NextGen: HN Non-Pilot Practitioners Engagement

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Introduction

Background and aims

As part of the ongoing research on Next Generation Higher National Qualifications (NextGen: HN), SQA is interested in the views of practitioners with experience delivering HNC and/or HND courses that have not yet been a part of the NextGen: HN pilot. Following a 2018/19 consultation with colleges, sector skills bodies, Skills Development Scotland (SDS), the Scottish Funding Council, and other stakeholders invested in updating qualifications to adapt them for the future, SQA developed NextGen: HN to equip learners with both the skills and knowledge necessary to thrive in 21st century environment. In order to realise this vision, NextGen: HN has included new elements, some of which are:

♦ 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

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 institutions)
♦ Implementation

Since 2021, NextGen: HN has been piloted in institutions across Scotland, and several evaluative pieces of research have been conducted with both learners and practitioners with first-hand experience of the pilot. As part of SQA's assurance to make evidence-based decisions, the aim of this research is to understand the views of the wider sector on NextGen: HN, by incorporating the experiences of college practitioners who are currently still delivering HNC and HND qualifications and contribute further to the evaluation to provide a holistic evidence base.

As practitioners without first-hand experience of the pilot are not involved with the day-to-day delivery of pilot courses, which includes new elements such as meta-skills and learning for sustainability, many non-pilot practitioners will be transitioning into NextGen: HN with less foundational knowledge than practitioners who have already been formally introduced to the pilot. By seeking in-depth, non-pilot practitioner views on the NextGen: HN pilot so far, SQA will also be able to:

♦ explore areas where support may be needed in the transition to NextGen: HN
♦ evaluate transition and integration of the pilot into specific subject(s) areas
♦ evaluate any potential impact of NextGen: HN to practitioner workloads and student learning in the transition period

In addition, this research will also be compared against research with employer stakeholders, who have also shared their experience 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 few units, and 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

Comparing evidence from stakeholders together will help SQA understand important gaps in knowledge, understanding, and experience of the pilot, and as a result can produce a rigorous and well-rounded evidence base to inform on a successful delivery of NextGen: HN moving forward. In addition, this research will contribute to wider evaluation of NextGen: HN across all stakeholder groups.

Method

Because the aim of the research was to understand non-pilot practitioner experiences, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted to provide further understanding into the wider sector. By conducting semi-structured interviews, researchers would be able to capture answers to questions on specific elements of the pilot, as well as understand other views or concerns about the pilot and wider sector climate that may have an impact on a NextGen: HN rollout.

A practitioner is considered non-pilot if their institution is not taking part in a pilot programme in the subject that they teach. This is the case even if their institution is taking part in other pilots for NextGen: HN. Between 2022–24, 14 courses were piloted across Scotland, with some courses piloted across institutions at varying times. For the purposes of being able to compare evidence across research, there was particular interest in non-pilot practitioners who delivered courses that were piloted at other institutions. For example, Social Sciences was a pilot course in NextGen: HN, but this research was still interested in non-pilot Social Sciences practitioners for the possibility of comparing pilot and non-pilot practitioner views on NextGen: HN within the same subject area.

Table 1: Pilot institutions and subject areas

Colleges delivering the pilot 22 / 23 to 23 / 24	Courses delivered on the pilot 22 / 23 to 23 / 24
Ayrshire College	Accounting
City of Glasgow College	Acting and Performance
Dumfries and Galloway College	Agriculture / Agricultural Tech
Dundee and Angus College	Childhood Practice
Edinburgh College	Computing
Glasgow Clyde College	Engineering
Glasgow Kelvin College	Horticulture
NESCOL	Networking and Infrastructure
New College Lanarkshire	Physical Activity and Health
Scotland's Rural College (SRUC)	Radio
South Lanarkshire College	Social Sciences
UHI	Social Services
VSA SVQ Centre	Software Development
West College Scotland	Television

Of the pilot institutions that were contacted, 13 out of 14 pilot institutions were approached (as above); VSA SVQ Centre was excluded. In addition, all non-pilot institutions were contacted (n=4). In initial contact emails (see pages 43-44) to participants from pilot institutions, the subjects being piloted in emails were removed from a list of subjects labelled as 'particularly interested in'. For example, because Edinburgh College piloted both Accounting and Television, these subject areas were removed from the 'interested in' list in the recruitment email to the Edinburgh College SQA co-ordinator. In doing so, it would be possible to recruit non-pilot practitioners who delivered a range of non-pilot and pilot courses.

As a result, 18 participants across eight institutions and 18 subject areas (across seven sectors) were recruited for in-depth interviews conducted over Microsoft Teams, between 29 August and 19 September. 17 out of 18 practitioners recruited delivered courses at pilot institutions. Seven practitioners delivered courses being piloted at other institutions than the one they teach, and 11 taught on courses that were not being piloted at the time of the research. All participants were initially approached through an SQA co-ordinator.

Table 2: Recruitment data

Sector of participants	Institutions of participants
Creative and Cultural	Ayrshire College
Health and Social Care	Borders College
Land Based and Environmental	Dundee and Angus College
Sport and Leisure	Glasgow Clyde College
Social Sciences	NESCOL
Science and Mathematics	New College Lanarkshire
Business and Administration	South Lanarkshire College
	SRUC

Semi-structured interviews between 30 and 60 minutes were arranged with participants in order to gain an in-depth understanding of their views on NextGen: HN. Because practitioners were originally selected from a range of institutions with varied participation in the pilot, it was anticipated that practitioners would have varying levels of knowledge and exposure to the pilot, and would therefore need more flexibility in terms of interview structure and time. Because of this, practitioners were also sent links to some public-facing NextGen: HN material in original recruitment emails. However, due to the number of participants recruited from pilot institutions, it was anticipated that those interested in taking part may have already formed opinions about at least some elements of NextGen: HN. This is somewhat reflected in the numbers of practitioners coming from pilot institutions versus non-pilot institutions, with 1 out of 18 practitioners coming from non-pilot institutions.

In addition to links to information in participant collection emails and participant information sheets, some of the more detailed elements of NextGen: HN were shown to participants during the interview in the form of slides provided by the NextGen: HN team. This was done in order to get views on elements of NextGen: HN that participants may not know about, and to avoid collecting data based on rumours or misunderstandings. These elements were: HNCs and HNDs as separate qualifications; new grading models; meta-skills; and learning for sustainability (see page 51–53). At the start of interviews, participants were informed that some information would be shared with them in the form of slides, however, they would not need to use these slides to answer any questions and that their role is more to provide context. In doing this it was possible to collect views from both more and less informed participants. Additionally, during introductions participants were told that the researchers are

not on the NextGen: HN development team. Together, the use of slides and sharing of not being on the NextGen: HN development team helped to:

1. combat participants using the interview as a NextGen: HN information sharing session, where researchers have no first-hand knowledge and experience of the pilot

and

2. quickly provide basic information to participants in order to facilitate answers to questions that they may otherwise feel difficult or impossible to answer based on low-knowledge levels of the pilot

Where practitioners asked questions about the pilot during interviews, researchers were instructed to take those questions as valuable indicators of where more information may be needed or provide evidence of initial impressions. However, as it was explained that researchers were not on the NextGen: HN development team, researchers were instructed not to answer questions beyond the information that was already presented on the slides. This was done in order to stop researchers from providing inaccurate information to participants. Instead, where more detailed questions were asked, researchers used this as an opportunity to probe why the question was asked, and any concerns that participants may have had, leading them to ask this question. A full list of the questions practitioners asked can be found in the Appendix (page 41).

Prior to showing participants slides or asking questions on any specificities of the NextGen: HN pilot, participants were asked what they already knew about the NextGen: HN pilot, and where they received their information from. This was done for three reasons: firstly, it would help to gauge levels of understanding for the rest of the interview. Secondly, this would help with analysis from the perspective of understanding to what extent responses were initial reactions to a pilot element or more grounded in understanding. Lastly, knowing what participants already know about the pilot at the onset of research helps to show overall levels of engagement with the pilot in general. By learning what practitioners already know on their own, and then following their answers with slides outlining some basic information necessary to answer questions, it was possible to both understand general engagement with the pilot, as well as understand initial impressions on elements of the pilot where engagement has been low.

Data were coded and analysed using NVivo. Interview transcripts were read in full, and then coded based on the Eight Design Principles, as well as 'Other'. The Eight Design Principles were sub-coded based on common themes that emerged across interview transcripts, and analysed based on these thematic commonalties. 'Other' was sub-coded into themes that reoccurred across interviews, for example the reoccurrence of general concerns across interviews. Overall, codes and subcodes for the purpose of analysis were:

1. Overall Prior Knowledge to Pilot

2. Eight Design Principles of NextGen: HN:
   ♦ HNCs and HNDs as separate qualifications
   ♦ Larger and few units
   ♦ Reduction in assessment
   ♦ New Grading Models
   ♦ Meta-skills

- ♦ Learning for Sustainability
- ♦ External quality assurance
- ♦ Digital technology

3. Overall lecturer views:
- ♦ Positive
- ♦ Neutral
- ♦ Negative
- ♦ Concerns

4. Other themes:
- ♦ Barriers to rollout
- ♦ Support needs

Limitations

Some environmental issues needed to be considered when recruiting practitioners. Across all institutions (pilot and non-pilot), participant recruitment in August with interviews in September was not ideal, due to many practitioners being on leave in August, and returning to heavy workloads in September. This was indicated by some SQA co-ordinators on initial approach. In addition, the window to indicate interest in the research across all institutions was approximately two weeks, after which participant collection was closed with interviews being scheduled over September. A reminder email to interested practitioners was sent out on 8 September. Due to this tight window, it's possible that recruitment attracted practitioners who already knew of and formed opinions on NextGen: HN and this would need to be considered in the analysis. Overall, participant recruitment was below expectations, where 30 participants across both pilot and non-pilot institutions would have been ideal.

Another issue, across all institutions, was industrial action, which took place nationally across colleges in the summer of 2023 before the new 23 / 24 term. This meant that some practitioners were returning to the 23 / 24 education year after a lengthy period of industrial action. Although industrial action was not directly related to SQA, some colleges took part in a marking strike, meaning that there was an indirect relationship as SQA waited for practitioners to submit marked assessments in order for students to be awarded. This may have affected views on workloads and the sector as a whole due to general feelings related to industrial action. Industrial action was further called across several colleges on 7 September, halfway through the interview period. This may have influenced recruitment, where only eight colleges were represented by practitioners, as well general practitioner feelings towards the sector as a whole.

A third consideration, across pilot institutions, was research fatigue. Because 14 institutions have taken part in the pilot development, pilot courses, as well as pilot learner and pilot practitioner research, further communications from SQA to these pilot colleges could have been ignored. In terms of analysis, one limitation to the research was asking practitioners to evaluate a qualification that they had no first-hand experience of delivering. It's worth noting that because most practitioners were recruited from colleges that delivered the pilot, it is possible that their knowledge, understanding, and views on NextGen: HN could have been affected by word-of-mouth from other colleagues or SQA in general — both would have been more present at these institutions due to piloting.

Ethics

This project was 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 at researchandevaluation@sqa.org.uk.

