2 Higher level skills

2.1 What are higher level skills?

The term ‘higher level skills’ is complex and is used with a range of meanings in a range of contexts. One common usage, within the context of curriculum design and quality assurance, is to indicate and define the cognitive and analytic skills that a student successfully completing a higher education programme should be able to demonstrate. This is sometimes described as ‘higherness’. QAA expects programmes to address:

• intellectual skills
• practical skills
• transferable/key skills.

(‘Guidelines for preparing programme specifications’, 2006)

Higher level skills are those which go beyond acquiring basic knowledge and understanding and being able to apply that understanding to straightforward situations. They include analysis and synthesis of a range of knowledge, which may be acquired by using research skills; critical reflection on different and potentially conflicting sources of knowledge; problem-solving by identifying a range of possible solutions, evaluating these and choosing the solution most appropriate to the situation; developing complex arguments, reaching sound judgements and communicating these effectively. The FHEQ describes the higher level skills that students should be able to achieve and demonstrate at each qualification level.


Alternatively, and increasingly within the policy focus on the skills agenda following the Leitch Review (see Section 1), the term references the higher or ‘high’ level skills seen as contributing to employability and the country’s socio-economic development.

High level skills – the skills associated with higher education – are good for the individuals who acquire them and good for the economy. They help individuals unlock their talent and aspire to change their life for the better. They help businesses and public services to innovate and prosper. They help towns and cities thrive by creating jobs, helping businesses become more competitive and driving economic regeneration. High level skills add value for all of us.


Extract from: supporting higher education in further education colleges. Policy, practice and prospects. HEFCE 2009/05
HEFCE policy has identified FECs as having a particular contribution to make to the development of higher level skills in this second sense and in engagement with employers (‘Higher education in further education colleges: Consultation on HEFCE policy’, HEFCE 2006/48). These higher level skills may be developed through the prescribed higher education funded by HEFCE, but also through those higher level qualifications – largely professional and work related – described as non-prescribed higher education and funded in colleges by the LSC. See Section 2.2 for a description of higher levels.

Notwithstanding this emphasis on higher level skills in HEFCE policy and an expectation of a focus on flexible ‘short cycle’ provision (including foundation degrees and HNs), any higher level vocational provision should address the expectation that all HE students should benefit from a high-quality learning experience at the appropriate level. The elements of such a high-quality learning experience are set out in QAA’s framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, described below.

2.2 The Academic Infrastructure

For an explanation of the QAA’s Academic Infrastructure see Section 10.1.

FHEQ

The Academic Infrastructure has four components: the ‘Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education’; the frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (EWNI) and in Scotland; subject benchmark statements; and programme specifications (see QAA website for details). In addition, there are progress files and country-specific guidelines for the accreditation of prior learning (APL). This section focuses on the FHEQ and programme specifications. Section 6 focuses on programme specifications and subject benchmarks in the context of curriculum development, and Section 10 addresses the code of practice. Section 6 includes progress files.

The FHEQ is designed to assist HE providers to maintain academic standards and comparability of awards nationally and internationally. It is the reference point for institutional audit, IQER and other forms of external review (see Section 10). The FHEQ contains qualification descriptors for qualifications at each of five ‘levels’. However, it excludes those higher level skills awards which comprise NPHE (see Annex D).

The FHEQ qualification descriptors set out the generic outcomes and attributes expected for the award of individual qualifications at each level, to ensure that qualifications are designed and delivered at the appropriate level. These descriptors provide a framework within which the relevant higher level skills can be identified.

A national framework for higher education qualifications was proposed in the Dearing Report (1997) and was first published in 2001 with an implementation date of 2003-04. A revised edition of the FHEQ was published in August 2008. This can be read at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/EWNI08/). The five levels in the FHEQ reflect five levels of intellectual achievements associated with the main higher education qualifications. These were originally designated as certificate, intermediate, honours, masters and doctoral. In the 2008 revision they have been changed to: 4 (certificate), 5 (intermediate), 6 (honours), 7 (masters) and 8 (doctoral).

The relationship between the FHEQ and other frameworks

The FHEQ and the definition of levels used by the QCA and by some FE/HE credit frameworks were initially distinct. In 2004, however, the FHEQ and NOF were aligned at the higher levels (Table 1). Edexcel BTEC Higher National Diplomas and Certificates
(HNDs/HNCs) were included in the NQF and revised NQF, although they are prescribed higher education funded by HEFCE. Additionally, the NQF included higher level NPHE awards. Higher level awards previously identified as levels 4 and 5 were redefined or newly defined within the NQF – and now the QCF – to include levels 6, 7 and 8; Table 1 contains some examples of qualifications which were allocated to the new levels.

Subsequently, to meet the expectations of the Bologna Declaration, the FHEQ was aligned with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. The labels used to distinguish the levels of the FQ-EHEA – short cycle (within or linked to first cycle qualifications), first cycle (degrees), second cycle (masters) and third cycle (doctoral) – have been incorporated into the FHEQ (2008). Foundation degrees and higher nationals are short cycle. A table setting out broad equivalencies of the main qualifications in each country of the UK (‘Qualifications can cross boundaries’) can be accessed from the FHEQ section on the QAA web-site.

