



Department for the
Economy
www.economy-ni.gov.uk

Consultation on Level 4 and 5 Provision and Higher Education in Further Education

NOVEMBER 2022

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SUMMARY OF THIS CONSULTATION

What is this publication about?

This document is seeking views on level 4 and 5 provision and Higher Education in Further Education (HE in FE) – these are higher education courses and qualifications undertaken by learners aged 18+. This provision is primarily vocational in nature, is offered in a range of subject areas and is delivered mostly by further education colleges in partnership with universities and awarding bodies. Qualifications at this level can lead directly into employment or on to further study, including to undergraduate degrees.

Why is level 4 and 5 provision and HE in FE important?

Level 4 and 5 provision and HE in FE is critical in helping to ensure the widest possible range of people can access higher education and it is also essential for employers. These courses and qualifications often focus on practical and technical skills and so provide a vital pipeline for our economy to help our businesses grow and adapt.

Who will be interested in this publication?

We think a range of people and organisations will be interested in this consultation, including:

- Students and potential students.
- Parents, carers and families of students and potential students.
- Charitable, voluntary and other organisations who work with potential learners.
- Higher Education providers.
- Business and industry groups and employers.
- Qualification Awarding Bodies.

This is your chance to hear about what is being proposed and have your say. This will help us to understand what the changes might mean for you and help us to make a final decision.

What happens after I respond?

All the responses we receive on the consultation will be summarised and evaluated. A summary of responses received will be published on the Department for the Economy website.

We will use the evaluation of responses to make a decision on which options we propose should be taken forward.

Recommendations will be put to a future Minister for consideration and approval.

What is being considered and proposed?

<p>Purpose and principles</p>	<p>We want to establish a framework to guide future policy and delivery of level 4 and 5 provision and establish a clearly defined role for the further education colleges in the higher education landscape. It is hoped the purpose and principles will maintain the sector’s ability to deliver skills needed to support economic growth and to tackle disadvantage by providing viable pathways to education and employment.</p>
<p>What qualifications to deliver?</p>	<p>Currently the Foundation Degree (a level 5 qualification) is the preferred qualification for delivery in this space. We need to decide whether this should continue to be the case. We have proposed two possible ways forward. We could either make some changes to the Foundation Degree to make it as appropriate as possible for providers, employers and learners - or we could not have a preferred qualification but instead introduce an overarching approval process where a range of qualifications could be delivered.</p>
<p>Who should deliver which HE qualifications?</p>	<p>The key question we consider here is whether the further education colleges should deliver undergraduate degrees (level 6 qualifications). Currently this is permitted in exceptional circumstances. We are proposing to retain this position but to set some clear criteria to better help everyone understand when level 6 degrees can be delivered by a further education college.</p>
<p>Foundation Degree policy</p>	<p>There are two key policy areas we consider here. A Foundation Degree must have at least one undergraduate degree (level 6) on which students can ‘articulate’ on to. Should a learner who has successfully completed a Foundation Degree be exempt from the first two years of an undergraduate degree? This is our preference but there are often circumstances where this is not possible and so the Department cannot set a definitive policy on this. The other policy area we want to consider is whether we should keep the current policy that further education colleges must partner with a local university (ie. Queen’s University, Ulster University or the Open University) in the delivery of Foundation Degrees unless they are unable or unwilling. The proposed option is to set some criteria for when further education colleges can seek a partnership with a university outside of Northern Ireland.</p>
<p>Funding for students undertaking level 4 and 5 qualifications</p>	<p>Higher education student support funding for level 4 and 5 students is currently restricted to specific qualifications, primarily Foundation Degrees, Higher National Certificates and Diplomas and Certificates and Diplomas of Higher Education. The preferred option is that, subject to a full assessment of cost and the availability of funding, higher education student financial support should be available to all qualifications on the Regulated Qualifications Framework which have been subjected to a separate quality assurance process.</p>

INTRODUCTION

While most people will be familiar with qualifications such as A-levels and undergraduate degrees our research¹ has shown us that there are still many people unfamiliar with qualifications that sit at level 4 and 5 on the Regulated Qualifications Framework and Framework for Higher Education Qualifications. This includes a range of qualifications such as Foundation Degrees and Higher National Diplomas.

Many of these qualifications are delivered in our six further education colleges, as part of their 'Higher Education in Further Education' offering. Higher Education in Further Education (HE in FE) includes not just level 4 and 5 qualifications but also level 6 qualifications, such as undergraduate degrees, and even some level 7 professional qualifications.

The provision of HE in FE is a key component of the Northern Ireland skills framework and has the potential to significantly contribute to the strategic objectives set out in 'Skills for a 10X Economy'² and the wider economic vision for a '10X economy: Northern Ireland's decade of innovation'³ by allowing a wider range of people to access higher education and by meeting the needs of businesses for high level technical and practical skills.

However, these qualifications are often regarded as a second choice option for those who are not able to progress to university, despite their value to employers and a clear link with increased earnings.⁴ The range of qualifications on offer can also make it hard for both employers and potential students to navigate their options and understand the value of these qualifications.

If we are to deliver the decade of innovation and growth envisaged in 10X and address the skills imbalances highlighted in our Skills Strategy we need to address these challenges and increase the number of people successfully undertaking learning at level 4 and 5 and through HE in FE. We are therefore aiming for an education and skills offering in HE in FE that delivers widely recognised and valued qualifications, a system that can be agile and responsive to changing economic needs and one that leads to qualified individuals with skills to support our economy and boost its global competitiveness.

We are not starting this from scratch and have many positive aspects on which to build upon. Many successful partnerships and working relationships exist between our further education colleges and other higher education institutions and we view this collaboration as key to ensuring appropriate pathways are in place for students to reach their potential, at levels 4 and 5 and beyond.

1 [Perceptions of Level 4 and 5 qualifications in Northern Ireland | Department for the Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

2 [Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland. Skills for a 10X Economy. \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

3 [A 10x Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

4 [Are Level 4 and 5 qualifications a good investment? - HEPI](#)

We want to build upon this and work towards an even more joined up mutually beneficial system, in support of our vision for a collaborative integrated “ecosystem” of tertiary education opportunities within Northern Ireland. This will help us to meet the needs of students, of all ages and backgrounds, and employers, with a view to retaining more of our talent within the region. This will help us build a globally competitive economy.

In an ever changing and fast paced economy, we want to enable our further education colleges to be agile and responsive, responding in a timely manner to employer needs at regional and sub-regional level. We want learners to access qualifications that employers need and we want employers to have access to appropriately skilled and qualified individuals. With this in mind, we are aiming to enhance flexibility of level 4 and 5 and HE in FE provision to offer greater opportunity for reskillers, upskillers, lifelong learners and students of all ages and backgrounds. We will build upon the actions set out in the Framework to Transform 14-19 Education and Training Provision⁵ to do this, working right across the education and training systems. We will also work closely with employers to better link the high level demand identified by the Skills Barometer⁶ with the requirements of individual sectors and individual employers.

We also want a streamlined and easy to navigate system which offers increased value for money with raised awareness of level 4 and 5 higher education qualifications and HE in FE pathways. Ultimately, we are striving to have valued, cohesive, navigable pathways and destinations that offer viable and well known alternatives to traditional university higher education pathways. We believe there is economic need and future demographic demand to support both and want to build on the work already ongoing to set out more clearly the options and pathways available for people at all ages.

5 [Developing A More Strategic Approach to 14-19 Education and Training. A Framework to Transform 14-19 Education and Training Provision. \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/developing-a-more-strategic-approach-to-14-19-education-and-training-a-framework-to-transform-14-19-education-and-training-provision/)

6 [Northern Ireland Skills Barometer 2021 \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/northern-ireland-skills-barometer-2021/)

BACKGROUND

What is Level 4 and 5 Provision and HE in FE?

1. HE in FE is the delivery of higher education courses through the Further Education sector. Further education colleges have been delivering higher education courses in Northern Ireland since the 1980s and are now considered established providers of higher education by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. Most of the higher education delivered in the colleges is at levels 4 and 5 on National Qualification Frameworks though there is also a small amount of provision at level 6 and above. Frameworks define and link the levels and credit values of different qualifications. The current frameworks for Northern Ireland are:
 - The Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) for general and vocational qualifications regulated by Ofqual in England and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) in Northern Ireland;⁷ and
 - The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (FHEQ) for qualifications awarded by bodies across the United Kingdom with degree-awarding powers.⁸
2. The Department regards all qualifications on the above frameworks at levels 4 and above as higher education for provider funding and administration purposes. A distinction is made between designated and non-designated higher education courses for student support purposes, with students on non-designated courses not eligible for higher education student loans or maintenance support.
3. Designated higher education qualifications at levels 4 and 5 include Foundation Degrees, Diplomas of Higher Education,⁹ Certificates of Higher Education, Higher National Diplomas and Higher National Certificates. Some further information about these qualifications is provided below and in the glossary. Designated higher education qualifications at level 6 are mostly undergraduate degrees. There are also a wide range of non-designated higher education qualifications that lead to diplomas, certificates and awards in a range of vocational areas.
4. While the Foundation Degree is the Department's preferred higher education qualification at levels 4 and 5 collectively, there are four broad categories of qualification that are delivered:
 - a. University awarded qualifications (listed in the FHEQ): including Foundation Degrees, Certificates of Higher Education and Diplomas of Higher Education.
 - b. Awarding Body designated qualifications (listed in the RQF): Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) and Higher National Certificates (HNCs).
 - c. Awarding Body non-designated qualifications (listed in the RQF): professional qualifications such as accountancy, procurement, marketing or HR qualifications.
 - d. Awarding Body non-designated qualifications (listed in the RQF): other qualifications required for a specific vocational or technical pathway (for instance, in areas such as hair and beauty or social care).

⁷ [Qualifications Frameworks | CCEA](#)

⁸ [Qualifications Frameworks \(qaa.ac.uk\)](http://qaa.ac.uk)

⁹ [May also be referred to as an Associate Bachelor's Degree](#)

All these types of qualifications are currently delivered in Northern Ireland's further education colleges as part of their HE in FE offering.

5. Currently there are around 9,500¹⁰ students in HE in FE in Northern Ireland, most of whom are studying at levels 4 and 5 (approximately 90%). Of these students, around 3,500 students are full-time with the rest studying part-time, including approximately 400 Higher Level Apprentices. In 2020/21, there were approximately 2,700 Foundation Degree enrolments in HE in FE, 68% of which were full-time.

