

Written evidence submitted by the Department for Education

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Education Select Committee: Evidence submitted by the Department for Education to the inquiry into The future of post-16 Qualifications.

Introduction

1. This paper sets out the government's evidence for the Education Select Committee inquiry on the future of post-16 qualifications.
2. It sets out the department's policies and reforms on a wide range of post-16 qualifications provision and education.
3. It provides information in relation to each of the terms of reference provided by the committee.
4. The first main section provides evidence in relation to a number of the committee's terms of reference.
5. The remaining sections respond directly to the remaining terms of reference.

Summary of the current system of post-16 qualifications and the review of Level 3 qualifications.

A vision for a reformed post-16 system

Up to the age of 16 pupils follow a broad and balanced curriculum to prepare them for the next step in their education. We encourage all pupils to study the core academic subjects at GCSE - English, maths, science, history or geography and a language - the English Baccalaureate (EBacc). These subjects provide a sound basis for a variety of careers beyond the age of 16, enrich pupils' studies and give them a broad general knowledge that will enable them to participate in and contribute to society. Pupils' study programmes, guided by the government's Progress 8 school performance measure, also include a broad a range of other GCSEs and qualifications at 16. This broad approach up to 16 provides a firm and universal academic basis upon which pupils can then build and specialise post-16.

Post-16, our ambition is to have an education system that rigorously prepares students to take their next step, whether that be continued study or moving into the workplace. This means introducing a degree of specialisation, with qualifications that are closely aligned to the needs of employers or higher education.

In future, students will be able to choose between clearly defined academic and technical routes with high quality qualifications with a primary focus on entry to further study and skilled employment, respectively. This clarity of purpose will help students to make good choices and see more easily how their study will help them to progress.

Our education system therefore has and will have the advantage of a broad curriculum pre-16, and the advantage of specialisation post 16 – this approach supporting three-year university degrees rather than the four-year degrees which are common internationally.

Ensuring that qualifications have a clear primary purpose will improve outcomes for students, but it does not mean that students need be locked into a particular path. They will continue to have a range of destinations open to them, whichever route they choose. We want both academic and technical routes to provide for students with differing talents and aspirations: we need to support them the to take the path that is right for them. A levels, as the recently reformed academic choice, have a clear purpose and are already understood and valued by learners, parents and employers alike. They are respected internationally, and underpin high entry and graduation rates¹ to our globally highly regarded universities.

It has been clear for a number of years that the quality of vocational education has not always matched the quality of A levels. The 2011 Wolf Review focused on vocational education at 14-19 and found that the current system of

¹ [Graduation rates and entry rates \(oecd.org\)](https://www.oecd.org/education/graduation-rates-and-entry-rates/)

vocational education was failing too many young people, a large proportion of whom were on courses that had little or no market value. The review estimated that at least 350,000 16 to 19 year olds were getting little to no benefit from the post-16 education system.

Building on the findings of the Wolf Review, the 2016 report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education (the Sainsbury Report) found that routes through the post-16 skills system were complex and of variable quality. Overlapping qualifications and the range of optional elements make it hard for employers to judge what the holder of a qualification is able to do, with many qualifications holding little value either for individuals or employers.

To address these failings we have started a series of reforms aimed at streamlining and improving the quality of the post-16 qualifications system at level 3 and below. The centre of these reforms is the redevelopment of occupational standards to create a foundation for technical education at all levels that is aligned to employers' needs.

At level 3 we are introducing T Levels, based on those employer-led standards as a technical option that will command the same respect, understanding and value as A levels. Alongside the introduction of T Levels we are reviewing other qualifications at Level 3 and below to create a coherent system in which all classroom-based qualifications that sit alongside A levels and T Levels at level 3 are good quality. This has included reviewing the need for qualifications such as Applied General qualifications often used for entry to higher education as well entry into the workplace. As a result of these changes to technical and vocational education:

- Students will benefit from clearer, high-quality choices that support their aspirations and show clear pathways for their onward progression. They can be confident that the qualifications they take will get them where they want to go, whether to further study or into skilled employment.
- Employers will benefit from a clearer skills system, which is based on the same set of occupational standards so they can be confident it will provide the skills they and the economy need and can adapt to meet the needs of the future.
- Colleges and schools will benefit from high-quality, up to date qualifications for every student, with support and investment from government to support them during change.
- Adults will benefit from high-quality qualifications that are flexible enough to meet their varying needs, supporting them to upskill, retrain and progress into employment or further study.

Key Stats and charts (snapshot of activity end of 2020)

- Participation of 16-18s in education or apprenticeships is the highest on record
- The age 16-18 not in education and training (NEET) rate remained stable and is still one of the lowest on record.
- 4.1% in wider training and 7.0% in employment.

Ages 16-17 (in compulsory education or training)

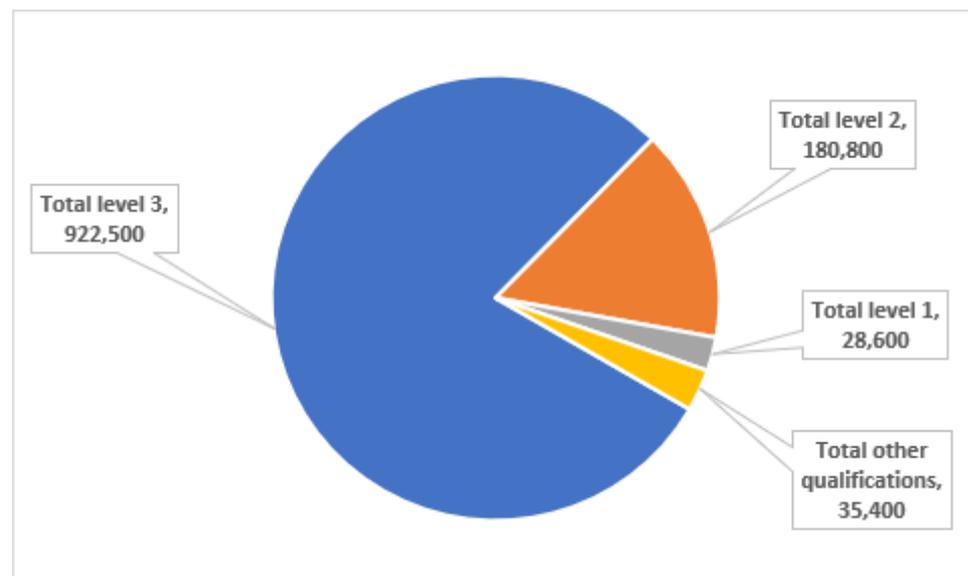
- 91.2% participating in education or apprenticeships, a record high.
- 3.9% NEET, a record low.
- 2.8% in wider training and 2.1% in employment.

