

Ofqual consults on “tighter rules” for performance table qualifications

The latest [consultation](#) from Ofqual proposes a new approach to regulating the Technical Award qualifications listed on Department for Education school and college performance tables.

The consultation focuses on the regulation of Technical Awards offered to 14 to 16 year olds. Taken by 35% of Key Stage 4 students alongside GCSEs, Technical Awards are Level 1 and 2 non-GCSE performance table qualifications that are designed to provide students with applied knowledge and practical skills of a sector or occupational group.

The consultation proposes that Awarding Organisations (AOs) will submit Technical Awards for review under the new regulatory criteria by Spring 2020 alongside an assessment strategy for each qualification setting out the AO's approach to the design, delivery and awarding of the qualifications.

It is proposed that Technical Awards should be broadly similar in size to GCSEs with at least 120 hours Guided Learning and significantly, that 40% of the total marks are through an ‘assessment by examination’ which should be in the form of a written test or tests, made available on two sets of dates each academic year. Ofqual recognises that on the occasions where an alternative assessment method is more appropriate, AOs can apply for an exemption to assessing by a written test.

All submissions by AOs will be reviewed by Ofqual and the DfE against their requirements, with the final decision on inclusion in performance tables resting with the Secretary of State.

The intention is that the proposed rules will apply to Technical Awards to be taught from September 2021 and therefore listed in the 2023 Key Stage 4 performance tables.

Commissioner calls for review of Level 2 outcomes

The Children's Commissioner for England has written to the government calling on ministers to conduct an independent review into falling Level 2 attainment.

The call comes following the publication of [research](#) into the increasing numbers of young people leaving education at 18 without reaching Level 2 attainment in five GCSEs or the equivalent technical qualifications. Statistics from the research show that since 2015, there has been a 28% increase in the number of children leaving education without ‘substantive’ qualifications. In 2018, 98,799 children in England (18%) left school without five ‘good’ GCSE passes.

The report suggests this means more young people are leaving education with fewer of the qualifications needed

to help them secure apprenticeships or advance to other qualifications.

In its response to the report, the Association of Colleges highlighted the value of students' achievements on their way to Level 2: “It is wrong to describe those who have not yet achieved a full Level 2 qualification as having achieved ‘nothing’”, said the AoC. “Many young people are working hard and improving their skills using Level 1 and Entry Level qualifications as a stepping stone to progression. Their learning journey and their achievements should not be dismissed”.

The Children's Commissioner has formally requested that the DfE sets out a clear action plan for improving opportunities for attainment at Level 2.

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Inquiry calls for Passport in English

An [inquiry](#) set up by the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) has called for the English Language GCSE to be scrapped and replaced with a 'Passport in English' qualification.

The inquiry was launched to boost the prospects of what ASCL calls the "forgotten third" of students who do not achieve at least a grade 4 in GCSE English and maths.

Covering English teaching and learning from early years through to age 18, the inquiry report makes a number of recommendations to improve the prospects of students not achieving at least a grade 4 pass in GCSE English at the end of their schooling. Key recommendations include:

- The introduction of a 'Passport in English' to replace the current English *Language* GCSE driven by a DfE/Ofqual/professional associations working group. This passport qualification would be taken by all students 'graduating' from school/college into the workplace or

higher education.

- The Passport would be criterion referenced comprising online assessment, a portfolio of a student's writing and a significant oracy component. The qualification could be taken at different levels between the ages of 15 and 19, replacing GCSE resits.
- All students should continue to take GCSE English *Literature* as a core subject to encourage curriculum breadth but it should be taken at the end of year 11 only.
- The DfE and Ofqual should no longer use the "unhelpful" terminology of 'standard' and 'strong' pass to describe GCSE results – "a grade is a grade".

It is also recommended that similar consideration be given to a companion 'Passport in Maths'.

Results trends 2019: GCSEs

Reformed GCSEs were awarded for the first time in 25 more subjects this summer bringing the total number of reformed subjects to 48. 99% of all students in England received only numerical grades. But how is reform impacting on results trends?