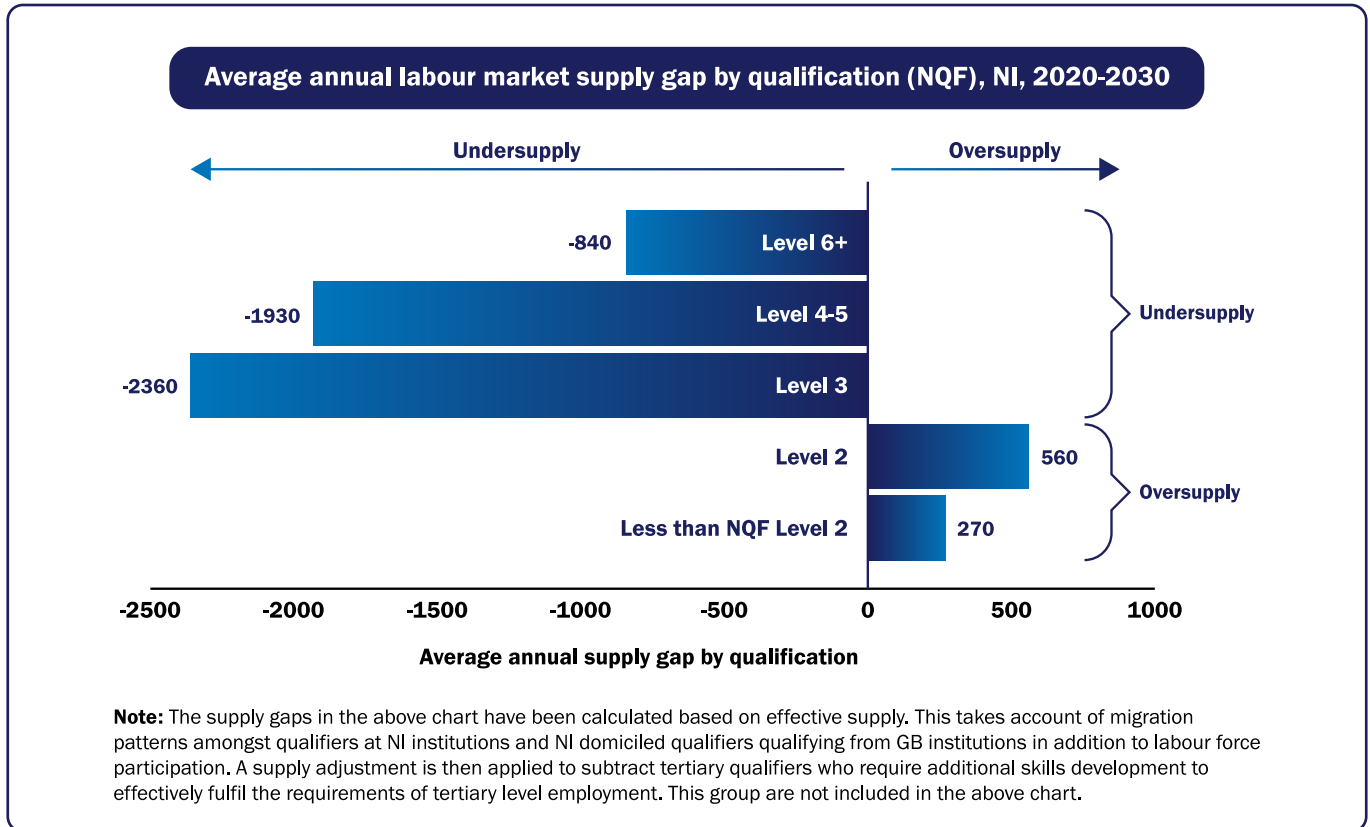
Foundation Degrees

6. The Foundation Degree is the Department's preferred higher education qualification at level 4 and 5 collectively. The Foundation Degree is a professional and technical higher education qualification, which integrates academic and work-related learning. The Foundation Degree aims to equip students with the combination of technical skills, academic knowledge and transferable skills that employers need. The Foundation Degree is a level 5 qualification on the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications.
7. A Foundation Degree takes two years to complete full-time, but it can also be studied part-time, usually over four years (though this may be flexible). Entry requirements for Foundation Degrees are usually stated in terms of UCAS points. Applicants without formal qualifications, who can demonstrate they have the relevant skills and aptitudes, may also be considered.
8. The Foundation Degree is a qualification in its own right and should open specific employment opportunities. However, there must also be a clearly stated arrangement for articulation to at least one undergraduate degree.
9. In Northern Ireland, Foundation Degrees are developed and delivered by consortia involving a Northern Ireland university, a further education college and employers. The university is the body with degree-awarding powers and has responsibility for ensuring standards, the employers ensure the curriculum will give students the skills employers need and the further education colleges provide the close-to-home delivery.

¹⁰ [Further education sector activity in Northern Ireland: 2016/17 to 2020/21 | Department for the Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

Skills context

10. The Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland, Skills for a 10X Economy, sets out ‘Addressing Skills Imbalances, Driving Economic Growth’ as an overarching objective, at the heart of what the Skills Strategy aims to achieve. Within the evidence and programme of activity outlined to meet strategic skills goals, the Skills Strategy points to the Skills Barometer forecast shortages of level 4 and 5 qualifications.



Source: Northern Ireland Skills Barometer 2021 (High economic growth scenario)

11. As can be seen in the diagram above, the Skills Barometer forecasts that the largest supply gaps are likely to emerge in the mid-tier skills levels (levels 3-5) and, at higher education level, the largest supply gaps are at levels 4 and 5. The Skills Barometer notes the under-supply is linked primarily to a supply issue with level 4 and 5 qualifications representing only 7% of the overall supply of labour from the education system.¹¹ Both the Skills Strategy and Skills Barometer recognise that there are a number of areas of policy that contribute to mid-tier skills levels and a number of recommendations are raised in the Skills Strategy in response. At levels 4 and 5, key policy drivers relate to apprenticeships and HE in FE. The focus of this consultation is on the HE in FE element, which includes level 4 and 5 provision. Skills Strategy recommendation 14 is relevant:

A review of level 4 and 5 ‘HE in FE’ education will conclude in spring 2022. Recommendations and actions arising from the review will be incorporated in the implementation of the Skills Strategy.

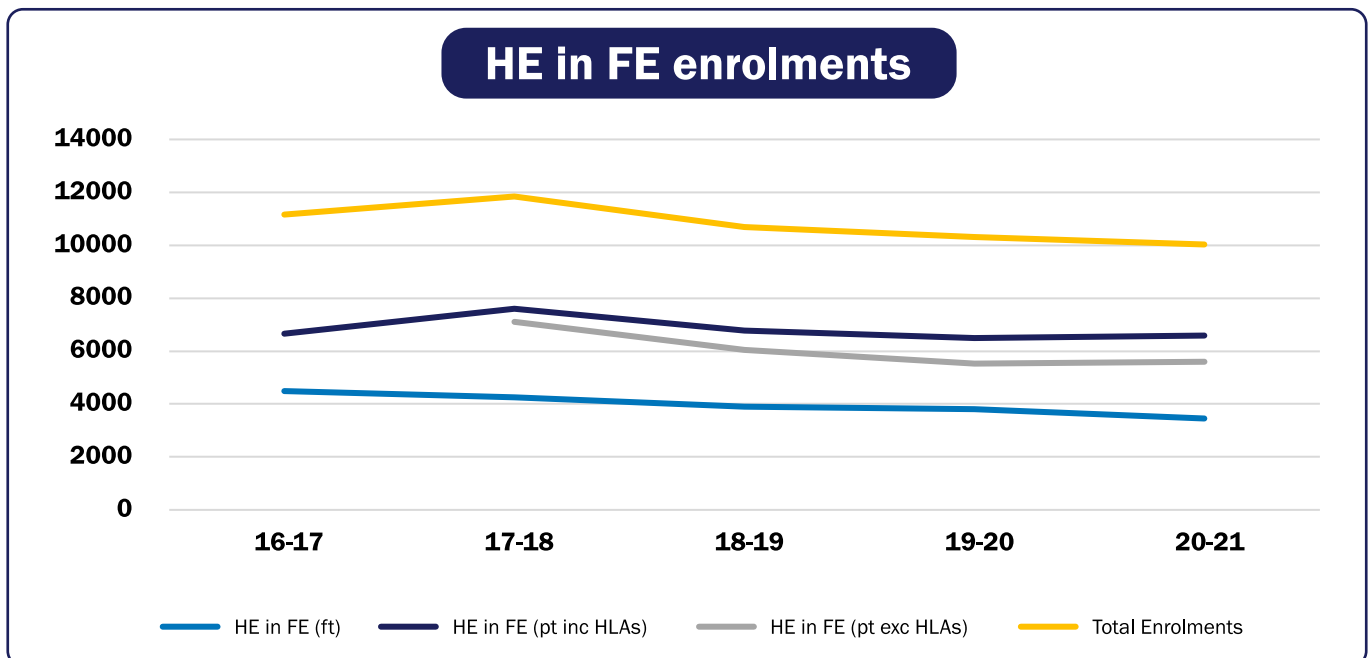
11 [Northern Ireland Skills Barometer 2021 \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk)

12. The Skills Strategy also recommends a review of vocational education provision in Northern Ireland. A consultation on vocational education reform is running simultaneously to this one. Both consultation documents combined present a wider understanding of the strategic context and of how we are working towards meeting mid-tier skills needs. The key principles identified for all vocational qualifications – and which are therefore relevant to the issues and options set out in this document are:

- i. All Vocational Qualifications should present opportunities, where relevant, for the development and demonstration of transversal skills.
- ii. All vocational qualifications must reflect economic need and support inclusive growth.
- iii. All vocational qualifications must be appropriately assessed.
- iv. All vocational qualifications must be based on recognised standards and allow portability and progression.
- v. All vocational qualifications should embrace innovation.
- vi. All vocational qualifications must support flexible delivery and access to all.

Review of Level 4 and 5 Provision and HE in FE

13. The Department commenced a review of level 4 and 5 provision and HE in FE in November 2020. The review was set up primarily in response to declining enrolments in HE in FE provision, with current trends showing that the number of higher education enrolments at the further education colleges has been declining over the past five years.¹² Declining enrolment trends present a clear challenge in light of the skills needs of the economy and forecast under-supply at levels 4 and 5.



Source: Consolidated Data Return

12 Further education sector activity in Northern Ireland: 2016/17 to 2020/21 | Department for the Economy (economy-ni.gov.uk)

14. There are also other reasons why we are reviewing this area now. There has been an increased focus by the Department for Education in England on technical and vocational education in recent years. A series of consultation and reform programmes are underway regarding post-16 and post-18 education and funding, Higher Technical Education and lifelong learning. Some of the drivers for these reforms are similar to our own, in terms of forecast skills shortages. There is a desire to improve vocational skills and competencies to address productivity and social mobility issues which has resulted in a greater emphasis on level 4 and 5 programmes. Quality, visibility, increased provision and uptake are the main reform aims. The reform programme in England results in potential risks and opportunities for Northern Ireland, reinforcing the need to review existing policy relating to level 4 and 5 and HE in FE.
15. The overarching aim of the review in Northern Ireland is to achieve a level 4 and 5 and HE in FE sector that can meet the needs of the economy through provision that is unique; through provision that is responsive to employer and skills needs; through provision that is complementary and aligned with other provision available locally and at other levels; and through provision that continues to provide opportunities for those from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate in higher education in the post Covid scenario.
16. To achieve the above aims, eight work strands were identified and taken forward:
 - To define the level 4 and 5 and HE in FE proposition.
 - Level 4 and 5 qualifications.
 - Foundation Degree policy.
 - Alignment with other Departmental initiatives, i.e. Higher Level Apprenticeships.
 - Pathways and progression.
 - Funding and MaSN.
 - Level 4 and 5 provision at higher education institutions and level 6 provision at further education colleges.
 - Retention and achievement at level 4 and above.
17. The work strands are now complete and a number of recommendations have emerged. A report providing an overview of the findings and recommendations emerging from all of the work strands has now been published.¹³ Some of the recommendations are operational in nature and are about how we can improve and enhance internal process and governance arrangements. These recommendations are not subject to consultation. Recommendations we wish to consult on are those relating to the strategic context and policy and are set out in the rest of this document.

13 [Review of Level 4 and 5 Provision and Higher Education in Further Education - Overview \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

HOW TO RESPOND

18. This consultation will be hosted online at the following address:
[Level 4 and 5 Provision and Higher Education in Further Education - NI Direct - Citizen Space](#)
19. The Citizen Space website has been specially designed to be as user-friendly and welcoming as possible for those who wish to complete the consultation. It also allows the Department to rapidly collate results. For this reason, we would particularly encourage anyone who is interested in responding to this consultation to utilise Citizen Space as the method of their response.
20. However, if this is not possible, you can respond to this consultation via email at:
level4&5HEinFE.Review@economy-ni.gov.uk or you can respond in writing to the HE in FE Branch address in Adelaide House by 17:00 on 9th March 2023:

Level 4 and 5 Provision and HE in FE Consultation
HE in FE Branch
4th Floor
Adelaide House
39-49 Adelaide Street
Belfast
BT2 8FD
21. When responding via email or in writing, please state whether you are responding as an individual, or representing the views of an organisation – and if so, please state the name of the organisation. Also, quote the following Consultation Reference: Level 4 and 5 Provision and HE in FE Consultation.
22. Any responses received after the closing date will not be considered as part of this consultation process.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND DATA PROTECTION

23. On conclusion of the consultation, all responses will be collated and a summary will be published on the Department for the Economy website. This summary document will include a list of the organisations that responded, but will not include people's personal names, addresses or other contact details.
24. Information provided in response to this consultation, including personal information, may be subject to publication or disclosure under access to information legislation (primarily the Data Protection Act 2018/the General Data Protection Regulation 2018; Freedom of Information Act 2000; and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004).
25. For this reason, you should identify in your response any information which you do not wish to be disclosed and explain why this is the case. Please note that an automatic confidentiality disclaimer generated by your IT system will not, of itself, be regarded as binding on the Department. If we receive a request for disclosure of this information, we will take full account of your explanation, but we cannot give an assurance that confidentiality can be maintained in all circumstances. For further information about how we process your personal data, please see our Privacy Notice at Annex Five.