Credit frameworks and higher education

The FHEQ is a qualifications framework (setting out qualifications descriptors for each level), not a credit framework. However, some other frameworks within the UK and Ireland have used credit level descriptors to determine the relative demand, complexity, depth of learning and learner autonomy associated with a particular level of learning and achievement, and many English HEIs use credit level descriptors for programmes. In August 2008, QAA published a credit framework for HE in England: ‘Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England’, drawn up by the CIDG. It offers national guidelines aligned with the FHEQ, but is not prescriptive (see Section 6 for guidance on using credit in curriculum development).

The new QCF set out in ‘Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework’, August 2008, covers all levels from entry to 8. It incorporates the principles of units and credits and has agreed generic descriptors for each level (see the QCA and Ofqual web-sites, www.qca.org.uk and www.ofqual.org.uk). Unlike the QAA descriptors, the terminology of ‘awards’, ‘certificates’ and ‘diplomas’ within the QCF relates to the size rather than the level of the qualification. The titles of all awards in the QCF are in a standard format which identifies the level, size and a concise description of the contents of the qualification; thus all higher level vocational and professional qualifications will include a level between 4 and 8. The titles for certain occupational qualifications may or may not include (as a bracketed addition) the acronym NVQ (see Ofqual et al, 2008, ‘Operating rules for using the term “NVQ” in a QCF qualification title’).

Table 1 illustrates the 2008-09 broad alignment for higher level awards with previous and current QCA levels, aligned to current and previous QAA levels and nomenclature.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NQF previous levels</th>
<th>NQF revised levels (QCF)</th>
<th>LEVEL</th>
<th>FHEQ (EWNI) (2008) typical qualifications within each level</th>
<th>FEHEA corresponding cycle</th>
<th>Previous FHEQ (EWNI) QAA level titles and typical qualifications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 5:</td>
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<tr>
<td>NVQ 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 5 diplomas</td>
<td>Specialist</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Doctoral degrees</td>
<td>Third cycle qualifications</td>
<td>D (doctoral) – doctorates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Examples:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BTEC Advanced Professional Award in Management Studies, Cambridge ESOL level 7 Diploma in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (DELTA)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Masters degrees, postgraduate diplomas, postgraduate certificates in education, postgraduate certificates</td>
<td>Second cycle qualifications</td>
<td>M (masters) – masters degrees, postgraduate certificates and diplomas</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Level 4:</td>
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<tr>
<td>NVQ 4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level 4 diplomas</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Higher nationals</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Examples:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ILEX level 6 Higher Diploma in Law, Trinity Guildhall level 6 Licentiate Diploma in Teaching</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Bachelors degrees with honours, bachelors degrees, professional graduate certificates in education, graduate diplomas, graduate certificates</td>
<td>First cycle qualifications</td>
<td>H (honours) – bachelors degrees, graduate certificates and diplomas</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Higher nationals</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other examples:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ILM Diploma in Management, Edexcel level 5 Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Foundation degrees, diplomas of higher education, HNDs</td>
<td>Short cycle (within or linked to first cycle) qualifications</td>
<td>I (intermediate) – diplomas of higher education and further education, foundation degrees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AAT level 4 Diploma for Accounting Technicians, CIM level 4 Professional Certificate in Marketing</td>
<td></td>
<td>HNCs, certificates of higher education</td>
<td></td>
<td>C (certificate) – certificates of higher education</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Revised levels were not implemented for NVQs levels 4 and 5, and those currently in the NDAQ are listed at their original levels in the NQF. Qualifications that have been accredited in the NQF can be rewritten and submitted for accreditation into the QCF with or without the term ‘NVQ’ in their title, in line with the specific operating rules.

2 BTEC is revising the specification for HNs for delivery from 2010-11.

3 While all HNs will be level 5 in the QCF, only HND will be level 5 in the QAA framework. HNCs are positioned at level 4 and HNDs at level 5 in the FHEQ to reflect typical practice among higher education awarding bodies which award the HNC under licence from Edexcel.
Higher level awards

Higher education institutions offering their own awards devise them within the Academic Infrastructure. Other higher level awards are offered by recognised awarding bodies.

The National Database of Accredited Qualifications (NDAQ) contains all the qualifications that have been accredited by the regulators in England (Ofqual, created when the QCA was split into two in 2008), as well as in Wales (DCELLS) and Northern Ireland (CCEA). It can be searched for specific qualifications, by awarding body and by level. A search on levels 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 in October 2008 listed over 800 qualifications on the NQF and slightly over 100 higher level qualifications accredited to the QCF. These include NVQs, HND/Cs and other higher level awards; they are awards of general awarding bodies – most commonly Edexcel and City & Guilds – specialist awarding bodies, professional bodies and some universities. The number of these qualifications, most of which would be NPHE, indicates the complexity of higher level provision in England.