One consideration that had to be considered during interviews was industrial action. The research was undertaken after a lengthy period of industrial action and in addition, more industrial action was called across colleges during the interview and recruitment process (7 September 2023). Union-related activities such as union membership is considered to be a sensitive topic area, and due to the amount of industrial action that had occurred over the 22 / 23 year, it was understood that there was a possibility for union membership or activities to become a topic in interviews. Union activities were never prompted by researchers, and where prompted by participants, this was treated as a sensitive topic area, where it was up to participants to decide how much they wanted to discuss this topic. Where questions about union or industrial action were followed up, it was done with the sector as opposed to the individual in mind, for example probing whether they felt industrial action would affect NextGen: HN.

Lastly, researchers also needed to consider researcher positionality. As all researchers working on the project worked for SQA, researchers had to be aware of the possibility of perceived power imbalances in terms of SQA-practitioner relationships. Although overall perceptions of SQA-practitioner relationships were outside researchers' control, researchers were instructed to briefly introduce themselves and explain that outside of research, they have no relationship to the ongoing development or design of NextGen: HN, and that participant views are anonymised.

Findings

Practitioner experience and NextGen: HN

Participant experience was varied. Participant experience ranged from fairly new to further education with under a year of lecturing experience, to decades-long careers in further education. Some practitioners also had experience at their institutions as curriculum managers, course leaders, program team leaders, quality development, and unit development. In terms of experience of SQA, several participants (eight) were also involved at some point as External Verifiers (EVs). In addition, several practitioners either delivered across a wide range of courses, or had experience lecturing across different disciplines.

Table 3: Practitioner experience in education

Lecturing experience, in years	
Under 5 years:	5
5+ years:	4
10+ years:	5
20+ years:	4

It's worth noting that the varied range of experiences may demonstrate that number of years of teaching were not necessarily an important factor in assessing NextGen: HN. Practitioners with more experience in further education will have, overall, seen more change in the sector than less experienced practitioners. However, there doesn't seem to be evidence from these results that time spent lecturing will create any particular degree of openness to change to NextGen: HN. In fact, practitioners with over 20 years of experience mentioned the need for more change to HN qualifications, describing current HNs as 'out of date' and having an interest in updating HNs to be 'more fresh, more new'. In addition, practitioner experience did not seem to come up as an important factor in any one particular aspect of the NextGen: HN pilot; where there was any indication of length of experience lecturing as a variable to participating in NextGen: HN, it was more to do with the *perception* that more experienced colleagues would be less open. However sometimes this perception came from practitioners who themselves had many years of experience and were oppositely very open to change in the sector:

> *'I think there's opportunities [in] any subject areas to be honest…Probably just that, you know, you've got people who have been delivering the same unit for 5 to 10 years and they've got a way to do it and then… meta-skills will be that, the next thing on a cycle of things that come around.'* — Practitioner with 14 years of teaching experience

> *'I think it will be OK it's just if someone's been used to delivering human biology for 10 years and suddenly you ask them to do something different, that can be awkward.'* — Practitioner with 30 years of teaching experience

Prior knowledge of NextGen: HN

Knowledge of NextGen: HN ranged from no knowledge prior to taking part in the research, to high engagement with development of the pilot. Of the participants who knew broadly about the pilot prior to taking part in the research, almost all participants attended information sessions, such as SQA webinars, or meetings with other colleges, to learn about the pilot. Other ways that practitioners learned about the pilot were through general engagement with SQA, for example through newsletters, or the website. However, one practitioner had the view that practitioners as a whole wouldn't have an interest in the pilot 'until it hits their doorstep'.

Several participants indicated they talked about the pilot with other colleagues, and learned about the pilot through 'professional networks' or word-of-mouth. Of these participants, some tended towards more negative to neutral overall views of the pilot. In terms of further analysis, this could indicate that this method of learning about the pilot may not currently be conducive to understanding or positivity. Although this participant group is not statistically representative of non-pilot practitioners as a whole, this does provide some indication that practitioners are discussing NextGen HN between each other, and that this may not always lead to positive outcomes.

Only one participant knew nothing about NextGen: HN prior to taking part in the research. This was the only participant coming from a college that was not piloting any NextGen: HN courses at all; they further indicated that none of their colleagues have talked about the pilot either. This may indicate that SQA could do further engagement with non-pilot institutions before any wider rollout.

Eight design principles

HNCs and HNDs as separate qualifications

While most practitioners had heard about elements like meta-skills, learning for sustainability, and holistic design, many practitioners had either not heard of HNCs and HNDs becoming separate qualifications before taking part in the research, or had not completely understood what separating the two qualifications meant. This could be an indication that HNCs and HNDs becoming separate qualifications is not signposted enough or referred to in public-facing literature on NextGen: HN, or, in considering that the majority of participants work in pilot colleges, it's not necessarily an element that is being discussed. However, learning about the separation of qualifications for the first time did not seem to influence overwhelming positivity or negativity:

> 'So just to confirm that the plan is that, actually I didn't realise that, sorry, HNC[s] have to do a first year and then potentially go to an HND. But you're saying NextGen is going to bypass that. Oh, OK yeah, yes, [I] like that, I'm up for that.'

> 'Well, it was news to me. I guess it's fine as that. Yeah…it's probably the guidance that [learners] will need before they commit to one or the other, I think that the current model of "they do the HNC and then the ones that want to learn a bit more" or…certainly in animal care the HND is much more broad. It's like they learn the core stuff in the HNC, and then they get to sample a lot of other wider subject areas in the HND, which I've always found quite good. But I guess it would depend [on] how this is configured really, so I don't think it's a bad thing in itself.'

For the practitioners who were learning about HNC and HND qualifications separating for the first time, understandably practitioners had a range of questions. Some questions seemed to be contrary to the information being presented to them on slides 2 and 3, which could indicate that communications on separating the qualifications could be stronger. Questions related to the separation were mostly practical in nature:

- What are the entry requirements for entering into HND level without an HNC?
- Will entry into HND level require more than an HNC for entry, or will there be additional requirements?
- Could levels 7 and 8 be done together?
- What is the purpose?
- How will learners understand which qualification to apply for?
- To what extent is the separation similar to Highers or Advanced Highers?

In terms of subject area, participants from Counselling and Childhood Practice felt this didn't necessarily apply to their subjects because, as both subjects have an HNC, they do not alone guarantee entry into an HND. In addition, participants in Healthcare and Social Services similarly felt the separation of qualifications would not apply to them, because they do not offer HND level for their courses. A practitioner in Social Sciences was similarly unfazed, as they only run HND courses if the student numbers are high enough, and so did not see this proposal as much of a change.

Feelings towards the separation of HNC and HND qualifications overall seemed neutral to accepting. Most practitioners were concerned with entry requirements, and were not really able to fully assess the separation of HNC and HND qualifications without knowing details of how a learner would gain entry into an HND. Some practitioners seemed to lean more towards the impossibility of preparedness for HND without an HNC behind them:

'…you couldn't not do anything for an HNC, for example, and then be put in [HND], or you wouldn't be able to get your HND without…doing the work that is required for an HNC. So I'm not sure how [learners] would be able to catch up, or what the sort of situation there is… but I think in general, we'll find a way. I mean there's solutions to it, so. I don't think the positives outweigh the negatives in this instance'

'…for the sciences anyway, because a lot of the HNC stuff will underpin the HND...I suppose if that makes sense it's like...there's no point trying to teach them HND pathology when they don't know what a cell does, kind of thing…it'd be interesting to see how that works out.'

Practitioners were also asked if the splitting up of the qualification would have any practical impact on their own working life; one practitioner identified a potential barrier:

'I can teach anywhere from level five to HND and one of my parts as a practitioner is using the content to develop the skills of people so that they are ready for the next level towards the end of the year. I feel like it works better with retention and things like that, so if they're coming in at level 8, which is a very demanding level for people just coming in, as they're coming in fresh, how are we going to address issues [of] retention?'

New grading models

Although 'larger and fewer units', 'reduction in assessment loads' and 'new grading models' were listed as three separate design principles in NextGen: HN, for the purpose of analysis, these design principles were analysed together. This is because in the analysis of these design principles, it was found that practitioners understood these principles as being interconnected through new grading models overall, and therefore often discussed these elements in relation to each other:

New grading models connected to:

♦ Achieved, Achieved with Merit, Achieved with Distinction
♦ Whole qualification grading and project
♦ Larger and fewer units
♦ Whole qualification grading
♦ Reduction in assessments

Several different positive elements about new grading models came through interviews, which includes larger and fewer units and 'achieved, achieved with merit, and achieved with distinction' grading statements. Positive elements of the new grading model identified by participants were varied:

♦ Encourages a sense of 'personal best'.
♦ Encourages more ownership from students.
♦ More efficient.
♦ Facilitates easy transition due to similarities with current models.
♦ Encourages parity among practitioners.
♦ Encourages students to connect ideas from units.
♦ Fairer system for students.
♦ Improves on perception from employers and universities.
♦ Develops learners over a longer period and at a deeper level.
♦ More reflective of how industry works.

Some participants liked the idea of whole qualification grading in theory; however several had some questions about how grading works on a practical level, and the extent to which new grading models will facilitate objectivity:

'I think…a bit more of a personal approach in terms of grading is a lot better, like considering maybe the behaviour, in general, of what the individual brings to the table for the class. But then it just opens it [up] to interpretation, so it could be a double-edged sword.'

'So, how is it going to be graded? Will it be across different practitioners…? …they'd have to be meeting regularly, they'd have to be evidenced. The student would have to be, you know, met with quite a few times to see what, what they're on track for and things. I don't think it could be a surprise at the end you've just achieved cause, you know the students are going to want to achieve with distinction. And so…are they meeting regularly with students…the people that are delivering it, the practitioners that are delivering it. You know?'

'But I also have concerns about how that's going to be supported within the colleges because if I got on really well with a student, does that mean I'm going to head towards the Achieved with Distinction or will I go towards the Achieved with Merit if it's a student that I know…really struggled. Because with your graded unit, you can be one point off, but…you still achieve [a] B. But with their [Achieved] with Merit, if you're one point off the Achieved with Distinction, do you sway towards that because you know it's going to get them better job opportunities…how is that going to be dealt with, how is it going to be supported?'

Other impressions of holistic grading were similarly concerned with practicalities. For example, one practitioner raised that the new grading model will be the odd one out in terms of grading models that students experience at school and university, and wondered what kind of impact that may have on learners. Another practitioner expressed that new grading models were actually a step back to what had already been accomplished during COVID-19. Interestingly, rather than expressing this in terms of ease of transition like another practitioner, this was expressed as a negative rather than a positive, with this practitioner concerned about whether universities will respond positively to new grading models:

'I do not see there being a problem with grading the HNC as a whole because we've done it through COVID and it was working very, very well. SQA have now made the decision to take us back four years, which is actually for many of us a backward step by bringing back the graded unit for HNC social sciences. We were managing to put ABC grades onto the entire year's work, we were managing to grade students effectively and the universities were accepting that grading it was all working quite nicely'.

Another practitioner was sceptical that holistic grading models, including larger and fewer units, could have an impact on subject-expertise by requiring more general practitioners to deliver courses:

'I don't know if that's a good thing? Because just now you know you've got the subject experts on the units that are getting delivered. So, you're going to have to

have somebody that's very experienced in a lot of different things to be delivering it. If you know what I mean, like an area, they're going to have to be experienced in psychology, sociology and something other. If it's a huge unit, which…don't know.'