COPIES OF THE CONSULTATION

26. This consultation document is being produced primarily in electronic form and may be accessed on the 'Consultations' page on the Department's website at Department for the Economy consultations. If you require access to this consultation paper in hard copy, or in a different format – e.g. Braille, disk, audio cassette – or in a minority ethnic language, please contact level4&5HEinFE.Review@economy-ni.gov.uk and appropriate arrangements will be made as soon as possible.

SECTION ONE: PURPOSE AND PRINCIPLES

Introduction

27. The Review of Level 4 and 5 Provision and HE in FE sought to establish an agreed purpose and set of principles for level 4 and 5 provision and HE in FE at the outset. We want to use these to establish a framework to guide future policy and delivery of level 4 and 5 provision and HE in FE and to establish a clearly defined role for the further education colleges in the higher education landscape. We expect that future policy reviews and decisions regarding level 4 and 5 provision and HE in FE will include an exercise to ensure outcomes and decisions are aligned with the purpose and principles once these are finalised. We have referenced discussions in this paper to the proposed purpose and principles where appropriate.
28. It is important that the purpose and principles align more broadly with the draft framework on vocational qualifications which we are currently consulting on and which is available on the Citizen Space website [Principles for Vocational Qualifications in Northern Ireland - NI Direct - Citizen Space](#)
29. The draft principles for vocational qualification reform make clear that all vocational qualifications:
- Should present opportunities, where relevant, for the development and demonstration of transversal skills.¹⁴
 - Must reflect economic need and support inclusive growth.
 - Must be appropriately assessed.
 - Must be based on recognised standards and allow portability and progression.
 - Should embrace innovation.
 - Must support flexible delivery and access to all.
30. These wider principles for vocational qualifications are reflected in the purpose and principles for level 4 and 5 and HE in FE set out below, given that we expect the provision of HE in FE will continue to have a strong focus on vocational and technical subjects. They are also reflected in considerations throughout this document.

Purpose

31. We want the purpose of level 4 and 5 and HE in FE to align with our wider vision for further education and higher education in Northern Ireland. In setting out a purpose, we have drawn on the fact that:
- Employers use level 4 and 5 and HE in FE pathways to develop their employees in terms of skills, knowledge and qualifications. This can be for a current or future job role, often in a specialist, professional or niche area and can be in the form of a Higher Level Apprenticeship.

¹⁴ Skills that are typically considered as not specifically related to a particular job, task, academic discipline or area of knowledge and that can be used in a wide variety of situations and work settings (for example, organisational skills)

- Many learners engage in level 4 and 5 and HE in FE pathways if they wish to undertake higher education and cannot do so at university, perhaps because they have not studied the right subjects or missed their grades for direct university entry or because they want or need to study close to home. This includes those who choose level 4 and 5 and HE in FE pathways as a ‘stepping stone’ to study at higher levels.
- Many learners engage in level 4 and 5 and HE in FE pathways if they wish to progress to employment. The under-supply at levels 4 and 5 outlined in the Northern Ireland Skills Barometer¹⁵ suggests the economy needs more learners opting for level 4 and 5 pathways for this purpose.
- Many learners engage in level 4 and 5 and HE in FE pathways if they wish to transition to a new career and reskill. This facet, in particular, is significant to the Northern Ireland strategic vision for skills and the ambition to create a culture of lifelong learning.
- Level 4 and 5 provision and HE in FE plays a significant role in widening participation to higher education through providing local opportunities for those unable to travel to a university campus and a number of part-time courses that are suitable for those in employment, on day release and those with childcare and other caring responsibilities.

32. The following overarching purpose and subset of purposes are proposed for level 4 and 5 provision and HE in FE:

The overarching purpose of Level 4 and 5 Provision and HE in FE is to support a globally competitive, regionally balanced economy where more individuals and businesses can reach their potential.

Purpose 1: to meet the current and future needs of employers:

- Professional qualifications relating to a specific occupation or career including licence to practice/standard industry requirement for a particular occupation.
- Upskilling and development of existing employees.
- Strengthening future workforce requirements through the provision of Higher Level Apprenticeships.

Purpose 2: to meet the needs of learners:

- To provide suitable pathways to higher education qualifications.
- To widen participation in higher education, particularly in creating suitable opportunities for those facing barriers to education, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- To support progression to employment.
- For career transitioning or reskilling.
- For personal development or interest.

33. This twin purpose for level 4 and 5 and HE in FE was developed keeping in mind the dual mandate of our further education colleges: to deliver skills needs to support economic growth and to tackle disadvantage by providing viable pathways to education and employment.

15 [Northern Ireland Skills Barometer 2021 update | Department for the Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

Principles

34. The following set of principles are proposed for level 4 and 5 and HE in FE provision:

1. Further education colleges should continue to provide a broad range of high quality higher education pathways, particularly focusing on identified local need, key strategic clusters and the level 4 and 5 needs of employers and learners.
2. Level 4 and 5 provision and HE in FE should primarily be professional and technical and linked to the economic and skills needs of local business and industry.
3. HE in FE provision should be agile and responsive to best meet local and more niche higher level qualification needs.
4. Level 4 and 5 and HE in FE provision should promote and support widening participation and lifelong learning.
5. Further education colleges should offer higher education progression pathways locally for learners at level 2-3 – whether at school, further education college or in an apprenticeship.
6. Value for money, quality, avoidance of duplication and complementarity of provision should always be considered when taking forward any new level 4 and 5 and HE in FE provision. Further education colleges should collaborate across the sector (through Curriculum Hubs where applicable¹⁶) and with a range of stakeholders, including universities where relevant, in the design and delivery of provision.

35. Our aim is for the principles to align with our vision for a collaborative integrated “ecosystem” of tertiary education opportunities to meet the needs of learners, of all ages and backgrounds, and employers.

36. The proposed principles reflect our expectation that:

- Further education colleges should have a role in delivering higher education provision to meet economic and learner needs, with a focus on qualification levels that meet forecast economic under-supply.
- Level 4 and 5 provision and HE in FE should include alternative options to traditional undergraduate degree pathways, with a focus on technical and professional needs.
- Level 4 and 5 provision and HE in FE should enable progression opportunities into higher education, being a key contributor to widening participation, through offering a route for learners who might otherwise have stopped at levels 2 or 3.
- Level 4 and 5 provision should provide progression and an alternative route to level 6 for those learners who wish to continue their studies.
- Quality, agility, responsiveness and value for money are significant requirements of level 4 and 5 and HE in FE provision.
- Collaboration and cohesion with other further and higher education providers are essential components of level 4 and 5 provision and HE in FE.

¹⁶ The Curriculum Hub concept involves the designation of one college as the Hub lead which collaborates with the other five colleges to develop consistent provision, in a selected priority and growth sector occupational area.

37. The purpose and principles set out above have informed the proposals in the rest of this document, will inform policy decisions on an ongoing basis and will be taken account of as we make decisions on the allocation of funding. In particular, the Department will apply the purpose and principles set out above, as well as taking account of skills needs, in considering the funding of any new provision and in considering the division of funding for HE in FE between further education colleges.
38. The Department may choose to work with stakeholders to review the purpose and principles from time to time, to reflect changing requirements and circumstances.

Question 1

Do you agree with the purpose set out for level 4 and 5 provision and HE in FE?

Question 2

Do you agree with the principles for level 4 and 5 provision and HE in FE?

Question 3

Do you agree that the purpose and principles combined are appropriate for guiding future policy and delivery of level 4 and 5 provision and HE in FE?

Question 4

If not, what should be removed or added to the purpose or principles and why?

Question 5

Have you any other comments on the Purpose and Principles Section?

SECTION TWO: HIGHER EDUCATION QUALIFICATIONS

Introduction

39. In line with the purpose and principles set out in the previous section, level 4 and 5 and HE in FE qualifications should meet the needs of both employers and of learners. Qualifications should also be aligned with skills needs, identified by the Northern Ireland Skills Barometer and reinforced by the Department's economic strategy, 10X Economy¹⁷, and skills strategy, Skills for a 10X Economy.¹⁸
40. However, evidence also shows that there are particular challenges at level 4 and 5 with relatively low levels of understanding and awareness of these qualifications.¹⁹ A level 4 and 5 and HE in FE landscape that is easy to navigate, easy to understand and where there is strong recognition and brand awareness is essential if we are to boost uptake to meet the demand for skills and meet the principles set out in the previous section. We want HE in FE and level 4 and 5 pathways to offer an attractive alternative to the traditional university pathway and for this to be communicated through careers advisers, employers, schools and other routes.
41. The parallel consultation on vocational qualification reform sets out a proposed approach to the vocational qualification landscape more broadly and the proposals below should be considered in that context, to ensure the system as a whole is easy to navigate and understand. Cross references are made where appropriate below.

A preferred qualification - current position

42. The Foundation Degree emerged as the Department's 'preferred' qualification at level 4 and 5 collectively through a number of Departmental (formerly Department for Employment and Learning) strategies from its introduction, in pilot form, in 2001 through to, most recently, Access to Success in 2012.²⁰ The Foundation Degree is also the preferred qualification to underpin Higher Level Apprenticeships. While the Department does not currently have a 'preferred' qualification at other levels, other jurisdictions are becoming more directive about qualifications at some levels.²¹
43. To help achieve the objectives set out in the Department's Access to Success strategy a significant awareness raising communication campaign for the Foundation Degree ran from 2013 to 2016 and was effective in boosting awareness and understanding of the qualification at that time.

17 [A 10x Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk)

18 [Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland - Skills for a 10x Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk)

19 [Purdy, N. Gibson, K., Orr, K., Tsang, K. \(2022\) Perceptions of Level 4 & 5 Qualifications in Northern Ireland - Stranmillis University College | A College of Queen's University Belfast](#)

20 [Higher education strategy documents | Department for the Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

21 [For instance, through the introduction of T-levels in England and the withdrawal of funding for qualifications that are judged to overlap with these qualifications](#)

44. Aside from the Foundation Degree being the preferred higher education qualification at level 4 and 5 collectively, there is currently no guidance or criteria established as to what other qualifications are appropriate or under what circumstances other qualifications can be delivered at level 4 and 5. The suitability of qualifications is often dictated by higher education Student Support Regulations and relevant policy, particularly for full-time provision, where it is unlikely a further education college will offer a qualification if it is not a designated course for student support purposes. If a course is not designated, students cannot apply for support, such as tuition fee loans and maintenance support.
45. As noted in the background section above, the Foundation Degree is both designed to meet a specific business need and to articulate to at least one undergraduate degree. As such, Foundation Degrees are normally offered in conjunction with a university who use their powers to award degrees to confer a Foundation Degree on successful students.

Degree Awarding Powers

46. However, a small number of further education colleges in England currently have the powers to award Foundation Degrees and undergraduate degrees in their own name, without the need for a university as a validating partner. The Office for Students runs a process through which providers can apply for these degree awarding powers.²² Providing a Northern Ireland further education college with such a power would require the Northern Ireland Assembly to take forward an appropriate legislative Act to do so, or for the further education college to submit an application to the Privy Council for a Royal Charter.
47. There are some clear advantages to further education colleges having their own degree awarding powers. The powers may provide a further education college with the flexibility to respond more quickly to business need and to focus more strongly on vocational skills. In England such powers have also given certainty to further education colleges, given some universities have withdrawn support for previously validated Foundation Degree programmes. Degree awarding powers would also give further education colleges greater control and certainty over issues such as entry requirements, which are likely to be important in ensuring a growth in uptake of level 4 and 5 qualifications.
48. However, there is a risk that Foundation Degrees and undergraduate degrees awarded by further education colleges may lack the recognition and therefore attractiveness to learners of an undergraduate degree associated with a university. We also believe that collaboration between universities and further education colleges allows qualifications to reflect the significant research expertise that universities bring and combines an academic and vocational focus in a way that reflects the intent when Foundation Degrees were created. Degree awarding powers for further education colleges could mean that colleges would need to create their own level 6 articulation pathways, as this is a requirement for Foundation Degrees, which would shift the focus of further education colleges away from level 4 and 5 higher education qualifications that we recommend maintaining below. Collaboration between universities and further education colleges should also help to avoid duplication and overlap in their offerings, prevent over-supply and can give college students access to some university facilities, such as their libraries. There is a risk that providing further education colleges with degree awarding

22 [Degree awarding powers - Office for Students](#)

powers would encourage them to compete with, rather than collaborate with, local universities. We want to ensure the focus is on working together as we strive to meet our vision for a collaborative integrated “ecosystem” of tertiary education opportunities.