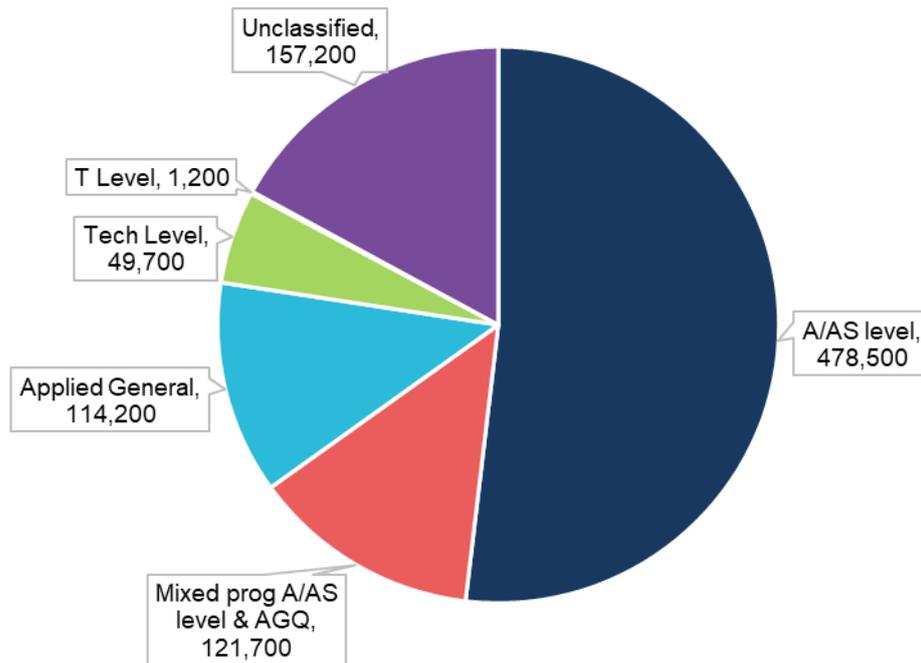
Age 18 (first year post compulsory education or training)

- 64.0% participating in education or apprenticeships, a record high.
- 12.0% NEET, an increase compared with last year and the highest level since 2014 resulting from falls in employment and falls in participation in wider training.
- 6.9% in wider training and 17.0% in employment.

Ages 16-18 (Participation in compulsory education or training)

- Total in FE 1,167,302, which comprises:
 - Level 3 922,495
 - Level 2 180,802
 - Level 1 28,556
 - Other 35,449





AS and A levels

Before we discuss other Level 3 qualifications in detail this next section outlines the current policy on and recent reforms to AS and A levels.

Advanced level qualifications (known as A levels) are subject-based qualifications which place emphasis on traditional academic skills and support progression to higher education. They have been widely regarded by successive governments as the 'gold standard' for academic qualifications at this level and enjoy high levels of public support. A levels are internationally renowned and recognised around the world, enabling students to access university courses in other countries.

They are designed to be two-year courses and to:

- define and assess whether students have the knowledge, skills and understanding to progress to undergraduate level study in the UK, particularly (although not only) in the same subject area;
- set out a robust and internationally comparable post-16 academic course of study to develop that knowledge, skills and understanding;
- support universities to distinguish between applicants for HE entry;
- provide school and college accountability measures; and
- benchmark academic ability for employers - some professional careers impose strict benchmarks for qualifications, in particular for competitive roles, and A levels can be a helpful indicator of students' academic ability.

A levels offer students the choice of a broad range of subjects (198 qualifications in nearly 40 subjects). It allows them to tailor their studies towards a specialist degree, other studies or future career. They also provide students with the flexibility to cover a spread of subjects to reflect their interests, enabling them to keep their options open.

The number of students studying for A levels has remained steady at 271,000 in the 2019/20 and 2020/21 exam cohorts². Students typically take 3 A level subjects (2021 average remains stable at 2.67³), providing breadth and enough depth of knowledge to enable progression into that subject at higher education. It should also be noted that this approach enables the UK to offer three-year university degrees rather than the four-year degrees common internationally.

Between 2015 and 2018, the government introduced a series of reforms to A level qualifications. They were reformed to address concerns from higher and further education institutions and employers that the previous qualifications did not adequately prepare young people for the demands of higher study and the workplace. The department consulted widely with schools, colleges, universities and employers, both on the principles for reform and the detail of the content of individual subjects, to help them prepare for their introduction. At A level, we wanted the qualifications to be robust and rigorous and keep pace with universities' and employers' demands.

The main features of the A level reforms were:

- linear exams (i.e. all exams at the end of the two year course) so that less time is spent on preparing for exams on individual modules and any resits and more time on teaching. This enables students to demonstrate synoptic learning (making connections between different areas of knowledge).
- designing the subject content to better meet the demands of higher education.
- less non-exam assessment (NEA)/coursework in some subjects and only to be used where knowledge, skills and understanding cannot be tested validly by an exam.
- decoupling AS qualifications from A levels so that their marks do not count towards the A level. Students will be able to benefit from the maturity that comes from a two-year course. This change was supported by research evidence, alongside feedback from university academics that the old modular A levels did not adequately prepare students for undergraduate courses

² [A level and other 16 to 18 results, Academic Year 2020/21 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](#)

³ [Analysis of results: A levels and GCSEs, summer 2021 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

The recent A level reforms were founded on strong evidence – review of some subjects was led by Professor Mark Smith of Lancaster University, with others conducted by the A level Content Advisory Board (ALCAB) and Russell Group academics. Ofqual also ran public consultations on the reforms which focused on a variety of issues, including the core content for new qualifications and timelines for the last teaching and exams in ‘legacy’ A levels. The reforms were introduced over several years, with some qualifications first taught from September 2015. The final tranche of subjects was first taught from September 2018 and first awarded in summer 2020. We have no further plans for wholesale reform of A levels qualifications.

Ofqual publish annual data on the perceptions of AS and A levels. The latest report⁴ shows that more than 80% of survey respondents (general public; parents; young people; teachers; head teachers; HEIs; and employers) say A levels are trusted qualifications – this view was consistent over the past 3 years. 79% also felt that A levels are good preparation for further study, increasing from previous reports (78% in 2019/20⁵ and 77% in 2018/19⁶). In addition, evidence suggests high attainment at A level supports successful study at higher education. Data⁷ from the Office of Students in 2018-19⁸ showed that 99% of students receiving 4 A* A levels went on to university compared to 91.1% of those with 3 D grades. Students with better A level grades were also more likely to receive a 1st degree or 2:1 at the end of their studies (97.6% for 4 A* and 78.9% for 3 D grades in 2019-20).

Alongside the A level reforms we also reformed AS levels which were decoupled from A levels so that their marks do not count towards the A level. AS levels (1 year courses) are now optional, standalone qualifications which can be taken alongside A levels. They are designed to:

- provide evidence of students’ achievements in a robust and internationally comparable post-16 course of study that is a subset of A level content; and
- enable students to broaden the range of subjects they study; and support progression to further study or employment.

The new AS specifications were designed to enable schools and colleges to co-teach the AS level course alongside the first year of the A level course. The first reformed qualifications were taught from September 2015 and first awarded in summer 2016. As with A levels, there are no further plans to reform AS level qualifications.

⁴ [Perceptions of A levels, GCSEs and other qualifications: wave 19 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

⁵ [Perceptions of A levels, GCSEs and other qualifications: wave 18 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

⁶ [Perceptions of A levels, GCSEs and other qualifications: wave 17 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

⁷ [Sector-level data - Office for Students](#)

⁸ 2018-19 is the most recent year for this statistic.

