

Ofqual welcomes DfE review but highlights range of learners in post-16 market

Ofqual supports the DfE view that qualifications should be high quality, necessary, have a distinct purpose and support progression to successful outcomes but at the same time, warns against disadvantaging the diverse range of learner needs and circumstances that the qualifications market needs to meet.

In an unusual move, Ofqual published its [response](#) to the Department for Education's [review](#) of post-16 qualifications at Level 3 and below ahead of deadline, clearly setting out its views on the variety of reasons why qualifications other than A Levels and T Levels might be appropriate for 16-19 year old learners.

"A broader range of publicly-funded qualifications may ensure greater equality of opportunity in accessing suitable qualifications", claimed the response, particularly signalling the importance of Applied General Qualifications to students who are not suited to either A Levels or T Levels. "Barriers to progress may be created if alternative choices are unduly restricted" said Ofqual.

Ofqual's response also highlighted:

- The need for flexibility in the size of qualifications – particularly for learners with SEND, caring responsibilities or part-time learners.
- Qualifications must reflect the breadth of knowledge and skills needed across industry; employers will always need a range of qualifications that cater for the breadth of occupational roles.
- There are valid reasons why similar qualifications can and should exist; a limited amount of qualification content overlap could be justified if a qualification served a distinct progression purpose that could not be satisfied by another existing qualification.
- It is preferable to have qualifications with fewer, more specific purposes, than to have overly-broad qualifications.
- Bearing in mind the scale of change the sector has dealt with recently, any changes made to post-16 qualifications must be manageable and given time to take effect.

The second phase of the DfE review of post-16 qualifications at Level 3 and below setting out more detailed proposals is expected in December 2019.

Core message from HE review: remove disparity between HE and FE

"Our core message is that the disparity between the 50% of young people attending higher education and the other 50% who do not, has to be addressed. Doing so is a matter of fairness and equity and is likely to bring considerable social and economic benefits to individuals and the country at large".

This is the message that underpins the proposals from the independent panel, chaired by Dr Philip Augar, following the extensive review into post-18 education and funding.

The panel's [report](#) considers both parts of tertiary education - Higher Education and Further Education - concluding that the considerable achievements of the HE sector need to be built upon, but more needs to be done for non-university post-18 education.

The report's recommendations identify areas where the post-18 education system could be improved. These include:

1. **Reform and refund the FE college network:** increase the base rate of funding for high-return courses, increase capital and workforce investment, rationalise provision across over- and under-supplied areas, fund some specialised colleges, improve links with HE and other providers.
2. **Strengthen technical education:** improve funding, implement a better maintenance offer, establish a more coherent suite of higher technical and professional qualifications.
3. **Improve the apprenticeship offer:** improve quality, strengthen Ofsted's role, improve wage-return information for would-be apprentices, address barriers for SMEs, fund apprenticeships at degree level only for those who do not already have a publicly funded degree.
4. **Increase opportunities for everyone:** reverse cuts to adult education, encourage part-time and later-life learning, give people choice in post-18 education outside of university via an accessible funding/loan

Also in this issue:

> DfE single departmental plan > New Ofsted inspection framework > Provisional A Level and GCSE entries
> 'Facilitating subjects' list dropped > Digital Functional Skills > T Level providers increase > T Level Transition Framework
> T Level provider survey > Funding for T Level providers > Professional development for T Level providers
> Update to T Level industry placement rules > Manufacturers and T Levels > The Last Word
> STOP PRESS: Higher Technical Education

system to increase flexibility and lifetime learning.

- 5. Address HE funding:** cap fees at £7,500 per year, reintroduce maintenance grants for disadvantaged students, rename student 'loans' as 'student contribution system', extend the repayment period.
- 6. Bear down on low value HE:** incentivise universities to increase the provision of courses better aligned with economic needs.
- 7. Support disadvantaged students:** increase funding support, improve advice and guidance.

The government will now consider the panel's proposals, engaging further with stakeholders and students, before finalising its approach at the 2019 Spending Review.

Improvements to non-university post-18 education feature in DfE plan

Following the publication of the [Augar review](#) into post-18 education and funding, the Department for Education has added the promotion of all forms of post-18 education to its objectives.

In its [Single Departmental Plan](#), the DfE promises to consider the outcomes of the review to make sure that systems are joined up to promote access and success in both Further and Higher Education. The DfE says it aims to provide choice, quality and value for money, as well as delivering the skills the country needs.

