

Spring budget sees more funding for 'T Levels'

Rare prominence was given to technical education in the [Spring 2017 budget](#), as the Chancellor promised a cash boost for the 15 technical routes previously outlined in the [Skills Plan](#).

Describing the new technical education qualifications as 'T Levels', Philip Hammond, outlined a phased budget of £500m over the next few years. With this additional funding came a commitment to increase by 50% the number of hours of training for every 16-19 technical learner and a three-month work placement.

Other budget news for education and skills included:

- Maintenance loans, like those available to university students, will be available to FE learners from

2019/20, for those undertaking higher level technical qualifications at the new Institutes of Technology or National Colleges

- Up to £40m will be made available for pilots to test the effectiveness of different approaches to lifelong learning
- The government reaffirmed its manifesto commitment to open 500 new free schools by 2020, extending the free schools programme with an investment of £320m in this Parliament to help fund up to 140 schools, including independent-led, faith, selective, university-led and specialist maths schools. Of these 140 schools, 30 will open by September 2020. A forthcoming Schools White Paper will ask universities and private schools to sponsor new free schools.

GCSE re-sit policy "causing significant problems" says Chief Inspector

Forcing resits on teenagers who do not get good GCSEs in English and maths is causing "significant problems", the new head of Ofsted has argued.

In her first [speech](#) on post-16 education, Amanda Spielman, said the policy was "well-intentioned" but questioned whether it was "the right way forward", with "miserable statistics" showing that around two-thirds of students did not manage to improve their grade last year.

The Chief Inspector recognised the effect repeated re-takes can have on students' confidence and attendance, and the challenges they pose for post-16 institutions.

Ofsted hopes that the government will reflect on feedback from the sector and refine its approach to vital English

and maths skills which form part of the wider curriculum.

In a separate report [Life After School: Confronting the Crisis](#), the education charity Impetus-PEF, concludes that GCSE catch-up provision is not working: most students who do not attain English and maths at 16 do not catch up by 19.

It recommends that the government retains its ambitions for English and maths but that it: provides extra funding for re-takes; commits to the development of high quality Functional Skills qualifications as GCSE alternatives; and tests ways to increase the supply of qualified English and maths teachers in the FE sector.

See *STOP PRESS* for the very latest developments on GCSE re-sits.

Reforms to Functional Skills put back a year

Reformed maths and English Functional Skills qualifications will now be introduced in 2019 – a year later than originally intended.

The DfE has announced that its commitment to reforming Functional Skills to the highest standards and to meet employers' needs will take longer than anticipated. The government wants to "take the time to consider fully the

recommendations made by the sector and how maths and English fit into the wider post-16 skills landscape".

The [Education and Training Foundation](#) will continue to lead the Functional Skills Reform Programme.

Further consultations are expected in the coming months.

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Report calls for maths tests for all UK university applicants

A maths test for all university applicants could help improve Britain's chances of competing in a post-Brexit world, according to a new report.

The [report](#), from the Coalition for a Digital Economy (Coadec), calls for universities to be forced to amend their entry criteria to include maths. This would help to ensure that maths training is continued beyond school age and increase the 'pipeline' of mathematical skills beyond university and into the workplace.

Existing qualifications such as A Levels could be used as a proxy for higher education entrance but a test would

need to be introduced for applicants who had not chosen to continue studying maths after the age of 16.

An alternative option, the report says, would be to make maths compulsory for 16–19 year olds. The Smith Review of post-16 maths is currently investigating this possibility and is expected to report next month.

Whilst the Coadec report focuses on the skills needed for businesses in the technology sector, its authors believe its findings are applicable to the wider economy, and could take 10 years to implement, not least because of the need to recruit and train more maths teachers.

No to compulsory post-16 maths say 17 year olds

In a large-scale survey of 17 year olds, over 80% of young people who didn't take any post-16 maths said they were against it being made compulsory.

This is one of the findings of the REVAMP (Rethinking the Value of Advanced Mathematics Participation) [report](#) from the Nuffield Foundation, which analysed current and changing attitudes to, participation in, and value of A Level mathematics.

The report highlights some important issues to address if the study of maths post 16 is to be made compulsory.

According to the report:

- The main driver of increased A Level maths participation is the rising number of A/A* grades at GCSE. Under reformed grading (9-1) at GCSE, students who would've achieved the top grades are now less likely to do so, meaning they will be less likely to go on to take A Level.
- The decoupling of A and AS Level could discourage advanced maths and further maths participation, particularly amongst girls.

