NextGen: HN Design Principles

Review of Evidence

Publication date: May 2024

Contents

1 Introduction

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

The four reports on NextGen: HN design principles are:

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

This report collates evidence that has been gathered from various NextGen: HN evaluative activities that have already taken place. The reporting and outputs from these activities have been scrutinised to determine what information we can gather on the various design principles for NextGen: HN qualifications, and what changes, if any, should be made to the design principles.

It also includes the key findings from two separate pieces of qualitative research; the research was undertaken in autumn 2023 with employers who had not yet been involved in a NextGen: HN prototype development and with practitioners who had not yet been involved in a NextGen: HN pilot, but who had experience of teaching current Higher National Certificates (HNCs) or Higher National Diplomas (HNDs).

It is important to note that the feedback discussed in this report represents the views of those who took part in the various evaluation activities. Some of the feedback may be based on misunderstood aspects of NextGen: HN. Such feedback is still included where it could potentially provide useful information for the future development of NextGen: HN.

Overall, the report takes a maximal approach. It does not only consider whether the current design principles are appropriate, or whether they need to be changed. It also includes feedback that relates to how the design principles operate, and on any changes needed to improve the operation of NextGen: HN as a result, even if this does not result in amendments to the design principles.

The report does not include recommendations, but, instead, aims to provide a summary of the information and evidence available.

A similar exercise leading to a separate report looked at the wider context in which NextGen: HN is being introduced. The further education sector in Scotland is dealing with a number of challenges at present, including the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, a tight financial situation and ongoing industrial action. As such, SQA needs to consider the sector's ability to cope with the introduction of NextGen: HN, and what, if anything, it can do to support the sector during this stage.

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

assessment. Given this, SQA's capacity to support the wider roll out of NextGen: HN should also be considered.

That report also considers the sector's and SQA's own ability to introduce NextGen: HN.

2 Sources of evidence

This section of the report provides background information on the various sources of evidence included in this report. Most, but not all, of the evaluative activity included took place in the latter part of 2022 or 2023. It is important to note that since the publication of these sources of evidence, the NextGen: HN team have continued to engage with various stakeholders, including practitioners and learners. Given the iterative nature of the NextGen: HN pilot process, in many cases changes will have been made in response to feedback from stakeholders. Where possible, this report has omitted outdated feedback and included information on actions taken in response.

2.1 Learner Engagement – Final Report 22/23

The research in the **Learner Engagement Report** focuses on 'opportunities learners have to shape the development of education policy at a national level, working with others to contribute to the success of the sector as a whole'. The aim was to gather feedback from learners on the new features and use the data gathered to inform and shape NextGen: HN qualifications and developments of other qualifications in the future.

The data presented in the **Learner Engagement Report** was collected through focus groups with those taking part in NextGen: HN pilot qualifications. 70 focus groups were conducted in two rounds, the first 35 focus groups taking place in November 2022 and the remaining 35 focus groups taking place in April and May 2023. Focus groups took place across Scotland in 13 centres that were delivering one or more NextGen: HN qualifications. 410 learners took part in the first round of focus groups and 353 took part in the second round.

2.2 Prototype Evaluation

The **Prototype Evaluation report** discusses the findings from the evaluation of the NextGen: HN pilot qualifications. Time for reflecting on the pilot was built in throughout the first year of delivery and involved various focus groups. There was a pre-launch evaluation focus group, which discussed and reviewed the qualifications against the aims and ethos of the NextGen: HN project. After the pilots went live, there were two further focus groups with delivery centres. These focus groups provided an opportunity to gauge responses from practitioners on the development on the pilot and gather views on any additional support that may be required.

Pre-launch focus groups were held online for 11 HNC subject areas in June and August 2022. They lasted an hour and a half and included representatives from the Qualification Design Team within SQA, pilot centres, industry, higher and further education. Focus groups with practitioners were held online in December 2022 and January 2023 for each subject. These involved practitioners and pilot centres. The final focus groups were held online in June 2023 with practitioners and pilot centres.

2.3 Change requests

The **change request forms** gathered proposed changes from 60 respondents between September 2022 and October 2023; the information gathered was used as evidence in this research. Respondents included pilot centre delivery teams, new product development managers, SQA coordinators from pilot centres and Qualifications Design Team members. The majority of these requests were for minor changes that came from the pilot centres or proactive action that SQA and new product development managers have taken in response to policy changes.

2.4 Review of quality assurance process

The **review of quality assurance (QA)** from 2022–23 involved a centre survey and an external quality assurer (EQA) survey. The response rate was low (4 responses out of 16 centres for the centre survey), but findings were mostly positive. Although the Quality Assurance Team were also reviewing and monitoring the process throughout the year, this report only focuses on the survey responses.

2.5 Change impact assessments

Change impact assessments (CIAs) were conducted through facilitated discussions with stakeholder groups at centres and a change practitioner from SQA. SQA facilitated 14 CIAs in 2022 and 3 in 2023. The CIAs served as a self-reflection tool for centres to assess their practices. They were designed to help centres understand the likely impact of NextGen: HN.

2.6 Ashbrook research with HEIs

The **Ashbrook report with higher education institutions (HEIs)** presents findings from research that Ashbrook Research & Consultancy Ltd undertook on behalf of SQA in April 2023. The project collected qualitative information related to issues around awareness and knowledge of NextGen: HN, differences between NextGen: HN and the current Higher National (HN) qualifications, impact, recognition of prior learning and articulation.

The research included a total of 32 interviews with individuals in HEIs involved in admissions processes and/or the development of NextGen: HN.

2.7 Lessons learned

The **Lessons Learned Document** gathered evidence of any issues that arose during the NextGen: HN pilot and how they can be resolved moving forward into the project rollout. This report looks at issues reported between June and October 2023.

2.8 Grading Review

The **Grading Review** summarises the grading methodologies that are used in the NextGen: HN pilot qualifications. It also discusses the risks and benefits, and evidence bases for these. This report draws its information from version 1.1 of the Grading Review.

2.9 NextGen: HN Employer Engagement research

The **NextGen: HN Employer Engagement research** aimed to capture the views of employers in sectors that align with piloted NextGen: HN subjects. This research looked at

those design principles that were relevant to employers, and that employers would be in a position to comment on. It also explored issues relating to the context in which NextGen: HN was being introduced. This research was carried out with employers who had not engaged with the development process of NextGen: HN.

