



ASSOCIATION  
OF COLLEGES

# Post-16 study at level 2 and below: call for evidence

**AoC response**

February 2021

The Association of Colleges (AoC) represents 95% of the 239 colleges in England incorporated under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. Colleges in England educate and train 2.2 million people per year.

- Level 2 and below is a large and diverse cohort with equally diverse and individual needs. There are 242,000 16-19 funded students and 459,000 adults studying at Level 2 or below.
- This group of students are the furthest from positive progression and a crucial area to invest to ensure the leveling up of education standards so that young people in every part of the country are prepared with the knowledge, skills, and behaviours they need.
- Individualised support that develops behaviours for learning/employment are crucial for progression and needs to be funded. Good practice in colleges at L2 and below maximises time spent on personal development, enrichment, maths and English skills and career planning to include exposure to career opportunities, employers and careers specialists. The vocational/technical subject is often the hook for engagement.
- After 6 years of Condition of Funding, English and maths policies should be thoroughly evaluated and reviewed.
- High quality careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) from key stage 3 onwards is an important factor in ensuring successful progression and should be funded accordingly.
- There needs to be evaluation of the role of qualifications. Academic pathways rely on qualifications, built into the education system from 16. Any consideration of non-qualification programmes should consider both 'academic and vocational technical routes.

6.	<p><b>Would a new form of transition programme be the best way to support progression for 16 to 19 year olds who want to study at level 3 but are not quite ready to progress and do not plan to take a T Level? If not, please suggest an alternative approach.</b></p>
	<p>Colleges work with a large range of students from entry to degree level, adults and young people from the age of 14. The role of interview and diagnostic assessment is to ensure that all students are offered a place on a programme which meets their needs.</p> <p>Level 2 and below is a large and diverse cohort with equally diverse and individual needs and starting points. There are 242,000 16-19 funded students and 459,000 adults studying at Level 2 or below in colleges. 16 to 18-year-olds may need three or more years to work towards achieving a full Level 3; for others a Level 2 qualification may lead directly to employment; for others supported living and or work is a positive outcome.</p> <p>This group of students are the furthest from positive progression and a crucial area to invest to ensure the leveling up of education standards so that young people in</p>

	<p>every part of the country are prepared with the knowledge, skills, and behaviours they need.</p> <p>High quality careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) from key stage 3 onwards is an important factor in ensuring understanding of opportunities and successful progression. It should be funded accordingly.</p> <p>Is there a need for a new form of transition programme? Having different programmes can be confusing for key stakeholders such as students and parents/carers. Would an alternative be to have a transition (or locally branded) programme with common core content, such as technical or study skills related to the student's area of interest, English and maths, information advice and guidance which allows students to explore the different progression options available as an early part of the course. This would be a more viable and inclusive option to build in individualised programmes.</p> <p>The transition programme should be funded to allow for more hours and or individualised support and enrichment to best prepare students for success at level 3. Transition will be different for each student depending on their motivation and previous learning experience.</p> <p>Some students (EAL or home educated for example, or those who just missed higher grades at GCSE at 16) may be interested in the opportunity to have another (or first) opportunity to work towards an A Level programme at 16. Some colleges currently run or have run GCSE or access to A Level type programmes in the past. If current programmes and practice are successful is there a need for change? We recommend further research into what works in this space. It needs to be remembered that not all colleges offer A Level programmes and therefore would probably not offer a level 2 programme focused on progression to A levels. However, current vocational Level 2 programmes do enable students to progress to A Levels, albeit that may mean another move for a student.</p> <p>The opportunity for all colleges to learn from the 2020 and 2021 transition providers about how they have adapted their current level 2 provision and what works will be invaluable. There should be dissemination opportunities to share good practice from this and other projects focusing on work with lower-level students, including collaborative projects with organisations such as the Prince's Trust.</p>
<p><b>7</b></p>	<p><b>Do you have evidence of existing effective practice in the design of study programmes to support 16 to 19-year-old students to progress to level 3? Please provide details.</b></p>
	<p>Nearly 50% of students on Level 3 study programmes start them at 17+, this indicates that they have started post 16 study at level 2 or below.</p>

