UVAC KNOWLEDGE NETWORK
UNIVERSITY VOCATIONAL AWARDS COUNCIL

The HTQ implementation Journey – 23 February 2026

Session details: Luke presented his journey of learning about Higher Technical Skills and Qualifications (HTQs) within his own institutional setting. Drawing on real-world experiences, he offered a "lessons learned from start to finish" perspective, highlighting common challenges, valid reasons for resistance, and the things he wished he'd known at the outset.

Luke Harrison is a Senior Lecturer in Sound Technology and Subject Group Head for Music at the University of Salford. Luke also has experience as a musician recording studio engineer. His wide experience has given him a rounded sense of education within creative arts and the place of sound within it. From 2022 - 2025 Luke served as the Academic Lead for Higher Technical Skills at the University. In this role, he has been instrumental in developing and overseeing the delivery of courses that fall under the broad category of Higher Technical Skills. As part of his role, Luke successfully led the university's application for the accreditation of three higher technical qualifications that are delivered through the Greater Manchester Institute of Technology, alongside several other DipHE programmes.

HTQ Implementation Journey - Key Lessons Learned

1. Advocate Strongly for HTQs (and prepare for some resistance)

- Even senior leaders may hold differing views on the value and purpose of HTQs – recognise and work with these.
- There may be misunderstanding about how HTQs differ from degrees or apprenticeships. Make sure you have the right information at your fingertips. That means reading widely.
- Advocating internally is essential to secure institutional buy-in, combat misconceptions, and demonstrate long-term value.
- Develop informed arguments comparing HTQs to workplace realities, occupational standards, and employer needs.

2. Find the Right People

- Effective collaborators are those open-minded about new forms of provision.
- Senior faculty staff were supportive but not always aligned; some academic staff assigned by workload were not the right fit.

- Newer academics or those with relevant technical backgrounds often brought more energy, openness, and practical ideas.
- Avoid retrofitting: staff heavily invested in traditional degree frameworks may struggle to adapt, and it is generally easier to start from the beginning with a new course when it comes to mapping and industry consultation.

3. Plan Programme Design Thoroughly

- HTQs sit between apprenticeships and traditional degrees; classroom delivery of occupational standards is complex.
- Early alignment with occupational standards is essential before designing modules. New design pathways can map as they go - so work better.
- Retrofitting existing programmes was highly labour-intensive and can require a lot of programme changes. It may be that if alignment isn't straight forward that it is better just to offer it as a non-HTQ level 4/5 award.

4. Engage Early with Quality Assurance (QA)

- Quality assurance teams may not initially understand HTQ differences (e.g., Level 4–5 award algorithms, external examiner scrutiny at Level 4).
- Award algorithms often needed review; in this case, level weighting was altered to avoid disadvantaging new HE entrants.
- Condensed timetables and holistic module design were developed to match student profiles and workplace expectations.
- External examiners and academic development teams must be involved earlier than for typical undergraduate courses.

5. Work Closely with Marketing

- Marketing teams often lack prior understanding of HTQs; direct collaboration is essential. But like all qualifications, effective marketing requires academics to explain the distinctiveness of HTQs, the target learners, and employer relevance.
- Innovative resources (e.g., externally produced video content, online tasters) helped raise awareness and interest.
- Partnership with marketing improved clarity of messaging and recruitment.

6. Know Your Students

- Analysis of first cohorts showed strong representation of: first-generation HE students; FE college backgrounds; BTEC/technical qualifications; Older learners upskilling from employment
- Transitional support is critical for these group[s: both from FE/returned to education into Level 4, and from Level 4 to Level 5.
- Understanding learner motivations helps shape curriculum and support services (who may also need support to provide support for HTQ students).

7. Consider Approach to Level 6 Top-Ups Carefully

- Top-ups can be valuable but must be used thoughtfully.

- Some learners seek top-ups simply because they want a full degree, without understanding demands of Level 6 study.
- A need exists for honest conversations about learner readiness and the purpose of each level.
- Level 4–5 should be seen as meaningful qualifications in their own right, not just stepping stones.

4. Additional Reflections from Group Discussion

a. FE & HE Collaboration

- Further education (FE) colleagues noted their long-standing experience with Level 4–5 provision (e.g., foundation degrees).
- Discussion highlighted differences in institutional histories and capacities regarding higher technical education.

b. Sources of Useful Information

- Over time, more information has become available (e.g., government guidance, occupational standard mapping, toolkit resources).
- Helpful resources included: occupational standards/competency maps; Frameworks for HE Qualification/SEEC descriptors; policy documents on skills and local skills improvement plans and employer workshops and roundtables
- Broad reading and policy awareness were critical.

c. Funding for HTQ Development

- Funding streams (e.g., government technical skills investment funds) supported buildings, equipment, and staff development.
- Internal advocacy was required to shape learning spaces and teaching environments to suit technical pedagogy rather than traditional lecture formats.
- Some organisational cultures demonstrated limited understanding of FE practice, learner backgrounds, or technical education needs.

d. Quality Assurance Changes

- Skills England HTQ approval processes are shifting toward automated mapping using AI-based tools.
- Emphasis is increasing on ensuring internal QA documentation is written in ways that clearly reflect KSB requirements for this mapping process.

e. Importance of Networks

- Peer networks were essential in early stages when institutional knowledge was limited.
- Continued knowledge exchange across institutions supports collective learning and capacity building.