Review of post-16 qualifications at level 3 and below in England

AoC discussion paper

1. The wider post-16 qualification system:

A coherent system with clear, high quality progression routes. A simplified qualification system that everyone understands and in which they have confidence. Streamlining the number of qualifications available. A qualification system that stretches students, supports their personal development and lays the foundations for continuing education, technical excellence and high-quality employment.

We support these aims.

2. Principles: purpose, necessity, progression and quality

These general principles should apply to post-16 qualifications and funding should follow these.

We support these principles but would caution against interpreting them too narrowly.

All qualifications must be necessary, meeting a defined educational or skills need in the system.

Qualifications should provide for progression: offering a clear line of sight to higher levels of study, technical excellence and/or high quality employment. Qualifications must deliver well on their intended outcomes.

It is possible for the same qualification to have more than one intended outcome.

Qualifications do not 'deliver outcomes' they are taken by students, who then use them for a range of purposes.

How any proposals may affect disadvantaged groups (SEND, protected characteristics and FSM).

It is essential that no qualification is withdrawn if it is contributing to inclusion or social mobility until it is clear that there is an alternative which will do this more effectively.

3. Purpose and necessity: the qualification role and the demand for the knowledge and skills developed

Qualifications should recognise and confirm knowledge, skill, progress and commitment and be designed to lead directly to a clearly defined outcome and deliver successful outcomes. For a qualification to have a distinct purpose it must lead to, and be designed to lead to, an employment or educational outcome at an agreed and clearly defined level. The clarity and distinctiveness of role of T Levels should apply to all qualifications at level 3 and below, giving all students clear choices.

We would question the idea of qualifications always being designed to 'lead directly to a clearly defined outcome'. In practice, the qualification market, the labour market and individual learner journeys cannot provide such uniform or linear routes.

4. Personal, social and employability skills qualifications:

Whether these qualifications are necessary as standalone qualifications and whether these skills should be taught through broader study and be supported by other changes.

Personal and social development should be an important element of all 16 to 19 study programmes with progression from level to level. This should be a funded entitlement for all 16 to 19 year olds and achievement should be acknowledged and valued without the need for standalone qualifications being necessary.

5. Progression: a clear line of sight to higher levels of study, excellence and employment

Qualifications should confirm what higher level of study the student will be equipped to undertake upon completion or identify what skills and behaviours they will be equipped to apply in the workplace. Achieved either via employer endorsement or involvement in qualification development or, for academic qualifications, whether they provide sufficient rigour to allow students to succeed in higher education and can be compared fairly with A Levels.

Being equipped for higher levels of study and the workplace are not mutually exclusive attributes. Qualifications can equip students for both.

Using destination data on how students move through the system to assess whether qualifications lead to successful outcomes.

Progression to particular destinations is a function of many factors other than the qualifications taken. We would caution against measuring whether qualifications lead to successful outcomes against too narrow a set of progression measures.

Many students entering HE with AGQs are lower achieving and more likely to drop out. We need to understand the role of AGQs and others in supporting progression and whether in some cases students would be better served by taking T Levels, A Levels or an apprenticeship.

AGQs are valued by HE providers as a good preparation for many courses at level 4 and above and have contributed to increasing participation and graduation levels for many students, notably from disadvantaged backgrounds.

We need a better understanding of the characteristics of students who drop out of HE and the effective strategies to ensure they achieve better. Lower retention or achievement rates can not necessarily be attributed to the qualification they progressed with.

We would expect people to continue to progress successfully to HE from the academic, technical and apprenticeship routes.

6. Quality: valued content and assessment, delivering on the purpose

The main indicators of quality: declared purpose, recognition by industry and/or HE, a minimum size, appropriate specified content, appropriate assessment including minimum external assessment, synoptic assessment, grading, employer involvement, evidence of progression and a proven track record. These indicators could go further to ensure that qualifications deliver on their purpose and allow progression to successful outcomes.

We support the need for clear definitions of quality but would question an excessively narrow definition of what it means for a qualification to 'deliver on its purpose'.

Tailoring size, structure and forms of assessment to a qualification's purpose.

We agree that size, structure and forms of assessment can affect the usefulness of a qualification. One size does not fit all – for example the 3 or 4 qualification mixed offer is an enduring key feature of the A Level route. Smaller qualifications which 'nest' within more substantial ones can provide flexibility, different routes and combinations and greater motivation for students, including adults. It would also help support infilling of students over 19.

