



Department
for Transport

High Speed Rail Vocational Qualifications Report

1 April 2020 – 31 March 2021

April 2022

High Speed Rail Vocational Qualifications Report 1 April 2020 – 31 March 2021

Presented to Parliament pursuant to
Section 66(1) of the High Speed Rail
(London – West Midlands) Act 2017



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Contents

1. Background	3
2. Data Collection	5
Lessons Learnt	5
Conducting the survey	5
3. Survey questions and results	8
Question 1. What category best describes your occupation?	9
Question 2. Did you complete a relevant VQ?	10
Question 3. On what basis are you employed on the HS2 Project?	11
Question 4. Where did you mainly work between the 1st April 2020 and 31st March 2021	11
Question 5. Which Phase of the HS2 Project are you working on?	13
Question 6. What topic was your qualification in?	14
Question 7. What level was the qualification?	15
Question 8. Who paid for the qualification?	16
Question 9. How much did it cost?	17
4. Overall conclusions and next steps	19

1. Background

1.1 Creating opportunities for skills and employment is one of the seven strategic goals of the HS2 project, complementing its main purpose to be a ‘catalyst for growth across the UK.’ HS2 also represents an opportunity to improve the delivery of the UK’s future project delivery pipeline by leaving a lasting skills legacy for the country.

1.2 In this context, it is forecast that a third of the jobs supported within construction occupations during Phases One and 2a will require high levels of skills, defined as at least degree-level or equivalent (NVQ4+). Further information can be found in HS2 Ltd.’s Skills, Employment and Education Strategy report.¹

1.3 The annual Vocational Qualifications (VQ) report helps us to understand how the workforce is being upskilled and how the aims outlined above are being achieved across the programme.

1.4 The High Speed Rail (London to West Midlands) Act 2017 (“the Act”) provides authority for the construction of a High Speed rail network between London Euston and Birmingham (known as Phase One of the HS2 project).

1.5 Section 66(1) of the Act stipulates that the Secretary of State must prepare a report on VQs obtained in each financial year in connection with the construction of the Phase.

1 <https://www.hs2.org.uk/documents/hs2-skills-employment-and-education-strategy/>

1.6 Section 66(2) of the Act requires this report to contain an account of VQs gained by individuals employed in constructing Phase One of HS2, in preparing for its construction and in connected and ancillary activities, and that they be broken down by type of qualification and activity.

1.7 Section 66(3) requires the report to contain an overall assessment of the costs of training for VQs and who paid.

1.8 This is the fourth annual VQ report made under the vires of the Act and it covers the period between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021. This report also covers VQs associated with Phases 2a and 2b, which technically fall under the powers of the High-Speed Rail (Preparation) Act 2013 (“the Preparation Act”). For reporting purposes, however, and in compliance with the VQ requirements of the Preparation Act, they are included in this VQ report.

1.9 The research results, which informed the VQ report, were sourced from HS2 Ltd. The Company distributed a survey to workers on all three Phases of the HS2 route.

2. Data Collection

Lessons Learnt

2.1 Based on feedback from the Department for Transport and Tier 1 contractors on the previous year's survey, HS2 Ltd revised the wording and order of the survey questions to provide a better user experience and capture higher quality data.

2.2 The improved survey allowed HS2 Ltd to increase the scope and detail of information associated with the respondents, including those who did not complete any VQs.

2.3 A significant improvement on previous surveys was the inclusion of an interactive map, which allowed respondents to visualise accurately the HS2 section on which they worked.

2.4 The survey also allowed respondents to select from a wider list of work occupations and was expanded to accommodate questions around hybrid ways of working. This allowed HS2 Ltd to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on VQ training.

Conducting the survey

2.5 Drawing on experience from previous years, a more effective communications plan and process were introduced for the 2020-21 survey.

2.6 An email was circulated to all Skills, Employment and Education (SEE) Coordinators within the Tier 1 Joint Ventures prior to the survey launch in June 2021.

2.7 SEE Coordinators and their internal communications leads were presented with a draft plan of action and invited to a meeting, where they discussed the survey's content and shared ideas on how to best raise awareness amongst HS2 workers.

2.8 The meeting led to the production of a demonstration video that provided a step by step guidance on how to complete the survey. The communications plan was finalised and shared with all Tier 1 suppliers, including an internal communications article featuring a QR code. The video demonstration was shared with Tier 1 contractors and was accompanied with a schedule for sending communication emails.