Lastly, one unique practical question that was raised by one practitioner was what the actual certificate that a learner walks away with would look like. This practitioner pointed out that there would be some consequences to putting 'achieved, 'achieved with merit', and 'achieved with distinction' on the HNC or HND certificate:

'…are employers going to use that grade? Is that, is that going to be a factor for the shortlisting? Because if that's going to be a factor they are missing so many other potential students that…would be fabulous in that job. I think what it does is that it puts [the overall grade] out there for other people to see.'

This comment raised an overall discussion about equality and fairness, leading to comments about subjectivity and objectivity in grading similar to comments other practitioners had made, but worried that this could go on to affect students in the long-term if employers interpret an 'achieved' mark as being unfit for hire. In practice for example, this practitioner described a student who had a double transplant during their HNC and as a result still managed to achieve; however new certificate classifications based on new grading models might show that this student did not achieve with distinction without reflecting on why. It is worth nothing though, that currently employers can see 'A' grades on current HNs and therefore may already use grading for shortlisting. Similarly, another practitioner mentioned that 'Achieved with Distinction' doesn't necessarily reflect impressive knowledge levels, but instead reflects students being strategic in their understandings of new grading models, for example students who may decide to coast through ungraded units in favour of assessments that contribute to the overall grade. Both these practitioners are similar in raising that grade classifications can be misinterpreted.

Assessments

Predictably, practitioners were very enthusiastic with the idea of decreasing assessment loads for students, as well as for themselves. However, while practitioners favoured the decrease in assessment loads for both learners and practitioners, a few participants identified some problems that could come with reducing assessment loads, for example university preparedness:

'… we need to be preparing them for the assessment models that the universities use and it is still essays. You go and study history, you write essays, you go study geography, you write essays…you're still writing reports based upon research that you've conducted. So you need those academic writing skills. And if we go all sparkly and digitised, then we're just going to end up sending universities people who are not prepared, at which point the universities will start getting annoyed…and will stop accepting our students.'

Again, thinking with students in mind, another practitioner mentioned that decreasing assessment loads may not necessarily reduce the amount of stress that students have, and that by decreasing the number of assessments contributing to a student's grade, it would 'actually put more pressure on those few assessments'. In addition, they felt that students in general had problems with engagement over sustained periods of time, and that if the larger

assessments aren't integrated properly, this may be 'difficult'. This practitioner delivers Applied Science courses, and instead mentioned that they would like to see assessments integrated more into courses such as lab work. Another practitioner, who lectures in Counselling, also said that decreasing assessment loads would 'water down' courses, and that that there isn't necessarily any unit that learners shouldn't be assessed on, indicating that some practitioners may associate assessments with learning outcomes more directly.

Practitioners were also asked if they saw any barriers to decreasing assessment loads besides changing the qualification itself. This was asked as a means of exploring whether there needed to be any expectation management on the extent to which SQA can decrease marking loads through changing to holistic grading models alone. Although as can be seen in views on holistic grading, where several practitioners could immediately see how decreasing graded units would also decrease assessment marking, some practitioners expressed scepticism that decreasing assessment marking by decreasing the number of assessments does not necessarily decrease workloads in general:

> *'…there are huge changes being made to grading, and that's excellent. But a lot of people are still a little bit sceptical from that just now…you don't have as many assessments to mark now, so you could probably take on more students and then the whole question that comes, you know, you've still probably got the same level of marking to do.'*

> *'So I think for me, the principle is absolutely brilliant. It will hang on the design. If we get the design wrong, we'll be dealing with large units or large marking schemes.'*

Project

Practitioners were not asked directly about an overall graded project; it was assumed that the project element of holistic grading was self-evident, as this was listed on [Slide 2: Grading statements](#) (page 51). However, interestingly only six practitioners commented on the project element unprompted. This may be because the project element itself is not as clear or not as signposted to as opposed to other elements of new grading models. However, it's worth noting that this may also be because practitioners didn't have anything to say about the project element.

Of the practitioners that did comment on the project, concerns were about the impact that independent, project-based learning may have on overall learning, where it was felt that some subjects require a foundation of knowledge prior to embarking on independent learning. Another concern was that a project-based course will require practitioners to have more front-loaded courses with information-heavy classes, rather than spread out across the year. Lastly, that learners may have trouble retaining information over longer periods.

Conclusion on new grading models

When looking at comments across new grading models overall, it is clear that practitioners are open to new grading models being introduced. In addition, for practitioners that had only heard about some aspects of new grading models, it seems like changes being introduced had mostly favourable first impressions. Where there were problems identified, practitioners tended to be concerned with the practical side of new grading models, as opposed to the core of what is being proposed. This could indicate that SQA could provide more space for demonstrating how new grading models work in practicality.

Lastly, practitioners produced several questions in relation to new grading models overall. Understanding what questions arise around understanding new grading models could help with identifying gaps in information to help practitioners fully understand what is being proposed. Questions that practitioners produced on new grading models as a whole were:

♦ To what extent will universities accept new grading models?
♦ Who decides what the overall grade is?
♦ What is the process for deciding what the overall grade is?
♦ Are there any changes to award requirements at HNC level?
♦ What will the certificate look like?
♦ What systems are in place for students to understand how they can move between the three grading levels?
♦ How flexible is the project unit?
♦ What does independent learning look like in practice?
♦ How will the appeals process work?

Meta-skills

Reactions to meta-skills were mixed. Positive expressions about meta-skills tended to be about valuing the characteristics such as curiosity, integrity, and critical thinking listed within meta-skills. These characteristics were considered to be positive, and participants would like students to have these characteristics. Some practitioners expressed feelings that their students were lacking in these skills, and that they'd like to see them developed. No practitioners expressed issues with any of the specific characteristics of meta-skills as listed in Slide 5: Meta-Skills and Slide 6: Learning for Sustainability (pages 51–53).

> *'No, I think it would just be getting into more of a mindset, of being more mindful of doing it. And when we've had and staff meetings before, when we've had a chat just recently about using meta-skills and talking about what they are and how they support students, what we recognise was, actually, we do it, but we don't evidence that, we don't use the specific wording. So, we are looking at more practical sides. We are looking at, you know, talking about transferable skills.'*

> *'I think meta-skills can be incorporated into any subject. It's just, the way that the current descriptors are written, you are limited in some areas. So, for example, in animal behaviour; the descriptor shows what the learning outcomes are, it's all knowledge based; there's no application of that knowledge. So students don't have the opportunity to apply what they've learned about animal behaviour to certain situations, whether that's in a domestic or captive environment, or whatever. So yeah, there are absolutely opportunities to develop meta-skills, yeah.'*

> *'It's a big, big part of counselling certainly for our college. But funnily enough, it's not always assessed. We do a lot of experiential activities on the course. Um, when we teach the theory, then we get them to reflect on the theory and look at activities that reflect that, and I should also say I'm speaking for myself because I'm dead passionate about this stuff. That's what I do. I don't know if everybody else does it, but what I try to do is make the activities and the teaching always very relevant to the*

assessment. But there is a lot of stuff that they do, probably these meta-skills, that isn't actually formally assessed, it's more informal.'

'No, absolutely fully supported…100% and we, you know, we aim to doing that ourselves. Regardless of whether NextGen comes to us or not, we agree that this is a very important part of graduat[ing], you know, of students being capable in the workplace.'

'No, I think that, I think it's a good thing. I think it's good that we're considering this at the time of writing the qualification rather than trying to cram it in afterwards and think "how can we make this fit". So, if the qualification is designed around the inclusion of meta-skills, then it's a good thing.'

However, where negativity towards the explicit inclusion of meta-skills was expressed, this was expressed specifically in terms of its explicitness. While no practitioners mentioned any characteristic of meta-skills they disliked, it was the explicit inclusion of it that was somewhat challenging, as some practitioners said that their students were already learning these skills:

'Well, it's an old thing. A rebrand…It's a process of their personal growth. So even if they never do science, they have learned how to project manage, so they know how to organise themselves, know how to organise a lab. That's the whole idea. So, I'm quite happy with what we do at the moment, but it would be better if it was implicitly stated.'

'Not much to be honest with you. I think for me my understanding is that it's just another kind of revised way of putting across all the kinds of knowledge and skills that they have. Um, we've got different areas because we've done a mapping exercise of this in the past. So I can see how they've given it kind of new names.'

In terms of subject-specific inclusion of these characteristics, one practitioner felt that the inclusion of meta-skills overall geared students more towards vocational and technical subjects that lead to employability, whereas it was felt that their own subject, Social Sciences, was an academic course and that meta-skills was catered more towards employability.

Barriers

In terms of identifying barriers to the explicit inclusion of meta-skills, several practitioners raised questions about assessments. Although practitioners were generally positive about the characteristics of meta-skills in theory, the explicit inclusion of meta-skills as a learning outcome seemed like a problem to some practitioners due to how these characteristics can be assessed. Although a couple of practitioners supported the idea that these skills would be assessed, other practitioners were unsure of the practicalities. Expressions of this ranged from questioning how they can be assessed, to saying that they felt assessing these skills was not possible:

'In practise? I suppose. We are starting to embed that into our integrated HNC just now…so we are looking at embedding that into our journal, which I think is fantastic. But! Do you know, we don't get a chance to necessarily see [learners] in [work] placement, we have great communication with placement providers, and we talk to

them and they feed back to us with progress reports about how the students are getting on. But placements, they're not meta-skills people, you know, they don't need to know any of that… that's the only time we as staff members, get to see about that, it's the feedback from placement, you know about how they're getting on. I'm just wondering if things like that can be taken into consideration a little bit, like I say, if there's two and three placements we're sending [learners] to and the feedback is that they are really, really not doing very well…do we have something in there that can actually say 'you're not quite ready to pass this just yet?'

'How on earth do you grade someone on their curiosity?...A student could believe that they are an incredibly good communicator, but actually they're not. So…how do you rationalise what a student thinks about their own skill with what it is you're actually looking for, and that type of thing and so, there's definitely concern in terms of this focus on meta-skills and the fact that that it is potentially a graded unit.'

'I can see why it sounds good and it's there but I think it's just being realistic about how do you assess somebody's integrity.'

Two practitioners suggested that this problem could be mitigated by more explicit support from SQA:

'...we're sitting in front of the EV'r, then it's 'this, this, this is wrong'. I feel like more explicit instruction, better communication through the QST and stuff like that is more effective. I think it will just be a case of communicating and supporting us. I think in terms of meta-skills as well when it comes to assessing that, if we don't have complete objective guidance, and it's very difficult to make objective guidance for that kind of thing, it may lead to subjectivity. It may lead to students going "well, he gave me that grade because he doesn't like me" kind of thing. So we have to make sure there's no room for that.'

'Are we going to map these out to specific assessments, are they going to be linked to evidence requirements? You know…that would probably be more useful than me sitting down looking at list of transferable skills and going "ohh that one fits"'.