49. We are therefore not considering degree awarding powers for the further education colleges at this stage as a way of underpinning the approaches set out below but we will keep this option under review as we move forward.

Options for level 4 and 5 qualifications

50. The following options are summarised for consideration with more detail later in the section:

- Option 1: Status quo - retain the current position that the Foundation Degree is the ‘preferred’ qualification at level 4 and 5 collectively.
- Option 2: Retain the current position that the Foundation Degree is the ‘preferred’ qualification at level 4 and 5 collectively but work with providers and validating institutions to ensure the Foundation Degree can be used flexibly to better meet the needs of a wider range of learners and employers and establish clear criteria where alternative qualifications can be delivered.
- Option 3: Remove the preference for a particular level 4 or 5 qualification but put in place an overarching approval process using quality criteria, similar to the approach to approving Higher Technical Qualifications in England.
- Option 4: Remove any preference for a particular level 4 or 5 qualification and allow providers complete freedom to choose and deliver qualifications they believe best meet the needs of learners and the economy, provided the qualifications are on a National Qualification Framework.
- Option 5: Select an alternative preferred qualification, such as HNC and HNDs or a new suite of level 4 and 5 Diplomas and Certificates focussed on technical skills and designed to meet local need.

51. We consider that option 2 or option 3 are most likely to help address the challenges we face with low awareness and brand recognition whilst ensuring we can meet the needs of both employers and learners. All these options have the potential to meet the purpose and principles set out in Section One and the principles we are consulting on for vocational qualifications more generally. However, options 2 and 3 combine the flexibility to meet local and more niche needs, while building on existing awareness and understanding – and meeting the need to widen participation in higher education and support lifelong learning.
52. Option 2 improves on option 1 by seeking to ensure both greater clarity and greater flexibility to meet need. Removing any preference for a qualification – option 4 – provides the most flexibility to meet some employer and learner needs but it is likely to make the challenge of poor recognition and understanding significantly worse, compounding low uptake and undermining the ability to meet learner and employer needs.

53. HNC and HNDs remain well respected and understood in some sectors of the economy and continue to be used extensively across the UK. They are the principal level 4 and 5 vocational qualifications in Scotland, though awarding arrangements there are different to England, Wales and Northern Ireland where they are provided only by the awarding body Pearson Qualifications. They also provide a separate, well established and distinct level 4 qualification which might attract some learners. However, switching focus to an alternative qualification would mean losing the significant investment put into developing and raising awareness of Foundation Degrees. Awareness of HNCs and HNDs is generally lower than for other qualifications such as the Foundation Degree.²³ It would also mean provision in Northern Ireland being tightly aligned to provision in England (and/or Scotland), where the biggest markets are for these qualifications. Focussing on an entirely new suite of qualifications might allow us to address some of the deficiencies in the other options but it would likely take too long of time to build an understanding and awareness of a new qualification with both employers and learners and to gain widespread acceptability for their use in progression.
54. We are therefore exploring options 2 and 3 in more detail below and seeking your views on the best option to pursue.

Option 2 – retain the Foundation Degree as the preferred qualification but with changes to ensure the Foundation Degree can better meet needs and establish clear criteria for when to use alternative qualifications.

Arguments in favour of option 2

55. There are a range of advantages to the Foundation Degree and reasons why retaining it as the preferred qualification is a strong option:
- The Foundation Degree is an established qualification for many sectors after over twenty years of investment, promotion and development in Northern Ireland. The longevity of the qualification within the Northern Ireland context should provide a basis on which to build greater awareness and recognition – some of the key challenges we are trying to address. Recent research into perceptions of level 4 and 5 qualifications²⁴ found that more prospective students had significantly more awareness of the Foundation Degree compared to other level 4 and 5 qualifications.
 - Foundation Degrees can be developed, delivered and awarded within the tertiary education sector in Northern Ireland with no reliance placed on awarding organisations or government policies outside of this jurisdiction. This is important from a risk perspective in ensuring the ongoing supply of level 4 and 5 qualifications in light of wider reforms taking place in neighbouring jurisdictions.
 - The co-design element of the Foundation Degree means it can be specifically focused and tailored to regional and local skills and employer needs. This is important in keeping with the proposed principles outlined in Section One, where there is an emphasis on meeting local skills needs.

23 [Purdy, N. Gibson, K., Orr, K., Tsang, K. \(2022\) Perceptions of Level 4 & 5 Qualifications in Northern Ireland - Stranmillis University College | A College of Queen's University Belfast](#)

24 [Purdy, N. Gibson, K., Orr, K., Tsang, K. \(2022\) Perceptions of Level 4 & 5 Qualifications in Northern Ireland - Stranmillis University College | A College of Queen's University Belfast, pg 25](#)

- The Foundation Degree is a successful qualification in widening access to higher education. Widening participation is one of the proposed purposes of level 4 and 5 provision and HE in FE as outlined in Section One. Significantly, each Foundation Degree must have an articulation route to an undergraduate degree built into its approval process by local universities and applicants without formal qualifications can also apply. These characteristics are further enablers of the proposed purpose and principles of level 4 and 5 qualifications and HE in FE, in terms of creating higher education pathways and creating suitable opportunities for those facing barriers to education, such as those without formal qualifications.
 - Foundation Degrees draw on the research background and expertise of universities to blend academic learning with vocational application. Industry led solutions incorporated within Foundation Degrees are strengthened by the applied skills and experience of further education colleges.
 - Engagement with students suggests that the link to a university adds prestige and therefore to the attractiveness of the qualification.
56. Retaining the Foundation Degree as the preferred qualification at level 4 and 5 collectively also reflects the wider Vocational Qualification Framework in that the Foundation Degree supports accessibility, supports progression pathways and, given their established position and prominence, will contribute to a clear and navigable landscape.

Challenges with the Foundation Degree and arguments against option 2

57. However, there are also some constraints and drawbacks associated with a focus on the Foundation Degree:
- They are constrained by unit/module requirements set down by the validating universities for progression purposes. The need to articulate to an undergraduate degree may limit the flexibility to meet the requirements of business and the economy.
 - In addition, the requirement for an articulation route means that provision cannot be developed if there is no relevant undergraduate degree provision at a university willing to support the development of a Foundation Degree. This may limit the ability to meet the needs of employers and learners – though it would be possible to use a different qualification where this is the case.
 - The requirement for an articulation route to at least one undergraduate degree often means that partnering universities apply their own entry criteria – this can result in some level 3 vocational qualifications not being acceptable for progression.
 - Development and approval processes can be slow, meaning it takes too long to respond to an urgent business need or opportunity.
 - A Foundation Degree requires the completion of a relevant work placement. That may not be possible for those who are in work but looking to reskill as a prelude to a career change. Given the importance of lifelong learning, this could be a significant drawback.
 - Start dates have traditionally been aligned with the start of the academic year, limiting flexibility to respond swiftly to need and provide additional cohorts in-year as agreement to changes may be needed from the validating university. There may also be constraints on sequencing of learning and delivery modes.

- The Foundation Degree is a level 5 qualification which means that students commit to a two year term of study. While students who successfully complete their first year but are unable to continue their studies can be issued with a Certificate of Higher Education there is not currently a clearly defined entry point from level 4. Other options, like HNCs and HNDs, provide a clearer framework for one year or two year study and provide a clearer option for those looking for a level 4 qualification.
- Foundation Degrees are subject to validation and revalidation by universities who may choose to vary entry requirements, for instance, and may not accept some types of qualifications as suitable for entry.
- The need to ensure there is sufficient academic and theoretical content to ensure articulation to an undergraduate degree may limit the scope for including all of the vocational content that may be a priority for business or the economy.

58. Work is already being undertaken to address some of these challenges. For instance, different start dates within the year have been agreed, to allow further education colleges to better respond to learner and business demand. Universities and further education colleges are discussing how to make use of existing flexibilities around work-based learning to ensure these qualifications work for those looking for a career change. Approval processes are also being considered to see how they could be speeded up, to ensure greater responsiveness. Work can also be undertaken to map the curriculum in HNCs and Certificates of Higher Education to allow individuals to start a level 4 course and move into the second year (if studying full-time) of a Foundation Degree. Going forward, this mapping to ensure a level 4 entry point (including the creation of Certificate of Higher Education if one does not exist and there is likely to be demand) should be taken forward alongside the development or revalidation of any Foundation Degree.

59. Nonetheless, some of the drawbacks set out above are likely to remain. This limits the ability to fully meet some of the proposed principles outlined in Section One and in our separate consultation on vocational qualifications. In particular, there may be some limits on responsiveness and the ability to fully meet all the needs of employers and learners. The Foundation Degree is also not currently required to map to occupational standards or reflect the transversal skills set out in our consultation on vocational qualifications: we would need to work with providers to develop a mechanism to ensure new qualifications reflected these requirements.

Option 2 – establishing criteria where it may be appropriate to use a qualification other than a Foundation Degree

60. If the Foundation Degree is to remain the ‘preferred’ qualification, then we intend to establish clear criteria where it may be appropriate to select an alternative qualification. This will ensure there is adequate scope for the further education colleges to have a qualification offering that enables them to meet the purpose of level 4 and 5 provision and HE in FE, as proposed in Section One.

61. In determining what qualification is suitable if a Foundation Degree is not, we intend to take an approach which is aligned with the overall vision for level 4 and 5 provision and with the proposed purpose and principles set out in Section One. Key criteria to guide choice of qualification should therefore be:

- Local university engagement - further education colleges may seek to deliver alternative qualifications if local universities state that they are unable or unwilling to support the development of a Foundation Degree (this may include circumstances where the relevant subject is not taught at the university or they do not have the appropriate expertise). Universities should respond in writing to colleges once a formal enquiry about developing a Foundation Degree has been made by providing a definite response within six weeks of formal enquiry. Further education colleges and universities should agree in advance points of contact for these queries.
- Employer engagement and employer preference - for example, if there is a clearly stated preference (supported by appropriate rationale) for an alternative qualification by a local employer with significant ongoing demand for the relevant qualification and skills.
- Professional pathways – where a professional qualification by recognised industry associations can provide appropriate pathways for employment and progression.
- Value for money – if a reasonable assessment concludes that the cost of a Foundation Degree is more and its benefits demonstrably less than those of the alternative.
- Progression and opportunity to widen access to higher education - for example, if a Foundation Degree does not enable progression for a significant cohort of level 3 learners, i.e. if there is evidence that entry requirements are an unreasonable barrier to progression for a significant cohort of level 3 learners.

62. In circumstances such as the above, where the Department introduces criteria to provide flexibility for providers we need to ensure that it is robustly considered and implemented. The further education colleges are responsible for applying criteria and we would expect this to be applied in collaboration with a Curriculum Hub, where a Hub exists. The Department may choose to review criteria based decisions taken by the further education colleges on a sample basis. In circumstances where appropriate process has not been followed and/or criteria has not been met, the Department will remove funding for the relevant course and expect the further education college to adopt new provision for future enrolments.

Option 3 – remove the preference for a particular level 4 or 5 qualification but put in place an overarching approval process using quality criteria, similar to the approach to approving Higher Technical Qualifications in England

63. The Skills Barometer 2021 states that the undersupply of mid-level (NQF level 3-5) qualifications reflects the fact that a relatively small number of qualifiers at this level transition to the labour market and also highlights that there is a need for new courses and a wider range of professional and technical skills. This is reinforced in Skills for a 10X Economy, which considers how professional and technical education pathways (typically level 3-5 qualifications) can be established as an alternative to academic education.
64. As some of the analysis above shows, it may not be possible to fully meet the needs of employers and learners through a single qualification. That means there will inevitably be some diversity of provision – particularly as we move to more modular forms of provision. It may be argued that greater flexibility to select the most appropriate qualification would allow further education colleges to better meet needs and therefore stand a better chance of boosting the enrolments at level 4 and 5. While reforms in England at this level have been driven by the wish to send a clear indicator of quality to students, they have seen the creation of an over-arching ‘brand’ – Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQ). A summary of English HTQ qualifications is

included at Annex Four. Their approach allows awarding bodies to put forward a qualification for assessment against the employer-led occupational standards that underpin apprenticeships and to be approved as a HTQ. This builds an overarching brand – HTQs – while retaining the individual qualification brands – the Foundation Degree, HNDs, etc.

