

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Reform of Level 3 Qualifications, HC 428](#)

Tuesday 3 December 2024

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Members present: Helen Hayes (Chair); Jess Asato; Mrs Sureena Brackenridge; Dr Caroline Johnson; Amanda Martin; Darren Paffey; Manuela Perteghella; Mark Sowards; Patrick Spencer; Caroline Voaden.

Questions 1 - 35

Witnesses

I: Ruth Perry, Senior Policy Manager, Natspec; James Kewin, Deputy Chief Executive, Sixth Form Colleges Association; Catherine Sezen, Director of Education Policy, Association of Colleges; and Simon Cook, Principal of MidKent College, FE representative on ASCL Council.

II: Alice Gardner, Chief Executive, Edge Foundation; David Robinson, Director for Post 16 and Skills, Education Policy Institute; and Jenifer Burden MBE, Director of Programmes for Gatsby Education, Gatsby Charitable Foundation.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Ruth Perry, James Kewin, Catherine Sezen and Simon Cook.

Chair: Good morning, everybody, and welcome to this Education Select Committee evidence session on the reform of level 3 qualifications. I am grateful to our witnesses for attending the Committee this morning. First, I invite Members to put on the record any interests they would like to declare.

Mrs Brackenridge: I have been a member of ASCL but am no longer a member of that association.

Chair: Thanks very much, Sureena. Anybody else? No. In which case I invite our witnesses to introduce themselves, perhaps starting with Catherine.



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Catherine Sezen: Hello and good morning. I am Catherine Sezen, the Director of Education Policy at the Association of Colleges.

James Kewin: Good morning. I am James Kewin, the Deputy Chief Exec at the Sixth Form Colleges Association. We also co-ordinate the Protect Student Choice—Don't Scrap BTECs campaign.

Ruth Perry: Hello. I am Ruth Perry, Senior Policy Manager at Natspec, which is the membership body for specialist colleges where all the students have special education needs and disabilities.

Simon Cook: Good morning everybody. I am Simon Cook, the Principal and Chief Executive of MidKent College. I am here today as the FE committee representative for the Association of School and College Leaders.

Q1 **Chair:** Lovely; thank you very much indeed. You have all, as organisations, broadly welcomed the Government's decision to pause and review the removal of funding from a number of level 3 qualifications, but you have also expressed concern about the scope and timing of the review. What impact has the Government's review had on schools, colleges, teachers and students? Perhaps we could start with Simon.

Simon Cook: I can expand further and give you lots of detail. If I were to simplify, the answer is uncertainty—an uncertainty that creates instability in a part of our education system that, in this current era, is so crucial to our future prosperity as a country. Particularly in the college sector, where we are delivering vocational qualifications that directly impact employers who are going to be part of our economic powerhouse, the uncertainty creates instability for them, for young people and for parents, and that instability is creating the uncertainty.

Ruth Perry: I do not have a great deal to add to what Simon said. We do not have any specialist colleges that offer T-levels, but we work in partnership with general FE colleges, with some subcontracting arrangements. Again, it is uncertainty: those colleges have not been able to say what their level 3 offer will look like and, therefore, what our students and specialist colleges will be able to tap into. So planning is difficult.

James Kewin: I agree. It is also hard to understate how disappointing this was, given that in opposition the Labour party agreed to pause and review. It is hard to understate how much hope it gave people when that commitment was made. It was a game changer. Equally, it is unfortunately hard to overstate how much disappointment there was when we found out in early July, or late July, that it was a compromised pause and review. Instead of pausing the defunding of AGQs that was due for next year and the year after, the pause applied only to a very small number of technical qualifications that were due to go anyway. It is important to put on record the sense of hope that was dashed as a result of the announcement.



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Things have changed even since the review was confirmed, because originally it was all level 3 qualifications and below, then it was just level 3, then it was the level 3 qualifications due to go next month. We do not expect to get all the answers next week. We understand that the results of the review are due next week but, to Simon's point, we are concerned that there could still be uncertainty next week. Overall, uncertainty is the main concern.

Catherine Sezen: I agree with a lot of what everybody has already said. We were pleased that the Secretary of State acted so swiftly, because that lack of clarity is a key issue for colleges, but I would emphasise the point that only a certain number of qualifications are being reviewed. We believe that other level 3 qualifications—and indeed level 2 and below, which is also really important for our students—will be reviewed through the curriculum and assessment review. There is a lack of clarity. It would be good to have clear messages on timelines and where we are going.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you. Given what you have all said, would anybody like to comment on what immediate steps the Government should be taking to ensure that students have confidence in the availability of qualifications for the coming year?

James Kewin: I don't mind starting on that because we provided a short note. We are where we are. It is disappointing but we are all, I guess, in the solutions business and we want to get to the right place. Our recommendations focus on 21 applied general qualifications that are high-enrolment, very popular, very important to the economy and very important for social mobility. Our message is that these qualifications must stay. They are the kind of red lines. We are talking about the extended diplomas in health and social care and applied science. These are vital qualifications. That is the first point.

The second point is that they must stay for two years. Again, to the point on uncertainty, we do not want confirmation of qualifications next week but only for a year, because we will be in this uncertainty loop again. We need to have at least two years of certainty about these qualifications.

Thirdly, the previous Government introduced rather bizarre rules of combination that said, "You can't combine an A-level in this with two BTECs in that, or two BTECs in that and an A-level in that." Our very clear message is that that just does not work. I do not think any Government would apply those rules to A-levels, so they should not apply them to applied qualifications either.

In summary, I think we have provided a clear way out of this and we really hope the Government take it.

Simon Cook: I am happy to add a bit more. We are in a unique period. As I think this Government are fully aware—given the announcements of the youth guarantee offers in the last couple of weeks—we are seeing some worrying numbers around young people who are classified as NEET,



which is a horrible phrase to be defined by. The post-16 population is going to grow over the next few years, so reducing qualification choice is going to exacerbate the NEET issue. As much as I know that it is a very short timescale and have agreed with the points that have been previously made, it is not an ideal world and we are where we are. But removing qualifications will make matters even worse than the current situation.

What would I prefer? I would prefer us to retain a duality of approach, particularly around T-levels and BTEC qualifications. I am a great advocate for T-levels but I also know full well that, in my own organisation, they are not working for everybody for various reasons. I will probably get the opportunity to expand on that later. Keeping and retaining, as opposed to removing, qualifications in this current period, is ever more crucial.

Ruth Perry: Colleagues have spoken about some specifics, but it would be helpful to get some general messages from this pause and review that go beyond the specific.

We would like to hear very firmly that overlap in content is definitely not a criterion for the removal of qualifications. We want to have a commitment to ongoing funding of applied general qualifications, certainly in the medium term, and, while that is happening, that there is some focused evaluation of T-levels in terms of whose needs can they meet. We have concerns that there are large numbers of students with SEND for whom T-levels are not suitable. We would like to see their effectiveness monitored. Without that, we risk losing a tried and tested progression route to HE for learners with SEND, which BTECs offer at the moment.

Finally, I would like to see Government indicate that this was stage one in a more fundamental review of the previous Government's plans for the reforms. We have heard nothing, for example, about what is happening to level 2 and below, particularly in terms of personal and social employability skills qualifications. There was a major consultation on that; we have never even heard about the outcomes from Government. We would like a firm commitment that this is just part of a review.

Catherine Sezen: I wanted to mention level 3 technicals. In addition to the applied general qualifications, there are key qualifications in sectors where we are desperate to make sure we are filling skills gaps—things like electrical and on-site construction. T-levels are not going to suit the needs of everyone. We need to make sure that we have qualifications that meet students' starting points, and also stepping-off points. It is crucial that we also consider those qualifications as well.

Q3 **Chair:** From your perspective, what would good look like? As you have mentioned, we are expecting the outcome of the review imminently. What content of the review would you have confidence in as a starting point?



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James Kewin: The recommendations we outlined earlier—a yes to those three would be a massive step forward and away from uncertainty, and it would keep some really important qualifications.

We are still concerned that for the majority of qualifications the first wave of defunding is due for next year and the second wave is the year after. There are significantly more qualifications in scope for defunding the following year. Even if we do get certainty next week about these qualifications, and we get that two-year certainty, which would be great, we will very quickly move into some of the really, really big enrolment subjects the following year.

The Government need to move really quickly. It is not good enough to say, as they have suggested, that this is a matter for the wider curriculum and assessment review. This is something they need to address urgently.

Catherine Sezen: I have a point about timelines. We have been through periods of reform over the past 10 years. We had diplomas, we had QCF, we have had T-levels, we have had qualification reform, and for the post-16 part of the sector the lack of clarity is very disruptive. It also impacts on key stakeholders. Parents, carers and employers struggle to understand the landscape. It would be very good to have clear plans for the next few years so that we can provide clarity to our stakeholders, as much as for our staff.

Simon Cook: I go back to the point that I made at the beginning. What would good look like? Good would look like a level of certainty as opposed to the uncertainty.

I will give you an example. Thousands of schools and colleges are going through a series of open events with parents and young people, and a common question from parents and young people is, “Are these qualifications going to be here next year?” It is a very nervous and anxious time for so many young people making choices that they believe will set their future, and the removal of uncertainty for them and for us would be really good in this first step.

The reality, though, is that this is a huge piece of work that needs unravelling, so there is still going to be a large amount of uncertainty that I suspect will go into the curriculum and assessment review, which will take longer. Specifically around the pause and review for level 3, we want that uncertainty to be taken away, giving some certainty about what is going to be funded going forward.

A number of colleges have already modelled the level 3 defunding, as it was before the pause and review. A number of them will be facing uncertainty in terms of becoming insolvent through the reduction of student numbers, by 2027 for some and by 2028 for others. That uncertainty is far deeper in those organisations, so knowing that there is some certainty around the qualifications that it was proposed would be



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defunded would certainly help many of those organisations and their young people, parents and employers.

Ruth Perry: In summary, we need clarity around the specifics. Part of that is knowing exactly what is going to happen to those qualifications that have the sword of Damocles hanging over them; another part is about the future direction of travel. We would be very pleased to have firm signalling that there is a continued place for applied general qualifications.

