

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

Summary

The wider post-16 qualification system:

- We need to ask fundamental questions about the wider post-16 qualifications system, the qualifications that are needed and the ways in which their quality can be assured. We want to create a coherent system with clear, high quality progression routes. (Foreword) We need to consider qualifications in the context of the wider system including study programmes for 16 to 19 year-olds. (22)
- The current qualification landscape at level 3 and below is complex, with over 12,000 qualifications... Some are well-recognised and valued, too many are poor quality and poorly understood, weakening their currency. (2)
- Routes into and through post-16 education are unclear. (3)
- We want a simplified qualifications system that everyone understands and in which they have confidence. (35)
- We need to streamline the number of qualifications available. (1) A streamlined, simplified and ambitious technical qualifications system (5) that stretches students, supports their personal development and lays the foundations for continuing education, technical excellence and high-quality employment. (35)

Principles: purpose, necessity, progression and quality

- Gather views and evidence about the general principles that should apply to post-16 qualifications. (4) Funding should follow these key principles: quality, purpose, necessity and progression. (5)

- All qualifications should have a distinct purpose. (37) Even when that purpose is clear, qualifications must be necessary, meeting a defined educational or skills need in the system. (6) The content, design and size of a qualification must align with and support the qualification's purpose. (8)
- Qualifications should provide for progression: offering a clear line of sight to higher levels of study, technical excellence and/or high quality employment. (7)
- We need to be clear about which qualifications will lead to good outcomes (Foreword) Qualifications must deliver well on their intended outcomes. (8)
- SEND and FSM students are over-represented in post-16 qualifications at level 2 and below and within level 3 and they are over-represented on Applied General Qualifications (AGQs) and other level 3 qualifications. We need to make sure every available option is a good one and supports progression. (32)
- We will assess carefully how any proposals may affect disadvantaged groups. (34)

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

- Well designed, well recognised and assessed qualifications in which people have confidence are important for students, employers and the economy. They recognise and confirm knowledge, skill, progress and commitment, they allow differentiation between candidates and contribute to labour mobility and the efficient identification and deployment of available skills. (39)
- The purpose of a qualification is the role that it plays for students taking it. Purpose and progression are interdependent. A clear purpose is of little value if it doesn't consistently deliver successful outcomes. (38)
- 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. (40)
- Qualifications are designed, with varying amounts of flexibility, to play different roles including developing literacy, numeracy and broader skills: T Levels are designed to lead directly to a clearly defined outcome or higher technical education. A Levels and AGQs are designed to lead directly to continued and higher levels of academic education. (41)

- As well as having a clear and distinct purpose, a qualification should also be necessary; the knowledge and skills delivered should be in demand whether by employers or students aiming to progress to further study. (46)
- The ambition of the Skills Plan is to provide students with a clear choice between high quality technical and academic options. The clarity and distinctiveness of role of T Levels should apply to all qualifications at level 3 and below, giving all students clear choices. (42)

Personal, social and employability skills qualifications:

- These are funded in the Preparation for Life and Work subject sector area and account for 19% of approved qualifications at level 3 and below (67% at Entry level, 29% at level 1, 10% at level 2 and 3% at level 3). (43) We want to test whether these qualifications are necessary as standalone qualifications (44) and whether these skills should be taught through broader study and be supported by other changes. (45)

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. (46)
- For employment-focused qualifications, this can be achieved through employer endorsement or involvement in qualification development. For academic qualifications they need to provide sufficient rigour to allow students to succeed in higher education and can be compared fairly with A Levels. (47)
- Even if qualifications have a clear purpose and appear necessary and in demand, this does not guarantee that students will progress to the intended outcomes. We will use destination data on how students move through the system to assess whether qualifications lead to successful outcomes. (48)
- This includes data on progress to higher education and the success of qualifications in enabling students to gain entry to HE, their achievement and employment outcomes ... Many students entering HE with AGQs are lower achieving and more likely to drop out. We want 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. (49)

Quality: valued content and assessment, delivering on the purpose

- What should be the main indicators of quality? To be approved for performance tables, qualifications must: have a declared purpose, be recognised by industry and/or HE, be of a minimum size, have appropriate specified content, be assessed appropriately with minimum external assessment thresholds (eg: 40% for AGQs and 30% for T Levels) with synoptic assessment, grading, employer involvement, evidence of progression and a proven track record. (55)
- These indicators could go further in order to ensure that qualifications deliver on their purpose and allow progression to successful outcomes. (56)
- Features including size, structure and forms of assessment need to be tailored closely to a qualification's purpose. (58)

