



Institute for Apprenticeships  
& Technical Education

# Higher Technical Qualifications Cycle 5 Criteria

The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education

## Contents

<b>Higher Technical Qualifications Cycle 5 Criteria .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1. Higher Technical Qualifications .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2. Requirements to submit into the HTQ category .....</b>	<b>4</b>
2.1. Statutory regulation and recognition .....	4
2.2. Application requirements .....	5
2.3. How we will apply our tests .....	7
<b>3. Employer Engagement .....</b>	<b>8</b>
3.1. Overview.....	8
3.2. Application requirements .....	8
3.3. Supporting guidance for applicants .....	8
<b>4. Content Coverage and Mapping.....</b>	<b>10</b>
4.1. Overview.....	10
4.2. Application requirements .....	11
<b>5. Assessment.....</b>	<b>13</b>
5.1. Overview.....	13
5.2. Application requirements .....	13
5.3. Sample assessment materials (SAMs).....	15
5.4. Supporting guidance for applicants .....	16

# Higher Technical Qualifications Cycle 5 Criteria

## 1. Higher Technical Qualifications

**Core aim:** The qualification is at Level 4 or 5<sup>1</sup>, aligns to Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours (KSBs) in an existing occupational standard(s) and enables entry to the aligned occupation(s) (including providing occupational entry competence with the possibility for further learning/training in work to reach full occupational competence).

Qualifications in this category may be approved under section A2D5 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009 (ASCL 2009).

The appropriate tests for this category are:

- the alternative approval test (in section A2D5 (3) of the ASCL 2009), (and)
- the employer demand test (in section A2D5 (6) of the ASCL 2009)

The **alternative approval test** is met if:

- a standard is published under section ZA11 of the ASCL 2009 for the occupation
- the Institute is satisfied that by obtaining the qualification a person demonstrates attainment of as many of the outcomes set out in the occupational standard as may reasonably be expected to be attained by undertaking a course of education

The **employer demand test** is met if:

- the Institute is satisfied that there is, or is likely to be, demand from employers in the occupations for employees who have obtained the particular qualification

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<sup>1</sup>

- (a) on the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies:  
The Frameworks for HE Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies dated 3 November 2014 is accessible online at <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/qualifications-frameworks>. Hard copies are available from the Department for Education, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT.
- (b) as described in the Ofqual Handbook: General Conditions of Recognition:  
Level requirements (including level descriptors) are in Section E of the Ofqual Handbook: General Conditions of Recognition dated 12 October 2017 (as updated 21<sup>st</sup> September 2023) which is accessible online at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ofqual-handbook/section-e-design-and-development-of-qualifications>. Hard copies are available from the Department for Education, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT.

## 2. Requirements to submit into the HTQ category

### 2.1. Statutory regulation and recognition

Qualifications submitted for HTQ approval MUST either:

- be awarded by a Higher Education Institution which has Foundation Degree/Degree Awarding Powers and is registered with the Office for Students (OfS), (or)
- be awarded by an Awarding Body who have the relevant sector/subject area in their scope of Ofqual recognition and be on the Ofqual Register

2.1.1. Providers regulated by OfS must continue to meet the definition of 'an English higher education provider' and must demonstrate that it satisfies the ongoing general conditions of registration applicable to the category of the Register in which it is registered, as set out in the Securing student success: Regulatory framework for higher education in England.

2.1.2. Qualifications regulated by Ofqual are expected to be compliant with the General Conditions of Recognition and, where relevant, any applicable Qualification Level Conditions and Subject Level Conditions, which apply to specific kinds of qualifications.

2.1.3. Certain occupations are regulated by law which means that there is a legal requirement to have certain qualifications or experience (or meet an alternative condition or requirement) in order to undertake certain professional activities or use a protected title. Where a submitted qualification relates to an occupation which is regulated by law you must evidence that the relevant regulator agrees that the qualification must be obtained (along with any other conditions stipulated by the regulator) in order for an individual to practise in the occupation.

