

Research Briefing

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By Joe Lewis,  
Siobhan Wilson

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# The reform of level 3 qualifications in England

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## Summary

- 1 What are level 3 qualifications?
- 2 Background to the reforms
- 3 How will the new system work?
- 4 When will changes happen?
- 5 Reaction to the Government's reforms
- 6 The Advanced British Standard

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## Summary

The Department for Education is reforming level 3 qualifications to make A Levels and their new technical alternative T Levels the main further education qualification options at age 16 in England. Following a reformed approvals process, they will sit alongside complementary level 3 academic and technical qualifications deemed to meet new quality criteria. Apprenticeships will remain available as an alternative post-16 option.

### What are level 3 qualifications?

In England, Wales, and Northern Ireland there are [nine qualification levels](#), ranging from entry level (which has three sub-levels) to level 8. The higher the level, the more difficult the qualification. Level 3 qualifications are mainly taken by young people after their GCSEs (level 2).

The Department for Education (DfE) approves level 3 qualifications submitted by awarding bodies/organisations for public funding if they meet certain criteria. These are then included on the [Education and Skills Funding Agency's \(ESFA\) approved qualifications list](#). Further education providers receive funding from the ESFA to deliver level 3 qualifications on this list to their students as part of [study programmes, or T Level programmes](#).

Most young people pursuing a level 3 qualification in England are studying for AS/A Levels. Students interested in studying technical or vocational qualifications have generally taken Applied General qualifications, which include qualifications commonly known by their brand name, such as BTECs and Cambridge Technicals. Since September 2020, the Government has also begun rolling out [T Levels](#), which are two-year technical qualifications equivalent in size to three A Levels.

### How will the new system work?

Following a [consultation on post-16 qualifications at level 3](#) in 2020/21, the Government [published a policy statement in July 2021](#) saying it wanted to create “clearly defined academic and technical routes” for post-16 progression that sit alongside apprenticeships. The Government hopes the reforms will remove “[low-quality qualifications](#)” from the system, and ensure students have confidence in the outcomes of their choices.

A Levels will be central to the academic route, which is intended to lead to higher education study at university. T Levels will become the main

qualification option for the technical route and are intended to support progression into skilled employment (requiring specialist training or expertise), further technical study or apprenticeships, and potentially higher education courses.

Other level 3 qualifications, including applied general qualifications, will sit alongside A Levels and T Levels, but they will [need to demonstrate their quality and distinct purpose](#) to continue receiving public funding. Overlapping qualifications, including BTECs that overlap with T Level subjects, and those that do not meet the quality criteria for academic and technical qualifications set by the Department for Education and the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education respectively, will no longer receive public funding.

## When will changes happen?

### Phase 1: Defunding qualifications with low and no enrolments

The Department for Education has published a [list of the 5,500 qualifications at level 3 and below with low and no enrolments](#) for which funding was removed from August 2022 for new starts.

### Phase 2: Defunding qualifications that overlap with T Levels

T Levels are expected to be fully available across England by 2025. Under the current timetable, funding will be removed from overlapping qualifications in waves from August 2024. An overlapping qualification is a technical qualification with similar outcomes to a T Level.

In October 2022, the Department for Education published a [list of the 134 qualifications](#) that will have funding withdrawn from 2024 because they overlap with T Levels launched in waves one and two (digital; construction; education and childcare).

In October 2023, it published a [list of the 85 qualifications](#) that will lose funding from 2025 because they overlap with wave three T Levels (business and administration; engineering and manufacturing; finance and accounting).

### Phase 3: Quality review of remaining qualifications

The Department for Education has [published guidance on the third phase of its reforms](#), which explains the new funding approval process that most level 3 qualifications will need to go through in order to receive public funding alongside A Levels and T Levels. Reformed qualifications will, in future, be

approved for three years (rather than the current one-year cycle), unless there is a change in circumstances that means an earlier review is necessary.

In cycle 1, the Department for Education will approve level 3 ‘alternative academic’ and technical qualifications in subjects that complement wave one and two T Levels. These will be taught from September 2025. In May 2024, a list of qualifications approved for funding will be published. Awarding organisations will then be able to appeal, with a final list published in July 2024.

Cycle 2 will then cover all other level 3 qualifications to be funded and taught from September 2026, with a list of approved qualifications published in May 2025. Again, there will be an opportunity to appeal any decisions.