Q4 **Chair:** Before I pass the baton to colleagues to ask questions that go into a bit more detail, would you be able to tell the Committee really briefly what engagement you have had with the Department over the review?

Catherine Sezen: We have had quite a lot of engagement. There were opportunities for over 100 colleges to engage on a route-by-route basis, looking at specific qualifications in those routes, which we said we thought was a really good way forward, because the problem at the moment is that we have a one-size framework but all sectors are different.

We have also had opportunities for college principals and CEOs to meet with the team members as well, which we appreciated. We know that that was also appreciated by our members.

James Kewin: The review team at the DfE deserves credit for this. They were given an impossible job, frankly, and the team looking after it has been as open as they could be. However, the bigger issue for me is that it is inconceivable that any Government would review every A-level in three months behind closed doors, not publish terms of reference, have no consultation mechanism, and then tell schools and colleges at Christmas what A-levels they can deliver the following year. That just would not happen. There is a double standard here. The team itself has done a great job, but it should never have been done in this way.

Ruth Perry: We have had more limited contact, but that is in the nature of the provisions—the colleges do not offer T-levels themselves—but Natspec has contributed to a roundtable.

Simon Cook: Like other colleagues, I have been part of the participation. The reality is, unfortunately, that a number of colleagues in the Department have come to visit the organisation to see how the policy applies in practice, and it reminds me every time that this is an impossible task for some. It is a huge task and a huge piece of work that needs unravelling. The more we can work with colleagues in the Department to help unravel the challenges, the more I think it will help.

One thing it proves to me is that the approach of one size fitting everybody simply does not work. Fundamentally, that is what this policy has become, or became, and one size definitely does not fit all, neither



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geographically nor for employers, young people and adults who are looking at programmes.

Q5 Mrs Brackenridge: My question on the reform of level 3 qualifications will help you to build on some of the specifics and the issues you have shared with the Committee. There have been calls for the Government to pause the defunding of all applied general qualifications until 2027. What would this look like in terms of benefits for students and providers? How will the defunding of AGQs affect different types of FE providers?

Catherine Sezen: This is the point about clarity and goes back to the point I made previously. We have been through periods of reform. We now have the curriculum and assessment review, which for key stage 1 to key stage 4 is quite novel, new and exciting. I think it is also exciting for colleges—don't get me wrong—but equally we have been through periods of reform over many years. Let's say, "Right, we are going to take time, we are going to step back and we are going to come up with a system that we are not going to change again for another 20 or 30 years." We realise that there will always need to be change but we want that consistency and certainty.

Going back to James's point, it is important for people to know what they are delivering and for our key stakeholders to know what students are coming to college to do. It is important for employers too. Also, this is not just about AGQs; technical qualifications in the technical space are very important as well. Maybe the numbers are smaller, but they are really important, particularly in areas such as electrical. We need young people to go on to be successful.

James Kewin: It would be a game-changer if we could get this over the line next week. It really would help institutions. I go back in time to the point at the beginning. Back in June 2023 the Protect Student Choice campaign secured the commitment for the current Government—then the Opposition—to pause and review. We set out a pretty detailed implementation plan at the beginning of this year about how that could operate in practice. All the way through, we have said that the timing is really important.

Catherine rightly says that other qualifications are available, but we are focused on the applied qualifications, because they had a particularly torrid time under the last Government. We have picked the qualifications that we think would have the biggest impact. But for it to be a game-changer we need that certainty over time. Apologies for sounding like a broken record, but we need that two-year certainty.

There is something even more fundamental that needs to be addressed. What has bedevilled the campaign and bedevilled this area since 2019 is the view, which I am sure we will come on to, that T-levels are essentially an upgraded version of applied general qualifications. A small number of influential people are still pushing this view. Until that view is addressed and until we get clarity that they are different qualifications



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that serve a different purpose and that we need to retain the three-route model of academic, applied and T-levels, this is going to come back. We are going to have this conversation again and again. Rather than a stay of execution, we would rather have this more fundamental conversation happen so that we can stop going round the same houses.

Ruth Perry: I agree pretty much entirely with what James just said. We also want the opportunity to use a period in which these qualifications are retained to do a proper fundamental evaluation of T-levels to determine whether they are accessible and appropriate for a full range of learners. I am thinking particularly of learners with SEND, but also learners with different types of disadvantage.

I know you are talking to the Education Policy Institute next. Their report shows that learners with SEND are definitely under-represented on T-levels, that the drop-out rate is higher for learners who are disadvantaged and that one third of those who drop out go on to be NEET. We really do not need anyone else falling into that NEET category.

It seems illogical to take away the currently perfectly good provision that we could be offering. Let's use the period to understand better who T-levels can serve and also look at how much more accessible they can be made. While they are not the right option for many learners with SEND, they are certainly the right option for some. We could also use the period to look at the inflexibility of their structure and assessment methodology and at how we could make them more accessible.

Simon Cook: I am going to be the broken record that keeps talking about uncertainty. Let me give you a couple of examples to explain why.

A-levels are a known brand. They have been around since the early 1950s. They have not really changed much since the 1950s. GCSEs are known by most people. They have been around since 1988. I was one of the very first people to sit a GCSE in 1988, all those years ago. They have not changed much.

A few years ago we changed the grading of GCSEs from letters to numbers. I am sure you are all very well versed on the equivalency of letters and numbers. Most parents still ask what the difference means. Yet in the period since 2020, the number of reforms we have seen in further education and post-16 provision is mind-blowing. That creates uncertainty and instability.

I can go back to some of the areas that Catherine and James talked about. I have staff, I have students, I have employers in key areas of our economy who have simple uncertainty around what the future is. I have staff delivering subjects like public services, electrical, plumbing, e-sports, all of which are having a profound impact on our economy and our young people, on reducing NEET numbers and helping to improve employability prospects. None of those qualifications have any certainty that they will still be around.



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I can be much better at my crystal-ball gazing if I want to be, but it is still crystal-ball gazing so I am basing most of my planning for 18 months and beyond on whether I have the best guess possible on what may or may not happen. That uncertainty is incredibly risky when I am stewarding and accountable for stewarding a significant amount of public money.

Q6 Mrs Brackenridge: Would anyone like to come back with further information on the impact this could have? Ruth mentioned student dropout and retention across technical subjects, as well as ADQs. Do you feel that the defunding pause until 2027 would support students to have more informed, guided choices and to make better decisions?

Catherine Sezen: Yes. We know that in colleges, 60% of students who are on level 3 qualifications start at either 17 or 18. They will have done a level 1 and/or a level 2 at age 16 and progressed. Those students are often those who had lower-grade entry GCSEs. They often come from more disadvantaged backgrounds and they often have additional needs. About 33% of students at colleges in level 2 have additional needs.

To make sure that we have clarity and that we can make sure that we have options for all students, not just some students—we were talking outside about the rising NEET figures—we want to make sure that we are having a positive impact and that we are doing the best that we can to engage our young people.

Q7 Darren Paffey: Since the Government launched their review, the Skills Minister, Baroness Smith, has said that some of the level 3 qualifications will remain, even if there is some overlap between them and the T-levels. The criterion she put on that is where the balance of learner and employer needs within a sector requires them. Can you comment on how that balance between learner and employer needs can be judged and who should be doing the judging?

James Kewin: Can I say something to preface that? It is interesting to compare this Government's position on this issue with that of the previous Government. The fundamental issue we had with the previous Government was that they saw a world of A-levels and T-levels. They saw essentially a two-route model with other qualifications approved by exception.

When the new Government came in and the new Minister started talking in this same kind of way, I thought it was maybe a bit less dogmatic than the previous Government. However, they are still starting from the wrong place. Take the rest of Jacqui Smith's remarks. She talks about qualifications that sit alongside A-levels and T-levels, and that is still the wrong starting point. That should not be where the debate begins. We need a three-route model, ensuring there are high-quality qualifications within each route.



The trap the last Government fell into, in my view, was that in driving up T-level numbers, the output became more important than the outcome, which is making sure that every young person has a high-quality qualification to pursue. We are all supporters of T-levels—I am sure we will come to this—and everybody wants them to succeed, but frankly they do not merit being one of the first two names on the team sheet. These are qualifications that have a significantly higher drop-out rate than AGQs, they have a lower pass rate and they have much lower student satisfaction. From the T-level transition programme, 92% of young people do not progress on to a T-level. T-levels need help and support. They are not in a position yet, in our view and certainly in the campaign's view, to be in the first two names there alongside A-levels.

There is something, Darren, about your question around where we begin before we get into deciding which qualifications survive.

Darren Paffey: That is helpful.

Ruth Perry: I would like to make a point about overlap. Overlap has been seen as overlap in terms of content, but content is just one part of it. Applied general qualifications offer a different approach, a different assessment methodology, different sizes of qualification. They belong to multi-level, multi-size qualification families that provide progression routes from level 1 through to level 3. They are a very different beast. I think that is what James is saying—that we cannot look at it as an either/or. The differential is not just content. The fact that some of their content overlaps should not be a major factor in whether we have an applied general qualification in that area or not.

Simon Cook: Where the approach has been right, it has been pretty obvious. Student numbers—enrolments—have been a helpful guide. They have shown popularity. I agree with the point that James made: we must not think that one size fits all. This is not about T-levels versus everything else. I am a great advocate for how T-levels have worked for a proportion of our young people and our employers—for example, by transforming our relationship with primary care and NHS trusts, which AGQs alone were not able to do. Being able to offer both T-levels and AGQs in the area of health is helping young people to progress and gain employment and at the same time is significantly enhancing and improving our direct impact on employment prospects for organisations such as the NHS.

I can take a different suite of qualifications and say they work in opposite ways. There are local variances as well as qualification variances and industry areas that are quite different, too. Again, one size will not fit all, but if we look at student numbers, if we look at what works in a particular area or in a particular employment sector, it starts to help us identify how dual approaches might be a better solution in the short term than just one or the other.



Catherine Sezen: It is also about more than the qualification. Triangulation between providers, employers and Government is important and we have lacked that over the past few years. We can look at things that actually are going to work on the ground, but there are other challenges. We have foundational challenges in areas of funding and staffing as well.

