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**Higher Technical Qualifications**

**UVAC IN FOCUS**

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1. **What is Higher Technical Education (HTE)?**

Higher Technical Education is level 4 (e.g., Certificate of Higher Education level, Higher National Certificate {HNC} level) and level 5 (Foundation degree, Higher National Diploma {HND} level) technical education provision delivered by HEIs, FECs and independent training providers. Higher Technical Education is focused on developing the higher technical skills needed by employers and individuals. Provision includes level 4 and level 5 Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) and Ofqual regulated qualifications (Regulated Qualifications Framework qualifications) and professional and sector-based qualifications.

In 2016-2017, according to DfE figures, 53% of level 4 and level 5 students were taught in an FE college, 32% were taught by universities, with the remainder taught in alternative providers, e.g., private training providers, specialist colleges, sixth form colleges, and in adult community learning.

Far fewer individuals take Higher Technical Education programmes in England than in most OECD countries. In England, only 10% of adults aged 18 – 65 hold a level 4 or 5 qualification as their highest level of qualification achievement, whereas France, Japan, USA, Germany and Canada all have a high proportion of adults holding such qualifications. The comparative figure for Germany is 20% and for Canada 34%.

Government aims to expand and improve higher technical level, sub-degree courses to train or retrain individuals for high-skilled jobs. It has been a longstanding area of concern giving the perception that the UK has a persistent skills gap in technical education. The Government’s current reforms focus on:

* improving the quality of higher technical education on offer
* encouraging more people to take higher technical education courses and get high-skilled work
* introducing a national approval scheme, to show which higher technical qualifications meet employers’ skills needs.

On 29 September 2020 the Prime Minister announced a “major expansion of post-18 education and training to level up and prepare workers for a post-COVID economy”. The proposals aim to transform the training and skills system to “make it fit for the 21st century economy” and to help the country “build back better from coronavirus”. The announcement outlined various policies to encourage lifelong learning and to help adults to retrain including more flexible higher education loans, allowing adults and young people to space out their study across their lifetimes.

Government has also introduced a [Higher Technical Education provider growth fund](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-technical-education-provider-growth-fund) and is reforming the loans system through the Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE) to better support a broader range of FE and HE programmes including Higher Technical Education. The LLE will be introduced from 2025, providing individuals with a loan entitlement to the equivalent of four years of post-18 education to use over their lifetime. It will be available for both modules and full years of study at higher technical and bachelor’s degree level (Levels 4-6), regardless of whether they are delivered in colleges or universities.

1. **What are Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs)?**

Higher Technical Qualifications are level 4 or level 5 qualifications that have been awarded a quality mark by the Institute for Apprenticeship and Technical Education (The Institute or IfATE). The Institute is an employer-led organisation sponsored by the Department for Education (DfE) with an independent chair overseeing its work. A key element of its work is supporting employer groups in the development of Apprenticeship Standards and End Point Assessment Plans. It maintains the occupational maps which underpin all technical education and develops, approves, reviews and revises apprenticeships and technical qualifications with employers. This includes responsibility for T Levels and for implementing the approval process for HTQs.

A Higher Technical Qualification is not a specific qualification, but a quality mark for new and existing qualifications that could be OfS or Ofqual regulated. New or existing level 4 or level 5 qualifications (positioned on the FHEQ or RQF) submitted though the Institute’s approvals process on a rolling basis ([see UVAC summary of the timetable](https://uvac.ac.uk/t-levels-milestones-timeline/)) will receive a quality-mark if the qualification satisfies the IfATE [approvals criteria](https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/higher-technical-qualifications/approvals-criteria/). The process is based on mapping qualifications to relevant employer developed and IfATE approved occupational / apprenticeship standards. Higher Technical Qualifications are approved on the basis that they provide learners with entry-level competence enabling a learner to enter their chosen occupation. HTQ approved qualifications for the same occupation could have different credit values and the IfATE quality mark also allows a level 5 qualification to be quality marked against a level 4 occupation / apprenticeship standard. So, technically, different IfATE Quality Marked qualifications for the same Occupational Standard could be at different educational levels of difficulty and skill.

1. **Will the Push to Expand HTE/HTQs be at the Expense of Level 6 University Provision?**

There is a risk that Government will seek to expand HTE at the expense of level 6 undergraduate university provision. Student number caps and minimum entry grades could be used to limit undergraduate provision. Meanwhile HTQ provision could be financially incentivised and Quality Marked HTQs extensively promoted by Government and by HEIs and Awarding Organisations with Government support. HTQs could prove particularly attractive to adults already in the workforce seeking to develop new skills who do not want to undertake a lengthy programme of training.

