

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [The future of post-16 qualifications](#),
HC 55

Tuesday 12 July 2022

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Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Caroline Ansell; Miriam Cates; Anna Firth; Kim Johnson; Ian Mearns.

Questions 123 - 186

Witnesses

[I](#): Kirsti Lord, Deputy Chief Executive, Association of Colleges; Tom Bewick, CEO, Federation of Awarding Bodies; David Gallagher, Chief Executive, NCFE; Dr Lisa Morrison Coulthard, Research Director, National Foundation for Educational Research; and Ruth Perry, Representative, Special Educational Consortium, and Senior Policy Manager, Natspec.

Written evidence from witnesses:

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Kirsti Lord, Tom Bewick, David Gallagher, Dr Lisa Morrison Coulthard and Ruth Perry.

Q123 Chair: Good morning. Thank you very much for coming today, especially in this very cool climate that we currently have. We have a fair few questions to ask, so I will ask the witnesses to be as concise as they can.

For the benefit of those watching on parliamentary TV, I will ask everyone to introduce themselves, starting from this side. I am Robert Halfon, the Chair of the Committee.

Ian Mearns: Ian Mearns, MP for Gateshead.

Kirsti Lord: Kirsti Lord, Deputy Chief Executive at the Association of Colleges.

Kim Johnson: Kim Johnson, Labour MP for Liverpool, Riverside.

Tom Bewick: Tom Bewick, Chief Executive of the Federation of Awarding Bodies.

Caroline Ansell: Caroline Ansell, MP for Eastbourne.

Ruth Perry: Ruth Perry, Senior Policy Manager at Natspec. I am here today representing the Special Educational Consortium.

Dr Morrison Coulthard: Lisa Morrison Coulthard. I am from the National Foundation for Educational Research.

Miriam Cates: Miriam Cates, MP for Penistone and Stocksbridge.

David Gallagher: David Gallagher, Chief Executive at NCFE.

Anna Firth: Anna Firth, MP for Southend West.

Q124 Chair: I should make a declaration: I was a voluntary member of the Times Education Commission. I mention that because of the recent talk about a British baccalaureate and whether we should reform our A-level system and move over to a baccalaureate system. Some schools, as you know, are doing this. Some are doing the international baccalaureate diploma version and some are doing the international baccalaureate careers version. Anna and I visited Tonbridge Grammar School in Kent last week, which is doing the international baccalaureate diploma.

In March this year the NFER reported key findings from the literature review phase of its project, the Skills Imperative. It said: "Problem solving...critical thinking...communication, collaboration, creativity and innovation are transferable skills which will be in high demand in the next 15 years". A number of submissions to our inquiry stated that the current system did not teach the digital, technical or "soft" essential life skills needed by employers. I should say that I hate the term "soft skills". I am talking about careers advice, financial education and others.

To what extent does the school system have the right balance between



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knowledge and skills? I am not going to ask every witness to answer, so who would like to answer on this occasion?

Tom Bewick: Chair, it is not a particularly new debate, is it? It goes back many decades under successive Governments. I think Lord Baker recently made the comment that the current national curriculum in England is very similar to the Edwardian curriculum of 1904. I think this whole discussion about the degree to which we want our pupils to specialise in the upper secondary track or have a much broader breadth of skills—not least those employability skills that you mention, which come up in survey after survey from employers—rather begs the question why, after all these decades, there is not a more settled view in England among policy makers, including yourself and colleagues here today, about exactly what kind of curriculum we want that is fit for the 21st century.

Q125 **Chair:** Should GCSEs be reformed? We know that the Times Education Commission said that 94% of teachers surveyed said that GCSEs needed reform and that many employers were concluding that GCSE grades were not a good predictor of future performance. They recommended having five exams that you take at 16, but a British baccalaureate that goes on to 18, replacing A-levels, which would include academic, vocational careers and technical educations. Who wants to answer that question?

Tom Bewick: Do you want me to come back on that as a supplementary? It feels like a segue from the previous question. I read the Times Education Commission report and I think it is an excellent underpinning analysis, right from early years education to post-18 education. My one critique of it—I know there are members of mine who offer these qualifications who would observe this—is that it rather falls into the same trap that we have seen with Government in more recent years, which is somehow to suggest that you cannot have a successful upper secondary education system unless you abolish other qualifications in the process.

I urge the Committee to be cautious about the sort of carpet bombing approach to qualifications that we have seen in recent years, which somehow suggests that to make a wholly new, untried, untested qualification successful you have to take out other qualifications that do have a track record, do have a strong brand and, in the case of A-levels, have been around since 1953 and are exported to many jurisdictions overseas, and are a great British success story in education.

Q126 **Chair:** The only thing about A-levels is that they tell a student they can narrow their education field quite closely at 16. The other thing I would say is that there are 150 other countries that are successful and some of them have better skills outcomes than we do—we have a skills deficit in our country—and they do baccalaureates of some kind or another. Many of them are doing the career international baccalaureate. You could have a system where you keep A-levels but you also support schools that want to have the option of teaching the international baccalaureate, whether it



is the diploma version or the careers version, and then gradually the best system would win, because usually it is what universities and employers start to value as the best system.

Tom Bewick: Is that a debate about the qualification or is that a debate about the upper secondary track of education in England and the extent to which it forces students to specialise very early on as opposed to taking a broad breadth of qualifications? One of the advantages of the current qualifications mix, with the ability, for example, of a 16-year-old to take an applied general qualification alongside an A-level, alongside other sporting and creative type subjects, is that although it is not technically a baccalaureate in the sense of six subject choices, it does give students that mix-and-match approach that arguably is a direction of travel that we are not going in in England with the need now to specialise.

Q127 **Chair:** That is not the case everywhere; many students are just doing A-levels. Does anyone have any other views? I never realised you were such a traditionalist, Tom. It is amazing. I am shocked.

Tom Bewick: I am just representing our members.

Dr Morrison Coulthard: In terms of the need for reform, the NFER's position would very much be, "Let's just take a pause." What is needed at the moment, post covid, is a bit of stability and extra support for schools and colleges and the young people within them.

Thinking about future skills needs, you have mentioned our Skills Imperative 2035 project. What we aim to do over the next five years is take stock and properly understand what the future skills needs will be. You referred to them as "soft skills"; we are calling them "essential employment skills", because that is, in effect, how they are being framed in terms of the value that they will bring to employers and therefore the economy, but also enable people to flourish in the workplace.

In relation to what education does to enable the development of those skills, that again is something that we will be looking at across pathways. Whether it is the more academic route, such as A-levels, or more vocational or technical training, our research will provide insights into exactly at what point skills develop and how they continue to develop during that post-16 to 19 and then into employment.

Ruth Perry: I would like to make a very strong case for ensuring that any changes are evidence-based. What worries me most about what is happening at the moment is that everything is being tied to something that is untried and untested and, in the meantime, successful qualifications are threatened or being removed. If we do implement change, we need to think very carefully about impact assessment and think about the full range of young people in post-16 education—not just about schools but about colleges, and not just about A-levels but about the whole range of vocational technical education.



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There is something in the Government response to the post-16 qualifications consultation in which they say, "We realise this will have a negative impact on a small number but we think that is okay because the majority will benefit." That does not sit very comfortably with the Equality Act. I do not think that we can just write off that group of learners who might not be served by what is being proposed.

Q128 Chair: Thank you. What is your view about the delivery and the roll-out of T-levels? Will T-levels be as famous as A-levels? Why is the take-up low? Is it just that people do not know about it yet and it takes a long time for people to understand a new qualification system?

Dr Morrison Coulthard: Again, the research that we have done at NFER shows that generally they are going very well. Providers are highly engaged, students comment about high levels of satisfaction, but there are some issues that need ironing out. The other thing to bear in mind is that the current cohort is not what you would call a normal cohort, in the sense that it is not as broadly representative as we would anticipate the intakes will be post covid and so on. It is going to be interesting to look at the data that come out from the first completers because of that.

There are issues to do with, as you have mentioned, awareness, and that links to the issue about the adequacy of careers information, guidance and so on, but also the narrow focus, which certainly would put off some students who do not want to become so specialist at that young age. There is an issue in terms of placements, certainly on some of the specific T-level courses, and also uneven delivery. There is variation around the country in terms of what access to specific courses students have.

