

## Education Select Committee Publication- 28/4/23

### The Future of post-16 qualifications

#### T Levels

##### Summary

T Levels create a prestigious technical route for post-16 learners to study towards an occupational specialism and acquire the skills needed by employers and the economy but have yet to strike the right balance between rigour and accessibility. Issues include:

- High entry requirements – T Levels could be less manageable for some groups, including lower attaining and those with special education needs and disabilities.
- 20% dropouts (1<sup>st</sup> cohort) – who may not have other options available to them.
- Unclear progression routes – some universities are asking for A levels alongside T Levels; niche specialisms in T Levels may narrow options for HE.
- Progression from the T Level Transition programme is low (14% moving onto a T Level, 49% progressing onto a Level 3 qualification).
- Significant concerns with placements – 250,000 could be needed in the future (more than 45,000 in Engineering and Manufacturing) but employer engagement is falling (39% in 2019, 30% in 2021).
- Regional disparities – T Levels have been named as ‘urban’ qualifications, with concerns around placement in rural areas.

##### Committee recommendations include

- Increase work with universities and IfATE regarding progression – including working with universities to value T Levels and for progression profiles to be published as soon as possible.
- Align T Levels to Level 4 apprenticeships and incentivise T Levels students onto HTQs.
- Increase data releases on destination data, conversions from transition programme to T levels, programme leaver characteristics, placement forecasting/foresight and hybrid placement satisfaction.
- Consider micro-accreditation for non-achiever leavers and review the transition programme.
- Increased investment in communication and marketing for awareness (students, parents and employers).
- Convene an employer-led industry placement taskforce.

*“The evidence we have so far from the roll out of T Levels reveals major concerns that must be addressed as the programme moves forward. Around one-fifth of the first T Level cohort are estimated to have dropped out. Concerns have been raised that T Levels are less accessible and less manageable for some groups, including lower attaining students, ethnic minority students and students with SEND. On top of this, despite T Levels being developed with the input of 250 leading employers, the DfE’s own research shows that almost two-thirds of employers are not yet interested in providing a T Level replacement, and that where interest exists it appears to have declined. There are also many areas of the country where there are not yet enough employers near to colleges in regional, rural and left behind areas to accommodate learners on T Level placements. The Department must address these concerns as a matter of urgency to ensure the success of the programme.”*

## Applied General Qualifications

### Background and Context

Applied General Qualifications (AGQs) are level 3 qualifications that combine practical skills with academic learning, allowing students to develop knowledge and skills in a vocational area.

- Attracting UCAS points – as of 2019 there were 138 AGQs approved for delivery in a wide range of areas including business, science, health and social care and computing.
- AGQs can be studied as a standalone qualification or in a mixed programme alongside an A or AS level. (In 2021 over 132k students aged 16–18 took an AGQ, and a further 141k were taking an AGQ alongside an A or AS level).
- AGQs play an important role in promoting social mobility by widening access to, and participation in, higher education and skilled employment. 40% of university entrants from the least privileged quintile entered university with BTECs compared with less than a tenth from the most privileged quintile. 44% of white working-class students who enter university studied at least one BTEC and 37% of black students enter with only BTEC qualifications.

### Summary

Government reforms include the aim of ‘streamline’ post-16 qualifications, creating “clearly defined academic and technical routes”. As part of this, government is proposing to defund qualifications which “overlap” with T Levels, including a substantial number of AGQs. Qualifications which overlap with T Levels subjects from Wave 1 and 2 will not be funded from the academic year 2024/25 and Wave 3 and 4 from 2025/26.

This is a controversial decision: 86% of respondents to the Department’s consultation disagreeing with this approach; a Parliamentary petition to retain funding for AGQs attracted over 108,000 signatures; and a letter from the Protect Student Choice coalition to the Secretary of State attracted signatures from 118 MPs and Peers across party lines.

The government argues “the removal of overlapping qualifications will give T Levels the space needed to flourish and maximise the number of learners on these important qualifications.” Repeated concerns about entry requirements, lack of choice for certain demographics of learners and regional disparities have been a feature of the opposition to these plans (including from government’s own equalities impact assessment).