Edexcel is revising the structure of BTEC higher nationals for delivery in 2010-11. Flexibility will be increased in terms of the use of locally devised units and choice. The size of the mandatory element is likely to be reduced, with more choice available for centres to deliver specialist, employer-related or niche qualifications, and HNs will have an overall grade. They will be developed with reference to sector requirements, and where possible connections with professional body recognition and licence to practice qualifications will be built in at the design stage. International HNs will be aligned with the UK’s QCF higher nationals.

Edexcel BTEC

HN revision

Titling
Technically, all BTEC HN qualifications will be QCF diplomas because they all exceed 36 credits: a QCF award is one to 12 credits; a QCF certificate is between 13 and 36 credits, and a QCF diploma is 37 credits and over. To conform with the QCF titling criteria, the following have been proposed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current title</th>
<th>Proposed title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BTEC Higher National Diploma</td>
<td>Edexcel level 5 BTEC HND Diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BTEC Higher National Certificate</td>
<td>Edexcel level 5 BTEC HNC Diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New qualification</td>
<td>Edexcel level 5 BTEC HNA Diploma</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Units
The unit of measurement will be a ‘credit’ in addition to indicating guided learning hours (glh). Units will be multiples of 5 credits, normally up to a maximum of 15 credits (currently, 60glh units are normally 15 credits).

Level and size of qualifications:
- the HND, HNC and HNA will all be QCF level 5 qualifications
- the HND will be 240 credits
- the HNC will be 120 credits (reduced from 150 credits currently)
- a new HNA will be 60 credits
- up to 60 per cent of the qualification will be at H2 (level 5), an increase from the current 50 per cent
- HNDs are equivalent to 60 ECTS credits per year, or 120 ECTS credits for the complete HND.
Although the HND and HNC and the HNA ‘diplomas’ will be level 5 qualifications on the QCF, only the HND will be level 5 on the FHEQ. Progression from HNC to HND will be funded by HEFCE (the ruling on ELQs has withdrawn funding for equivalent or lower level qualifications, with some exemptions – see Section 3 – but HNCs, while at the same level as HNDs on the NQF, are at a lower level in the FHEQ).

Since 1992, Edexcel has offered HEIs the facility to offer higher nationals under licence; these protocols were revised in October 2007, with the next major update planned for 2013-14. Under this scheme, HEIs are able to offer ‘customised’ or ‘non-NQF’ institutionally validated awards of BTEC higher nationals (and other BTEC qualifications), and these can be offered in partner colleges under approved validation arrangements. In 2007-08, 56 HEIs were licensed. See Edexcel’s ‘Guidance for Higher Education Institutions offering BTEC Customised non-National Qualification Framework qualifications’ (2007).

City & Guilds describes its Higher Level Qualifications which have been accredited onto the NQF in ‘A centre’s guide to City & Guilds Higher Level Qualifications (HLQs)’ (2007). Higher Professional Diplomas (HPDs) at level 4 are designed to equate to 120 credits and to make it possible to contribute credit towards a foundation degree. Master Professional Qualifications are at level 7 and can be credited with appropriate masters points. City & Guilds is forming progression partnerships with colleges and universities to support customised awards.

Foundation degrees

Foundation degrees were placed at the intermediate level (now level 5) in the FHEQ. The descriptor for level 5 sets out the skills required for the award of a foundation degree. This descriptor can also be used as a reference point for higher nationals. Edexcel BTEC HN specifications include the higher level skills learners are expected to develop during the programme of study.

Table 2 is an extract from the FHEQ, 2008; it compares the higher level outcomes required for foundation degrees and honours degrees. Practitioners designing new foundation degrees (see Section 6) should ensure that the learning outcomes reflect these skills and address the need to progress to honours-degree level both generically and for specified linked honours programmes at the college or validating HEI. The benchmarks will form the basis of judgements during IQER (see Section 10). Full details of all levels are available in the FHEQ.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Are awarded to students who have demonstrated:</th>
<th>Foundation degree</th>
<th>Bachelors degree with honours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• knowledge and critical understanding of the well-established principles of their area(s) of study, and of the way in which those principles have developed</td>
<td>• a systematic understanding of key aspects of their field of study, including acquisition of coherent and detailed knowledge, at least some of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of defined aspects of a discipline</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ability to apply underlying concepts and principles outside the context in which they were first studied, including, where appropriate, the application of those principles in an employment context</td>
<td>• an ability to deploy accurately established techniques of analysis and enquiry within a discipline</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• knowledge of the main methods of enquiry in their subject(s) relevant to the named award, and ability to evaluate critically the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems in the field of study</td>
<td>• conceptual understanding that enables the student:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• an understanding of the limits of their knowledge, and how this influences analyses and interpretations based on that knowledge.</td>
<td>- to devise and sustain arguments, and/or to solve problems, using ideas and techniques, some of which are at the forefront of a discipline</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- to describe and comment upon particular aspects of current research, or equivalent advanced scholarship, in the discipline</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:</td>
<td>• use a range of established techniques to initiate and undertake critical analysis of information, and to propose solutions to</td>
<td>• apply the methods and techniques that they have learned to review, consolidate, extend and apply their</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• apply the methods and techniques that they have learned to review, consolidate, extend and apply their</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
problems arising from that analysis
- effectively communicate information, arguments and analysis, in a variety of forms, to specialist and non-specialist audiences, and deploy key techniques of the discipline effectively
- undertake further training, develop existing skills and acquire new competences that will enable them to assume significant responsibility within organisations

knowledge and understanding, and to initiate and carry out projects
- critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data (that may be incomplete), to make judgements, and to frame appropriate questions to achieve a solution – or identify a range of solutions – to a problem
- communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences.

