

DfE launches fundamental review of post-16 qualifications system

The long-awaited [consultation](#) on the review of post-16 qualifications at Level 3 and below has finally been published.

Aim of the review

Aiming to streamline qualifications for post-16 students, this first stage of the consultation sets out the principles for the future availability of qualifications, funding only those that are high quality, have a distinct purpose, are truly necessary and support progression to successful outcomes.

Principles

The DfE's key principles proposed for post-16 qualifications within the review are:

- **Purpose:** qualifications must deliver on their intended outcomes and have a necessity, meeting a defined educational or skills need.
- **Progression:** qualifications must offer a clear line of sight to higher levels of study, technical excellence or high quality employment and have successful outcomes. The knowledge and skills assessed should be in demand.
- **Quality:** to be good quality, the content, design, structure, form of assessment and size of the qualification must align with and support the qualification's purpose, be relevant and current.

Funding

The government expects, as a result of the review, that there will be far fewer qualifications at Levels 3 and below approved for funding post-16 than is the case at present. This is particularly the case where a qualification at Level 3 overlaps with a T Level or A Level; making T Levels and A Levels the options of choice for students undertaking Level 3 classroom-based education is the clearly stated aim.

Qualifications in the scope of the review

The review covers qualifications at Entry Level, Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3 that are approved for funding for

providers in England for their students aged 16 and over. Changes are not proposed to GCSEs, AS Levels and A Levels, T Levels, English and maths Functional Skills qualifications (Level 2 and below) or the new Essential Digital Skills qualifications. The DfE does not believe there is a strong case for change *at this stage* for pre-16 Technical Awards.

Applied General Qualifications

Currently at Level 3, older versions of Applied General qualifications are taught alongside newer versions that have been designed to meet performance table criteria. The DfE has decided to withdraw approval for funding for the older versions of these qualifications from 1 August 2020. Students already enrolled on these courses will be funded through to completion. Awarding Organisations will have the opportunity to notify the DfE if they believe a pre-existing qualification should remain approved for public funding. The review will also consider the potential continuing need for a small number of technical qualifications outside of the T Level framework to meet specialist or "niche" skills needs.

Other considerations

The consultation in two stages will also consider:

- The withdrawal of approval for funding for post-16 qualifications with either no or low enrolments from August 2021
- How any changes to Level 3 provision for 16-19 year olds should apply to adults, reflecting their differing circumstances
- What the implications might be for a 'transition framework' for students not ready to start Level 3 qualifications at age 16
- How any proposals may affect disadvantaged or specific groups
- The broader regulatory and accountability structures within which these qualifications sit. The DfE wants to establish new funding approval criteria, and a system to support and sustain future qualifications.

Also in this issue:

> Technical Awards ruled out of DfE review > Linear v modular GCSEs > Level 4/5 technical qualifications review
> Institutes of Technology > IfATE to continue essential role in skills reform > Skills Minister letter to T Level providers
> T Level report: A Qualified Success > The college of the future > Future of the skills system > Essential Digital Skills
> Ofqual corporate plan > Ofqual annual qualifications perceptions survey

Technical Awards ruled out of DfE review

Taking a Technical Award is associated with pupils having lower absence rates and lower exclusion rates when compared to similar pupils who do not take a Technical Award.

This is one of the main findings from recent DfE [analysis](#) into non-GCSE qualifications at Key Stage 4. The report provides an overview of pupil entries into non-GCSE qualifications, and associated pupil absence and exclusions.

The research focuses primarily on Technical Awards - approved Level 1 and 2 non-GCSE qualifications including OCR's Cambridge Nationals, that provide 14-16 year-olds with applied knowledge and practical skills.

The analysis has fed into the current [review](#) of post-16 qualifications at Level 3 and below, with the DfE stating that it does not believe there is a strong case for change *at this stage* for pre-16 Technical Awards.

In terms of entries:

- The proportion of Technical Award entries has decreased year on year since 2015, and in 2018 accounted for 5% of entries.
- Looking at pupils in all schools and colleges in 2018, 35% of pupils took at least one Technical Award.
- Disadvantaged pupils, pupils with low prior attainment at Key Stage 2 and boys are over-represented in terms of entries to Technical Awards qualifications *not* included in performance tables.

Linear exams are more suitable than modular exams at GCSE

This is the conclusion from Ofqual's three-year joint [research project](#) on the impact of modular and linear exam structures at GCSE.

Focusing on English, maths and science, the research considered whether change in the structure of GCSE exams has affected standards, fairness, teaching and learning practices, cost, and students themselves.

Ofqual has concluded that in the current educational context, linear examinations are more suitable at GCSE than modular. Findings include:

- Modular and linear GCSEs lead to similar outcomes overall
- Exam structure does not favour male or female students, or affect the outcomes of low and high socio-economic status students differently
- Grades awarded at A Level are not statistically

significantly affected by whether students have sat modular or linear GCSEs

- Many teachers say that student performance can be assessed with greater fairness and validity through linear GCSEs
- There is no cause and effect relationship between student stress and the changes to GCSEs.