	<p>Good practice in colleges at L2 and below maximises time spent on personal development, maths and English skills and career planning to include exposure to career opportunities, employers and careers specialists. The most effective study programmes also include embedded elements of enrichment and citizenship as well as health and wellbeing and are developed in partnership with local employers. Not all study programmes include a large vocational/technical qualification but those that do are mapped to occupational standards to also allow for progression to employment.</p> <p>On entry just 26% of Level 2 students have both English and maths at grade 9-4/A*-C. For these students ensuring access to high quality English and maths support is the enabler that supports progression to Level 3.</p> <p>Derby College have created a bespoke one-year Level 2 programme for students looking to progress in Sport or Uniformed Public Services (UPS). This is specifically designed for school leavers who require both GCSE English and maths resits. Students study both English and maths for 4.5 hours per week. The remainder of the timetable includes fundamentals of Sport or UPS, to build knowledge and career awareness ready for progression. Developing a bespoke programme creates flexibility to ensure content is relevant, e.g. this year a Covid module has been built into the programme.</p> <p>Progression from this largely dependent on GCSE resit results, if students achieve one GCSE (e.g. maths but not English) progression is likely to be to a L3 Subsidiary Diploma or L3 Extended Certificate with one GCSE resit alongside. For those who achieve both resits the majority progress onto a Level 3 programme in Sport or UPS, although they could go on to employment, an apprenticeship or a course within another department.</p>
<b>8</b>	<p><b>Which elements should be included in a new form of transition programme to address barriers to progression to level 3?</b></p>
	<p>The current transition programme includes diagnostic assessment, pastoral support, information advice and guidance, technical skills and English and maths - all are key to success. Technical skills could be replaced by tasters, a small level 2 qualification or GCSE and study skills for other Level 3 programmes. It is important to remember that it is the technical or subject specific skills that are a hook for students who have not always experienced success in pre-16 GCSE provision. All study programmes should include elements of enrichment, wellbeing and personal and social development. Employer engagement is also important in the design and delivery of the programme. Students should be able to access live projects co-created with employers or work placements.</p> <p>Careers advice and guidance is a crucial element of any transition programme, some students enter level 2 study without a clear understanding of the opportunities available to them both in employment and further study.</p>

	<p>Developing behaviours for learning, such as study skills, note-taking, working with others and effective communication skills are also a crucial element.</p> <p>Barriers to progression:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The desire to work combined with lack of accessible Level 3 apprenticeship opportunities in the local area.</li> <li>• English and maths – English and maths are crucial skills for life and work and progression, but present a challenge for some students, especially where they have not experienced success in these subjects at school. The current condition of funding approach and qualifications need a comprehensive review.</li> <li>• For some students, especially those with profound learning difficulties and disabilities, supported internships and independent living are more appropriate progression pathways.</li> </ul>
<p><b>11</b></p>	<p><b>Where level 2 classroom-based study leads to employment, our starting point is that it should be aligned with employer-led standards. What further actions can we take to ensure that, as far as possible, classroom-based qualifications hold the same value in the labour market as apprenticeships and that they work alongside each other effectively?</b></p>
	<p>There need to be clear progression pathways for all study programmes so that key stakeholders, parents/carers, young people and employers are fully aware of the purpose and intended outcome of a course. This especially needs to be taken into consideration when planning routes and Transition Programmes in 'trade' routes such as onsite construction, hair and beauty, motor vehicle and catering. However, students who have completed a Level 2 study programme should also have the opportunity to progress to a Level 3 programme including a T Level if they change their minds about their intended destination during the Level 2 year.</p> <p>It should also be easier to move between apprenticeship and classroom-based programmes. This would enable a young person to start on a classroom-based programme and move into an apprenticeship mid-year and continue with their studies. It needs to be borne in mind that only 4% of 16-year-olds progress directly from school to an apprenticeship. It would be interesting to explore with employers and young people why this is the case.</p> <p>If Level 2 classroom-based programmes which lead to employment are to be based on employer-led standards there needs to be clarity on what this means for qualifications at this level. Which sectors will fall into this category? How will this be decided?</p>
<p><b>12</b></p>	<p><b>What evidence can you provide of existing effective practice in the design of level 2 classroom-based study and qualifications to support students to enter employment? Please specify if your examples support students into apprenticeships or other job roles.</b></p>

