

Streamlining the HTQ Approvals Process – 19 November 2025

Session details: The session focused on recent improvements to the Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQ) approvals process, led by representatives from Skills England and the Department for Education.

Richard Clewley is a Senior Product Manager in the Higher Technical Qualifications team in Skills England and works across the programme on criteria, approvals and quality assurance. Richard has a background in aerospace and has worked on HTQs since cycle 1.

Liz Blackwell has worked in Department for Education for 9 years and is currently leading on the policy around higher technical qualifications. This includes all level 4/5 technical qualifications, across Higher and Further Education, and specifically HTQs. Prior to the DfE Liz had a career in the NHS working in School Health on a variety of health programmes for primary school aged children.

Key Enhancements

The approvals process has shifted towards **upfront support**, allowing providers to engage early and resolve issues before formal/final submission. The approach is designed to speed up decision-making and reduce delays. Technology is playing a central role, with the introduction of a **Natural Language Processing (NLP) tool** that automates the mapping of Knowledge, Skills, and Behaviours (KSBs) against occupational standards. This aims to significantly cut down manual work for applicants, who now only need to address gaps identified by the system and the team. The process is secure, with a closed system ensuring confidentiality.

Approvals are now **rolling**, rather than tied to fixed cycles, and there is greater flexibility around **first teach dates**, giving providers more control over implementation timelines.

Why HTQs Matter

Level 4 and 5 qualifications are critical for addressing skills gaps and improving job prospects. For example, in the West Midlands combined authority region, c.55% of job vacancies are at Level 4/5 or above, highlighting the importance of these qualifications to regional economies. HTQs also offer opportunities for a wider range of learners and support lifelong learning in a rapidly changing labour market.

Vision and Strategic Goals

Skills England's vision is built around three pillars:

- **Understand:** Use data to identify skills gaps and provide authoritative insights.
- **Simplify:** Make the skills system easier to navigate for learners and employers.
- **Mobilise:** Drive employer engagement and action to improve access to skilled workers.

The ultimate goal is to increase the number of HTQs and learners, ensuring qualifications remain relevant and responsive to industry needs.

Future Directions

Work is underway to align HTQs with **Industrial Strategy sectors** such as life sciences, advanced manufacturing, and construction. This will strengthen credibility and ensure qualifications meet emerging workforce demands. Flexibility is being introduced through new HTQ categories:

- **HTQs** aligned to specific occupational standards.
- The possibility of **Additional Specialist** content for upskilling within a profession.
- **Occupational Progression** pathways for career advancement.
- **Employer-proposed** qualifications where no standard exists.
- **Additional responsive content** for regional or emerging needs.

Communications and Outreach

There is recognition that communication campaigns have been limited. Plans include working with schools to promote careers linked to HTQs and aligning to the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) initiative to raise public awareness. Emphasis will be placed on occupations and work, rather than qualifications per se, to make messaging more relatable.

Employer Engagement

Employer demand remains a key criterion for approval, and while it is acknowledged this can be resource-intensive, efforts are being made to adopt pragmatic approaches. Advisory boards, regional growth plans, and revalidation processes will help maintain relevance and responsiveness.

The following additional points arose during the discussion:

Data & Reporting

Some form of earnings return forecast with a focus on Level 4 and above would be useful for reporting and contextualising provider data.

Progression data: No public data is currently available, but Skills England are working on this.

Awarding HTQs

FE colleges may need alternative options for awarding HTQ Level 4/5 – FDAP not available to everyone, and working with different awarding bodies – universities, Pearson, CMI etc can be complex.

No further details on white paper plans for OfS to develop HTQ awarding powers at present.

Purpose and Coverage

HTQs are primarily destination qualifications aimed at employment. As such they must cover KSBs in education-based settings and be seen as a primary vehicle for investment and economic growth.

It may be that to meet the needs of different sectors that there will be increased opportunity:

- 1) To align HTQs with broader qualifications where practicable; some already integrate with apprenticeships, but there may be wider opportunities
- 2) For occupational progression: recognise that KSBs from multiple OS may be needed to reflect particular sector needs e.g. construction or creative industries where alignment to a single occupational standard could prove limiting to the individual.
- 3) To broaden HTQ categories - Since the rolling approval process started, there are no level 4 or 5 occupational standards that are not eligible to be applied against. To discuss new standards you must speak to the Skills England team so that they can advise on suitability or areas where extra scrutiny may be applied. These will usually be in areas where there needs to be a high level of skills demonstration better suited to a workplace (for instance Tugboat Captain), or places where skills delivery facilities must be of a certain quality due to safety issues regarding the occupation (e.g. the protective services route).

All will have the same HTQ badge: the intention is to broaden the options for qualifications to receive that kitemark. Ultimately the key aim is to boost skills by creating qualifications aligned with labour market demands.

Integration with apprenticeships: Some HTQs attached to apprenticeships; half the cohort is adult learners.