Practitioners were also concerned with how meta-skills may impact on equalities. One practitioner identified that work-experienced students would already have a lot of meta-skills, and therefore might not need them added into courses:

'…you have somebody who's coming in, it's not an age-related thing, but they've [already] had an extensive work life. You know, they pre-assess and quite clearly they have self-management, social intelligence and they've had some degree of innovation or maybe haven't had innovation. They've been in a really sort of structured work environment. They're very good at the two sort of brackets there that you've got on the screen, but they really want to know more about innovation. So can they come in at that point rather than [needing] to go through all this communication?'

Other barriers surrounding equality were students who had additional support needs (ASN) or variable social backgrounds, who may not develop or express meta-skills in the same way, and therefore for whom assessing meta-skills could be inappropriate or unfair.

Participants in Applied Sciences signposted to their subjects in particular as attracting ASN students. One practitioner explained that students without 'great social backgrounds behind them', could have difficulty if they aren't arriving into courses with the same level of meta-skills already developed as other students. This could cause inequality in assessment, especially if using holistic grading models, as students with more robust resource and support systems may start courses with higher levels of meta-skills already developed:

> *'I suppose a lot of that comes from personality and probably…probably the social background. So there are…I wouldn't say many, but there is a fair amount of numbers of students that have not the greatest situation behind them and the communication side of it, the openness towards others is definitely not what it should be as coaches. It is hard.'*

> *'Resources. It's always going to come down to resources and…science attracts a large number of people from the autistic spectrum, so that's a very common, very common trait. And so the softer skills can be harder to develop, yeah. I think that's true across STEM. The softer skills. I think that's the top thing.'*

In terms of mitigating these problems, one practitioner expressed doubt that students who have social barriers to meta-skills would be able to develop them in a year, concluding that this is why it's better for some students to be at college for longer. Another practitioner, who expressed positivity towards the suggestion of meta-skills but also recognised barriers based on experience of current HNs, pointed out that mitigating potential barriers to developing meta-skills might require colleges to have resources that currently aren't available:

> *'I have in my HNC class four students with dyslexia...It's severe dyslexia. And that is a barrier definitely for building meta-skills, even from the get-go. You know, we're in week two of teaching at the moment, and I've had people in floods of tears...I then have to make sure that they are OK, talk to them…by that point we are near the end of the lesson. That's a huge barrier. Something needs to be done on that really. And that's, every college will be different. But I know for a fact that support departments are being completely decimated just now.'*

In conclusion, practitioners may see the worth in learners adopting the characteristics that meta-skills include, however, there may be some hesitancy moving forward without more flexibility and explicit support from SQA in terms of understanding. Overall, practitioners may need support in the following three areas:

♦ Understanding how meta-skills are assessed
♦ Understanding how meta-skills relate to what is already being delivered
♦ Demonstrating flexibility to learners of varying support needs

Digital technology

Practitioners ranged from accepting to very enthusiastic about embedding digital technology into NextGen: HN. This topic elicited a large depth of responses. In general, participants liked the idea of being able to embed more digital technology into courses, and some expressed hopefulness that NextGen: HN would be able to deliver this:

'I mean definitely I would love having [a] wee think outside the box with the assessment this time you know. Curiosity, creativity, sense-making, critical thinking. I would like if we could…do assessments that they could actually use in practise…for example a patient information leaflet or something, I don't know. And that we think about practise instead of assessment and essays. Actually, things that can be moved in there, moving with the times too. Using videos and TikTok, even.'

'Love it, love it. Love it… So yes, in classrooms love the digital learning setups. Love using the technology in surveying mechanisms. But there's a bit in the middle where you have to do that theory teaching, but [outdoors]. How can we make that better, would be a really cool thing. So, maybe NextGen's going to give us a nice sort of window of opportunity to get the creative juices flowing? Maybe. Hopefully.'

Notably, practitioners tended to express the inclusion of more digital technology into courses as a matter of necessity, as opposed to choice. Practitioner comments on the necessity of embedding more digital technology into courses varied in terms of experience levels and subject area, which indicates a general feeling of inevitability when it comes to digital tools:

'…I think if you're technophobic now, it's a big problem.'

'So being able to work and live in a world that is full of technology. But this technology will keep advancing. And so therefore these skills need to enable you not just for what's available right now, but enable you for the future and I think that's brilliant. But what that means in context can be quite difficult to unpick.'

'Because it's…it's here to stay and they're, [the] digital aspect of things isn't now just about "can you do a video? Can you do this?" It's going to be how do we manage AI.'

'Again, it needs to be done with meaning…Because we need to embrace it. Because it's here. So it's not going to go away. It's like…mobile phones. It's not going to go anywhere. They're just going to keep developing [technology]. But how do you [or] we support our students in realising that, yeah, you can absolutely use this, but use it with a purpose and be very careful [with] how you use it, because really, the HN is about their knowledge and understanding…and again it is it back to the staff, we need to be able to be using that confidently before we can explain to anybody else, how to use it confidently.'

Barriers

Although no practitioners expressed anything overtly negative about incorporating more digital technology in theory; where there was any sort of hesitancy to embedding digital technology into courses, it was through barriers to incorporating it, or identifying areas where digital technology could be incorporated but for external reasons seem difficult. Barriers to embedding digital technology into NextGen: HN identified were:
One participant for example talked about the digital literacy of learners immediately in response to the question about embedding more digital technology, and while they agreed that it was overall a good idea, it may be less relevant to their subject (Sports Science), or waste time, as a result of students' digital literacy:

♦ Digital literacy of learners

- ♦ Digital literacy of practitioners
- ♦ College resources and infrastructure
- ♦ Affordability

'…in all the students I've had, I would say 90%, they don't have a lot of experience in using the PC. A computer. So they are amazing with their phones and tablets. Oh god, using the computer and all the systems in it, oh my god. OK… [students] they're all like born in 2005, so maybe it's just a way to make me feel old, but they really don't have a lot of experience in the use of computer[s]. So, here's the thing, [embedding digital technology is] awesome. But they need to be. . .probably the same as they do, say communications, when…they're at level 6. They will need to do an IT class… I know it sounds terrible, but the time we waste because they cannot find this bit or that bit on their laptop. It's unbelievable. So yeah, I'm all about paper free, you know? But Jesus there cannot be that much of a hassle all the time. Because I end up, I don't like it, but I end up printing stuff sometimes...it's so much faster, like so much faster, especially when we are in the gym, or out on the pitch.'

Other practitioners expressed similar views about learners. It's worth noting that some practitioners were prompted about the question of digital literacy, and others were not, with the reason being that digital literacy came up in interviews enough times unprompted that it became a standard question with later participants.

While participants identified a digital literacy problem in general, they varied in identifying *who* is lacking in digital skills. For example, several practitioners expressed surprise at how little their younger students know about technology. This indicates that perhaps there is an expectation that young people would be better with digital technology by growing up with it, and that some practitioners are finding that this expectation has not been met:

'I'm really surprised how poor their levels are…the ones out of school. School kids are actually very poor. They can use a phone no problem, but they don't even know how to use a computer. It's very interesting.'

'There's this general assumption that, like even school pupils coming in know how to use a laptop. They don't. They're great at using their phones. Absolutely brilliant [at] using a phone. As soon as you put them on a laptop, they can barely type…then you've got that frustration that they don't actually know how to use the systems.'

'I think sometimes the ones coming out of school are not as digitally aware as what we would think? So what I think. . .our school students find it quite difficult, like navigating My Learning or even just like using computers and things. They don't seem to have the basic skills on it'

'…It's a mix, to be fair. Especially if we're getting students that are moving up from 6 to 7 and 7 to 8. Their skills are better. Because they've got a lot of practise with it. Direct entrance students though, really struggle. Really struggle.'

On the other hand, the above may reflect how a lack of digital skills is interpreted; another practitioner agreed that while 'digital natives' may not have used a particular aspect of technology before, they assess these students as having 'very good' digital literacy because of their ability to learn to use new technology quickly:

'Very good. I think that the digital natives that we've seen now just need time on new resources to problem solve. So in terms of that innovation and creativity and problem solving…They're just getting their hands in the sand and playing with it. Now, I like that because in 10 years time, they'll be in front of different technology that's far better than what they're using today, and the skill is problem solving…so having somebody telling them what to do but being able to navigate around this constantly developing world where new technologies are constantly bombarding us.'

Oppositely, other practitioners identified older, or more work-experienced students as needing additional support in terms of digital literacy, as opposed to younger people:

'Sometimes the younger students usually have [digital literacy], they're excellent…. But sometimes, some of the more mature students need bit of support.'

As a result, participants identified where support may be needed in order to incorporate digital technology successfully, and mitigating a decrease in subject learning due to time spent on increasing digital skills, as well as increases in workloads by giving support themselves to both students and other practitioners:

'…there's nothing even really out there, there needs to be some kind of programme that is available for students to work through, you know to increase their digital skills… Well, they can work on things online, obviously …I think having somewhere they can go for, you know, half an hour a week, an hour a week to spend with somebody on a one-to-one with staff where they improve competence.'

'… they're pretty good at picking things up like mapping and digital maps…but you have to create space in your timetables to add extra, if people need it…we don't do the core ICT because we were just, you know, 80%, 90% of our demographic would be like "bloomin' heck, really, you're going to teach me how to make a folder on a computer?". It was just missing the audience. So we haven't yet found the right perfect solution. But what we're doing now is study skills, which we can then say right, you know, "70% of the class need Excel. Let's do a session on Excel".'

'We do run core skills as part of like, it's more of a college thing than science thing, but it feels like having that formal….kind of like IT skills for science? That would be a really good inclusion, but make it relevant to science. Make it like, right, "this is heavy processing. That's how you use it to break formula" Even like basic programming and stuff like that, that would be so beneficial.'

Aside from digital literacy of students, a key topic within digital technology that several participants brought up unprompted was staff resources and practitioner digital literacy. Although staff digital literacy and resources are issues that can only be solved by college institutions, it's worth considering staff skills and resources as a barrier to successfully integrating more digital technology into courses, especially where there may be impacts to workloads:

> *'I'm a digital champion within my team. So I need to kind of stay on board with different systems and I'm the first person that people approach if they have a problem. … people are worried about how much IT that they're bringing in, "how many new systems do I have to learn? Am I [in] the position where students know more than me in this?" and it does cause a lot of… self-esteem [issues] in what they're doing and undermines their practises. Practitioners, I am, you know, we're subject specialists, but there's also an added demand on being aware of how to utilise IT better than your students and that's quite challenging, if you've got 20-year-olds in your class that, you know, have used it their whole lives.'*

> *'Absolutely fine, as long as we can be flexible…as long as there's not too much onus on lecturer responsibility in terms of things like managing AI. We have to remember we still have a generation of people working within the sector who are maybe not very technologically savvy...we support them within our team…Um, we spend a lot of time doing that to make sure that they don't feel like they need to run away and hide.'*

> *'…it's just really like the… it's making sure that they've got the right devices, isn't it… our college [has] with quite a lot of issues with the Wi-Fi going off because they're changing the Wi-Fi and they're working on that. Yeah… the Wi-Fi has definitely been an issue… sometimes it's not as fast and working as well as it should. So students are struggling with the Wi-Fi.'*

> *'We need support, we need IT support for [embedding technology], you know, to always be working and always be fixed. And for the clients themselves to have somebody to come to, and say "I'm having trouble", you know, from with the digital campus. Yeah…that's resourcing a digital campus and I think that requires investment.'*

Only one practitioner indicated that embedding more digital technology into courses was a problem for their subject in particular, Counselling. However in saying this, they seemed to indicate that they were thinking from a practical perspective. While this practitioner liked the inclusion of digital technology in terms of tools that students use for learning (for example, a digital class notebook), they didn't think that counselling as a profession should be moved entirely into online practice and worried about the chicken-egg effect of delivering Counselling courses for a digital world and therefore losing the face-to-face element in practice.