This research explored the views of employers from various sectors across Scotland in 14 semi-structured interviews that took place in September 2023. Some of the employers that were interviewed also worked in an employer training provider (ETP) organisation; they were able to provide unique insight with their dual position as both an employer and training provider.

2.10 NextGen: HN Non-Pilot Practitioner research

The **NextGen: HN Non-Pilot Practitioner research** aimed to capture the views of college practitioners with experience of teaching HN qualifications who had not yet been involved in the NextGen: HN pilot. The research looked at the design principles of NextGen: HN, and explored issues relating to the context in which NextGen: HN was being introduced.

This research explored the views of college practitioners from various sectors and further education colleges across Scotland in semi-structured interviews that took place in September 2023. 18 participants across 8 institutions and 19 subject areas were recruited for in-depth interviews conducted over Microsoft Teams. Out of the 18 practitioners recruited, 17 delivered courses at pilot centres.

3 Overall views of NextGen: HN

This section of the report collates feedback on the NextGen: HN project as a whole, and provides some context for later findings on specific design principles.

The **Learner Engagement Report** found that overall, learners were enjoying their courses and reported having a good experience. From the two rounds of focus groups, the majority of learners in the first round were somewhat more positive about NextGen: HN and were more likely to say their experience has been good or mostly good. However, in the second round, learners were more critical of certain aspects of their courses and there was more of a focus on some of the areas which did not work so well. These were mainly due to a lack of information and clarity.

Once the NextGen: HN pilots were live, focus groups were conducted with practitioners. The **Prototype Evaluation report** presents the findings. The broad consensus was that NextGen: HN allowed more flexibility in learning and teaching. Practitioners also highlighted that learners felt positive about the new approach, groupwork and the portfolio approach. More focus groups were conducted at the end of the pilots; the practitioners felt that they were better prepared to deliver NextGen: HN qualifications after going through the pilot. They also suggested minor changes to ensure that the course runs smoothly.

The **Ashbrook report** provided feedback from HEIs. The majority of participants had a general knowledge and understanding of the principles of NextGen: HN and what it was trying to achieve. However, many participants believed that there had been a lack of consultation and engagement with HEIs when developing the NextGen: HN courses.

However, there has been significant HEI involvement through subject-level consultation and engagement exercises, and through staff being involved in Qualification Design Teams.

The **NextGen: HN Employer Engagement research** found that employers were broadly enthusiastic about NextGen: HN. They felt it was a fresh approach that would provide the flexibility needed to serve the 21st century workforce and that it would be beneficial for learners too. Although the overall feelings towards NextGen: HN were positive, some employers would like SQA to provide more information on the next steps.

Evidence from interviews conducted in the **NextGen: HN Non-Pilot Practitioner research** found that practitioners identified a wide range of aspects of NextGen: HN as being positive overall. Negative views were mainly connected to a perceived lack of communication, which may show that while there is broad support for the NextGen: HN rollout, some practitioners are not aware of the resources available to them.

Overall, across the range of evaluative activity, there was a broad consensus in favour of the approach of NextGen: HN so far. Participants made a number of comments and suggestions about the various design principles, which are covered in the subsequent sections of this report; however, this feedback should be viewed in the context of broad support for the project and what it is trying to achieve.

4 Separation of HNCs and HNDs

HNCs and HNDs are individual qualifications, comprised of 120 SCQF credit points at SCQF levels 7 and 8, respectively.

Overall, stakeholders were either supportive of separating HNCs and HNDs, or took a neutral position. In many cases, respondents raised some potential concerns, but expressed that if these were considered and resolved, they would be comfortable with separating the qualifications.

The **CIAs** showed that some centres felt that the new HNC and HND structure may cause confusion and stress to learners. Centres also stated that options for part-time learners need to be explored.

Direct entry into year 3 of HEIs was raised as an area of uncertainty, and centres emphasised the need to formalise these routes before Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) applications start.

Among HEIs (**Ashbrook report**), the extent to which recognition of prior learning (RPL) is used to aid articulation with advanced standing varies. In general, however, RPL usually allows candidates who have achieved an HNC to move into second year of university, and those who have achieved an HND to move into second or third year of university. HEIs expressed a desire to widen access to articulation with advanced standing, and they are keen to explore the issue of using RPL to aid articulation with advanced standing further. The separation of HNCs and HNDs as part of the NextGen: HN qualifications may necessitate a review of institutions' current articulation agreements. HEIs have to ensure that learners are sufficiently prepared and supported upon entry to university, and it is important to them that RPL is dealt with appropriately.

Employers in the **NextGen: HN Employer Engagement Report** were broadly supportive of the HNC and HND decoupling. They felt that learners would benefit from this as it could save time, might be more flexible, and would allow learners to upskill later in their career.

However, employers also expressed some concerns about this change. They felt that because the HNC and HND were historically viewed as a coupled qualification, there may be some confusion amongst employers when NextGen: HN graduates enter the workforce. They thought that SQA should provide employers with more information about the decoupling to aid their understanding.

Additionally, employers expressed concern that learners would lose out on the foundation skills and training that are normally gained during the HNC, if they only do the HND.

In the **NextGen: HN Non-Pilot Practitioner Report**, overall feelings towards the separation of HNCs and HNDs were, again, fairly neutral. Most practitioners focused more on practical issues to be considered than on the overall merits of the proposal.

Additionally, 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.

The most frequently raised issue was around entry requirements for HNDs. Many practitioners found it difficult to fully assess the separation of HNCs and HNDs without knowing details of how a learner would gain entry into an HND. Some practitioners felt that it was going to be very difficult to prepare for HND study without achieving an HNC first. There were also concerns around whether learners would know which qualification to apply for. Lastly, some practitioners asked questions about the decoupling of HNCs and HNDs during research, despite these being covered in the information provided to them. This may indicate that SQA needs to communicate the decoupling of HNCs and HNDs more effectively.

5 Larger and fewer units, including project-based unit

NextGen: HN qualifications are comprised of larger and fewer units, including a mandatory project-based unit worth at least 24 SCQF credit points (3 SQA credits).

There was a range of feedback on different parts of this principle. Some participants provided feedback on either specific units, or on whether units could be reused for different purposes.

In the **Lessons Learned Document**, stakeholders gave several suggestions to improve qualifications. For example, the stacking of PDAs around professional standards to cover regulatory requirements was positively received and the same approach can be applied to HNs. One user said that there is a great deal of focus on utilising what already exists to develop individual units to address the issues of portfolio size.