This research is part of a programme of on-going work to evaluate the impacts of reforms to GCSEs and A Levels. Recent information published from Ofqual includes:

- A [blog](#) on how teachers and students are responding to new GCSEs and A Levels
- A [report](#) on the impact of reform on the practical skills of A Level science students
- An [assessment](#) of mathematical skills in AS/A Level business and AS/A Level psychology.

Review into Level 4 and 5 technical qualifications continues

New [research](#) into Level 4 and 5 vocational and technical education supports further promotion, access and higher education recognition of these qualifications.

Forming part of the [review](#) into the effectiveness of Level 4 and 5 education, the DfE-commissioned research looked into factors affecting the design and provision of Level 4-5 qualifications and barriers to uptake such as funding, student demand and relationships with other qualifications.

The research report recommends that the DfE should *continue* to:

- Enable access to government finance and loans for Level 4-5 learners.
- Encourage FE providers to enhance their facilities and expand their range and scale of Level 4-5 provision.
- Allow access to multiple Awarding Organisations,

helping to create a market which encourages competition and innovation.

- Require Awarding Organisations to demonstrate the labour market relevance of qualifications alongside support from employers.

The report further recommends that the DfE should *start* to:

- Work with the sector to support the promotion of Level 4-5 qualifications to providers, learners and employers including identifying a brand.
- Incentivise Higher Education Institutions to recognise Level 4-5 qualifications as providing exemptions from the first or the first and second year of a degree programme and challenge HEIs' promotion of full-time degrees as the primary option for Level 3 learners wishing to progress to higher levels.
- Stimulate FE providers and HEIs to expand their L5 provision.

- Remove from the funding register qualifications that have had no learner take-up in the last few years.

Level 4-5 qualifications in specific sectors, how they are considered in employer recruitment decisions, and what factors affect learner uptake is also recommended.

More research on learner and employer perceptions of

Institutes of Technology announced

The DfE has announced the 12 [Institutes of Technology](#) that will specialise in higher level technical training.

Following a competitive process, the 12 institutes will receive a share of the £170m capital fund to offer technical training at Levels 4 and 5 in STEM subjects, such as digital, advanced manufacturing and engineering. Training will be delivered via collaboration between universities, Further Education colleges, and employers.

The successful 9 colleges and 3 universities are:

- Barking and Dagenham College
- Dudley College of Technology
- Harrow College and Uxbridge College
- Milton Keynes College
- New College Durham
- Queen Mary University of London

- Solihull College & University Centre
- Swindon College
- University of Exeter
- University of Lincoln
- Weston College of Further and Higher Education
- York College.

The Institutes will aim to complement the further and higher education on offer in the areas where they are located but will have their own identity and physical presence. Some will be located in refurbished buildings, others will build new facilities on new or current sites.

The government is currently carrying out a [review](#) of higher level technical education, with a consultation expected in the coming months.

IfATE to continue “essential role in skills reform”

The government has issued [guidance](#) to the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education on how it should carry out its functions for the coming year.

The guidance document gives the Institute a steer concerning the government’s priorities for apprenticeships and technical education reform clearly setting out its responsibilities in relation to T Levels which include: convening T Level panels of employers; translating occupational standards into technical qualifications;

managing the bid process for Awarding Organisations; and managing the contracts with AOs to ensure that high quality technical qualifications are available.

The guidance encourages the Institute to continue to put employers at the heart of skills reform, promoting understanding of its work, fostering good relationships with employers, and responding constructively to employer feedback.

Encouragement for T Level providers from Skills Minister

With just over 18 months to go before providers begin delivering T Levels, the Skills Minister has written to “2020 Principals” thanking them for their “engagement and enthusiasm”.

In her letter, Anne Milton MP, takes the opportunity to update providers on the latest developments, including:

- T Level **course descriptions** will be shared shortly with final qualification specifications ready by February 2020
- Final decisions about **UCAS points** for T Levels have yet to be confirmed
- DfE T Levels **branding** and communications will be available soon for providers to feed in to local marketing activity, ahead of a full marketing campaign from September 2019
- Further information on **industry placements** is expected imminently with the DfE “exploring some variations to the models and approaches”
- A government response to the T Levels **funding** consultation will be published in June

- The first T Level results will not be published in performance tables and T Levels will not be included in Qualification Achievements Rates (QARs) data until 2024 at the earliest, if at all.

Providers are also being encouraged by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, to provide comments on the [outline content](#) for wave two T Levels in Construction, Digital, and Legal, Finance & Accountancy. Feedback on areas such as estimated teaching time and gaps in knowledge will help to shape the content from which the technical qualifications will be developed.

The DfE has also published an [accountability statement](#) showing the roles and responsibilities of government organisations in the introduction of T Levels. Organisations covered in the statement include the Education and Skills Funding Agency, the Institute for Apprenticeships & Technical Education and Ofqual.

