

Careers in Healthcare

Qualifications and Skills

Introduction

This information leaflet has been produced by Skills for Health for those who advise people on career options relating to the health sector. It will be helpful to careers advisers, HR and line managers, supervisors, and anyone else who offers information, advice and guidance to prospective and current employees, trainees and those seeking work.

In this leaflet you will find information on:

- An overview of qualifications and skills
- Vocational qualifications
- Higher Education and tips for supporting staff who want to access HE learning
- Accreditation of Prior Experience and Learning

The information in this leaflet will help you to understand how learning links to progression, and show where to go for the latest developments in health sector qualifications and career pathways across the UK.

This information leaflet is one of a series which are on the Skills for Health website. These cover topics such as health sector jobs, supporting staff learning, the voluntary and independent sectors, funding and much more.

Visit www.skillsforhealth.org.uk/careersinformationandadvice to access them.

*Skills for Health does not claim responsibility for the content and workings of other websites.
The information and web links in this document are correct at the time of publication
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Qualifications and skills

Qualifications are constantly evolving in the health sector. So it is important that Information, advice and guidance (IAG) processes in your organisation keep up to date, so that you can support individuals to:

- Make the most of potential career pathways
- Have their learning and achievement recognised and rewarded
- Access suitable career routes - whether academic, vocational or through more flexible ways.

Career Frameworks provide several flexible ways for individuals to progress. In many cases, progression through the levels may be accompanied by obtaining a higher level of qualification.

Better recognition of learning. Skills for Health is working to ensure that qualifications meet the evolving needs of the sector, and that there is a qualifications system that recognises learning gained in various ways.

Suitable career routes. There are many work based and graduate routes opening up for staff across the health sector. Now there are also an increasing number of flexible routes, with several entry points that enable everyone to maximise their potential. Developments include the [Qualifications Credit Framework \(QCF\)](#), which enables people to gain qualifications at their own pace along flexible routes.

Further links which may be of interest:

Directgov for information on qualifications	Skills Funding Agency
Next Step for information on qualifications, courses and careers in England. You can also ring the helpline, Health Learning and Skills Advice line – 08000 150 850 to speak to an adviser	
NHS Employers for information related to employment in the NHS	The Welsh Assembly for information on Welsh government policy in health
National Database of Accredited Qualifications – the register of regulated qualifications for England, Northern Ireland and Wales	Careers Wales – for information on courses and careers across Wales
Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (Northern Ireland)	DELNI – Department for Education and Learning, Northern Ireland
Skills Development Scotland for information for employers and for individuals on My World of Work	Scottish Qualifications Authority
Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework	Warwick Institute of Employment Research
Skills for Health's pages on qualifications	Department for Business Innovation & Skills

Vocational Qualifications

[Vocational qualifications](#) offer a useful route for a career in the health sector. They can help individuals in an organisation to:

- access further study such as degrees
- progress through the Career Frameworks
- gain entry to new job roles through vocationally related qualifications (VRQs).

Did you know?

Vocational qualifications can be comparative to degree level qualifications, as indicated in the qualifications frameworks across the UK. As you can see on this rough [guide](#), qualifications can cross boundaries.

Individuals can obtain [Scottish Vocational Qualifications](#) (SVQs) and [QCF qualifications](#). Gaining these qualifications is often an essential part of working in health, and can be obtained whilst working in the sector. This includes those who are employed for an apprenticeship. Achievement of these qualifications can enable staff to start progressing through the career framework levels. The health QCF qualifications guide can be found on [Skills for Health](#). Qualifications can range from Healthcare support to pharmacy service skills to clinical healthcare support. The sector is so wide that other qualifications can apply to the sector, such as administration, catering, information technology and many more. The wider qualifications are listed on the [Register of Regulated qualifications](#).

Apprenticeship qualifications are developed at various levels across the UK. Further information can be found in the 'Routes into Work' leaflet and on the Skills for Health [apprenticeship](#) pages, where information can be found on the apprenticeship frameworks. There are a variety of health related apprenticeships including dental nursing, healthcare support and clinical support. Again it is important to remember that healthcare employs people in estates and in those support roles such as IT, housekeeping and medical laboratories. .

Higher education There are vocational qualifications at all levels of achievement. They have several [awarding bodies](#) and there are many different types of [learning provider](#), from further and higher education colleges to health sector organisations.