## Reaction to the reforms

The [Protect Student Choice campaign](#), which is a coalition of 30 organisations from across the education and employment sectors, has called on the Government to rethink its reforms to defunding level 3 qualifications. Arguments made against the Government’s reforms by the campaign and others include:

- The current three-route model (A Levels, technical qualifications that lead to a specific occupation, and applied general qualifications that combine practical skills with academic learning) works well and should be retained.
- T Levels are different qualifications that students will pursue for different reasons and should sit alongside the existing qualification offer.
- Removing funding from some BTECs may leave students without a viable progression pathway at age 16, including those from Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) backgrounds, Asian ethnic backgrounds, and disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Removing funding for BTECs may reduce participation in higher education among disadvantaged groups.
- The Government has used data “[in a partial and misleading way](#)” (PDF) to understate the performance of applied general qualifications and overstate the performance (and potential uptake) of T Levels.

In April 2023, following an inquiry into the future of post-16 qualifications, the House of Commons Education Committee [published a report that called for a “moratorium”](#) on the defunding of applied general qualifications, saying:

Tried and tested Applied General Qualifications should only be withdrawn as and when there is a robust evidence base proving that T Levels are

demonstrably more effective in preparing students for progression, meeting industry needs and promoting social mobility.

While the Education Committee did hear some support for the removal of funding from applied general qualifications, the vast majority of oral and written evidence it received was critical, and the report said it was rare for there to be such a consensus on a particular issue.

In June 2023, the Shadow Secretary of State for Education, Bridget Phillipson, pledged that the next Labour Government would [pause and review the removal of funding](#) from many level 3 qualifications.

## Advanced British Standard

Rishi Sunak first announced his ambition to overhaul 16 to 19 education as part of his unsuccessful bid for the Conservative Party leadership in 2022, when he outlined plans for a ‘British baccalaureate’.

On 4 October 2023, the Department for Education [published a policy paper on the Advanced British Standard \(ABS\)](#), which will be “a new Baccalaureate-style qualification that takes the best of A levels and T levels and brings them together into a single qualification.” It would be a post-16 option for students alongside apprenticeships.

The Advanced British Standard would consist of:

- A common core in which all students would study English and maths at an appropriate level and depth.
- A choice of academic and technical subjects that would be a mix of bigger and smaller subjects, called ‘majors’ and ‘minors’. Students typically doing three major subjects and two minor subjects.
- Non-qualification time which would include enrichment, pastoral, and employability activities for all students, and a relevant industry placement for students preparing for a technical occupation.

The Government has said it will take around a decade to implement the Advanced British Standard fully. It will launch a formal consultation on the approach and design of the new qualification in autumn 2023. This will inform a White Paper due to be published in 2024.

# 1

## What are level 3 qualifications?

Most qualifications have a difficulty level. In England, Wales, and Northern Ireland there are [nine qualification levels](#), ranging from entry level (which has three sub-levels) to level 8. The higher the level, the more difficult the qualification.

### Qualification levels

A list of qualification Levels and examples is available on GOV.UK at [What qualification levels mean](#). Examples of qualifications include:

- Entry Level: Skills for Life.
- Level 1: GCSE grades 3-1 (D-G).
- Level 2: GCSE grades 9-4 (A\*-C).
- Level 3: A Levels, AS Levels, T Levels, BTECs.
- Level 4: Higher National Certificate (HNC), Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE).
- Level 5: Higher National Diploma (HND), Level 5 Diploma, Foundation Degree.
- Level 6: Undergraduate Degree.
- Level 7: Master's Degree, Postgraduate Diploma.
- Level 8: Doctorate (for example, a PhD).

Level 3 qualifications are mainly taken by young people after their GCSEs (level 2), but some are also funded for adults.<sup>1</sup>

They can precede higher education qualifications at levels 4 and 5 (such as higher technical qualifications, including higher national certificates and higher national diplomas) and at level 6 (undergraduate degrees and [higher and degree apprenticeships](#)).

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Education, [Free courses for jobs](#) (accessed 31 October 2023)



## 1.1

## How are level 3 qualifications funded?

The Department for Education (DfE) approves qualifications submitted by awarding bodies/organisations for public funding if they meet certain criteria. These qualifications are then included on the Education and Skills Funding Agency's (ESFA) [List of Qualifications approved for funding](#).<sup>2</sup>

Further education providers receive funding from the ESFA to deliver qualifications on the approved qualification list to their students as part of [study programmes, or T Level programmes](#). These are tailored to each student's prior attainment and career goals and typically combine qualifications with other activities, such as work experience and sport.

### The National Funding Formula

A national funding formula is used to calculate annual funding allocations for most 16-19 further education providers in England (funding for special schools and special academies is calculated using student numbers only).