Number of entries

In 2019, entries and outcomes were largely stable. The 16 year-old population increased by 1.5% and overall GCSE entries are up 1.4%. 4.6 million GCSE entries were received from 580,850 16-year-old students in England.

Top grades

From amongst all the 16-year-old students in England taking 7 or more reformed GCSEs, 837 students achieved a grade 9 (designed to recognise the very highest performing students) in all of them, with two thirds of those being female. This figure is up from 732 in 2018.

National Reference Test

Evidence from the National Reference Test (NRT) fed into the awarding of GCSE English Language and GCSE maths for the first time this year as an additional source of evidence. Following [analysis of the NRT results](#), Ofqual took the decision not to make any adjustments to English and maths GCSE grading in 2019.

Popular subjects

The top ten most popular GCSE subjects remained the same and in the same order as 2018.

For the second year running, ahead of maths and English, the science double award had the greatest number of entries up 4.8% with 15.1% of the total GCSE entries.

Computing GCSE entries saw a significant increase of

7.2% to 80,027, with female entries increasing by 14%, although they remain only 21.4% of the total entry.

Other subjects which saw increases in entries this year include:

- Art and Design subjects up 9.5% to 195,928
- Spanish up 7.5% to 102,242 (over 100,000 entries for the first time)
- History up 7.1% to 278,759
- Geography up 3.4% to 265,169.

Of the larger-entry GCSEs (entries greater than 100,000), religious studies saw the greatest percentage decrease by 1.8% to 249,022.

English and maths

Entries in both English and English Literature were above the increase in the age population increasing by 4.4% and 3.8% respectively. English Literature entries for 15 year-olds increased by 17.9% this year, an increase of 5,777. Overall entries in maths increased by 4.2% with an increase of 4.9% for candidates aged 17 and over.

Re-sits

For post-16 students, entries were up for GCSE English Language and maths and outcomes were down when compared with 2018. This year, only 21.5% of 17-year-olds achieved a grade 4 or higher in maths (22.3% in 2018), with 30.5% achieving this pass grade in English Language (32% in 2018).

Statistics covering the whole of the UK by subject, grade and gender are available on the [JCQ website](#).

For further exploration of results trends, Ofqual's [analytics tool](#) includes an interactive map of England showing GCSE results in different subjects by grade and county.

Results trends 2019: A Levels

Reformed A Levels were awarded for the first time in 19 more subjects this summer bringing the total number of reformed subjects to 44. But how is this impacting on results trends?

Overall results in England were slightly lower at grade A and above compared to last year (25.2% in 2019 compared with 26.2% in 2018). Generally pass rates were stable from the previous year.

The number of 18-year-olds taking A Levels has decreased slightly but not as much as the decrease in the cohort size suggesting that proportionally, more 18-year-olds took A Levels this year. Total A Level entries in England in 2019 were 737k (compared to 746k in 2018).

Despite a decrease in entries by 5.9%, maths remained the most popular A Level subject with a total of 91,895 entries. Biology, psychology and chemistry were the next most popular subjects. Entries for the sciences continued to increase (20.9% of all A Levels) with female entries for the first time overtaking males. Subjects increasing in popularity included political studies (up 9.8% to 19,729), sociology (up 9% to 38,015) and computing (up 8.1% to 11,124).

English decreased in popularity with entries for English Language down by 21.8% (to 14,114) and English Language and Literature down 15.3% (to 8,197).

The average number of A Levels taken per student was 2.66. This follows the trend for fewer 18-year-olds taking four or five A Levels.

As expected, the decline in AS Level entries continued following the de-coupling of the AS from the A Level, with total entries declining by 50% to 114k. 40,880 students took at least one AS Level in 2019 compared with 270,500 in 2016. Entries for the Extended Project Qualification were also down by 3.9% to 38,852.

Whilst A Level reform is largely complete, a number of lesser taught languages will be first examined in 2020.

For further exploration of results trends, Ofqual's [analytics tool](#) includes an interactive map of England showing A Level results in different subjects by grade and county.

Statistics covering the whole of the UK by subject, grade and gender are available on the [JCQ website](#).