Q129 Chair: Some of you have suggested in submissions to the inquiry that a modular or flexible approach to T-levels would work to increase enrolment. Stakeholders have told us that young people see T-levels as an all or nothing route, where over the course of two years pupils cannot change their options if they change their mind. The NCFE told us that T-levels should be made up of component parts so that learners can evidence their achievements without completing the full programme. How would a modular approach to T-levels affect the numbers of pupils enrolling and achieving a T-level? If you did a modular approach, would it pose any risks to completion rates?

Kirsti Lord: I agree with some of the points Lisa made around placements. Cohort 1 is just completing, but that is 1,300 students, so a small number, who have had an excellent experience because providers have worked really hard to make it so. It is the scalability that is going to be the challenge. Cohort 2 are at the end of their first year. A lot of our members have reported fewer enrolments than they were anticipating. We do not know if that is because of CAGs and TAGs and changing pathways because of that.

I think there is a challenge in terms of a modular approach from a provider perspective, in that of course there must be viable numbers in a



cohort to be able to deliver a variety of modules. That brings us back to being able to fund that adequately to offer those choices. A T-level is a large programme, and if there are different modules that young people can opt in and out of, absolutely that will provide the flexibility, but it could provide an enormous challenge in terms of what providers can offer and deliver.

There is also an issue in terms of specialist staff recruitment and being able to recruit to deliver those modules, which might mean that you end up with some inequalities across the country where some providers have very large cohorts and can provide lots of different modular options, but some have to provide a very narrow route because they have fewer students enrolling on those courses. There is a risk there as well.

David Gallagher: Can I build on that point? To the modular point, a concern that is shared by all stakeholders is a safe off-ramp for learners. If a learner for whatever reason is unable to complete their studies, what is the safe off-ramp to other provision or to a job? One of the recommendations that we would make is around consideration for recognition or some form of credentialling for learners who do not for whatever reason complete that programme of study, as a segue to further learning. It is a broad concern that we share.

On the narrow nature of T-levels, we seem very comfortable with the narrow nature of an apprenticeship. An apprenticeship is a job and a training programme to support that one occupation. T-levels is much broader. It has occupational specialisms within it, yet it is much broader than an apprenticeship. If we can be comfortable with an apprenticeship, that does not reconcile with discomfort around narrowness of T-levels.

Kirsti mentioned that we are just seeing the first learners complete their first two years. Numbers are slightly below the original plan, but not significantly. It was planned to start at relatively low volumes so that we could iron out the inevitable wrinkles in the system; work placements were challenges. The odd lapel badge aside, there has been very little done in terms of sector-specific, employer-backed campaigns that will raise its profile.

Q130 **Chair:** Do you think there should be a way of doing T-levels with A-levels, or part of a T-level with an A-level, rather than having this binary choice—academic or skills-based?

David Gallagher: To best meet the needs of learners, the evidence tells us that a broad base for some learners is the right approach. Some learners will absolutely know the occupation and an apprenticeship might be right; some learners will have a strong sense directionally of the sector that they want to go into, where a T-level may be fit for purpose, and if that is available in their local area then that is fantastic. For other learners it will be absolutely appropriate to have a mix of academic, applied general and possibly technical in that mix. So absolutely; we would support that view.



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Tom Bewick: There is an irony, building on David's point, about Government policy in this space. The post-18 Augar review of course called for more modularisation of qualifications. Members of this House of course have just enacted into law the Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022, which specifically makes a commitment from 2025 to introduce the lifelong loan entitlement. That cannot really be delivered for adults unless we move in this country down the modularisation track. There is a slight paradox that in terms of the 16 to 19 cohort, which we are talking about in respect of T-levels, there is quite a lot of in-built rigidity coming through. I think that is David's point about the need for off-ramps.

I will make one final observation. BTECs were originally worth the equivalent of three A-levels, but since 2003 it became possible to take a BTEC alongside an A-level or alongside other vocational technical qualifications, and arguably that resulted in a massive increase in the progression routes and opportunities for those cohorts of learners, not only into higher education—I think the data on that speak for themselves—but also into apprenticeships and other forms of workplace learning. The evidence suggests that is the case.

Q131 **Chair:** BTECs are going to go over the next few years, mostly, and we are going to move to this T-level system. Should that option be available—that you could do a bit of T-level with an A-level?

Tom Bewick: If the policy objective is to ensure flexibility and maximum progression, and in particular to help those disadvantaged groups, then the answer is yes. But as you know, the Government's ideology since the Sainsbury panel reported in 2016 has been to entertain this notion of a binary choice, in part, I think, misguided by the view that in the Germanic systems, in their upper secondary track, students are tracked into either the academic or the vocational. Of course, we do not have anything like the corporatist culture that Germany or Switzerland have where, for example, two thirds of young people under the age of 20 in Switzerland are put into high-quality four-year apprenticeships. We are miles away from that kind of vision in this country.

David Gallagher: If I could come in on a technical and hopefully not too boring point, T-levels contain a TQ—a technical qualification—and the technical qualification's primary purpose is to get learners to competence, so that the primary purpose of gaining a job thereafter can be fulfilled. If we were to trim down a technical qualification or a T-level and put it alongside, we would need to consider whether that would lead to competence. The example we use often is in education and childcare, which is a specialism of ours. Would you want somebody who was responsible for looking after your children to be nearly competent? I do not think any of us would. It is the competence basis that is important to consider.

Chair: Before I pass over to Caroline, I will make a final observation. One of the reasons why I am looking very closely at all of these different ideas for some kind of baccalaureate is that I do think it marries academic



education with skills and vocational learning, and it stops this binary thing where some students do this and some students do that.

- Q132 **Caroline Ansell:** I am not going to champion binary, because of course we want to offer flexibility and choice, but one of the key findings from earlier in the inquiry was that the landscape is quite confusing to learners. Would this migration from part T-level, part A-level or other vocational course not add to the confusion?

David Gallagher: A great example is that BTEC is a brand, and BTEC as a brand represents primarily two types of qualifications—an applied general qualification, and a technical and vocational qualification—yet those of us who are not in the space just think of BTEC the brand. That is a powerful brand and compelling for learners and employers, but it does not necessarily describe what sits underneath. What appears to be simplicity is not as simple as it seems.

I make that point on the basis that when you get into qualifications there is a whole raft of technicalities, and I believe it is our job as a sector to make it easy for employers to understand it, to make it easy for parents and carers to understand it, and to make it easy for young people to make the best possible choices—hiding some of the complexity to help people make an informed choice. The big brand piece may solve some problems, but it will not necessarily give us that absolute clarity.

Specifically to the point about baccalaureate, we do think there is a space for programmes that have a mix of academic, applied general, and vocational and technical, and we think it is the job of the sector to give simplicity to all those stakeholders, to help them to better understand it, but ultimately to help young people develop the academic, the essential skills and the technical skills that will be valuable for them in their future career.

- Q133 **Caroline Ansell:** Would what you are describing be something new and different from a combination of A-levels and T-levels? Is that the baccalaureate?

David Gallagher: It could possibly be one approach.

- Q134 **Caroline Ansell:** Rather than the road we are travelling, which seems to require that BTECs fall so T-levels can rise. Yet I am hearing quite a lot of positivity around the BTEC.

David Gallagher: There are a significant number of applied generals and other technical and vocational qualifications that would still be available. There definitely needs to be some clearing of the canopy for T-levels to thrive, but we are not talking about burning down the rainforest. I think, based on submissions and conversations, that all of us in this room absolutely agree that there is space for a mix of academic, applied general and technical, and then very specifically technical routes where young people directionally know the career they want to go into. Again, in education and childcare, every year, the vast majority of learners who



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come to that programme know exactly that they want to be in education and childcare, so the notion of not having a technical route other than an apprenticeship would not work for swathes of learners. We think the mix of academic, the blend, technical and apprenticeships is the right way to go.

Ruth Perry: It is important to remember that there are a significant proportion of young people who reach the age of 16 who are not working at level 3 and need provision. Some will step off provision at level 2, level 1 or entry level, and some will need it as a progression platform to level 3 and beyond.

One of the things that our members have looked at in terms of T-levels is how effective they think they would be in supporting young people with special educational needs and disability into higher education. At the moment they see them as too large and too inflexible, with too little relationship to lower levels, to build that progression route. I think members are very keen on the framework of differently sized and different levels of qualification that belong to a family through which young people can progress.

