Higher Technical Qualifications Cycle 4 Criteria

The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education

Contents

1. Category Title: Higher Technical Qualifications

Core aim: The qualification is at Level 4 or 5[1], aligns to 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 AD25 (6) of the ASCL 2009).

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

- a standard is published under section ZA11 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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[1]

(a) on the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies;
The Framework 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(**1**);
Level requirements (including level descriptors) are in Section E of the Ofqual Handbook: General Conditions of Recognition dated 12 October 2017 (updated 12 May 2022) 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, (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.

I. 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.

II. 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.

III. 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.

IV. 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.

V. 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.

VI. 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.

VII. 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

I. All submissions must be made using our application form. Applicants must select the correct qualification category and answer all questions within the form. Each qualification requires a separate application form.

II. 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. A separate application form should be submitted for each qualification.

III. 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/syllabus
   • IfATE HTQ KSB Mapping Spreadsheet which shows how the content and assessment methods in the qualification cover the occupational standard KSBs
   • qualification Structure Spreadsheet which displays the qualification structure and shows which occupational standard modules are mapped to and identifies any modules that are additional content.
   • assessment strategy
   • sample assessment materials

When submitting the above documents, please submit a zip folder. Please avoid uploading scanned documents and ensure you label any attachments clearly.
Failure to submit complete versions of all requisite documents will render the submission invalid until such a time that all completed materials are received by IfATE. This may mean the submitted qualification would be considered for approval within a future HTQ approval cycle.

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 regulators, where relevant when reviewing and approving Higher Technical Qualifications.

3. Employer Engagement

All applications submitted to IfATE must demonstrate:

I.   That the applicant has gathered a range of evidence, which could be both qualitative and quantitative, which assures IfATE of employer demand for the qualification. This may include industry or employment reports, for example reference to Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) or labour market data. Evidence of demand collected 2+ years prior to submission of the qualification for approval will not be considered.

II. That the applicant has collaborated with employers during the development of the content and assessment of the qualification and has a plan 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).

3.1.   APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS

Applicants **must** submit an employer engagement rationale, demonstrating a robust, coherent, approach to gathering employer evidence.

The rationale should clearly lay out the applicant's approach to establishing that the submitted qualification (including assessment methods and outcomes) is supported by employers and that employers are likely to have demand for a student who has achieved the qualification. The rationale should describe what plans are in place to ensure ongoing employer review of the qualification.

The rationale must be accompanied by a range of evidence that best demonstrates the applicant's research and engagements, including details of collaborating employers and their contributions, samples of evidence demonstrating employer demand and evidence of planned activities ensuring ongoing currency,

We do not expect applicants to submit all evidence gathered in the development process as part of their evidence. Evidence submitted should be sufficient to assure IfATE that the engagement described within the rationale has taken place. 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.

3.2.   SUPPORTING GUIDANCE FOR APPLICANTS

I.   Applicants could provide the following evidence to support their rationale that the qualification is in **demand** and supported by employers:
   • qualification-specific student progression data
   • jobs board data / labour market information (LMI)
   • information from IfATE publications / Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) Mayoral combined authorities (MCA) / Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) which demonstrate demand

- records collated from direct employer engagements, including associated decisions / actions
- survey responses (including details of who the respondents represent, the materials shared with them for review and their full responses to the questions posed)
- bespoke letters of endorsement / support from employers (including professional association bodies) summarising the reasons for their support

II. Applicants could provide the following evidence to support their rationale regarding **future employer reviews**:
- details of planned qualification review cycles
- details of ongoing employer relationships (for example, regular review panels)

III. To ensure the broadest possible endorsement of their qualification, applicants should, as far as possible, ensure they engage with a range of employers which is representative of the occupational area. This should include:
- employer/industry professional/representative bodies and providers with links to industry.
- employers of different sizes, including SMEs.
- regional and national employers.
- employers who represent the different contexts in which the occupation can be found, such as sub-sectors or self-employed practitioners.

IV. Applicants should provide details of the organisation, job role and general role requirements of the employers they engage with.