Among other things, the funding formula is based on:

- Student numbers at a provider
- National funding rates for study programmes and T Level programmes (determined by the size of a programme based on planned hours, the student's age, and whether the student has high needs. For example, the national annual funding rate for 16- and 17-year-olds studying 580+ hours is £4,753 in 2023/24.)
- Programme cost weightings to reflect the fact some courses are more expensive to teach than others (for example, academic study programmes with two or more science A Levels get an additional weighting of 10%).
- Disadvantage funding (this supports students from areas of economic deprivation and with low prior attainment)

This funding formula allocation is then supplemented by additional funding for [high needs students](#) and [financial support to help students with their education](#).

More information is available in the Commons Library briefing [Further education funding in England](#).

The principles and processes the DfE uses to approve qualifications for the ESFA list are set out in guidance.<sup>3</sup> This explains the common criteria that all

<sup>2</sup> Education and Skills Funding Agency, [List of Qualifications approved for funding](#)

<sup>3</sup> Department for Education, [Qualification funding approval: 2023 to 2024](#) (updated 28 September 2023)

qualifications need to meet to be approved for funding, as well as additional criteria for each specific funding offer, including the 16-19 offer (which funds qualifications for 16 to 19-year-olds) and the Advanced Learner Loan offer (which allows adult learners to take out a loan for approved level 3 to 6 qualifications).

In deciding whether to approve funding for a qualification, the DfE considers the “qualification’s title, level, size, sector subject area, operational start and end dates, as well as the qualification specification published by the awarding organisation.”<sup>4</sup>

## 1.2 What level 3 qualifications do young people take?

Most young people pursuing a level 3 qualification in England are studying academic qualifications, with AS/A Levels the most popular. These qualifications help students to progress into further study in higher education. In 2021, of the 885,000 16- and 17-year-olds studying for a level 3 qualification (68.8% of the total 16- and 17-year old population), 612,000 were studying at least one AS/A Level (47.6% of the total 16- and 17-year old population).<sup>5</sup>

Students interested in studying technical or vocational qualifications have generally taken Applied General qualifications, which include qualifications commonly known by their brand name, such as BTECs and Cambridge Technicals, or Tech Level qualifications. Some students combine A Levels with Applied General qualifications. Since September 2020, the Government has also begun rolling out [T Levels](#), which are two-year technical level 3 qualifications equivalent in size to three A Levels. In 2021, there were 113,000 16- and 17-year-olds studying an Applied General qualification (8.8%), 45,000 (3.5%) studying Tech Level qualifications and 5,750 (0.4%) on T Levels.<sup>6</sup>

The following chart shows the relative number of students taking each different type of level 3 qualification.

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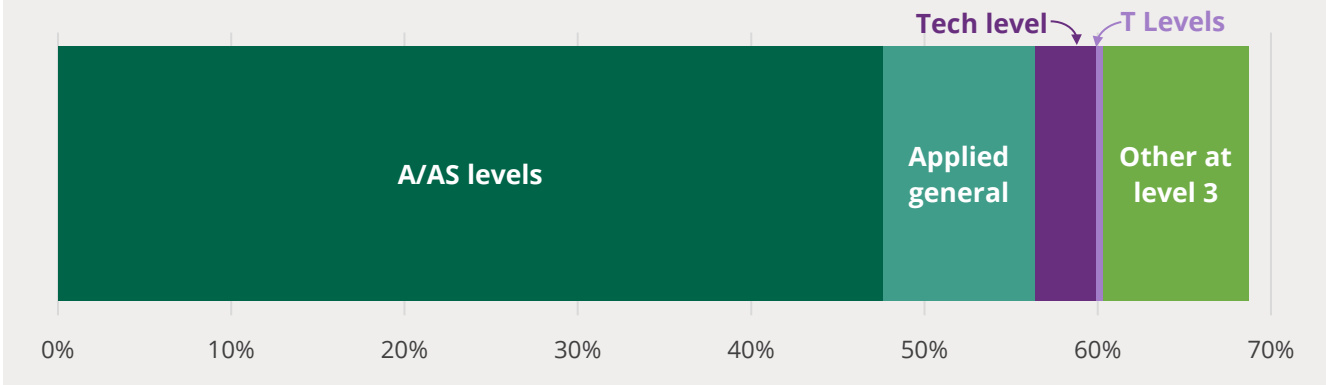
<sup>4</sup> Department for Education, [List of Qualifications approved for funding. Further Information](#)

<sup>5</sup> Department for Education, [Participation in education, training and employment age 16 to 18 2021](#), 30 June 2022

<sup>6</sup> Department for Education, [Participation in education, training and employment age 16 to 18 2021](#), 30 June 2022

## Highest qualification aim of level 3 students, England 2021

Full- and part-time students aged 16-17, percentage of their age group



Source: Department for Education, [Participation in education, training and employment age 16 to 18 2021](#), 30 June 2022.