I am talking about learners with special educational needs and disabilities, but lots of learners who are disadvantaged with poor experience of schooling for other reasons also benefit in that way. They enter FE and it is not clear what they are capable of and they do not really know what they want to do either, so to have this flexible route through which they can travel, build confidence, build skills and move through into something better—employment, higher education—is where I think it is important that we do not throw the baby out with the bath water.

Q135 Ian Mearns: David, listening to what you said about the options that we would like to see, it seems to me we are a million miles away from that for the vast majority of young people. That for me begs a question: if that is where we want to be, how appropriate is our 11 to 16 curriculum to go down that direction? It seems to me that it is not at all appropriate at the moment for youngsters to have that range of options because it is all based in one direction, the 11 to 16 curriculum.

My second question is: when are we going to have this magic appearance of a vast array of impartial and independent careers information, advice and guidance provided to young people so that they know what the panoply of possibilities is for them?

Chair: Lisa, I think you were nodding.

Dr Morrison Coulthard: Yes. Certainly the awareness of different options is dreadful. In the Youth Employment UK survey, 65.5% had never heard of traineeships and 77.7% had not heard of T-levels. Interestingly, 14.2% had not heard of apprenticeships, so there was much bigger awareness of that than expected.



One of the bigger barriers, which comes to Ian's point, is the challenge of the maths and English requirement—grade 4 and above—which closes doors at that stage in terms of whether you can get on to a T-level programme. The concern is whether you will pass the resit and then be able to complete, or whether routes are not available to you in terms of an apprenticeship because SMEs will not take on young people without maths and English and so on. There is a real mismatch between what the system currently demands and what it can deliver. In particular, while passes are increasing, still less than half of those who resit are successfully achieving the grades.

Q136 Ian Mearns: You have just mentioned SMEs not being willing to take on youngsters unless they have maths and English, but the vast majority of SMEs are not taking anybody on. I have been talking about this during this inquiry for a long time. It seems to me that if we are going to get this all to work at some point in the future, we need a massive culture shift among businesses to get them engaged in training youngsters.

Kirsti Lord: It is absolutely a culture shift in business in terms of the engagement that they have with young people, but for me there is something about a culture shift in terms of 11 to 16—very specific subjects, all exam-based and a very academic route with very little exposure and interaction with developing skills, and applied skills particularly. So you are naturally driven to, "Well, if I am excelling academically, surely that is what I should continue to do," because you have had no experience of anything else. How do you know what you are good at if you have not had the opportunity to try it? That really does drive the attitudes around an academic route being best and if you cannot do academic you do something that is more applied and technical. That is really challenging. For me, at key stages 3 and 4, there should be opportunities and exposure to developing other skills—practical skills—rather than just an academic system, because it is not going to suit everybody.

The other part of that is that we are very focused at the moment—I am tipping back to level 3—on that 40% externally assessed component. Some people are really good at exams—there will be exams in that whatever it looks like—and some people are just not. That is going to be a barrier to achievement and success for some people, who could be brilliant at something, just because that is the way we choose to assess them. Fundamentally, if we do not start at 11 teaching young people that they have a broader set of skills than just being able to pass an exam then we are in trouble.

David Gallagher: There is evidence out there, particularly through WorldSkills, that the earlier young people are exposed to the opportunity to engage in technical skills development or vocational skills development, the greater the likelihood that they could get to a level of excellence or mastery. We have a productivity problem in this country and one of the ways that we can solve that is to have technical experts



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who can get to that level of excellence. It is not just, as Kirsti talks to, the engagement and the inspiration element of it and a broader-based curriculum; we firmly believe that it will, over time, contribute positively to productivity as well.

Q137 Chair: When you talk about more skills in key stage 3 and so on, what does that mean in practice? What would you do?

Kirsti Lord: There are a range of things that can be done. The Wolf report was absolutely right in terms of some of the vocational and technical qualifications that were being delivered at key stage 4 and their equivalency in GCSE. What we have done is take all of that out, rather than thinking about how we might include that as part of the curriculum.

Q138 Chair: Tell me how you would do it.

Kirsti Lord: At 14 to 16, one of the things that worked really well when I was working in colleges was increased flexibility, where students would come to college and work in a workshop a day a week. That would work towards part of a qualification suite that they had at key stage 4. I am not suggesting that that is equivalent to four GCSEs—

Chair: You said at key stage 3.

Kirsti Lord: At key stage 3, that is about building those relationships with providers that have access to technical equipment and qualifications.

Q139 Chair: I agree with what you say, but I want to understand what it means in practice for a child at key stage 3 age, when that starts, at 11 or 12. What does that mean in practice in their daily learning?

Kirsti Lord: It can be really simple things, like a bigger emphasis on craft, design and technology within the curriculum that they are working on—things that already exist but are probably a very small part of the curriculum at this point at key stage 3 that could be expanded and extended to diversify their skills.

Chair: I think all of us who believe that that should be the case need to flesh out what it means in practice. Absolutely, design and technology—but I am guessing you mean more than that. I would be interested, even if you write to the Committee at a later date, in what you mean.

Q140 Ian Mearns: We can sit here and talk about where we would like things to be, but it is a question of how to make that transition, and it does not seem to me we are even starting on that journey at the moment in many respects. In fact, for a number of years we have been going in the opposite direction.

If there are any particular strengths in our current system, what are they, and what are the obvious weaknesses?

Tom Bewick: The obvious strength is the fact that we do have diversity and choice in the qualification system. I would argue that has come about more by default than design, but it is nevertheless a feature of the



current system in England. It allows students to mix and match and it addresses many of the points that colleagues have raised today about the importance of trying to cater for prior attainment levels, which do not come in these very neat categorical boxes—my colleagues and I say this in the nicest possible way over at the Department for Education—for those who believe that qualifications can be easily slotted into just four categories or boxes.

It comes back to the point—the Times Education Commission made this point as well—about the need in England for a longer-term education strategy. We do not have to completely reinvent the wheel. I think Kirsti talked about her time at college. You can look into the recent past and see the experiments—very successful, evidence-based work that went on with the introduction of youth apprenticeships back in the mid-2000s. That was very successful at helping young people make that transition from pure classroom study into work-based learning. It is what I call the great graveyard of failed education and skills initiatives. It is quite large, but if you go wandering around the tombstones you will come up with a few gems from our recent history where things have worked, but for whatever reason the Government have decided to discontinue them.

Q141 Ian Mearns: From my perspective, a massive missed opportunity was the Tomlinson review, but that is neither here nor there. We will not go there.

What are the key benefits and challenges posed by the Government's reforms to level 3 qualifications? We have talked about it, but is there anything that we have missed?

Dr Morrison Coulthard: The key thing with respect to the changes to applied generals, certainly, is that that could close the door for a certain proportion of young people. As Ruth said earlier, while there is acknowledgement of that within the impact assessment, we need more in-depth information to understand the extent of that potential disproportionate effect and also a longitudinal look at it.

There is a concern in relation to the acceptance of T-levels at university, and whether that is considered a valid and robust route to going on to higher education. As we have all touched on, there is something about the complexity of the current system but also the lottery in terms of the quality of careers support, advice and guidance that there is available.

Q142 Ian Mearns: It is not so much a lottery, because it is just absent in a lot of places, isn't it? I have had this debate with Lord Baker over a number of years. It is because of bums-on-seats funding regimes—and guess who brought that in.

David Gallagher: Ian, can I add a couple of really quick points? At the last count, 126 universities were accepting T-levels, so there does need to be a bit of myth busting around whether universities recognise T-levels.



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For us, there are three improvements to the system. We simply will not have world-class technical and vocational education unless we invest more in our educators. We have to get that investment right, so we need to go further there.

Work experience placements are critical, not just for the employability skills and the technical skills but for the reference, the CV, the something to talk about at interview—all these things matter. We have to get creative with work experience placements if we are going to deliver at scale and to the quality standards.

Q143 Ian Mearns: But scaling that up is going to be really, really difficult, isn't it?

David Gallagher: Incredibly difficult. We must be really creative and think about it differently—the project work and the different scenario type-based things that we can look at to make it work. It is a massive challenge, but hugely valuable.

Q144 Ian Mearns: Given the number of youngsters that we have on T-levels at the moment, the challenge is getting businesses involved in that process. I think that is the big culture shift challenge from that perspective.

David Gallagher: A sector where it works well already is education and childcare, because work experience placements have always been the lifeblood of that sector. People ask me why it works there, and it is simply employer attitudes. They are so supportive of it that it works.