	<p>There are several sectors where entry to employment at level 2 is commonplace. These include construction, hair and beauty, automotive, manufacturing and catering. Effective programmes support student progression to employment through individualised learning plans which meet the needs of the student, readying them for the next step. Where this is effective, providers will have engaged with employers to understand their needs and co-created a programme to ensure students have not only the technical skills but also the behaviours required to succeed.</p>
<b>13</b>	<p><b>Where level 2 classroom-based study leads to employment, our starting point is that it should be aligned with employer-led standards. Are there any types of level 2 classroom-based study leading to employment where this would not be suitable?</b></p>
	<p>No, however the standards need to be relevant and regularly reviewed. The standards also need to consider that many employers at level 2 are SMEs and they need to be represented in the development of any standard.</p>
<b>14</b>	<p><b>How useful are level 2 qualifications for the purpose of upskilling adults in employment? Please give specific examples, or indicate whether other methods are more effective.</b></p>
	<p>Qualifications provide portability especially at levels 1 and 2 where students may move in and out of education and training. Completing a full level 2 programme is a challenge for adults. A structured bitesize and modular approach, aligned to individual skills gaps, would be more accessible for adult learners in particular those aged 24+ and enable them to move between jobs and sectors.</p>
<b>15</b>	<p><b>Does level 2 study play a role in supporting adults in employment to progress to level 3 qualifications?</b></p>
	<p>Level 2 study will be essential as a progression route to the roll-out of the National Skills Fund's Level 3 adult entitlement. The success of the new scheme will be dependent on adults having access to Level 2 provision to enable them to move through to Level 3. This is particularly applicable in practical vocational subjects like construction and engineering which require a certain level of knowledge and skills before starting a Level 3.</p>
<b>16</b>	<p><b>What are the main factors providers consider when deciding whether a student should start at entry level rather than level 1?</b></p>
	<p>Colleges use previous qualification outcomes, initial and diagnostic assessment to place both 16 to 18-year-olds and adult students at all levels. It needs to be noted that the starting point for some 'trade' qualifications can appear to be a 'backward' progression if judged by the language of 'academic' levels.</p> <p>Entry level Students usually start at entry level if they have more profound learning difficulties and disabilities with low level achievement or little or no previous educational experience (some asylum seekers and refugees for example who may have had limited educational opportunities in their country of birth or students who have</p>

	<p>experienced very disrupted learning pre 16). The smaller qualifications allow for time to be focussed on developing the behaviours required for learning and readiness for further study. SEND students will often have 'spikey profiles' hence need to work at different levels for different parts of their programme.</p> <p>Level 1 In some subject areas such as onsite-construction, hair and beauty, catering, motor vehicle students often start at Level 1 irrespective of their previous educational attainment, though with some experience students can also start at Level 2 (unusual in Construction).</p> <p>Colleges also run more generic programmes at Level 1 to accommodate in-year starts (NEET intervention) or to provide a 'foundation' offer for students progressing from school with low levels of attainment possibly due to disrupted education, alternative provision, or home education. These programmes are distinct from entry level programmes as the student profile is different.</p>
<p><b>17</b></p>	<p><b>How do providers define good outcomes for 16 to 19-year-olds studying at entry level? Which features are most effective in achieving these good outcomes? Please refer to the features listed in paragraph 56* in your response.</b></p> <p><i>*56. We think the key components of level 1 and entry level study programmes are: • English, maths, and digital skills; • Introductory vocational skills and knowledge where appropriate and in line with a student's motivations; • Information, advice and guidance (IAG); • Work experience; • Personal and social development (e.g. communication skills); and • Employability skills (e.g. CV writing, interview skills).</i></p>
	<p>Many or most 16 to 19-year-olds studying at entry level have education, health and care plans (EHCPs) which outline expected outcomes for each individual. These outcomes vary from one individual to another. In some cases there might be a focus on progression, e.g. Supported Internships, or on a vocational programme,. But EHC plans also cover the areas of community inclusion, independent living and health which might be equally important for an individual student.</p> <p>All the components in paragraph 56 are key to securing positive outcomes for entry level students. Personal and social development should include aspects of citizenship. Taking part in youth social action, volunteering and enrichment activities also help students develop skills for adulthood. It should also be recognised that students with more profound SEND will require a very personalised approach geared towards their individual needs.</p>
<p><b>18</b></p>	<p><b>What are the main factors providers consider when deciding whether a student should begin study at level 1 rather than level 2?</b></p>