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## 2 Background to the reforms

### 2.1 Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education (2016)

In November 2015, an Independent Panel on Technical Education was established by the then-Minister for Skills, Nick Boles. The Panel was chaired by Lord Sainsbury (and hence generally referred to as the ‘Sainsbury Review’) and tasked with advising the Government on actions to improve the quality of technical education in England.

In April 2016, the [Panel completed its report](#) (PDF) and it was published by the Government in July 2016. In setting out the need for reform, the report said the UK’s economy was being held back by a “long-term productivity problem” and years of undertraining had led to “a chronic shortage of people with technician-level skills.”<sup>7</sup> The report argued investment in the development of technical skills was essential to enhancing productivity.

In addition to this economic rationale for reform, the report outlined a social need for change. It said individuals should have access to a national system of technical qualifications that is:

- easy to understand
- has credibility with employers
- remains stable over time.<sup>8</sup>

The current system, the report argued, failed on all three counts, comprising “a confusing and ever-changing multitude of qualifications”, many of which “hold little value in the eyes of individuals and are not understood or sought by employers.”<sup>9</sup>

#### Recommendations

The Panel put forward 34 recommendations in its report, which were aimed at “systematically reform[ing] technical education for the long term” and

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<sup>7</sup> Department for Education, [Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education](#) (PDF), July 2016, p22

<sup>8</sup> Department for Education, [Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education](#) (PDF), July 2016, pp22-3

<sup>9</sup> Department for Education, [Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education](#) (PDF), July 2016, p23

“ensuring individuals can develop the technical knowledge and skills that industry needs through education and training.”<sup>10</sup>

The recommendations included the introduction of a new framework of 15 technical education routes, which would “provide training for skilled occupations where there is a substantial requirement for technical knowledge and practical skills.”<sup>11</sup>

The report also said the Government should develop a “coherent technical education option which develops the technical knowledge and skills required to enter skilled employment, which leads from Levels 2/3 to Levels 4/5 and beyond”.<sup>12</sup>

Alongside an employment-based mode of learning (typically an apprenticeship), the report said a college-based technical education option should also be available:

[T]his is typically a two-year, full-time study programme which should include work placements appropriate to the technical education route and individual student.<sup>13</sup>

The report said while it would be necessary for the Government to design the overall system of technical education, “employer-designed standards must be put at its heart to ensure it works in the marketplace.”<sup>14</sup>

## 2.2

### The Post-16 Skills Plan (2016)

Alongside the publication of the report by the Independent Panel on Technical Education, the Government published its Post-16 Skills Plan in July 2016, which accepted the Panel’s recommendations and committed to their implementation.<sup>15</sup> A [document outlining the rationale for the proposed changes](#), which echoed much of the arguments set out by the Independent Panel’s report, was also published.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Department for Education, [Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education](#) (PDF), July 2016, p8

<sup>11</sup> Department for Education, [Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education](#) (PDF), July 2016, p10

<sup>12</sup> Department for Education, [Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education](#) (PDF), July 2016, pp22-23

<sup>13</sup> Department for Education, [Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education](#) (PDF), July 2016, p9

<sup>14</sup> Department for Education, [Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education](#) (PDF), July 2016, p9

<sup>15</sup> Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and Department for Education, [Post-16 Skills Plan](#), July 2016

<sup>16</sup> Department for Business, Innovation & Skills and Department for Education, [Technical education reform: the case for change](#), July 2016

The Plan outlined the Government’s desire for academic and technical options at age 16 to be held in similar esteem. Under the proposed reforms, every young person would be presented with two educational choices at age 16: an academic route and a technical route. The Skills Plan argued the academic option is “already well regarded” and so focused on developing a reformed technical option, which, it said, “must also be world-class.”<sup>17</sup>

The Plan said:

Our ambition is that every young person, after an excellent grounding in the core academic subjects and a broad and balanced curriculum to age 16, is presented with two choices: the academic or the technical option. The academic option is already well regarded, but the technical option must also be world-class. As with the reforms in higher education, we want to improve both the quality of education and student choice. There should be appropriate bridging courses to make movement between the two options easily accessible.

The technical option will prepare individuals for skilled employment which requires technical knowledge and practical skills valued by industry. It will cover college-based and employment-based (apprenticeship) education, building on our apprenticeship reforms.