2.9 Preceding the launch of the survey, HS2 Ltd published an article in HS2 News which is the designated contractor newsletter, covering all construction sites and Tier 1 contractor staff.

2.10 While the survey was open, regular emails were sent to the Tier 1s SEE Coordinators, which kept them informed on progress, and provided the numbers of responses, asking them to continue promoting the survey using their internal communication channels.

2.11 The survey was extended for a further two weeks via an email which was sent to all Tier 1 suppliers. The

email was communicated within the Joint Ventures and the wider supply chain.

Covid-19 Implications

2.12 The research on VQ took place during the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to the restrictions and safety concerns surrounding the health crisis, HS2 Ltd made the decision not to use hard copy surveys, which meant that the questions could only be accessed online.

2.13 A QR code was created and shared with construction site managers, who in turn distributed the code amongst site workers and allowed time for them to complete the survey.

2.14 To gain a better understanding, the 2021 survey retained a question from the 2020 survey which asked where the respondents mainly worked. However, HS2 Ltd revised the response options to better suit the hybrid ways of working that everyone had adopted during the pandemic.

3. Survey questions and results

3.1 The total HS2 workforce at the time the survey was initiated was estimated at around 16,550. The target for representation of the workforce by the survey was to capture 1,655 responses or 10%.

3.2 The survey lasted six weeks and resulted in 1,449 submissions, capturing 8.75% of the workforce.

3.3 In total, nine questions in relation to VQs were asked. The survey structure is explained in further detail below. The full list of questions in the survey were:

- Which category best describes your occupation?
- Did you complete a relevant VQ?
- On what basis are you employed on the HS2 Project?
- Where did you mainly work between the 1st April 2020 and 31st March 2021?
- Which Phase of the HS2 Project are you working on?
- What topic was your qualification in?
- What level was the qualification?
- Who paid?
- How much did it cost?

Question 1. What category best describes your occupation?

3.4 778 (54%) respondents who completed a VQ worked in Manager, Director, Senior Roles or Engineering roles.

3.5 358 (25%) respondents were working in a Professional Occupation.

3.6 64 (5%) respondents were Onsite Construction Operatives, Plant Operatives, Labourers, and Transport Operatives.

3.7 The results show that most of those who completed VQ's were already working in senior or highly skilled roles.

3.8 However, as the survey was not directly accessible to those working in the supply chain, such as Onsite Construction Operatives, Plant Operatives, Labourers and Transport Operatives, this would have had an impact on the sample and therefore responses to question one. These roles are often found within the Tier 2 supply chain, where HS2 Ltd and the Tier 1's would have limited capacity to influence delivery of the survey.

Occupation	Total	%
Manager, Director and Senior Officials	392	27
Engineering (includes Civils)	386	27
Professional Occupations	358	25
Associate professional and technical occupations	110	8
Administrative and secretarial occupations	100	7
Onsite Construction Operatives	44	3
Engagement and Customer Service	34	2
Plant Operatives	11	1
Labourers and Transport operatives	9	>1
Not Answered	5	>1

Table 1 What category best describes your occupation?

Question 2. Did you complete a relevant VQ?

3.9 This question was added to the 2020 survey to help improve data quality and ensure that only those who had completed a relevant qualification would complete the survey.

3.10 Of the 1,449 respondents, 183 (13%) people completed a VQ while working on the HS2 project between 1st April 2020 and 31st March 2021.

3.11 If a respondent answered “no” to this question they were taken to the end of the survey and no further information was collected from them.

	Response total	Response percentage
Yes	183	13%
No	1,266	87%

Table 2 Did you complete a relevant VQ?

Question 3. On what basis are you employed on the HS2 Project?

	Response total	Response total %
Employed	1,260	87
Agency/Consultant/Contractor	101	7
Self employed	43	3
Not Answered	43	3

Table 3 On what basis are you employed on the HS2 Project?

Question 4. Where did you mainly work between the 1st April 2020 and 31st March 2021

3.12 This question was added to the 2020 survey to help give a better understanding of the reach of the survey within the HS2 workforce. It was decided to keep this question in the 2021 survey to see the outreach of the survey. This also allowed us to gather data on whether those working from home were accessing opportunities to complete a VQ qualification. It was found that 64 responses said they were mainly working at home

and that this was the most popular answer chosen for this question.