University admissions: Education Secretary not ruling out PQA

The Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson, has backed a review which will consider whether students should apply to university after getting their results (post-qualification applications).

In a [letter](#) to the Office for Students - the regulator for higher education – Mr Williamson said “I recognise that we need to review if the current [admissions] system is working as well as it can, so I am glad the OfS is looking at whether it would be in students’ interests to apply for their university place after they have their A Level results.”

Whilst post-qualification applications have been debated in the past, the DfE now believes the context in which the sector is operating has changed amidst concerns about the rise in the numbers of unconditional offers.

T Levels: grading, certification and UCAS tariff points

More detailed information on the grading and certification for T Levels is available following a policy update from the DfE. The update sets out how a student’s overall grade will be calculated and how all T Level programme achievements will appear on the certificate.

UCAS tariff points have also been confirmed for T Levels, with points allocated to overall T Level grades not to separate elements of the T Level:

UCAS tariff points	T Level overall grade	A Level
168	Distinction *	A*A*A*
144	Distinction	AAA
120	Merit	BBB
96	Pass (C or above on the core)	CCC
72	Pass (D or E on the core)	DDD

Although T Levels are primarily designed to provide a direct route to skilled employment, tariff points will allow higher education to be an alternative option for T Level learners.

Further T Levels updates

The Department for Education has published the 2019 [T Levels Action Plan](#) providing an update on progress in the development and launch of T Levels.

Now under Secretary of State for Education Gavin Williamson's signature – a former FE student himself - the Action Plan confirms the government's commitment to technical education. Updates in the Action Plan include:

Roll-out schedule

Now confirmed for delivery from September 2022:

- Legal T Level
- Financial T Level
- Accountancy T Level
- Engineering: maintenance, installation and repair T Level
- Engineering: Manufacturing and process T Level
- Engineering: Design, development and control T Level
- Management and administration T Level
- Human Resources T Level

Confirmed for September 2023 delivery:

- Animal care and management T Level
- Agriculture, land management and production T Level
- Craft and design T Level
- Cultural heritage and visitor attractions T Level
- Media, broadcast and production T Level
- Hair, beauty and aesthetics T Level
- Catering T Level.

Provider selection criteria

Potential 2022 providers need to apply by January 2020. The previous requirement to have a minimum of 100 current students across all pathways applied for has been dropped. Awarding Organisations are working on developing Provider *Approval* Criteria.

Certification

Prototypes of the Certificate and Statement of Achievement as well as grading examples are included in the Action Plan for the first time. Work continues to develop a results and certification "T Levels service" to support the tracking and aggregation of data to be available ahead of first teaching in September 2020.

Integrating Maths, English, Digital and employability skills

Information on '[general competency frameworks](#)' for these competencies has been published under the 'operating instructions for the creation of outline content'.

Ofsted

The Action Plan confirms that T Level provision will be subject to Ofsted inspection. Ofsted will consult on how T Levels will be integrated into the education inspection framework.

Communications

To raise awareness, the DfE is running an advertising campaign - 'the NexT level' - locally and nationally including a dedicated [website](#), as well as a schools engagement strategy and further employer engagement activities.

Core components of T Level Transition Programme confirmed

The five "nationally set", key components of the T Level Transition Framework have been revealed as part of new [guidance](#) from the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA).

The T Level Transition Programme will be a new type of 16 to 19 study programme aimed at students who are not ready to access a technical education route at age 16, helping them to prepare for T Level study.

Available for delivery from September 2020 to a limited number of [providers](#), the components are designed to provide a broad foundation, whilst allowing flexibility to tailor programmes to students' needs in terms of duration and order of delivery:

Diagnostic and guidance period	To assess students' capacity and support needs in order to tailor their Transition Programme to address these needs Help students decide which T Level route they want to prepare for.
English and maths	For students who do not hold at least a GCSE grade 4 in English and/or maths and are required to continue studying as per the condition of funding.
Work experience and preparation	To develop the skills, behaviours, attitude and confidence that will be needed for students to complete the T Level industry placement.
Introductory technical skills	Introductory skills and concepts to prepare students for the T Level route they wish to progress to.
Pastoral support and personal development	Relevant and meaningful support to address barriers to education, support emotional and/or mental health difficulties and support the development of study skills, and reflective and resilience skills.