Qualifications such as [Foundation Degrees](#) and Higher National Certificates open up more pathways of further study and professional development. These qualifications can often be studied as a progression route or a requirement of a level 4 position, such as an assistant practitioner. It is important to check that the course meets the requirements of the post. This is often determined by employer engagement with the university. Courses range from dental technology to paramedic science to a range of health qualifications including areas like health administration and health and social care. .

Vocationally related qualifications (VRQs) provide a broad introduction to a vocational area and can be studied by people who aren't currently employed in that field. Scottish Progression Awards (SPAs) offer a similar route. VRQs may be a good starting point for a member of staff who is thinking about changing their career or job: for example, an administration assistant considering moving into a clinical role.

Further links which may be of interest:

Advice resources for Next Step advisers	National Open College Network
'Day in the life' – exploring options in health in the South West	Open College Network Northern Ireland
The Beeches Management Centre Northern Ireland	

Accessing Higher Education

This is a key area of IAG for staff who want to progress beyond level three of the Career Framework for Health. Accessing higher education supports staff progression into [assistant and associate practitioner roles](#)¹ and beyond, so is an important area of provision by an organisation.

Progression into higher education

Most students who embark on a higher education course will do so after completing a level 3 ([QCF](#)) or level 7 ([SCQF](#)) qualification.

Entry requirements

Entrants can come from a variety of backgrounds with qualifications ranging from the traditional 'A' levels and Highers to those who have gone through a work based qualification such as an apprenticeship. For those who have followed a vocational route, the university may want evidence of literacy and numeracy or evidence that the potential student can make the transition to more academic study. Read Lee Campbell's case study, showing his route to becoming a registered nurse.

Entry requirements to different universities and higher education institutions vary so, once a course of study is identified, a search is necessary to check on entry requirements. See the [UCAS website](#) for further information. NHS Careers also has a [course finder](#) where clinical courses can be easily identified. [Medical Careers](#) and [Nursing Careers](#) can also provide valuable information. The Health Professions Council ([HPC](#)) also lists courses that meet professional registration requirements and further information can be found by professional bodies. Research can be followed up by direct contact with the institution to discuss their requirements. These can vary based on qualifications and experience, so it is always important to check.

Taking an '**Access to Higher Education**' course gives adults without formal qualifications the chance to study at degree level. Some of these courses will be tailored specifically to the health sector. For example, 'Access to Health and Social Care'. These courses are mainly offered by Further Education providers (and some universities). [Access to Higher education](#) and the [Scottish Wider Access Programme](#) provide information on these courses. Read [Donna Clift-Williams](#)' story about qualifying as an osteopath via Access and Degree courses at the British School of Osteopathy².

The [Open University](#) also offers a variety of courses in health and social care that can give learners an opportunity to build up their knowledge.

¹ For more on new roles download the publication 'Proven role templates for a skilled and flexible workforce' (Skills for Health, 2010)

² See Skills for Health (2011) Careers in Healthcare: A Guide to Working in Voluntary Organisations, pages 42-43

Prior experience

Individuals with sufficient experience in a relevant post may be considered for access straight onto a Foundation Degree or a Higher Certificate/Diploma. Education providers will also look for evidence of a competent level of literacy and numeracy and recent learning or study.

Accreditation of prior experience (APL) and accreditation of prior experience and learning (APeL)

APL is a term broadly used to recognise demonstrated learning from the past. APeL is an extension of this as it includes assessed learning from life and work experience. They can offer a useful route for individuals to extend their learning and development, and can help organisations to better recognise the skills of the entire workforce.

- It enables individuals to receive formal recognition for skills and knowledge they already have
- It can be used at many stages of their career pathway
- Past learning and experience could be taken into account to help them gain entry into a higher education course
- It can contribute to the achievement of a higher education qualification. Arrangements for APL/APeL vary across different colleges and universities, so it is important to check directly with the organisation before individuals decide to take up this option.

In Scotland, this process is referred to as Recognition of Prior Informal Learning (RPL).

How does APeL/RPL support professional and personal development?

- It allows individuals to make a connection between past learning and future learning opportunities
- It helps individuals to build up confidence and self esteem
- It encourages self-knowledge and personal development
- It prepares individuals for further learning, and also for new roles / tasks

Further links which may be of interest:

UCAS and APeL	
	Transitions Wider Access Programme
Scottish Wider Access Programme	Diverse routes into Higher Education in Scotland
ApeL Framework for East of England – core principles and best practice (2009, but useful guide)	HELOA Higher Education Liaison Officers Association Wales
APeL guidelines in Northern Ireland	NIPEC APeL (Northern Ireland Practice and Education Council)

Nursing and Midwifery Council ApEL guidance and annexe	NHS Careers ApEL in Nursing
RCN Qualifications and Experience	APeL with Education for Health

Higher Education

- There are many opportunities for potential and existing staff to study at higher education level and several routes to getting there.