	<p>In some subject areas such as onsite-construction, hair and beauty, catering, motor vehicle students often start at Level 1 irrespective of their previous educational attainment, though with some experience students can also start at Level 2 (unusual in Construction). This is because skills required in trades are different from subjects studied at school and require everyone to start at the beginning.</p> <p>In subjects such as health and social care, early years, IT, business, land-based and creative industries students start at Level 2 if they have GCSEs at grade 2/ 3. Students with lower grades start at Level 1. Sometimes it is not viable for a college to run a wide range of Level 1 programmes which can limit choice at this level.</p>
<b>19</b>	<p><b>How do providers define good outcomes for 16 to 19-year-olds studying at level 1? Which features are most effective in achieving these good outcomes? Please refer to the features listed in paragraph 56 in your response.</b></p>
	<p>Good outcomes for Level 1 students would be those which enable them to reach their potential and for SEND learners these should be the outcomes set out in their EHC plan. These might well include progression to Level 2 and or work/ supported internship and are not necessarily be confined to a vocational outcomes or progression.</p> <p>All the components in paragraph 56 are key to securing positive outcomes for Level 1 students. Personal and social development should include aspects of citizenship. Taking part in youth social action, volunteering and enrichment activities also help students develop skills for adulthood.</p>
<b>20</b>	<p><b>How do providers deliver personal, social and employability skills to adults? Is a qualification essential for this?</b></p>
	<p>In many circumstances personal, social and employability skills are the most important element of a programme and the area a student needs the most support. However, funding drives the requirement for a qualification which sometimes limits the time providers are able to spend supporting students to develop these essential skills. In devolved administrations some colleges have been able to access additional funding to deliver bespoke programmes focussing on essential skills alongside, or as an alternative to a regulated qualification.</p> <p>The option of a fundable qualification to recognise personal, social and employability skills would allow colleges to focus on developing these skills as opposed to it been an additional smaller element of a programme. However, personal and social skills are very individual, and any qualification would need to be designed in a very flexible way which allowed for a wide range of variation.</p>
<b>21</b>	<p><b>How do providers deliver introductory vocational level 1 and entry level skills to adults? Is a qualification essential for this?</b></p>
	<p>These are delivered as part of Community Learning, online learning and classroom-based learning, particularly in ESOL and Functional Skills. A qualification is not</p>

	necessarily essential although it can help with progression to an apprenticeship. The English education system is based on the achievement of qualifications. Thus, qualifications can be important for adults with previously low levels of attainment at school, acting to boost confidence and self-esteem. In many ways, it would be difficult not to have qualifications in the vocational space if qualifications are given for GCSEs as this would imply a two-tiered approach.
<b>22</b>	<b>What are the benefits of having three sub-levels at entry level?</b>
	Three sub-levels at entry allow for differentiation and progression opportunities especially for students with more profound learning difficulties and disabilities for whom these small steps are very important. This is also important for ESOL students.
<b>24</b>	<p><b>Which students are GCSEs and FSQs not appropriate for, and why? What are the most effective features of alternative English and maths qualifications?</b></p> <p><b>16 to 18-year-olds</b> After 6 years of Condition of Funding, English and maths policies should be thoroughly evaluated and reviewed.</p> <p>English and maths are crucial skills for work and life. However, we question whether the current blanket requirement for 16 to 18-year-olds who have achieved Grade 3 in GCSE English and or maths to continue working towards GCSE is appropriate. 90% of students subject to the condition of funding (CoF) are taught in colleges. Over the past 6 years (with the exception of Centre Assessed Grades in 2020) this policy has seen around 20% of 16 to 18-year-olds subject to the CoF achieve a grade 4 or above pass in GCSE maths and 30% in GCSE English each summer.</p> <p>95% of college students currently studying A Levels have already achieved a grade 4+ in both English and maths. For T Level students, this is 94%. For Applied General and Tech Level students the proportion are 73% and 72%. This means that over 50,000 current Level 3 students would be unlikely to meet the entry (and exit) requirements for either T Levels or A Levels.</p> <p>The current requirement for all students with grade 3 English and maths on T Level Transition programmes to work towards GCSE makes little sense. T levels require GCSE <u>or</u> Level 2 Functional Skills to achieve the programme. It could also suppress progression to T Levels. Many colleges have set entry requirements of grade 4 or above for T Levels as they are rigorous Level 3 study programmes.</p> <p>We call for a review of the policy for the Transition programme and other study programmes. The review should establish what is the most appropriate approach to supporting students to improve their English and maths skills post 16. College feedback indicates that students need to be able to see the relevance of English and maths in order to engage effectively. A review should focus on students as much as the qualifications themselves. What are their motivators to study? There also needs to be in depth research into the English and numeracy skills required by employers.</p>