UVAC fully supports the development of HTQs. We have, however, continually argued against expanding HTE provision at the expense of level 6, emphasising the crucial role level 6 undergraduate provision has in supporting social mobility, levelling-up and increasing UK productivity. Maintaining and expanding student choice and having HTQs that support progression to a bachelor’s degree, is a key feature of a high-quality higher education sector.

1. **Why is the HTE/HTQ Agenda of Importance to Universities?**

Just like the apprenticeship agenda, the HTE/HTQ agenda represents both a threat and opportunity for universities.

Negatively, Higher Technical Education could be expanded at the expense of level 6 undergraduate higher education programmes. Further Education providers with lower cost bases could deliver Higher Technical Education programmes for a lower cost than HEIs. Smaller Ofqual regulated qualifications (i.e., qualifications with lower credit values than FHEQ qualifications) could gain the IfATE Quality Mark for the same Occupational Standard.

Positively, in some occupational areas there could be a high demand from employers and individuals for Higher Technical Qualifications. Health and Social Care cold be a good example. UVAC has asked the Institute to undertake work with employers and PSRBs to establish the demand, from employers and individuals for specific HTQs. Government and IfATE is committed to promoting Higher Technical Qualifications and has launched a quality mark logo that makes no distinction between FHEQ and RQF regulated qualifications:



HEIs may also want to explore the development of progression routes from Higher Technical Qualifications to bachelors’ programmes. HTQs could prove particularly attractive to adults in the workforce seeking to update existing skills or acquire new skills to meet employment needs.

The £18 million HTE provider growth fund announced by the Secretary of State in June 2021 poses eligibility problems for some HEIs. To qualify for funding an HEI must have a good or outstanding Ofsted grade (for Apprenticeship) if inspected and of more significance to the sector be delivering level 4 and 5 technical education provision which relate to their intended HTQ offering. That is an HEI cannot use the Growth Fund to move into level 4 and 5 technical education provision. In contrast, the fund criteria allow for further education colleges delivering T levels in the same occupational areas to use the fund to expand into higher technical qualification delivery. UVAC has raised this anomaly with ESFA/DfE. The publicity surrounding the launch of the fund was rather ‘anti-HE’ with the then Secretary of State commenting “We want to counter the myth that a degree is the only way to a good job”. UVAC has always emphasised the importance and value of degrees in the jobs market and argued for the need to create progression routes and top-ups between HTQs and bachelor’s degrees.

1. **How do HTQs Relate to New T Levels?**

T Levels are a level 3 qualification, HTQs are a level 4 and 5 qualification. T Levels are being introduced as a new ‘technical’ pathway to complement the ‘academic’ A Level pathway. 16 – 18-year-olds will in most cases be offered two choices: A levels or a T Level, with a very limited number undertaking Apprenticeships. Government wants Applied Generals (e.g., BTEC and Cambridge Technicals) to become rare. Both T Levels and HTQs are related to Occupational Standards. HTQs should form a good progression route for students who have taken T Levels. HEIs should be aware that at least in the early years of their roll out, cohort sizes and geographical availability of mandatory T level work placements (a minimum of 315 hours in a role relevant to the T Level) will make the financial feasibility of many HTQ programmes that rely on T Level entrants questionable. It is likely that in some sectors e.g., health, nursing and social care T Level/HTQ progression pathways will develop as important new routes to higher education for young people.

UVAC continues to make the case for a ‘climbing frame’ approach to progression rather than a binary choice and separate “academic” A Level/degree and “technical” T Level/HTQ progression routes. The promotion of the technical pathway is often combined with the message that you do not need to go to university to get a good job. As part of UVAC’s support we will outline how progression from T Levels to HTQs is and can work in key subject areas and we frequently raise the importance of Applied Generals in supporting access and participation to HE for underrepresented cohorts.

1. **How are HTQs Funded?**

HTQs are funded in the same way as the qualification awarded the quality mark. For an FHEQ qualification this will be through the student loans system. Changes are, however, coming. Government has been clear that in the medium to long-term it wants to introduce financial disincentives for level 4 and level 5 technical qualifications that have not been awarded the quality mark. More broadly Government is aiming for the new Lifelong Loan Entitlement to “transform the current student loans system so that adults will be able to access a flexible loan entitlement to the equivalent of 4 years of student loans for higher-level study and training at university or college”. The Lifelong Learning Entitlement is being trialled from 2022 and introduced in 2025. Part of the rationale for the Lifelong Learning Entitlement is to support the delivery of new forms of provision and a national FE and HE credit system with credit transfer between institutions and courses and an enhanced use of digital learning.