And holders will have the:

- qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and decision-making.

- qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring:
  - the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility
  - decision-making in complex and unpredictable contexts
  - the learning ability needed to undertake appropriate further training of a professional or equivalent nature.
Subject benchmark statements

In this context, the term benchmark is not used (as it usually is in further education) to refer to the measurement of achievement, but to expectations of outcome. Working with the higher education sector, QAA has published subject benchmark statements for disciplines. These statements set out the academic characteristics and standards required at honours degree and, in a small number of cases, at masters level. Benchmark statements are available on QAA’s web-site; they include a summary of the subject knowledge and understanding, and the subject-specific and generic skills required for the achievement of an award. Section 6 explores how they should be used in curriculum design.

A generic foundation degree qualification benchmark was published in October 2004. The FDQB specifies the outcomes for the intermediate level as set out in the FHEQ in 2001, now level 5 of the revised 2008 FHEQ.

Programme specifications

A programme specification is a concise description of the intended learning outcomes of an HE programme, and the means by which the outcomes are achieved and demonstrated. As well as knowledge and understanding of the subject, a programme specification should address the three categories of higher level skills: intellectual, practical and transferable/key skills. The guidance includes suggestions for appropriate ways of assessing each of these skills.

In its report on the five-year cycle of academic review of (directly and consortium funded) education in colleges, ‘Learning from Academic review of HE in FECs in England 2002-07’, QAA noted that aims covering the development of higher level skills were not often set out explicitly (paragraph 64). Some reviewers reported that ‘the development of analytical thinking, research and critical evaluation skills continues to present a challenge to some staff and students’ (paragraph 65).

Intellectual skills

These are the skills required to understand and engage with the theoretical framework that structures a field of knowledge: research, critical analysis and evaluation. They are the skills most closely identified with academic achievement in higher education.

Practical skills

Practical skills are increasingly discussed in terms of employability and problem-solving. They include the ability to apply theory in practice and evaluate theory in the light of practical experience. These skills enable learners to apply theory to action in a critical way and reflect on performance. An understanding of these skills also enables students to draw on experiential learning to inform their academic development.

Key/transferable skills

These are skills with which learners can most effectively access, interpret and communicate new and diverse forms of knowledge. They include communication, information technology (IT) and numeracy skills; the ability to communicate in written and oral form; and the ability to work with others. Colleges are likely to have well-established systems for developing these skills, reflecting their importance in level 3 provision and historically in higher nationals, but need to ensure that they reflect level 4 descriptors.
Debate is ongoing about the ways in which and the extent to which the three categories of skills are separable and/or transferable, and the significance of the context in which they are learned and practised. However, critical reflection and self-reflective practice can encourage students to develop skills across a range of contexts and promote generation and application of new knowledge.

2.3 Preparation for higher education courses

Some colleges and partnerships offer preparation for higher education courses, focusing on developing students’ learning and study skills before the HE course starts. Such preparation courses usually target applicants who have been out of education for some time and who may not have any formal qualifications at levels 3 or 2. These courses may be accredited at levels 3 or 4; if they are accredited at level 4, they may offer credit towards the level 4 award.

City & Guilds

Part of the City & Guilds suite of Higher Professional Diplomas is the HPD in Higher Level Study Skills (3 units). This provides academic study guidance and prepares learners progressing from purely vocationally based education to a foundation or honours degree.

In some cases, specially designed courses are provided for students with vocational qualifications to support transition to academically orientated studies. The following two examples illustrate collaborative developments.

Aimhigher Greater Manchester and the Greater Manchester Skills Alliance (GMSA)

The Step-In to HE project is an innovative new joint initiative from Aimhigher Greater Manchester and the GMSA. It is aimed at all Greater Manchester advanced apprentices who have completed or are about to complete the requirements of their apprenticeship. The project’s main purpose is to build advanced apprentices’ confidence in their ability to progress to HE, with the help of a new course called the Step-In Module. The Step-In Module aims to help:

- advanced apprentices to develop and demonstrate the transferable higher level skills needed for the successful completion of an HE qualification
- employers to ‘grow their own’ staff by encouraging more advanced apprentices to progress to HE and take vocationally relevant courses, including foundation degrees.

The Step-In Module focuses on developing higher level thinking skills, and gives practical experience of research, personal development planning (PDP) and writing techniques relevant to HE study.