Data gathered from participants in the **change request forms** provided feedback on units across various subject areas. For example, feedback on Systems Engineering: An

Introduction (J6CY 47) indicated that there are too many criteria per learning outcome and requested relevant changes. Other changes included small amendments to the language used in unit specifications.

Some centres, in particular amongst computing staff, noted in the **CIAs** that they would like to have better understanding of the new frameworks and units. They proposed more planning and discussions at team meetings as countermeasures, as well as meetings with other pilot colleges and integration of units across assessments.

There was also more detailed feedback, again in the **CIAs**, around the implications of the changed approach. Centres thought that changes in unit delivery would result in more contact days with learners, more self-directed research on the part of the learners, and some process updates. Other centres noted that some learners might be reluctant to move to more independent learning. Expectations would have to be carefully communicated, as well as potential exit routes. If it is more difficult for learners to successfully complete individual units, they may be more likely to withdraw, and end up not completing any qualifications.

Integration of the units and assessments will require planning, co-ordination and communication. For this reason, some centres raised the importance of timely communication of key unit information.

Some centres commented that they did not anticipate significant resistance to the change in units. They brought up the need for co-ordination of the 'right people' to facilitate the rollour of the project. Other centres wondered how to manage delivery of large-sized units, and noted the need for significant planning, timetabling and preparation. These centres noted time, money and other resources as potential barriers, including funding needed for lecturers to engage in professional development.

Another concern raised was whether larger units would mean that if someone failed to pass their HNC, they would have to redo an entire year rather than simply repeating a few units, as they could in legacy HNCs.

In the **NextGen: HN Non-Pilot Practitioner Report**, most feedback focused on issues relating to the assessment load and grading, rather than a reduction in the number of units. These comments are covered in subsequent sections. Of those who commented on the number of units, most were supportive of the idea of having a smaller number of larger units.

There was also some feedback on project-based units. In general, this feedback was more about potential issues that may require consideration rather than support or opposition to the idea. Learners were broadly supportive, though some concerns were expressed in the **Learner Engagement Report**. Overall, learners enjoyed project work and found individual projects to be a positive experience, as project work allowed them to provide continuous evidence of their progress. Group projects, however, received mixed feedback as learners had concerns around how everyone's progress and development would be observed, especially if participants had different levels of competency. This made group projects demotivating and stressful for some learners.

Some respondents in the **NextGen: HN Non-Pilot Practitioner research** commented on the proposal for a project-based unit, mostly related to the implications of a project-based

unit. There were concerns about the impact that independent, project-based learning may have on overall learning, as practitioners felt that some subjects require a foundation of knowledge before learners can embark on independent learning. Another concern was that project-based units will require practitioners to deliver front-loaded courses with information heavy classes, rather than spreading the information out across the year. Lastly, project-based units may require learners to retain information over longer periods, and some learners may have difficulties with this.

6 Reduced assessment load

The use of larger and fewer units should result in a reduction in assessment load, allowing more time for in-depth learning.

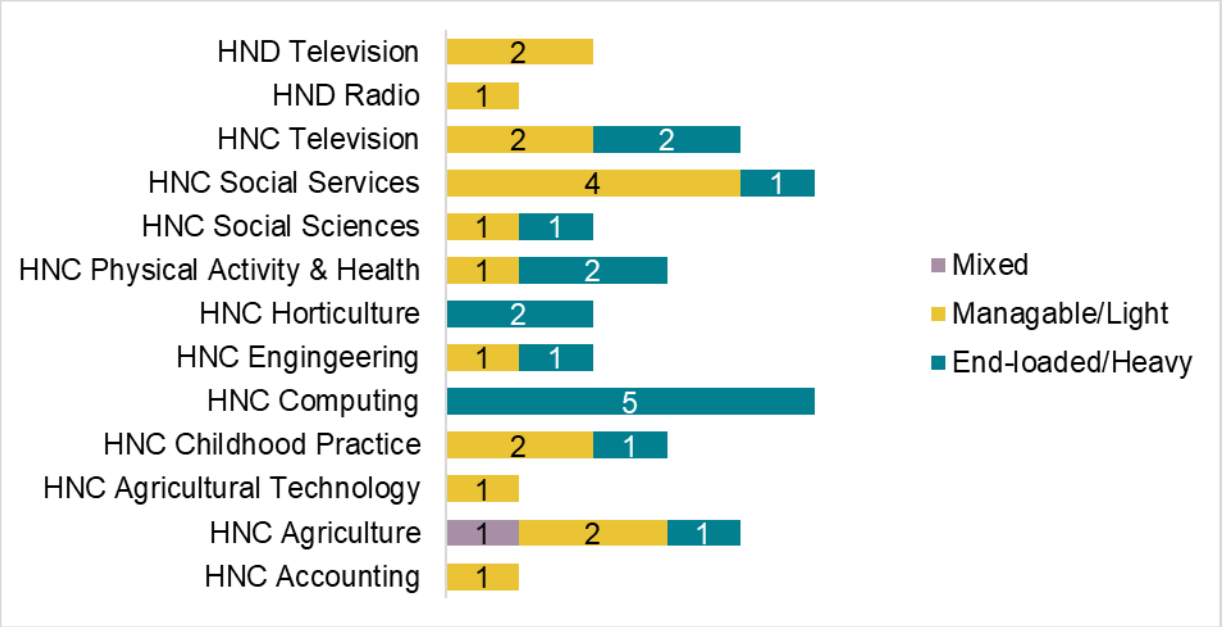
In general, participants welcomed the idea of a reduction in assessment load. For example, HEIs in the **Ashbrook report** perceived decreased assessment burden positively as one of the main differences between NextGen: HN and the current HN. Most of the concerns raised were around whether a reduction in the assessment load had been successfully implemented in all subjects. Some of these concerns could relate to how the assessment approach is communicated to learners.

In the **Learner Engagement Report**, learners had mixed views regarding their assessment load. Just over half (51%) said assessment load felt manageable or light, while under half (46%) stated that it felt either end-loaded and/or heavy.

Those who felt their assessments were end-loaded said that the first semester had few or no assessments, which rapidly increased in the second semester, with deadlines close to each other. This caused many learners to experience anxiety and stress. Learners who had their assessments spread out throughout the year did not seem to feel as much stress or anxiety about their final assessments as the learners who had end-loaded assessments. However, it is worth noting that many of the learners did not have previous college experience; therefore, they were unable to compare the assessment load of current HNCs and NextGen: HNs. It is also worth noting that distribution of assessments throughout the year is a matter for centres to decide on.