3.13 There had been plans to improve the scope of the survey to target the on-site workforce, but due to Covid-19 restrictions HS2 Ltd could not implement these plans. (See section 2.12.)

3.14 Even without these additional methods of dissemination, 23% of those who responded were based on site.

3.15 67 respondents (37%) were home based, and 40 respondents (22%) worked in a combination of on-site and office based. This would have been increased by the number of staff whose working locations were altered during the pandemic.

3.16 24 respondents were office based. This is expected to increase in future surveys when more people return to office working.

	Response total	%
Home based	67	37
On-site	42	23
Combination office based/on-site	40	22
Office based	24	13
Not answered	10	5

Table 4 Where did you mainly work between 1st April 2020 and 31st March 2021

Question 5. Which Phase of the HS2 Project are you working on?

3.17 This question was added to the survey for 2021 so that we could better understand the distribution of those completing VQ's across the line of route.

3.18 The majority of those who responded worked on Phase One (139 respondents).

3.19 There were four respondents who worked on Phase 2b, 16 worked on Phase 2a and 18 worked route wide. This question was supported by a map of the route with a key to clearly indicate where each phase was located.

3.20 Six people did not respond to this question.

	Response total	%
Phase One – London to West Midlands (Fradley)	139	76
Route-wide	18	10
Phase 2a – West Midlands (Fradley) to Crewe	16	9
Not Answered	6	3
Phase 2b – Crewe to Manchester or West Midlands to Leeds	4	2

Table 5 Which Phase of the HS2 Project are you working on?

Question 6. What topic was your qualification in?

3.21 For each qualification that a respondent completed they were asked what topic the qualification was in. Rather than asking for the specific name of a qualification they were asked to identify the general topic.

3.22 The most frequently chosen topic was Construction (42 responses), followed by Not answered (36) Engineering (30) and Health and Safety (19) and Project Management (16).

3.23 The response for this question correlates with this stage of the project since notice to proceed for Phase One was issued in April 2020. Increased on-site construction would require a focus on upskilling in these topic areas.

	Response total	%
Construction	42	23
Not answered	36	20
Engineering	30	16
Health and Safety	19	10
Project Management	16	9
Business and Finance	11	6
Transport/Traffic and Logistics	7	4
Security	5	3
Environmental Management	4	2
Plant	3	2
Rail	2	1
Leadership & Management	2	1
Administration	2	1
Architecture	1	>1
Risk Management	1	>1
CEEQUAL	1	>1
Human Resource	1	>1

Table 6 What topic was your qualification in?

Question 7. What level was the qualification?

3.24 Based on feedback from the Tier 1 suppliers, we included equivalency information for UK and EU qualifications, to help improve the respondents' understanding when answering this question.

3.25 However, despite this additional measure, 24% did not know the level of qualification that they completed. A further 22% did not answer this question.

3.26 From those that did know what level their qualification was, we can see that most respondents either completed a Level 3 or 6 qualification.

3.27 It is expected that as the project progresses a change in the levels of qualifications undertaken may be evident, as more entry level jobs come through the supply chain.

	Response total	%
Level 1	6	3
Level 2	8	4
Level 3	20	11
Level 4	14	8
Level 5	13	7
Level 6	24	13
Level 7	13	7
Don't know	44	24
Not Answered	41	22

Table 7 What level was the qualification?

Question 8. Who paid for the qualification?

3.28 As you can see in Figure 9, 109 respondents reported in the survey that their employer paid for the qualification.

3.29 Only 29 of the respondents paid for their own qualifications.

3.30 The response to this question shows that in most circumstances the employer paid for the qualification, which confirms that during this time the project offered employees opportunities to do a VQ at no cost to themselves.

	Response total	%
My employer paid	109	60
Not answered	40	22
I paid	29	16
Don't know	5	3

Table 8 Who paid for the qualification?

Question 9. How much did it cost?

3.31 Most qualifications completed fell in the £1,000 to £5,000 bracket. This is an increase on last year's survey when most qualifications were reported in the 'Up to £500' bracket. This agrees with the findings in question 1, which shows most respondents who completed VQ's were those in senior level roles. The most chosen option was 'don't know' with 54 responses followed by 41 instances where this question was not answered.