2.1.4. Applicants submitting qualifications against statutory regulated occupations (as specified in the relevant occupational standard) must be recognised/registered by the relevant statutory regulator prior to submission. Applicants must provide Statutory Regulator recognition/registration numbers for the Institution and/or qualification being submitted for approval, where relevant.

2.1.5. As part of the application process OfS, Ofqual or the relevant statutory regulator may advise us about any relevant ongoing or impending regulatory action into a relevant qualification, Awarding Body, Higher Education provider or Higher Education Institution. When making approvals decisions, IfATE will have due regard to this advice.

2.1.6. We are likely to withhold making a final approval decision until we are satisfied that any relevant ongoing or impending regulatory action has concluded. When making our decision about whether to withhold a decision we will consider the specific circumstances of each case. This will include the nature of the regulatory action and the timeframes anticipated for any action to be resolved. We will also take into account our wider statutory duties to have due regard to (amongst other things) the quality of training and the reasonable requirements of employers and students.

2.1.7. Submissions into the HTQ category must align to one or more occupations for which an occupational standard is published at level 4 or 5. We will only accept submissions of level 4 and 5 technical qualifications in this category. We will not consider any other level of qualification within the HTQ category.

## 2.2. Application requirements

2.2.1. Applicants must attend a support session prior to submission. All submissions must be made using our online application form, which is only made available after an initial support session. Each qualification requires a separate application form.

2.2.2. In the application form, applicants must clearly identify the occupational standard(s) the qualification aligns to. Some occupational standards (called core and options) cover several separate occupations with similar training needs. Applicants should identify which occupation(s)/option(s) the qualification aligns to. Where a qualification aligns to more than one occupation, the approval criteria must be met in full for each occupation for the qualification to be considered for HTQ approval.

2.2.3. Alongside the information requested within the application form, applicants must submit (via the upload function) the following materials in order for their application to be considered:

- employer engagement evidence
- qualification specification/course descriptor and module/unit outlines
- IfATE HTQ KSB mapping spreadsheet which shows how the content and assessment methods in the qualification cover the KSBs in the occupational standard(s)
- IfATE HTQ qualification structure spreadsheet which displays the qualification structure and shows which modules/units are mapped to the occupational standard(s), level of module/unit and whether core/mandatory or optional
- assessment strategy and policies
- sample assessment materials
- statutory/regulatory body recognition (if required)

If submitting Higher Nationals (e.g., HNC, HND), applicants must ensure they have received consent from Pearson and submitted evidence of this consent.

We will accept the submission of level 5 qualifications against occupations at level 4. This may be appropriate because qualification content could go beyond the KSBs in the level 4 occupational standard. The level 5 qualification would need to meet our criteria for approval. We do not generally expect to approve level 4 qualifications against occupations at level 5 because it is unlikely that a qualification at level 4 could fully cover the KSBs of a level 5 occupation. However, please contact the Higher Technical Qualification team before submission if you have a level 4 qualification that you feel aligns to a level 5 standard and meets all of our other criteria.

Please do not upload scanned documents and ensure you label attachments clearly.

### **Missing, incomplete or unclear evidence**

Missing, incomplete or unclear evidence will result in the review of your application being delayed and / or your application being rejected.

### **Application dates**

There will be two application windows for cycle 5, which will be as follows:

**Primary window (5.1):** Monday 11<sup>th</sup> March 2024 – Friday 12<sup>th</sup> April 2024

**Secondary window (5.2):** Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2024 – Friday 25<sup>th</sup> October 2024

### What happens when an applicant submits an application?

When an applicant submits an application, we will first check that the application meets five minimum requirements. We will update applicants once we have established if the application meets these requirements. Applicants will have the chance to reply and let us know if they disagree with our judgement.