Employers will sit at the heart of the system and take the lead in setting the standards. Crucially, standards will be designed by considering what is needed to move to skilled employment and then working backwards.<sup>18</sup>

As proposed by the Panel, the Government committed to developing high-quality, two-year, college-based programmes for 16–18-year-olds, which would sit within 15 technical education routes. The Plan said each programme would comprise a ‘common core’, including English and maths requirements and digital skills, and “quality work placements”.<sup>19</sup>

## Introduction of T Levels

These proposals were developed into T Levels, which have been rolled out in waves since September 2020, and are due to be fully available from September 2025.

T Levels all follow the same broad framework and primarily consist of:

- **A technical qualification.** This is the main, classroom-based element and includes core content followed by occupational specialisation. Students will learn about their chosen sectors through a curriculum designed by employers and developed by an awarding organisation.

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<sup>17</sup> Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and Department for Education, [Post-16 Skills Plan](#), July 2016, p7

<sup>18</sup> Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and Department for Education, [Post-16 Skills Plan](#), July 2016, p7

<sup>19</sup> Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and Department for Education, [Post-16 Skills Plan](#), July 2016, p24

- **An industry placement with an employer.** This runs for a minimum of 315 hours (45 days) overall and will give students practical insights into their sector and an opportunity to embed the knowledge and skills learned in the classroom.
- **English and maths provision.** This is built into the classroom-based element of the T Level with the aim of giving those students who need it a solid foundation of transferable skills.

More information is available in the Commons Library briefing [Technical education in England: T Levels](#).

## Previous reforms: 14-19 Diplomas

14-19 Diplomas were introduced in 2008 following recommendations in the [Tomlinson Report on 14-19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform](#) (PDF), which was published in 2004. Designed with employers, diplomas aimed to increase post-16 participation in education by providing learners with a qualification that combined academic study and work-orientated skills.

Subjects covered by the diplomas included Engineering; IT; Society, Health and Development; Construction and the Built Environment; and Creative and Media. The three main components of the qualification were principal learning (a single qualification, based on the chosen specialism), generic learning (functional skills in English, Mathematics, ICT, and work experience) and additional learning (other qualifications such as GCSEs or A Levels).

The House of Commons Education and Skills Committee [published a report on 14-19 Diplomas](#) (PDF) in May 2007.<sup>20</sup> OCR awarded its final 14-19 Diplomas in July 2014.

## Diplomas and T Levels

The Government has argued T Levels are better placed to succeed than 14-19 Diplomas because:

- Diplomas lacked a clear purpose and tried to chart a ‘middle course’ between vocational and academic qualifications and so were not widely taken up.
- Only some of the recommendations of the Tomlinson Report were implemented, which led to Diplomas adding “a layer of complexity” to the existing system rather than simplifying it. In contrast, all the recommendations of the 2016 Sainsbury Review are being implemented, “making T Levels part of a new, streamlined technical option.”

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<sup>20</sup> House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, [14-19 Diplomas](#) (PDF), 17 May 2007, HC 249 Fifth Report of Session 2006-07

- Diplomas were broadly relevant to whole sectors and did not reflect the specific skills that employers wanted. T Levels set out to equip young people with the skills needed to enter skilled employment.<sup>21</sup>

## 2.3

### Review of post-16 qualifications at level 3 and below (2019)

Between March and June 2019, the Department for Education consulted on the principles that should apply to level 3 qualifications and below in England.<sup>22</sup>

The Department for Education said its aim was to create “a more streamlined, simplified and ambitious technical qualifications system”, in which all publicly funded qualifications demonstrated the principles of “quality, purpose, necessity and progression.”<sup>23</sup>

As part of this consultation, the Department for Education published a case for change,<sup>24</sup> which drew on independent reviews of the further education system commissioned by the Government in 2011 (the ‘[Wolf Review](#)’) and in 2016 (the ‘[Sainsbury Review](#)’).<sup>25</sup>

The Department for Education argued reforms were necessary for the following reasons:

- High quality qualifications are needed to address significant skills gaps and aid social mobility.
- The existing system is complex and of variable quality. At July 2018, there were 4,000 level 3 qualifications eligible for public funding.<sup>26</sup> Many were duplicates in the same subject, including over 200 different engineering qualifications.
- The current system is not working for all students.