Learner were told that the course would be holistically assessed, therefore they expected continuous assessment. However, this was not always realised in practice, and some learners were met with end-loaded assessments. Figure 1 below shows the variation in the perceived assessment load for different NextGen: HN qualifications. Some qualifications appear to have more effectively reduced the assessment load for learners, namely the HND in Television and HNC in Social Services. However, learners enrolled in HNC in Computing and HNC in Horticulture were more likely to experience a heavier load of assessments.

Figure 1: Number of focus groups reporting different perceived assessment load in the second round



When focus groups were conducted with pilot centres in December 2022 and January 2023 in the **Prototype Evaluation report**, it was too early to comment on the assessment load as few assessments had taken place at the time. However, it was noted that the load did feel lighter than previous years and assessments had been reduced in the NextGen: HN pilots compared to current HNs; learners also fared well in assessments that had taken place.

A number of respondents in the final focus groups agreed that although there had been a reduction in assessments, the assessments were end-loaded for some subjects. This was concerning to both lecturers and learners.

Participants welcomed the flexible approach to assessments. Some centres have already identified the changes they would make moving forward, such as more touch points for learners, and integrating assessments across the units and outcomes.

Several **CIAs** mentioned implications of reduced summative assessment load. For example, more formative assessments may be needed to ensure that learners can succeed in summative assessments. An increase in progress reviews may also be needed as there may be longer periods of time between learners sitting summative assessments.

Overall, centres expressed the need for sufficient time to liaise with one another to develop and integrate a new assessment approach and develop any new resources required for formative assessment of individual units.

In the 2023 **CIAs**, the need for sufficient time to develop a new assessment approach was reiterated. It was noted that while learners might not be aware of the degree of change, they would welcome fewer assessments.

Respondents who contributed to the **NextGen: HN Non-Pilot Practitioner research** were generally supportive of the idea of decreasing assessment loads for learners. They thought it

would be beneficial for both learners and practitioners. However, some practitioners expressed concerns that this approach may be problematic for learners who progress to higher education if the assessment models that HEIs use are significantly different from NextGen: HN's assessment model. This was seen as an issue both for learners and for HEI acceptance of NextGen: HN.

Some respondents felt that decreasing assessment loads may not necessarily reduce the amount of stress that learners have; and that by decreasing the number of assessments contributing to a learner's grade, it would increase the pressure on the remaining assessments.

Some practitioners believed that assessment should be better integrated into courses, and that this may be more difficult with fewer, larger assessments. Others felt that all parts of the course should be assessed; this may imply that some practitioners associate assessments with learning outcomes directly.

Non-pilot practitioners were supportive of the idea of reducing workload through reducing assessment and marking, but some were sceptical if the changes would actually lead to a reduction in workload. There were concerns around whether the details of the design would work as intended.

Some more specific feedback on assessments was gathered from **change request forms**. They contained a number of different requests relating to assessments, showing actions that had already been taken in this area. These included changes for:

- closed-book assessments to allow progression to HEIs
- staggering of the deadlines for assessment-related work, such as when using unstructured questions or a portfolio approach, so they are not all due at the same time
- allowing group presentations and adding additional evidence from learners
- a higher word limit across a range of courses and subjects

7 Learning for Sustainability

NextGen: HN qualifications incorporate opportunities to engage with Learning for Sustainability (LfS).

Overall, there was significant support for the inclusion of LfS in NextGen: HN qualifications, and little opposition in principle. There were concerns as to the extent to which this can be done across all subjects, and respondents felt that there was a need for enough flexibility to take this into account appropriately.

The **Learner Engagement Report** found that there was limited coverage of LfS across all qualifications as it was not mandatory in NextGen: HN qualifications in 2022–23. Overall, learners supported LfS being included in the qualification if it was contextual to their subject; they also understood the importance of sustainability.

In the **Prototype Evaluation report**, respondents from the final focus groups in 2023 had no strong feelings on this and could see where this would fit in with their course. Some respondents stated that they had already included LfS in their teaching.

The **Employer Engagement research** found that employers were supportive of sustainability knowledge being embedded into NextGen: HN. Some felt that the qualification proposals did not include enough sustainability content and that SQA was already too late in implementing LfS into the HNs. To an extent, there was a link between the sector that an employer worked in and their views on the incorporation of LfS. Employers in some sectors felt that LfS may not be very relevant in their industry, or that there is a lack of knowledge of sustainability and environmental issues in their sector.

Overall, employers felt that incorporating LfS into NextGen: HN was both sensible and in line with the overall direction of society. Some employers expressed concerns around whether there was sufficient time to cover all elements of the NextGen: HN proposal. Some employers also felt that some learners, especially those returning to education or older generations of employees, may not place importance on sustainability or may struggle to adapt to changes.

The **NextGen: HN Non-Pilot Practitioner Report** suggested that most practitioners were broadly supportive of LfS, and that their colleges had already taken some steps towards operating more sustainably. There was also a belief that given the increased importance of sustainability and environmental issues, it was appropriate for LfS to be built into NextGen: HN.

That said, views varied according to subject, and some practitioners felt that a mandatory approach may not be appropriate for all subjects. In subjects where the relevance of LfS was not immediately obvious to learners, practitioners expressed concerns that learners may lose interest if LfS was over-emphasised. Many practitioners working in a wide range of subjects felt that LfS was relevant and should be an integral part of the course in their subject. There were few barriers to including LfS, except the concerns around relevance in some subjects that have already been discussed.

8 Meta-skills

There are opportunities throughout NextGen: HN for learners to develop meta-skills.

Feedback around meta-skills can be split into two main types. Firstly, there was feedback on the principle of including meta-skills in NextGen: HN qualifications. This feedback was broadly supportive, but respondents raised a number of issues that may require further consideration. Secondly, there was feedback from learners and practitioners who had been involved in NextGen: HN pilot qualifications, who had experienced integrated meta-skills.

8.1 Principle of integrated meta-skills

NextGen: HN Employer Engagement feedback suggested that employers were broadly supportive of the idea of including meta-skills in NextGen: HN qualifications, and they saw the importance of meta-skills. Employers viewed the incorporation of meta-skills positively as this would enable employees to articulate their soft skills better in interviews and in the workplace, and it would benefit younger people who might be more likely to change jobs often.

On the other hand, employers stated that awareness of the concept of meta-skills in the employment sphere was low, and that this may be confusing or act as a barrier for employers in understanding HN: NextGen qualifications.