### What happens if an application doesn't meet these minimum requirements?

Applications that do meet the minimum requirements will proceed to be considered for approval in that cycle. If an application does not meet the minimum requirements, it will not be considered for approval in that cycle, but applicants may resubmit their applications in future cycles. If an application is not approved in cycle 5.1 it may be resubmitted in cycle 5.2.

### Minimum requirements

1. the awarding body or higher education provider must be on Ofqual/ OfS register and the application must include evidence that qualification is recognised/registered with Statutory Regulator where relevant.
2. all requested attachments listed in paragraph 2.2.3 above must be submitted, including correct number of complete sample assessment materials.
3. the application must include evidence from at least two different named employers indicating support for the specific qualification.
4. no more than 10% of KSBs in the occupational standard are insufficiently covered by the qualification. For example, if the occupational standard has 60 KSBs that can reasonably be delivered in a course of education, and we find that more than 6 are not covered in the content of the qualification with supporting evidence, then your application will not meet this threshold.
5. nothing about the structure of the qualification falls short of our criteria i.e., no qualification pathways that do not align to an occupational standard and all possible module, unit or occupational pathway combinations cover the knowledge, skills and behaviours in the occupation(s) to which the qualification relates.

### Funding and 'first teach' implications

We will analyse applications in the order in which they are received. Some applications that are approved in cycle 5.1 may be approved in time for a first teach date of September 2025.

Applications approved in cycle 5.1 that do not achieve this teach date will have a first teach date of September 2026.

All applications approved in cycle 5.2 will have a first teach date of September 2026.

Which cycle should an applicant submit to?

We strongly recommend that all Ofqual regulated Awarding Organisations, all new applicants and all applicants interested in achieving an earlier 'first teach' date apply to the primary window.

## **2.3. How we will apply our tests**

IfATE will apply both the alternative approval test and employer demand test to the materials received as part of the applicant's submission for HTQ approval in order to make an approval decision. The criteria for approval will be laid out in full below to ensure applicants are aware of the specific focuses of the tests we will apply. It is important to note that IfATE will also receive feedback from statutory regulators, where relevant, when reviewing and approving Higher Technical Qualifications.

## 3. Employer Engagement

### 3.1. Overview

#### All applications to IfATE must demonstrate:

That there is, or is likely to be, demand from employers in the occupations for employees who have obtained the particular qualification (the Employer Demand Test). This must be evidenced by:

3.1.1. Submitting a range of evidence, which assures IfATE of employer demand in the occupation for the qualification. This should include support, endorsement, or comment from credible and representative employers on how the qualification fulfils sector needs and delivers in-demand skills into the economy and/or qualification-specific progression data. Evidence of demand collected more than 2 years prior to submission of the qualification for approval will not be considered.

3.1.2. Demonstrating collaboration with employers during the development of the content of the qualification and providing details of an annual process in place for future employer reviews, ensuring that it remains relevant and continues to fulfil sector needs (for example, by assisting the applicant in identifying actual or emerging skills gaps and responding to sector trends and developments).

### 3.2. Application requirements

Applicants must answer question 1 in the employer engagement section of the application form demonstrating **employer demand** for the qualification, as set out in 3.1.1. Applicants must answer question 2 in the employer engagement section of the application form describing **employer collaboration and future employer reviews** of the qualification, as set out in 3.1.2. Both answers should be supported with evidence.

If your qualification maps to multiple occupations, we expect credible employer engagement evidence for each occupation.

IfATE may directly contact employers cited in the application, for example to verify skills gaps or demand for the qualification, and you should inform any cited employers that they may be contacted by us.