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<sup>21</sup> Department for Education, [Implementation of T Level programmes. Government consultation response](#), May 2018, p11

<sup>22</sup> Department for Education, [Review of post-16 qualifications at Level 3 and below in England](#), March 2019

<sup>23</sup> Department for Education, [Review of post-16 qualifications at Level 3 and below in England: Government consultation document](#), March 2019, p8

<sup>24</sup> Department for Education, [Review of post-16 qualifications at Level 3 and below in England: The current system and the case for change](#), March 2019

<sup>25</sup> Department for Education and Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, [Review of vocational education: The Wolf report](#), March 2011; Department for Education and Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, [Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education \(PDF\)](#), April 2016

<sup>26</sup> Department for Education, [Students and qualifications at Level 3 and below in England](#), March 2019



- Recent controls have not been fully effective in raising quality and have limitations.<sup>27</sup>

Following this consultation, the Department for Education stopped approving public funding for new level 3 qualifications. It also announced the removal of funding from 163 duplicate qualifications and said qualifications with no or low enrolments would lose funding from [July 2021](#) and [August 2022](#) respectively.<sup>28</sup>

Through this process, around 5,500 qualifications at level 3 with low or no enrolments had their funding removed by August 2022.<sup>29</sup>

## 2.4 Review of post-16 qualifications at level 3 (2020/21)

The [second stage of consultation](#) took place between October 2020 and January 2021. It sought views on which remaining level 3 qualifications should continue to be funded alongside A Levels and T Levels.

The consultation document setting out the Government’s proposals said T Levels would be the “right choice for most 16- to 19-year-olds” who want to progress into skilled employment or higher levels of technical education, but “additional specialist qualifications” would also be available, provided they do not overlap with T Levels.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Department for Education, [Review of post-16 qualifications at Level 3 and below in England: The current system and the case for change](#), March 2019

<sup>28</sup> Department for Education, [Withdrawal of funding approval from qualifications with no publicly funded enrolments for the funding year 2021 to 2022](#), 7 December 2020; Department for Education, [Withdrawal of funding approval from qualifications with low and no publicly funded enrolments for the funding year 2022 to 2023](#), 25 August 2022

<sup>29</sup> [HC Deb \[BTEC Qualifications\] 18 July 2022 c206WH](#)

<sup>30</sup> Department for Education, [Review of post-16 qualifications at Level 3 in England: Second Stage. Government consultation](#), 23 October 2020, p10

## 3

## How will the new system work?

Following the 2020/21 consultation on post-16 qualifications at level 3, the Government published a policy statement in July 2021 that set out changes to the level 3 qualification landscape in England.<sup>31</sup> It said the Government wants to create “clearly defined academic and technical routes” for post-16 progression that sit alongside apprenticeships.<sup>32</sup> The Government hopes the reforms will remove “[low-quality qualifications](#)” from the system, and ensure students have confidence in the outcomes of their choices.<sup>33</sup>

A Levels will be central to the academic route, which is intended to lead to higher education study at university.<sup>34</sup> T Levels will become the main qualification option for the technical route and are intended to support progression into skilled employment (requiring specialist training or expertise), further technical study or apprenticeships, and potentially higher education courses.<sup>35</sup>

Other level 3 qualifications, including applied general qualifications, will sit alongside A Levels and T Levels, but they will need to demonstrate their quality and distinct purpose to continue receiving public funding. For example, by meeting business and industry needs or leading to specialist higher education courses.<sup>36</sup>

Qualifications that are technical, offer similar content and outcomes to T Levels, and support entry to employment in the same occupational area, however, will be considered to “overlap” with T Levels for 16 to 19-year-olds, and so will have their funding removed.

A reformed approval process means the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education will then use employer-led standards to evaluate the remaining technical qualifications in the system. Most academic qualifications will also have to undergo approval using quality criteria developed by the Department for Education.

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<sup>31</sup> Department for Education, [Review of post-16 qualifications at Level 3 in England: Policy statement](#), 14 July 2021

<sup>32</sup> Department for Education, [Review of post-16 qualifications at Level 3 in England: Policy statement](#), 14 July 2021, p4

<sup>33</sup> Department for Education, [Clearer choice of high-quality post-16 qualifications](#), 14 July 2021

<sup>34</sup> Department for Education, [Review of post-16 qualifications at Level 3 in England: Policy statement](#), 14 July 2021, p11

<sup>35</sup> Department for Education, [Review of post-16 qualifications at Level 3 in England: Policy statement](#), 14 July 2021, p11

<sup>36</sup> Department for Education, [Guide to the post-16 qualifications landscape at level 3 and below for 2025 and beyond](#), April 2023

## 3.1

# The qualification landscape from 2025

From 2025, A Levels will be the primary academic qualification for students and will exist alongside small and large ‘alternative academic qualifications’ in certain subjects.