Finally, I would mention information, advice and guidance, making sure that we are getting students on the right courses at the right time, and courses that meet their needs. Taking all those things together is huge and goes back to James's point about it being difficult to try to achieve that in a three-month period. Going forward, I think greater collaboration and social partnership will hopefully help us to get to a place where we can meet the needs of employers as well as the needs of young people and our adult learners.

Q8 Dr Caroline Johnson: Do these AGQs contain work placements? Are there any particular difficulties at the moment in obtaining work placements?

Catherine Sezen: Not that many AGQs include work placements. Qualifications like education childcare have traditionally included a large work-placement component, and that is very much embedded in that sector. There are also some qualifications in land-based industries that require placements, and students are required as part of their study programme to do work experience.

It is quite tricky. It takes a lot of work and effort. It is a great opportunity for young people to be able to engage in employment because it is a very different landscape from when I was growing up and we were out doing paper rounds or something when we were 12; things are quite different now. Placements provide real opportunity and I think we would like to see more opportunities for young people to get out to do them. Does that answer your question?

Q9 Dr Caroline Johnson: Are they paid?

Catherine Sezen: No, they are not paid.

Chair: Anybody else want to come in on that?

Simon Cook: You have asked the question about placements in AGQs, which gives me a perfect opportunity to talk about industrial placements for the T-levels. Forgive my poetic licence.

Industrial placements are a singularly positive impact of T-levels. However, if I looked at a world that just had T-levels with the industrial placement component, then I would, in my region, struggle to recruit enough employers. I gave you the example earlier of T-levels in health and how they have single-handedly helped to transform our relationship with primary care trusts, helping them to solve their recruitment challenge and helping us to get young people to consider careers in the



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NHS that they perhaps had never thought of before. That is really important and that is great, because we have some very big employers across the NHS.

Q10 Dr Caroline Johnson: Do they get paid?

Simon Cook: They are not paid—not at all. We have worked in collaboration with two other colleges in our region and our great success is convincing the NHS that it is okay to have people under 18 in clinical roles, which takes a lot of convincing. You do not just turn up to an employer and hear them say, “Yes, we are desperate to take loads of people on.” The larger your small and microbusiness landscape in a community, the harder that is. An NHS organisation has a huge infrastructure behind it to help.

We have a density of small businesses and it is very difficult to ask them to take on volunteers and unpaid volunteers who are learning as they go. It requires a great deal of effort and work. In other sectors—construction, for example—it does not work so well. It has been very difficult to get enough employers willing to take on industrial placements for our T-level in construction.

This goes back again to what I said earlier about one size not fitting all across our economy and our country. Where students get exposure to the world of work while they are studying, that is excellent—brilliant. That only helps them to build self-esteem, confidence and the skills that will help them to transition into work. Industrial placements have led to so many young people being offered employment while they are working for that employer. They are a great thing where they do take place.

Ruth Perry: If I may quickly return to young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities, the advantage of the applied general qualification is that while it is a requirement of a provider’s funding contract that they provide work placements as part of the study programme, a provider can be very flexible in how they meet individual needs, taking account of the capabilities, stamina levels and so on of a young person with SEND. Rather than having to have work placements make up a fixed proportion of the programme, providers can flex and be responsive to what a young person needs.

Q11 Mark Swards: Thanks for your answers so far. Qualifications such as BTECs will need to meet the new occupational and employer-approved criteria in order to be publicly funded from 2025. I have three questions, but will start with just two. How effective do you think the approval process will be in streamlining the qualification options? Do you agree with the specifications in the criteria?

Catherine Sezen: The criteria question is a bit tricky because I am not quite clear what the criteria are. We know that overlap is no longer a criterion, for which we are grateful. It has to go back to that point about how you can identify, in a short space of time, which qualifications are



the qualifications of choice and which are not. It takes us back to that point about what would we like to see in an ideal world. Clarity about how the decisions have been made would be quite welcome as well, when we get to that point.

Simon Cook: Knowing fully and transparently what the criteria are would be very helpful. I will give you a slightly different example. Let's look at the impact of something that has gone through a similar process. Let me take apprenticeships. Everybody knows about apprenticeships—a really strong brand—yet if we look at how apprenticeships are now compared to how they were a few years ago, uptake is nowhere near as much as we would like it to be and most of our apprenticeship system has been coerced into a very different type of provision from the intent that was set.

What I mean by that is that when you have a very specific small group of individual organisations or groups determining qualifications, it is always going to be biased—isn't it?—and therefore not meet everybody's needs. We live in an era now when it is much more acknowledged and recognised that we have local differences and local nuances. We now have a Government that is looking much more closely at devolved powers and autonomy in local areas, and that has to be factored in.

A national employer may well have lots more infrastructure and time to get involved in setting standards for a particular industry, but time and again, as we have seen through the reform of apprenticeship standards, we still have employers who say, "That standard does not fit my workplace; it does not fit what we do here in this industry." I do not have an answer for this but we have a wider challenge within the skills landscape, given how our industry convenes around setting standards that are consistent across the country but also reflect local and particularly smaller businesses, which it is much harder to reflect.

Ruth Perry: I want to log a concern about an over-emphasis on employers designing and making decisions about qualifications. I absolutely understand the importance of the skills in qualifications needing to match the skills that employers require, but employers do not always have a good understanding of young people's starting points, how they learn, what motivates them, what they enjoy. Understandably, employers can be very aspirational, but that makes them very inflexible. That is why we have T-levels that are so large in content terms, because employers have fought their corner to put in everything possible and a lot of it is mandatory.

The more you create these rigid structures, the less accessible those qualifications are to a wide array of learners with different needs. We should be cautious across the whole of the qualification reform programme. We have probably tipped a little bit too far into responding to employer needs, forgetting to balance them with young people's needs.



James Kewin: I agree with everything that Ruth just said. Although the Government have changed, we still have the infrastructure of the previous Government in place. I mentioned earlier the fact that the way the system is set up in terms of approval is still very much academic or technical. The previous Government sort of airbrushed the applied route out of existence, and that is still a bit of a concern for us.

Without getting too much into the weeds, because it is a horribly over-complicated system, I mentioned earlier that the Government are reviewing 500 qualifications behind closed doors. The Government made a very early decision, wrongly in our view, to continue with what are called alternative academic qualifications—AAQs instead of AGQs. Take the name, even: who would want to do a qualification called an alternative? By definition, they are a second-best, yet they are going to be in play.

In September next year, if we get these AGQs over the line still, which would be great, we are going to have AGQs alongside AAQs in different sizes. This was a completely avoidable situation if the Government had had, as promised in opposition, this two-year pause, because we would have had the time and space not just to work through what qualifications are here but to iron out some of the complexity. AGQs have a slightly different approval process.

However, again, we are where we are. It is not where we wanted to be but I think we are going to end up with incremental change, hopefully making sense of the system, but at some point we need to have that fundamental review we have talked about. Are we going to have a three-route system or what? We think we absolutely need to have that.

Q12 Mark Swards: That nicely leads into my final question. James, you have identified 21 applied general qualifications at level 3 that you say it is essential to retain. How did you decide which qualifications needed to be retained and which we could dispense with?

James Kewin: It was not that hard in some respects because there are not that many of them. Again, as a preliminary point, we used to hear a lot about how complicated the landscape is, with students wandering around completely bamboozled by the number of qualifications, but actually there are more A-levels than there are AGQs. In total there are only 134 AGQs anyway.

In the first wave, there were 38. Many of them had low or no enrolments. When you pick the ones that have high enrolments but that also meet—and we did this quite deliberately—the Government's criteria about being necessary, having economic value, having value for students, having a good track record of progression to HE and so on, it was a relatively straightforward process. The chosen AGQs are often the kinds of household names, like health and social care, and applied science—the ones that are really important to keep. Of course, other qualifications are



available. We are focused on AGQs and, in this first wave, these were the ones that really have to stay.

Mark Sewards: That is very helpful. Thank you.

Catherine Sezen: I want to make the point again that it is not just about AGQs. There are technical qualifications. There are concerns about qualifications at level 3 in plumbing and electrical—again, qualifications with smaller numbers of enrolments but in key sectors. While looking at numbers, the balance of provision within colleges and the balance of the types of learners also has to be considered. That is also very important, bearing in mind what Ruth said about focusing on the learner as much as the employer.

Q13 **Patrick Spencer:** I have another question, but first I want to ask one on this subject. The premise of reform all those years ago was to simplify the system. James, you described an over-complicated system and yet, sitting here, you are all arguing for the retention of an over-complicated system. How do we square that circle?

James Kewin: I think quite easily, because what I am talking about is a system that we will see, not the one that we have now. I think we have 5,500 qualifications at level 3 and below. Of the 5,500, maybe 1,500 are level 3 qualifications and, of those, only 134 are applied general qualifications.

We are saying that we have a very small number of well-established qualifications. We have often heard from Government, and even this Government sometimes, that there are too many qualifications in the firmament. We would say that that is true if you count them all, but we are not making the case to retain every single qualification.

Another point is that those 134, although small in number, are extremely popular—134 qualifications that at least 280,000 young people are studying. As Simon was saying earlier, they are very well understood, they are well established and they work very well with A-levels, as well as being stand-alone qualifications.

We think that where there is complexity, it is not in the applied space. You could make a case for saying that the A-level landscape is more cluttered because there are at least 100 more A-levels than AGQs. The complexity is more in the technical space where there are multiple qualifications often in the same area. Our message has always been, “By all means rationalise, by all means simplify things, but if you are looking at applied generals to do that, you are looking in the wrong place.”

Q14 **Patrick Spencer:** I was struck by what you said—that T-levels would not even get on to the team sheet if you are looking at the top two, because of dropout rates and low levels of satisfaction among students. Why are the AGQs so much more popular? What can we do to get T-levels to a point where students are getting the most from them?



James Kewin: Fundamentally, T-levels are a minority product and no amount of marketing a minority product will turn it into a mass-market product. We have always said that T-levels have a very important role to play but, as currently constructed, they do not serve a mass audience in the way that applied general qualifications do. They come in different sizes, you can combine them with A-levels and so on as well. There are all sorts of reasons for why the two qualifications serve very different purposes.