The Case for Improving Vocational and Technical Education

The review of post-16 qualifications at level 3 builds on successive reviews of the post-16 skills system - the 2011 Wolf Review and the 2016 report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education (the Sainsbury Report).

There are well documented skills shortages in areas that depend on high quality occupational training, with the latest Employer Skills Survey⁹ highlighting an 8% increase in the number of skill-shortage vacancies compared with 2015. Also, over half of businesses (52%) are not confident about accessing sufficient intermediate skilled talent in future, and two thirds of businesses (66%) are not confident there will be enough people available with the necessary skills to fill their high skilled jobs.¹⁰ One of the main reasons for the skills shortage is because there are not enough students studying courses that the economy needs. While comparatively high numbers of students by international standards study at level 6 (ordinary/bachelor degree or equivalent), fewer students undertake technical study at levels 3, 4 or 5.¹¹ Ensuring there are high quality technical routes post-18 is the task of the Review of Higher Technical Education (level 4 and 5), but we also need the right mix of qualifications available earlier in the system.

The Sainsbury Review stressed the importance of having clear choices between high quality academic and technical routes. As the Commission for Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning concluded, students deserve technical qualifications that provide “a clear line of sight to work”. The current system not only has a large number of qualifications (more than 12,000 at level 3 and below including over 4,000¹² at level 3 alone), it has a number of different types of qualifications, adding further to the choice and complexity in the system. The evidence set out by the Wolf and Sainsbury Reviews underpins our move to a coherent system of technical education based on employer-led standards. This will ensure students gain the skills in demand by employers and that our skills system is responsive to the needs of the future economy.

There are also good reasons to look at the qualifications that students are using to enter higher education. Evidence around qualifications such as AGQs¹³ and BTECs finds that while they generally provide positive impacts for students in terms of progression to HE, wage returns and employment, these benefits are generally exceeded by those on A levels – even after controlling for background characteristics such as prior GCSE attainment, SEND and ethnicity:

⁹ Winterbotham and others (2018). ‘Employer Skills Survey 2017 – UK Findings’

¹⁰ Pearson and others (2018). ‘Educating for the Modern World – CBI / Pearson Education and Skills Annual Report’.

¹¹ OECD Education at a Glance (2018). ‘Educational attainment and labour market status: share of population by educational attainment’.

¹² ESFA funded qualifications as of May 2020, excluding A/AS levels.

¹³ Applied General qualifications (AGQs) are qualifications included in post-16 performance measures and are explicitly designed to support HE entry. They may include Pearson BTECs as well as qualifications developed by other awarding organisations, such as OCR Cambridge Technicals.

- After controlling for prior attainment, students holding just A levels are more likely to progress to HE than those holding just AGQs. On average, students holding just AGQs were 17 percentage points less likely to progress to HE, than students holding just A levels. However, amongst those in the lower prior attainment categories (i.e. an average GCSE grade of less than 5.2), those holding a combination of A levels and AGQs are more likely to progress to HE than those holding A levels alone¹⁴.
- Students who entered with just BTECs are almost twice as likely to drop out before their second year compared to similar students who have just A levels, around 1.7 times more likely to repeat their first year and around 1.4 times more likely to graduate below a 2:1, after controlling for prior attainment and other demographic variables¹⁵.
- 71% of entrants holding BTECs with D*D*D* (D is “distinction”) go on to get a first or upper second degree, a lower rate than those entering with A level grades of CCD (75%). For context, around 95% of those entering holding A levels at grades of A*A*A* achieve a first or upper second degree¹⁶.
- After controlling for time spent in higher education, graduates with older style BTEC qualifications have become increasingly less likely over time, relative to A level students, to be in full-time employment, in a ‘highly skilled occupation’ and to be earning over £20,000 per year¹⁷.
- Evidence shows that holding a health and social care or health studies BTEC appears to be a disadvantage for students studying nursing degrees, in terms of both dropout and graduating with below a 2:1, compared with someone with BTEC, or mixed BTEC and A level qualifications in a different subject¹⁸.

This evidence highlights the variation in quality of current qualifications on offer and the benefits they are delivering for students in terms of progression and outcomes at higher education. We want students to be able to access the best HE options possible. While the evidence shows that alternatives to HE are working for some students, particularly as part of mixed programmes, we must ensure that qualifications are adding value to the A level offer and will deliver for students.

¹⁴ Sixth Form College Association, (2019) [‘Six Dimensions Report Chapter 5: Saving General Applied’](#)

¹⁵ Dilnot et al, (2022) ‘Educational Choices at 16-19 and University Outcomes’

¹⁶ Office for Students, (2021) [‘Difference in Student Outcomes’](#)

¹⁷ Ofqual, (2018) [‘An exploration of grade inflation in ‘older style’ level 3 BTEC Nationals’](#)

¹⁸ Dilnot et al, (2022) ‘Educational Choices at 16-19 and University Outcomes’

T Levels

T Levels are the centrepiece of our reforms at level 3. They are world-class programmes developed with over 250 leading employers to the same quality standards as apprenticeships and include a real world nine-week industry placement, setting them apart from many existing vocational qualifications. They have been designed drawing from best practice internationally, including the course structure, employer led design and industry placement component.

They have a range of benefits that will ensure more young people gain the skills and knowledge in demand by employers as set out below.

The breadth and depth of T Levels is unmatched. T Levels offer a broad course content, giving students a thorough understanding of the sector – and an occupational specialism to develop the knowledge and skills needed to work in specific occupations.

T Levels are based on the same occupational standards as apprenticeships. By giving employers the lead in designing T Levels, we believe that this sets them apart from many current vocational qualifications and will produce a highly skilled workforce that will support economic growth.

The rigour of T Levels, combined with the 9 week industry placement in a genuine workplace, will equip more young people with the skills, knowledge and experience necessary to access skilled employment or further technical study.

T Levels are challenging qualifications, and we are unapologetic about this. They are designed with leading employers, have significantly longer teaching hours and include a meaningful nine-week industry placement. All students deserve to be able to take rigorous qualifications and we are committed to ensuring that T Levels are accessible to all young people, including those with SEND.

We are clear that T Levels should be accessible to as many students as possible. Many measures are in place to achieve this as set out above and we have also introduced the T Level Transition Programme, which is a new high-quality preparatory programme for T Levels, for those students who need this first. However, our reforms are ambitious and are built around quality so it is essential to get this right. This is why we have decided to allow, as announced in November 2021, an extra year before introducing reformed qualifications and removing public funding from those that overlap with T Levels.

This extra year will allow us to continue to work hard to support the growth of T Levels and gives more notice to providers, awarding organisations, employers, students, and parents so they can prepare for the changes.

The requirement for every T Level to include a quality work placement is critical. We recognise that delivering this as T Levels scale is far from trivial. We are working closely with providers and employers on the ground to ensure every T Level student is able to access a quality industry placement.

The Post-16 Review of Qualifications at Level 3 and Below

The sections above set out the rationale for making changes to qualifications at level 3 and below. We set out our final plans for change in 2021 following two public consultations. The Department is streamlining and improving the quality of the post-16 level 3 system.