Q145 Ian Mearns: It is employer attitudes based on the fact that they have a massive recruitment and retention problem. There is an incentive for them to engage in that process, in the hope that those youngsters will come into their businesses. I accept that.

Ruth Perry: I would like to put in a plea for work placement to be considered in the round, holistically, across all the different programmes at different levels. We are calling on employers to provide opportunities for young people. We think that there is potentially a threat to supported internships if T-levels take over the world, because who wants to work with a young person with much greater need? If we can think about the planning for capacity among employers to provide that support, then let us do it across all work-based learning.

Kirsti Lord: Three quick things. First, we have to consider what Lisa mentioned about the concerns about social mobility and some of the limitations that might be an unintended consequence. In terms of placements, your average college has connections with about 700 employers. That is not going to be enough, because some of these SMEs are going to take on one placement, so—

Q146 Ian Mearns: I keep referring to my patch in the north-east of England, which has 110,000 businesses but only 1,000 of those businesses have



more than 50 employees. There are 109,000 businesses with 50 or fewer employees, and the vast majority of them will be two or three people. How do you fit youngsters who need the skills and qualifications and experience into that? It is the number of businesses that have the capacity to do that, the will to do it and the time to engage. A lot of them are running to stand still at the moment.

Kirsti Lord: And if you consider the amount of different organisations that might be knocking on an employer's door for a work placement, to engage in a school, to meet the requirements of the Gatsby benchmarks, talking apprenticeships, talking work experience, it is quite overwhelming for an employer. We have talked for a while about maybe using the NAS as a database and a single point of contact. That might be very helpful to limit the amount of engagement an employer has to do, because with the best will in the world, even if a single college has an excellent CRM and management system, there will be other stakeholders asking for that employer's time and engagement as well.

Ian Mearns: Can I say, Chair, what a pleasure it is to sit in a panel with so many northern voices for a change? It is really good.

Chair: Thank you. Caroline, do you have some further questions?

Q147 **Caroline Ansell:** Yes—to look at how the A-level and the T-level compare and contrast when it comes to skills. I think we have touched on lots of these things already—skills, readiness to work, routes for progression and thinking of some of the different cohorts. We are focusing today on that A-level/T-level juxtaposition, so do you have thoughts on that?

Dr Morrison Coulthard: Are you thinking of things like apprenticeships, so broader than T-levels and A-levels alone?

Q148 **Caroline Ansell:** I think we do need to understand the place of T-levels, particularly as it has already been said that there is not perhaps the recognition across the university sector for T-levels. We are looking at just a small number that have been brought forward at this point and there are further qualifications to come within the next two or three years. How do you build that body of students who are going to make the difference around understanding of the T-level and what the T-level is delivering, particularly in quite a busy landscape? In terms of making the case for T-levels, how do they compare, sitting alongside A-levels, in terms of skills progression?

Dr Morrison Coulthard: From some of the evaluative work that NFER has done there is some concern that it is a very difficult qualification in terms of its standards, so not so much level 3 but level 3.5, and that can be seen as particularly off-putting for some students that may be not academically flying in that sense, if we go back to the discussion about the traditional GCSE qualifications.

There are things like the T-level transition programme, which we have done some evaluation of. Again, like T-levels, that is seen as very



positive and in terms of the satisfaction of students it is rated highly. The problem with the T-level transition programme is the transition rates. From the information that we have from the research that we have done, only a third of students on a transition programme have indicated that they would be likely to go on to do the T-level, and a freedom of information request showed that the actual conversion rate is 14%—albeit in covid years, so not necessarily representative.

Q149 Caroline Ansell: Can I come back on one point you made? You talked about student satisfaction being quite high. In terms of the evaluation of skills and work readiness, where did that sit? I understand that we are looking at very small numbers and it is very early days, but has there been any work done around what this T-level has done for that young learner?

Dr Morrison Coulthard: That is work that certainly we will be doing as part of our Skills Imperative work, looking at the acquisition of essential employment skills during those different post-16 pathways.

Q150 Caroline Ansell: I recognise that these are very early days, but do you have any evidence to bring to bear?

Dr Morrison Coulthard: Not at this stage, and I think we would possibly have concerns, as I said before, about the nature of the current cohort and the extent to which these may be the more able students, given those that were taken in for the initial intake.

Q151 Caroline Ansell: So when will we know? Three years? Five? When will we have evidence that this is a good way forward?

Dr Morrison Coulthard: We can certainly look at the data from the first cohort, but it will be necessary to do the comparison with following years and look at what happens within year 1 and year 2 to see how that skill development is coming through, and to hear from employers who take on those that have completed the qualification about whether they are work ready in that sense.

Tom Bewick: You raise an important point about the metrics and there being some consensus across Government and the broader sector about the success factors for all qualifications, including T-levels. I would urge slight caution in trying to put T-levels up against A-levels. They are different types of qualifications with different aims; their efficacy is different. Arguably, of course, because of their longevity, the track record of A-levels has been predominantly about progressing students on to higher education—not exclusively, but that is where they find their currency.

The challenge around T-levels is just how, in a short space of time, the narrative has changed. When I went to see Damian Hinds, a former Secretary of State, launch T-levels at Battersea power station, he made clear that the main measure of success of T-levels was progression into skilled employment in those 23 occupational routes. You do not hear that



so much now from Ministers; you hear a lot about progression into higher education. It does not have to be a binary choice—either/or—but the lack of any clear vision statement with metrics attached, which I think is what you are referring to, at three, five and 10 years, is a concern for a programme that is attracting, quite rightly, tens of millions of pounds of public money.

Ruth Perry: Just a quick caveat, building on what Lisa said: we suspect that colleges have been risk averse in terms of who they put on to the first cohorts, but very sensibly so. They have set entry requirements quite high, so we do not have a representative cohort of young people. Given that the BTECs have a reputation for supporting young people with disadvantage/SEND into higher education and into employment, I think we would need to see that fully tested out with representative cohorts with a wide range of protected characteristics.

Kirsti Lord: On the point about higher education progression, I agree with Tom that there should and will be a focus on getting young people into skilled employment. That is incredibly important.

On the point about UCAS points, eight or nine years ago UAL put out a suite of qualifications that did not have any UCAS points because universities did not understand what they were and were not particularly interested. Once they realised what those students brought, suddenly UCAS points were attached to them. We are coming to the end of the first cohort. It is a very small cohort and there is not a massive amount of understanding. Universities are now coming on board; they are just being a bit slow about it. I do not necessarily see it as a barrier to progression, albeit it will be with higher education qualifications that are appropriate to the T-level.

Q152 **Anna Firth:** I will come at this from the angle of a British baccalaureate and whether we think that is a good idea. By way of context, as the Chair mentioned, he and I visited a brilliant grammar school that does the international baccalaureate in Kent last week, Tonbridge Grammar School for Girls. The pupils that we engaged with were absolutely outstanding. It was very clear from our visit that they had both academic and other social, soft skills—I actually think they are hard skills, but other skills that will make them extremely employable: fluency, critical thinking, the ability to argue, the ability to engage. The school is a very good advert for the international baccalaureate, but it has been in existence in the UK since 1971—for 50 years—yet it is not widespread throughout the system.

What are your thoughts on the international baccalaureate and why it has not spread? Depending slightly on your answers to that, do you think we want to invent a new baccalaureate, called the British baccalaureate but based broadly on the IB?

Tom Bewick: I should declare to the Committee that the international baccalaureate organisation is a member of the Federation of Awarding



Bodies. I cannot really speak for it individually, but what I will say is that when you look at the IB, it is one of only two qualifications that is underwritten in international treaty obligations in terms of international education. That is one of the reasons why it has spread so far and wide across the globe.

Coming to your point about a British baccalaureate, I am very proudly British but I find it quite a curious recommendation, given the fact that this House does not have competence to pass legislation in education because it is a devolved area now. Are we talking about an English baccalaureate or a British baccalaureate? In Wales, for example, there is the Welsh bacc; they have experimented with the baccalaureate concept. Under the Curriculum for Excellence reforms in Scotland, following a pretty damning OECD report just last year, they are looking to reform education. I have not heard across these islands any call for a British baccalaureate within that context. It is important that we are clear about the terminology.

If it is about an English baccalaureate, then again it comes back to some of the discussion that we have already had about the way you can flex up the existing system to potentially achieve the same aims as a baccalaureate. You could call it that as a brand, I guess, but I encourage the Committee to think about the outcomes it is trying to achieve for 16 to 19-year-olds as opposed to jumping to a specific brand of a qualification.