Under the previous Government, there was a very clear view that A-levels and T-levels would be the two qualifications of choice. Our view was always that, as currently constructed, that was a wildly unrealistic aspiration, because fundamentally they are not a mass-market product. The irony of all of this—we saw some modifications to T-levels announced only yesterday—is that the only way to make T-levels into a mass-market product like BTECs is to make them more like BTECs, in which case why not just keep BTECs?

I think there is a clarity of purpose here. What are T-levels for? They are currently for a very small number of young people—26,000 versus 280,000—and we need to have a conversation about what is the target here and what is the aim of this group of young people that we want to see served by these qualifications. Fundamentally, we should not try to replace BTECs with T-levels because they are completely different qualifications in many respects and examples.

Simon Cook: To be honest, Patrick, I think the answer to your question is a whole new Select Committee on its own. Your question feels simple, does it not? Why can we not make T-levels more accessible and better in order to replace the AGQs that exist? To be able to fully answer that question, you have to look at the whole qualification structure and the whole education system in some way, shape or form.

I said earlier that I am a huge advocate for T-levels. They work well for a small number of young people. Since we have been doing T-levels in my organisation, we have about 213 students interested in T-levels. It works well for some students—perfectly—but the AGQs work well for students who cannot access T-levels.

One of the most significant barriers to T-levels is the amount of assessment that takes place. A young person doing a T-level is going to have to sit 40 hours of examinations in two lots of about 20 hours over two windows. That is a huge amount of work for a very specific young person who is going to need to have a very specific set of skills. I cannot just pluck a young person off the street and have them be ready for that without an immense amount of work beforehand over a number of years to allow access for that young person. That is before I talk about young people with SEND, who might need even more support.

One single barrier is sometimes the level of literacy and numeracy that those young people have. If they do not have the requisite grade 4s or



better in English and maths, I know that they are not going to be able to cope with 40 hours of examination. That is a huge barrier to accessing T-levels.

To give you an example, since 2020 we have been running T-levels—really successfully—and have about 220 students on T-level programmes. It is by far not the biggest and not the smallest across the post-16 sector. In the last two years, however, I have re-entered the A-level market and already, within two years, I have the same number of students doing A-levels. That is because, in some parts of our community, A-levels are a trusted brand. Students know what they are going to do; they know what they are going to get. T-levels are still that magic U-word I used at the beginning—uncertain, unclear—and some young people and their parents do not want to choose that. We have to change behaviours over a longer period, certainly not over a short period.

Catherine Sezen: I reiterate the point about assessment. In comparison with A-levels, the assessment is huge, but assessment is obviously based on content, because we are looking at competency in a T-level. Perhaps that should be reviewed. We definitely need to look at content and assessment if we want the T-level to be more accessible.

Then it takes us back to the starting points of students as well. We know that around 40% of young people do not achieve both English and maths at 16, and to ask a young person to go on to a T-level, which is already a large qualification with substantial amounts of assessment, alongside doing GCSEs in English and maths, is something that I personally would not do. Having worked in a college, I know that that would not be appropriate information, advice or guidance for that young person.

There are a number of other factors that we have to look at, albeit lots of colleges are positive about T-levels. In health, for example, T-levels are working well because they do provide that pipeline into an important sector, because those students know that they want to go into nursing or allied healthcare.

We must also look at this it on a route-by-route basis. We have had quite a lot of enrolment in digital, education and early years; they are very popular T-levels. In fact, we now have more students doing T-levels than legacy qualifications. It goes back to the one-size format not fitting all, and we need to look at it sector-by-sector.

Ruth Perry: My colleagues have made it very obvious why learners with SEND are not particularly attracted to T-levels—the size, the amount of assessment, the style of assessment. Another factor is that you need to know at age 16 where you are headed if you are going to pick a T-level. So many young people come into further education and they do not have a clue. They come in with a checkered experience of school, they do not know what their skills are, they do not know what their strengths are, and they are not in a position to pick something that focuses them and channels them so clearly in one direction.



Interestingly, we do not ask A-level students to do that. They pick a blend of things that give them multiple options for their next steps, but here we are trying to funnel young people into a particular route, and most are not in a position to make that choice.

- Q15 **Patrick Spencer:** Sorry, Chair, to abuse my position with one more question, but the issue is parity of esteem between an academic and a non-academic route. Is the purpose of T-levels and alternative qualifications and colleges to provide an alternative to all children, or to children who are struggling in the more traditional routes through education? The way you guys have presented it is very much, "We are trying to provide an alternative to children who might not succeed, or have not succeeded at school, and are not going on to HE."

This is important. It is a principle that we have to establish in this country, whether we are trying to create a high-quality alternative to academic qualifications like A-levels, or we are trying to find some way of keeping children in formal institutions until their 18th birthday.

Chair: I urge relatively brief answers to this question because we are running out of time.

Ruth Perry: It is a good question. It is fundamental to the parity of esteem debate. However, I think we have to get away from thinking that you cannot offer two very different high-quality products. They do not have to be so similar.

If we make an assessment methodology that seems as hard or even harder than A-levels, we should be looking at what types of rigour are appropriate—fit for purpose—for vocational options, rather than trying to impose one model on to the other.

Simon Cook: Parity of esteem—there is another hour in that. We, collectively as a country, have done a lot over the last few years to create parity of esteem. I do not for one second suggest that we have not got it right; I think it takes a long time to challenge these things.

I would suggest that you do not get parity of esteem through reforming qualification structure. You get that through how we all, throughout society, place value on qualifications. I say that as a young man who left school at 16, became a professional chef and went to work in Germany for four years. I know exactly how that feels, working as a professional chef in a different country.

Parity of esteem is a social attitude. Qualifications are subsidiary to that and I think it is important that we continue to message that value we place equally—so on both qualifications—because over time that will permeate through our society and it will become a norm. I would not want us to give up on that, but it is not through qualifications that we will achieve it. That is my own view.

Chair: I need you to be super brief with any further answers.



Catherine Sezen: It is important to have a variety of qualifications. I am sure you have all recently been to a restaurant, been to have your hair cut or needed a plumber, and you needed someone who is competent. That is important. They may not necessarily have the particular academic skills; we require people with a variety of skills. As Simon so eloquently said, we need to respect all of those skills and promote equal routes.

Chair: Thank you.

Q16 **Manuela Perteghella:** We already heard about some of the challenges and threats to the inclusivity of the post-16 educational landscape, especially for SEND students. The Government have said they are committed to making A-levels and T-levels the main further education qualification options at age 16. What are the likely consequences of this for students with special educational needs and disabilities and for those with education, health and care plans?

Ruth Perry: As the SEND person on the panel, I will kick off on that one. We are in danger of closing down options for these learners and that would be an unforgivable thing to do. The Government made it clear in their own impact assessment from the original publication of their proposals that the learners most likely to be impacted are those with SEND and other types of disadvantage. But they also made the claim that they were most likely to benefit from the changes. There has been no formal analysis of whether that is the case or not, and I think we would find, if we were looking carefully at the stats, that T-levels are not serving this group well. They close routes to university—to higher education. There is a massive over-representation of learners with SEND in BTECS compared to A-levels, for example, in terms of those who progress to university. We will be taking that away without a proven alternative. I think there are risks.

James Kewin: Last year, as a campaign we published a report called “Desperate Measures”. What we attempted to do was answer the question that the Government were not able to answer, which is: what are students going to do when presented with a choice between an A-level or a T-level?

We found that there were 155,000 young people who would fall through the qualifications gap that would be created if we moved to a model of A-levels and T-levels. Many of those students would, disproportionately, have SEN, they would be disadvantaged, they would have lower levels of prior attainment. The previous Government’s answer to that was that they could do another level 2 qualification or they could do the T-level transition programme, which we discussed earlier, where 92% of students do not progress.

It is astonishing that we are even having this debate, because the case for retaining the three routes is so strong. As Ruth was saying, the Government’s own impact assessment was clear that these young people



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would be the most disadvantaged. You would be disadvantaging the already disadvantaged.

The point about higher education is important. We have the National Education Opportunities Network as a campaign partner. The network works with the universities that specialise in widening access, and found that the most disadvantaged quarter of young people would not progress to university if the BTEC route was taken away. They said it would set back widening participation by years, if not decades.

What you have heard today, even from this answer, but also more broadly, is that there is a consensus that we need to keep the three routes. It is extraordinary that last week the Government published a White Paper aimed at reducing the number of young people not in education, employment or training, yet next week the same Government could scrap qualifications that do more than anything else to prevent people from becoming not in education, employment or training. Again, those young people are disproportionately SEN, disadvantaged or with low prior attainment.

A very small constituency is pushing this, saying that we have to have T-levels, that we need to get rid of BTECs, but when you talk to the majority of people, there is no support for moving to that two-route model.

Chair: Can I bring Caroline in with a related question? I am mindful of time, but you should be able to make any additional points in relation to Manuela's question as well.

Q17 Caroline Voaden: We know that students with SEND are more likely to pursue applied general and tech-level qualifications than their peers. What do you think the Government should do to mitigate the impact on students with SEND if funding is withdrawn from these qualifications?

Ruth Perry: I do not like that conditional bit at the end. The strongest thing I would say is: do not withdraw that funding. I think you are on a hiding to nothing taking that away. We could look at accessibility route by route; there is a route-by-route review of the T-levels going on to try to improve accessibility. There are changes that would enable more learners to access them.

I would strongly recommend that in any future research done by Government they talk to providers who are not offering T-levels and ask why not, and talk to providers who are and ask them which learners are they steering away from T-levels and why. That is a bit of untapped information that I think would give a lot of clarity and make a case for retaining the third route.

Q18 Caroline Voaden: In your written submission to the review, you suggested that some BTECs and other AGQs would benefit from updated content rather than defunding. What changes do you think would benefit



students with SEND in the content of those qualifications?

Ruth Perry: While we have a “Save the BTEC” campaign, it is not to save them and never reform them, never revise them, never make them better than they are at the moment. The campaign is about saving the model, the approach and so on, but in updating there is room for more use of technology.

Some modernisation could be taking place, with more flexible ways of working, more flexibilities that could be brought into the structure. However, that is more about fine-tuning particular BTEC content. I do not think there is anything that is screaming out for change. We are not saying we have something perfect as it is, but that we have a model that works, and let us make sure the content is as up-to-date as possible.