In conclusion, practitioners may see the necessity to embed more digital technology into courses and be enthusiastic about integrating digital technology moving forward. However, in order for this to be done successfully, the following problems may need to be considered:

♦ Varying degrees of literacy in learners

- ♦ College resources
- ♦ Integrating subject-specific digital technology
- ♦ Practitioner workloads in adapting

Learning for sustainability

Practitioners were asked what they knew about Learning for Sustainability (LfS). Most practitioners acknowledged sustainability in their current practices and described what sustainable practices were already in place within their institutions. Practices included:

- ♦ Advocating for active commuting (that is, cycling).
- ♦ Recycling and reusing / repurposing resources.
- ♦ Using recyclable props in theatre.
- ♦ Embedding the 17 United Nations sustainable development goals (SDGs) into current units.
- ♦ Having conversations about which natural materials can be used in, for example, Forest Kindergarten.
- ♦ Incorporating environment awareness / teaching a discrete unit on education for sustainability in foundation year.
- ♦ Embedding sustainability in project-based learning.

Some had knowledge of LfS already being piloted or incorporated at their institutions:

'So I think Early Years has a policy. Education Scotland just put out something for Early Years. And we were looking at that as a team as well, like how can we make sure that's happening. I like how the units went for the trial, the pilot ones as well. There was some other stuff added that was maybe lacking in terms of the units that we do, like child protection. So there was interest in bits in the wee pilot.'

Most practitioners had at least some knowledge of LfS. Some adopted more sustainable practices only because of the COVID-19 pandemic (going digital), while for others, COVID-19 hampered sustainable practices (use of PPE and other consumables in the healthcare industry).

When asked about their overall thoughts, practitioners largely welcomed the inclusion of LfS goals into the Next Gen: HN qualifications. Many practitioners commented on the increasing importance and pervasiveness of sustainability:

'I think it's really important because it's part of our culture now. It's something that they all become familiar with. If you said that to us maybe 15 years ago, we would have been like "what are you talking about?" but it's so much more part of our culture that we talk about it every day.'

Practitioners who shared this view felt that the LfS component was a core, or essential, step toward preparing for the future. Some added that the inclusion of the LfS component encouraged more forward and critical thinking. Additionally, practitioners were glad that the LfS goals addressed not only environmental concerns, but other aspects, such as business

and community sustainability. There were a few practitioners, however, who felt that LfS was just a 'buzzword' and that the LfS goals were too ambitious:

'I'm not too sure. I get the idea that sustainability seems to be a big focus across the whole world, I suppose, more than anything else just now...but having it as a true focus on every single course I think it's maybe just a wee bit of overkill. To have that as a full module? I think it's just maybe going a step too far.'

Suitability to subject area

Practitioners were asked to what extent they felt the LfS goals were suited to their subject area. There were mixed views among participants. Some struggled to see the relevance of incorporating LfS into all subject areas:

'I don't like that there's this mandatory aspect. And because it doesn't necessarily fit all of the subjects, so for instance, if you're doing geography, absolutely. You're going to cover these goals. If you're focusing on history and politics, are we then trying to shove things in where it's not actually quite relevant? But we have to do it because it's mandatory?'

Some practitioners were worried that there was a risk learners would lose interest in their subject area if there was too much focus on LfS:

'I think if it's related to the subject area and the practices of the subject area, it's better. I think we wouldn't want to add anything into these qualifications that detract from that because when students come to pick a subject it's because they have an interest in that subject. They don't want to spend time exploring something they feel is irrelevant.'

Many practitioners stated that LfS was well suited to their subject area. These subjects included animal care, golf, applied sciences, childhood practice, music and theatre, biotechnology, any subject involving lab work, geography and healthcare.

Subject areas where practitioners felt LfS was not suitable included theoretical subjects (that is, physiology), history, politics and criminology. However, practitioners in Childhood Practice linked LfS to Forest Kindergarten, with one of these practitioners expressing a lot of concern and uncertainty that Forest Kindergarten wouldn't be included in NextGen: HN units.

Barriers

There were few challenges identified by practitioners. Despite some practitioners who felt that LfS was not particularly relevant to their subject area, most expressed confidence that LfS goals could still be included in some way:

'I don't know if it fits well but I think they'll still be able to do something. I think we could probably get it in there.'

However, others struggled to see where LfS would fit into the curriculum:

'In criminology, for example, where could we do that? Where does that link in? Unless it's a separate thing that we discuss in class? So [there are] situations where

you need to find a really tenuous link or look outside of the class and the teaching to do that.'

Some practitioners also expressed concern that learners may not care about LfS goals or may simply not have an awareness of long-term consequences:

'Do they care? I'm not quite sure. I'm not saying, you know, that many are...I'm just not sure they're fully taking in the impact of what they're doing. So it's definitely important but I just don't think they care.'

External quality assurance

Participants were not asked directly about new supportive models of external quality assurance. It was felt that if participants had not heard of new models of external quality assurance already, fully describing new models enough to get meaningful responses from participants would take up too much time. Although there was a model of external quality assurance available on the NextGen: HN webpages, the process demonstrated was too detailed to put into an introductory slide, and there was a concern that researchers would not be able to explain the process accurately, or that it would take participants a long time to read.

Instead, participants were asked 'how supportive do you currently find SQA in terms of external quality assurance?' followed by the question 'how would you like to see SQA be more supportive moving forward?' This was done in order to get a quick understanding of views on support from SQA, and in addition get views on what practitioners might like to see in methods of support moving forward. Together, comments across these two questions can be used by NextGen: HN development to identify any potential areas in new models of external quality assurance that may not fully address what practitioners currently identify as support needs, especially in considering that changes to the sector over the 22-23 period may have changed support needs.

Importantly, as mentioned in [Practitioner experience and NextGen: HN](#), several participants (eight) also were currently EVs, or have had experience as an EV. However, this did not seem to affect whether or not experience was positive or negative, for example one practitioner with EV experience who described SQA as 'hidden':

' I think we are starting to see more EVs available to complete prior verification on assessments. I understand it could just be an issue of the time, we are [still] just coming out of the pandemic and I know that's had immediate impact on everything and it does create a backlog, but again it's communicating…rather than, sometimes you feel like people are just not saying things to keep up appearances. But if we actually knew the context that the SQA were working at, perhaps we'd be more understanding. And you know, at the end of the day, if something was happening in one of my classes and it was affecting my ability to do my job, I would be communicating that to my students. It should be the same regardless of which end of the spectrum you're working on.'

Current views

In terms of how supportive practitioners currently find SQA, or the external quality assurance process overall (practitioners often commented on both at the same time), practitioners had extremely mixed views. Sometimes views between practitioners were at odds, for example some assessing SQA as poor versus efficient on communications, which possibly suggests an inconsistent approach. The external quality assurance process as it exists currently was described by participants on one hand as:

♦ generally good; great; no issues; and efficient at communication

…while on the other hand:

♦ stunted; slow; not transparent; inexpertly lead; inconsistent; time consuming; stressful; multi-headed; and poor at communication

Although experiences tended towards negative, where there were positive experiences, practitioners seemed confident. Some practitioners described that *who* the EV or co-ordinator was made a big difference to experiences of external quality assurance:

'I signed up to be an EV. We also have just recently done that too, so that I can offer that support. But for EV processes I've always found SQA to be fab. Whoever they have sent as the EV, that has been fantastic support.'

'I've had good and bad experience with external qualification… we actually had an issue with something quite recently and we did find that the external verifier was not very understanding of the reason why we had made certain decisions and…[the EV] was very much by the book, which is also something that I'm personally not very for…The very reason why I see the NextGen as the much preferred delivery is that it's got this sort of flexibility and… [it's] not as rigid. We had a situation there which was not a very positive one. I would say generally the positive ones have been the ones where you've [met the] external verifier in person.'

'…we had a really good co-ordinator, local co-ordinator, who just kept us moving forward. We had a solid revalidation panel. We have seen some good change, and then we subsequently, just last year had an EV event on the programme. . .Our EV has been brilliant and we're a bit sad [they're retiring]. So I think they were saying that they were looking at retiring and we're like "ohh no!" because this chap's been with us for… well, longer than 12 years because he was in place when I was started.'

In addition, practitioners identified several variables that they felt affected experiences of SQA and external quality assurance. These variables were:

♦ Face-to-face versus online
♦ SQA institution size
♦ Resources
♦ Subject specialisation
♦ Time

Face-to-face support was identified a number of times by practitioners as affecting positive experiences. Overall across several questions on NextGen: HN in general, face-to-face support was a variable, however for external quality assurance in particular this seemed to be important as a way of facilitating communication and understanding:

'I was the quality and compliance manager at a work-based learning provider and part of that role was being involved in awarding organisations so I have experience with [a] whole range of [other] awarding organisations and they always have a hands-on approach. They're very supportive. They produce very supportive materials online, but they will come and talk to you face-to-face. They'll come to the institute and they provide support in a number of different ways and their quality assurance processes have always been quite robust. Now, I'm not in a quality role at [College], so it may well be that the people that have much more direct contact with SQA have that experience. But in my experience as a practitioner… it's impossible to comment on their procedures because I think [SQA are] invisible. There's no, there's nothing transparent about how [SQA] are supporting colleges, and making sure that the quality assurance processes are rigorous and robust. It's not to say that they're not, it's just that my experience of SQA is very different to what I've had with previous awarding organisations, and you can only…use the COVID argument for so long. It's been at least two years since we've fully emerged from any kind of lockdown. So I would like. . . I think there should be…more engagement.'

'We've had much more positive, I would say generally the positive ones have been the ones where you've [met the] external verifier in person. [It's] an easier way of discussing things and finding out why you've made certain decisions, whereas over email or you know, the sort of backwards and forwards, [it] just doesn't seem to lend itself to having that kind of discussion

'So we've been EV'd a few times and…they keep in touch and things. They could be more kind of...[supportive], how they used to come out and tell us about the units and stuff. So maybe more of that would be good for specific courses. So I think like our ASN… and I don't teach on it, but we do the childhood ASN, Additional Support Needs award as well. And I think that's one that maybe the staff were thinking it would be good if somebody else [with] more expertise came out.'

One of the participants agreeing that external quality assurance was better before virtual support, is currently an EV:

'Yeah. Guessing that's a good shout. I think you guys need to come back out and see [us] on the college floor, maybe coming to staff development days. You're always really hidden? And as an EV a virtual visit is. . . it's not working. I don't think it's the best place for it. [I] think [it is] due to cost and things like that, I get it, but I don't think [virtual] is the best way forward.'