Q153 Anna Firth: Can you deal with the point about the IB in itself, putting aside the British baccalaureate? I hear what you say on that, but what do you think about the IB as a qualification? Do you think it is outstanding? Is it something that we should be pushing? Why do you think it has not spread, when it has been around for 50 years?

Tom Bewick: The OECD has looked into the international baccalaureate; it is a big champion of the IB. I think on previous occasions Andreas Schleicher from the OECD has given evidence to this Committee and others, and I think he was the international adviser on the Times Education Commission. In our own written evidence to the Committee we highlighted the six or seven principles that the OECD put forward. Those principles map across exactly to what the aims are—the efficacy of the international baccalaureate, the broad-based curriculum, the mixing of both academic and vocational skills, the extended project, the need for a work placement. I do not believe it is as many as 45 days—

Q154 Chair: Is it a good idea? That is what we are trying to find out. Where we have seen it—I have gone to a second school to see it, where they are doing both baccalaureates, the international careers one and the international diploma one—the outcomes of the school have been very good, Ofsted inspections have been very good and the outcomes for the students have been very good. Is it something that we should support? Is it good for those schools that want to do it? That is what we want to know in a nutshell.



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Tom Bewick: As I said in written evidence, the Federation of Awarding Bodies does not have a collective position on this, so I would not want to give a view on it.

Q155 **Chair:** You are being very unusual this morning. It is not like you to hedge your bets. Clearly there are different views among your members.

Tom Bewick: Maybe the chair of my policy board will help me out.

Ruth Perry: Reputationally, I think the IB is associated with the private school system and the grammar school system. I do not know enough about it to say whether the evidence is that it works there but it would not work everywhere. I do not know.

Q156 **Chair:** There are some state schools doing this.

Ruth Perry: There are some, yes.

Chair: And don't forget that it requires more funding.

Ruth Perry: I was saying reputationally, so that is the association that may put others off.

Q157 **Chair:** Anyone else? I just want to get the answer to the question.

Kirsti Lord: The IB and anything of that baccalaureate nature is an excellent avenue for a limited amount of young people.

Q158 **Chair:** Why?

Kirsti Lord: In terms of some of the barriers that there are for young people across an exam-based component, having to mix and match a number of components can be incredibly challenging. For some people it is hugely beneficial, but for others it is not.

Q159 **Chair:** Why is that different from A-levels? They have to do exams in A-levels.

Kirsti Lord: I absolutely agree, but you see the amount of young people who move away from anything to do with academic because of that GCSE exam experience. What I am saying is the IB will appeal, I think, to the high-performing A-level students.

Q160 **Chair:** It depends what IB it is. Well, first, we met students from all backgrounds, but you have the careers IB, which has a stronger vocational element—although the IB diploma does have skills, as my colleague Anna has pointed out—so it depends which one you are talking about. I am still not getting a clear answer from all of you, for some reason. I do not know what is going on. Lisa, what is your view? No hedging.

Dr Morrison Coulthard: Our view is similar to Kirsti's, which is that we would want to see the evidence and how well such qualifications served students across the board. If it was the case that it suited the more able



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academically, fine, but we would not want to see something put in place that reduced options for young people across the board.

Chair: It does the opposite. It increases options, when you look at what these students do. Anna, I interrupted; I beg your pardon. Carry on.

Anna Firth: Thank you, Chair. We have David next.

David Gallagher: We completely endorse the point about the essential skills that are developed within the baccalaureate. The need for critical thinking, judgment, decision making, problem solving—we would absolutely advocate for that, either embedded in every programme at level 3 or delivered alongside in a discrete way.

We have a range of high-quality qualifications at level 3 and the IB, not that I know it particularly well—I know it more by reputation—has a really strong reputation and a really strong brand. Assuming it is a high-quality qualification we think there is a place for it, as there is for A-levels and T-levels and a range of other applied generals. Ruth made the point that we must be led by the research—what would best meet the wide range of needs of learners who come into our tertiary education system, and whether that also meets employers' needs in terms of future skills demand. We must be led by the evidence.

Kirsti Lord: When we consider that 35% to 40% of young people are coming into post-16 education without GCSE maths and English, doing an IB alongside a GCSE resit is just too much.

Q161 **Anna Firth:** But if you do the IB, you do maths and/or English as standard subjects. You do not have to be a pure mathematician. That is what I see as one of the benefits of the IB—that you have to keep both maths and English going and you have to achieve a standard level in maths and English.

Kirsti Lord: With the condition of funding you would have to do your GCSE maths or English alongside.

Q162 **Anna Firth:** Is the problem here that there are preconceptions about the type of schools that do the IB and that that is clouding the issue? There is no doubt about it that if the IB were to be spread across the whole country there would have to be more funding put in, because you require more teachers to deliver the IB. There is also no doubt that the universities would have to change the exchange rate, because at the moment if you do IB you have to get better qualifications on a parity with A-levels than if you do A-levels.

I want to explore more whether we are getting the right balance in our post-16 education between academic and skills. There is a tendency to think of A-levels as being far more academic, and the IB encourages both the academic and the skills. Are we getting the right balance in current qualifications between the academics and skills at level 3?



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Tom Bewick: If you read any major education report over the last three decades the emphatic answer to that question will be no, we are not. The narrowness of the curriculum in recent years has only exacerbated that challenge. I put it back to colleagues that the Government, for some years now, have been pursuing a policy—not least concerned, as they would see it, about standards and rigour in the curriculum—of going in the opposite direction from what we have been talking about here today, completely opposite to some of the core underlying principles of the international baccalaureate. For me, all roads lead back to this central challenge, which I think we are all grappling with—I think that is one of the reasons, Chair, why you are finding it difficult to get a straight answer out of me today—

Chair: It has never happened before.

Tom Bewick: I know. The challenge is that there is not a settled view among the educationalists or the policy makers in this room about exactly what kind of upper secondary system our young people—

Q163 **Chair:** Let me talk about what the students that Anna and I went to see were learning. They are doing theory of knowledge, an extended essay of 4,000 words, a self-directed piece of research, and “creativity, activity, service”, in which students complete a project related to three concepts. They have six subject groups: studies in language and literature, language acquisition, individuals and society, science, mathematics, and the arts. You have different courses within each subject group. Each student takes at least three subjects, but not more than four, at the higher level of the IB and the remaining at standard level. They can opt to study an additional science, individuals and societies, or language course. This is not even the careers version; this is the diploma version. What on earth is wrong with that? Why can’t—

David Gallagher: It sounds absolutely fantastic.

Q164 **Chair:** Let me finish. They are doing really well, yet not one of you can give us a black and white answer whether this is a good thing and that more schools should be doing it. Not one of you can say that.

David Gallagher: The content at a high level sounds fantastic and all of us, I would imagine, have gone straight to all the diverse learning groups that we work with. The 16-year-old that I met the year before last at the beginning of T-levels said, “I grew up in the social care system, I absolutely want to work with children and young families, but I don’t want an apprenticeship yet because I don’t think I’ve got the level of experience and I want the college experience; I want to try different routes.”

Q165 **Chair:** I am not against T-levels. I am very pro T-levels.

David Gallagher: It is just a demonstration, I think, Rob, that it absolutely will be fit for purpose for a demographic of learners but there



is a whole range of other qualifications that will meet every individual's needs.

Ruth Perry: You lost me at the 4,000-word essay. At that point you can see a whole tranche of young people who could succeed in employment, in higher education even, but that type of assessment, regardless of what type of learning is going on, is going to be a turn-off.

Q166 **Chair:** First of all, I don't know if every one of them has to do that. Don't forget I mentioned this is the diploma version, not the careers version, so it is more academic. Secondly, they are doing millions of essays in A-level if they are doing those kinds of subjects—

Ruth Perry: I think that is the point. Is it a better thing than A-level? Probably—possibly—but is it a better thing than the wide range of potential options for young people now? I think possibly not.

Kirsti Lord: Anna, you talked a little bit about the fact that it would require more investment because there is more delivery. When you look at a study programme, 540 guided learning hours, two-year linear summatively assessed A-levels, all of that is hoovered up into the delivery of those A-levels, pretty much. With vocational technical qualifications, a full BTEC is 540 guided learning hours a year, and it hoovers up all that time. Where is the space? We used to have enrichment and entitlement. Ten years ago, we had entitlement worth 104 hours a year that was paid for. That was removed. That provided some of that wraparound in not quite such a prescriptive way. So there is something for me about investing in the broader, while keeping those core qualifications as they are. The IB will be perfect for particular demographics of students, I think.