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, these qualifications are set out in the [Framework for Higher Education Qualifications](#). Scotland combines all its qualifications into one framework, the [Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework](#)

Key facts for individuals and organisations

Higher education (HE)

HE embraces both purely academic qualifications which are university or college based, as well as vocational qualifications which may combine academic study and work based learning/experience. It is possible for those with experience to undertake postgraduate study without a full first degree. For example, an experienced manager who wishes to undertake a postgraduate management qualification such as an MBA may be able to enter with strong evidence of experience.

Universities can require very definite qualifications to some of their courses. However, some can also be flexible in their entry requirements. For instance, there are definitive A level entry requirements for medicine, but some people go in via an Access course or even after having completed another degree. Nursing is to be degree entry only in England from 2013. In order to become a paramedic, you have to go through a student route, undertaking a higher education qualification. Things do change and it is important to check out details before making applications. Universities also often ask for evidence of experience, whether that is voluntary work or actual work experience. It is vital to many applications – to apply for a place as a midwife, for example, you will need evidence of experience in such as a health or social care setting. Key skills such as communications and team work can be vital and this will be looked for in applications and at interview. [NHS Careers](#) provides a guide for students.

Professionally qualified staff

If a member of staff wants to become professionally qualified, for example as a registered practitioner, the route to achieving this will include some study at a higher education level. There are many ways to get to this point, as illustrated above. There are many clinical roles in the health sector that require registration to practice and as already been outlined, it is important to check that the course meets registration requirements.

Foundation degrees/HNC/Ds

As previously outlined, these are awarded by universities and enable support staff (in bands 1 to 4) to develop into assistant / associate practitioner roles. They can also provide a stepping stone towards further academic study, including professional qualifications. They are also a qualification in their own right and may help people obtain and develop within a certain role. Assistant practitioner roles could lead to nursing, but a radiotherapy assistant, for instance may be happy in that role and want to continue operating at that level. They do not lead to automatic progression as it depends on entry and professional requirements, organisational requirements and the individuals themselves.

Continuing professional development

Undergraduate and postgraduate study enables registered practitioners to further their careers and fulfill their continuing professional development (CPD) requirements. See the Supporting post-registration section in the 'Supporting individuals in their learning' leaflet for more information.

Management and Leadership

Practitioners often take up postgraduate study to develop in a leadership or management role. Clinical staff may also pursue enhanced registration, for example as an autonomous practitioner. See 'Supporting staff in their learning' leaflet (management and leadership) for more information.

Research

This is a specialist area of postgraduate study. Research degrees are often taken by health sector staff as part of their clinical roles. Some health sector staff choose to enter into research posts instead of clinical practice. These posts will be offered/hosted by universities and research institutes.

NHS Organisations

These are the largest purchasers of higher education in the UK. Each year organisations plan and buy specific training from universities based on identified need. It is therefore crucial that existing staff discuss their learning and development needs with their manager, preferably as part of their personal development review process.

Key sources of advice and support for study

- The relevant professional body or association. See the [NHS Careers](#) website for more detail
- Individual universities and higher education institutions
- [UCAS](#) (undergraduate applications)
- [Prospects](#) - a site for graduates

- [RD Learning](#) is a specialist website for research based courses and opportunities
- Other careers websites, such as [Careers A - Z](#), which provides links to further information

Further links which may be of interest:

Hobsons Postgrad	Macmillan Support Learning Zone
University and College Open Days	QAA The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
Careers A - Z	Compare subjects at UK universities and colleges
Foundation Degree Forward	Go Wales information for students, graduates and employers
HEFCE Higher Education Funding Council for England	HEFCW Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
NHS Wales Graduates	Careers Service Northern Ireland
NI Courses	Gradireland
Scottish Funding Council	Institute of Healthcare Management
Institute of Leadership and Management	Graduate Management training scheme
NHS Gateway to Leadership programme	Gateway to Wales management training schemes
NHS Scotland Management training scheme	Third sector student internships (Scotland)
Intro management scheme (Northern Ireland)	Beeches Management centre (Northern Ireland)
Graduate Talent pool UK wide	Professional and supporting bodies in the UK
Nursing regulatory bodies	Allied health professionals regulatory bodies
Healthcare science regulatory bodies	