We are strengthening the pathways to progression, creating clearly defined academic and technical routes with qualifications leading to further study, and/or skilled employment. This clarity of purpose will provide students with a range of good options and allow them to see more easily how their study will help them to progress.

In addition to clarity of purpose, all qualifications in future will need to meet new quality standards and demonstrate their necessity, showing where they will add value to the T Level and A level offer. Ofqual and the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education have a key role in this and is covered in more detail later in this pack.

As T Levels become widely available, we will remove 16-19 funding approval from technical qualifications that overlap with them, which will help to simplify the market and provide students with high quality qualifications.

We will fund two groups of technical qualifications alongside T Levels for 16 to 19 year olds.

- The first will be qualifications in areas where there isn't a T Level. To make sure they are valued by employers, these qualifications will need to give people the knowledge, skills and behaviours described in an employer-led occupational standard that is not covered by a T Level.
- The second will be 'specialist' qualifications that develop more specialist skills and knowledge than could be acquired through a T Level alone, helping to protect the skills supply in more specialist industries and adding value to the T Level offer.

Employers will play a central role in deciding whether qualifications are necessary in both groups, with input fed through the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education.

The review has also considered the need for academic qualifications to sit alongside A levels and support students to enter HE. Whilst we want clearer, simpler choices for students, we are not moving towards a binary system of just A levels and T Levels. We will continue to fund some BTECs and other Applied General qualifications in future that can be taken as mixed programmes with A levels as well as a smaller number of large alternatives to

A levels. These qualifications will continue to play an important role for 16 to 19 year olds and adults as they do now.

We will fund small (one A level sized or smaller) qualifications that complement A levels, for example if they have more of a practical component, such as health and social care or engineering. It also includes those that are designed to enable progression to more specialist higher education (HE) courses.

We are also going to fund large qualifications that would typically make up a student's full programme of study and could be taken as an alternative to A levels, if they give access to specialist HE courses such as those with high levels of practical content. They will be in subject areas less well-served by A levels and will not overlap with a T Level e.g. creative and performing arts. We will also continue to fund the International Baccalaureate diploma, to be taken as an alternative programme to A levels.

Progression into HE

The changes we are introducing to level 3 academic qualifications will ensure that all options available to students are high quality, serve a clear purpose, and can deliver good outcomes for students in terms of progression to HE.

There will be a range of qualifications available for students to take to access HE courses in future. On the academic side this includes A levels and qualifications such as BTECs and others similar to current AGQs which can be taken in combination with A levels or as an alternative where there is a need for skills and knowledge to support progression to HE. Students will also be able to use T Levels, which carry UCAS points, as a springboard to higher education, including to higher technical qualifications and undergraduate degrees in related fields. Over 80 higher education providers have already confirmed that they will consider T Levels for entry into higher education in 2022. We expect that number to grow as T Levels become more established in the technical education system and are rolled out in more subjects

To support students, schools and colleges with understanding options for progression into higher education from T Levels, we have published a list of higher education providers who have confirmed that they will consider T Levels for entry onto at least one course at their institution.

High quality careers advice and guidance and will be important in supporting students to make good decisions about their choice of qualifications, ensuring the routes students take open up the best opportunities for progression.

The Government is also reforming the level 4/5 market to grow provision and uptake of high-quality level 4/5, such as Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs). This year we have approved 30 digital higher technical qualifications

for first teaching in September 2022, and by 2025 these qualifications will be rolled out across all technical routes and we are taking forward a range of measures to achieve this, including funding to support HTQ rollout, national comms campaigns and improved information, advice, and guidance. In particular, T levels offer an ideal route to HTQs, as well as skilled employment and degree level study.

We are clear that the traditional 3-year degree route is not the only pathway to success and that non-degree routes can be a viable and often better choice for some students. We want to make sure that students, regardless of their level of education, are equipped with the skills they need to progress, on whichever pathway suits them best.

Apprenticeships

In contrast with other components of our post-16 skills offer, apprenticeships are paid jobs with a twelve month minimum duration, created by employers, with sustained on and off-the-job training designed to give an apprentice full competence in an employer-defined occupation.

This government's reforms have made apprenticeships a high-quality option for young people, equipping them with the skills employers have told us they need and supporting them on the path to successful careers. 159,700 16–24-year-olds started an apprenticeship in the 2020/21 academic year, 50% of all apprenticeship starts that year.¹⁹ As announced at Spending Review, apprenticeships funding will grow from £2.5 billion to £2.7 billion by 2024-25, supporting more apprenticeship starts for people of all ages.

Employer-designed apprenticeship standards are available at all levels and in all sectors of the economy, ensuring a wide variety of options for young people. There are currently 644 standards approved for delivery, 349 of which are at Levels 2 and 3.²⁰ Employers continue to develop new apprenticeships to meet their skills needs, including in sectors with skills shortages and in crucial and growing areas like the green economy, supporting more apprentices to gain skills relevant for the future.

Rigorous end-point assessment gives the employer, and future employers, confidence that an apprentice is occupationally competent. Apprenticeships can include qualifications if they are a regulatory requirement for the occupation, or a requirement of a professional body for professional registration relevant to the occupation. Indeed, young people can study for degree and degree-level apprenticeships and it is encouraging to see that in 2020/21, 15,022 under 25s started Level 6+ apprenticeships, an increase from 10,973 in 2018/19.

We know that apprenticeships have positive outcomes and offer good wage returns. Upon completion, 91% of apprentices go into work or further training

¹⁹ [Apprenticeships and traineeships, Academic Year 2020/21 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](#)

²⁰ [Apprenticeship standards / Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education](#)

with 89% in sustained employment.²¹ Median earnings for an apprentice completing at Level 3 were £17,220 one year on, rising to £21,990 five years on.²²

We are confident that apprenticeships already provide a high-quality offer, but we want to go further to support more employers and young people to benefit from them and to ensure that every apprentice has a high-quality experience.

We are supporting employers to offer more apprenticeships to young people through encouraging more flexible training models such as front-loaded, accelerated apprenticeships, flexi-job apprenticeships and by developing occupational traineeships. These innovative training models will also support more employers, for example in sectors where short-term, project-based employment is the norm, to make greater use of apprenticeships. We also continue to provide additional funding to support employers and training providers who take on apprentices aged 16 to 18.

In addition, we have set out in the Skills for Jobs White Paper how we will go further to drive up quality. This includes investing in a comprehensive package of professional development available to all apprenticeship providers and their workforces; extending Ofsted's remit to inspect apprenticeships at all levels; and introducing a new risk-based accountability approach, comprising a wider set of quality measures to support provider improvement and more timely intervention.²³

Ofsted will continue to undertake monitoring visits of new apprenticeship providers to provide additional quality assurance. We are strengthening the external quality assurance of end-point assessment organisations by transitioning this activity to Ofqual. Where an apprenticeship standard is an integrated degree, external quality assurance will be undertaken by the Office for Students.

We continue to encourage more young people to consider apprenticeships through our Apprenticeship Support & Knowledge programme which reached over 600,000 students across England in the last academic year.