- Small alternative academic qualifications will be up to the size of an A Level and be taken in conjunction with A Levels. They will “complement and enhance the A level offer”, and be available in “strategically important” subjects, such as science, technology, engineering, maths, and those supporting the NHS, as well as subjects less well-served by A Levels.<sup>37</sup>
- Large alternative academic qualifications will be at least the size of two A Levels and generally be taken on their own. They will be available in subjects where there are no T Levels, there is a need for a large qualification enabling entry to more specialist areas of higher education, such as performing arts, and there is a clear and direct progression link into higher education.<sup>38</sup>

Alongside T Levels, there will be three main types of technical qualifications:

- Technical occupational entry and technical occupational progression qualifications which aim to support a student to enter or progress within a role.
- Technical additional specialist qualifications that allow a student to develop additional knowledge and competencies and specialise within a sector.
- Technical cross-cutting function qualifications that allow students to develop skills that are relevant across occupations.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Department for Education, [Guide to the post-16 qualifications landscape at level 3 and below for 2025 and beyond](#), April 2023, pp14-16

<sup>38</sup> Department for Education, [Guide to the post-16 qualifications landscape at level 3 and below for 2025 and beyond](#), April 2023, pp17-18

<sup>39</sup> Department for Education, [Guide to the post-16 qualifications landscape at level 3 and below for 2025 and beyond](#), April 2023, pp21-24

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## 4 When will changes happen?

### 4.1 Phase 1: Defunding qualifications with low and no enrolments

The Department for Education has published a [list of the qualifications with low and no enrolments](#) for which funding was removed from August 2022 for new starts.<sup>40</sup> This resulted in the removal of public funding approval from around 5,500 qualifications at level 3 and below.

### 4.2 Phase 2: Defunding qualifications that overlap with T Levels

T Levels are expected to be fully available across England by 2025. Under the current timetable, which was announced in November 2021, funding will be removed from overlapping qualifications in waves from August 2024.

A qualification is deemed to overlap with a T Level if it is a technical qualification with similar outcomes to those set out in a standard covered by a T Level, and it aims to support students into employment in the same occupational area.

#### Delay to the original defunding timetable

Following a campaign urging the Government to rethink its plans to remove funding from BTECs in particular – including a [letter signed by a cross-party group of 118 MPs and peers](#) – the then-Secretary of State for Education, Nadhim Zahawi, announced on 15 November 2021 the original reform timetable would be delayed by a year, with funding now to be removed from 2024.<sup>41</sup>

During the passage of the Skills and Post-16 Education Act, concerns were raised in both Houses of Parliament about the Government's reforms to level 3 qualifications. In response, the then-Secretary of State for Education, Nadhim

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<sup>40</sup> Department for Education, [Withdrawal of funding approval from qualifications with low and no publicly funded enrolments for the funding year 2022 to 2023](#), updated August 2022

<sup>41</sup> “[118 MPs and peers write to Secretary of State for Education urging him to reassess plan to scrap BTECs](#)”, FE News, 13 October 2021; Department for Education, [Skills and Post-16 Education Bill: Second Reading Opening Speech](#), 15 November 2021

Zahawi, sent a [letter to peers](#) in April 2022 in which he provided several clarifications on the policy, including:

- The Government expects public funding to be removed for only a small proportion of the total level 3 qualification offer through the process to identify qualifications that overlap with wave 1 and 2 T Levels.
- Many applied general qualifications, including BTECs, will have a “continuing and important role to play alongside A-Levels and T-Levels.”
- Students will be able to take applied general-style qualifications, including BTECs, alongside A Levels as part of a mixed programme.
- Employers will have the opportunity to say if they believe level 3 qualifications support entry into occupations not covered by T Levels.
- Qualifications that overlap with T Levels introduced in 2020 and 2021 will not have funding approval removed until the 2024/25 academic year.
- Qualifications that overlap with T Levels introduced in 2022 and 2023 will not have funding approval removed until the 2025/26 academic year.<sup>42</sup>

## Overlapping qualifications defunded from 2024

In October 2022, the Government published the final list of the first qualifications that will have funding withdrawn for 16- to 19-year-olds from 2024. These 134 qualifications overlap with T Levels launched in waves one and two (Digital, Construction, Education and Childcare).<sup>43</sup>

This list was shorter than the provisional list, and Schools Week covered the qualifications that were saved from being defunded.<sup>44</sup> The list was accompanied by a written statement from the then-Minister for Skills, Andrea Jenkyns, that said the review had been led by evidence, and involved independent assessors conducting in-depth reviews of the qualifications.<sup>45</sup>

## Overlapping qualifications defunded from 2025

In May 2023, the Department for Education published a provisional list of qualifications that overlap with wave 3 T Levels (business and administration; engineering and manufacturing; finance and accounting), and so will lose funding in August 2025. Awarding bodies were given the opportunity to appeal the decisions.