Four Greater Manchester delivery centres – Bury College, Skills Solutions, Stockport College and Wigan and Leigh College – have worked in partnership to agree a shared scheme of work, shared assessments and common procedural documentation. All learners have access to information, advice and guidance (IAG) on possible HE and career progression. The module, which is delivered over seven weeks, is worth 10 credits at level 4 and is validated by the University of Bolton. It will sit within GMSA Advance, the Greater Manchester credit accumulation and transfer scheme (CATS).

Extract from: supporting higher education in further education colleges. Policy, practice and prospects. HEFCE 2009/05
Over 40 learners are enrolled on the first runs of the course, from a very wide range of occupational areas. As many as half are expected to go on to HE soon after completing the Step-In Module, with HNC/D cited as the most popular next step; interest has also been shown in progression to foundation degrees.

Wiltshire College

Wiltshire College piloted a preparation for HE course in May to June 2008, funded by the Western Vocational LLN. The course was designed to help those who had achieved a level 3 NVQ who wished to progress to a named degree or foundation degree, but felt unprepared and unconfident about higher academic study.

The course was delivered one morning per week over six weeks to a range of social work, computing and childhood studies candidates. Course content focused on study skills, learning styles, academic writing and referencing skills. The course material was made available through the college’s virtual learning environment (VLE), which the students will use when they progress to their degree. An online discussion forum was set up to enable the students to keep in contact with each other and with the course tutor outside course hours.

The students were assessed through a mid-term and final assignment. The mid-term assignment did not count towards the final grade, allowing students to practise their skills in a ‘safe’ way. Next-day feedback enabled them to apply their learning immediately. The final assignment required students to describe a recent legal, policy or general development from their intended discipline area and discuss implications for practice. The assignment was produced incrementally; students wrote a first draft early in the course, then as their skills developed they shaped and refined the draft until final submission. Written tutor feedback was provided at each stage of the assignment preparation, focusing on skills and confidence building. Students recognised that the ideas they wished to communicate in the early first draft were sound, but that their assignment-writing skills were insufficiently developed. This acknowledgement of their sound intellectual capacity but under-developed written skills gave them a significant confidence boost.

The course ended with students presenting their assignment findings using PowerPoint. For most, this was their first experience of delivering a presentation and using PowerPoint, and was a huge success. All students successfully completed the programme and progressed onto degrees or foundation degrees at the college.

2.4 Developing higher level skills

In addition to pre-entry programmes, many colleges offer additional learning and study-skills support to those students who need it, particularly during induction and in their first year.

For FE course teams providing HE, a consensus on the characteristics of higher level skills, and approaches to teaching them, should be established at the stage of course design (see Section 6). Since not all staff teaching on the course will have been involved in its design, a written strategy setting out the college’s approach to teaching higher level skills is useful; the higher level skills will differentiate the progressive and more challenging aspects of learning.
The balance between areas of skills development may vary across cognate areas and type of course. Foundation degrees and higher nationals will have a particular emphasis on practical skills; professional higher level qualifications will reflect the requirements of the professional bodies; and higher level NVQs will have a specific vocational emphasis.

Technology can support online and distance-learning skills modules.

**University of Plymouth Colleges (UPC)**

UPC has created an online Higher Education Studies Toolkit, which will be available to all UPC higher education students.

UPC recognised the importance of a tool that could support all its learners irrespective of location or subject. It allows learners to develop and enhance study skills throughout their programme as well as preparing them for the transition for their stage 3 (final year) at the university.

The toolkit has different academic levels: it will be presented via an animation of a toolbox, aiming to give a welcoming user interface. By clicking on sections of the toolbox image, users will access materials at differentiated levels to support their varying levels of experience, need and learning style.

The toolkit is designed to provide:
- easy navigation so that students can ‘pick and mix’ the materials they require and develop a personalised route through their learning
- support for a learner-centred pedagogy that encourages independent learning.

Provided by the HE Learning Partnerships Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (HELP CETL), University of Plymouth

**Progression**

Foundation degrees and higher nationals enable progression to an honours degree for substantial numbers of students, and should accommodate the differences in the FHEQ qualification descriptors set out in Table 2.

Higher nationals can give students access to the second or third year of an honours degree, but this varies across HEIs and subjects and courses. The revision of the specification will make the HND 240 credits – as with the foundation degree – equivalent to the number of credits available on the first and second years of credit-based or credit-rated honours degrees.

At the point of an HEI’s validation of a foundation degree, the skills required to progress to the third year of the university course should be addressed. However, it may be that other HEIs will expect a bridging course to address skills at honours degree level.

The development of higher level skills in HE has generated considerable debate as to the most appropriate and effective models for delivery. Research into the impact of various models continues, and no conclusive evidence exists as to which approach works best. However, consensus is growing that students respond most effectively when skills development is incorporated within the range of assessed work making up the core part of the course. Separate skills support, possibly provided...
centrally, can also be helpful, but will need to recognise the separate funding streams for FE, NPHE and HEFCE-funded HE (see Section 3.2).

Effective mechanisms are needed for diagnosis and referral and for monitoring progress through personal development planning (PDP). Colleges are piloting the use of technology to support the compilation of personal development plans (see Section 2.6).