V. 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.

VI. Applicants should ensure that representatives of employers have experience that is suitable for the task requested of them, for example:

- technical experts: Applicants should engage those currently or recently working in the relevant occupation to provide direct input to the content and assessment of the qualification.

- senior decision makers: Applicants should engage these individuals within employer organisations (for example, individuals responsible for hiring activities) when gathering evidence pertaining to the demand for the qualification, for example, the likelihood of employing an individual who has achieved the qualification.

VII. In some instances, employer representatives may satisfy both categories (technical expert and senior decision maker). In such instances the applicant should ensure it is sufficiently clear in their submission to IfATE that the individual has the credentials to comment on technical content, as well as student employment prospects.

- when providing evidence of interactions with employers (during the development process) and the decisions resulting from such interactions, applicants should avoid submitting exhaustive accounts (for example, transcripts) of their work with employers. Evidence submitted relating to direct interactions should focus on assuring IfATE that employers engaged through the process agree that the developed content is accurate, suitably covers the occupational KSBs, and is reflective of their needs.

4.   Content Coverage and Mapping

All applications provided 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). Applicants will need to indicate which KSBs they think cannot be achieved in an education setting or can only be partially achieved in an education setting and explain why. IfATE will assess this in line with the following principles:

I. **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.

II. **Skills statements**: Usually, we expect a skill statement to be fully covered in the content of the qualification. Many skills can be obtained in a peer-to-peer setting, through simulation, scenario or other training device without requiring an applied, clinical or specialist setting. Otherwise, partial or no (in very rare instances) coverage of a skill statement will be considered, taking into account access to required technology, training devices, setting, user groups etc.

III. **Behaviour statements**: Usually, we expect a behaviour statement 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.

IV. 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 (and for which IfATE has published an occupational standard). 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 in scope for HTQ approval.

V. Where a qualification maps 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.

VI. 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 may challenge applicants who propose excluding KSBs which we consider could be delivered, either fully, or at least partially, in a course of education.

VII. Qualifications may include additional content relevant to the occupation(s) that is valuable to employers. We expect the vast majority (substantive element) of the qualification to cover the KSBs within the occupational standard(s) and applicants must 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 awarding bodies on the occupational relevance of submitted additional content.

VIII. **Additional content** is content not mapped to the occupational standard to which the qualification relates. A disproportionate amount of additional content may therefore impact the overall quality and/or credibility of the qualification with employers. We may not approve

a qualification if we have significant concerns about the amount of additional content and its relevance to the occupation. 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, not currently specifically agreed by employers as part of the occupational standard, but which could be valuable to the occupation in future.

- content not specifically agreed by employers as part of the relevant occupational standard, but relevant to the occupation in a certain context, or in relation to the sector, industry, or locality.

- content that adds value to students' employability, relevant to the occupation, that does not fit within any of the above.

4.1.   APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS

Applicants **must** provide, as part of their submission, a PDF of the Qualification Specification or syllabus document containing within it coverage of as many KSBs from within the aligned occupational standard(s) as can be achieved within a course of education.

Applicants **must** use the IfATE HTQ KSB mapping template provided within the online application form to show how the content and assessment methods in the qualification they are submitting cover the KSBs in the relevant occupational standard(s).

Applicants must submit a Qualification Structure Spreadsheet which displays the qualification structure and shows which occupational standard modules are mapped to and identifies any modules that are additional content.

4.2.   SUPPORTING GUIDANCE FOR APPLICANTS

As well as mapping their qualification to the KSBs, applicants will also need to indicate if there are any KSBs that cannot be achieved in a course of education or that can only be partially achieved in a course of education and explain why. Justifiable rationale could include (but not be limited to):

I.   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).

II.   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).

The qualification may also include additional content over and above the KSBs set out in the occupational standard if the rationale submitted demonstrates that content is relevant to the occupation and valuable to employers.

Any content that does not align to the relevant occupational standard(s) should be included in the additional content section of the application form. We expect the vast majority (substantive element) of the qualification to cover the KSBs within the occupational standard(s).