Government urged to be “bolder and more ambitious” with T Levels

“T Levels have the potential to make a valuable contribution to our education system, but this will only be realised if they are conceived, designed and delivered in the wider context of building a high-quality and sustainable technical education route.” This is the conclusion from the Policy Exchange’s investigation into T Levels and the wider vocational system.

Whilst the report [A Qualified Success](#) asks questions about many aspects of T Levels policies to date, it provides recommendations for the future success of T Levels, supporting the need for technical education reform within a broader system.

The recommendations include:

- Build a simpler and stable 16-19 qualifications system with three pathways - ‘academic’, ‘applied’ and ‘technical’ with each subject only appearing in one pathway
- Replace the single awarding organisation model

with a single assessment model (one assessment, multiple providers) and allow current regulated awarding organisations to create the first two waves of T Levels within a consortium

- Merge Apprenticeship ‘Trailblazer’ groups with T Level employer panels
- Allow employers to use apprenticeship levies to pay for T Level industry placements.

The report believes that its recommendations will go some way to supporting the [Sainsbury Review’s](#) aim to create “a system of technical education in England that is the match for any in the world”.

Policy Exchange is a think tank aiming to develop and promote new policy ideas which deliver better public services, a stronger society and a more dynamic economy.

What will the college of the future look like?

An independent commission has been launched to set out a new vision for colleges in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

The [Independent Commission on the College of the Future](#) will be chaired by Sir Ian Diamond and features representatives from industry, education, the media and the trade union movement, as well as national and international experts from across the four nations of the UK.

The Commission will consider demographic and

technological changes, as well as the demands of the labour market to set out the role that colleges have to play in meeting these challenges.

The Commission will meet five times throughout the year and will be supported by an expert panel who will feed into the process. There will be a range of roundtable and workshop events with a broad range of stakeholders across the UK throughout the year. The Commission will produce a final report with clear recommendations to be published in Spring 2020.

Future of the skills system

How can we build a skills system that responds to local needs and future economic and social priorities? This is the question posed by a new [inquiry](#) aiming to create a vision for the future of the FE and skills system in England.

Launched jointly by the Skills Commission, Policy Connect and the Learning and Work Institute, the inquiry will look at what structures are needed to respond to local and national needs and how to futureproof these. The inquiry is calling for evidence from all stakeholders to determine what needs to improve in order to develop an overarching vision which will join everything together in a

coherent way.

It will investigate the FE provider base and local employer needs, and the implementation of national policy at a local level. The deadline for submissions of evidence is 27 May 2019.

The Skills Commission is an independent body comprising figures from across the education sector that meets every month in parliament to discuss important issues in skills, training and further education policy.

National standards for Essential Digital Skills released

New standards for [essential digital skills](#) for adults have been unveiled.

These standards will form the basis of Essential Digital Skills qualifications for adults who do not have the skills necessary to live in an increasingly digital world, such as sending emails or completing on-line forms.

The new qualifications will be available free to anyone over the age of 19 from January 2020.

The standards will also inform the development of new subject content for digital Functional Skills qualifications, available for first teaching from September 2021.

Ofqual plan reflects changing qualifications landscape

Ofqual's latest [corporate plan](#), providing information on its planned programme of work for the next three years, highlights its major priorities within a changing educational landscape.

Categorised under six headings, the corporate plan sets out the regulator's work for both general and technical/vocational qualifications, including:

General qualifications:

- Evaluating GQ reforms
- Using the National Reference Test in GCSE English and maths awarding
- Improving awarding via new ways of using expert judgement
- Improving the quality of marking including evaluating the use of artificial intelligence.

Technical/vocational education:

- Supporting the introduction of technical qualifications within T Levels

- Maintaining standards in post-16 qualifications at Level 3 and below
- Supporting government reform of Functional Skills
- Consulting on regulatory requirements for higher level technical qualifications at Levels 4 and 5
- Evaluating end point assessments for Apprenticeships
- Strengthening how national technical and vocational qualifications are designed and assessed.

Ofqual will also:

- Investigate the barriers to the wider adoption of online and on-screen assessment in schools and colleges
- Continue its work to deter and address malpractice
- Publish research into the effectiveness of moderation and consider whether changes are necessary
- Conduct further research looking at student anxiety in relation to exams.

Perceptions about qualifications remain consistent

Understanding of and confidence in qualifications remains broadly consistent with previous years, according to Ofqual's latest [qualifications perceptions survey](#).

This annual survey aims to investigate the perceptions of head teachers, teachers, students, parents, the general public, employers and Higher Education Institutions in qualifications and the examination system in England.

This year's survey report shows an improvement in the proportion of teachers reporting knowledge of the system for reviews of marking, moderation and appeals for

GCSEs, AS and A Levels following changes to the rules introduced in summer 2017. Levels of understanding of the new 9 to 1 GCSE grading scale have also increased among parents and employers.

Other results from the survey show general stability in levels of trust, perceived marking accuracy, and maintenance of standards across GCSEs, AS and A Levels.