Many students are accepted under colleges’ widening access policies, some with non-traditional entry qualifications. Colleges place considerable emphasis on further developing and enhancing students’ study skills to help them with the transition to higher-level study and provide the preparation for the increased demands of HE. Staff offer considerable developmental support outside timetabled teaching hours. Generally, small class sizes enable attention to be paid to each student’s development and enable them to pursue relevant career aspirations …

‘Learning from higher education in further education colleges in England 2003-05’, QAA, 2006, p16

When course teams develop programme specifications (see Section 6), they need to consider the required skills and their levels. It can be helpful to develop a grid on which all skills are mapped and to see whether they are assessed.

Academic skills

When course teams are designing teaching and learning activities and assessments, it is worth making sure that a range of academic skills is included, particularly:

- critical analysis
- academic discourse
- research
- referencing
- awareness of plagiarism
- examination skills.

Critical analysis

Students need to be able to evaluate different types of evidence, based on an understanding of how the data have been collected, interpreted and presented. Critical analysis is one of the skills for which students need to provide evidence progressively through their learning.

Academic discourse

In those colleges where recruitment is largely from under-represented groups, students may well need focused support in academic presentation skills. Students need to understand how to use key terms and concepts connected with their subject, along with related vocabulary.

Research

Higher level skills for academic achievement and employability require students to engage directly in the generation of knowledge in their chosen subject area. Terms such as ‘investigation’ and ‘enquiry’ raise learners’ awareness of the many ways in which they are already engaged in collecting and

Extract from: supporting higher education in further education colleges. Policy, practice and prospects. HEFCE 2009/05
collating information. The status and use of that knowledge provide a foundation for developing a more systematic set of practical research skills.

FE staff may not be exposed on a daily basis to institutional debates on research. However, requirements for initial teacher training (ITT) and continuous professional development (CPD) in the sector emphasise reflective practice, and some colleges encourage and support research (see Section 9). Partner HEIs may offer free-standing modules or workshops on research methods, or could be invited to present a workshop to introduce staff to current discourse on research approaches and methodology.

Referencing

The conventions of referencing are explicit at higher levels of study. It is a professional expectation that academic arguments are attributed appropriately; failure to do so, out of ignorance or a deliberate intention to conceal sources, is treated very seriously. Students need to be introduced to correct referencing from an early stage. While the Harvard method is widely used, the awarding body usually determines the protocols, which are applied by the external examiner.

Awareness of plagiarism

QAA’s publication ‘Learning from Academic review of higher education in further education colleges (2005-07)’ noted concerns expressed in a number of reports regarding undetected plagiarism. A clear understanding of the processes and protocols described above is particularly important in helping students to understand definitions of plagiarism.

Misuse of the internet and copying and pasting extracts from others’ work is a growing problem, but may seem acceptable to many students. Evidence suggests that less academically experienced students are most vulnerable to charges of plagiarism; they are less certain about how to handle new subject matter and less confident about expressing their views. These students may also have limited command of essay-writing skills and the conventions attached to quotation. International students are also at risk; academic conventions are to a certain extent culture bound, and expectations of how sources should be used and referenced should be clearly explained.

Clear guidelines on academic honesty are important and should be included in course handbooks. Legal judgements indicate that the provider of the award must make it clear what is expected to all students. Some colleges oblige students to sign a generic statement indicating their understanding of the requirements; others require a statement attached to each submission of coursework. Colleges may be required to operate the systems of validating or franchising HEIs.

Increasingly, higher education providers are using software to check for plagiarism. The Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) offers an internet plagiarism advisory service providing generic advice and guidance to institutions, academics and students. It also provides access to the TurnitinUK detection software. Some staff encourage students to run their work through software detection systems as a demonstration of the process, and consider it formative. However, there is currently debate about whether this develops skills in ‘beating the system’.

Examination skills

While many courses in further education colleges do not include examinations as part of the summative assessment, it is rare for this to be the case in HEIs. Examination skills are likely to be essential for students progressing to a third year.
The independent learner

A central characteristic of higher level skills is the confidence and ability to operate as an independent learner. Students are expected to develop independent learning skills during level 3 learning, but many HE in FE students have not – or have not recently – studied at level 3. These skills may need to be explicitly addressed in years one and two of higher education in order to support progression to study in an HEI. Equally, diplomates or graduates entering employment will need these skills for long-term effectiveness in updating and facing the challenges of new learning in the years ahead.

Students who move from further education colleges into HEIs are generally positive about the preparatory experience of studying HE in FE. However, some do not feel that they have been well prepared, and struggle with new and unanticipated expectations. HND and foundation degree students, for example, frequently report difficulties with the volume of reading required, and the expectation that all students will have well-developed essay-writing skills or be able to cope with a dissertation. Some HEIs run special workshops for students making the transition or (as indicated above) require a bridging course, but colleges may prefer to embed these skills in the first years of the course.

The Higher Education Academy commissioned a report on the experience of students on NQF BTEC higher nationals as part of its HE in FE enhancement programme supporting higher education in further education colleges. It includes case studies of good practice, such as a range of business programmes at Exeter College.