- Any perceived increase in demand within the new A Level maths is likely to put young people off choosing the subject.
- School maths may not prepare students well for some undergraduate science disciplines.

The [Smith Review](#) of post-16 maths has yet to be published.

Recent DfE [statistics](#) on post-16 maths participation in 2014/15 show that 38% of those taking maths at age 16 go on to study maths at a higher level, 26% continue at the same level or lower, and 36% stop studying the subject. 76% of those with an A* GCSE and 32% of those with an A go on to maths A Level, compared with only 5% of those with a B.

Meanwhile, an Ofqual [report](#) on school approaches to tiering in maths, predicts that the majority of schools will enter more students for foundation tier GCSE in summer 2017 than previously, due to the more demanding content which they felt made the higher tier too much of a stretch for some students who might previously have been entered for it.

Do schools have to choose between the EBacc and the arts?

A new analysis of trends in GCSE entries claims that the introduction of the EBacc performance measure has had "no discernible impact on the popularity of the arts at GCSE".

The [report](#) by New Schools Network challenges conventional thinking that government policies are forcing subjects such as drama and music out of the classroom in favour of subjects considered more academic, by showing a small increase in the uptake of GCSE arts subjects.

The report states that the number of arts GCSEs being

taken in 2015/16 was higher than in 2011/12 when the EBacc had only just been announced. It says that the average number of arts GCSEs studied by each pupil has increased by 7.4%, with 48% of students taking at least one arts GCSE in 2015/16.

Whilst this may bring some cheer to those worried about a decline in arts education in schools, figures show that arts subjects account for a relatively small number of all GCSE entries in total.

Statistics from the report are reached by removing entry data from private schools which the Network claims are

not influenced by the EBacc, and by removing Design & Technology GCSE as an 'arts' subject.

In contrast to the New Schools Network report, [Sussex University researchers](#) say that Music "could face extinction" as a subject in secondary schools in England, because of pressure on pupils to take subjects included

in the EBacc school league table measure. 55% of schools surveyed believed that the EBacc was having a negative impact on the provision and uptake of Music within their own school and on the wider curriculum, with Music only compulsory for 62% of year 9 students, despite it being compulsory in the National Curriculum.

Coursework marks to be made available from 2018

Pupils will be able to request the results of their GCSE and A Level coursework from next year.

This is one of the latest decisions [Ofqual has announced](#) following changes made last summer to the review of marking, moderation and appeals systems.

The more recent changes include:

- Learners will be able to request the results of centre-marked assessments for the summer 2018 exam series onwards
- Marked GCSE scripts will be available to centres, before their deadline for requesting a review of marking, for the summer 2020 exam series onwards
- Exam boards must provide the reasons for review of marking decisions automatically for the summer 2020 exam series onwards

- Implementation of the removal of automatic grade protection that currently applies will be deferred, following a review of moderation for at least two years.

A final decision regarding extending the grounds for appeal will be taken later this Spring once analysis of the pilot study has been completed.

Ofqual intends to make the systems schools and colleges use to challenge GCSE, AS and A Level results in England clearer, more consistent, and fairer for all students.

Ofqual has also launched a [survey](#) for teachers about the review of marking and moderation services.

Strategy sets out access to digital skills

Following on from its Industrial Strategy published in January, the government has launched its [Digital Strategy](#) aimed at creating a world-leading digital economy.

The Strategy aims to deliver the digital infrastructure that businesses across the country need to be able to take advantage of the UK's digital skills and tools.

A key part of the Digital Strategy is to ensure that everyone has access to the skills they need. This includes a pledge that adults in England who lack core digital skills will not have to pay to access the digital skills training they need, mirroring the approach taken for adult literacy and numeracy training.

A new Digital Skills Partnership will be established

helping people to access digitally-focused jobs at a local level, bringing together technology companies, local businesses, local government and other organisations to identify digital job vacancies and take action to help people move into these jobs.

These new initiatives are in addition to those already planned to develop digital skills which include:

- Relevant digital skills will be included in all of the 15 technical education routes as set out in the Skills Plan, as well as the creation of a specialist digital route
- A digital degree apprenticeship has been introduced
- The National College for Digital Skills opened in September 2016.

Qualifications reform continues to drive choice

Nearly half of schools and colleges have changed the qualifications or subjects they offer as a result of qualification reform, according to the latest [survey](#) from UCAS.

This year, UCAS' annual qualifications survey, designed to gain a better understanding of how schools and colleges are responding to qualifications reforms, has been broadened beyond A and AS Levels to include GCSEs and vocational qualifications. Nearly 300 schools

and colleges took part in the survey giving valuable information to universities on current trends in higher education entry qualifications.