Other DfE priorities for vocational and technical education

listed in the plan include:

- Deliver T Levels and a transition offer
- Reform apprenticeships
- Improve the capacity and quality of the FE sector
- Continue the review of post-16 qualifications at Level 3 and below
- Review higher level technical education
- Develop a national re-training scheme to increase adult learning
- Support the industrial strategy by delivering the required skills
- Improve careers advice and guidance.

Ofsted inspections will focus on the substance of education: the curriculum

Ofsted's new [education inspection framework](#), to be implemented from 1 September 2019, will aim to ensure that education focuses on the real 'substance' of education: the curriculum.

Following the largest consultation in Ofsted's history generating over 15,000 responses, Ofsted has published its finalised framework and guidance.

Responses to the consultation showed overwhelming support for the introduction of a 'quality of education' key judgement. The new framework will shift to focus on what is learned through the curriculum, how well it is taught and assessed, and the impact it has on learners, with less emphasis on how schools and colleges generate, analyse and interpret data.

Inspectors will be interested in the conclusions drawn and actions taken from any internal assessment information, but they will not examine or verify that information first hand. Inspectors will still use published national performance data as a starting point for inspection.

Despite some concerns expressed during the consultation, Ofsted will continue to ask schools how they are working towards the government's Ebacc ambition. Ofsted regards EBacc subjects as the academic foundation of a broad, rich curriculum in secondary schools and recognises the government policy to encourage schools to enter their pupils for Ebacc subjects at GCSE.

GCSE EBacc entries continue to rise

2019 entries in EBacc subjects have increased overall by 4% on 2018 according to Ofqual's [provisional entry statistics](#). Entries in non-EBacc subjects decreased overall by 9% compared with the previous year.

Other key points from the Ofqual data on the number of provisional entries for GCSEs, AS and A Levels in England include:

GCSE

- GCSE entries increased by just under 1% (5.2m)
- Most EBacc subjects increased particularly combined science, English language and maths.
- Modern Foreign Language entries increased overall by 4%. French was up by 4% and Spanish up by 10%.
- In all tiered subjects, entries for the foundation tier increased.

AS Level

- Entries fell by almost 60% from 2018 (down to 117,595).

A Level

- A Level entries dropped slightly by 2% (0.75 m)
- Increases in entries were seen in biology, chemistry, physics, psychology, sociology, geography, history, computing and political studies
- Decreases were seen in English subjects and maths, although maths remains the most popular A Level subject by far (86,185 entries)
- The next most popular A Level subjects remain the same as last year – biology (64,460), psychology (62,685) and chemistry (55,615).

‘Facilitating subjects’ list dropped by Russell Group

The list of subjects quoted as being essential for pupils wanting to go to university but who don't yet know what they want to study, will no longer be published by the Russell Group.

Instead, the Russell Group has relaunched its [Informed Choices](#) website – a guide for Year 10 and 11 pupils on subject options to study at sixth form or college and how these relate to future study and careers.

The website allows pupils to explore various degrees and subject areas to build up a more personalised picture of potential subject combinations.

The renewed guidance is particularly targeted towards

improving social mobility and supporting less advantaged pupils, who may not always receive the same level of advice as others their own age.

Recent Russell Group research shows that young people consider subject choice at school or college to be less important for successfully applying to university than a range of other factors including meeting grade offers, putting in a strong application or performance in an interview or audition. By contrast, teachers ranked subject choice as more important than these other factors.

The Russell Group is a self-appointed organisation consisting of 24 UK research-intensive universities.

Functional Skills go digital

New Digital Functional Skills Qualifications will be available from September 2021 to replace existing Functional Skills Qualifications in ICT.

Proposals for the new qualifications have been released in the form of two consultations. The [first](#) from Ofqual sets out the proposals for the design, delivery, awarding and maintenance of the standards, and the [second](#) from the DfE asks questions on the proposed content for new Digital Functional Skills Qualifications which is based on the national standards for [essential digital skills](#).

The purpose of the new qualifications, set out by government, is “to provide reliable evidence of students’ achievements against demanding content that is relevant to the workplace and real life”. Digital Functional Skills Qualifications should also aim to provide a foundation for progression into further study or employment.

Ofqual's plans for Digital Functional Skills include the intention to promote comparability between awarding organisations and over time, using improvements made to Functional Skills in English and maths to do this.

T Level providers now total over 100

The total number of providers preparing to deliver T Levels has reached over 100 as the second wave of providers who will deliver T Levels from 2021 has now been [announced](#).

These providers from the first two phases can offer T Level pathways in Construction, Education and Childcare, Digital and Health and Science.