1. **Who Quality Assures HTQs?**

The HTQ quality mark is awarded by IfATE. The Institute is currently working on quality assurance arrangements for the quality mark and the approval process of all technical qualifications. Quality assurance arrangements for the qualification awarded the HTQ quality mark are determined by the type of qualification (e.g., whether FHEQ or RQF regulated) and type of provider delivering the qualification. Existing arrangements apply.

1. **What is the Timetable for the Rollout of the Reforms to Technical Education and HTQs?**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Technical Qualifications: T levels and HTQs - Summary Timetable** | |
| **Date** | **Detail** |
| September 2020 | **1st Wave T level delivery** **starts.** |
| 46 providers. |
| 3 T levels. |
| 23 September – 16 December 2020 | **Cycle 1 HTQs:** Approvals window for the **DIGITAL ROUTE** (7 occupations)opens. |
| **22 submissions** made including qualifications from NTU, OU, Staffordshire University and University of Plymouth. |
| January 2021 | **Skills for Jobs White Paper** published forming a key part of Government’s **Plan for Jobs** |
| 1 April 2021 | 400 qualifications available to take backed by £95m government funding in 2021/22 as part of the **Lifetime Skills Guarantee** for those who haven’t achieved a qualification equivalent to A levels |
| May 2021 | **Skills and Post-16 Education Bill** brings forward measures outlined in Government White Paper, *Skills for Jobs*, and includes details of a **Lifetime Loan Entitlement (LLE)**. |
| 30th June 2021 | **Cycle 1 HTQs** **approval** of digital qualifications confirmed. |
| 19 applicants successful including NTU, OU, Staffordshire University, and University of Plymouth (as awarding body). |
| 5th July 2021 | **Cycle 2 HTQs:** Approvals window for **DIGITAL ROUTE** (9 occupations), **CONSTRUCTION ROUTE** (7 occupations) and **HEALTH & SCIENCE ROUTE** (16 occupations) opens. |
| September 2021 | **2nd Wave T level delivery starts.** |
| 67 providers. |
| +7 T levels (10 total). |
| 17th September | **Cycle 2 HTQs** approvals window **closes** for Standard Submissions. |
| Autumn/Winter 2021 | **Launch of national HTQ campaign** aimed at raising awareness and promoting approved qualifications. |
| September 2022 | **3rd Wave T level delivery** **starts.** |
| 88 providers. |
| +6 T levels (16 total). |
| **1st teaching of digital HTQs** with the brand and IfATE quality mark. |
| 1 August 2023 | Removal of funding approval for qualifications that overlap with T level 1st Wave (2020 delivery) and 2nd Wave (2021 delivery). |
| September 2023 | **4th Wave T level delivery starts.** |
| * T Levels that were introduced in 2020 and 2021 to be delivered by any provider delivering 16 to 19 study programmes. * T Levels introduced in 2022 and 2023 to be delivered by Ofsted *Good* and *Outstanding* providers only. |
| +8 T levels. |
| **24 T Levels in total.** |
| 1 August 2024 | Removal of funding approval for qualifications that overlap with T level 3rd Wave (2022 delivery) and 4th Wave (2023 onwards). |
| September 2024 | **Full national roll out of** **T Levels:** available to be delivered by all providers delivering 16 to 19 study programmes. |
| 2024 | **LLE secondary legislation.** |
| 2025 | **LLE introduced.** |

1. **How can Universities Engage in the THE/HTQ Agenda?**

Universities need to apply for the qualifications they award and deliver to be quality marked as an HTQ. The IfATE has a rolling programme with openings for applications.

Universities will need to ensure a prospective qualification meets the IfATE criteria. For example, for the second phase of the construction route and health & science route, where once the criterion was a 60% minimum map to the occupational standard in the first submission for digital, now the IfATE are stating they expect a 100% map to the knowledge, skills and behaviours (KSBs) that can be delivered in a classroom environment. This is challenging and for some Standards the reality will be that the 100% that can be delivered in a classroom is only 40% of the total KSBs. The differential cost of delivering in FE and HE is to be included in a report by HMT and DfE. DfE’s Lifelong Learning Entitlement Team are also looking at how HTQs can be modularised.