	<p>For example, employers often refer to effective communication skills, but the GCSE grade doesn't include a speaking and listening element.</p> <p>One recommendation is to enable colleges to decide which students should take GCSE and which should work towards Functional Skills or alternative English and maths qualifications which are currently not funded for this age group. This would bring other study programmes in line with T Levels. The decision could be based on a student's previous grades, progression plans and motivation and agreed with their college tutor as part of their individual learning plan.</p> <p>Another recommendation is to consider the opportunity for students to bank papers that they have passed at GCSE enabling them to focus on the papers they have not achieved. This would act as a powerful motivator.</p> <p><b>ESOL</b></p> <p>ESOL learners on Functional Skills can struggle. FSQ teachers are not ESOL specialists so cannot always offer (nor have the time) support with grammar, language and context. However, running discrete ESOL programmes is not always viable. Additionally, colleges feel that the marking criteria on Functional Skills is geared towards native speakers and some learners with English as a second language struggle with the written assessments.</p> <p><b>Adults</b></p> <p>Success for adults on GCSEs is better than for 16 to 18-year-olds at around 40% for GCSE English and 30% for GCSE maths on college-based programmes. Adults are placed on GCSEs or Functional Skills based on their initial assessment grades rather than prior attainment.</p> <p><b>Students with profound learning difficulties</b></p> <p>Students with profound learning difficulties need to be able to work towards bite-size qualifications that allow them to experience success.</p> <p>A final recommendation would be to break Functional Skills into modules/units, so learners do not have to pass the entire qualification but build their units. This would be a motivational factor to encourage them to keep going. Students are more likely to give up after a full qualification fail. In ESOL qualifications you can pass them separately and this helps.</p>
25	<p><b>Are the National Standards for Adult Literacy and Numeracy and the Adult English Literacy and Numeracy Core Curriculum still relevant for the English and maths qualifications that are available alongside GCSEs and FSQs?</b></p>
	<p>Standards are out of step with current qualifications and need to be reviewed but provide a useful framework.</p>

<b>26</b>	<b>Which features of ESOL qualifications are most effective in supporting students to progress to further learning or into employment?</b>
	<p>Reading and writing skills are more important for progression to future learning (especially HE) while employers often value speaking and listening skills more as they enable staff to action upon verbal instructions.</p> <p>Many ESOL learners will present with strengths in some areas, whilst exhibiting difficulties in another area, for example, their speaking and listening skills may be better than their writing skills. Allowing a spiky grade profile would enable employers to see what level they have for each component and determine if they are appropriate for employment.</p>
<b>27</b>	<b>Are ESOL qualifications at levels 1 and 2 necessary? If yes, what role do they play?</b>
	<p>Second language development is different from literacy, particularly at lower levels. ESOL students may already have good numeracy skills and be literate in their first language though this can depend on their previous educational experience.</p> <p>Employers often value (and recognise) Functional Skills in English and maths more than ESOL qualifications. In some colleges ESOL numbers are small and therefore it is not viable to run ESOL classes at all levels and thus ESOL students infill into Functional Skills groups. In other colleges there are large numbers of ESOL students and there are numerous groups at all levels.</p>
<b>28</b>	<b>Are the National Standards for Adult Literacy and ESOL Core Curriculum still relevant and useful in relation to ESOL qualifications and their teaching?</b>
	<p>The National Standards for Adult Literacy require learners of English to reach the same standards as fluent English speakers. This is justified on the basis that they need to enter the same job market, join the same courses, manage in the same society. However, this requires a level of language at Level 1 ESOL similar to that expected for A level French/Spanish etc, (and even higher at L2) so it is very demanding. Most British people do not have that level of skill in any other language.</p> <p>The ESOL Core Curriculum is the only comprehensive curriculum outline that has been developed for ESOL; it is a clear basis for the levels and is used for qualification specifications by Awarding Organisations. Previously there was no consistency across providers and AOs.</p>
<b>31</b>	<b>Do you agree that we should remove funding approval from the level 2 ICT FSQ and level 2 ICT User qualifications?</b>
	Yes, but only if there are established, funded qualifications as an alternative in this crucial area for both adults and 16-19 students.
<b>32</b>	<b>What needs to be retained or improved in the current level 2 and below offer to ensure that providers can accommodate the needs of i) 16 to 19 year olds with SEND and ii) adults with learning difficulties or disabilities?</b>

It has not always been productive for SEND students with more complex needs to follow an accredited programme as it can be too prescriptive and not allow the flexibility to have a personalised programme specifically tailored to their individual needs. However there also is the argument that in terms of equal opportunities these students should receive a formal qualification.

If qualifications are simply taken away this could lead to a vacuum with teachers who are unused to devising personalised programmes and there would need to be some training programme to fill this - which could usefully be based around RARPA principles. In many instances what SEND students need is a personalised hybrid approach which allows them to develop personal and social skills in a non-accredited context while at the same time following some aspects of an accredited programme. However, there is a concern that in some cases Local Authorities demand an accredited qualification which might not always be the most appropriate route for a particular individual.

The consultation seems to imply that it is only at Level 2 or above that young people can enter employment. For many students with SEND Level 2 is unattainable but they do still get work. Many of these students need a programme very focussed on employability skills - for them this is the main substance of their learning and cannot simply be embedded into other areas of work.