Want to know more about T Levels?

Tick the [T Levels box](#) to subscribe to our regular newsletter [Spotlight on T Levels](#) to get all the latest news, developments and debates.

AoC to deliver T Level transition framework

The Association of Colleges has been appointed to run the T Level [transition framework](#) support programme.

The programme will support T Level providers involved in the phased implementation of the T Level transition framework, running up to first delivery in 2020 and 2021. The AoC will:

- Support advisory panels to contribute to thinking on the content of the transition framework
- Provide support for participating providers to develop,

- package and deliver their local transition programme
- Encourage and facilitate these providers to explore different approaches to implementing certain elements of the transition programme.

As recommended in the [Sainsbury Review of Technical Education](#), the T Level transition year is intended for students not yet ready to start T Levels at age 16. Schools/colleges must be a T Level provider in 2020 or 2021 in order to offer the transition programme.

Providers broadly supportive of T Levels

Recent [research](#) from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) provides a snap-shot of how T Level providers are preparing to deliver the first three T Levels from 2020.

Providers are broadly supportive of the move to introduce T Levels. They see this as an extension to their existing provision and an opportunity to be at the forefront of changes in technical education. The providers surveyed did not see T Levels as a replacement for Applied General Qualifications.

Other key findings from the research include:

- Providers were being kept well informed about overall T Level design noting the tight timescale to fully develop their curriculum plans, which could impact on quality. Several providers raised concerns about delivering a programme the size of a T Level with its range of requirements.
- Providers were generally confident in their staff expertise and capacity for delivery in 2020 but could not be sure without the detailed qualification specifications. Where staff did not have all of the specialist sector knowledge, most providers planned to develop existing staff rather than recruit new staff for 2020, expecting to have to recruit in the longer term to

be able to scale up for T Levels. This was seen as a major challenge in some sectors which could lead to 'patchy' delivery in the future. Funding for professional development was a concern for providers.

- While providers were confident about recruiting their target student numbers for 2020, they reported challenges around future student recruitment. All 25 of the providers surveyed reported they were only planning to recruit between 12 and 20 students for each T Level in the first year. More clarity on potential progression routes for T Level students would be welcomed.
- Providers highlighted the need for continuing support and funding for new providers delivering T Levels in the future, particularly those with less experience and capacity than wave one providers.
- Most providers felt reasonably confident in securing the required industry placements for 2020 but reported challenges in certain sectors and over the longer-term with increased learner numbers. Securing Digital placements with the small size of many of these businesses was a particular challenge.

NFER plan to review progress in the autumn.

Additional one-off payments for early T Level providers

In recognition of the additional costs that are unique to early T Level providers, the DfE will introduce additional one-off payments to providers for each new T Level introduced in 2020, and also for providers introducing the transition framework in 2020.

This is one of the outcomes from the DfE's provider funding [consultation](#) which closed earlier this year. The additional payments recognise the costs associated with early engagement in T Levels and the development of the transition framework. The DfE is considering further one-off payments for providers covering each new T Level introduced in 2021 and those introducing the Transition Framework in 2021.

In general funding terms, the consultation outcome confirmed that the government will fund different T Levels at different rates depending on their size. 18 year old T Level students will be funded at the same rate as 16 and 17 year olds.

Local offer

Following concerns raised during the consultation that students should not be prevented from taking a T Level just because there is not a skills need locally for that particular subject, the DfE has clarified that providers can also take into account factors such as national skills needs, breadth of provision and social mobility when planning which T Levels to offer.

Industry placements

The DfE will continue to consider the funding rate for industry placements following concerns expressed during the consultation phase about this mandatory aspect of T Levels. Additional funding will be made available to students with special educational needs and disabilities.

Maths and English

The DfE is confident that its proposals will provide

sufficient funding at the right time for students who need to continue studying maths and English despite some concerns that the funding should be spread over two years for those that need it, rather than as a one-off payment in the first year.

Regional hubs established for T Level support

[Regional Knowledge Hubs](#) are being created to support T Level professional development for providers.

As part of the Education and Training Foundation's T Level Professional Development offer, the Hubs will help to ensure that Further Education and post-16 providers in the first two tranches are T Level ready, as well as supporting those wanting to deliver them later.

The professional development offer aims to ensure that teachers and trainers have the teaching skills, subject knowledge and confidence needed to deliver high-quality T Level programmes from the outset.

The Knowledge Hubs will develop teacher development networks and collaborative activities focused on T Level routes, pathways and subject-specific themes. Employers and professional bodies will also be engaged to ensure that learning and practice reflects industry needs. The three Hubs will be delivered by the Skills and Education Group, Association of Colleges and Creative Education.