Q167 **Anna Firth:** Full disclosure: both my daughters did the IB and both went to this school for part of their education, so I know it extremely well. I was a governor at the school as well. There is no doubt that it would require further investment, but all of those additional enrichment activities are hugely helpful to the children in enabling them to go to university and make that transition extremely easy and then to go on and get high-level jobs at the end of it. I think it is an exceptionally good model for that career trajectory.

I asked the question: "Hang on a minute. Would this work in areas where you have a less privileged cohort?" I accept what Tom has been saying. The answer was, "Yes, actually, it does work in areas where you have a less privileged demographic," and we were given several examples of that. So I am not sure that I accept that as an answer. Would anyone else like to comment on that?

Tom Bewick: Speaking as a parent, Anna—I have two daughters, 10 and 12 years old—I would love them to take up that type of qualification, quite frankly. It is a bit too late for the 17-year-old lad; he is just coming through his level 3s now. In the current system we have been able to mix



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and match, by the way, an applied general qualification with one A-level and his sporting option. So absolutely, there is huge strength in that.

The reason why you are getting some reticence from colleagues today, including from me in my professional capacity, is that there is a lot of reform fatigue around at the moment in this space. The Sainsbury panel was a big reform around the introduction of T-levels. I think there is a view among my colleagues that we want to make T-levels work; we want them to be a success. We do think that there is a home for T-levels alongside these other applied general qualifications but there is this fatigue around. If we keep on talking about changing the qualifications—rolling out IB across England, for example, would require the abolition of GCSEs and A-levels. It would be a massive, massive—

Q168 **Chair:** No, it would not require the abolition of GCSEs at all, because—

Tom Bewick: Although you have advocated for the abolition of GCSEs in the Times Commission, yes.

Chair: That is a separate argument.

Tom Bewick: That is where I am getting confused, Chair. Apologies for that.

Q169 **Chair:** That is a separate argument. I am not some Robespierre type, saying we should scrap a very good system that is available, which I recognise has qualities. What I do not like is that everybody seems to be—not everybody but some—either hedging or closing down any idea of debate. The previous Secretary of State said, “We don’t want to hug the world.” I think it is a recipe for stasis that you never discuss any radical reform. If everything was so hunky-dory, we would not have the huge problems that we have in our education system, with 9 million adults who cannot even read or write properly or do basic maths.

Tom Bewick: All I would say to that, Rob, is it is just a shame that you were not in the room when Tomlinson was trying to persuade Tony Blair for this reform but it was blocked by Lord Adonis. Equally, when the Sainsbury panel reported—as it happens, another Labour peer—the Conservative Government accepted those recommendations. Obviously, you and other colleagues here were not in the room when that decision was made. It is educationalists around this room who have to implement these reforms.

Chair: I believe in T-levels but I just think that we should have a debate about these things and look at where schools are doing it and perhaps support those schools that want to offer it.

Sorry, Anna; I promise not to interrupt again.

Anna Firth: No, that concludes my questions. Thank you very much, Chair.



Chair: Thank you. The good news is that I am coming on to Miriam now.

Q170 **Miriam Cates:** Thank you, Chair. I completely understand the concerns about T-levels being too high level for some students and the dangers of getting rid of BTECs, but thinking about T-levels in particular, the one thing that they do offer that A-levels do not is direct work experience of 350 hours. Do you think that that 350 hours is an effective way of providing the skills and knowledge needed for the world of work? Specifically what I mean is: are students then ready to go straight into work at 18? What are they still lacking that otherwise might be in the T-levels, or where do they have the advantage over A-level students at that point? Do you want to go first, David?

David Gallagher: I would be very happy to. The answer, unsurprisingly, is not straightforward. In some sectors that will work very well, as it has done in the forerunners to T-levels. Study programmes that embed work experience placements—that is already the lifeblood of the education and childcare sector, as I have mentioned already, and learners do come out with competence for an occupation. They are fully competent to go into a skilled technical job at that level.

In other sectors we think that it is going to be more of a challenge. We cannot really comment on that one because they are not NCFE's T-levels and, secondly, we have not seen the learners come through and complete yet. We have only seen that on wave 1. Therefore, it will vary from sector to sector and occupation to occupation whether that work experience placement is enough. Is it possibly even too much, given the challenges that Ian alluded to earlier?

The thing that we will always come back to on the work experience placement is that it is not just about competence; it is about the broader set of employability skills—the essential skills that we have spoken about. It is about a reference, it is about a CV, it is about having things to talk about at interview to get that job. It is a much broader piece than I think sometimes is understood about the work experience placement.

Also, when we have surveyed hundreds of parents, carers who are responsible for young people, young people themselves and educators, the thing that comes out on top as the most attractive every time is the work experience placement. People are really drawn in by that opportunity. While we completely recognise and agree with the challenges that Ian alluded to, it is difficult to do that at scale to the quality standard, but absolutely crucial if we are serious about social mobility and we are serious about developing the skills that will help young people to get good-quality careers.

Q171 **Ian Mearns:** And added to that challenge, David, workforce planning and training.



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David Gallagher: Yes. It is only the larger employers who typically do long-term strategic workforce planning. Smaller employers do not, you are absolutely right, so it is a challenge.

Dr Morrison Coulthard: As David said, there is an issue about supply of placements and quality of placements that needs to be addressed. Also, the bigger picture—I know I keep coming back to this—is about understanding what the country's future skills needs are going to be and how that gets delivered through education and therefore how T-levels contribute as a whole as part of that bigger picture. There needs to be a greater understanding about where different sectors might see growth or decline.

Added into the mix, although it is not something that we have touched on here, is the need for upskilling, reskilling and supporting transition of existing workers as well. Whether it is the responsibility of the education system, employers or both, enabling that is part and parcel of that. That also speaks to modular learning because you would not want somebody who is fully qualified as an electrician, for example, to have to go back and do a full qualification in being an electrician; they would just want to upskill in whatever that particular component was. As David said, it is a complex picture, and we need more evidence and data to understand it a bit more.

Kirsti Lord: To reiterate, the placement is an absolutely unique selling point of the T-level and is massively valued by the people who are going on to the T-level. We just have the first cohort of 1,300 completing. It is early days to see how that is going to translate and convert into work for young people. Anecdotally we know that some of those people who have been on placement have been offered jobs in the place that they did their placement. We can start to triangulate that a little bit, because it is not a massive cohort, and find out what that looks like.

To speak to a previous point, it is quite an exceptional cohort in terms of the entry requirements but also quite an unusual experience for them because some of them have had to do some of their placements in digital and unusual ways. In terms of expanding placements, that might be a way forward when you think about how a lot of companies have pivoted in terms of digital work and online work. That is certainly something where we can do some evidence gathering over the next few weeks and months to start to test how that looks.

Tom Bewick: You asked about the 45-day industry placement. It is incredibly encouraging, as the former Skills Minister, Alex Burghart, said on the Floor of the House at education questions last Monday, that 90% of the cohort—albeit obviously, as we have discussed, in terms of the pandemic—did secure their industry placement.

The challenge will be all about scalability. To helicopter out and quote the figure that we included in our written submission from the OECD, currently we are 19th out of 32 countries for the availability of work



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placements—industry placements—for this particular age group, so we have a long way to go. If the challenge is to withdraw BTEC study programmes that compete with T-levels, a lot will depend on the extent to which at the same time the Department for Education, with the provider base, can scale up placements. Those will probably be in the region of around 200,000 to 250,000 a year, I would have thought, not least when you consider the size of this cohort. Currently, the number of 16 to 18-year-olds in England is 2.1 million. There is a real challenge ahead around scalability. I do not know the details of the contracts, but the Department for Education has hired a brokerage firm to help the provider base with securing these placements.

Coming on to your point about the progression on and whether that is that enough, it would be great to see, for example, this brokerage function being able to convert as many of those 45-day industry placements, subject, obviously, to qualification, then going into the level 4 apprenticeship track. That would really show that there is clear progression from the T-level into skilled employment.

Ruth Perry: The point I was going to make about scalability is that we should not focus everything on quantity and getting a placement for every student; we should focus on getting a quality placement for every student. That is really the answer to your question. Do they serve learners well? Yes, if they are a high-quality experience. David mentioned that some sectors are very experienced in offering high-quality work placements because it has been part of their culture for a long time. For others it is quite new. As we get a broader, hopefully, cohort of young people going through, they are going to be exposed to young people with a wider range of needs who will need different types of experience while they are on their placements.