Colleges make use of technology to support independent learning, for instance through the development of portfolios.

Higher Education Academy

Exeter College – encouragement of independent learning

The college aims to foster this – right at the outset an assessment is made of the study requirements of the learners. The learners are focused on trying to achieve distinction grades – evidence of independent learning is included in the criteria for a distinction. There is a wide variety in the nature of assessments, partly aimed at assisting independent learning. Other examples include project planning and the research nature of the project, action plans, finding own clients for projects, use of the library, and the realistic nature of the assignments. Learners are successful in their progression to work and further studies.

Rodney Ranzetta, 2007, ‘HE experience of NQF BTEC higher nationals in further education colleges’, Higher Education Academy

North Devon College

An e-portfolio was introduced to the Computing Fd to combine the delivery of tutorials, PDP, work-related learning and study skills. Students undertook assignments that were designed to mirror the workplace and required learning of new concepts/tools. These assignments also introduced problem-based learning, action planning and reflective evaluation. Students initially experienced problems with reflective evaluation, but as they...
2.5 A higher education experience

The development of higher level skills occurs within the context of the student’s experience of higher education in a further education college. This embraces not just the teaching, learning and assessment activities, but also what commentators variously describe as a higher education ethos, culture or experience.

A review of information and literature for the Higher Education Academy identified four dimensions:

- the learning and teaching dimension of an HE ethos
- the symbolic aspects of an HE ethos
- the physical, infrastructural aspects of an HE ethos
- student engagement and the HE ethos.


Symbolic aspects of an HE experience include markers such as marketing, enrolment procedures, signage, staff and departmental titles, student identity cards and graduation ceremonies. These can help to build a student and staff identity that is distinct and separate or, by their absence, integrated. However, the physical or infrastructural elements of separation such as separate classrooms, resource centres and other support systems, staffing and buildings are of course themselves symbolic markers.

The arrangements for managing and delivering HE in colleges vary greatly. For quality assurance and enhancement, QAA noted that: ‘The greatest progress has been made in colleges where one member of staff has oversight of all HE provision within the college’ (‘Learning from higher education in further education colleges in England 2003-05’, p22). However, this does not equate to unitary management of the HE provision at programme or departmental level, or to a separate quality monitoring system, or to a separate site for delivery of HE (see Sections 3 and 10). Some colleges manage prescribed and non-prescribed higher education together, while others do not. However, whatever the structural arrangements, the HEFCE guidance for production of an FE college’s HE strategy is that it should address both forms.

Some colleges believe that it is desirable to provide a physically separate space in order to provide an appropriate HE environment; others maintain that all students should be integrated in the spirit of inclusivity and of a distinctively HE in FE experience. Some embed HE programmes within the FE provision to benefit from specialist staff and equipment, or because the low volume of provision does not warrant separation, or because capital funding is not available to support dedicated facilities. Some colleges may offer a mixture, particularly multi-site colleges where provision may be separate on one site but integrated on another. However, even when delivery is embedded there is likely to be a separate resource centre or social and study space, and possibly dedicated classrooms or practical rooms. As Section 3 indicates, even when delivery is within a dedicated centre, the staff may well work across FE and HE and be managed within a single organisational framework.
The college has over 1,500 HE students studying on a range of foundation degrees and other higher education courses. As the college works over eight main centres, it is not feasible for HE students to study on just one site. However, the college has developed a University Centre at one of its main centres, and this provides a separate study, resources and relaxation space for HE students. The facility has been received very well by students, and the college intends to build on this in the near future.

Some colleges will continue to embed their provision within subject-specialist areas or focus on niche provision. However, the emphasis on expanding higher education through locally based campuses in ‘A new “University Challenge”’ (DIUS, 2008) and HEFCE’s intention to invest Centres for HE Excellence in colleges in the next few years (see HEFCE 2006/48) will be a driver for more larger providers to expand or develop HE centres, in a range of relationships with HEIs (see Section 1).

Kingston Maurward College

The college prides itself on its diverse programme of opportunities for those wishing to study predominantly land-based studies from foundation studies to higher education. Meeting the needs of this diverse student population has presented a challenge in terms of accommodation for learning resources. Higher education students, in particular, need a quiet work environment that is conducive to study but does not alienate them from the whole college experience.

As higher education developed within the college, it was agreed that there should be a separate area where HE students can study quietly, relax during lunch and break times and have easy access to the HE co-ordinator. With financial help from Bournemouth University, our HE partner, an annexe building was refurbished and established as the new HE centre. It is located centrally on campus and has a small IT suite, a comfortable seating area and a kitchenette, and houses the HE co-ordinator’s office.

Students value the area highly, as it provides the opportunity to study quietly and gives them a sense of HE identity.