### 3.3. Supporting guidance for applicants

3.3.1 Applicants could provide the following evidence to demonstrate that the qualification is in demand and supported by employers, as set out in 3.1.1. and required by question 1 in the employer engagement section of the application form:

- letters or communications from credible and representative employers commenting on and supporting the qualification, describing how it fulfils sector needs and delivers in-demand skills into the economy



- records collated from direct employer engagements, including associated decisions and actions
- qualification-specific learner progression data
- survey responses (including details of who the respondents represent, the materials shared with them for review and their full responses to the questions posed)

3.3.2. Applicants could provide the following evidence regarding employer collaboration and regular processes that ensure the qualification continues to fulfil sector needs, as set out in 3.1.2. and required by question 2 in the employer engagement section of the application form:

- details of planned annual qualification reviews outlining the role of employers in keeping the qualification current and identifying skills gaps etc., including mechanisms for considering and making changes to the qualification
- details of periodic revalidation, including the frequency and role of employers
- details of collaboration and ongoing employer relationships and partnerships (for example, regular review panels, industry advisory boards etc.)

3.3.3. Applicants should ensure they engage with a range of employers that are representative of the occupational area.

Where an individual or organisation engaged in the development or validation process has a vested interest / conflict of interest (for example, a commercial partnership with the applicant), this should be declared within the evidence submission, and in such circumstances, we may seek additional information.

## 4. Content Coverage and Mapping

### 4.1. Overview

#### All applications to IfATE must demonstrate:

That by obtaining the qualification a person demonstrates attainment of as many of the outcomes set out in the occupational standard as may reasonably be expected to be attained by undertaking a course of education (the Alternative Approval Test). IfATE will assess this in line with the following principles:

**4.1.1. Knowledge statements:** We expect knowledge statements to be fully covered in the content of the qualification. Exceptionally, we may consider justification of partial coverage e.g., if a specific employer procedure is explicitly referred to in the knowledge statement, meaning that the knowledge could only be acquired when in the workplace.

**4.1.2. Skills statements:** Usually, we expect skill statements to be fully covered in the content of the qualification. We expect skills delivery facilities that reflect the demands of the occupation, and many skills can be obtained in a peer-to-peer setting, through simulation, scenario or other training device. Otherwise, partial coverage of a skill statement will be considered, taking into account access to required technology, training devices, setting, some particular user groups and specialist populations etc., and whether a skill may be more safely and reliably be delivered in a workplace.

**4.1.3. Behaviour statements:** Usually, we expect behaviour statements to be fully covered within a course of education. Where this is not reasonable, we expect a minimum of partial coverage. For further information on behaviours please see our guidance on developing occupational standards.

**4.1.4.** Applicants must indicate in the IfATE KSB mapping template if there are any KSBs that can only be partially achieved in a course of education and explain why. Justifiable rationale could include (but not be limited to):

- that to practice a particular skill, access is required to specialist machinery or equipment, which may not be readily available (however, this should not discourage submission of qualifications that have been designed for specialist providers)
- the knowledge, skill or behaviour statement requires the individual to be based in an organisation (for example, understanding a particular company's brand, goals, and commercial objectives, or having access to the use of an organisation's systems or processes)

**4.1.5.** IfATE will make a judgement as to whether each KSB (in the occupational standard(s) to which the qualification relates) can reasonably be attained by undertaking a course of education and we may follow this up and/or request further information where applicants propose excluding KSBs which we consider could be delivered, either fully, or at least partially, in a course of education.

4.1.6. Some qualifications include multiple **optional units, modules or occupational pathways**. We will only approve qualifications where all possible module, unit or occupational pathway combinations cover the knowledge, skills and behaviours in the occupation(s) to which the qualification relates. We will not approve qualifications where it would be possible for students to avoid learning certain KSBs, through their choice of optional modules or units, or where a qualification/programme contains occupational pathways of study that are not mapped to an occupational standard(s) in scope for HTQ approval.

4.1.7. Where a qualification aligns to more than one occupational standard, the applicant must make it clear (in the specification) which specific units or modules combine to create each individual qualification or occupational pathway.