Q172 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, panel. The country at the moment faces a major challenge in having a sufficiently skilled workforce, particularly since the withdrawal from the EU and looking at the challenge of decarbonisation. What evidence do you have that the proposed interventions in skills development will deliver what is required at speed?

Dr Morrison Coulthard: That is exactly what we are looking into at the moment. As I say, it is a five-year project, but there are different stages of it. We have already done a literature review looking at what the evidence is saying at the moment but also what leading commentators are saying, recognising the fact that, as you have mentioned, there are numerous drivers that are going to fundamentally change both the size and the composition of the labour force over the next 10 to 15 years.

We are also starting to map skills directly on to the standard occupational classifications and then see, based on our projections of what the labour market might look like in 10 to 15 years, what specific skills are going to be in most demand in specific sectors. There is not a quick answer because we want to do it in the most robust and valid way possible, but that will enable the unpicking of where different skillsets come from and,



for example, whether you can assess particular skills and whether they are taught or caught—I think that is the terminology. If they are caught, how do you measure that?

There is also the important element of a young person's understanding of what skills they have acquired and being able to articulate that, because I suspect that within our education system some of the key skills that we have been talking about are acquired or developed. It is more knowing that at interview you can say, "Yes, I am really good at problem solving because of x, y and z" or, "Yes, I can do teamworking because in science we did this project," or whatever it might be. There is an element of ensuring that young people know what skills they possess but also enabling teachers to support that articulation too.

The evidence base needs to be built. I do not think that the nature of the skills challenge in this country is well understood, and that is certainly the premise behind our research programme. The point is to bring together Government, employers and educationalists to understand what the evidence tells us so that there can be things like an informed long-term strategy and so on.

Chair: Kim, because of time we will not be able to ask every witness to answer every question, so what is your next question?

Q173 **Kim Johnson:** Okay. My second question is to Kirsti. Kirsti, you mentioned the high percentage of 16-year-olds without maths and English. What impact will the DfE's proposal to withdraw 130 level 3 qualifications and 38 BTECs have, particularly on black kids, SEND kids and kids who live in disadvantaged communities?

Kirsti Lord: There is a real challenge, and I think that has been proven in terms of the impact assessment that was done by the DfE around disadvantaged groups—particularly socioeconomic disadvantaged groups and those that underperform at GCSE. Somebody is going to underperform at GCSE because we are on a bell curve. You cannot have 100% grades 9 to 4. Even if everybody gets over 60%, you will have the people who fall 1 to 3, which is a challenge. In any given year you could fall between a 3 and a 4 and it could be a matter of 1% or 2%, depending on how everybody else in your cohort performs. That is hugely frustrating.

So I think the impact of withdrawing qualifications where there is space to do that—some of these students do two GCSE resits alongside their level 3 qualification, although not many; usually you do your level 2 and focus on GCSE—is vast. I know that there is evidence and concerns about the fact that with applied general qualifications perhaps students do not perform as well at university as other students who have gone through an A-level route. That is probably because they have gone to college on to a level 2 course with no GCSEs and then progressed to a degree. I think that is pretty amazing in terms of your progression.



The danger that we have with removing all applied generals that compete with T-levels is that there is no space for those students going forward and there is a real danger of a lot of young people becoming not in education, employment or training, or dropping out of the system and becoming economically inactive at a very early age. Therefore, there are some inherent challenges there. While I really support A-levels, T-levels and really a high-quality system, there has to be a balance of something that allows those progression opportunities for young people who do not necessarily do well at GCSE or exam-based study.

Q174 Kim Johnson: Thanks for recognising the challenges. What do the DfE and this Government need to do to prevent that from happening, where we have a lost generation of young people?

Kirsti Lord: We have a question mark over what alternative qualifications will look like in the system. They are not very well developed. To a certain extent we have a system that we are trying to fix. One of the points that I made around reputation of the existing system is that you see that certain qualifications with certain providers have superb reputations with universities and high levels of progression, and with employers and progression into work.

Therefore, my advice would be not to throw the baby out with the bathwater, for want of a better term, and not just to say, "Well, that overlaps 60% with a T-level; it's got to go." What is it doing for those young people? What progression opportunities is it offering? Does it need preserving? And looking at the T-level, what are the placement opportunities and do we need to have a balance?

We talk about provider reluctance with T-levels. Some of that is around making sure that there is a high-quality placement for students. If they cannot guarantee that, they are not providing any route into that industry at all, and that could be a massive challenge. There are lots of qualifications that can go, but let's retain the ones that are doing good things for young people and allowing opportunities to progress onward or into work.

Tom Bewick: At the stroke of a pen, the Secretary of State for Education, linked to the local skills improvement plans, could just direct officials not to withdraw T-levels until such time as those local skills improvement plans—therefore the providers, the stakeholders, the employers in any given area, including in your constituency—are content that these qualifications are now embedded and entrenched and that they have the currency and the track record. That is a Secretary of State for Education decision. The previous Secretary of State very helpfully delayed—

Chair: And the Chancellor.

Tom Bewick: The current Chancellor delayed the roll-out by—



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Ian Mearns: Do you mean the previous Secretary of State or the one before that?

Tom Bewick: I am getting confused because we had three in one week last week and I have just come back from America. Anyway, I think you get the point about where the power lies.

Q175 **Chair:** I have a lot of sympathy for what you say. Without speaking for my colleagues, I think the nodding of heads from all sides shows there is some sympathy.

Kim Johnson: In the interests of time, they are all my questions, Chair.

Chair: Thank you very much. Miriam, you have another question.

Q176 **Miriam Cates:** Yes—particularly for Ruth. What challenges do you think young people with special educational needs and disabilities might face in accessing T-levels specifically, and what can be done to improve access?

Ruth Perry: The two biggest factors are size and inflexibility. Underneath that is a lack of relationship with the provision at level 2 and level 1. You do not have an easy progression framework to move up through.

The Special Educational Consortium worked quite closely with the Department, advising around accessibility for T-levels. Quite a few changes were made as a result of that. We were really pleased at the impact of that advice. Those included the uncoupling of English and maths, the flexibilities around the reducing of the English and maths level required, and the amount of hours that a young person might need to do on their work placement if that was going to make it inaccessible for them. In a way, we have T-levels to a point of accessibility that may be appropriate for the cohort for whom they are suitable. What we are lacking is an alternative for those for whom that type of qualification is not the appropriate route.

Q177 **Miriam Cates:** That is helpful, thank you. Do you mean that there may be specific T-levels that could be adapted, or do you mean that all the T-levels ought to have a SEND route or a SEND adaptation within them?

Ruth Perry: I do not think that I am talking about a more adapted T-level; I am talking about an alternative pathway. Much work has been done looking at accessibility of T-levels. If I had one magic-wand wish, it would be to look at the assessment methodology—that creates the biggest barriers remaining—and ensuring that there is flexibility around reasonable adjustments, special arrangements and so on within that.

To be as accessible as possible, you want accessibility by design. Rather than having to tweak this and tweak that for learners with different needs, you need to build in the flexibility to start with that allows young people to work in slightly different ways according to their needs. External written assessment is always going to throw up barriers. If my colleagues on the SEC Committee from the British Dyslexia Association



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were here, they would be beating that drum of too much written assessment.

Q178 Miriam Cates: Thank you. A final question from me. Access to T-levels is quite patchy at the moment geographically. That is inevitable when you start off a new thing. You have also mentioned the fact that the first cohort probably had much higher entry requirements than it was designed for or will eventually be the case. How do we get from here to the point where T-levels are universally acceptable no matter where you live and we are getting the right calibre of student on them so that the entry requirements are not too high but at the same time colleges are careful about who they select in terms of who will run the course and who will manage to keep going until the end? Who wants to start?

David Gallagher: I can offer three things that we think are crucial. First, we need ongoing investment in the capacity and capability of colleges. That is infrastructure but also, in particular, educators. We do not feel that there is enough investment in our people. As I mentioned earlier, we will not have world-class technical and vocational education without world-class educators, so we need a further investment there.

On the work experience placement, as we have said several times, we must get creative and flexible if we want the scale and to retain the quality.