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. (61)
- We want T Levels and A Levels to become the qualifications of choice for 16 to 19 year-olds taking level 3 classroom based qualifications. (9) T Levels will offer a high quality, prestigious technical alternative to A Levels. (Foreword)

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

- Our aim is that more people will be motivated and supported to achieve a level 3 qualification and benefit from the improved job prospects and wage returns that come with it. More people across the country have the potential to do this. (68)
- Several providers are designing level 2 programmes around the aim of transition level 3 and this is an opportunity to share and strengthen best practice. (69)

- Study below level 3 needs to give students the skills that give them access to a range of careers and support them to re-engage with training or further education. (10)
- We will 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. (33)
- We are developing a transition framework to provide effective preparation for students to complete a T Level for students who may not be ready at 16 but can realistically achieve it by 19. This framework will evolve as the qualification landscape changes. (70) It could include a period of diagnostic IAG support, English, maths, work experience and work-related study, technical skills and pastoral support. (71)
- The new system needs to be able to support young people and adults working at level 1 and below post-16 and we want to clarify the roles of qualifications at these levels and ensure they are all valued by employers or provide the basis for progression. We want to know if there are additional principles which should apply to these qualifications (eg: around size and support for literacy and numeracy). (75)
- There is no strong case for intervening in the market for Technical awards at Key Stage 4 but concerns about the reliability and validity of some of these qualifications. (27)

Funding:

- We will only fund high quality qualifications that serve a clear and distinct purpose (1)
- We will 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. (11) 145 of the 359 AGQs and Tech Levels have pre-existing versions that are still available. (91)
- We will withdraw approval for funding for qualifications with no or low enrolments. (12) 45% of qualifications at level 3 or below had no enrolments in 2016 or 2017. (95) Qualifications with low enrolments are those with fewer than 100 enrolments in each of the last 2 years (16-19 or AEB). (100)
- Qualifications that overlap with T Levels or A Levels should not be approved for public funding. (9) We need to consider how such overlaps will be defined. (64) There will be exceptions: in occupations or 'niche' areas not covered by T

Levels and there will be a need for qualification options to help adults upskill or retrain. (66)

- The majority of the changes to the funding approval of qualifications should not take place before September 2023, in line with the rollout of T Levels. (83)

Process: pace of change and regulation

- We recognise that education providers ... will need time to prepare and adjust. (Foreword) We need to take careful account of the impact of the likely changes on all involved and proceed at a pace that will protect the interests of students and the delivery of education, training and skills needed. (82)
- We recognise that a 'one size fits all' approach will not work, particularly in relation to adults. (4) & (20)
- Regulation of the new system will need to be appropriate, proportionate and tailored to the outcome of the review. (13) We will re-examine the broader regulatory and accountability structures within which these qualifications sit and will see higher standards established and maintained over time. (77) We will consider the respective roles of Ofqual, ESFA and IATE in the future system. (78) We have not made any decisions about the shape of the new system. (79)
- 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. (15)

Timeline:

Jul 2019	Confirm which pre-existing/QCF quals will not be funded for new starts in August 2020.
Aug 2020	Pre-existing/QCF quals withdrawn from funding.
Aug 2021	Funding approval withdrawn from no/low enrolment qualifications.
Sep 2023	Funding removed from quals as determined by the review.

Supporting documents:

The current system and the case for change: further information on the challenges and the rationale for current and future change.

Ad-hoc statistical release on students and qualifications at level 3 and below: an analysis of the enrolment trends for qualifications at level 3 and below including by prior attainment, churn and repeat learning by age 19.

Ad-hoc statistical release on Technical award entries at age 14-16

Glossary of terms:

From the glossary

Applied General Qualifications (AGQs): are level 3 qualifications for post-16 students. They allow entry to a range of higher education courses, either by meeting the entry requirements in their own right or being accepted alongside and adding value to other level 3 qualifications such as A Levels. AGQs are included in DfE's 16 to 18 school and performance tables.

Technical Education: encompasses any training, such as qualifications and apprenticeships, that focuses on progression into skilled employment and requires the acquisition of both a substantial body of technical knowledge and a set of practical skills valued by industry. Technical education covers provision from level 2 to higher education but it differs from A Levels and other academic options in that it draws its purpose from the workplace rather than an academic discipline.

No definitions of: A Levels, academic education, vocational qualifications.

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