5. Assessment

All applications provided to IfATE must demonstrate:

III.   That the assessments in the qualification are agreed by employers as fit for purpose to assess the content defined within the qualification.

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

   • IfATE will have due regard to the advice of relevant regulators when making approval decisions and may not approve qualifications if we have concerns about assessment (or any other areas brought to our attention) including the validity, appropriateness, or deliverability of assessment methods.

V.   That the assessments in the qualification suitably cover the breadth of the qualification outcomes and provide a **holistic** opportunity for students 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.

VI.   That the qualification, as a minimum, operates a pass/fail grading structure and that grading requirements have been agreed with employer input.

VII.   That, where modularity exists, there is evidence that the use of modular assessment does not compromise a student's ability to demonstrate holistic 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.

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

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

5.1.   APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS

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 student'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 students and providers.

5.2.   SAMPLE ASSESSMENT MATERIALS (SAMS)

You must submit **three** sets of SAMs. Each set of SAMs must be from a different unit or module within your qualification. At least one set of SAMs must provide evidence of holistic assessment. Where a qualification contains multiple pathways, applicants are required to submit additional SAMs for each pathway. SAMs must be no more than two years old.

Each of the three required sets of SAMs must include:

- Live or sample question paper(s) and/or task brief(s)
- Associated mark scheme(s) and/or assessment criteria (for example, marking rubric) for each question paper/and or task brief.
- A specification content coverage record for each assessment, where applicable
- Unit/module grade descriptors, where applicable

5.3.   SUPPORTING GUIDANCE FOR APPLICANTS

Assessment Design

The purpose of HTQs is to prepare learners appropriately and have competence 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.

Holistic assessment in a technical context is achieved when a student is required to draw on outcomes from across a range of qualification content, demonstrating their competence within assessments that mirror the requirements of the relevant occupation.

Assessment design should therefore take opportunities, as appropriate to the occupation, to holistically assess how far students 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 students achieving a
pass for the qualification having failed to demonstrate sufficient competence for one
or more of the occupational requirements. Where compensation is applied, awarding bodies must explain, within their submission, how their approach to compensation does not compromise a student's ability to demonstrate occupational competence.

Where qualifications are designed with several assessments available at multiple points throughout the qualification, we believe there is a particular risk that these may assess (and that students could develop) a fragmented rather than holistic understanding of the occupational area. In such situations, we think it is particularly important to ensure students can make effective connections and draw together knowledge, skills and/or understanding from across the occupational requirements. Where possible, we believe that assessments should also seek to incorporate key occupational behaviours, assessing these as part of the wider assessment construct.

Awarding bodies may decide that a modular approach to assessment is appropriate to the purpose of their qualification. If taking a modular approach, awarding bodies must ensure that

assessments group content coherently, generating tasks which are representative of actual industry requirements.

When delivered correctly, modular approaches to assessment can provide several benefits to students. IfATE has identified the following primary benefits of adopting a modular approach to assessment:

- a modular approach can allow students to be assessed regularly throughout their course of study, with achievement acting as a motivator for continued study.

- a modular approach may allow coherent off-ramps for those students wishing to claim partial certification and move between provision or into the workplace (for example, using partial certification to RPL to an apprenticeship).

These benefits must be considered alongside the requirement for students to develop competence within the occupational area(s) to which the qualification relates. It is IfATE's view that the achievement of small tasks in isolation is not sufficient for a student to demonstrate competence within the occupational area, as it removes the requirement for students to holistically demonstrate their learning across the breadth of the occupational requirements.

We also expect modularity to be used to support flexibility within a defined qualification structure and not to promote undue levels of optionality. It is IfATE's view that high levels of optionality within a qualification is likely to lead to students not being required to cover occupational requirements sufficiently or consistently, thus reducing employer understanding/confidence in the competence being delivered by the technical qualification.

Grading
The achievement of technical qualifications is intended to signal to employers that a student has achieved a level of competence suitable to perform a job role or function within the occupational area.

We encourage awarding bodies 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.