Another practitioner for example, explained that they felt they tended to find information through 'word-of-mouth' as opposed to from 'the source' or SQA, directly. Although this is not a straightforward comment on face-to-face, it does raise questions about why word-of-mouth was preferrable to how SQA currently delivers quality assurance information.

Subject specialisation was also identified a number of times by practitioners as either a barrier to good support, or as a way that support could be improved. One practitioner for example said EVs were more 'effective' if they came from their own subject area; again, similar to face-to-face support, subject specialisation was a variable mentioned across several parts of interviews. For external quality assurance specifically, there seems to be a perception among some practitioners that the number of subject specialists providing support has been diminishing:

'There used to be more subject specialists' involvement in decision making, so you have subject specialists who would be… I mean at the moment we do have a say through the QSTs. But we don't have the final say, so although we may sit around the table of subject specialists and say something, SQA will come back and tell us about doing something else. Which is fine, because it's SQAs award. Ultimately, it's their award. But it's very frustrating. And I give an example: the markers who marked for SQA previously, they were marking guidelines and now they're grid lines, so now people feel well, I'm just a big red pen now. There's no judgement, no value of my judgement. I'm just…being a little bit like an automaton. [Another] example, there's [my colleague] he is an extremely experienced scientist. And yet he can't…he can deliver the kind of learning he wants, but he can't assess it the way he wants to make sure that the students meet the criteria now. Yes, I mean, in my little world of science, [name of staff] and the team SQA are brilliant. I have no fault with them, but I think there has been a slow drift towards, um, non-specialists making judgements on specialist topics. You know, it's like in the hospital you would never want a hospital manager, it's a wonderful job they do, but you would never want them making a clinical decision about healthcare. You'd leave that to clinicians.'

Of the practitioners who had ideas about how SQA can be more supportive moving forward, these recommendations were:

♦ Employing more subject specialists.
♦ Employing EVs by SQA, rather than by colleges.
♦ Ensure the EVs are trained to be supportive.
♦ A subject specialist, 'quality contact' or helpline that practitioners can call.
♦ Face-to-face support.

Overall views of NextGen: HN

Overall pilot views are views that practitioners expressed about the pilot as a whole, as opposed to individual elements of the pilot. These views tended to come out towards the end of interviews, where closing comments or answers to final questions often involved practitioners making overall assessments of the pilot. Sometimes, these views also came out towards the beginning of interviews, especially where participants indicated high engagement with pilot development and already formed opinions. Overall views were categorised into three broad groups:

♦ Overall Positive — any expressions indicating positivity towards the pilot as a whole overall, for example, anyone looking forward to the pilot rolling out in their subject
♦ Neutral — Expressions of uncertainty, or neither conclusively positive nor negative towards the pilot

♦ Overall Negative — any expressions indicating negativity to the project as a whole, for example, indicating the pilot is not fit for purpose

Because views are categorised, practitioners themselves tended to fall into more than one category: for example overall negative and neutral, or overall positive and neutral. However, it's important to note that although practitioners may ultimately have an overall positive or negative view of the pilot, that is no comment on individual elements. For example, one practitioner who expressed overall negative views on the pilot was very positive about the inclusion of meta-skills. Overall positive views of the pilot described the pilot as:

Table 4: Examples of overall positive views of NextGen: HN

Positive points	Quotes
Innovative	'Innovation is always good...it's always good to try new things and see how that goes opposed to staying the same way forever'
Creative	'I think [practitioners] will rise to the challenge, I think they would enjoy it, everything, especially if it's going to be more creative'
Holistic	'...it's more overall learning, isn't it? So it's more integrated, it's more holistic...I think it overall looks quite positive'
Reduce stress, workloads, and anxiety	'We have 150 students online now. It's a very successful programme, so reducing and integrating assessment are absolutely core issues for us because our students are time starved and that's the student feedback we're getting all the time'
Beneficial	'I think the change of assessments will be very beneficial, and having more flexibility, having more open book, more variety of assessments rather than just your bog-standard question and answer...I feel like that'll be very beneficial. Yeah, I feel like I feel like it'll be a positive move.'
Develops key skills	'...it's something that maybe needs to happen, to develop the skills to get learners able to do [their] roles more effectively...'

Positive points	Quotes
Improves outcomes for students	'Ultimately we're doing this for students, for the development of their skills that they need to go and work in the industry...I think it's definitely going to be an improved experience and improved outcomes for students as well' 'I hope it will improve the outcomes and give students an opportunity to be assessed in a range of skills that will help move [them] into the workplace or to University'
Forward-thinking	'I hope it happens for Animal Care because I think the current qualification is out of date for so many reasons' 'I think it's a good idea. I think it'll do each subject area well, to look back in itself...and see what we're doing that we don't need to do anymore'

Overall positive views tended to be more varied than overall negative views. Where overall negative views tended to be negative across four broad categories, participants with overall positive views tended to see NextGen: HN as positive for a wider range of reasons. Several practitioners expressed excitement for NextGen: HN to rollout in their courses, which may suggest that some communications on NextGen: HN have been positively effective:

'I think we're just waiting patiently; I think as our new HN model came in 2020 or 2019, and then we're a little bit sad that we missed the boat to get on the NextGen trials. And so yeah...[NextGen] can't come soon enough for us to be honest with you. Appreciate there's going to be some teething problems, but yeah, looking forward to it.'

'…And no one would be complaining from our side, because we've been kind of wanting this change for a long time…It feels like a plaster that needs to be kind of ripped off. I think you could look at it from a safe perspective and go "well, there's maybe going to be too much of a change" or "it's going to be a burden or difficulty". I think it's just like, well, listen, we are living in a different world now than we did when the original setup [before] these qualifications were made. And I think we just need to evolve for everyone's sake. I'm just kind of excited about the idea that these changes might be coming for us and seeing what we can do with that kind of set up and seeing how it's going to work. Because I think I've said throughout this interview, I think it's a really positive change and…[I'm] keen to do it, yeah.'

On the other hand, overall negative views expressed by practitioners were less varied in what is causing concern to practitioners:

Table 5: Examples of overall negative views of NextGen: HN

Negative points	Quotes
Inflexible	'This is where the concern is in relation to NextGen, almost feeling like being imposed a one-size-fits-all to all types of HNC. And HNCs are not like that.' '...I think if [NextGen] comes, that it's almost like we're having to go back the way again. It would be very demotivating, I suppose, more than anything else, but, as I said, I suppose if we're still allowed to have a bit of flexibility in [NextGen] and the fact that we can adapt it a little bit, then that would be good.'
Stressful	'...a new award is going to add to the stress. I think you are asking members of staff to be mentors for something that they don't understand yet, and they can't understand it because we at the college don't understand it yet. So again it's, how are we gonna support mentors if they've not done that qualification, if they don't know the ins and outs of that qualification? ...I think that at this minute in time in the sector, the last thing they need is bringing in a new qualification that's going to impact in the everyday working life as well and add more stress to that. I wouldn't like it if that happened to me.'
Conservative	'It's not changing enough...I just don't feel like we're...almost all or some parts of [NextGen] are rehashing what we've done rather than really taking the opportunity to smash it open...' 'So it started off really ambitious. However, [in] the longer term, as we've been progressing through it, that feels on a lecturer level that that ambition is slightly diminishing, the longer it's going on. Unfortunately. But yeah, it feels like we've kind of stepped back a little bit on how ambitious [NextGen's] going to be, in Social Sciences anyway.'
Inexpert Design	'I think they need to have people with experience in Early Years leading it, as well. Because quite often I have to explain what it is that I'm talking about, so I have to explain 'what is pedagogy, what does that look like in Early Years?'...And I don't mean that, the way it sounds, but when you're constantly explaining things, it gives you anxiety about who it is that's leading the qualifications for the future workforce. So I think that there needs to be more transparency as well.'

In addition, it's worth noting that of the participants who expressed overtly negative overall views or concerns.

Although there are negative overall views of the pilot being expressed, as said before overall negative views are not a comment on individual aspects of NextGen: HN. For example, practitioners who expressed overall negative views still expressed positivity towards meta-skills, learning for sustainability, the inclusion of digital technology, new grading models, as well as needs for change to current HNs. When comparing this to overall views that the pilot is inflexible, conservative, stressful, and inexpertly designed, this could suggest:

1. that there's a gap somewhere in communicating the practicalities of making the positive elements of the pilot a reality, for example feeling positively about assessing meta-skills but expressing doubts about implementation

or

2. that there are overall negative circumstances outweighing otherwise positively viewed elements, for example wider sector pressures outweighing changing HN qualifications

Overall however, most practitioners expressed neutral views to NextGen: HN. Neutral views were mainly expressed in terms of lecturers feeling like they were unable to assess NextGen: HN overall due to:

♦ feelings of general lack of knowledge of the pilot
♦ feelings of not being able to assess the pilot until it's delivered

In addition, practitioners were categorised as having overall neutral views if they tended to express hopefulness towards the pilot meeting its aims without expressing confidence that aims would be met, for example:

> *'I hope. As I said, I don't know very much about it, but I really hope that it attracts people [to] lifelong learning and you know, improving their careers and their vocational prospects because of education, and becoming better practitioners. I really hope that those aims are met.'*

Evidence across all interviews suggests without further research it remains unclear whether or not practitioners as a whole feel negative or positive about NextGen: HN. However, what this evidence does suggest is that where practitioners are positive about the pilot as a whole, there may be a wide range of reasons that practitioners have identified as being positive overall aspects of NextGen: HN. Additionally, where practitioners have expressed overall negative views, the evidence suggests that negative overall views of the pilot may be connected to communications.

Overall practitioner concerns

Alongside the Eight Design Principles of NextGen HN, additional evidence came out of interviews which speak to overall practitioner concerns. For the purpose of analysis, this evidence was identified by looking at common themes that continued to come up unprompted by questions across interviews rather than as responses to specific questions.

Objectivity and subjectivity

Questions about objectivity and subjectivity came through across over half of the practitioners interviewed, which indicates some level of concern or matter of importance. Questions about whether or not an element of NextGen: HN would increase objectivity or subjectivity occurred across:

♦ External Quality Assurance
♦ New Grading Models: Achieved, Achieved with Merit, and Achieved with Distinction
♦ New Grading Models: Whole qualification grading
♦ New Grading Models: Appeals Processes
♦ Industry

However, although objectivity and subjectivity came up as topics across external quality assurance and new grading models, practitioners were varied in their assessment of whether or not pilot proposals would have a positive impact on objectivity, or a negative impact. It may be the case that practitioners understand bias as a present part of lecturing, and therefore they may want to ensure there are processes in place to reduce this as much as possible. In terms of new grading models, facilitating collaboration amongst practitioners was a key suggestion, which perhaps explains why so many practitioners questioned *who* would be doing the grading and *how* they would be marked when new grading models were presented. Ultimately though, questions around objectivity and subjectivity demonstrate some practitioners are concerned with providing fairness to learners.

In terms of industry biases to course delivery, one practitioner mentioned that they felt that 'small animal nutrition' was overly focused on the pet industry, due to the pet industry being the largest sector in the field but 'not the only sector' in the field, and therefore course outcomes weren't objective in considering the wider animal care sector. However, as this is a problem that only came up across this subject, it's unclear to what extent this applies to other practitioners. More broadly, another practitioner of Social Sciences mentioned they felt NextGen: HN as a whole was more biased towards preparing learners for employment rather than university.