Traineeships

Traineeships support young people who are further away from the labour market to gain the skills they need, including through a work experience placement, so they can progress into an apprenticeship or other employment. As announced at Spending Review, we are making funding available for up to 72,000 traineeship places over the next three years to support the largest-ever expansion of traineeships.

²¹ [Further education: outcome-based success measures, Academic Year 2018/19 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](#)

²² [Further education: outcome-based success measures, Academic Year 2018/19 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](#)

²³ [Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

The latest figures show that 63% of trainees continue into sustained employment including apprenticeships and/or learning and we are enhancing our traineeships offer to support more young people to positive destinations.²⁴ We are introducing occupational traineeships, aligned to apprenticeship standards, in sectors such as construction, transport & logistics, nuclear, manufacturing, and social care, to significantly increase progression opportunities for young people.

The Role of Ofqual and the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE)

Qualifications, examinations and assessments in England are regulated by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual). Ofqual is independent of ministers and directly accountable to Parliament. We understand that Ofqual plans to also submit evidence to the committee.

Its statutory responsibilities include making sure that regulated qualifications reliably indicate the knowledge, skills and understanding students have demonstrated; assessments and exams show what a student has achieved; and people have confidence in regulated qualifications and assessments.

Ultimately Ofqual ensures that qualifications are high-quality and trustworthy. Ofqual controls entry to the regulated market, creates rules and provides guidance for awarding organisations to ensure regulated qualifications are fit for purpose, valid and delivered safely. Ofqual monitors qualifications as they are delivered and conducts evaluations of how qualifications function to ensure they are meeting the needs of users and are being delivered safely and efficiently. Where appropriate, Ofqual use the reform of qualifications as an opportunity to ensure that qualifications are well designed, threats to validity are minimised, and risks to safe delivery are anticipated and mitigated.

Overseeing the qualifications system is a significant undertaking – at the end of March 2021, Ofqual regulated 161 awarding organisations and nearly 12,000 qualifications for which certificates were issued in 2020. These include GCSEs, AS and A levels, Functional Skills, technical qualifications in T levels and a wide range of other qualifications. By the end of March 2021, they were also providing external quality assurance (EQA) for 100 new apprenticeship assessment standards, External Quality Assurance (EQA) ensures that end-point assessment organisations (EPAOs) all work to a high standard and that an apprentice would get the same result from their end-point assessment (EPA) regardless of the EPAO. IfATE is moving to a model whereby the majority EQA for standards will be delivered by Ofqual.

All new qualifications will need to meet new quality criteria to be approved for funding in future. The full range of qualifications that will be funded in future will depend on the outcome of the new approvals process we are putting in place through the post-16 qualifications review. Qualifications will need to

²⁴ [Further education: outcome-based success measures, Academic Year 2018/19 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/explore-education-statistics)

demonstrate their necessity and meet new quality standards. These standards are currently in development and will be published later in 2022. The Department is working with IfATE and Ofqual to develop these criteria. There will be opportunities for schools, colleges and awarding organisations to contribute through the activities being led by Institute and Ofqual.

IfATE is an independent, employer-led organisation and its key purpose is to ensure that the technical education and training within its remit equips learners with the skills they need to progress into skilled occupations. It has responsibility for approving and maintaining occupational standards, which are developed with groups of employers and set out the knowledge, skills and behaviours required for competence in an occupation. It also has responsibility for approving apprenticeship end-point-assessment plans and technical qualifications in line with standards.

IfATE currently approves T Level technical qualifications and Higher Technical Qualifications (at levels 4 and 5) in alignment with occupational standards. Going forward, all technical qualifications at level 3 will need to be approved by IfATE in order to be considered for public funding. To support these reforms, measures in the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill will enable IfATE to approve a broader range of technical qualifications than is possible under IfATE's current powers. The legislation will also embed the collaborative relationship between IfATE and Ofqual for the approval and regulation of technical qualifications, as well as support its effective quality assurance. This will streamline and reinforce the long-term stability of the regulatory framework for technical qualifications, and will create a single statutory approval gateway for the approval of technical qualifications via IfATE by taking technical qualifications out of scope for separate statutory accreditation by Ofqual.

For academic qualifications, the Department will set criteria to ensure all qualifications approved for funding are necessary alongside A levels. Ofqual will provide advice about quality to the Department which will take decisions about approving qualifications for funding. This will ensure that all qualifications are high quality and provide the skills needed to support progression either into skilled employment or further study.

Information and Guidance

In order to support young people to make the right choice it is essential that they have access to high-quality careers education, information, advice and guidance throughout their secondary education. Schools have a legal duty to secure independent careers guidance for year 8-13 pupils. For pupils of compulsory school age, this must include information on the full range of 16-18 education and training options, including apprenticeships.

The Government supports the Education (Careers Guidance in Schools) Bill, introduced by Mark Jenkinson MP, which passed Commons Committee Stage on 27 October 2021. The Bill is seeking to extend the careers duty to all pupils in state-funded secondary education and to establish consistency across

education settings by extending the duty to academy schools and alternative provision academies in England.

Schools are required to have regard to statutory guidance that underpins the duty. This is structured around what schools need to do to achieve the world-class Gatsby Benchmarks of Good Careers Guidance, the framework adopted by government for careers provision in secondary schools.²⁵

The provider access law (so-called Baker Clause) introduced in January 2018, requires all maintained schools and academies to publish a policy statement setting out opportunities for providers of technical education and apprenticeships to visit schools to talk to all year 8-13 pupils, and to make sure the statement is followed.

A January 2019 report by the Institute for Public Policy Research found that only 40% of schools were complying with the provider access legislation.²⁶ We are determined to take action so that all young people can learn about the exciting, high-quality opportunities that technical education and apprenticeships can offer.

Through the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill we aim to strengthen the legislation so all schools must offer at least three encounters with providers of technical education and apprenticeships for year 8-13 pupils. This is part of our 3-point-plan, announced in the Skills for Jobs white paper. We will also take tougher enforcement action and make careers support, funded through The Careers & Enterprise Company (CEC), conditional on compliance with the provider access duty.

The Government believes that support for schools is important to help bring about the step-change in careers provision for young people that we all want to see. We are investing £29.6m in 2021-22 to support schools and colleges to improve their careers programmes for young people. This includes £28m for CEC to rollout Careers Hubs across the country and deliver support to schools and colleges to implement the Gatsby Benchmarks.

We are providing funding to CEC during this financial year so that they can fulfil the important role we gave them - continuing to make progress on the ambitious 2017 careers strategy. CEC's Grant Funding Agreement sets out the objectives Government asks CEC to deliver in 2021-22, including:

- Building Networks by linking schools and colleges with employers and other external careers providers.
- Supporting Career Leaders, including providing Careers Leaders with training and support
- Backing the Gatsby Benchmarks and supporting the implementation of a best practice standard for careers support.

²⁵ (2021) <https://www.gatsby.org.uk/education/focus-areas/good-career-guidance>

²⁶ Institute for Public Policy Research (2019) [The Baker Clause One Year On](#)

Government is also investing over £18.5 million to support the full rollout of Careers Hubs across England, as recommended by the Augar report²⁷. They are a key driver of system change and support schools and colleges to use the Gatsby Benchmarks to drive accelerated improvements in careers education and improve skills and opportunities for young people.