NextGen: HN Non-Pilot Practitioner research feedback on meta-skills was mixed. Positive views tended to focus on valuing positive characteristics such as curiosity, integrity, and critical thinking listed within meta-skills, which participants would like learners to have. Some practitioners mentioned that their learners were lacking in these skills, and that they'd like to see learners develop these skills. No practitioners raised issues with any of the specific characteristics of meta-skills.

However, some practitioners expressed negative views towards the explicit inclusion of meta-skills as a learning outcome. They saw the explicit inclusion as somewhat challenging, as their learners were already learning these skills. Some practitioners perceived meta-skills to be little more than a rebrand of previous initiatives covering core or soft skills.

One respondent felt that meta-skills were more appropriate in courses which are likely to lead to employment, and noted that some HNCs and HNDs are more academic in nature.

In terms of identifying barriers to the explicit inclusion of meta-skills, several practitioners raised concerns about assessment. Learners' development of meta-skills is included in assessment through approaches such as self-reflection and reflective practice, although meta-skills are not assessed directly. There were mixed views on whether meta-skills should be assessed. Some practitioners supported the idea that they should be, while others were unsure of whether meta-skills can be assessed in practice.

Practitioners were also concerned with how meta-skills may impact on equality, as learners could have very different levels of meta-skills. They suggested that learners with work experience would already have high levels of meta-skills, and thus may not need them added into courses.

There were also concerns around learners with additional support needs (ASN) or varying social backgrounds, who may not develop or express meta-skills in the same way as other learners. This led to further concerns about the fairness of assessing meta-skills, especially if holistic grading models are used, as learners with more robust resource and support systems may start courses with higher levels of meta-skills already developed.

Overall, practitioners may need support in the following three areas:

- understanding how meta-skills are assessed
- understanding how meta-skills relate to the current HN
- demonstrating flexibility to learners with varying support needs

A lack of understanding around meta-skills among practitioners and learners was a key theme that emerged from **CIAs**.

Participants felt that it was important to establish an understanding of meta-skills, so that learners can feel confident in applying them in everyday life and in the workplace. Centres felt learners may need to take on more self-directed research in understanding meta-skills

and how to demonstrate them. Some participants also believed that there could be some resistance to the meta-skills aspect if it was not part of the assessment.

Some centres mentioned the potential for support staff and teams to help with initial meta-skills sessions or provide additional support sessions outside class time for any learners having trouble with aspects of meta-skills development. They also suggested regular interviews with learners, as well as early interventions, to support learners in adapting to this aspect of NextGen: HN and ensure that they are aware of what they are working towards.

Some centres felt that meta-skills, as well as the new assessment strategy, could lead to increased potential for group work.

As with reduced assessment load, HEIs in the **Ashbrook report** perceived meta-skills as one of the main differences between NextGen: HN and the current HN. However, they did not give further explanation.

8.2 Experience of integrated meta-skills

Overall, there were mixed views on how meta-skills were being integrated into NextGen: HN qualifications.

Results from first round of focus groups for the **Learner Engagement Report** found that the delivery of meta-skills in NextGen: HN qualifications was inconsistent across the pilot centres.

The first round of data collection identified the various approaches of integrating meta-skills into NextGen: HN qualifications:

- integration of meta-skills across all units
- meta-skills activities being completed but not integrated
- meta-skills not being covered until delivery of the project-based unit

In the first round, learners had mixed views on the integration of meta-skills. 51% of learners felt that meta-skills had been integrated throughout their course, while 49% felt that they had not been integrated well.

The inconsistent methods of integrating meta-skills were still evident in the second round of data collection. However, the discussion of the focus groups centred on how meta-skills progression was monitored and recorded. 57% of learners had been monitoring their meta-skills development actively, compared to over 40% felt that they had not been monitoring their meta-skills progression frequently.

The top three methods of monitoring progress used by the 35 focus groups in the second round are listed below, along with the number of focus groups that used each method:

- reflective journal — 18 groups
- self-assessment tool — 4 groups
- SWOT analysis — 3 groups

Learners generally felt that the approaches to integrating meta-skills did not work as well as they had hoped. This was mainly due to learners not receiving feedback or any support on how they could improve their meta-skills. The activities around meta-skills were completed and forgotten about as lecturers were not monitoring learners' progress, which led learners to think that it was not important. As there was no clear development plan around meta-skills, it was challenging for learners to monitor their own progress. Learners that discussed their meta-skills development with their lecturers found that discussion to be limited, and there was no meaningful reflection or actions for improvement.

Some feedback from learners on how to make meta-skills delivery more effective included having one-to-one sessions with lecturers on progress and goal setting, integrating meta-skills into practical activities, setting deadlines for reflection and feedback on meta-skills development, and more guidance and support on how learners could write effective reflective accounts.

Learners were also asked about including meta-skills in grading. 69% of learners thought that meta-skills should not contribute to their final grade, 20% agreed that meta-skills should count towards their final grade, 9% had mixed feelings towards this, and 3% were undecided.

Over half of the groups (54%) agreed that meta-skills would be helpful for their future education and employment opportunities. This shows that learners are aware of the benefits and importance of meta-skills.

Focus groups conducted with pilot centres in December 2022 and January 2023 in the **Prototype Evaluation report** found that they engaged with meta-skills with varying degrees of confidence. The report gave the following examples:

- The Agriculture and Agriculture Technology groups introduced meta-skills to learners early on and got them to reflect on their meta-skills development throughout the course.
- The Childhood Practice group took the same approach. Learners were using reflective journals as well as SDS resources.
- However, the Computing and Engineering groups both felt that it was hard to get learners to engage with meta-skills.

Both learners and practitioners welcomed more support and guidance on meta-skills.

The final focus groups revealed that the SQA Academy modules for meta-skills had helped both centres and learners to understand meta-skills better. However, some centres still found meta-skills difficult to manage, and there was a greater issue where meta-skills were not embedded throughout the award. There are still challenges for practitioners to understand how to thread meta-skills throughout the course, to give learners opportunities to develop and reflect on their development throughout the course, and not just keep it siloed to one unit within the framework. The table below summarises the use and reflections from the different subjects that were part of the focus groups.