There also needs to be a recognition of students' 'spiky profiles' and the need for flexibility in responding to their individual needs.

7. Level 3 - Making T Levels and A Levels the option of choice:

Level 3 qualifications are designed to prepare students for further study or to enter skilled employment or support career progression.

All 3 of these aims are important and should not be seen as mutually exclusive.

If the only routes available to students at level 3 are academic, technical and apprenticeship, perhaps these routes should include more than just A Levels and T Levels with some opportunity to combine elements of each or to move between them. There needs to be some recognition that students do not all neatly slot into, or stay in, these categories.

We need to protect, or bring into the technical route, qualifications in non-T Level sectors, such as Sport, Performing Arts, Travel and Tourism and Public Services.

We need to identify those qualifications which are not A Levels or T levels which meet the criteria for good level 3 qualifications.

There needs to be a strong common core for all the routes built around the entitlement to Personal and Social Development.

Consistently good Careers Education Information and Guidance at 16 will be as crucial to the success of these reforms as the design of the qualifications themselves.

8. Level 2 and below – getting more people to level 3:

Motivating and supporting more people to achieve a level 3 qualification. Giving students the skills that give them access to a range of careers and support them to re-engage with training or further education. Make sure there are high quality alternatives for young people not ready to begin a T Level at age 16, or for people of all ages whose career plans or needs might require a different approach. Develop a transition framework which could

include a period of diagnostic IAG support, English, maths, work experience and work-related study, technical skills and pastoral support.

There needs to be more emphasis on the design of high-quality programmes at level 2 and below which support successful progression and are well understood by employers.

Students who are not yet ready to begin a level 3 programme need more investment and more contact time to build their knowledge, skills and confidence to prepare them well for progression. These programmes should be a high priority and success at this level has the potential to make the most difference by increasing the 'pipeline' of future level 3 students.

Clarify the roles of post-16 qualifications at level 1 and below and ensure they are all valued by employers or provide the basis for progression. Decide if there are additional principles which should apply to these (eg: around size and support for literacy and numeracy).

Programmes at level 1 and below need to acknowledge the various barriers faced by these students and be designed to motivate students and support the development of key functional skills, personal and social development and opportunities for progression.

9. Funding:

Only fund high quality qualifications that serve a clear and distinct purpose.

We would caution against to narrow a definition of 'clear and distinct purpose'.

We would caution against withdrawing funding from any existing valued qualification for which there is a strong current demand and employer support until an alternative is well established.

We need to ensure that the funding system does not disincentivise progression for students who take longer to access T Levels and other level 3 provision because their starting point at 16 was from a lower base.

Withdraw approval for funding for new starts on older 'pre-existing' versions of Applied Generals running in parallel with the newer versions from August 2020.

Three quarters of AGQ entries in 2018 were on the 'pre-existing' courses. There needs to be an acknowledgement of the scale of curriculum and pedagogic change required

to make this shift and a recognition that further changes need to be at a manageable pace.

The prospect of changing from pre-existing AGQs to the newer version and then onto T Levels in quick succession is not attractive to colleges and will not help qualifications to get established.

Withdraw approval for funding for qualifications with no or low enrolments.

Agreed, subject to a dialogue with providers and Awarding Organisations about the potential need for any of these qualifications.

Qualifications that overlap with T Levels or A Levels will not be approved for funding. We will consider how to define such overlaps.

We would suggest that size (being able to nest within an existing qualification) and distinctiveness (eg: the Extended Project Qualification and the International Baccalaureate) should be taken into consideration.

Introduce most of the changes to the funding approval of qualifications in line with T Level rollout.

The withdrawal of any alternative programmes needs to take account of the actual availability of new programmes. T level rollout is a gradual introduction of new programmes and these will not be universally available immediately.

10. Process: pace of change and regulation

Regulation of the new system will need to be appropriate, proportionate and tailored to the outcome of the review.

Agreed. There may be a case for a rationalisation of the regulatory framework.

The second stage of the review will build on the responses from the first stage and set out more detailed proposals for change including the criteria for removing approval for funding and any regulatory change.

We can see a case for further research in specific areas between the first and second stages of the review, for example on the characteristics of those students who have low prior achievement but manage to achieve and progress better than 'expected'.