Flexibility

Flexibility and topics around issues of flexibility, for example speaking negatively about strict requirements, was another topic that came up unprompted amongst over half of participants. In general, flexibility was expressed by practitioners across several areas:

Table 6: Practitioner comments about flexibility

Topic	Practitioner comments on flexibility
NextGen: HN	♦ Flexibility of NextGen: HN Course units and specs ♦ Flexibility in making changes to NextGen: HN after trial and error
Meta-Skills	♦ Flexibility in adopting meta-skills due to differences in learner pathway ♦ Flexibility in assessing meta-skills due to learner needs
Digital technology	♦ Flexibility in terms of adapting to learner and practitioner skills, and college resources
New Grading Models	♦ Flexibility within courses for learners to progress between Achieved, to Achieved with Merit and Achieved with Distinction ♦ Student freedom in assessment methods
Support from SQA	♦ Taking a flexible approach to communications with practitioners ♦ Flexibility in modes of support from SQA ♦ Flexibility in the process of rolling out NextGen: HN
College	♦ Flexibility in adapting to NextGen: HN

Occasionally, practitioners expressed flexibility as an important factor through describing SQA processes positively as flexible. For example, one practitioner had favourable impressions of NextGen: HN due to their perception of the pilot as having flexibility and being 'not as rigid'. Another practitioner positively described the feedback received from an EV as 'not set in stone in anyway' and despite some other issues, this flexibility was a 'fantastic' element of the standardisation experience.

One practitioner, however, did seem to have one problem with flexibility, where in their experience as an EV they observed colleges offering the same course, however delivering it in different ways, which was 'problematic' for them due to 'saturating industry with a course where there's not enough placement'. Overall however, the evidence suggests that flexibility could be a key factor for participants either in terms of assessing NextGen: HN or in terms of

needing support. Maintaining flexibility within certain areas during the rollout of NextGen: HN, or demonstrating how NextGen: HN is flexible, could help to facilitate an easy transition.

Future-proofing

Several participants expressed in some form the need for change in the sector, and feel positively about introducing innovation. This was expressed across several areas of interviews, for example, digital technology, meta-skills, and learning for sustainability:

> *'I think the structure that we've had in up until now and still have is an outdated model and something that doesn't work in 2023. We need to move with the times … we are living in a different world now than we did when the original setup for these qualifications were made. And I think we just need to evolve, for everyone's sake.'*

> *'I think these qualifications do need upgraded, you know, especially for Counselling. They're well out of date, we've got contemporary units they're called, but they're not really contemporary.'*

> *'…also the HNC units are terribly out of date. They were written in 2006 and 2007, so I'm looking forward to, you know, seeing what the changes will be. It's more contemporary.'*

> *'I'm enthusiastic about developing curriculum that's fit for 21st century needs.'*

> *'I hope it happens for animal care because I think the current qualification is out of date for so many reasons.'*

However, when considering the evidence that the sector is 'outdated' in some form, this meant that practitioners sometimes assessed NextGen: HN in terms of its innovation and its ability to future-proof:

> *'SQA have now made the decision to take us back four years, which is actually for many of us a backward step by bringing back the graded unit for HNC social sciences.'*

> *'. . .I feel that we're going almost back a step because we're separating the units again.'*

> *'I mean, it's going back in time. When I first started work, we had the merit statement on the SQA unit'*

> *'It's not changing enough.'*

This could be valuable evidence in terms of communicating changes to HN qualifications, where it may be the case that changes to HN qualifications are considered too conservative, or communications on what changes are being made to HN qualifications are ineffective at demonstrating change. However, with that being said, it's worth noting that while some practitioners indicated wanting more change, some practitioners commented that more change would put practitioners under too much stress. This could indicate a need for finding

the best way to communicate NextGen: HN, by finding the line between showing that NextGen: HN is updating current HNs significantly in concurrence with support.

Entrance to university and employment

Participants were asked directly to what extent they understood NextGen: HN to better prepare learners for either university or employment. However, this question was neither asked nor answered across interviews in the same way consistently, due to knowledge levels of the pilot required to compare between current and NextGen: HN qualifications. In addition, because practitioners can lose sight of learners once they move on to employment or university, this question asked participants to speculate. In doing so though, this helped to gauge the extent to which they felt NextGen: HN prepared learners for pathways. Additionally, beyond this question university and employment came up several times across other parts of interviews and therefore indicated a general concern for practitioners.

Practitioners identified positive elements about NextGen: HN in relation to employment, however they also had questions and concerns. Questions surrounding NextGen: HN and entrance to university or employment were:

Table 7: Practitioner questions about university and employment

University	*Employment*
To what extent are universities adjusting entrance requirements to new grading models?	How will NextGen: HN prepare students for oversaturated job markets?
Will point of entry into university be at year 1, 2, or 3?	Will NextGen: HN courses lead to freedom of choice in employability?
Can students cope with university grading systems following NextGen: HN?	Will NextGen: HN prepare learners with technical skills?
To what extent will learning outcomes prepare learners for success at university?	How will student achievement be communicated to employers?
To what extent are universities also future-proofing courses?	
To what extent were universities involved with the development of NextGen: HN?	

As can be seen above, questions tend to be more concerned with university. This may be because universities are seen to be more exclusive than employment, and so where practitioners have sizeable numbers of students whose pathways are university, concerns tend to be about whether or not NextGen: HN will have any impact on that pathway.

In terms of general questions about both university and employment, questions regarded:

1. Does NextGen: HN prepare students for both university and employment equally?
2. To what extent are NextGen: HN courses flexible in supporting all learning pathways?

However, it is important to note that while practitioners raised points about how NextGen: HN could provide better or worse pathways to university, practitioners did not raise discussions about how current pathways are currently lacking or in need of improvement; no direct comparisons were made in terms of current HNs to NextGen: HN. This could be reflective of how student pathways function in general, where once a learner moves on to university or employment, there's no data linking their progress to their HN; nothing in place exists which would reliably let practitioners know how their HN graduates are progressing. In this case, it's notable that for university and employment, access to pathways is a concern for practitioners when it's not typical for practitioners to know graduate progress.

Subject specialisation

Subject specialists were mentioned by over half of participants throughout various parts of interviews. Overall, there seems to be evidence for a feeling that subject experts are not as involved with the wider sector as expected, and that this is a concern for practitioners. The need for subject specialists were mentioned in regards to:

- EVs
- External quality assurance support
- NextGen: HN development
- SQA in general
- Assessment design
- Delivery of larger and fewer units

One concern for a couple of practitioners within Childhood Practice were the links being made between Childhood Practice and Health and Social Care, where these participants explained that the crossover between the two disciplines indicate a lack of subject specialisation in the design of NextGen: HN. In addition, one of these practitioners seemed concerned that there were only two colleges piloting the NextGen: HN qualification for Childhood Practice.

Workloads

Several practitioners expressed a strong or certain impression that NextGen: HN would increase workloads:

> *'NextGen has the potential to make [workloads] a bit worse because we still have quite a significant core of our HNCs who stick with, "that's the basic HNC that we offer. I don't want to do [NextGen}. I don't want any other options. I just want to do the basic..." Whereas NextGen terrifies me that I might have 120 basically individual timetables to sort out at the beginning of the academic year. So the. . .paperwork in terms of that.'*

> *'Obviously. So it's just getting the course materials, isn't it, getting the stuff ready that would be the challenge, wouldn't it? And our time. So hopefully we would have the time in the summer, when we came back to kind of get [NextGen: HN materials] ready, and usually at Ayrshire we split it anyway. So we would look at units for workloads. Some staff would develop materials for some units, so that it's not [one person] doing it all...So it would just be looking at the course material we've got, and*

making sure that we had that, the right stuff for them, and if it's maybe something that we're not sure of, [because] we're learning about it as well, because in practise things change quite a lot, don't they?'

'It's going to definitely increase workloads, to get prepared for delivery, and to become familiar with the actual content and how that's going to look.'

It's worth noting here, however, that practitioners were varied in concern to workloads, where some practitioners expressed that they don't really see an already demanding role becoming more demanding, where NextGen: HN could potentially bring improvements:

'I think everybody's workload is off the scale these days. But no, because I enjoy it and I think most of the people I work with in FE enjoy it. So, if it improves it for the student, then [practitioners] will do it; and if there's less assessment then that might take off some of the burden. So, workload is really an approach, how a department does things, you know, it comes down to how manager's [have] organised things.'

Overall, these concerns could potentially be helped through better communications from SQA in terms of what's expected from practitioners in terms of development, as well as communications on how colleges are organising and making room for NextGen: HN pilots. These concerns could be further mitigated by incorporating more evidence of pilot experiences into SQA communications.

Conclusion

Throughout interviews, practitioners indicated varying degrees of positivity and openness to NextGen: HN. In general, practitioners tended to feel positively about individual elements of NextGen: HN with negativity tending around issues of practicalities. Overall, interviews suggest that NextGen: HN is rolling out across a complicated time for the sector as a whole; practitioners on one hand may be indicating a want for change and future-proofing, yet on the other hand express some need to weigh this against overburdening staff where it may be unnecessary or not the right time.

Practitioners identified areas of uncertainty about the pilot, which could suggest that current levels of engagement with information is varied. One takeaway from this research should be that current information outputs on NextGen: HN could actually be *more* detailed, and that the number of questions practitioners had across various aspects of the pilot demonstrate that current outputs of information may create anxiety where there is less detail. Although these impressions may be coming from what was shown to practitioners through interview visual aids, this alone may suggest more room for engagement. Although these results cannot be used to comment on non-pilot practitioners as a whole, in considering the level of engagement this research had with non-pilot institutions, this could be an indicator to communicate with non-pilot institutions more.

In conclusion, it's clear that several aspects of NextGen: HN are viewed as positive changes to the sector in theory. While some practitioners have expressed excitement and anticipation for the rollout of NextGen: HN in their subjects, there is some evidence to suggest that current levels of engagement and communications may be impacting positivity. With more communications and transparency between SQA and the sector as a whole, including pilot design, this could have a positive impact on engagement and experiences of NextGen: HN moving forward.

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Recruitment email to interested practitioners

Hello,

My name is Ayla Rosales, I am a Research Analyst at SQA. As a stage of the research on NextGen: HN, SQA is interested in the views of practitioners with experience delivering HNC and/or HND courses that are not yet a part of the NextGen: HN pilot.

Since 2021, SQA has piloted NextGen: HN qualifications across Scotland, and we have been gathering evaluative evidence from both learners and practitioners on their experience of the pilot. We are currently seeking evidence from practitioners who do not deliver NextGen: HN courses yet, with the aim of:

- Understanding views on HNCs and HNDs as individual qualifications in their own right
- Understanding views on the pilot design, including the addition of meta-skills and learning for sustainability
- Evaluating the potential impact of NextGen: HN to practitioner workloads and student learning
- Evaluating integration of the pilot into specific subject(s) areas
- Exploring areas where support may be needed in the transition to NextGen: HN

We are interested in lecturers who deliver on the following courses in particular, but lecturers who deliver any HNC or HND course are welcome:

- Accounting
- Acting and Performance
- Agriculture / Agricultural Technology
- Childhood Practice
- Computing
- Engineering
- Horticulture
- Networking and Infrastructure
- Physical Activity and Health
- Radio
- Social Sciences
- Social Services
- Software Development
- Television
- Plus any others

More information on the pilot can be found at [NextGen: HN - our qualifications are changing - SQA](https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/100550.html) (https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/100550.html), however please note it is not necessary for participants to know anything about the pilot in order to participate in the research.