Simon Cook: I am grateful that you have mentioned young people with SEND. I think they are the perfect example, a lens through which we can look at the binary nature of this particular reform, particularly those of us that work with young people and adults with SEND. You know, for sure, that one size does not fit all and that having a much broader, individualised approach is what you need to empower young people and adults to be able to move on in life, to acquire a qualification and to achieve as well as anybody else.

If we just looked at it through the lens of SEND, I think it would be pretty obvious that one size does not fit all. However, we must also remember that the number of young people, particularly those with SEND, is not going to decrease: it is going to increase. That places greater urgency for me on providing a broader church that allows us to be able to individualise to individual needs in a way that helps particularly those young people with SEND to succeed.

Achievement by examination and an assessment only by examination has a huge impact for young people with SEND. It has a huge impact on us as providers. I have to shut my college down for one day when we do GCSEs alone, in order to be able to accommodate concessions and extra support for young people with SEND. There is a much wider infrastructure implication as well. It is worth considering through that lens, so thank you for asking.

Catherine Sezen: To reiterate the point, coursework can be successful and in life we are not asked to do exams, we are asked to work together, collaboratively, to do projects and presentations. College staff are well versed in doing internal assessment and then being able to sample. I think having greater flexibility is good, and I totally agree with the point about looking at how we can use digital solutions as well.

Q19 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** I have a very short question. Catherine, you talked about assessment. Most students—a majority—do A-levels; how reliable is the grading and assessment for A-levels?



Catherine Sezen: Going back to what Simon said, that could also be another whole hour of conversation. Obviously, assessment through an examination, externally assessed, is one method of assessment, but I think there are other options for assessment.

It is very much a cliff edge. Particularly for young people who have learning difficulties and disabilities, they go into a room, perhaps a room on their own because they need that, and they have extra time, but they are put into a pressurised situation. Providing the opportunity to show their creativity, to be able to do design, to work on a project, means that we are not just working towards students who achieve well at exams. Some people do, some people do not, and we need to be mindful and to recognise that people have different skillsets.

Chair: This will be our last question.

Q20 **Manuela Perteghella:** What are some of the wider pressures facing the further education sector? Also, if the Education Committee were to conduct an inquiry into further education, including looking at funding, skills and the curriculum, what issues should we explore and why?

Chair: We just wanted to give you that opportunity right at the end of the session.

Simon Cook: We are champing at the bit on that. What a wonderful question, Manuela—thank you.

Without question, primarily the biggest thing that affects most further education providers would be the English and maths reset policy. Let me make sure that I quantify something so that you do not go away with poor apprehension. This is not about saying young people do not need further development on literacy and numeracy. But we have had a reset policy in place now since 2014 that has been forced and mandated, and while more young people might be sitting the same subjects over and over again, we are still not doing enough to move the dial to allow more young people to achieve literacy and numeracy. We are forcing square pegs through round holes, and that needs looking at with the utmost of urgency—without denigrating the fact that young people do want to study English and maths in some way, shape or form. That is my No. 1.

Ruth Perry: You will not be surprised at my No. 1. I would like the Committee to look at the role of further education providers, specialist and mainstream, in working with young people with SEND. It is a huge part of what the FE sector does but it is often overlooked in FE and skills policy. It is often shunted towards SEND policy, but that is mainly focused on schools. It falls into a gap in the middle.

I think we could be looking at how LSIPs could better embrace students with SEND. We could be looking at how they could be used to leverage disability youth employment. We could be looking at how the recently



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announced youth guarantee could serve young disabled people. There are loads of things we could be exploring.

We know that the Government have said FE is a priority, we know they have said SEND is a priority, but I fear that unless we have a ministerial commitment to bringing those two things together, opportunities will be lost.

James Kewin: First, you should definitely do a review on this. The review that you have done today, in case you do not get an opportunity, is valuable, because the decision next week is so important. It has flown under the radar. This short piece of work you have done today is valuable.

We had a manifesto, pre-election, with what we wanted to see. I could sum that up in nine words, which are: "raise the rate", "don't scrap BTECs" and "leave us alone". The raise the rate part is important. Core funding is key. It is much lower than it should be. In sixth-form colleges, it is 22% lower than it is in secondary schools. That cannot be right. We may have covered "don't scrap BTECs" already today.

"Leave us alone" is important. The amount of interference from Government, the amount of bureaucracy, the amount of audit, the number of people looking over our collective shoulder is absolutely extraordinary and it grows every year. Our message would be: give the experts the tools to do the job and let them get on with it. That is an important point.

If I could make two final points, one is about equality. We are currently engaged in a legal case with the Department over teacher pay. The Department has made the inexplicable decision to award that to teachers in schools but not teachers in colleges, which we think cannot really be defended.

A more technical thing—it sounds boring but it is important—is the way the Department for Education works. There are two silos: there is skills in colleges and there are schools. Rather than talking about FE, let us talk about sixth form, about 16-to-19, about post-16, but let us not have solutions for colleges and solutions for schools and academies. Let us have solutions for the age group.

Catherine Sezen: Lots of things have already been covered. English and maths are definitely important, because they have such an impact on young people and providers. Funding has already been described.

Funding impacts on staffing. I was speaking to a principal last week who is going to have to make difficult decisions about electrical because it is so difficult to find staff. The reason why it is so difficult to find staff is being able to pay the rate that people need to be able to say they are going to commit to work in further education. For most people working in industry, that means a pay cut. It would be good to look at how we can



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focus and encourage more people into the sector so that we can deliver on those skills.

Let us look at triangulation, at how we all work together in social partnership, and at the system as a whole. The CAR looks at key stage 1 to post-16, but colleges also deliver apprenticeships, and they deliver to adults, and it is important that we have an adult strategy. We also deliver HE. It is important to look at it in the round, looking at the whole ecosystem in any given area. Can we have more of that joined-up thinking? Speaking to James's point about schools and skills, it would be great if we could have more joint working.

Chair: Thank you all very much for coming to give your evidence today. It has been interesting and helpful to us. That concludes our first panel.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Alice Gardner, David Robinson and Jenifer Burden.

Chair: Let us resume our session this morning on level 3 qualifications. Thank you very much to all of the witnesses on our second panel, and apologies that we are slightly overrunning from the first panel. Thank you for your patience. Can I invite all three of you to introduce yourselves to the Committee, starting with Alice Gardner?

Alice Gardner: Hello, it is very nice to be here today. My name is Alice Gardner. I am the chief executive of the Edge Foundation. We are an independent foundation. We are interested in young people acquiring the skills, knowledge and behaviours that they need to succeed in work and life.

We are lucky to have an incredibly dynamic team made up of researchers, policy individuals and the practice team to help us to find ways in which we can help and support good policymaking and make sure that we are able to put forward the student voice.

On that note, today we launched our latest T-level report, "Student Voices". That is 200 young people talking about their experience on T-levels, which I am sure we will get to in some way today.

David Robinson: My name is David Robinson. I am the director of vulnerable learners and post-16 at the Education Policy Institute.

Jenifer Burden: Hello, I am Jenifer Burden. I am a director of programmes at the Gatsby Foundation.

Q21 **Chair:** Thank you very much. We have heard that there are concerns about the scope and timing of the Government's review into level 3 qualification reforms and the impact that it is had on students, schools, colleges and teachers. What is your assessment of the Government's review and the previous Government's reform in recent years?



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Jenifer Burden: Let us think about the purpose of the review, which I think is a good place to start. The first review was on the reform of qualifications. We have really had with that an opportunity to think about making sure that all qualifications, from entry level up to level 3—this is not just about level 3—have a clear purpose and also clear oversight, which we would obviously want for every qualification for every young person.

We think that is a positive step. It is an economic imperative because if we think about the case for change and reform, it is clear that skills needs were not being met. It is also an important opportunity for us to make sure that every young person has access to a high-quality study programme.

Of the several elements that have been put in place by that first review, three are very important. The first is the recognition that academic and technical education are distinct—they are not the same. The second is taking that distinction of purpose through to the design of qualifications so that they either have that line of sight through to academic university education or they are looking at the line of sight through to skilled work, which might be direct or it might be after further study.

The third thing is that all those qualifications—this is built into the reforms—need to be based on national standards. That is not the case for qualifications currently. That is the case for A-levels, it is the case for GCSEs, it is the case for T-levels. Take T-levels as an example. They are based on occupational standards, which are currently set through the work of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education. That work will move to Skills England. The standards are occupational standards that are set by employers to say, “These are the skills and this is the knowledge that you need to be successful in an occupation.” Employers then scope the outline content for T-levels. There was a process for consultation on that and then awarding organisations set the specification. But you will not have that; you do not have that same process there. It is really important for other qualifications that we have that strong oversight. I think it is often quite a surprise to people that we do not have that oversight.

I will stop there but I hope that sets a useful background.

David Robinson: I think that the Government are right to pause defunding of overlapping qualifications. Our research has suggested that T-levels are challenging qualifications. They do lead to good outcomes for students who complete them, but they are more challenging than existing overlapping qualifications. Our research showed that only 5% of T-level students have not previously achieved level 2 English and maths at a grade 4 or above, whereas for those taking qualifications due to be defunded, 25% have not achieved that threshold.

The serious question is where that extra 20% of students are going to go. I do not think that the transition programme is the solution for those



students, for reasons that we might come on to later. I think that it is right that the Government are pausing on this review. I do, however, think that there is room in the medium term to continue to rationalise qualifications, particularly smaller level 3 qualifications, because T-levels, of course, are large and challenging qualifications.

Alice Gardner: I would echo quite a lot of what David said. T-levels certainly are not for all. The piece of work that we are publishing today, from a student's perspective, shows that they are challenging, which is a good thing but that also means that they are possibly not the route for every young person. The statistics suggest that a third of students dropped out in wave 3, versus 90% retention on A-levels and BTECs. We need to be careful how we approach this.

A pause and review is probably timely and a good thing. However, we need to look at it in the context of what else is happening—the curriculum review and the launch of Skills England. Let's not do this too quickly in advance of those two things coming down the line. Let's think about whether there is room to rationalise, in a steady way initially, until we know what is going to happen with the curriculum review and indeed Skills England.