The final point is employer-backed, sector-specific campaigns that do not just talk specifically to T-levels but talk to all of the different options for technical and vocational, bringing in level 2, bringing in apprenticeships, bringing in higher technical and all of the opportunities thereafter. They are the three things that we think are absolutely crucial going forward if we are to deliver on the ambition.

Kirsti Lord: I echo everything that David has said. We know, because we checked with our members, that there is a real issue in terms of recruiting high-quality staff and retaining them in the sector at the moment. We struggle to compete with industry pay and we struggle to compete with school pay. If we want highly skilled educators who have recent industry-relevant skills, there is a real need for investment around that. Placements is the other thing, because—

Q179 Miriam Cates: Do you think that we need a different model, potentially, or to be more flexible? I have heard the same from my local college. In digital you could be earning a £50,000, £60,000 or £70,000 salary. We are never going to provide that salary in education. Is there a more flexible model? Could you put people on day release, so that big tech companies release people to help in local colleges? Obviously they will not have the same pedagogical skill, perhaps, but they still have something to offer. Could there be some more flexibility?

Kirsti Lord: Yes, and that would be really welcome. There are some initiatives through DfE such as workforce industry exchange that are



already working on that. The challenge that we see is that where there are huge skills shortages in industry it becomes that much harder for them to release people because they are struggling to recruit themselves. Speculating for their future workforce is really challenging for them, so yes, there is that.

You are right that we will never get to industry pay. We would quite like to match school pay. We do see a lot of people who come into teaching, particularly in further education, who see it as a vocation. Pay is not necessarily their primary motivator but they do need to be able to pay their mortgage.

Q180 Miriam Cates: Tom, how can we roll out T-levels?

Tom Bewick: A final very concise comment, which is unusual for me, I know. This is a general point that I would say about all qualifications. We need to remember that they are a currency, at the end of the day. It is students, parents and employers who will decide the future of these qualifications. You cannot doom a qualification to success, however hard you try. That is a lesson for all of us to think about what we are getting into here as we roll out this really important reform.

Ruth Perry: In addition—I agree with everybody—we need to win the hearts and minds of parents and carers and establish T-levels as as valid as an A-level. People should not think that A-level is the default and that you look for something else if you are not capable of A-level. It should be a first-class choice rather than something that you do because you are not suitable for A-levels.

Dr Morrison Coulthard: Just two recommendations from NFER. One is that the £1,000 employer incentive for placements should be continued. That might be a way to increase the number of placements available. The other is to consider, for disadvantaged young people, some kind of financial support for travel to get to placements, because that has a disproportionate effect.

Chair: Kim has a supplementary.

Q181 Kim Johnson: David, I want to pick up on what you were saying about training people within the workforce to meet needs. We know that we have a massive shortage of health and social care workers and we know that those are historically low-paid jobs and there is a high turnover. What do you think needs to happen? You are training all these people to work in the sector yet they are not staying because of the lack of progression routes within the sector. What do you think needs to happen to make significant changes in that sector?

David Gallagher: Yes, and it is true for a number of sectors. I do not think that any of us have ever experienced a period like this with so much volatility in the labour market, so it is difficult. We feel that the primary responsibility is on employers to offer appropriate terms and conditions, progression opportunities and qualifications that support that



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progression, and then it is about how we as providers and Government enable and support employers.

We have talked for a while in the sector about flexibilities around the levy, for example. Are there opportunities to think about the levy differently in terms of how that might encourage, incentivise or disincentivise certain types of behaviours that we want to see employers take? As I say, I think that the primary responsibility is on employers and putting the incentives and disincentives in the right place to improve the sectors where we have those challenges.

Q182 Kim Johnson: Do you use those selection criteria when trying to match students with placements to ensure that they are good employers with respect to terms of terms and conditions and rates of pay?

David Gallagher: As an awarding organisation, our primary responsibility is the design, development and quality assurance of the qualification and then supporting colleges to set them up to deliver successfully. We do not get involved in the careers advice or the delivery side, so I am not best placed to comment on that. With level 3 programmes, they are linked to occupations that have been really well thought through in terms of where the future labour market is going, where the economy is going, and then careers advice providers and colleges are there to support learners to make the best choice.

Q183 Ian Mearns: On securing this culture shift among businesses, particularly the small and medium-sized enterprises, is there anything that we can be doing to coach employers in terms of how they manage a work placement? I know that there is an element of that going on but there will be an awful lot of businesses and employers out there that think they will get somebody on work experience but do not have a clue what to do with them. Is there something that we can think about in terms of a national strategy so that we can build up the capacity of people out there? I am afraid that it seems that all too many employers have just been hoping that they will be able to pick semi-skilled or skilled people off a tree somehow, and it does not happen.

Tom Bewick: What I have seen that works really well in Switzerland is a whole national network of workplace mentors, as they call them—that is how it translates. These are people that employers trust to go in and spend time in the workplace with the individuals. They do that mentoring, they do the coaching, they do the pastoral care. They also sometimes have to make sure that people get out of bed in the morning and get into work—all things, by the way, that, if you are small business owner running a small firm, are not on your to-do list when you fire up the company in the morning.

Again, this is where as educators we have to be realistic about the bandwidth that employers have to engage in all these various initiatives. That is why the investment in a national network—this speaks to your point, Rob. You have been campaigning for many years about reforming



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the careers service, which is not fit for purpose in this country and we need an honest debate about that. This might be a route forward in bringing in some new capacity and some new skills to help support small businesses.

Chair: We are starting a separate inquiry into careers later in the year, so we may have you back, Tom.

Ian Mearns: You are absolutely right, Tom. There was never a golden age but it has been completely fragmented and under-resourced. If you look at the resourcing for the careers strategy at the moment, it is probably less than it was 30 years ago, not in real terms but in basic financial terms. I remember when the careers service was morphed into Connexions. They took the careers service budget and added about 10% to create Connexions. It was never going to be enough, since Connexions was meant to be a comprehensive, all-singing, all-dancing service for young people, not just careers education and guidance. It was about £110 million then for the careers service alone and it is nowhere that now in terms of real-terms funding.

Q184 **Chair:** Finally, can I ask you to give a one-sentence answer about degree apprenticeships? We have talked a bit about apprenticeships, but what would you do to ensure that they could be expanded as an option for post-16 students?

David Gallagher: What one thing would we do on degree apprenticeships? We would ensure that they truly were apprenticeships and not degrees rebadged, which is a challenge. We would make sure that there was a very strong workplace element, which would then be more appealing to a broader range of students and parents as an option.

Chair: That was brilliantly concise, thank you. We will have to get you back.

Dr Morrison Coulthard: I think we need to make that there is a clear pathway for all students to go on to do an apprenticeship at that level. There is some concern from the evidence that it is individuals who are already well qualified or already working in the labour force. It is a question, as we have talked about on many issues—sorry, I am not being very concise—of making sure that that pathway is there and that the careers advice and guidance backs it up.

Ruth Perry: Very simply, raise awareness that they exist and of what makes them distinctive.

Q185 **Chair:** What about special educational needs students?

Ruth Perry: I cannot see any reason why they should not work, so long as you take David's advice and make sure that they are suitably practical in nature.



Tom Bewick: I agree with you, Chair. They are the two best words in the English language: “degree” and “apprenticeship”. On the point about expansion, it is very simple: give employers access to the £11 billion a year student loan finance system and look at the extent to which you can incentivise employers to sponsor degree-level students with an employment contract. On your point, David, it has to be employed status. I think we would see a massive uptake.

Q186 **Chair:** Are you saying that it should be turned into a loan?

Tom Bewick: Well, rather than all of the £9,500 a year going to the higher education institution, some of it could go to the employer as an incentive to take on and sponsor, through an employment contract, the degree apprentice.

Chair: Will you write to us about that, Tom, if you have any further points?

Kirsti Lord: I agree with the previous points. One of the things that we are seeing coming through is thinking about EPA and gateway.

Chair: Can you explain what that means to normal people who are watching?

Kirsti Lord: End-point assessment—that assessment point that enables you to complete your apprenticeship. We are seeing massive challenges, where there is a degree embedded, in employers not seeing the value of completing end-point assessment because the person has the degree that they need to qualify to work in that area. I do not know what the answer is—whether it is about firming up the end-point assessment component or recognising that the degree is the end point and that is acceptable—but there is an issue there that is emerging at the moment.

Chair: Thank you very much. We are only two minutes behind. I really appreciate your evidence; it has been invaluable. Thank you. I wish you all well. Thank you for all that you and the staff in your professions do.