I am asking for any practitioners who are interested in contributing to this research to please fill out this form: https://forms.office.com/e/a6nieP921E, after which SQA will make 1-1 contact with anyone expressing interest with further information and arrangements for availability.

Thank you for your time,

Ayla Rosales

Ayla Rosales

Research Analyst

Research and Evaluation: Policy, Analysis and Standards

email: ayla.rosales@sqa.org.uk | w: http://www.sqa.org.uk

Scottish Qualifications Authority

The Optima Building, 58 Robertson Street, Glasgow, G2 8DQ

Participant Information Form

Title of research: NextGen: HN Practitioner Engagement Research

Researchers: Ayla Rosales; Rachel Whitford; Pooja Marwaha; Colin Moore; Maggie Mroczkowski

Hi, my name is Ayla Rosales and I am a Research Analyst at the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). I am interested in finding out your views on the Next Generation Higher National pilot (NextGen: HN) which are set to replace current HNC and HND qualifications in the 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?

As part of the ongoing research on Next Generation Higher National Qualifications (NextGen: HN), SQA is interested in the views of practitioners with experience delivering HNC and/or HND courses that have not yet been a part of the NextGen: HN pilot. Following a 2018 / 19 consultation with colleges, sector skills bodies, Skills Development Scotland (SDS), the Scottish Funding Council, and other stakeholders invested in updating qualifications to adapt them for the future, SQA developed NextGen: HN to equip learners with both the skills and knowledge necessary to thrive in a 21st century environment**.** To realise this vision, NextGen: HN has included new elements, some of which are:

♦ Larger and fewer units, to reduce the assessment load for staff and learners
♦ Incorporation of meta-skills and learning for sustainability
♦ Mandatory project unit
♦ New grading model

Since 2021, NextGen: HN has been piloted in institutions across Scotland, and several evaluative pieces of research have been conducted on both learners and practitioners with first-hand experience of the pilot. The purpose of this research is to find out the views of practitioners on HNC and HND qualifying courses on the NextGen: HN pilot. As part of SQA's assurance to make evidence-based decisions, this research will incorporate the views of college practitioners who are still delivering current HNC and HND qualifications to contribute further to the evaluation and provide a well-rounded evidence base.

2. Why have I been chosen?

You are being asked to take part because you are an HNC and / or HND qualifying course practitioner, and you do not yet have first-hand experience of delivering the NextGen: HN pilot.

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, over Microsoft Teams.

I will ask you some questions about what you think about your views on NextGen: HN. This includes your views on:

♦ HNCs and HNDs as individual qualifications in their own right
♦ The pilot design
♦ Potential impacts on student learning and workload
♦ The qualification as a whole single graded unit
♦ A new system of support for external quality assurance
♦ Digital technology as an embedded tool

You do not have to answer any question that you do not want to. This will take anywhere between 30 to 60 minutes, depending on how much you want to share. I will record and save the answers on Microsoft Cloud/SharePoint so that afterwards I can listen carefully to what was said. You will be asked to complete a Consent Form.

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

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. I will destroy the data at the end of the project.

7. Who has reviewed the research?

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

8. Who can I contact for further Information?

If you have any questions about this research, please contact me at: ayla.rosales@sqa.org.uk. If you wish to make a request for the information we hold about you, please contact data.protection@sqa.org.uk.

Thank you for reading this form.

Topic guide

A. General:

1. I know that you deliver HNCs / HNDs courses in _____; can you tell me a little more about your background working in education?
2. What do you know about NextGen: HN?
3. How did you find or receive information on NextGen: HN?
4. Is there anything you think would be useful to know about NextGen: HN before the wider rollout?
5. How supportive do you currently find SQA to be in external quality assurance?
6. How do you think SQA can ensure a more supportive role moving forward?

B. Views on specific elements of the pilot design:

1. [SLIDE 2] HNCs and HNDs are becoming individual qualifications, meaning learners will not be required to complete an HNC before progressing to the HND. What are your views on this?

[Prompts, if needed]:

   a. Can you see this having an impact on any aspect of your work?
   b. To what extent will this impact learners?

2. What do you know about new grading models?

   [*show* SLIDE 4, *before following:*] HNCs and HNDs will have larger and fewer units, and be graded as a whole by Achieved with Distinction, Achieved with Merit, and Achieved.

   a. To what extent do you think grading the qualification as a whole, as opposed to single graded units will impact you? Impacting learners?
   c. One purpose of a new grading model is to decrease the number of assessments practitioners will have to mark. Are there any other contributing factors that could be a barrier to decreasing marking loads?
   d. To what extent do you think new grading and assessment models will more accurately reflect student achievement? Why?
   e. Any other comments about grading?

3. What do you know about meta-skills?

   [*show* SLIDE 5, *before following:*] Meta-skills are the formal introduction of developing skills for further learning and career development, such as self-management, social intelligence, and innovation.

   a. What do you think about the inclusion of meta-skills into NextGen: HN?
   b. To what extent are there opportunities in your subject area for learners to develop meta-skills?
   c. Is there anything about your subject area which could make it difficult to incorporate meta-skills?

4. What do you know about learning for sustainability?

[*show* SLIDE 8 *before following prompts:]* Learning for sustainability is the inclusion of core components to prepare learners for the transition to net-zero and increasing demand for green skills, jobs, and careers.

   a. What do you think of the inclusion of learning for sustainability into NextGen: HN?
   b. How well do you think learning for sustainability fits in your subject area?
   c. Is there anything about your subject area which could make it difficult to incorporate learning for sustainability?

5. What are your thoughts on integrating more digital technology into courses and assessments?
   a. Is there anything about your subject area that might make the integration of digital technology more or less difficult?

6. [*SKIP unless the participant has indicated they know a lot about the pilot*]. Based on what you know about the pilot so far, how do you think it compares to the courses you currently deliver?
   a. How do you think the pilot compares in terms of academic rigour?
   b. To what extent do you think lecturers need support in delivering an academically rigorous course?
   c. To what extent do lecturers want support?

7. To what extent do you think NextGen: HN will better equip learners for employment, or university?
   a. Do you think NextGen: HN specifically presents any new barriers to preparing learners for employment?
   b. Do you think NextGen: HN specifically presents any new barriers to preparing learners for further education?

C. Views on delivering the pilot:

1. Are there any elements about NextGen: HN that you feel will have an impact on your role as a lecturer?
   a. Could there be any impact on your current workload?

   [If participant indicates the rollout will have a NEGATIVE impact]:

   b. What kind of support might practitioners need in mitigating an excessive workload in the rollout of NextGen: HN?

2. Do you see any potential barriers in introducing NextGen: HN?

[Prompts, if needed]:

    a. ...to your institution?

    b. ...to lecturers?

    c. ...to learners?

3. Are there any demands colleges are currently facing that may have an impact on the rollout of NextGen: HN?

4. What support do you think practitioners will need to be able to deliver NextGen: HN?

D. Conclusion:

1. Overall, what impact do you think NextGen: HN will have on the sector as a whole?

    a. Is the sector currently able to cope with the volume of change that a move to NextGen: HN would incur?

2. That concludes our interview. Are there any other comments that you would like to make?

Stop Recording: Thank you very much for participating. If you need to contact me for any reason, my email is on the participant information sheet.

NextGen: HN interview visual aids (as text)

Slide 1: NextGen Design Principles (text from PowerPoint slide)

- HNC / HNDs designed to be individual qualifications
- To comprise of 120 SCQF credit points at levels 7 and 8 respectively
- Larger and fewer units
- Inclusion of a mandatory project-based unit worth at least 24 SCQF credit points (3 SQA credits)
- Reduction in assessment load
- Incorporation of Learning for Sustainability (LfS)
- Incorporation of meta-skills
- New grading models, no graded unit
- New supportive approach to external quality assurance
- Digital by design — use of technology embedded to enhance and support assessment, learning and teaching approaches

Slide 2: Grading Statements (text from PowerPoint slide)

- Achieved:

  This candidate demonstrates knowledge, understanding and application of skills. They think and work independently and use their judgement to find solutions to problems. They achieve agreed aims by applying a range of meta-skills and working well with colleagues and peers.

- Achieved with Merit:

  This candidate demonstrates an excellent level of knowledge, understanding and application of skills. Thinking and working independently to a high standard, they demonstrate good judgement and effective problem-solving skills. They achieve agreed aims by applying a broad range of meta-skills and working effectively with colleagues and peers.

- Achieved with Distinction:

  This candidate consistently demonstrates outstanding knowledge, understanding and application of skills. Thinking and working independently to an exceptional standard, they apply excellent judgement and creative problem-solving skills. They achieve or exceed agreed aims by confidently applying an extensive range of meta-skills and working very effectively with colleagues and peers.

Slide 3: Grading (text from PowerPoint slide)

Current vs NextGen

- ABC vs Achieved, Achieved with Merit, Achieved with Distinction
- Whole qualification grading
- Assessment will change — no more graded unit
- Meta-skills part of the delivery and grade

Slide 4: Meta-Skills (text from PowerPoint slide)

Transferable behaviour and abilities that help you adapt and succeed in life, study and work.

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

NextGen aims:

♦ to complement vocational technical aspects of courses

♦ to give students skills for future leverage and articulation

NextGen approach:

♦ meta-skills model integrated across the course

♦ contextualised development and reflection

♦ carrier projects are SCQF levelled but meta-skills are not

♦ personal development of meta-skills assessed in one unit

Slide 5: Meta-Skills (text from PowerPoint slide)

Self-management:

♦ Focusing

♦ Integrity

♦ Adapting

♦ Initiative

Social intelligence:

♦ Communicating

♦ Feeling

♦ Collaborating

♦ Leading

Innovation:

♦ Critical Thinking

♦ Sense-making

♦ Creativity

♦ Curiosity

NextGen: HN courses will include the development of meta-skills as part of their core content, complementing vocational, academic and technical aspects of the learning. Of course, employers, lecturers and training providers have always supported learners to develop their meta-skills in one way or another, even if they haven't used this term. However, by formally including meta-skills now, we can make this support much more

visible, and learners will be better able to actively develop and articulate their career-ready skills, whatever their future pathways.

Slide 6: Learning for Sustainability (text from PowerPoint slide)

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.

The intention is for LfS to complement the vocational and technical aspects of each NextGen: HN course alongside its key features and learner focus.

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.

Slide 7: Learning for Sustainability — United Nations sustainability development goals (text from PowerPoint slide)

Design principles for NextGen Higher National Qualifications (Phase 2 Prototype 2) include the requirement for Learning for Sustainability to be considered and, where appropriate, a common outcome can be included within one of the mandatory units.

Sustainability can be embedded in a qualification in several ways, including directly through developing sustainability-related content and assessment, and / or indirectly through establishing sustainability-related practices within the qualification.