4.1.8. Qualifications may include units or modules that do not cover KSBs in the occupational standard(s). This **additional content** must be relevant to the occupation(s) and valuable to employers. We expect the vast majority (substantive element) of the qualification to cover KSBs within the occupational standard(s) and applicants may need to provide a rationale for the occupational relevance of any content that does not directly align with the occupational standard. We may request employer engagement evidence and make suggestions to applicants on the occupational relevance of submitted additional content.

4.1.9. A disproportionate amount of additional content may impact the overall quality and/or credibility of the qualification with employers. We would therefore carefully consider our policy goals of improving quality and clarity in the technical education landscape, and our wider statutory duties (which include the requirement to have due regard to the quality of training and the reasonable requirements of employers and learners) when making an approval decision on qualifications containing significant amounts of additional content.

Additional content could include (but is not limited to):

- content that helps bridge a gap with a higher-level occupation and support progression
- content which provides additional transferable skills which will support a learner in their career within an occupation
- cutting edge, innovative content, or emerging skills, which could be valuable to the occupation in future
- content that adds value to learners' employability, relevant to the occupation, that does not fit within any of the above

## 4.2. Application requirements

Applicants must provide the qualification specification or course descriptor and all module/unit outlines/descriptors that make up the qualification.

Applicants must submit the IfATE KSB mapping template provided online to show how the content and assessment methods in the qualification cover the KSBs in the selected occupational standard(s).

Applicants must submit the IfATE qualification structure spreadsheet that displays the qualification structure and shows which modules/units are mapped to KSBs, identifies any

modules/units that are not mapped to KSBs (classed as additional content) and shows the code, name, level, credits and whether a module/unit is core/mandatory or optional.

## 5. Assessment

### 5.1. Overview

#### All applications to IfATE must demonstrate:

5.1.1. That the qualification successfully balances the requirements of manageability, validity, reliability, comparability, and minimising bias.

5.1.2. That the assessments in the qualification suitably cover the breadth of the qualification outcomes and provide a valid opportunity for learners to demonstrate attainment of as many of the outcomes set out in the occupational standard as may reasonably be expected to be attained by undertaking a course of education.

5.1.3. That the qualification, as a minimum, operates a pass/fail grading structure.

5.1.4. That, where modularity exists, there is evidence that the use of modular assessment does not compromise a learner's ability to demonstrate competence in the occupational area. Any modular approach must ensure that any combination of modules (if there is optionality within the qualification structure) covers the range of the KSBs in the related occupational standard.

5.1.5. That the applicant has in place suitable arrangements to ensure qualification delivery standards are maintained over time.

5.1.6. That the submitted sample assessment materials suitably reflect the applicant's ability to deliver the approaches described within the assessment strategy.

### 5.2. Application requirements

#### 5.2.1 Ofqual regulated applicants must submit:

##### Assessment strategy

As part of their submission, applicants must provide an assessment strategy or syllabus explaining the choices that have been made in the development of the qualification, as well as their approach to its ongoing monitoring.

Please ensure that you provided the following information within your assessment strategy:

##### Assessment design

- purpose of the qualification
- approach used to determine controls for each assessment, including non- examined assessments

- where centre adaptation of tasks is permitted, an explanation of the extent to which this is permitted, measures in place to support and monitor Centres and the rationale for the approach
- approach taken to ensure the demand of assessments is set appropriately to the level of the qualification
- the types of mark schemes and marking criteria used and their suitability for the assessment method
- how mark schemes will provide differentiation between grades and how they are applied consistently
- approach taken to develop mark schemes and marking criteria, and how the approach has been reviewed over time
- how assessments will be delivered consistently from series to series over the lifecycle of the qualification
- quality assurance processes used when designing assessments

### **Content coverage**

- content in scope to be addressed by each unit/component of assessment
- how content covered by each assessment is varied over time where relevant
- where content covered by each assessment is not varied over time, the rationale for this and how inappropriate predictability is mitigated