Table 1: Uses of and reflections on meta-skills

Subject	Use and reflection
Accounting	Feel learners are engaged and understand meta-skills.
Agriculture	Reflected that they do not want to silo the use of meta-skills.
Engineering	Meta-skills used in project work and not embedded throughout the course. Reflected on the need for embedding meta-skills at the start and continuously enforcing them.
Horticulture	Struggled with embedding it and feel like it is a tick box exercise.
Physical Activity and Health	Reflected that contextualising meta-skills really helped learners.
Social Science	Noted that SQA resources were useful but came too late.
TV	Have work with the framework longer and feel confident. Have used project work to help learners develop meta-skills.

All of the groups welcomed the resources from SQA, but noted that it would have been useful to have had them earlier. They are all looking at ways to improve for the next session, with a focus on trying to embed meta-skills throughout the course so meta-skills don't feel like an add-on. They see the value in doing this for the skills development to happen naturally, and for learners to reflect on the skills in a more organic way.

Data gathered from **change request forms** also provided feedback on meta-skills. These included missing meta-skills that are subject specific (Sociology A: The Sociological Imagination — J6EW 47), changing the meta-skills element to be consistent with standard text (Professional Considerations in Accounting — J6E1 47), and adding mandatory meta-skills outcomes (NextGen: HNC in Horticulture, Maintaining Gardens and Greenspace — J6F1 47). Another change requested was to increase the time allocated to meta-skills (Social Sciences: An Evidence-Based Approach to Social Problems — J6EM 47) to 25 hours, as it had taken learners longer than anticipated to get familiar with the requirements of reflective practice.

9 Grading

NextGen: HN qualifications deliver new grading models, focusing on the qualification as a whole instead of a single graded unit.

There was a large volume of feedback on grading. This feedback can largely be split into two main areas — views on the principles behind the grading approach, including potential issues and concern; and experience-based feedback from learners and practitioners who have been involved in pilot NextGen: HN qualifications.

9.1 Principles of grading

In the feedback on the principles of the grading approach, there were concerns that the approach to grading was relatively radical and different from that used in other qualifications. There was no clear consensus across different stakeholder groups either in favour of or

against the proposals on grading. However, there was agreement that providing as much information as possible to all relevant stakeholders would be helpful.

In the **CIAs**, centres noted that careful communication is needed regarding grading to ensure everyone is clear on how grades will be determined, as this is ‘a significant departure from the existing model’.

Centres raised concerns that the new grading model would pose a risk to articulation agreements and may result in ‘less progression.’ Specifically, centres wondered whether/how the new grading approach would compare with the current A/B/C letter grade system. Though the new grading approach was considered more flexible, centres questioned how certificates will record grades. Without grading each competence, centres felt learners may miss out on certain opportunities to showcase their knowledge and experience to employers.

The new grading approach may also have implications on the appeals process. Centres proposed a standardised approach across pilot centres involving external verifier (EV) teams and good practice sharing, such as rubrics used to determine grades. This is an area where changes have been made, with rubrics now being used as suggested.

Centres were unsure how many systems will be affected by the new grading approach. Barriers posed included cost, whether learners will understand what they are signing up for, and whether partners (such as HEIs) understand the models. Collectively, these issues caused some concern around whether the changes were in learners’ best interests.

Centres wondered if universities might be more inclined to admit learners with traditional grades, given that the new grading approach may not align. Some believed that it may take one to two years for HEIs to see the difference and benefits of the new grading system.

Findings from the **NextGen: HN Employer Engagement research** were generally supportive of a move towards more continuous assessment. Employers largely welcomed the change, as they felt that the approach allowed the focus to be on learning rather than assessment, and would reflect the abilities of the candidate better. They also thought it would be beneficial to learners, in that it would reduce stress from assessment, and would be more equitable as some candidates do not perform well in an exam setting.

Employers were also asked what challenges they felt the new grading approach would present. The most common responses had to do with preserving the integrity of assessments, standardisation, and ensuring centres were adequately prepared for the change. Employers wondered how the new system would approach assessment integrity and standardisation. However, they implied that these issues were not unique to NextGen: HN qualifications and were unlikely to pose significant challenges.

There were also differences in views by sector, with a view that the graded unit was better suited to some subjects than continuous assessment.

Some employers were concerned that the descriptors, ‘Achieved,’ ‘Achieved with merit’ and ‘Achieved with distinction’ would be viewed as similar or equivalent to an A, B or C grade. Furthermore, they expressed concern around whether continuous assessment would

accurately reflect the abilities of learners who may have poorer grades at the start of their course or difficult personal circumstances, and what impact this would have on standardisation.

In the **NextGen: HN Non-Pilot Practitioner Report**, participants expressed a number of practical concerns. Some participants liked the idea of holistic grading in theory; however there were questions about how grading would work on a practical level, and the extent to which new grading models will allow for objectivity.

Participants also raised wider issues around equality and fairness. They were worried that the proposed approach could impact on learners in the long term if employers interpret an 'Achieved' grade as being unfit for hire, although it is possible that employers may already use existing grading in HNCs to help with shortlisting. They also expressed concerns as to whether learners could choose to be strategic in their approach to assessment, and may choose to spend less time on ungraded units in favour of focusing on assessments that contribute to the overall grade.

There were also concerns about the grading approach in NextGen: HN being substantially different from others that learners were likely to encounter in school and higher education. Respondents felt that HEIs may be less likely to support new grading models as a result. Others felt that learners may find a different approach to be difficult.

HEIs in the **Ashbrook report** saw the new grading approach as another major difference between NextGen: HN and the current HN. Although this is not being proposed, at the time of the research, HEIs expressed concerns about the possibility of receiving candidate portfolios that an admissions team would be expected to review, believing that this was unlikely to be viable. HEIs also expressed that it would be difficult for admissions teams to assess applicants based on distinction, merit and pass descriptors, as they do not fully understanding how these descriptors compared with A, B and C grades. Furthermore, HEIs felt there had been significant confusion regarding the extent to which portfolios would be used. This did not appear to relate to any one grading model, but more of a general concern about how learners would be assessed and graded.

HEIs expressed a strong desire to develop a more detailed understanding of the new grading model. They felt that for articulation to be successful, they would need more information in particular about grading, as well as the content of qualifications. They expressed concern that learners might not be offered a place at an HEI due to lack of knowledge and confidence about qualification content, grading and mapping.

9.2 Experience of grading models

Learners and practitioners provided feedback on how the grading models worked in practice.

