How much experience do you have of NextGen: HN qualifications? (Prompts: were they consulted in the development of NextGen: HN? Have they heard of these before this interview? Have they employed/worked with anyone who has taken part in the NG pilot?)

#### Industry information (10 mins)

##### Views on sector

4. What are the strengths of your sector's workforce currently? (Prompt: in what areas are people working in the sector highly skilled? How does this facilitate the work that your organisation carries out?)
5. What demands is your sector currently facing? (Prompt: what skills/knowledge are/is lacking in general? Are there any specific areas facing a skills shortage/challenges? What is the impact of this on your organisation? How is your organisation currently dealing with these demands?)
6. What challenges do you see on the horizon for your sector? How can new employees be prepared to deal with this? (Prompt: What skills and knowledge would you like to see in new HN graduates?)

##### Views on current HN learners in the workforce

7. What strengths do you see in employees who have studied HN qualifications? (Prompt: what skills or knowledge or experience do they possess?)
8. What weaknesses do you see in HN graduates compared to employees that have studied different qualifications?
9. What are the barriers to entering the sector that current HN learners come up against? (Prompt: Gaps in skillset/professional skills? What do HN graduates struggle with in interviews?)

##### Views on NextGen: HN proposals (Note: that some employers may not know a lot about NextGen: HN)

##### General (2 mins)

10. Ask if they had read the NextGen: HN information sheet and what they thought about the proposals generally

##### Views on decoupling the HNC/D (5 mins)

Ask if need recap? — The HNC/HND will be decoupled so that they become both become qualifications in their own right, comprising 120 SCQF credits each. This has been designed to make the qualifications more flexible for learners and to promote opportunities for returning to further study and training.

How might this change benefit your sector/organisation/applicants? (Prompt: flexibility, upskilling, time)

Are there any challenges/barriers that you can think of that may occur as a result of this change? (Prompts: how might this impact on sector/organisation? How prepared is your organisation for this change? What support might your organisation need to help facilitate this change? What do you think the impact of this change will be on graduates? Do you have any concerns about this change?)

Views on meta-skills (5 mins)

Recap — Meta-skills are transferable and generic skills that can be adapted by individuals to promote success across work, study and in life. NextGen: HN will include the development of meta-skills as part of its core content with the aim of allowing learners to actively develop and articulate their career-ready skills in a workplace context.

How does your organisation currently assess or promote skills development in the workforce?

How might this change benefit your organisation? (prompt: How might this change impact your workforce/organisational processes/professional development of employees?)

Are there any challenges/barriers that you can think of that may occur as a result of this change? (prompt: how might this change impact on your sector/organisation? What support do you think your organisation would need to help facilitate this change? Do you have any other concerns about this change?)

Views on digital learning (5 mins)

Recap - To support the success of learners in the 21st century workplace, digital technologies will underpin all stages of the learning process in NextGen: HN qualifications. This means that different forms of assessments will be completed and assessed online, course information and content can be accessed digitally, and course content will be updated to reflect 21st digital knowledge and skills

What kind of digital skills are needed in your industry? (Prompt: How is digital technology currently used in your organisation?)

How might this change benefit your sector/organisation/applicants? (prompt: How might this change impact your workforce/organisational processes/professional development of employees?)

Are there any challenges/barriers that you can think of that may occur as a result of this change? (prompt: How might you get around this? Are there any barriers that you've come up against in the past when trying to implement new technologies or digital tools? Is there any support that you think you would need as a result of this change? Do you have any other concerns about this change?)

Views on Learning for Sustainability (5 mins)

Recap — Learning for Sustainability is a learning approach that builds learners' capacity to deal with the social, economic and environmental challenges facing our rapidly changing world. Through studying a NextGen: HN qualification, learners will be better prepared for the increasing demand for green skills, jobs, and careers, as Scotland transitions to a net-zero economy.

In what ways do environmental concerns impact your sector/organisation? How is the current level of awareness about and understanding of environmental issues in your organisation?

How might the inclusion of Learning for Sustainability in NextGen: HN benefit your organisation/applicants? (prompt: How might this change impact your workforce/organisational processes/industry in general?)

Are there any challenges/barriers that you can think of that may occur as a result of this change? (prompt: Is there any support that you think you would need as a result of this change? Do you have any other concerns about this change?)

Views on a new grading model (5 mins)

Recap - NextGen: HN qualifications will adopt a new grading model, which will mean that the whole qualification content will contribute towards learners' final grades. Learners will be assessed on their performance throughout the course, and across the content — rather than solely on one or two end of course assessments (the current 'graded units'). Learners will only be able to be awarded a grade once they have met all the evidence requirements in the qualification units — if they do this, they will receive an Achieved grade. If the standard of their work across the course is above the requirement for Achieved, they can receive an Achieved with Merit or Achieved with Distinction grade.

How important is academic achievement in your sector/to recruiters in your organisation? (Prompt: What other aspects of a job application are more important? Why?)

How might this change benefit your organisation? (Prompt: What do you think the benefits are of this change to applicants? How will the new grading model impact your assessment of the candidate's ability?)

Are there any challenges/barriers that you can think of that may occur as a result of this change? (prompt: Is there any support that you think you would need as a result of this change? Do you have any other concerns about this change?)

Conclusion (5 mins)

Thinking about the changes to the HNC and HND that we have just discussed, what do you think the impact of these changes will be on the sector as whole? (Prompt: will the sector/organisation be able to cope? What support is needed from SQA? Do you think that learners will integrate well? Long-term impacts?)

Do you have any other concerns with this qualification prototype in its current format? Are there any changes that you would like to see?

Any other comments?

Follow-up

Ask if they would be interested in taking part in an Advisory Group on Articulation, Progression and Grading for NextGen: HN.

We are looking for employer representation for this group

Would involve a quarterly meeting

If they would like more information or would like to join, ask if their details can be passed on to David McShane, one of the NextGen managers