65. Simply removing our preference for any qualification would, as noted above, add to the issues with awareness and understanding of these qualifications by extending the complexity. An over-arching designation could take advantage of the brand awareness and understanding of individual qualifications while providing some coherence. It could also be used to ensure that, while there would be flexibility in the qualifications used, they would meet a minimum criteria which would provide assurance around their value.
66. If this option is progressed, there would be no ‘preferred’ qualification at level 4 and 5 but instead we envisage there would be a quality assurance process introduced that will determine the suitability of qualifications in line with established criteria. Approved qualifications would then fall under an overarching brand.

Arguments in favour of option 3

67. Key arguments in favour of this approach include:
 - The opportunity to develop a strong all-encompassing brand at levels 4 and 5 and, potentially, benefit from any marketing and branding initiatives of HTQs in England. This will potentially lead to greater visibility and awareness of level 4 and 5 pathways and, in turn, greater uptake.
 - Greater flexibility for the colleges to respond to employer need and, in particular, flexibility to meet the specific needs of the economy at levels 4 and 5 without the necessity of a guaranteed articulation pathway to an undergraduate degree.
 - Greater opportunity for development and/or delivery of niche or bespoke qualifications.

Arguments against option 3

68. The reasons why we might not wish to pursue this option include the following:
 - There may be cost implications and capacity constraints associated with expanding the range of qualifications used. This is addressed more broadly in Section Four.
 - A quality assurance process will need to be introduced to determine the suitability of qualifications in line with established criteria. This will have significant resource implications to establish and will result in recurring costs to deliver. A third party provider, such as a partner organisation, will likely need to be engaged to take on the quality assurance function on an ongoing basis.
 - The quality assurance process could make the creation and approval of new qualifications a lengthier process and creates costs for providers, validating universities and awarding organisations.
 - While this process could be applied to new qualifications it would be significantly more burdensome to require all existing qualifications to go through this process, making it difficult to apply this term to existing provision – and therefore for it to become effective as an umbrella term for a number of years.

- There is a risk that this option will result in a wider range of qualifications being available which will exacerbate existing challenges around navigability and awareness of level 4 and 5 qualifications, despite the over-arching brand.
- The use of an umbrella term, such as HTQs, is new and it may take some time to build the brand and raise awareness. This presents a challenge given the need to raise the profile and awareness of level 4 and 5 qualifications in the short term.

Considerations regarding an over-arching designation and quality assurance process should option 3 be adopted

69. If the approach set out above were adopted, there would need to be a decision on what the over-arching designation, or brand, would be. One option would be the Higher Technical Qualification term adopted in England. This would, however, be subject to agreement with the Department for Education in England who own the copyright. This would bring the advantage that awareness raising and communications activity delivered by England – which may impact here – would be relevant. However, it would also limit our ability to make decisions independent of the Department for Education in England.
70. In addition, the term Higher Technical Qualification may not be perceived to be fully reflective of the range of subjects delivered at level 4 and 5. There may be alternative titles which are more reflective of this cohort of learning – and which would bring the benefits of an over-arching designation. While this loss of consistent terminology with England would allow more freedom in how any over-arching designation is applied, it would also be likely to make it harder to achieve strong brand recognition and awareness.
71. In order to protect the HTQ brand and ensure a degree of consistency in its application, the Department for Education in England would expect some kind of quality assurance to match qualifications to business need, if they were to allow us to use that brand. In England, qualifications are assessed against the employer-led standards that also underpin apprenticeships to confirm they can be awarded the HTQ status. Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland have chosen to continue to rely on the National Occupational Standards²⁵ rather than the new English standards. However, the National Occupational Standards are not linked to particular levels of study and generally do not focus on higher education standards. That leaves us with the option of either seeking to extend National Occupational Standards in relevant areas to make them appropriate to higher education qualifications, which is likely to be prohibitively expensive; relying on the English employer-led standards; or using some other mechanism such as endorsements from a minimum number of employers. Currently when a Foundation Degree is developed QAA level descriptors and QAA subject benchmark statements are used to help guide the development of the qualification for validation panels – we would expect this to continue to be the case alongside any additional criteria.
72. This approach could bring some significant additional costs as there would be an additional layer of approvals in order to confirm a qualification meets the criteria to use the over-arching designation. This may discourage awarding bodies from putting their awards through this process. This could be mitigated either by ‘passporting’ approvals provided by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education in England, without requiring any additional checks in

25 [National Occupational Standards | Department for the Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk)

Northern Ireland and/or by seeking to ensure a very light touch assessment process. Running such an assessment process would bring additional costs which would need to be met – and the assessment process could delay the use of new or updated qualifications, undermining the flexibility and responsiveness that this approach would be intended to deliver.

73. We would also need to be clear how qualifications currently in use would be treated. As noted above, it would not be possible to assess all current qualifications against a new process in a short period of time. While in England there are no restrictions on using level 4 and 5 qualifications that have not met the HTQ criteria at this time (beyond existing requirements associated with funding), we are likely to want to move to a position whereby only qualifications that have met the criteria can be used (for instance, by making this a requirement of funding). This will take a significant period of time, which would delay the benefits and in the meantime could add to the confusion and complexity in the system.
74. Any of the options proposed above will need to be fully assessed to understand any financial impact they might have and their affordability before they could be implemented.

Question 6

Do you agree that options 2 and 3 are the most appropriate for further consideration? If not, why not?

Question 7

Do you think option 2 or option 3 better meets the purpose and principles we have set out for level 4 and level 5 qualifications? Are there any additional arguments for or against either of the options that you would make?

Question 8

Do you agree with the criteria at paragraph 61 for when an alternative to a Foundation Degree could be used, if a Foundation Degree is to be our preferred qualification? If not, what should be changed?

Question 9

If we were to adopt an over-arching designation do you agree we should work with England to use the Higher Technical Qualification terminology? If not, what should we use and why?

Question 10

If we are to use an over-arching designation what should any quality assurance process be based on – the employer-led standards that also underpin apprenticeships in England, National Occupational Standards or something else such as employer endorsements – and why?

Question 11

Do you agree that an over-arching designation with an associated quality assurance would create additional costs and time requirements? How can we ensure these are kept to a minimum without lowering standards? What would the costs be for you/your organisation?

Question 12

How should we deal with existing qualifications in use if we were to introduce a new overarching-designation with an associated quality assurance process?

Question 13

Do you have any other comments or information relevant to the considerations in Section Two on Higher Education Qualifications?

SECTION THREE: HIGHER EDUCATION DELIVERY BY DIFFERENT PROVIDERS

Qualification levels at universities and colleges – current position

75. The current approved policy position is that further education colleges can offer only the first and second years of an undergraduate degree programme except in exceptional circumstances. This focusses provision on level 4 and 5 with level 6 provision only in exceptional circumstances. This policy was approved by the then Minister for Employment and Learning in April 2008. At that time, the views of stakeholders were considered and the recommendation was based on the following argument:

There should be no mission drift in the Further Education sector. The skills gap is most acute at a level that is represented by higher education qualifications below undergraduate degree level and therefore the focus of the further education colleges should be on the delivery of work focused intermediate level higher education programmes such as Foundation Degrees. In addition, due to Maximum Student Number restrictions, any increase in full-time final year undergraduate degree provision at further education colleges will produce a consequent reduction in the number of places available for intermediate level higher education provision.

Options

76. The following options are available:

- Option 1: Maintain the status quo, which means that further education colleges can only offer level 6 undergraduate degrees in exceptional circumstances.
- Option 2: Restrict HE in FE to levels 4 and 5 only, with no exceptional provision.
- Option 3: Continue to limit the circumstances in which the further education colleges can offer level 6 undergraduate degrees but with clear criteria defining the circumstances when level 6 undergraduate degrees can be introduced.
- Option 4: Allow further education colleges complete flexibility in the level of their HE in FE provision, within the confines of The Further Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997.²⁶

77. Through our engagement to date there has been a strong desire from a number of key stakeholders to make the current policy position more flexible with the aim of better meeting the need of employers and learners, both on a regional and sub-regional level (and in line with Principle 1 in Section One and our focus on ensuring vocational qualifications reflect economic need and support inclusive growth).

78. Key considerations include the fact that:

- The further education colleges are subject to the same quality assurance standards and requirements as the higher education institutions.

26 [The Further Education \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1997 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk)

- A full range of higher education qualifications in further education college settings supports accessibility and, in that respect, supports a number of Departmental and wider strategies and priorities in relation to widening participation in higher education, lifelong learning and meeting rural needs.
 - Particularly in relation to part-time learning, reducing travel time can be important in ensuring that learning opportunities are accessible to those in work or with other responsibilities, such as caring responsibilities especially given lower levels of maintenance support, for instance.
 - The further education study model may suit some learners better in achieving their higher education goals than the university alternative, in terms of class sizes and access to lecturing staff and resources.
 - For students looking to progress from level 5 to level 6 having to change institution and teaching style can represent an additional challenge which may impact on their chances of success.
 - In addition, level 4 and 5 provision may be more attractive where there is level 6 top up provision available at the same institution.
79. Counter to these points, we note that the Covid-19 period has seen the development of new approaches to teaching and the use of technology, which could improve access to universities remotely. However, for many people the further education study model will continue to be the best option to provide the support learners need to help them succeed. Higher student financial support is also different for distance learning provision.
80. However, there are a number of arguments as to why a more flexible approach to level 6 undergraduate degree provision in the further education colleges should not be introduced:
- We need to be cognisant of the fact that the higher education skills gap remains most acute at levels 4 and 5. Any move away from a focus on level 4 and 5 could undermine our ability to meet the needs of employers, as identified through the Northern Ireland Skills Barometer.
 - We are also concerned to ensure that relationships across further and higher education are built on cooperation rather than competition and that we balance choice with avoiding unnecessary duplication (in line with Principle 6, set out in Section One).
 - Increasing the number of providers who can deliver level 6 undergraduate degree provision may fragment the market and lead to delivery difficulties for some providers, should class sizes begin to decline or be spread too thinly.
 - Proliferation and fragmentation of the market could also ultimately lead to over-supply of level 6 undergraduate degree qualifications.

Preferred option

81. Given the factors set out above, our preferred approach is for option 3:

Continue to limit the circumstances in which the further education colleges can offer level 6 undergraduate degrees but with clear criteria defining the circumstances when level 6 undergraduate degrees can be introduced.

82. This approach should ensure greater clarity for higher education providers, should ensure the needs of employers and learners can be met but not diminish the role or position of the universities and university colleges in any way. The Department continues to see the universities and university colleges as the main publicly funded providers of undergraduate degree and post degree level study in Northern Ireland.

Criteria

83. Proposed criteria for the delivery of level 6 undergraduate degree provision going forward:

- There must be clear and sustainable demand at local or regional level, linked to priorities set in the 10X economic vision or identified in the Northern Ireland Skills Barometer.
- There must be evidence of strong support from local or regional employers and evidence of likely sustainable demand from potential students.
- There must be engagement with Northern Ireland universities and university colleges to ensure there is significant differentiation with existing or planned level 6 undergraduate degree provision in local universities or university colleges – or agreement from those institutions to the new provision. A conclusion to the engagement and agreement liaison, where relevant, should be facilitated by the universities and university colleges within a timescale of six weeks.
- Additional provision should be endorsed by the relevant further education Curriculum Hub where one exists and any relevant Professional or Regulatory Bodies.
- Provision should be part-time unless a particularly strong case is made for why full-time provision is necessary and relevant.
- Provision should contribute to widening access to higher education and meeting rural needs.
- Further education colleges should demonstrate sufficient expertise of teaching staff, in line with relevant agreed policies.