What we have to be careful of—it was a nod there from David—is that there is overlap, but there are a number of students who will need that overlap and the option to do BTECs or other qualifications in this area. We want to make sure that we do not take away that choice. Quality is incredibly important—we should not try to set this up as a dichotomy between quality and T-levels—but let's think about this carefully and not act rashly.

Q22 **Chair:** Thank you very much. We might have the outcome of the Government's review as soon as next week. What would good look like from the perspective of your various organisations?

David Robinson: I think I covered some of this in my previous answer. The roll-out of T-levels should continue. There is perhaps some room for rationalisation or removal of some qualifications that overlap with T-levels that are of a similar size to T-levels, because one of the key things from our research is that they are challenging but that that is partly because of the size of those qualifications. For the moment, the Government should maintain a range of other options at smaller sizes, but then in the medium term rationalise those qualifications as well, possibly in a similar model to the one that has been introduced for T-levels, where we have a franchise model with one awarding body per qualification.

Jenifer Burden: You will not be surprised that we would like to see the phased removal of funding to continue. We think that that gives the most opportunity for more students to access high-quality programmes, be that A-levels, A-levels combined with alternative academic qualifications, T-levels—or, for some students, we must not forget other levels. We are



talking a lot about level 3 here, but there are strong level 2 pathways—many are good opportunities to enter work or go into apprenticeships.

Alice Gardner: It is important that we acknowledge the challenges across all the qualifications, because if we do not acknowledge what the issues are, we cannot possibly fix them. There are clearly some issues with the uptake of some qualifications—low numbers—and possibly we should be challenging the quality within that. But at the same time—again, echoing what David said—T-levels are a very chunky qualification. They are the equivalent, in effect, of three A-levels, and that does not allow the mix and match that a lot of students thrive on.

We did some polling earlier this year of the general public, and 74% of those polled felt that having a broad range of choice at that age was important—thinking about some sort of baccalaureate style, with a kind of mix and match of majors and minors, giving young people the opportunity to be stretched but also not narrowing their choices. We would like to see a very persuasive case for cutting funding for qualifications at this stage while we wait to see what happens with the curriculum review and Skills England.

Q23 Mrs Brackenridge: The Government have described T-levels as the core of post-16 technical education. However, our predecessor Committee found very little evidence, or inadequate evidence, that T-levels more effectively prepare students for progression, meet industry needs or promote social mobility. What are your views on T-levels?

Alice Gardner: Those are all very valid questions. The concept of T-levels is a good one, but there are lots of challenges. One of the things that has come out in our report today, listening to the young person's voice, is that they absolutely love the work placements. That is a really positive and good thing. However, there was a lot of variation about the quality of that experience, whether the placement was connected properly with their course—whether they felt that the work they were doing in the workplace was reflected back into their academic work.

A lot of the young people felt that they had been guided into T-levels without really understanding what they were, what they were going to be doing, and whether that was going to help them in their progression routes. We know that a lot of young people at the moment going through T-levels see university as their destination, and that is absolutely fine. However, surely if you are going to have a gold standard technical route, you should be looking at all the pathways to success—apprenticeships, degree apprenticeships and higher-level apprenticeships, as well as going straight into the workplace. I am not sure that we have that quite right yet, because for a lot of people finishing a level 3 T-level, their employer would probably be quite keen to put them on a level 3 apprenticeship, but then you are doubling up on the qualification and they might not be ready to do a level 4 or level 5. We need to think about how that works.



Certainly when we have been talking to students and employers in the healthcare tracks, they have said that sometimes students who finish their T-level on that track are not ready to go into the workplace at the level that they need, having finished that T-level. There seems to be some gap between the honest intention and the actual delivery. There is quite a lot to think about there.

The mix and match concept is important. At the moment, you can do an A-level and a BTEC, and you can combine those two routes, whereas with T-levels, because they are so chunky, you have to pick your T-level and that is your route. It is very difficult then to migrate between the pathways. We have learnt over the last 10 years or so that choice is important. A broad and balanced curriculum that allows young people to thrive is what allows them to be good in the workplace, but also achieve in life. Ultimately, isn't that what we want for young people?

David Robinson: Our research suggests that T-levels are quite successful for those students who succeed in completing the T-level. Those students are more likely to progress to an apprenticeship or a higher technical qualification. But as I said previously, they are challenging, so they are not for all students. Students who take T-levels are 20% less likely to achieve their qualifications than similar students taking alternative level 3 qualifications.

We also know that disadvantaged students are more likely to drop out of their T-level, and a third of those who do drop out do not continue on to other education and training. They are good for those who succeed but I do not think that they can be the only level 3 option without pushing more students down to take level 2 qualifications instead, at a time when we know that the returns for existing level 3 qualifications—the employment outcomes—are good for those students who take them.

Jenifer Burden: I will pick up on size first; that is a valid point. T-levels are large and they need to be, as historically we have had much smaller programmes than you would see in strong technical education systems, so it is very important to increase the amount of time our young people have to develop their technical knowledge and skills. That was a very positive step. We also need to recognise that the reforms do not remove the possibility of combining A-levels and small AAQs. Those mixed programmes are still available within the reforms.

But that does not mean that there is a third way. If you look at the international evidence—and it is useful to look at international evidence, not to pick it up and drop it in ours, but to see what the practice is—there are clear academic and technical pathways across the majority of OECD countries and the countries where you would see strong technical education. What you see in the academic track, though, is some flavour of academic pathways. You will have an academic pathway that is very much that core, "I am heading to a research-focused university"—really fast-tracking—and you will also see academic pathways internationally



that have that very strong core of robust academic learning, like A-levels in our case, and alongside that, opportunities to take some options for more applied learning, like the small AAQs. Those are still very much academic paths because they are designed to progress students to academic study.

Picking up on destinations, because I think that was mentioned, we have been looking at students' destinations for T-levels. I would like to thank the T-level providers who are working with us to provide that information. We have produced a report for the first cohort and we will shortly produce the report for the second cohort.

I will give you an example from that data. Looking at a sample of over 300 health T-level students with a known destination, 92% were in apprenticeship, employment or further study. Those destinations might be directly into employment. That could be healthcare support workers or healthcare assistants. Forgive me if I am reading this; I want to get the numbers right.

Students may move into apprenticeship pathways. That covers nursing, dental nursing and pharmacy technicians. Students who need to take some further study because they need to undertake an undergraduate degree in order to move into those areas will be moving into nursing, midwifery and across allied health professions.

Over 85% of the students moving on to higher education did so into health-related roles. That is really important—they are moving into the destination that they study for. That is heartening to see because we know the dedicated work that providers and employers are putting into setting up industry placements. That is a very strong part of the T-level. It is not the only part, but it is a very strong part and we see from the DfE-funded learner survey pretty high satisfaction across the industry placements. I take your point, Alice: we would want that to be 100%.

Q24 Chair: Can I push you on that, and I am going to bring Patrick in on this question as well? That is an analysis of the feedback from students who do T-levels, who are currently about one-tenth of all post-16 students. In your previous answer, you indicated that for students who could not access either T-levels or A-levels, one option for them is to take another level 2 qualification. I want to push you on the question of progression for students. You are acknowledging that there are some students who, as things currently stand, cannot access either A-levels or T-levels. Is it really acceptable that we say to those students, "Just go and do another qualification at the same level; there is no progression route for you, you just stick at level 2"?

Jenifer Burden: That is quite interesting. We have a way of thinking about levels in this country that suggests that if you move into a different area and you move from school, where you have been attempting level 2 qualifications and then you move into college and you might start at level 1 or level 2—I think Cath mentioned that earlier—that that is somehow a



step back. We are saying to students, “We want to be really aspirational for you and the way to do that is to extend your programme. We are aspirational for you to reach level 3, but we think you need more time. We want to give you more time to do that”.

- Q25 **Chair:** If level 3 is defunded, there is no level 3, the implication of narrowing down the courses is that that course that allows that progression might not be available any more.

Jenifer Burden: For those students who would have taken those courses previously, there are other options. They may move into a mixed programme, take a T-level or may take longer to get to their T-level, so they may need to take the foundation year to be ready to prepare for that, or they may take a strong level 2 programme that gives them access into the workplace.

- Q26 **Patrick Spencer:** In same vein—we touched on this with the previous panel—how do you square T-levels as a true equal to A-levels while also ensuring that they are accessible to all learners with all learning styles?

Jenifer Burden: We heard earlier from the panel that the Department is undertaking a route-by-route review of T-levels and we welcome that; it is valid. We have been collecting feedback from providers on T-levels about how they are working—mainly, in our case, to inform the work that we do to develop teaching resources to support T-levels, which I know are important.

It is worth taking the time to champion the providers who have quietly embraced T-levels and are doing a fantastic job to deliver them. On T-levels results day, for example, it was my privilege to go to Blackpool and the and The Fylde college, in one of the most deprived areas of our country, where they have embraced T-levels and over the last three years have seen strong outcomes for students across their intake. This does need work. Providers are working hard to make sure that T-levels are accessible, and we do need that very important stepping that stone for students to go through into progression.

David Robinson: I do not think, as they are currently structured, that a model of just A-levels and T-levels can provide access for all students, for some of the reasons I mentioned previously around the level of challenge.

Patrick Spencer: As they are currently structured?

David Robinson: As they are currently structured, yes.

- Q27 **Patrick Spencer:** Do we change the shape of T-levels and make them a wider number, with varying levels of complexity and assessment styles? This is what I am getting at.

David Robinson: Yes, of course, you can reform the qualification, and make it smaller and perhaps less challenging in some respects but more



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accessible to a wider variety of students. However, some of the benefits of T-levels are around parity of esteem, the level of challenge, the success of students coming off those programmes. I would rather take the model of T-levels, where they have simplified the market of qualifications—or they were aiming to simplify the market—and apply that to smaller level 3 qualifications as well. That is where you could provide a range of options.

Student profiles are not homogeneous. Students may want to take a variety of either level 2 or level 3 qualifications, academic and technical qualifications, and research suggests that employment outcomes for students who do take a variety are often very good. Perhaps extending the model of T-levels to make progression options accessible to a wide range of students is the way to go, but T-levels on their own, as currently structured, do not work, I think.