The Transition Programme is aimed at full-time study with a minimum of 540 planned hours.

Whilst completion of the Transition Programme would be considered good preparation for supporting progression to a T Level, the ESFA states that it will not in itself lead to automatic enrolment onto a T Level. Students will need to apply for entry to a T Level programme as part of a school, college or training company's normal enrolment practices.

The ESFA intends to monitor data to ensure the Transition Programme is meeting its policy aim of preparing students for progression onto T Levels. Accountability measures will be published following national roll out.

Taking a phased approach to implementation, further iterations of the Programme are expected as good practice and experience are built upon.

Malpractice systems work well but there's room for improvement, says Commission

"The exams system in the UK works well and there is a very low level of malpractice. The vast majority of the several hundred thousand people involved in the exams system act with integrity and professionalism". This is the view of the Independent Commission on Examination Malpractice commissioned by the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) to consider ways to reduce malpractice in both general and vocational assessments.

Despite the Commission's findings that the system is robust and that relatively little malpractice occurs, the Commission has noted a number of areas for improvement to further minimise incidents of malpractice.

The 176-page [report](#) of the year-long detailed review of the current system, makes 78 recommendations in total, including:

- Agree a single definition of malpractice
- Clarify the role of heads of centre in preventing and investigating malpractice
- Future-proof the system against new technology-based malpractice whilst using new technologies to prevent and investigate malpractice

- Consider an on-line database of certificated results in order to prevent forgery of paper certificates
- Improve the clarity of JCQ documentation and communications
- Rationalise the demands on centre staff workload
- Improve support for exams officers and increase levels of training for all staff involved in malpractice and invigilation in schools, colleges and the workplace
- Improve malpractice data
- Consult with Awarding Organisations on more ways to prevent malpractice in centre-based assessment
- Review Awarding Organisation centre inspection processes and increase the capacity of the JCQ centre inspection service to inspect vocational and technical assessment provision.

JCQ will issue a report in September 2020 to highlight progress on the implementation of recommendations from the Commission.

JCQ is the membership organisation representing the eight largest providers of qualifications in the UK.

Ofqual consults further on AO controls for centre assessments

Ofqual has issued a consultation on the conditions, requirements and guidance relating to how awarding organisations (AOs) control assessment judgements made by schools and colleges.

This follows its publication of the [outcomes](#) of an earlier consultation on AO moderation and verification of centre-assessment judgements.

Within these consultation outcomes, Ofqual confirmed that all AOs must introduce Centre Assessment Standards Scrutiny processes by no later than September

2021. This is the new term to cover all of the controls an AO might put in place with centres such as moderation, verification or other checks. If an AO already carries out the minimum requirements for centre monitoring, centres may not notice any difference. Ofqual has produced useful [guidance](#) on what this decision means for schools, colleges and training providers.

The new technical [consultation](#) runs until 14 November 2019 and covers the specific rules Ofqual proposes to put in place to implement its confirmed approach.

Ofqual to update its approach to intervening when things go wrong

Ofqual is proposing to introduce new measures to manage Awarding Organisation (AO) non-compliance.

Whilst Ofqual can currently issue fines where an AO breaches its conditions of recognition, it is now consulting on potentially taking new types of action in less serious cases including issuing rebukes and imposing fixed penalties. Whilst most non-compliance by AOs is resolved without formal action, these latest proposals would give Ofqual the ability to highlight issues which it would not expect to see occur elsewhere.

Proposals in the [consultation](#) also include:

- An explanation of Ofqual's approach to supporting

AOs to remain in compliance, including how it might notify AOs where it has concerns about a training provider, school or college

- The removal of the £10,000 lower threshold on recovering Ofqual's costs where it takes regulatory action.

The changes are intended to better reflect Ofqual's regulatory strategy and current practices which have moved on since the regulatory policy was first published in 2012.

The consultation is aimed at AOs, schools, colleges and other users of regulated qualifications.

