NextGen: HN Design Principles: Transition and Context

From two separate qualitative research projects undertaken with employers and non-pilot practitioners with a stake in the development of Next Generation Higher National (NextGen: HN), common themes emerged relating to the transition to NextGen: HN in education and wider employability sectors.

The findings section of this report focuses on data gathered from these two research projects surrounding the context, or environment, that NextGen: HN will be implemented in and the barriers to the transition that may occur. The conclusion section discusses the findings of these two research projects in conjunction with relevant findings from other sources of evidence in the wider evaluation regarding the context of and transition to NextGen: HN.

The further and higher education sectors in Scotland were dealing with a number of challenges at the time of fieldwork, including the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, a tight financial situation and ongoing industrial action. In the employment sector, many organisations were challenged by recruitment difficulties, the cost-of-living crisis and an ageing workforce.

This research found that employers and non-pilot practitioners identified many strengths in various sectors related to meta-skills and technological ability, which will be advantageous in the transition to NextGen: HN. Challenges in the sectors that employers identified included attracting technically and practically skilled recruits to their sector, and worries about the impact of artificial intelligence. Non-pilot practitioners also identified different challenges, mainly a lack of resources (including staff) and investment within the college sector as a whole.

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

- college and practitioner resources
- student additional support needs
- college industrial action
- college campus sizes
- lack of knowledge among employers

'Barriers' did not necessarily indicate negativity towards NextGen: HN from participants. However, recurring themes across interviews showed that some participants, particularly practitioners, questioned whether the current environment was conducive to NextGen: HN working as designed. Some practitioners expressed positivity towards elements of the pilot in theory, but felt sceptical about realising the theory in practice.

Areas of support identified by non-pilot practitioners and employers were:

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

From the evaluation of other secondary evidence, together with the research on employers and non-pilot practitioners, SQA have developed several areas as a response. The iterative nature of the NextGen: HN project means that some changes suggested in the research have already been introduced and the action taken is noted, where relevant. As of March 2024, SQA has received 52 change requests.