84. In addition we would welcome views on whether there should be some form of cap on the provision of level 6 qualifications at further education colleges. In 2020/21 there were 959 students studying at level 6 in our further education colleges. This is out of a total of 9,407 students studying Higher Education in Further Education, of whom 3,437 were studying full time. This means around 10% of all HE in FE students (full time and part time) were studying at level 6 and we estimate a lower proportion studying full time at level 6. However, the proportions vary significantly between further education colleges. In addition, some students enrol on more than one course – meaning that the total enrolments at level 6 were 1,090 (total enrolments for HE in FE were 10,034)²⁷. All these figures include students enrolled on Higher Level Apprenticeships.

85. We would welcome views on what level any cap should be set at and how it should be applied – only to full time students, to all students and to each individual further education college or to the sector as a whole. The intention of any cap would be to ensure the focus in further education colleges continues to be at levels 4 and 5 and to limit the chances of duplication and over-provision.

86. We propose that the further education colleges can continue to offer non-undergraduate degree level 6+ qualifications, such as those offered by professional bodies, in line with existing policy and requirements.

27 [Further education sector activity in Northern Ireland: 2016/17 to 2020/21](#)

87. We also affirm the position on the role of universities and university colleges in level 4 and 5 provision. Fundamentally, the universities, university colleges and further education colleges should work on a collaborative basis and, just as we see the universities and university colleges as the main publicly funded providers of under graduate degree and post degree level study, we also wish to affirm the position that the further education colleges are the main publicly funded deliverers of level 4 and 5 provision. Universities are, of course, independent institutions and certain exceptions may therefore apply, such as where provision is introduced by a university to address a need identified in relation to prospective international students, where commercial arrangements apply, where provision is procured via tender exercise or where the provision relates to areas where the further education colleges do not have the relevant skills or expertise to deliver the programme.
88. Currently the Department's agreement is required before any level 6 undergraduate degree provision can be introduced by a further education college. Going forward, the Departmental agreement would be required if the local universities or university colleges are not in agreement with the level 6 proposal put forward by a further education college or consortium of colleges.

Question 14

Do you agree with the proposed option to continue to limit the circumstances in which the further education colleges can offer level 6 undergraduate degrees but with clear criteria defining the circumstances when level 6 undergraduate degrees can be introduced? If not why? And what would be your preferred option?

Question 15

If so, do you agree with the criteria that should be applied for the delivery of level 6 undergraduate degree provision within a further education college setting? If not, why not and what would you change?

Question 16

Do you agree that some form of cap should be set on level 6 provision in further education colleges? If so, at what level should it be set – and should it be based on full or part time provision? And should it be set for each further education college or be a single cap across all the colleges?

Question 17

Have you any other comments on the issues in Section Three on Higher Education Delivery by Different Providers?

SECTION FOUR: FOUNDATION DEGREE POLICY

Foundation Degree Policies Review

89. A key work strand of the Review of Level 4 and 5 Provision and HE in FE was on the Department's policies in relation to the Foundation Degree. In relation to the Foundation Degree, we wish to consider the following:
- Should the Department have a policy on the articulation model used for the Foundation Degree?
 - What validation and partnership arrangements should be mandated by the Department, if any?

What is articulation

90. Articulation is concerned with recognition of prior learning and receiving credit for this learning to optimise learner journeys. In the case of the Foundation Degree, which is a qualification in its own right, there must be articulation arrangements in place. This is the process whereby an awarding institution (i.e. the university) reviews provision at another organisation (i.e. the further education college) and judges that the curriculum of a specified programme (or a specified part) provides an appropriate basis, and is of an appropriate academic standard, to enable direct entry to year two, three or four of appropriate degree programme(s).
91. Arrangements normally involve credit accumulation and transfer, so that credit achieved for the approved study at the first institution is transferred to contribute to the award completed at the second institution (which is the awarding institution for the next level qualification). The two separate components are the responsibility of the respective institutions delivering them but together can contribute to the award of a higher level qualification (from the awarding institution), such as an undergraduate degree. The arrangements include a formal agreement whereby an awarding institution agrees that any students who have satisfactorily completed the specified programme (or a specified part) at the partner organisation and satisfied the stipulated assessment requirements are entitled to enter directly into subsequent stages of one or more specified programmes delivered by the awarding institution. For example, a student may successfully achieve a Foundation Degree and decide to continue their studies by articulating on to an undergraduate degree programme – the articulation arrangements in place may enable the student to join the undergraduate degree programme in year two, three or four.

Articulation – current position

92. In February 2011 a Validation and Articulation Framework for Foundation Degrees was published. Departmental policy on articulation was set as follows:
- a. the Framework would seek to maintain academic standards in all higher education programmes at all levels in both entry to, and graduation from, higher education courses;
 - b. given that a high percentage of Northern Ireland undergraduate degree courses are of four years duration, it would be wrong to create a two-tier system wherein one system of progression (in this case a Foundation Degree + 1 year top-up) would undermine another (traditional 4-year undergraduate degree) by offering a shorter route to the same or very similar qualification. Therefore, there can be no blanket promotion of a 2+1 system;

- c. similarly, Foundation Degree students must not be disadvantaged (vis-à-vis any other progression route) when applying for undergraduate degree programmes. Therefore a blanket 2+2 model will not always be appropriate; and
 - d. the Department recognised that universities are responsible for setting the admissions criteria to their own undergraduate degree programmes and are best placed to decide on the merits of individual applications and routes to progression. However, when considering applications, universities have a wider responsibility to fully recognise the level 5 value of a Foundation Degree when determining a student's progression path and as such there should be no single model of articulation.
93. Articulation was considered again by the Department in 2014 and the conclusion reached that there was no persuasive case to change the position that there should be no single model of articulation. The reference to a four year undergraduate degree at point (b) above reflects the widespread use of a year in industry or study abroad as part of undergraduate degree courses in Northern Ireland. References to 2+1 and 2+2 models reflect the number of study years involved, excluding any 'sandwich' years in industry included as part of courses. Both 2+1 and 2+2 articulation routes are currently in use in Northern Ireland.

Articulation – options

94. The options considered by the Department are:
- Option 1: To request a blanket one year top up articulation model across all Foundation Degrees, this is what is known as the 2+1 model.
 - Option 2: The 'status quo' option – to leave the current Validation and Articulation Framework as it is.
 - Option 3: To amend the current Articulation Framework to elevate the 2+1 model as the preferred articulation model but to recognise there will be circumstances where this is not appropriate or possible and so the existing position that there can be no blanket model is retained. Articulation routes should be based on evidence and focussed on ensuring students can succeed – they may therefore need to reflect individual circumstances such as performance in the Foundation Degree. The approach to articulation should also be a consideration in decisions on who further education colleges partner with to deliver Foundation Degrees (see next section below).
95. In option 1, all Foundation Degree students would complete their level 6 undergraduate degree within one year (full-time). This would reflect an approach which is widely used by universities across the UK. This would address the challenge that we face with students travelling to Great Britain to top up their undergraduate degree more quickly (on a 2+1 model) and potentially not returning to Northern Ireland (as evidence shows many NI domiciled students do not return after studying in Great Britain). However, this is not considered a viable option for the following reasons:
- The universities are autonomous institutions and responsible for setting their own admissions criteria. It is therefore up to the articulating universities to determine the point of entry for Foundation Degree students.

- A number of undergraduate degrees are accredited by Professional, Regulatory and Statutory Bodies (PRSB) and, in many cases, the accreditation is highly specified and stringent with restrictions imposed on articulation models. PRSBs often do not permit a 2+1 articulation.
 - They may provide a quicker route to achieving an undergraduate degree if articulating students do not undertake the placement years required of students who entered university directly.
 - This may not be appropriate for some students and could result in lower levels of achievement and completion.
96. We are concerned, though, to seek to ensure 2+1 articulation routes are in place wherever they are appropriate to avoid learners duplicating learning credits and facing additional costs to complete their education. We do not believe the Validation and Articulation Framework as currently drafted places sufficient emphasis on this.
97. We also recognise the need for flexibility, to ensure that students are given the best chance to succeed and it may be the case that 2+2 articulation is optimal to achieving this in some cases. This focus on ensuring students are given the best chance to succeed should be at the heart of any approach to articulation. The most appropriate route for articulation may therefore depend on factors such as how well a student has performed in completing their Foundation Degree. However, validating partners should ensure they put in place appropriate packages of support to help students transition and integrate effectively into an undergraduate degree course.
98. Conversations between the delivery partner and the validating partner should reflect on relevant evidence from previous cohorts about levels of achievement and the factors which are most relevant to student success. The first focus should be on the additional support available to help students achieve, rather than lengthening the total study time. We also recognise there may be times when evidence suggests that some bridging provision may be necessary to help students transition effectively.
99. Through the Tertiary Education Senior Leaders Forum, chaired by the Department, we intend to facilitate the sharing of information between providers. This will help ensure a common understanding of the evidence base and ensure transparent decisions and reasoning by all parties.

Articulation - preferred option

100. Our preferred approach is therefore option 3 that:

The current articulation framework should be re-framed: while not prescribing a single model of articulation the focus should be on 2+1 models unless there is clear evidence that individual students or cohorts of students are unlikely to succeed even despite appropriate support. The underlying principle should be that Foundation Degree students can complete the level 6 qualification in a timeframe similar to a student undertaking the straight level 6 undergraduate degree pathway unless there is clear evidence that individual students or cohorts of students are unlikely to succeed even despite appropriate support. The framework should be enhanced to emphasise this principle and to emphasise the 240 credit value of a Foundation Degree. Securing appropriate articulation arrangements should be a factor in considering arrangements with institutions outside of Northern Ireland.

101. We are keen for local and regional articulation pathways to be expanded for students and encourage relevant providers and validating partners to collaborate on this, with a focus on priority skill areas.

Question 18

Do you agree, given the factors outlined, that there should be no single model of articulation?

Question 19

Do you agree with the underlying principle that Foundation Degree students can complete the level 6 qualification in a timeframe similar to a student undertaking the straight undergraduate degree pathway unless there is clear evidence that individual students or cohorts of students are unlikely to succeed even despite appropriate support?

What validation and partnership arrangements should be mandated by the Department?

Validation and partnership arrangements - current position

102. Current policy is that Foundation Degrees in Northern Ireland should be validated by a local university (i.e. Ulster University, Queen’s University or the Open University), unless they are unable or unwilling to do so. This policy was adopted in order to encourage the development of partnerships between the local universities and further education colleges and to ensure the quality of the developed learning programmes. The validation policy was last revisited in 2007/08, consulted upon and a decision taken that it should remain in place (the exception regarding local universities being unable or unwilling to validate a Foundation Degree was an addition to the policy at that point).
103. All three universities are now involved in validating Foundation Degrees for delivery at further education colleges. The development of, and increase in, provision validated by the Open University which articulates to their Open BA/BSc (which allows students to choose a mix of subjects) has also led to the adoption of specific level 6 top-up provision in some further education colleges.

Issues for consideration

104. It has been argued that the existing policy is anti-competitive. It could also be argued that it does not allow scope for diversity, that it is a barrier to cross border collaboration, that it restricts the ability of further education colleges to develop curriculum and partnerships that are sufficiently innovative, best meet regional economic need and that are most likely to attract students (including international students).
105. There are also ongoing issues raised about the length of time the validation process takes, which impacts the colleges’ ability to be responsive to employer needs, and entry requirements which sometimes exclude certain qualifications or see entry tariff arrangements set relatively close to university entrance requirements (which could impact the ability of some groups to access these qualifications). Some universities will also have different approaches to key issues such as assessment, with some having a stronger emphasis on more traditional and academic approaches to assessment. Greater flexibility may help HE in FE provision be agile and responsive to regional and more niche needs (in line with Principle 3 in Section One).