Findings include:

AS and A Level:

- 56% of respondents have changed their AS and A Level provision in the last year
- 29% are offering the AS in all reformed subjects

(much fewer than originally predicted), with 30% offering it in some subjects

- 36% are not currently offering the AS
- Nearly half intend to revisit their AS decisions for 2017/18 at which point all A Level subjects will be reformed.

Vocational Qualifications:

- 23% are offering an unreformed vocational specification despite the availability of the reformed version
- 22% don't feel that higher education has a good understanding of vocational qualifications
- Universities need to ensure they reflect the diverse

range of vocational qualifications available in their entry requirements.

GCSE:

- 40% don't feel confident in identifying learners' levels of performance under the 9-1 grading scale
- The majority of universities and colleges that previously required a C for entry, now ask for a 4.

UCAS will continue its work with universities to assist them in remaining up to date with reformed qualifications, allowing them to make informed decisions regarding applicants.

Could 2 year university degrees become a reality?

Proposals from Universities Minister, Jo Johnson, will allow universities in England the ability to charge higher annual fees for shorter degree courses.

The [proposals](#) would allow universities to sign students up for a two-year degree and receive the same fee income as they would get from a three-year course.

The government says these 'accelerated degrees' are in response to a demand for more flexible courses that students can fit around work and life.

The Minister claimed: "These changes will not mean any compromise in quality, or an increase in overall degree costs for students. The tuition fees for a student taking an accelerated degree will never be more, in total, than those for the same degree over a longer time period. It is also likely that students will end up paying less overall because they will have fewer years of maintenance costs and a real chance of entering the workforce more quickly."

The Last Word

Paul Steer, Head of Policy, comments on some of the issues featured in this issue.

In a slightly peculiar communication from Justine Greening we learn that "Rather than reporting on the "good pass", we (the DfE) will instead distinguish between a grade 4 as a "standard pass" and a grade 5 as a "strong pass" and report on both". This has understandably resulted in a certain amount of bafflement and even hilarity. Does this mean a grade 3 is a "near miss" or that a grade 9 is "mission impossible"? The truth is that for all the obfuscation the letter represents a very sensible move away from the government's original and untenable position of making the grade 5 its new gold standard and we should applaud the Secretary of State for a careful reconsideration of the original position. To be clear, it was always the case that anyone who would have achieved a C grade under the old system is likely to get a grade 4 under the new system. And that is all that needs to be said.

In a far clearer announcement the DfE has let it be known that, following a review of Applied General Qualifications, it has concluded that this category of valuable level 3 qualifications, which includes most of OCR's Cambridge Technicals, should continue to be recognised in performance measures. Given the growth in uptake of these qualifications and the important role they play alongside A Levels in providing progression to Higher Education, this is very good news. Again, the DfE should

be congratulated for a decision that will preserve the best interests of many young people.

According to an unconfirmed report in FE Week, the DfE has also shown good sense by backing away from its heavily criticised GCSE re-sit policy. Those who achieved a D at GCSE English and maths will no longer be required to, as Justine Greening herself put it, "spend time running upwards against a brick wall that they're not going to get over". This sounds like a very sensible response to criticism from Amanda Spielman and others. Let's hope the story turns out to be true.

If this change of policy comes into being it will mean that many young people will be taking Functional Skills in maths and English rather than re-sitting GCSEs in these subjects. This is wholly appropriate for the many, but we should bear in mind that although nearly 200,000 students 'failed' their re-sits last summer, under the GCSE re-sit policy there were 85,700 students who converted their re-sits into a C or above. The opportunity to re-sit GCSEs where it is appropriate should not be lost.

We should also acknowledge that Functional Skills are far from the perfect solution. In yet another outbreak of good sense, the DfE has announced that the current review of Functional Skills is to be delayed for a year.

This is important because there are fundamental questions about these qualifications which still need to be addressed and which, as yet, have barely been acknowledged. Firstly, there are questions about the validity of the assessment model and whether the scenario-based examination questions used are really testing a student's ability to apply skills to 'realistic' situations. Secondly, there are concerns about comparability of standards between the fifteen separate exam boards offering Functional Skills - Ofqual is already floating ideas about what it can do to guarantee greater comparability between boards; this includes some form of joint awarding or data sharing – no trivial matter when you consider that 820,000 Functional Skills certificates were awarded last year and that, with the change to re-sit policy, this figure can only go up.