2.6 Using learning resource centres to develop higher level skills

While funding should support college provision that is equivalent in standard to that in HEIs, smaller volumes of provision may mean a lower level of investment in learning resources; this can disadvantage colleges in terms of quality assurance. For example, it can be difficult to provide a wide selection of journals with the most current articles, abstracts and reviews. While QAA noted that over the period of its five-year cycle of review (‘Learning from Academic review of higher education in further education colleges in England 2002-07’), learning resources in general had improved, ‘areas for further development generally include limited book or journal stock and limited access to library facilities, computing and specialist equipment, particularly for part-time students’ (p33).
Staff teaching on HE courses and learning centre/library staff need to work together in making available a broad and rich range of texts and resources, both traditional and electronic. Library staff from local HEIs will often help, and indirect funding arrangements should cover access to a partner HEI’s learning resources. This may take the form of negotiating access to the university’s learning resource centre (LRC), or through professional support in developing electronic access. Imaginative and creative use of new technology can give most colleges access to a wide range of resources. Practical and comprehensive induction of students and ongoing support from learning centre staff should back this up.

It makes a real difference if these members of staff are proactive in bringing students into the learning centre and teaching them to help themselves. Teaching staff in colleges support students extremely well, with substantial amounts of contact time, but this approach occasionally means that students become dependent on their teachers and do not develop the skills of independent learning: they need to spend time accessing external sources too.

Colleges occasionally underplay the value of journals or periodicals, which can offer important updating of the subject. A number of colleges have purchased Infotrac (an online collection of 3,000 journals in a range of subjects). However, some students need to be encouraged to read paper-based journals.

Kingston Maurward College

In September 2007, the college opened a new learning resources centre to meet the learning resource needs of the whole college. HE students were considered at every stage of the project and, again, Bournemouth University made a financial contribution.

The spacious modern library and IT facilities have been designed to promote an environment for study to encourage students to maximise use of the resources available. Flexible study spaces, new open-access computers and prominent enquiry points all contribute to the learning-focused ambience.

Previous laboratory facilities had been deemed inadequate for HE-level study, so the new flexible and fully equipped laboratories in the LRC have enabled a far wider range of activities to take place.

Elements of student support, learning support and IT support have also been accommodated in the new LRC, providing students with a single, centrally located and accessible building where a wide range of their support needs can be met.

Colleges usually provide library induction for all their students. Some differentiate activities for HE students by adding to their basic induction:

- information on copyright, plagiarism and collecting references
- presentation of appropriate reference materials, specialised collections and journals
- advice on planning research
- help with literature searching and information resources.

Some HEIs provide specialised guides for students based in partner colleges who use the HEI’s learning resource centres.

2.7 Supporting higher level skills through technology

Extract from: supporting higher education in further education colleges. Policy, practice and prospects. HEFCE 2009/05
HEFCE’s strategy for e-learning (HEFCE 2005/12) is supported by a collaboration between JISC and the Higher Education Academy. JISC now uses the term ‘technology-assisted learning’ rather than e-learning, and ‘technology to support practice’ rather than virtual learning environments.

Technology is increasingly used to support all aspects of the learning experience and communicating with students. The systems most commonly used in HEIs and FECs are Moodle and Blackboard.

All colleges and HEIs are connected through JISC to the Joint Academic Network (JANET), and regional centres provide support.

RSC Northern

The Regional Support Centres (RSCs) – nine in England, two in Scotland, one in Wales and one in Northern Ireland – exist to help hard-pressed curriculum and support staff in FE and other colleges to get the best out of e-learning. RSCs were originally created to ensure that the 400+ colleges had a local point of contact, initially for technical support. Curriculum support quickly developed once JANET connections were up and running, and over the last seven years that support has morphed into help with the systems and people aspects of e-learning.

A typical RSC has about 10 staff whose role primarily involves brokering training for client staff, promoting JISC services, providing advice on e-learning systems and technology, and operating social networks and forums. The latter are very important in promoting self-help across communities. The RSC is able to monitor, facilitate and disseminate projects.

JISC has funded a series of projects to implement, pilot and evaluate a range of technologies with learners in the HE in FE context; these started in March 2007 and finish in March 2009. The projects are all piloting existing technologies, with an emphasis on evaluating learners’ experience of implementation. They can be accessed through the JISC web-site under www.jisc.ac.uk/heinfe

City of Sunderland College

The Comport project has been designed to compare and contrast different approaches to the use of mobile and other technologies for supporting HE programmes that include substantial work-based learning (WBL) elements.

This collaborative project of Tyne and Wear colleges includes a pilot project with students on a Service Management Fd at City of Sunderland College. Thirty-four second-year learners are producing an e-portfolio as part of the assessment for their PDP unit. This is an assessed part of the course, with the e-portfolio element worth 50 per cent of the unit total.

As part of the research, each learner has been loaned a personal digital assistant (PDA) to help collect evidence for their electronic portfolio. The PDA can be used to take digital photographs, video shots and sound files, and as a mobile storage and communication device. This is to help learners to gather and store personal development evidence in and out of their work environments. This evidence can then be uploaded onto their web-based e-portfolios.
The Government’s British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (BECTA) offers a wide range of supporting materials on information and communications technology (ICT) in education on its web-site (www.becta.org.uk), but its focus is on schools.