Additionally, universities need to carefully consider:

* The employer and individual demand for the prospective HTQ and issues of scale
* Other qualifications that could compete with an institution’s HTQs
* How HTQs could support access and participation activities
* Whether to apply to the higher technical education growth fund

UVAC will provide a series of ongoing support webinars and briefings.

**UVAC OPINION**

**Will Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) Be a Success?**

Government has been clear that it wants more individuals to take level 4 and 5 Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs). From a higher-level skills perspective, although many of the occupations where there is a real need for growth are at level 6, police constables and registered nurses in the public sector and STEM occupations in the private sector, there are occupational areas where higher technical provision needs to be expanded. Higher technical occupations in the health, construction, digital and engineering sectors being good examples. UVAC has accordingly argued that while expanding Higher Technical Education should not be at the expense of level 6 programmes, a push to increase the number of Higher Technical qualifications available is appropriate and welcome. Accordingly, we want to do all we can to support the HE sector deliver on this agenda.

There are, however, a number of barriers that need to be overcome. To get awarding organisations/HEIs and providers onboard, DfE/IfATE needs to lead urgent work to:

**Demonstrate the Need and Demand for HTQs –** Government and the IfATE, working with awarding organisations and HEIs must clearly outline the potential demand from employers and individuals and need for HTQs. This should be done on an occupation-by-occupation basis linked to the HTQ approvals process. Projections in employment and salary rates should be researched and published setting out why HTQs in a specific occupational area are a good choice for an individual and will support employers recruit and train the staff they need.

**Clarify how HTQs will be Marketed and Promoted –** To date other than a suggestion that Government will promote HTQs and a low-key launch of the IfATE HTQ Quality Mark logo we have seen little specific marketing activity. Contrast this with T Levels where substantial marketing and awareness raising activities have been undertaken and are planned.

**Outline how HTQs will be Funded and Financially Incentivised** – This is the Government’s big lever, yet at the moment providers planning to deliver HTQs are unsure as to how HTQs will be incentivised vis-à-vis other level 4 and 5 programmes.

The lack of clarity on how HTQs will be marketed and how they may be financially incentivised is acting as a break on HEIs and others considering developing into this market. The messages UVAC usually hears are “We’re keeping a watching brief, but are uncertain as to whether to invest” and “is scalability achievable?”

Two further issues also need to be considered by the DfE and IfATE if the success of HTQs is to be assured.

**1. Is the HTQ Approval System Robust and Flexible Enough to Ensure the Success of HTQs?** - To gain the HTQ Quality Mark qualifications submitted by HEIs/awarding organisations are mapped by the IfATE against the Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours specified in relevant Occupational Standards developed by Apprenticeship Trailblazers. While Occupational Standards will be a very useful tool in guiding the design, development and approval of higher technical qualifications there are problems with this approach. The first is that occupational standards were designed and developed for a different purpose – that is as the basis of work-based Apprenticeships that develop full occupational competence. HTQs are, in contrast, a classroom-based programme – hence some of the confusion as to the extent to which an HTQ must map to an Occupational Standard, 60%, 80% or simply to the components that can be delivered in the classroom? If we are honest, we also have an issue with some occupational standards – they do vary in quality. Occupational standards also need to be forward looking and not simply reflect the knowledge, skills and behaviours employers believed, at the time of writing the standard, an individual needs to be occupationally competent. This all calls for the IfATE to have a far greater interventionist role and a role in challenging and questioning employers when developing Occupational Standards. An approach we think the IfATE is adopting.

**2. Ensuring the Rollout of HTQs Support other Aspects of Government Skills Policy** - Read the Skills for Jobs White Paper and the Government’s desire to create a national FE and HE credit system is clear. The approach to Higher Technical Qualifications doesn’t, however, seem to fit with this policy. Firstly, a level 5 HTQ can be mapped to Occupational Standards at level 4 or 5. Secondly qualifications of very different credit/programme sizes can be awarded the same quality mark. Such an approach rather undermines the notion of a national credit system. If different HTQs are of varying credit sizes, how will they fit into a national system for recognising credit?

So, will Higher Technical Qualifications be a Success? The answer is potentially **yes**, but only if there is clarity in focus, marketing, funding and their role and contribution to the broader skills agenda. UVAC looks forward to working with IfATE on this agenda.