Briefly coming back on the previous points around the transition programme being a stepping stone for those students who are not quite ready for a T-level, our research suggested that that is not working as it is currently structured. Only a very small percentage of students progress from the transition programme. Less than 10% progress from the transition programme to a T-level and of those who do, around a third drop out in the first year. That programme, as it is currently structured, is not working against its stated aims of transitioning students to T-levels.

Alice Gardner: As a country, we get very hung up on technical versus academic, when actually what most young people and indeed adults like is variety, and that is how they thrive and how they learn. Maybe the question could be more about whether it is time to think about a baccalaureate-style qualification that allows you to have a twin-track of major and minor subjects so that you can do academic alongside technical and vocational, and you are not narrowing your choices. Take some of the great bits that are working with T-levels and the good bits that are working in academic qualifications, and look at whether we could have a much more radical look at what the 16 to 19 curriculum looks like. That way you could spend much more time thinking about how all young people could access that and they would be given more time to get to the end of the programme if they needed it, but also much more choice and without too much speciality too early on.

It is never good to say to a young person, "You must take this route, this is the route you have chosen and there is no migration, there is no room to change your mind." We are asking these young people to make some significant choices pretty early. We know that with careers information, advice and guidance there has never been a golden age, and certainly over the last 10 or 15 years, with various cuts to careers advice and guidance—the PE teacher on Friday afternoon doing their bit—we need to think about what is happening also pre-16 to allow young people to really understand what their choices are going to look like later on.



I would be nervous about cutting back too much on overlap at the moment because I think there are some much bigger decisions to be made that would really allow the Government to think about what is next. Keeping options open for young people is really important.

We have not mentioned SEND pupils either, and I want to make clear that SEND does not mean that they have a lack of academic ability, it just means they have various challenges that they need to meet. I am not sure, from the information that we have at the moment, that T-levels are allowing them to thrive as much as they might or could or should.

Q28 Caroline Voaden: We have briefly touched on this already. Only 21% of students who started T-levels in 2022 finished their course. Why do you think that T-levels have a much lower retention rate compared to other level 3 qualifications?

Alice Gardner: Interestingly, from listening directly to the students, there seem to be several things going on here. One goes back to the point about careers information, advice and guidance. I am not 100% sure that they know what they are getting themselves into. From the work that we have done on 200 students talking about their experiences of T-levels, we find that their choices were not necessarily proactive but were guided—"We're doing T-levels now. You might be suited to it". There was a gap in expectation versus the reality. We have talked about the challenge: it is chunky—equivalent to three A-levels. It has provided more challenge than some young people expected, and they found that very classroom-oriented teaching quite heavy. Although they have enjoyed the 45-day or equivalent in hours of the work placement, some have found that that has not connected directly to their learning, which is so important if it is going to add real value.

I think that there is a gap between expectation and reality, and that is tricky. Mentoring is important and we have seen that on apprenticeships. Where students are slightly left to flounder, their reaction is to drop out where they do not have the support, particularly collectively, around them. Some of the students coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may find that they do not have the wraparound support that they need that helps to guide them throughout the qualification. It is also about social capital and sometimes they do not have that either. There is quite a lot going on there.

Teacher retention was also mentioned by young people as an issue. They were finding that they were just getting into the swing of whoever was leading their course and then the teacher left. We know that that is an issue in FE and in secondary teaching at the moment, but it seemed to be a particular issue for these young students on T-levels and that leads to inconsistency of delivery.

We also know that there was not a lot of guidance early on, meaning that the first cohorts felt that the teaching might have been inconsistent as well. We had some comments from the tutors themselves saying that



they did not have a lot of back-up and were not 100% sure if they were delivering the T-levels in the most effective way to get the best outcome. That of course has an impact on the learner as well. There is a lot going on there.

This is a fledgling qualification. I am not saying that it couldn't work; it is just that without acknowledging the challenges, it will not work. Just binning the competitive qualifications to force uptake seems to be the most unholy, ridiculous course of action.

David Robinson: Our research covered the fact that students were more likely to drop out but, unfortunately, we did not cover the why. The Edge Foundation's work nicely fills the gap that we created there, so I do not have much to add beyond what Alice covered.

Jenifer Burden: We know that most students often change their minds about a programme of study after they start. About one in five students withdraw from large vocational qualifications; we are not talking about T-levels. We were talking about this earlier. It is important to understand that across the piste—not solely focused on T-levels. That is an area that we ought to know more about.

Retention for T-levels has been slightly lower than in comparable large qualifications. It is a new qualification and some of the things that Alice said are valid. As a teacher, when you start a new qualification, you do tend to teach to the specification. You are getting used to the sense of the breadth and the depth that you need to go into. We would want teachers to have more resources in that case. Some of the work that we are doing helps to shape that. What happens is that as you get used to the qualifications, you see the connections between the various areas and you start to shape it and sequence it in a way that suits you and your students. One of the things that we have heard from teachers who were working on the resources is that the T-level structure gives them more freedom to do that because they can link topics together; they are not in separate units, so they can do that. It is interesting to see teachers starting to grasp the T-levels and make them their own. I think there are elements there that will see that retention figure rising over time.

I would like to pick up the point on the transition year as well. I take your point, David, that we are not seeing significant numbers moving into T-levels, but it is important to note that the transition year overall showed higher progression to level 3 than other level 2 programmes. It is a programme that has been developed with teachers, working with the Association of Colleges and the Department for Education, to shape that foundation year. We think that that foundation year should be available to all students who need extra time before moving on to level 3, whether they are going to move on to an academic path or a technical path. If they choose to move into an apprenticeship, that is not a poor outcome. We should simply be helping students who need more time to get ready for level 3 to have it.



Q29 Caroline Voaden: What can be done to support students who choose to withdraw from T-levels, especially those who are most susceptible to leaving education and training all together? Obviously if we defund the other qualifications, we are narrowing their options if they drop out of T-levels. What can we do to support them?

Jenifer Burden: We were talking earlier about what happens to students when they withdraw from any course. The majority of them do withdraw early and move on to another course, but we need more research across the piece on what happens to young people who leave their courses and what interventions would be the best approach for them in that case.

Q30 Caroline Voaden: You are advocating the defunding of AGQs. If they have struggled with T-levels because they are too academic—the equivalent of three A-levels is quite a lot for somebody who is choosing not to go down an A-level pathway. If we defund technical qualifications, where do those people go and what do they do?

Jenifer Burden: It is more about their starting point. If we know that they will need more time to be ready to take a T-level or to move into an academic pathway—

Caroline Voaden: They might never be ready to take a T-level.

Jenifer Burden: That is true, and that is true for students now who do not all progress on to level 3. We need stronger level 2 pathways for those students, with oversight. I mentioned it at the start of the discussion. Those qualifications have no national oversight of content now, either for technical or in the academic space. Outside of A-levels, GCSEs, T-levels and some other specialist qualifications, the Government have no national oversight, or very little national oversight, of the content of those qualifications. It is a fundamentally important part of the qualifications reform that we can make sure that those level 2 qualifications have strong stepping points into employment. At the time that a student takes that qualification and perhaps moves into the workplace or takes an apprenticeship, level 3 may be right for them later in their career journey. We need to make sure that we have good options that are well-funded for them as adult learners—as older learners—rather than expecting all young people to follow that single path to level 3 at an age when they may simply need a bit more time.

David Robinson: I echo some of Jenifer's points. There is not enough research of what works well in this area and I do not know whether there is space for the Education Endowment Foundation to think about what works for students—the kinds of interventions that successfully move students on to good outcomes. Having a range of level 3 qualifications—smaller qualifications—would allow students to still get those level 3 qualifications. As I have said, those existing qualifications do lead to good employment outcomes for young people.



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Another important point here, though, is that for those students who take three years of 16 to 19 study, the funding falls off quite significantly for students in their third year of study. Those students who may need the most support will struggle to get the same amount of support because of that extra year of study. That is one thing that the Government could be looking at, which is matching the rate for the first and second year for the third year of 16 to 19 study.

Alice Gardner: I think it is worth thinking about why originally the funding was being looked at for AGQs. It was probably motivated by the lack of take-up for T-levels. The last Government was thinking, "How do we increase take-up. One of the ways that we can do that is to remove some of the competition for students." That is not a good starting point, because in policy you should be looking for what you are trying to achieve—the outcome—and that does not feel like a good starting point.

So here we are. We have inherited this point where we are having a pause and review. A pause and review should not be about throwing the baby out with the bath water, though I am sure that there are plenty of level 3 qualifications that need reviewing and probably need defunding, either because they have low uptake or perhaps because they do not provide the quality or the stretch that students need—but that does not mean that we should defund all level 3 qualifications that overlap with T-levels. Your question goes to the heart of the point: the drop-out rate is already so high, including students who have been earmarked as those who will potentially thrive on a T-level, so if we defunded those other qualifications, we would be undermining the students' opportunities to succeed. I do not think that anyone from any political persuasion wants that.

We want the very best outcomes for young people, and we want them to match the skills and needs of employers. This is a social and economic imperative: social because it is right that young people have the ability to thrive in their life and be a good source to their community and be part of that economic community; on the other hand, for the economy, employers are saying to us all the time that young people are not meeting their needs. We have an economic and social imperative to get this right.

How do we stop young people dropping out? Part of it is by them having a choice and choosing the best route. If you have a dichotomy, when it is A-levels or T-levels, you are removing that option for choice and permeation between the tracks.

The other way that you could prevent drop-out on level 3 qualifications, full stop, is to have a review of what happens pre-16, and have a much broader and balanced curriculum in advance of 16 and look at the way that qualifications are assessed, look at the curriculum in its entirety, and think about whether progress 8 still is fit for purpose and whether the EBacc is the right move. If we get it right pre-16, those students getting



to that point at 16 and making big decisions about what is next will be able to make much better choices about what is right for them, which will help to prevent drop-out.

You cannot force young people on a pathway that they are not suited to, and expect them to see it out and pass at the end. T-levels are quite complex. They have year-end exams; they have the employer elements. They have to pass all of that to get their certificate at the end. It seems to me that there is an opportunity for T-levels to be good for some students, but plenty of other AGQs are very suitable for lots of other students that will help them progress either to university or on to an apprenticeship or straight into work. This is about keeping the student in mind. This should not be about dogma or political posturing. This should be about how we best get young people into a position where they can get a good job and contribute to society, both economically and socially.