Careers Hubs build on the support the Enterprise Adviser Network provides and the tried and tested model of partnership and collaboration. Hubs lead partnerships of secondary schools, colleges, employers, Local Enterprise Partnerships, local authorities, and careers providers to help young people connect closely to local skills and economic needs through a responsive careers education programme.

As set out in the Skills for Jobs white paper, we will accept the Post-18 Review Panel recommendation to complete the national rollout of Careers Hubs, digital support, Careers Leader training and the Enterprise Adviser Network to all secondary schools and colleges in England. This will continue to accelerate the progress of all schools and colleges towards achieving the Gatsby Benchmarks so that all young people are equipped to make informed career and learning decisions.

We want to create quality interactions between schools and businesses, and so we expect secondary schools to provide pupils with at least one meaningful interaction with employers per pupil per year, with a particular focus on STEM employers. The Careers & Enterprise Company connects schools and colleges with employers to provide meaningful encounters with the world of work for young people. They do this through their Enterprise Adviser Network, delivered in partnership with Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) who provide local tailoring aligned to skills and local labour market information.

As part of the Network, full-time Enterprise Coordinators are co-funded with LEPs and work with local clusters of up to 20 schools and colleges to help them build careers plans. They use these plans to make connections to local and national employers and businesses. A vital part of the Enterprise Coordinator role is to simplify the offer locally and help coordinate access for employers and providers into schools and colleges.

The Network is operating in all 38 Local Enterprise Partnerships and has grown rapidly. 4,000 senior business volunteers, Enterprise Advisers, have been recruited to work with schools and colleges to develop their career strategies and employer engagement plans.²⁸ Employers engaging in careers provision are making a difference to young people. 3.3 million young people are now having regular encounters with employers - up 70 per cent in 2 years²⁹

²⁷ Independent panel report to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding (2019), recommendation 2.11, pp.55-56.

²⁸ CEC 21-22 Q2 data

²⁹ [CEC Careers Education in England report 2020](#)

We will continue to consider what future investment the Government could make to support employer encounters. This would be based on evaluation of our existing investment and alongside our other priorities for careers.

Supporting Disadvantaged Groups, Students from Minority Ethnic Backgrounds, Known to the Care System, and Those with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities.

We believe that supporting students to make a choice at 16 between an excellent academic or an excellent technical route will prepare students better for the next phase of their lives. This is more important than ever as the economic downturn brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic is disproportionately affecting opportunities for young people and we need to support them to get ahead in their careers and achieve their full potential.

High-quality careers guidance that shows where different routes lead to is vital to help them make these choices. We also need to show where there is breadth of outcomes within routes, such as the opportunity to progress to relevant HE courses through T Levels.

To support as many students as possible to progress to level 3 and beyond, we need to ensure that approved qualifications are relevant, necessary and can lead to positive outcomes for all students, including those with SEND and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.³⁰ The impact assessment for the review of level 3 qualifications gave a full view of the ways in which the changes might affect different student groups³¹. Students from SEND (special educational needs and disability) backgrounds, white Asian ethnic groups, and males could be particularly impacted by the proposals. We also concluded that students from disadvantaged backgrounds could also particularly benefit. This is because students from these backgrounds are disproportionately highly represented on qualifications likely to be replaced by higher quality qualifications.

Overall, we expect that the impact of the review on vulnerable and disadvantaged groups will be positive because they will benefit from studying higher quality qualifications which will lead to better outcomes. The policies and changes described above that aim to support as many students as possible to achieve will benefit all student groups, including those with lower prior attainment and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

We understand that raising the quality bar at level 3 will mean more rigorous and stretching qualifications for some. However, we believe this is the right thing to do. Those students who are most likely to be affected by changes have the most to gain. This is because they are more likely to be taking qualifications that are not currently delivering the skills that employers really want or offering them the best preparation for further study.

We have made a number of changes to our plans following extensive consultation to help to ensure that the review delivers its intended benefits.

³⁰ www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-post-16-qualifications-at-level-3-in-england

³¹ www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-post-16-qualifications-at-level-3-in-england

- Our final plans for reform of level 3 qualifications set out a broader range of situations where we see a role for qualifications to sit alongside A levels and T Levels, including allowing 1 A level sized academic qualifications that have some overlap with A levels, such as IT or applied science. This will allow a broader range of students to access particular routes and help to support access into high value HE courses. These qualifications will still need to be high quality and demonstrate where they can add value to an A Level programme.
- We are removing the level 2 English and maths exit requirement for students who take T Levels, so they can still achieve their T Level even if they do not achieve a level 2 in English and maths after finishing their T Level. This will bring T Levels into line with other Level 3 classroom-based programmes, like A Levels. This will reduce the risk that talented students cannot access T Levels simply because of the additional hurdle that achieving level 2 in English and maths represents.
- We are allowing an extra year before our reform timetable is implemented. The extra year means that we will remove 16-19 funding approval for qualifications that overlap with wave 1 and 2 T Levels from academic year 2024/25, and from wave 3 and 4 T Levels from academic year 2025/26, giving all T Level providers a year of delivery before funding is removed. This will give schools and colleges more time to prepare for change and for delivering new or revised qualifications to a broad range of students.

We have made changes to T Level English and maths exit requirements which will make the T level more accessible. These are; the T Level Transition Programme which will support students not quite ready to start a T level at 16 to progress onto one a year later; or the wider impact of improvements to the quality of level 2 qualifications. We are committed to ensuring that T Levels are accessible to all young people and have introduced flexibilities for students with SEND.

Whilst we want as many students as possible to progress to level 3 and beyond, for some level 2 may be the most appropriate route into a sustainable and fulfilling career. We want these students to move into the best possible employment opportunity, including via an apprenticeship, traineeship or supported internship – one that is skilled, sustainable, and allows for career progression through a system of employer-led occupational standards. The level 2 and below consultation will set out our proposals in this space.

T Level Transition Programme

We are phasing the rollout of the T Level Transition Programme alongside T Levels. The programme will provide a high-quality route onto T Levels. It is aimed at students with the potential to progress onto a T Level, who would benefit from additional study time and preparation before they start their T Level. We have recently redeveloped the programme, working with a wide

range of early T Level Transition Programme providers, other education providers, employers, education specialists and other sector stakeholders.

This has ensured the programme focuses on developing a broad range of knowledge, skills and behaviours that providers and employers have said are important preparation to help students not only progress onto, but also succeed on, their chosen T Level route. This includes new nationally-set, industry-relevant introductory technical content relevant to their chosen route.

We have also made recent changes to make T Levels accessible to a broader range of students. English and maths are critical elements of T Level programmes – as they are in all post-16 study. All students must continue to study English and maths if they haven't achieved level 2 by age 16. However, we do not want to unnecessarily inhibit talented students from accessing T Levels simply because of the additional hurdle that reaching level 2 in English and maths represents. We are therefore changing our exit requirements for students who take T Levels. They will not fail if they do not reach level 2 in English and maths after finishing their T Level.