The three grading models provided at the time of research for each qualification were:

- Key competency model — HNC and HND in Television, HND in Radio, and HNC in Agriculture
- Holistic model — HNC in Accounting, HNC in Agricultural Technology, HNC in Childhood Practice, HNC in Engineering, HNC in Horticulture, HNC in Social Science, HNC in Social Services, and HNC in Physical Activity and Health

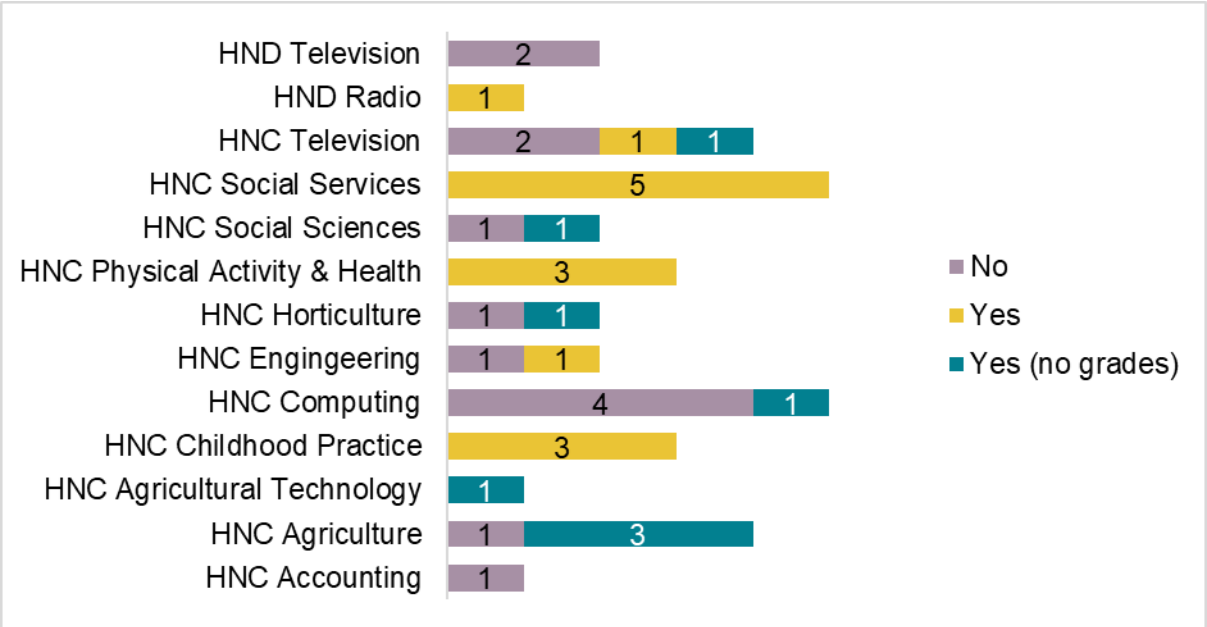
- Key components model — HNC in Computing

SQA is now just focusing on the key competency and holistic models of grading after the Grading Review found that the key components model was not appropriate for the qualification.

Feedback from the **Learner Engagement Report** suggested that learners were broadly supportive of the grading model, but felt that more information could be provided on their progress. The new grading model was welcomed by learners and most felt that it would reflect their performance more effectively than graded units. 51% of the groups consulted in the first round of focus groups stated that they understood the changes to the grading unit and received sufficient information. However, in round 2 of the focus groups, 63% felt that they had not received enough information on the level required to obtain an 'Achieved', 'Achieved with Merit', or 'Achieved with Distinction' grade for their work. Additionally, in round 2, 57% of the groups did not know what grade they were on track to obtain.

Feedback on assessments varied considerably across the different qualifications, as shown in figure 2.

Figure 2: Number of focus groups receiving feedback and interim grades



Learners who did not receive any feedback or interim grades lacked confidence in their potential grades. These learners also mentioned that the feedback they received for their assessments was brief and late. Although there was no discussion with lecturers, learners on specific qualifications utilised progress-tracking mechanisms, which allowed them to monitor their progress.

Learners who received feedback but did not receive interim grades felt that the feedback was useful, but they would have benefited from more constructive comments.

The learners who got both feedback and interim grades were satisfied. They felt that it was constructive and provided them with useful advice on improving their grades. They were also less anxious about the final grades overall.

As the focus groups conducted with pilot centres in December 2022 and January 2023 in the **Prototype Evaluation report** were conducted early in the academic year, this limited the discussion around the different approaches to grading. All the groups felt that the move towards a more holistic approach to grading would be better and fairer to learners, but there was a learning curve they needed to cross to understand how it would work in practice.

The final focus groups that were conducted found that although the grading models have been tricky to get to grips with, they were a better and fairer way to assess the learners' abilities than a graded unit. Key issues included time constraints, as well as the learning curve for the delivery team to adapt and understand the grading models and how they work in practice. It was challenging to find the time to build in feedback sessions with learners. This issue was highlighted as a problem, as the final grading models for the awards had not been finalised until well into the 2022–23 academic year. All the groups felt that the delivery of grades in 2023–24 would go smoother as they would have more experience.

The **Grading Review** stated that many aspects of the three grading models piloted as part of NextGen: HN had operated well. In line with the iterative approach of the NextGen: HN project, it recommended some changes based on how well different approaches had worked so far, including the dropping of the key components model. It argued that the role of the Grading Review was not to recommend a specific grading model, but more to produce a set of principles for grading that would apply to all NextGen: HN qualifications. It went on to recommend replacing the existing grading models with such a set of principles, although it was clear that many aspects of the existing models should be retained either as mandatory principles or strong guidance.

It also suggested that these principles should include an explicit statement of the purpose of the NextGen: HN qualification grade outcomes, which may respond to some of the feedback from HEIs and employers discussed earlier in this section.

The report endorsed the idea that all NextGen: HN qualifications should specify their standards consistently to allow for easier QA and to build confidence with external stakeholders. In general, the Grading Review argued that there was a need for a more clearly defined approach to grading than was currently the case, and suggested that further engagement and research with employers and a literature review of holistic assessment should take place.

The report also looked at grading in terms of meta-skills. It recommended that: ‘Meta-skills should have their own grade descriptors, reflecting the new position statement, and supporting centres to make fair and reliable judgements on learners’ meta-skill engagement and reflection, regardless of the context of the HN.’

It also set out a range of issues for further consideration before the production of a final grading report, and an agreed final position on grading in May 2024. These included the possible inclusion of LfS in grading, grading matrixes and grading rubrics, and standardisation of grade outcomes across centres, HNs, resits, resubmission, and appeals.