106. If the current policy is relaxed, however, some stakeholders have raised a number of concerns. One of these relates to quality of provision, depending on which universities partnerships are developed with. The different higher education quality assurance mechanisms developing between parts of the UK are an important factor to consider here.
107. Secondly, there is the issue of the potential loss of students from Northern Ireland who might opt to top up to an undergraduate degree with the partnering institution outside of Northern Ireland, which has obvious implications for skills needs if students do not return. This may be less of a risk for shorter top-up awards than for students studying a three or four year undergraduate degree. Working with validating partners outside of Northern Ireland may also create a barrier to students articulating. For instance, those with caring responsibilities or families may not be able or willing to spend a period away from Northern Ireland to top up their qualification. Given the Foundation Degree is a significant route into higher education for individuals from groups less likely to attend university, this is a significant factor which impacts on a number of principles underpinning both our approach to Foundation Degrees and to vocational qualifications more broadly. However, we should also note that our principal demand gap and therefore focus is for learners qualifying at level 4 and 5 rather than level 6.
108. Stakeholders also argue that institutions from Northern Ireland have local and regional knowledge and expertise, an understanding of the educational landscape and excellent links with employers which wouldn't be successfully replicated by partner institutions outside of Northern Ireland. Local institutions also allow students to access facilities such as their libraries. Any move away from Northern Ireland validating arrangements would see funds moving outside of Northern Ireland, with fees paid to universities in Great Britain.
109. Also of relevance is work to coordinate and align provision across different further education colleges. Collaboration in the development of a Foundation Degree (for instance, through a Curriculum Hub) can ensure clear pathways across Northern Ireland and reduce the burden on individual further education colleges. This consistency may also be important as we seek to increase the number of agreed pathways to university from HE in FE provision.

Validation and Partnership – options

110. The following options are therefore put forward:

- Option 1: That the current policy remains in place that Foundation Degrees should be validated by a local university, unless unable or unwilling to do so.
- Option 2: That the current policy remains in place but greater flexibility to work with validating partners outside Northern Ireland is offered in specific circumstances (for instance, where it is the clearly stated preference of a local business with significant ongoing demand for these skills or where it is necessary to meet Departmental policy requirements).
- Option 3: That the current policy is removed and a further education college or group of colleges can seek a partnership with an institution outside of Northern Ireland in any circumstance.
- Option 4: That the current policy is removed but that certain requirements are put in place (so that in seeking a partnership outside Northern Ireland, further education colleges must demonstrate arrangements would not present significant articulation barriers, for instance, or must collaborate with other further education colleges in doing so).

Validation and partnership arrangements – preferred option

111. Greater flexibility in validation arrangements may help further education colleges better respond to employer need and remove some barriers to entry – but could create other barriers, particularly in relation to articulation. In balancing these our proposed recommended option is option 4:

- **Further education colleges can seek partnerships with universities outside of Northern Ireland. However, this is subject to:**
 - **Compliance with relevant Departmental policies.**
 - **Evidence that articulation arrangements would not present a significant barrier for students wishing to articulate.**
 - **Collaboration to ensure new provision is only developed once and is used across all further education colleges.**
 - **Confirmation that the arrangements would not be significantly more expensive for students or the Department.**

Question 20

Do you agree with the proposed option that Foundation Degrees should be able to be developed with universities outside Northern Ireland subject to the proposed criteria?

Question 21

Do you agree with the proposed criteria?

Question 22

Do you have any other comments on Section Four on Foundation Degree Policy?

SECTION FIVE: HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENT FUNDING

Current position

112. The Education (Student Support) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009,²⁸ as amended, set out designated courses for which students can access higher education student support funding. This includes loans to pay tuition fees as well as maintenance support (both grants and loans).
113. The regulations set out a position whereby eligible students can access this funding support for level 4 and 5 qualifications set out in paragraph 3 of Schedule 3, which are:
- Foundation Degrees.
 - Higher National Certificates.
 - Higher National Diplomas.
 - Certificates of Higher Education.
 - Diplomas of Higher Education.
114. In addition, the Department can provide access to funding support for other higher education qualifications under paragraph 8 of Schedule 3 of the same regulations and has done so in a limited number of circumstances – for instance where a qualification under paragraph 3 is not available in a particular subject area.
115. Students studying qualifications at level 4 and 5 not on this list and not designated by the Department are therefore not generally eligible for support such as tuition fee loans and maintenance support. Despite this, further education colleges do deliver other level 4 and 5 qualifications. These are often more specialist qualifications in areas such as leadership and management, beauty, health and social care and human resources. These qualifications are often delivered on a part-time basis and in many instances tuition fees will be self or employer funded.
116. In England a similar approach to funding is supplemented by a system of Advanced Learner Loans which are available for a wide range of designated qualifications. The Department for Education in England have, however, consulted on changes to higher education student financial support, including the introduction of a Lifelong Loan Entitlement from 2025 which will be available for both modules and full courses at higher technical and degree levels (levels 4 to 6). As noted in Section Two, to be designated a Higher Technical Qualification level 4 and 5 qualifications are assessed by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education against their framework of employer-led occupational standards.
117. This means there may be a wider range of level 4 and 5 qualifications funded in England than in Northern Ireland.

28 [The Education \(Student Support\) Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2009 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

Considerations

118. This restricted approach encourages a focus on a smaller number of qualifications, which may help reduce complexity and build a greater awareness of the qualifications that are supported. This may help to address some of the challenges identified in the Stranmillis University College research report on perceptions of level 4 and 5 qualifications.²⁹ It may also be argued that these restrictions help to ensure the ongoing rigorousness and value of the qualifications (in line with the principles in Section One and work on vocational qualification reform), which could be lost if a wider pool of qualifications were accepted. This may impact our ability to raise awareness of and demand for qualifications at level 4 and 5, in line with the Northern Ireland Skills Barometer, and to avoid duplication and ensure value for money, in line with our objectives set out in Section One.³⁰
119. Alternatively it could be argued that this approach could be stopping people from studying the most relevant qualifications at level 4 and 5 or stopping them from studying at all if they cannot access financial support for the qualification they wish or need to study. In particular, our proposed purpose set out in Section One, makes clear the requirement to meet the needs of employers by supporting training in professional qualifications, including license to practice qualifications (such as in accountancy or procurement, for instance). These qualifications normally fall outside the scope of higher education student support funding, meaning training would need to be paid for by either individuals or businesses directly. Our proposed objective to deliver a broad range of higher education pathways, focussed on identified local need could also be limited by current restrictions; as could our objective of being agile and responsive to local and more niche needs.
120. Clearly, a more open approach to providing higher education student financial support would complement option 3, in Section Two: Higher Education Qualifications. However, even if there continues to be a focus on the Foundation Degree as our preferred qualification at levels 4 and 5, there will still be circumstances when it is appropriate and necessary to use other qualifications – and this may include qualifications which do not automatically qualify for higher education student support funding.
121. The Review of Level 4 and 5 and HE in FE, which has informed this consultation, recommended a wider approach to funding combined with a mechanism to ensure the quality of any qualifications supported with access to higher education student finance support. That quality assurance mechanism could be the same as that used if option 3 in Section Two is adopted. If that option is not taken forward, then similar options are open to us (assessment against relevant standards or employer support). There could also be a criteria based assessment undertaken by the Department or a partner organisation on the Department's behalf. Any such process would bring additional costs for the Department and would need to be considered in light of other budget pressures.

29 [Purdy, N. Gibson, K., Orr, K., Tsang, K. \(2022\) Perceptions of Level 4 & 5 Qualifications in Northern Ireland - Stranmillis University College | A College of Queen's University Belfast](#)

30 [Northern Ireland Skills Barometer 2021 update | Department for the Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

122. Alternatively, it may be argued that those qualifications on the Regulated Qualifications Framework have already been through a quality assurance process and that this should either provide sufficient reassurance – or be tightened further rather than creating a duplicative process. Changing the regulatory process would only impact qualifications seeking new approvals – it might therefore be necessary to run a dual system with a separate approval process for qualifications already on the Regulated Qualifications Framework. All qualifications awarded by bodies with degree awarding powers at levels 4 and 5 (Foundation Degrees, Certificates of Higher Education and Diplomas of Higher Education) are already included within current funding arrangements.
123. For any new process, the type of process used would define whether the provider (for instance, a further education college) or the awarding organisation would be best placed to make an application for a qualification to be supported by access to higher education student support funding in Northern Ireland. The approach used will also have an impact on the costs of making any application: we would welcome any observations on the likely costs and impact of such a process.

Costs

124. Expanding the range of qualifications eligible for higher education student support funding could increase costs for the Department by expanding the number of people accessing maintenance support and the number of loans made to pay tuition fees. Because maintenance loans and tuition fee loans are subject to repayment, the charge to government reflects likely loan write-offs and interest rate subsidy rather than the full value of any loan.³¹ The costs of this are, in part, controlled by a cap on full time HE in FE places.
125. While enrolments vary from year to year, assuming every level 4 and 5 qualification currently used but not supported with access to higher education student support was funded by a tuition fee loan this would add around £1.7m to the total value of tuition fee loans, assuming no displacement of existing qualifications already eligible for support. There may also be increases in demand for maintenance loan and grant support.
126. Of course, there is a risk that demand for these qualifications increases given access to higher education student finance support. While some of this could be a movement from other qualifications which are already supported through higher education student finance support, there may be additional ‘new’ demand, increasing the total cost. Conversely not all students will choose to use tuition fee loans to fund their study and there may be significant displacement – with students and providers switching from qualifications currently eligible for higher education student funding support. We would welcome any evidence in this area about the likely scale of demand and costs.
127. There is also a risk that this approach could see employers reducing their financial support and in-house schemes for staff undertaking, for instance, professional qualifications. While this does not appear to have been the case in other UK jurisdictions, we would welcome any evidence in this area as well.

31 [Referred to as the Resource Accounting and Budgeting charge](#)

128. Any proposed changes to eligibility would be subject to their affordability and may need to be implemented in a phased approach. Costs associated with full time provision would also continue to be subject to the existing cap on maximum student numbers to ensure cost controls; changes to part time provision may need to be subject to controls such as a phased rollout.
129. Student support funding is administered by Student Finance NI on the Department's behalf, consisting of the Education Authority and the Student Loans Company. Any proposed changes to student support funding in Northern Ireland will result in increased administrative costs. Furthermore, Student Finance NI capacity constraints may be a significant factor in the timing of introducing any changes. There may also be wider policy changes and reviews which have an impact on the way higher education student finance is delivered, for instance any impact from the proposed Lifelong Learning Entitlement in England.

Student support funding for level 4 and 5 qualifications – options

130. There are four options on which we are seeking views:

- Option 1: Continuing with the existing approach, with a limited number of qualifications supported by access to higher education student finance support at levels 4 and 5.
- Option 2: Opening higher education student finance support to all qualifications on the Regulated Qualifications Framework (in addition to existing qualifications).
- Option 3: Opening higher education student finance support to qualifications on the Regulated Qualifications Framework (other than a HNC/D, which are already eligible) which have been subjected to a separate quality assurance process.
- Option 4: Opening higher education student finance support to qualifications on the Regulated Qualifications Framework which have been subjected to a separate quality assurance process (other than a HNC/D) until such a process can be fully integrated into the regulatory process.

Student support funding for level 4 and 5 qualifications – preferred option

131. The recommended option is 4:

Subject to a full assessment of cost and the availability of funding, higher education student financial support should be available to all qualifications on the Regulated Qualifications Framework which have been subjected to a separate quality assurance process (other than a HNC/D) until such a process can be fully integrated into the regulatory process.

Question 23

Do you agree with the recommended option? If not, why not?

Question 24

Is there any further information about the likely costs associated with different options that you can provide or wish to comment on?

Question 25

Are there any other comments you wish to make on Section Five on Higher Education Student Funding?

SECTION SIX: IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

132. Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act places a statutory obligation on Public Authorities to carry out their functions with due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and good relations in respect of religious belief, political opinion, gender, race, disability, age, marital status, dependants and sexual orientation. Whenever we implement a new or revised policy we must consider impacts and potential impacts in terms of equality.
133. In addition to this public consultation, we conducted a Section 75 Equality of Opportunity Screening. In consideration of the data and research available we determined that the proposed revised policy is highly unlikely to create a differential adverse impact, either directly or indirectly, upon any of the groups.
134. In addition to this we undertook a Rural Needs Impact Assessment (RNIA) and also determined that the proposed revised policy is highly unlikely to create a differential adverse impact, either directly or indirectly, due to residing in a rural location. The RNIA can be made available on request, please contact Level4&5HEinFE.Review@economy-ni.gov.uk to request a copy.
135. A draft Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) has also been initiated. This is a live document and will be further developed when the consultation has concluded, to enable all relevant issues to be taken into account.