Supporting Students with SEND

We are committed to reforming the post-16 skills system to drive improvements for all students, including those with SEND. This is particularly important as we know the cohort below level 3 is very diverse and students from the most deprived areas, as well as those with SEND, are disproportionately represented at level 2 and below. Statistics on this are as follows:

31% of 16 to 19 year old enrolments at level 2, 36% at level 1 and 37% at entry level represent students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. This compares to 18% at level 3 and 22% across the whole 16-19 cohort at level 3 and below.

23% of 16 to 19 year old enrolments at level 2, 35% at level 1 and 36% at entry level are from students who receive Special Educational Needs (SEN) support or have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). This compares to 6% of enrolments at level 3 and 12% across the whole 16-19 cohort at level 3 and below.

We are committed to improving the design and accessibility of technical education routes, progression, and work experience to meet the needs of all students, including those with SEND. The Skills Bill places a duty on all colleges in the statutory sector to review their provision, at least once every three years, to ensure that the education and training provided meets the needs of all students in the local area – including the needs of learners with SEND.

Colleges must use their best endeavours to secure the special educational provision called for by the student's special educational needs. In addition, colleges also have duties and obligations under the Equality Act 2010 to

ensure that they are acting inclusively and not discriminating against disabled students. As with other FE providers, they are obliged to make reasonable adjustments to prevent disabled students being placed at a substantial disadvantage. With the right preparation and support, the overwhelming majority of students with SEND are capable of sustained, paid employment. Some students, including those with SEND, may benefit from completing a transition year before progressing onto T Levels. Details of the T Level Transition Programme are included in a previous section of this document.

The National Disability Strategy, published in July 2021, sets out how government will help level up opportunity and improve the everyday experience of disabled people, including through improving inclusion in the workplace, to tackle the disability employment gap. We committed in the Strategy to supporting pathways to employment for disabled learners, including strengthening the Supported Internship programme and ensuring that Traineeships and Apprenticeships are accessible. Supported Internships are a work-based study programme for young people aged 16 to 24 who have an Education Health and Care (EHC) plan, designed to equip young people with the skills they need to secure and sustain paid employment through learning in the workplace, with support from a qualified job coach. They usually last for one year and include extended work placements of at least six months.

Students Known to the Care System

The government is committed to ensuring that looked-after and previously looked-after children are supported to succeed in education. We do not expect to see a disproportionate impact of this review on students known to the care system except where they fall into another group.

The government has put in place measures like the Virtual School Head and designated teacher for looked after children and extra funding to meet their needs through the Pupil Premium Plus, care leavers apprenticeship bursary and HE bursary. Research by the Rees Centre on the GCSE outcomes of looked-after children who took their GCSEs in 2013 showed that those who were looked after for at least 12 months performed better than children in need and those looked after for less than 12 months. This suggests that care can act as a protective factor educationally.

Pupil premium funding is additional funding for schools to close the attainment gap between children eligible for this funding and others. Looked-after children have been eligible for this funding since it was introduced in 2011. In April 2014 the pupil premium plus for looked-after children was introduced. The current rate of pupil premium funding for looked-after children is £2,345, more than double the £900 it was in 2013-14.

Subject to there being financial need, looked-after children may be eligible for the 16-19 bursary for defined vulnerable groups; this can be up to £1,200. Looked-after children aged 16 or 17 and care leavers aged 16-24 who start apprenticeships are eligible for a one-off bursary of £1,000 to spend on the

costs of their transition into work and to support them in their first year of an apprenticeship. If care leavers are following a recognised course of higher education the local authority that formerly looked-after them must pay them a one-off HE bursary of £2,000.

The Experience to Date of Those Taking or Delivering T Levels.

We are in the initial stages of T Level implementation – the phased rollout began with 43 providers and 3 T Levels from 2020. As the rollout continues, we are seeing these numbers increase year on year. Over 100 providers are now offering ten T Levels, from 2022 this increases to nearly 200 providers and 16 T Levels. We have over 400 providers registered to deliver T Levels from 2023, when 23 T Levels will be available. The take-up of T Levels has been positive with around 1,300 students in the 2020/21 cohort and 5,500 in the 2021/22 academic year. Around 70 T Level providers are also delivering the T Level Transition Programme for the first four T Level routes – with around 3,550 students enrolled in academic year 2021/22 – and circa 50 further T Level providers have signed up to deliver the programme for the first time from September 2022. Overall, over 11,000 students have studied all or part of a T Level or Transition Programme course since they were launched in 2020.

To date, the collection of feedback from students and providers has been informal, through regular monitoring, stakeholder advisory groups and a student panel. We have asked Ofsted to carry out a Thematic Survey for T Levels and the T Level Transition Programme to provide comprehensive feedback from providers covering AY21/22 and AY22/23. Ofsted will complete 2 rounds of survey visits to providers, and we will publish an interim report in 2022, followed by a final report in 2023.

We set up the T Level Student Panel in early 2021 – enabling students to feed in their views on T Levels. The T Level Panel gives students a network to explore issues or concerns and discuss ideas for the future of T Levels and has given us valuable insight into their experience of studying T Levels. The Panel now includes students from both the 2020 and 2021 cohorts. Feedback from the panel has suggested that:

- Many students thought T Levels give greater independence, freedom to explore the subject and inject creativity
- Some students had experience of A Levels and felt that there is a big difference in how T Levels are delivered – with students reporting that they enjoy the practical elements of T Levels
- Because T Levels are industry focused, students had the opportunity to engage with employers from the sectors they were interested in which they found helpful
- Students felt they were getting valuable pre-work interview practice by applying for placements
- Students felt they would benefit from resources to support revision and exam practise. This feedback was passed to awarding organisations who have produced more resources

- Some students reported concerns that university websites were not mentioning T Levels as entry criteria – we are working with universities to ensure that this is mentioned by the over 80 higher education providers that have said they will consider T Levels for entry onto courses so far
- Students felt that some of the T Level course titles were misleading and were surprised by the content of some courses

Students have told us that they are enjoying their courses, in particular the industry placements:

Alex - T Level in Building Services Engineering for Construction: *I chose to study T Levels because of the focus on employment. We learn a wide range of skills that I know will come in handy during my career. The facilities are great and the teaching is fantastic, they make the course enjoyable as well as setting you up for the workplace.*

Daisy, studying Education and Childcare at Havant & South Downs College (HSDC) : *Being a part of something new was something really exciting to me, I knew my input would be valued and it would allow me to get more involved with my college and my classmates and the industry placement has been nothing short of fantastic.*

Anecdotal feedback from T Level providers suggests they view T Level qualifications as high quality:

T Level teacher at Bridgwater & Taunton College: *We've had all three (2020) T Levels running. It's been a really positive experience for the students and they've learnt an awful lot. I think what we've seen is how ambitious the T Levels are in terms of the knowledge and the curriculum so they've made great progress over the year. We are looking forward to next year. We've got Health coming on board and we have a great partnership with our NHS trust. They're placing all of our Health students, they're going to have their own uniform, they're going to be part of the workforce. They see them as their nurses of the future - from 16 they're going to take them into their workforce to train them.*