- Q31 **Caroline Voaden:** David, the Education Policy Institute has recently recommended the introduction of smaller alternatives to T-levels to enable access for a wider range of students. What are the advantages and challenges associated with this change?

David Robinson: To flesh that out, we were not proposing that we introduce yet another qualification into an already complex market. What we were getting at was that it is a complex market and one of the advantages of T-levels, or the intent of T-levels, was the rationalisation of that market. It is the case that there are many, many more choices and qualifications available to young people going down the technical or applied route than there are for the academic route. Extending the model for T-levels to smaller level 3 qualifications in a way that either you have one awarding body per qualification or you have more of an A-level style model—where you have more of the standardisation that you have for A-levels but multiple awarding bodies operating within that standardised approach—would help student choice and provide a choice in a market that is quite complex at the moment.

Chair: Manuela, I need to ask you to be very brief.

- Q32 **Manuela Perteghella:** This is a question for Jenifer about the SEND cohort of students. We know that SEND students are much less likely to pick up level 3 qualifications. What support would you want to see for this cohort of students to take up the T-levels and widen participation?

Jenifer Burden: The last T-level action plan—I was just checking the data—showed that 10.5% of the cohort of students taking T-levels had SEND support or EHC plans. It is good to see that they are accessing T-levels. That figure is 15% for students with any level 3 course, so it is smaller, but I am not surprised by that at this stage of the roll-out of T-levels. We can see that increasing. It is very important on the industry placement that there are flexibilities for students with SEND needs, and that those are in place to ensure that they can benefit from that



experience. We also need to look hard at the resources that we are providing to support teachers in delivering T-levels.

Earlier Cath mentioned the DfE's route-by-route review—where colleges have been feeding in information about each T-level pathway. We have not seen the outcomes from that but I would imagine that there has been a strong conversation about SEND learners and how flexibilities within the industry placement and so on can support them.

Q33 Jess Asato: There is evidence that disadvantaged students, as well as those from working-class and minority ethnic backgrounds, who enter higher education are more likely to hold applied qualifications, such as BTECs, than their peers. What specific actions should the Government take to ensure these students are not deterred from going to university or pursuing other higher education options if BTECs are defunded?

Alice Gardner: This is not supposed to be facetious, but you kind of hit the nail on the head there. We do not want to narrow their opportunities, so let's not defund their route to university. BTECs, as you quite rightly say, for those young people you mentioned are one of their best and most effective routes in, recognised by universities and by employers, so why would we want to stem their opportunities to access higher education?

David Robinson: The challenge for disadvantaged students is partly in accessing qualifications—Alice mentioned the need to keep a range of qualifications as alternatives to T-levels—but actually the challenges that we see for disadvantaged students are much wider than the particular qualification choices. We know from our research that disadvantaged students fall further behind in the 16 to 19 phase. It may be no coincidence that disadvantaged funding as a whole falls by about a third between the secondary phase and the 16 to 19 phase. I do not think that there is any underlying rationale for that funding fall. We and other organisations have previously called for a student premium to mirror the pupil premium that exists in primary and secondary school to support students, and to institutions with a large proportion of disadvantaged students to support greater outcomes for those students.

Jenifer Burden: I think it is fair to say that one of the concerns about offering AGQs for students rather than mixed programmes with A-levels and AAQs are the outcomes of grades. Providers seek to ensure that students get the highest grades and that is completely understandable. Students who do not get the highest grades in their A-levels or mixed programmes are not stopped from accessing university, and evidence shows that students who take A-levels are less likely to drop out and they are more likely to graduate with a 2:1 or a first than those with BTECs.

Recent data from the Office for Students, in particular, shows that students who entered with three distinctions in their BTEC were less likely to get a first or a second than those with three Ds at A Level. This is data that we can go back and forth on. It is complicated by the fact that those



students are more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds or be a non-traditional entrant to university. They are often not gaining equality with their peers from their time at university. The director of fair access at OfS has been clear that the job of widening participation isn't just about getting people into university.

We absolutely agree that it is important that university degrees are open to all those who want to take them, but we would encourage policymakers to take a system-wide view and to think about the quality of outcome for those entering university rather than simply the numbers enrolling, and consider the greater benefits that there are from extending the duration of the 16 to 19 programme in the way that we have talked about—I absolutely agree with David on full funding—so that those students can access the qualifications that are getting the best outcomes when they do move on to university.

Q34 Amanda Martin: The IFS has estimated that it would cost the Government about £400 million to sustain 16 to 19 education funding in its current level per student but in the recent Budget £300 million was allocated for further education. What are the likely consequences of this shortfall for the sector?

Alice Gardner: Further education is always overlooked. We have a quite disjointed system between primary, secondary, further education, sixth-form colleges and higher education. Funding is always an issue for further education colleges. They have big issues around hiring and retaining staff. If we want to have a gold standard of technical and vocational education and we are expecting them also to pick up resits of maths and English, they require funding to be able to deliver a fair pay deal for their staff.

If you want industry experts to be able to teach things like T-levels and those more hands-on qualifications, where you want them to have had industry expertise and you want to draw them back out of the workplace into college, accordingly the salary needs to match. Otherwise, if you are working in an engineering firm, what would be the attraction, apart from the altruistic element, of coming into a further education college to deliver that real direct and exciting learning that young people like? So there is the workforce.

There is also the fact that if you want to be able to teach technical and vocational qualifications in a manner that is engaging and will last beyond the student's life in the college, there is pressure always on having the newest equipment so that you can make sure that young people are going into the workplace understanding the latest technology that is being used. For most colleges that is a challenge all the time. Some colleges have been clever about they share that between a number of colleges—so that one is specialising in perhaps engineering and another specialises in construction, but the pressure is on all the time to be able to keep up with the evolution of what is happening in the sector.



Workforce is important and then there is the strategy of what FE is there for, what it is designed for and what we want from it, because it is a catchall and it is under a lot of pressure to deliver on so many different things. We have colleges delivering English as a second language, we have maths and English retakes, we have BTECs and T-levels. Some are providing HE provision; some are providing a community hub element. We do expect a lot from HE and we fund it the least.

David Robinson: I will echo some of Alice's points on workforce. We hear a lot about the challenges of workforce in primary and secondary schools, yet vacancy rates in FE are around 10 times those in schools. It is particularly challenging in areas such as construction, engineering, basic digital, maths and English. We also know, relatedly, from the IFS, that schoolteachers are paid about 18% more than teachers in colleges, so clearly there are going to be recruitment and retention issues. This will have an impact on students and student outcomes. Research from 2018 suggested that around a quarter of basic literacy and numeracy teachers were unqualified to teach at level 2 or above. That is quite a shocking finding and it is not one that we would necessarily accept in schools in the primary or secondary phase.

It is easy to always come back to funding, but some of the funding differences are so stark: 16 to 19 funding is down around 11% since its 2010 peak, whereas schools are back at the 2010 peak, so the phase has definitely fallen behind. As I mentioned previously, disadvantaged learners are probably the hardest hit by this, with them seeing the greatest fall in funding between the ages of 16 in secondary school and then the 16 to 19 phase.

Jenifer Burden: I will not repeat the figures on funding because we echo them.

One thing that is worth mentioning is that we are working with colleges to develop appropriate training for individuals who come from industry. It is an industry associates programme. What is it like for somebody who is moving from industry into FE teaching, possibly not full-time to start with, and what sort of training do we need to have that is appropriate for them if they are not stepping straight into full-time teaching? It is quite a change to move from industry into full-time teaching. That is an area that deserves a lot more attention.

Q35 **Jess Asato:** I have a final question. Could you tell us about some of the wider currently facing the further education sector? If this Committee were to conduct a broader inquiry into FE, including looking at funding, skills and the curriculum, which issues should we explore and why?

David Robinson: A few people have mentioned resits. I would echo that. I would say resits, and more broadly numeracy and literacy for the phase, and maybe even extending that into curriculum breadth. Alice has made some good points on whether we need to be moving in the longer term to more of a baccalaureate system. I hesitate a little bit in saying



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that because there has been constant reform for the FE sector, and that would be a very significant one and it would need to be highly supported to enable delivery on that. I would say resits, curriculum breadth and the workforce, which I mentioned previously.

Jenifer Burden: Workforce certainly would be on my list. We have not mentioned looking at essential skills. That is an area that gets talked about a lot under various banners—employability, work readiness—but there are proven and evaluated approaches to embedding essential skills and that would be something for any future work on curriculum to look at.

I want to revisit the importance of not only looking at level 3. I think Cath mentioned that earlier. I am particularly interested in the area around level 1 and below. We looked at a report from DfE in 2017: of 49,000 16 year-olds without GCSE passes at A* to C who studied entry level or level 1, 38% progressed to an apprenticeship or level 2 the following year. The key thing is that at institutional level, that range went from 75% to 7%. That suggests that although prior attainment would account for some of that, it does not count for everything. That is an area that deserves as much oversight so that each and every student is getting the same level of oversight of their qualification as level 3.

Alice Gardner: I echo resits and the workforce. It is also important to protect apprenticeship opportunities for young people under the new growth and skills levy. The Edge Foundation has done a really good piece of work—I would say that—called “Flex Without Compromise”. It is well worth having a look at it. It is important that if we are going to allow flex within the levy, we continue to make sure that we focus on young people’s opportunity between the ages of 16 and 24 to enter the workplace via an apprenticeship.

Moving forward, it would be interesting to understand Skills England’s role and how that will link with the discussion that we have had today. Perhaps this Committee might be able to look into an accountability hearing on the newly established body. It would be interesting to understand how that all slots together.

I would also say we need a vision for 16 to 19 education, including those academic, technical and vocational pathways—thinking about it much more holistically and then trying to join education, from four all the way up, so that it becomes much less siloed, so that we can see how young people progress through each and every stage. Then we can pick up those who are struggling or falling behind before it becomes too late. We could fix lot of the problems that we have talked about today earlier in the journey, and then we would not be facing the same sorts of issues post 16.

Chair: Thank you very much. That brings our evidence session to an end. I thank all our witnesses, and all Members for their questions.