Research projects known as Teacher Regional Improvement Projects ([TRIPs](#)) will support teachers to prepare their teaching practice for T Levels. Grants of £45,000 will be awarded to 50 collaborative TRIPs across England.

Update to T Level industry placements rules

T Level industry placements can now be offered with up to two employers, rather than just one, in further [guidance](#) that has emerged as part of new government support for employers.

Industry placements can be taken as a block, series of blocks, day release or a mix of these, depending on what works best for the employer, the training provider and the student. If an employer cannot offer the full 315 hours minimum (now counted in hours not the previous 45 days), part of the placement can be shared with another employer.

Students with special education needs and disabilities can now use on-site facilities, such as a college-run restaurant or hair salon, for a maximum of 105 hours of the placement, while students studying at young offender institutions can complete their full placements in these on-site environments. A student's part-time job hours can

now be counted towards the required placement hours, so long as the job is occupationally relevant to their specialism, takes place off the provider's campus and works towards learning objectives.

Other DfE guidance for employers also published includes:

- The approved framework of industry placement models
- The funding and support available from September 2019
- Further evaluation of the industry placements pilot, with the addition of route reports providing insights into the experiences of delivering placements within specific industries.
- A pilot scheme to understand whether financial support, such as for equipment and protective clothing, would increase employer engagement to offer placements.

Manufacturers show lack of T Level awareness

Almost two thirds of manufacturing companies (65%) haven't heard of T Levels, according to Make UK's latest [report](#).

T Levels - make or break for manufacturers? sets out the organisation's concerns about the implementation of T Levels for manufacturers asking for the government to do more to raise awareness amongst employers.

The manufacturing industry supports the principles behind T Levels believing they can form part of the solution to help fill the skills gap the industry faces, but has the following recommendations for encouraging T Level success:

Industry placements:

- Simulated work environments should be permitted

- More financial support is needed for employers
- Employers require flexibility about when they can host a placement
- More guidance and support is required for employers
- More than one employer should be allowed.

Parity of esteem:

- Post-16 pathways should be clearly mapped
- Higher Education Institutions must accept T Level students
- Additional careers support is required to bridge the gap between manufacturers and education.

Structure:

- T Levels should focus on the breadth of knowledge rather than the depth
- Employers should be consulted on grading structures
- T Levels should include work-readiness and digital skills modules.

The Last Word

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

It was good to see Ofqual joining the chorus of voices warning against any thoughts of abolishing Applied General Qualifications. Ofqual is right to signal in its [response](#) to the **DfE consultation about reviewing post-16 qualifications** that Applied Generals, such as OCR's Level 3 Cambridge Technicals, are an important option to those students who are not suited to either T Levels or an unleavened diet of A Levels.

There are lots of reasons why Applied General Qualifications (AGQs) are going to be around for a good few years yet - here are nine of them:

1. AGQs have a proven track record in providing access to Higher Education - one in four young people going to university holds at least one AGQ. The growth of the AGQ route into HE is something that is highlighted in the recently published Augar [Post-18 Review of Education and Funding](#).
2. AGQs are distinct from A Levels because they include both examinations and practical, applied assessments that nurture exactly those skills valued by higher education.
3. AGQs are often taken alongside A Levels or other AGQs as part of a mixed or 'blended' programme which allows for breadth and the development of a full range of skills.
4. AGQs are more rigorous than they used to be. The 'reformed' versions are subject to greater comparability, include examined components, and have more rigorous content. 71% of Cambridge Technicals candidates achieved Distinction* - Merit, compared to 78.4% A*-C at A Level.
5. AGQs aren't as numerous or confusing as you'd think: there are 138 AGQs but there are over 450

A Levels. 'Applied Generals' is fast becoming established as the umbrella term which brings together qualifications such as Cambridge Technicals and Level 3 BTECs into a single category.

6. According to [DfE figures](#), retention rates for A Levels are falling – more candidates on linear, two-year A Level programmes are dropping out. At the same time retention rates for Applied Generals are improving.
7. AGQs are a good route into employment and higher level training, including apprenticeships. Although designed primarily as preparation for undergraduate study, OCR has worked closely with employers to ensure they can also provide up-to-date and relevant preparation for industry. Employers we have worked with include: IBM, UK Athletics, Alton Towers, Jaguar Land Rover, Kings College Hospital, Siemens and Fujitsu.
8. AGQs play an important part in supporting social mobility and widening participation. People taking AGQs are more representative of the wider population than those taking A Levels and AGQs are significant in providing a route into HE for the disadvantaged.
9. AGQs help 16 year olds to keep their options open. Unlike T Levels, an Applied General does not require a commitment to a career in a specific sector from the age of 16. Professor Wolf, in her [Review of Vocational Education](#), pointed to a global trend of 'delaying specialisation' by encouraging people to study a broad curriculum up until the end of compulsory education.