Changes to AO conditions of recognition

The three regulators in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are consulting on their Conditions of Recognition - the rules they set for the awarding organisations (AOs) and qualifications they regulate.

The [consultation](#) proposes a number of changes to the Conditions including changes aimed at clarity of wording, recognition of prior learning, issuing of results, transparency of qualification fees and the role of the Responsible Officer.

Ofqual, Qualifications Wales and CCEA have sought to align their proposals as far as possible recognising that many of the AOs regulated are common to all three countries. Where different requirements are proposed, these reflect differences in legislation, policy decisions, processes and national contexts.

VTQs account for 80% of regulated qualifications

Vocational and technical qualifications account for 80% of the qualifications that Ofqual regulates and its annual report outlines how it continues to dedicate more resources to this area.

Ofqual's [annual report](#) sets out how it has delivered against all its [goals and objectives](#) for 2018-2019 when it regulated 15,000 qualifications and 156 Awarding Organisations. The report covers Ofqual's performance across multiple programmes of reform including A Levels, GCSEs, Vocational and Technical Qualifications, Functional Skills Qualifications and Apprenticeships.

Performance highlights include:

1. Standards were maintained in summer 2018, when 62 new GCSEs, AS and A Levels were awarded for the first time, in addition to the 32 qualifications awarded for the first time in summer 2017.
2. Action was taken to prevent around 9,000 GCSE combined science students from being ungraded and another 11,000-15,000 students taking Applied General Qualifications were protected from missing out on certification.
3. The third National Reference Test was successfully

conducted in spring 2019 and results from the test were considered alongside GCSE awarding for the first time in summer 2019.

4. Ofqual's role in the regulation of technical qualifications within T Levels was confirmed.
5. Ofqual agreed to be the external quality assurer for 61 new apprenticeship assessment standards by the end of March 2019.
6. Evidence of grade inflation was identified in some vocational and technical qualifications and Awarding Organisations were called on to strengthen their controls around internal assessment.
7. The extensive review of the arrangements Awarding Organisations have in place with centres continued and Ofqual took regulatory action when non-compliance was identified.
8. Ofqual issued fines totalling more than £350,000 on 17 occasions – the largest annual sum.

Much of Ofqual's work will extend into next year as its [programme of regulatory work](#) reflects the education and skills landscape.

Perceptions of vocational qualifications are improving

Learners, employers and training providers have a better perception of vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs), according to Ofqual's second annual [perceptions survey](#).

The survey, carried out during late 2018 and early 2019, covered a range of regulated VTQs available for study in England.

A notable difference between the first and second survey results was that more learners indicated they were choosing to take VTQs not just to improve their skills or confidence but because they expected to progress either to higher level qualifications or to get a better job. Some of the other findings from the research include:

Vocational and Technical Qualifications (VTQs)

- Employers, training providers and learners continue to hold very positive views of VTQs regardless of whether the qualifications are pursued within

apprenticeships or standalone

- Amongst training providers, levels of agreement that learners/parents understand the purpose of VTQs have increased markedly (from 54% to 70%)
- 77% of learners said that VTQs prepare them well for the workplace.

Functional Skills Qualifications (FSQs)

- Employers' understanding of FSQs has improved between the surveys with levels of knowledge increasing with organisation size
- Larger businesses and training providers are more likely to hold positive perceptions of FSQs
- 78% of learners said that they valued FSQs.

Ofqual believes that the government's programme for the reform of post-16 vocational qualifications will clarify the landscape and further assist understanding amongst employers and learners.

FE area reviews: a success or not?

The DfE has published a [record](#) of the implementation of the post-16 education and training area review programme.

Focusing on meeting the needs of an area's learners and employers, the principal aim of the area review programme was to create financially stable FE institutions able to deliver high quality provision.

37 area reviews took place in 5 waves between 2015 and 2017 followed by an implementation phase ending in March 2019.

At the start of the area review process, there were 93 Sixth Form Colleges and 241 FE colleges.

By April 2019, the number of Sixth Form Colleges had reduced to 54 and the number of FE Colleges to 193, meaning the number of individual college corporations in the sector had been reduced by 26%. Inadequate financial health ratings dropped from 37 colleges in 2015 to 21 in 2018.