Feedback gathered from the **change request forms** suggested changes to the grading framework. The words to differentiate between 'Achieved' and 'Achieved with Merit' were too similar (HND in Radio); the grading matrix was not the best fit for HNC in Childhood Practice; the criteria for placements were okay but other criteria did not match learners' work.

10 Quality assurance

NextGen: HN qualifications provide a new supportive approach to external quality assurance.

The **review of QA** suggested that the new approach to QA was broadly working well. All centres thought having a named contact for support (their EQA) was a benefit of the NextGen: HN QA model. One centre raised that contact with the EQA was very mixed depending on the course, highlighting the support is subject to individual points of failure. This view, that the success of QA is very much dependent on the EQA (or EV previously), is one that has come up in discussions repeatedly. SQA may want to take steps to ensure that EQAs and EVs are as well trained and effective as possible.

Some touchpoint meetings took place too early in the year and the evidence was insufficient.

Almost all of the EQAs reported that they received enough information and training to carry out their role as an EQA successfully. Most of them found the pre-delivery meetings helpful and thought the touchpoint meetings worked well. EQAs' most frequently expressed issue with touchpoint meetings was a lack of meaningful time with the centres, either because they were not invited to many meetings, or that decisions were made outside of touchpoint meetings. All EQAs found that their centres required additional support outside of the scheduled touchpoint meetings.

One EQA noted that the standard QA system sometimes 'works against' the NextGen: HN qualifications, as centres require a named assessor and internal verifier per unit. Using the existing QA model alongside the holistic approach taken by NextGen: HN (meaning that multiple internal verifiers may be needed per larger unit) has created confusion. The Quality Assurance Team did produce an interim reporting method for piloting NextGen: HN qualifications, but this did not prevent confusion.

All of the EQAs found the NextGen: HN team helpful, while 10 of the 14 EQAs found the experience as a NextGen: HN EQA 'good' or 'excellent'.

Centres mentioned in the **CIAs** that they would need to develop their knowledge of any QA process changes, including any system restrictions. They will need support. One centre seemed to have set up a next steps webinar to act on this.

Some centres felt that there may be too many touchpoint meetings in relation to QA during delivery. Centres also expressed that the SQA QA system would likely need to change to cope with the qualification changes, as entries are currently unit by unit.

A new QA model will likely impact centres' existing internal quality assurance processes. Approaches to sampling evidence will need to be agreed upon.

The **NextGen: HN Non-Pilot Practitioner research** asked respondents how they saw SQA's current approach to QA, rather than trying to explain the new approach under NextGen: HN. They were then asked for suggestions on how SQA's current approach could be improved.

Overall, there were very mixed views, with different respondents taking quite strongly opposing viewpoints. For example, some respondents felt that communication about QA was efficient, while others felt that it was poor. Overall, there were some indications that approaches to QA were inconsistent — both positive and negative opinions about current experiences were strong, and some practitioners felt that having a good EV or coordinator made a big difference to experiences of external quality assurance.

At times, respondents felt that both face-to-face visits, and having a subject specialist as an EQA both improved the standard of QA. For external quality assurance specifically, some practitioners thought that the number of subject specialists providing support has been diminishing.

Respondents were also asked to make recommendations on how SQA could improve its QA support. The main suggestions made included:

- employing more subject specialists
- SQA rather than colleges employing EQAs
- providing better training for EQAs to enable them to be more supportive
- a subject-specialist QA contact that practitioners can call
- face-to-face support

11 Digital by design

NextGen: HN qualifications adopt a digital by design approach. The use of technology is embedded to enhance and support assessment, learning and teaching approaches where appropriate.

Participants were generally supportive of the digital by design approach, although, as with other design principles, they raised a number of issues which require some consideration.

Findings from the **NextGen: HN Employer Engagement Report** suggested that employers were broadly supportive of the digital by design approach, although they expressed some concerns around digital poverty and exclusion. The research also suggested that employers may not have a fully developed understanding of what a digital by design approach might look like. For example, some participants took a binary approach where learning is either face-to-face or online, rather than the use of technology being integrated into learning which may take place in a face-to-face setting, which would lead to more effective learning.

It was common for employers to say that young people entering the workforce lacked basic IT skills, such as using a computer, and that there was a need to digitally upskill the workforce.

While employers could see the benefits of digital learning being embedded in NextGen: HN, they expressed concern with moving away from face-to-face methods. The main reasons for

supporting a digital by design approach were greater flexibility, breaking down of accessibility barriers, and a greater understanding of 21st century technology.

However, employers were concerned that inequality would increase due to digital poverty if the qualifications were very digitally focused. They also felt that there was less engagement with online delivery and that digital learning would cause more problems with security and privacy. Some of these concerns might have been mitigated if employers had a better understanding of what digital by design learning would look like.

Overall, in the **NextGen: HN Non-Pilot Practitioner Report**, practitioners expressed many similar views. Although no practitioners expressed negative views about the principle of incorporating digital technology into NextGen: HN, there were concerns about digital literacy of both learners and practitioners, and also questions about affordability and college resources. A respondent felt that, while learners may be very comfortable using phones and tablets, they often have little experience of using PCs and laptops, and that time is often spent teaching them the basics of using such devices.

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 learners 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 this expectation has not been met. Others felt that while young people may not be familiar with all the technology they would use, they tended to acquire such skills relatively quickly. Conversely, other practitioners identified older, or learners with more work experience, as needing additional support in terms of digital literacy, as opposed to younger people. Overall, there was a concern that time spent on teaching digital skills was time that would otherwise have been used to teach subject knowledge.

Another related topic that several participants brought up was staff resources and practitioner digital literacy. Although staff digital literacy and resources are issues that only college institutions can solve, staff skills and resources may be a barrier to successfully integrating more digital technology into courses, especially where it may increase workloads.

Other respondents felt that the extent to which a digital by design approach was possible was very much dependent on the subject.

That said, practitioners were generally supportive of a digital by design approach, as long as the issues discussed earlier can be resolved. Although not explicitly asked in the **Learner Engagement Report**, learners provided feedback relating to the inclusion of online resources in their qualifications. They highlighted concerns about using digital tools in learning and teaching. Learners also felt they had limited access to their lecturers for support and could not reach out to them, as their lecturers were directing them to online resources when they asked for help and clarification. Learners also had concerns about self-learning but enjoyed face-to-face learning on campus.

Two HNC in Horticulture cohorts took part in the focus groups. One was a remote qualification, and this group did not enjoy the online delivery of the course. Learners also thought that the e-Portfolio aspect of the course increased their workload.