ANNEX ONE – QUESTIONS

SECTION ONE

Question 1

Do you agree with the purpose set out for level 4 and 5 provision and HE in FE?

Question 2

Do you agree with the principles for level 4 and 5 provision and HE in FE?

Question 3

Do you agree that the purposes and principles combined are appropriate for guiding future policy and delivery of level 4 and 5 provision and HE in FE?

Question 4

If not, what should be removed or added to the purpose or principles and why?

Question 5

Have you any other comments on the Purpose and Principles Section?

SECTION TWO

Question 6

Do you agree that options 2 and 3 are the most appropriate for further consideration? If not, why not?

Question 7

Do you think option 2 or option 3 better meets the purpose and principles we have set out for level 4 and level 5 qualifications? Are there any additional arguments for or against either of the options that you would make?

Question 8

Do you agree with the criteria at paragraph 61 for when an alternative to a Foundation Degree could be used, if a Foundation Degree is to be our preferred qualification? If not, what should be changed?

Question 9

If we were to adopt an over-arching designation do you agree we should work with England to use the Higher Technical Qualification terminology? If not, what should we use and why?

Question 10

If we are to use an over-arching designation what should any quality assurance process be based on – the employer-led standards that also underpin apprenticeships in England, National Occupational Standards or something else such as employer endorsements – and why?

Question 11

Do you agree that an over-arching designation with an associated quality assurance would create additional costs and time requirements? How can we ensure these are kept to a minimum without lowering standards? What would the costs be for you/your organisation?

Question 12

How should we deal with existing qualifications in use if we were to introduce a new overarching designation with an associated quality assurance process?

Question 13

Do you have any other comments or information relevant to the considerations in Section Two on Higher Education Qualifications?

SECTION THREE

Question 14

Do you agree with the proposed option to continue to limit the circumstances in which the further education colleges can offer level 6 undergraduate degrees but with clear criteria defining the circumstances when level 6 undergraduate degrees can be introduced? If not why? And what would be your preferred option?

Question 15

If so, do you agree with the criteria that should be applied for the delivery of level 6 undergraduate degree provision within a further education college setting? If not, why not and what would you change?

Question 16

Do you agree that some form of cap should be set on level 6 provision in further education colleges? If so, at what level should it be set – and should it be based on full or part time provision? And should it be set for each further education college or be a single cap across all the colleges?

Question 17

Have you any other comments on the issues in Section Three on Higher Education Delivery by Different Providers?

SECTION FOUR

Question 18

Do you agree, given the factors outlined, that there should be no single model of articulation?

Question 19

Do you agree with the underlying principle that Foundation Degree students can complete the level 6 qualification in a timeframe similar to a student undertaking the straight undergraduate degree pathway unless exceptional circumstances can be demonstrated?

Question 20

Do you agree with the proposed option that Foundation Degrees should be able to be developed with universities outside Northern Ireland subject to the proposed criteria?

Question 21

Do you agree with the proposed criteria?

Question 22

Do you have any other comments on Section Four on Foundation Degree Policy?

SECTION FIVE

Question 23

Do you agree with the recommended option? If not, why not?

Question 24

Is there any further information about the likely costs associated with different options that you can provide or wish to comment on?

Question 25

Are there any other comments you wish to make on Section Five on Higher Education Student Funding?

ANNEX TWO – STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION

Stakeholder Advisory Group

A Stakeholder Advisory Group (SAG) was established for the Review of Level 4 and 5 Provision and HE in FE. The Group met eight times in the period November 2020 – July 2022 to consider findings and recommendations emerging from the various work strands. Membership of the SAG included representatives from the following organisations:

- College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE).
- The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA).
- Further education colleges (three representatives across the sector).
- NUS-USI.
- Queen’s University Belfast.
- Ulster University.
- The Open University.
- Stranmillis University College.

Stakeholders consulted informally

Engagement also took place with the following organisations/bodies:

- Federation of Awarding Bodies Northern Ireland.
- Pearson.
- Skills Council.
- Interim Strategic Advisory Forum.
- Careers Advisory Forum.
- Northern Ireland Youth Forum.
- Secondary Students’ Union of Northern Ireland (SSUNI).
- Life and Health Sciences Sectoral Partnership.

Stakeholders invited to respond to this consultation document

The consultation document is available publicly but invitations to respond have also issued directly to some organisations and bodies, including those outlined above.

If you are aware of other organisations or stakeholder groups not included above who may have an interest or wish to contribute to this consultation document, please provide contact details to:

Level4&5HEinFE.Review@economy-ni.gov.uk

ANNEX THREE – QUALIFICATION LEVELS

There are nine qualification levels that apply in England, Wales and Northern Ireland:³²

Entry*	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4**	Level 5**	Level 6**	Level 7**	Level 8**
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Entry level award - Entry level certificate (ELC) - Entry level diploma - Entry level English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) - Entry level functional skills - Skills for life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First certificate - GCSE – grades 3, 2,1 or D, E, F, G - Level 1 award - Level 1 certificate - Level 1 diploma - Level 1 ESOL - Level 1 essential skills - Level 1 national vocational qualification (NVQ) - Music grades 1, 2 & 3 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - CSE grade 1 - GCSE - grades 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4 or grades A*, A, B, C - Apprenticeship - Level 2 award - Level 2 certificate - Level 2 diploma - Level 2 ESOL - Level 2 essential skills - Level 2 functional skills - Level 2 national certificate - Level 2 national diploma - Level 2 NVQ - Music grades 4 & 5 - O level – grades A, B, C 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A level - Access to higher education diploma - Apprenticeship - Applied General - AS level - International Baccalaureate Diploma - Level 3 award - Level 3 certificate - Level 3 diploma - Level 3 ESOL - Level 3 national certificate - Level 3 national diploma - Level 3 NVQ - Music grades 6, 7, 8 - Tech level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Certificate of higher education (CertHE) - Higher national certificate (HNC) - Level 4 award - Level 4 certificate - Level 4 diploma - Level 4 NVQ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Diploma of higher education (DipHE) - Foundation degree - Higher national diploma (HND) - Level 5 award - Level 5 certificate - Level 5 diploma - Level 5 NVQ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Undergraduate degree with honours - Graduate certificate - Graduate diploma - Level 6 award - Level 6 certificate - Level 6 diploma - Level 6 NVQ - Ordinary undergraduate degree without honours 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Integrated master's degree - Level 7 award - Level 7 certificate - Level 7 diploma - Level 7 NVQ - Master's degree - Postgraduate certificate - Postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE) - Postgraduate diploma 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Doctorate - Level 8 award - Level 8 certificate - Level 8 diploma

* Each entry level qualification is available at three sub-levels - 1, 2 and 3. Entry level 3 is the most difficult.

** A Higher Level Apprenticeship in Northern Ireland can be underpinned by a range of the qualifications listed above from level 4 to 7.

32 Main source: [What qualification levels mean: England, Wales and Northern Ireland - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/what-qualification-levels-mean-in-england-wales-and-northern-ireland)

ANNEX FOUR – SUMMARY OF HIGHER TECHNICAL REFORM IN ENGLAND

1. The Department for Education in England has announced a new approach to qualifications at levels 4 and 5. To help ensure the quality of qualifications at this level a national opt-in approval scheme has been launched with awarding/validating bodies able to put forward their level 4 and 5 qualifications for approval. The scheme is run by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IFATE). Employer ‘trailblazer’ groups define the knowledge, skills and behaviours required in a particular occupation. This ‘occupational standard’ then underpins apprenticeships and, more recently T levels and Higher Technical Qualifications. Once approval has been achieved, the qualification can then be labelled as a Higher Technical Qualification. The intent is to ensure that these qualifications link closely to employer need and will therefore prove good value to students, who normally pay fees to complete these qualifications. Northern Ireland, along with Scotland and Wales, has continued to use the National Occupational Standards, rather than adopting the new English ‘trailblazer’ standards. England is underpinning the Higher Technical Qualification brand with advertising and communications activity and the Higher Technical Qualification logo will be used to signify the Higher Technical Qualification quality mark.
2. Approvals for Higher Technical Qualification status in England are being undertaken in phases. The first phase focused on digital qualifications with 31 Foundation Degrees, Diplomas of Higher Education, Certificates of Education and HNDs approved for Higher Technical Qualification status – with students starting these courses from September 2022. The next phase covers digital (again), construction and health and social care – with students starting courses from September 2023. While applications have been made for this second phase, announcements have not yet been made on which qualifications were successful.
3. Currently in England only some qualifications at level 4 and 5 are supported by access to higher education student financial support (including students being able to apply for a tuition fee loan, maintenance fee loan etc to undertake these qualifications). The qualifications that are supported in this way are Foundation Degrees, HNC/Ds and Certificates or Diplomas of Higher Education. This position is set out in regulations and is similar to higher education student support in Northern Ireland.
4. Advanced Learner Loans (ALL) are also available in England to help with the costs of a course at an approved college or training provider. Eligible qualifications include levels 3 – 6 for learners aged 19 or older. The ALL is not available in Northern Ireland and is a separate funding stream to higher education student support.
5. The Department for Education in England has now announced its intention to change the approach to higher education student support and to extend it to students studying Higher Technical Qualifications from 2023/24. This may include some new types of qualifications, such as level 4 or 5 certificates or diplomas, not currently eligible for higher education student financial support.
6. See [Higher technical qualifications \(HTQs\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/higher-technical-qualifications) for further information.

GLOSSARY

Term	Definition
Certificate of Higher Education	The Certificate (CertHE) is awarded after one year of full-time study (or equivalent) at a university or other higher education provider, or two years of part-time study. A CertHE a level 4 award in its own right, and students can study for a CertHE in various academic disciplines.
Curriculum Hub	The Curriculum Hub involves the designation of one college as the Hub lead which collaborates with the other five colleges to develop consistent provision, in a selected priority and growth sector occupational area.
Diploma of Higher Education	The Diploma of Higher Education (DipHE) is a higher education qualification, awarded after two years of full-time study at a university or other higher education provider. A DipHE is a level 5 qualification.
Foundation Degree	A professional and technical higher education qualification, which integrates academic and work-related learning. The Foundation Degree is a level 5 qualification on the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications.
Framework for Higher Education Qualifications	The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (FHEQ) for qualifications awarded by bodies across the United Kingdom with degree-awarding powers.
HLA	Higher Level Apprenticeships - offers the opportunity to gain quality training and a recognised higher education qualification while in paid employment.
HNC	Higher National Certificate - level 4 vocational qualification that takes one year to complete, or two years part-time. They are practical-based courses that can either prepare you for work upon completion or continue studying at the undergraduate degree level.
HND	Higher National Diploma - is a level 5 vocational qualification that takes two years to complete, or three to four years if you study part-time. HND's are practical-based courses ideal for those wanting to enter the workforce or study towards an undergraduate degree.
Level 4+	Any qualification higher than level 3.
Level 4 and 5	Level 4 and 5 qualifications sit between level 3 (e.g. A Levels and T Levels, amongst others) and level 6 (e.g. undergraduate degrees). They are typically, but not exclusively, technical in nature.
MaSN	Maximum Student Number – the maximum number of full time students that a further education college or a university should enrol in any given academic year.

Term	Definition
<p>Professional and Licence to Practice qualifications</p>	<p>Professional Qualifications - qualifications designed to train you up to meet particular standards in practice for a particular profession and give you certain expertise in a particular profession.</p> <p>Licence to Practice - in some sectors, L4-5 qualifications are recognised as licence to practice or standard industry requirement for a particular occupation. This is most common in the health sector or other public-sector occupations, which tend to be more heavily regulated.</p>
<p>Regulated Qualifications Framework</p>	<p>The Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) for general and vocational qualifications regulated by Ofqual in England and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) in Northern Ireland.</p>
<p>Skills Barometer</p>	<p>Report providing a detailed understanding of the skill requirements for the Northern Ireland economy</p>
<p>Technical qualification</p>	<p>Technical qualifications aim to provide occupational skills and signal work-readiness to employers. These include technical knowledge and practical skills.</p>
<p>Vocational qualification</p>	<p>Vocational qualifications are work-related qualifications available in a wide range of career areas. They are designed to enable the learner to acquire knowledge and skills that meet recognised standards necessary to perform a particular job and are designed for a specific occupation.</p>