Of course these sorts of arguments, compelling as they are, seem rather abstract. The whole debate about the

future direction of qualifications has to be about the real life young people that take them and their real life aspirations.

Meanwhile, there is plenty of news about the activities being rolled out to support the delivery of the first T Levels (the very first tranche is due for teaching in September 2020). Support programmes for teachers and funding are being put in place. The recent **NFER T Levels research study** suggests that the prospective providers are broadly confident about their plans and preparation.

There are a few concerns however, recruitment being one of them - providers are increasingly realising how demanding these programmes and the accompanying qualifications are likely to be. One provider recently reported to the [TES](#) that T Levels looked more demanding than A Levels. There is a growing view that T Level students will have a very similar educational profile to those who would normally choose A Levels and that, therefore, it will be difficult to tempt recruits away from the 'royal route'.

Similar concerns continue to be voiced about the availability of industry placements which have to be a minimum of 315 hours long, even with the concession recently made in relation to the **industry placements** rules by the DfE.

It seems likely, therefore, that numbers in the first wave of T Levels will be restricted and, even in following years, it will be years before T Levels are seen as fully embedded in the system. This is no bad thing as it means that

quality will be prioritised over quantity. As **Ofqual** said in its response to the consultation on post-16 qualifications, bearing in mind the scale of change the sector has dealt with recently, any changes made to post-16 qualifications must be manageable and given time to take effect. And wherever we end up, the priority must always be to match the right courses to the right people and that means having a broad range of curriculum choices.

OCR recently held a round table discussion with school and college leaders about the coming changes to the **Ofsted inspection framework**. The discussion was wide ranging but curriculum choice and breadth was one of the key topics. All recognised the challenge of embedding curriculum thinking across schools and colleges but welcomed the change of emphasis that came with the new framework. There was some disappointment about the framework's encouragement of growth in uptake of the EBacc, although there was also recognition of the new wording that states: "This is an ambition, and not a target for any individual school. Inspectors will not make a judgement about the quality of education based solely or primarily on its progress towards the EBacc ambition."

At the same event, Tim Oates, Group Director of Cambridge Assessment's Research Division, talked about the importance of choice at 16 (and the important role GCSEs played in providing a foundation for that choice). He said that one thing that helps secure an efficient education system post 16 is giving learners a range of good choices - studying what you are interested in and love is good for you, good for education, and good for the economy and society as a whole. Sounds like another reason why Applied Generals are here to stay.

..STOP PRESS...STOP PRESS...STOP PRESS...STOP PRESS...STOP PRESS...STOP PRESS..

DfE continues boost to higher technical education

England has too few people gaining the higher technical skills that the economy needs. This is the basis for the DfE's on-going review of higher technical education (HTE) and the prompt for its latest proposals for reforms to higher technical qualifications (HTQs).

The DfE's latest [consultation](#) sets out the vision for establishing HTQs that provide the skills that employers want. Proposals include:

- National approval of qualifications at Levels 4-5 that deliver the knowledge, skills and behaviours set out by employer-led occupational standards. The Institute for Technical Education (IfATE) will oversee the approval of qualifications working with employer route panels.
- Awarding Organisations (AOs) will seek IfATE approval of qualifications against the occupational standards. Approved qualifications will be identified through the use of a kitemark or single name.
- AOs can submit existing qualifications for approval as well as new qualifications – a phased approach is expected.

- In contrast to T Levels, the DfE is proposing an opt-in system for AOs that enables more than one qualification to be approved against a given occupational standard.
- If not all occupational standards are covered at Levels 4-5, the IfATE may issue a tender for the development of a new qualification.
- Organisations that award IfATE-approved qualifications will be regulated through existing systems provided by both Ofqual and the Office for Students.
- Non-approved qualifications at Levels 4-5 will attract lower funding.

The consultation also covers plans to ensure that colleges, universities and other providers (including National Colleges and Institutes of Technology) offer high-quality higher technical courses, and that information and advice is improved to encourage take up.

The first IfATE-approved HTQs will be taught from 2022 when the first T Level students complete their courses.