Furthermore, there is a lack of data on the success of T Levels given their relatively recent introduction.

### Committee recommendations include

- The ability of businesses to offer sufficient high-quality industry placements, a clear track record of T Level success and evidenced improvement in equalities outcomes should be prerequisites for scrapping further Applied General Qualifications on the basis of “overlap”.
- The Department must place a moratorium on defunding Applied General Qualifications. Tried and tested Applied General Qualifications should only be withdrawn as and when there is a robust evidence base proving that T Levels are demonstrably more effective in preparing students for progression, meeting industry needs and promoting social mobility.

*“While there was much praise for T Levels and strong sector will for them to succeed, the vast majority of written and oral evidence provided to this inquiry expressed concern about the impacts of*

*withdrawing funding for Applied General Qualifications. Indeed, it is rare for an inquiry to receive evidence expressing such a significant degree of consensus on a particular issue.”*

## Post-16 apprenticeships

### Summary

Apprenticeships are paid jobs of at least twelve-months’ duration, with both on- and off-the-job training, designed to give the learner occupational competence.

- In the 2021 Spending Review, government announced apprenticeship funding would rise from £2.5 billion to £2.7 billion by 2024/25, to support more starts for people of all ages.
- In the 2022 Autumn Budget, government announced a 9.7% increase in the national minimum apprenticeship wage to £5.28 an hour.
- DfE announced that from 2024 young people will be able to use the UCAS portal to search for and learn about both degree and apprenticeship options.

There is a continued decline in apprenticeship starts among 16-18 years old and at Level 2. The number of apprenticeship starts among under-19s has declined from 131,420 in 2015/16 to 77,520 in 2021/22 — down 41%. The number of starts on intermediate apprenticeships (level 2, GCSE equivalent) has fallen by 69% between 2015/16 and 2021/22 (from 291,330 to 91,520). Possible reasons include:

- lack of careers information, advice and guidance at schools;
- employers have shunned 16-18-year-olds since the introduction of the levy and are using funding for degree apprenticeships or upskilling existing staff;
- and SMEs face challenges resulting in an overall 57% drop in starts between 2015/2016 and 2019/2020 (flexi-job apprenticeship agencies have been introduced and could support these type of companies in the future)

### Committee recommendations include

- The Department must set out how it will address the long-term decline in apprenticeship starts among young people and ensure apprenticeships are the gold standard ‘earn and learn’ option for school and college leavers. The Department must commission an independent review to examine possible mechanisms to achieve this (for example, considering ways in which levy reform could effectively incentivise an increase in apprenticeship starts among younger and lower-skilled learners).
- Subject to positive evaluation, the Department must expand the flexi-job apprenticeship scheme with an ambition to support 5,000 apprentices on the scheme by 2025. The Department must maintain a particular focus on supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to share apprentices. This will help ease pressure on SMEs by removing the requirement for a full 12-month training commitment.

## Other areas covered by the report

Other elements covered within the report included evidence on the **baccalaureate model** for post-16 education and a recommendation was made for “The Department must establish an independent expert panel, reflecting a wide range of educational perspectives, to conduct a full and considered review into the possibility of adopting a baccalaureate model in England. To prevent a further narrowing of 16–19 education, the Committee urges the Government to undertake a wholesale review of 16–19 funding, including offering more targeted support for disadvantaged students.”

The final part of the report covered the drive to mandate **maths** until the age of 18 recommendations included “convening an independent expert advisory panel to undertake an evidence-based assessment of any changes required to ensure curricula for post-16 maths delivers the practical and applied mathematical skills needed by students, employers and the economy. This needs to take into account a realistic assessment of the proportion of students who might struggle to achieve a grade 4 in GCSE mathematics, and a route for them to continue appropriate studies”. The committee also raised the challenge of recruitment ahead of any policy decisions and also the practical numeracy and financial skills (maths skills in context) approach to this policy.