Ruth Coyle – Director of La Retraite Sixth Form: *I've talked to a lot of other providers about them and you know they really are the future for social mobility and improving skills in the workplace. We've had a really successful year with the digital, education and childcare, and construction course...the T Level students came back from their placement saying how much they've enjoyed their placement and they've done really well on the core exam.*

T Level Accessibility

We have put a number of measures in place to ensure that as many students as possible are able to access T Levels, including:

- The T Level qualification allows for reasonable adjustments to assessment to support fair access to attainment. This could include extending the time for examinations or finding other ways to assess students' performance – on an individual basis. T Level qualifications also include compensatory grading, whereby weaker performance in one area can be compensated by strong performance in another.
- The Maths and English T Level exit requirement has been removed. As per other post-16 study programmes, students that have not yet achieved Level 2 Maths and English will be required to continue to study towards them. Students with an EHCP are permitted flexibilities.
- The T Level Industry Placement allows for providers' on-site facilities (e.g. onsite restaurant) to be used for SEND students for a maximum of 105 hours of the placement if this is regarded as in their best interests and is carefully aligned to their learning goals and development objectives. Students with SEND can also benefit from splitting their placement across two employers; the inclusion of part-time work; and other policies designed to support access to placements.
- Guidance on supporting students with SEND has been published. This is clear that providers should work with employers to help them identify extra support that SEND students might need – e.g. specialist equipment or adaptations, changes to work patterns or timings etc. The guidance outlines that some SEND students may require a more intense programme of work preparation activities and are likely to need ongoing support during their placement. It also sets out that under the Equality Act, providers must make reasonable adjustments for disabled students to enable them to commence and perform their industry placements without substantial disadvantage in comparison with students who are not disabled.
- The T Level Transition Programme will provide a high-quality route onto T Levels for students with the potential to progress onto a T Level following additional study time and preparation before they start their T Level. Providers have the discretion to determine how best to ensure the programme meets the needs of their SEND students, in line with the broader study programme guidance. For students with an EHC plan this might mean delivering the T Level Transition Programme over a longer period of time.

Disadvantage block 2 funding provides funds to support students with additional needs including moderate learning difficulties and disabilities. The funding rate for block 2 disadvantage for T Level students will be £650, which is higher than for other study programmes, in recognition that T Levels are large, demanding programmes and that additional support will be needed for students with SEND, including when they are on an industry placement. This means that a T Level student, without both maths and English by the end of year 11, would attract £1300. Each T Level learner is funded for 150 Hours of pastoral and enrichment support, which could include ensuring learners (including those with disabilities, have the opportunity to participate in community initiatives.

Post-qualifications admission system

We want to improve the HE application and offer system in a way that ensures improved fairness and transparency. Reform could potentially tackle widely recognised problems with the current system, such as inaccurate predicted grades, the widespread use of unconditional offers, and lack of transparency.

However, post qualifications admissions is a significant reform to the current system and needs careful consideration. That is why, last year, we launched a consultation to consider the case for post qualification admissions. The consultation closed on 13 May.

We were very pleased with the level of engagement from across the education sector. We will be publishing analysis of the responses to the consultation, and a government response shortly.

In a PQA system, students could potentially make better informed decisions as they would already have achieved their Level 3 qualifications before receiving offers and deciding which ones to accept. It could help to counter undesirable offer making practices, such as 'conditional unconditional' offers which are more likely to be given to students in low participation areas (POLAR, Quintile 1) and accepted by those who are first in their families to attend HE.

PQA could ensure a more transparent system, removing barriers for applicants, often the most disadvantaged, who are more likely to struggle to navigate the system.

PQA would be a significant undertaking for a range of stakeholders across the education sector, including universities, schools, and FE colleges, exam boards and Ofqual, and the Student Loans Company and UCAS. It would also require students to adjust to a new way of applying and responding to offers, at a time when education and exam recovery need to be prioritised.

Other implementation challenges that PQA would present include:

- A compressed time period for applications and acceptances. This would affect all students, but particularly:
 - Disabled students, who require support to be agreed and put in place before they commence their studies
 - International students who need visas
 - Students who are preparing to study courses that require disclosure and barring clearance.
- It would be difficult to schedule interviews, admission tests and/ or auditions if students did not make applications until after Level 3 results day. This would have a particular impact on Oxbridge courses, medicine and a lot of creative arts provision. A significantly shortened

window for HE providers to make admissions decisions and prepare for the term ahead.

- Ensuring that any new system continues to work across the Devolved Administrations.

There are possible admissions reform options, such as working alongside external stakeholders, including UCAS and UUK, to make improvements and tackle problems at the root, e.g., reducing the use of unconditional offers, improving the accuracy of predicted grades, and reforming the personal statement, to ensure that it helps disadvantaged students present their achievements and potential in the best possible light.

While PQA is the dominant form for university admissions systems beyond the UK, the nature of post-16 education, the timings of the school year, and the scheduling of exams, vary greatly from one country to another. This needs to be taken into account when making comparisons and proposing any changes to our system on the basis of other countries' practices.

International Good Practice Examples of Systems for Post-16 Education and Qualifications.

The use of international evidence, drawing on good practice from around the world, is crucial in policymaking and programme design, and the Department for Education actively looks at what we can learn from other countries to support the education system in England at all educational stages. This allows us to compare ourselves to countries facing similar challenges, learn about different policy approaches and programme delivery, and explore good practice.

However, other countries' systems cannot simply be copied. National context is vitally important. The use of international evidence must take account of different factors including socio-economic conditions, education traditions, recent reform trajectories, labour market conditions and institutional arrangements.

Examples of DfE reforms that have been informed by international evidence and the results of international comparison studies include:

- The establishment of T-levels, which drew heavily on evidence from the Norwegian, Dutch and Swiss models, centred around the involvement of employers. Based on employer-led standards and with the inclusion of a substantial industry placement, T Levels are designed to provide the skills and knowledge needed for direct progression into skilled work.
- As part of the ongoing review of post-16 qualifications at level 3 and below, countries which are widely regarded as having high performing technical education systems, such as the Netherlands, Germany and Switzerland, show that it is possible to have a streamlined qualifications system focused on quality, not quantity, which aligns with employer needs and still offers sufficient flexibility to meet student need.
- The reforms to the national curriculum in 2014, to set world-class standards across all subjects, and to GCSEs from 2015-17 were both informed by international evidence, where we benchmarked our curriculum and more rigorous qualifications against high performing jurisdictions. Reforms to A and AS levels from 2015-17 were also informed by international evidence.
- In 2014, following evidence that highlighted the low literacy and numeracy skills of our young people compared to our international partners, the Department introduced a requirement for all 16 to 19 students to continue studying English and/or maths up to Level 2 if they had not achieved a GCSE grade 4 (previously a 'C') at 16. We have also put in place similar English and maths requirements for apprentices.
- Our recent Skills for Jobs White Paper looks at practice from countries with long-established technical education systems such as Germany and the Netherlands, and those which have implemented more recent reforms,

such as Ireland. We aim to emulate important aspects of the best performers' systems, understanding their social and economic contexts, and adapting to our own situation.

January 2022