	Response total	%
Don't know	54	30
Not Answered	41	22
£1,001-£5,000	36	20
Up to £500	22	12
£501-£1,000	17	9
£5,001 or more (please specify)	13	7

Table 9 How much did it cost?

4. Overall conclusions and next steps

4.1 By upskilling the workforce, the HS2 project is meeting its aims of making sure that the right skills are in place to deliver the railway. For example, most VQ's were in Construction (23%) followed by Engineering (16%). Promoting VQ's ensures that the demand for high skilled labour is met over the course of the HS2 programme and contributes to providing high quality and long-term employment opportunities. This report demonstrates how VQ's are a key tool in the creation of a skilled construction and transport workforce for the HS2 project and beyond.

4.2 The most common vocational qualifications were in construction, engineering, and health and safety. This was similar to last year's results, where the most common topics were in construction, health and safety, and project management.

4.3 The total estimated cost of all these vocational qualifications is between £120,500 and £270,000. This compares broadly to last year's estimated cost of £150,000 and £410,000, a cost largely met by employers. The variance between the two years is due to fewer respondents, 88 in 2020-21, declaring a cost for an obtained VQ, compared to 169 in 2019-20. As with the 2019/2020 report, it is likely that the estimated costs for the 2020/2021 data are an underestimate due to the high proportion of "Don't know" to question 9, as well as the

upper band of courses costing £5,000 or more, which 13 respondents selected.

4.4 Due to the broad and complex nature of the HS2 supply chain, the use of a survey is still judged to be the most effective way of gauging the level of VQs on the HS2 project. However, survey results will be informed and limited by the coverage and response rate. The 2020/2021 survey successfully achieved greater engagement rates than previous surveys due to improved digital advertising. A total of 1,888 people opened the survey link. 400 (21%) did not complete the survey, despite initial engagement. 1,446 (77%) filled it in, 183 (13%) of which had completed an NVQ. 28 (15%) of those who responded said they completed two NVQ's.

4.5 Some methods of advertising the survey, such as posters, were impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The lifting of the restrictions and implementing previously agreed new practices could significantly increase the engagement for the next survey. However, this year's survey did not achieve the target completion rate of 10% (a representation of the HS2 workforce), achieving only 8.75% (1,449) of the workforce, compared to the 13.5% (1,226) achieved in the last report.

4.6 Measures are already being looked at to further improve data quality for the next annual survey. However, due to the high levels of respondents replying with "don't know" or leaving questions unanswered, a further refining of the survey is needed.

4.7 As with the 2019/2020 survey, there could be a correlation between the low response rate and the low number of achieved VQs, as those who did not achieve any qualifications were less likely to complete the survey, compared to those who did. It is also important to reiterate that the HS2 project is still in its infancy and that as the project progresses, it is anticipated that there will be an increase in vocational qualifications achieved. Another important point to reiterate since the last survey is that the level of vocational qualifications being achieved needs to be considered in the context of an already highly qualified HS2 workforce.

4.8 This survey had improved data collection methods by making it possible for respondents to submit details during the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to the restrictions and safety concerns surrounding the health crisis, HS2 Ltd made the decision not to use hard copy surveys, which meant that the questions could only be accessed online. A QR code was created and shared with construction site managers, to share with their workers to complete the survey. Another improvement was the order of the questions, the question *“did you complete a relevant VQ?”* was moved to the second question, and *“which category best describes your occupation?”* was moved to the first, to provide a better user experience and capture higher data quality.

4.9 Additionally, a communication plan was established to ensure systematic communication with the supply chain to be clear what they are required to do to ensure the survey details are widely circulated.

4.10 Drawing an overall conclusion from the collected data in the context of a global pandemic has been challenging. Although, a greater number people responded to the survey and were identified as having completed a VQ course compared to last year, the numbers fell short of the agreed 10% target as HS2 Ltd's total workforce increased by more than 7,000 people over the period covered by the Report.

4.11 Substantial improvements are anticipated in the 2021-22 report as the easing of Covid-19 associated restrictions and the return to pre-pandemic ways of working could lead to an increase in the uptake of VQ and improve the accuracy of data collection methods.

4.12 We will also aim to provide data that covers the pipeline for vocational qualifications, as an indicator of future vocational qualification take up.

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