The GCSE re-sit policy may also have been something which Professor Adrian Smith's long awaited review of post-16 maths education would have commented upon. Some of us have been eagerly awaiting the publication of this review since it was first promised for publication last Autumn but there is still no sign of it. When it finally arrives it will be interesting to see whether it picks up on the issues raised in the recent REVAMP report (Rethinking the Value of Advanced Mathematics Participation). The REVAMP report reminds us of some of the basic challenges facing the teaching of post-16 maths, including the not insignificant fact that 80% of young people remain adamantly opposed to making the study of maths beyond 16 compulsory.

The same review also highlights risks to the uptake of post-16 maths because of reforms to the exam system as a whole. The 9-1 grading system allows for greater differentiation between the most able which inevitably means fewer candidates will achieve the top grade. So while maths is currently the most popular A Level and OCR has developed two new A Level maths suites to meet the differing needs of students - the only exam board to do so – the REVAMP report fears the effect of this will be fewer people opting to go on to study maths at A Level. The linearisation of A Levels and the decoupling

of the AS, in general, seem to be leading to students studying fewer A Level subjects and it is possible that maths will be a less common A Level option as a result.

These concerns make it clear that the exam system is far from immune from risks and unforeseen consequences whenever a change is introduced, however well-intentioned that change is. The latest regulatory changes to the processes for reviewing marking are a case in point. The provision of GCSE scripts in advance of the deadline for requesting marking reviews is undeniably a step towards greater transparency and will allow for more informed decisions about when to request a review. What hadn't been anticipated were the concerns, now being raised by those representing the teacher workforce, that teachers may be asked to stay on at the start of their summer holidays to analyse each and every script. It remains to be seen whether this will become common practice in schools, but given the high stakes nature of school accountability measures, it might well do.

Schools are also concerned about the new requirement to make marks for internally-assessed coursework available to pupils. Again, it is right and proper that pupils should have access to this information, but schools are understandably worried about how this might increase the number of internal appeals they face. Managing appeals within a school can be time consuming and complicated, especially when it comes to finding an individual with the right subject expertise and sufficient independence to make a final judgement. Appeals in low-uptake subjects, often taught by a single member of staff, are particularly difficult to manage and could make the continued teaching of such subjects even more vulnerable.

In fairness, Ofqual always consults widely on proposed changes and always weighs up the feedback received very carefully, but the direction of travel is one of greater regulation, all for the right reasons, but not without complexity, additional cost and unforeseen consequences. We must hope that, like the DfE in relation to some aspects of exam reform, Ofqual will be prepared to reconsider things in the light of experience.

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Possible turnaround on GCSE re-sit policy

The Department for Education will scrap forced resits for GCSE English and maths according to an article in [FE Week](#).

The DfE has yet to confirm whether it has reviewed its policy that students not achieving a grade C or above in English and maths should continue with GCSEs post 16, but "multiple sources" have indicated that an announcement is imminent. This could open the door to Functional Skills as an alternative, as was the case before 2015.

We will have to wait for 2017/18 funding guidance, due for publication shortly, to confirm this news.

DfE confirms grade 4 as “standard pass”

In a review of policy, the Department for Education has [announced](#) that the GCSE grade 4 will be reported in performance tables as a “standard pass”.

This contrasts with its earlier position where the grade 5 was identified as the headline performance table measure for 2017 and 2018.

However, the grade 5 will also be reported, but as a “strong pass”.

Under the new grading system, a grade 4 and above will be equivalent to the current C and above. This is – and will remain – the level that pupils must achieve in order not to be required to continue studying English and maths post 16.

Applied Generals to be retained

Ministers have this week confirmed that the Applied General qualification category will be retained for school performance tables in England.

As recommended in the [Skills Plan](#), the DfE has reviewed the contribution of these qualifications for preparing students for higher education and what part Applied Generals, such as OCR’s Cambridge Technicals, can play in a reformed post 16 system.

Applied Generals are Level 3 qualifications designed to be part of the post-16 academic route alongside A Levels.

Funding agencies merge

The Education Funding Agency and Skills Funding Agency are to merge to become one body.

The new, single funding agency - to be called the [Education and Skills Funding Agency](#) - will sit within the Department for Education and operate from April 2017.

The new body will be responsible in England for overseeing:

- the funding of education for pupils aged 5 to 16
- education and training for those aged 16 to 19
- apprenticeships and adult education
- managing school building programmes.

Peter Lauener will carry on as Chief Executive of the Education and Skills Funding Agency until a permanent replacement is in place.