### **Marking approach**

- how examiner recruitment, training and/or standardisation (including ongoing CPD requirements and training guidance, where appropriate) ensures reliability
- how you review examiner marking and adjust it where necessary to mitigate risks including where centres carry out assessments

### **Minimising bias**

- How you ensure bias is minimised when developing and administering your assessments

### **Grading approach**

- range of qualification-level and (if applicable) component-level grades available
- how overall qualification-level grades are derived from component-level grades (if applicable) and whether requirements for component-level grades are set up front or determined after assessments have been taken
- the overall awarding process (i.e., academic board process)

- if a compensatory approach is applied, how you ensure this does not compromise a learner's ability to demonstrate occupational competence
- moderation processes and any internal verification undertaken

### **Standard setting**

- how standards are set and maintained over time and between different cohorts
- how comparability is maintained where there are multiple modes

### **Ensuring manageability**

- module and course summative assessment windows
- how you ensure your assessments are manageable for learners and providers

Assessment evidence must cover the following policies: conflict of interest, reasonable adjustments/accessibility, malpractice and health & safety.

## **5.2.2. Office for Students regulated applicants must submit:**

### **Assessment policy and regulation documents**

As part of the submission, applicants must provide assessment policy documents, handbooks, manuals, academic regulations or similar, covering the following areas:

- marking approach
- appointment of examiners and markers
- grading approach; compensatory approach
- overall awarding process
- annual review and periodic revalidation
- maintaining standards over time and between cohorts
- conflict of interest
- reasonable adjustments/accessibility
- malpractice and health and safety

## **5.3. Sample assessment materials (SAMs)**

**All applicants** must provide **THREE (3)** complete sets of SAMs where a qualification does not contain multiple pathways. Each set of SAMs must be from a different module or unit within your qualification.

Where a qualification contains multiple pathways, applicants are required to submit additional SAMs for each pathway. For example, in qualifications with 1 occupational pathway you must submit 3 SAMs, in qualifications with 2 occupational pathways you must submit 3 SAMs for the core and an additional SAM for each pathway (5 SAMs in total).

**SAMs must be no more than two years old and the date must be included in the SAM.**

Each of the three required sets of SAMs must include:

- Live or sample question paper(s) and/or task brief(s)
- Associated mark schemes, grade descriptors, marking rubrics for each question paper or task brief
- A qualification specification document, course descriptor or similar

## 5.4. Supporting guidance for applicants

### 5.4.1. Assessment Design

The purpose of HTQs is to prepare learners appropriately to enter a highly skilled occupation. Employers will therefore expect to see attainment across the wide range of learning outcomes that relate to the knowledge, skills and behaviours (KSBs) set out in the relevant occupational standard. Assessment should be used to promote competence in relation to the occupational area covered by the qualification.

Assessment design should take opportunities, as appropriate to the occupation, to assess how far learners are competent across the breadth of the outcomes covered by the qualification. Consequently, the use of compensatory approaches are discouraged, if this could result in learners achieving a pass for the qualification having failed to demonstrate sufficient competence for one or more of the occupational requirements. Where compensation is applied, applicants must explain within their submission how their approach to compensation does not compromise a learner's ability to demonstrate occupational competence.

### 5.4.2. Modularity

Modularity should be used to support flexibility. Where a course is modular we expect the learner to be able to demonstrate competence within the occupational area and across the breadth of occupational requirements. It is IfATE's view that the achievement of small tasks in isolation is not sufficient for a learner to demonstrate competence within the occupational area.

### 5.4.3. Grading

The achievement of technical qualifications is intended to signal to employers that a learner has achieved a level of competence suitable to perform a job role or function within the occupational area. We encourage applicants to differentiate grading above the pass grade if employers have indicated this is valuable to them for recruitment purposes. Where qualifications help progression to further study, differentiation should match progression requirements. To maintain comparability between their own qualification offers, we suggest that applicants consider adopting a consistent grading scale approach.





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