The report concludes that it is too early to assess the true impact of the area review programme on the FE sector, in particular the impact of mergers on both the financial health and quality of the colleges, but suggests that area reviews have had a broadly positive impact to date. Improvements included mergers, joint collaborations and shared efficiencies.

The DfE intends to publish an evaluation report in 2022 focusing on the impact of the programme.

A separate [report](#) however does draw conclusions from its evaluation of the area review process. Commissioned by the DfE, and based on the views of those involved in the process, the report identifies lessons learnt from the successes and challenges, and what might be done differently if a similar exercise was undertaken in the future. These include requests for the process to focus less on financial stability if appropriate and more on governance and the quality of provision, and to include school sixth forms and independent providers in reviews for the sake of local completeness and enhanced collaboration.

Further Institutes of Technology to be created

An additional £120 million of funding has been announced to create eight further Institutes of Technology.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson [confirmed](#) that eight new Institutes will be created to establish one in each major city in England along with the 12 Institutes [announced](#) earlier this year.

Institutes of Technology will focus on science, technology and engineering. Each will have an industry specialism and a licence to call itself an Institute of Technology awarded after a tender overseen by the DfE.

Training will be delivered via collaboration between universities, Further Education colleges, and employers.

New Skills and Productivity Board

As part of the government's reforms for vocational and technical education, a new Skills and Productivity Board has been [announced](#).

The Board will be established to provide the government with "expert advice" on how to ensure courses and qualifications on offer to students are high-quality, are aligned to the skills that employers need for the future and will help increase productivity.

The Last Word

Lindsey Taylor, Policy Researcher, comments on some of the issues featured in this issue.

With the next stage of the [DfE review](#) of post-16 qualifications at Level 3 and below delayed until Spring 2020, attention has turned to pre-16 vocational qualifications. Ofqual's latest [consultation](#) focusing on the regulation of non-GCSE qualifications on Key Stage 4 performance tables, is one of a number of areas of current debate impacting on provision for 14-16 year olds.

Deliberately omitted from the DfE review in the absence of a "strong case for intervening in the market", Technical Awards at Key Stage 4, such as OCR's Cambridge Nationals, are Level 1 and 2 non-GCSE performance table qualifications that provide students with applied knowledge and practical skills of an occupational sector. Given that over a third of Key Stage 4 students take Technical Awards alongside GCSEs, Ofqual's consultation highlights the significance of the debate about vocational education pre-16.

It is well known that vocational education at Key Stage 4 can support social mobility, providing that all important foundation for progression to Level 3 Applied General Qualifications, apprenticeships, A Levels or T Levels, and in addition, that vocational qualifications can provide an important tool to keep young people across the ability range engaged in education. The increase in 'assessment by examination' proposed in the Ofqual consultation to at least 40% of the total marks, will no doubt raise the debate about the appropriateness of written exams in Technical Awards at Key Stage 4, and the potential impact on student engagement in the future.

All this, at a time when Ofqual's annual survey tells us that perceptions of current vocational qualifications are improving amongst learners. In recognising the importance of Technical Awards in many young people's lives, Ofqual's consultation is seeking to ensure that these qualifications are as good as they can be from a regulatory point of view so that students who take them, those who teach them and those who rely on them, such as colleges and employers, can understand and be confident in these qualifications.

The current focus on qualifications at Level 2 can also be found in the general qualifications arena with the Children's Commissioner for England calling for a review into falling attainment. With her claim that nearly 100,000 students leave school without five 'good' GCSE passes by the age of 19, the Commissioner may well have a case for further investigation particularly when those in the poorest areas of the country and children with special educational needs are most affected.

GCSE attainment is also firmly uppermost in ASCL's latest report on 'The Forgotten Third' with its recommendations for improving the prospects of a third of students not achieving at least a grade 4 GCSE in maths and English. There is no doubt that the attainment of GCSEs can open doors for young people but such concerns clearly signal the importance of wider options for young people both pre and post-16 in compulsory education beyond just the academic route. A sense of achievement and opportunity for progression can take more than one form.