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<sup>42</sup> Letter to House of Lords from the Education Secretary, [Skills and Post-16 Education Bill: technical education qualification reforms](#) (PDF), 6 April 2022

<sup>43</sup> Department for Education, [Qualifications that overlap with T Levels](#), 11 May 2022.

<sup>44</sup> “[Revealed: 1 in 3 at risk BTECs saved from the chop](#)”, Schools Week, 14 October 2022 (accessed 11 September 2023)

<sup>45</sup> [HC Deb \[T-Level Overlap List\] 17 October cc18-20WS](#)

The final list was published in October 2023 and it showed all 85 courses included on the provisional list will have their funding removed from 2025.<sup>46</sup> (seven courses were mistakenly included on the provisional list that had already had their public funding removed during phase 1).

The final list shows 46 engineering courses will have their funding removed. Most of these courses are BTECs delivered by Pearson, including its level 3 National Foundation Diploma in Engineering, which was the most popular course on the list with 3,790 enrolments in 2020/21.<sup>47</sup>

An equalities impact assessment was also published alongside the list.<sup>48</sup> It said the following groups may be particularly affected by the removal of funding from qualifications that overlap with wave 3 T Levels because they are more likely to take such a qualification:

- Male students
- Students from a Black ethnic background
- Students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)
- Students with Education, Health, and Care plans (EHCPs)
- Students from disadvantaged backgrounds

However, the assessment said these students “will benefit in the future” from taking a T Level instead.<sup>49</sup>

## 4.3 Phase 3: Quality review of remaining qualifications

In January 2023, the Department for Education published guidance on the third phase of the review of post-16 qualifications at level 3.<sup>50</sup> It was updated in April 2023.

The guidance explained the new funding approval process that most level 3 qualifications will need to go through in order to receive public funding alongside A Levels and T Levels. Unsuccessful qualifications will lose funding from 2025. Reformed qualifications will, in future, be approved for three years

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<sup>46</sup> Department for Education, [Wave 3 T Levels: overlapping qualifications](#), updated 19 October 2023

<sup>47</sup> “[Confirmed: DfE will chop all courses that compete with wave 3 T Levels](#)”, FE Week, 19 October 2023 (accessed 27 October 2023)

<sup>48</sup> Department for Education, [Equalities impact assessment of the final list of qualifications that overlap with wave 3 T Levels](#), October 2023

<sup>49</sup> Department for Education, [Equalities impact assessment of the final list of qualifications that overlap with wave 3 T Levels](#), October 2023, pp7-8

<sup>50</sup> Department for Education, [Guide to the post-16 qualifications landscape at level 3 and below for 2025 and beyond](#), April 2023

(rather than the current one-year cycle), unless there is a change in circumstances which means an earlier review is necessary.

Academic qualifications will need to meet quality criteria developed by the Department for Education while technical qualifications will need to meet occupational and employer-approved criteria developed by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE). Both sets of qualifications will need to meet regulations set by Ofqual. The Department for Education will make the final decision on funding approval.

## Scope of the quality review

All level 3 qualifications the Department for Education approves for post-16 funding offers (including Advanced Learner Loans) are subject to the quality review, except:

- AS and A levels
- Access to HE Diplomas
- Advanced Extension Awards
- Core Maths qualifications
- Extended Project qualifications
- International Baccalaureate Diploma
- Performing Arts Graded Examinations
- Technical qualifications in T Levels.<sup>51</sup>

Apprenticeships are also out of scope of the review because of their different funding arrangements through the apprenticeship levy.

## Academic qualifications

The Department for Education defines a qualification as academic if its primary purpose is to support students to progress into higher education. A Levels will be the primary qualification for students taking 16 to 19 academic study programmes and will exist alongside small and large ‘alternative academic qualifications’ in certain subjects.

Most students taking small alternative academic qualifications will also be studying two A Levels, but the Department for Education has said there will be some flexibility “where this is not appropriate”, giving the examples of students on a part-time study programme or students with special

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<sup>51</sup> Department for Education, [Guide to the post-16 qualifications landscape at level 3 and below for 2025 and beyond](#), April 2023, p9

educational needs and disabilities.<sup>52</sup> Students taking large alternative academic qualifications equivalent in size to three A Levels will not typically take additional qualifications.

### Small alternative academic qualifications

Small alternative academic qualifications will be up to the size of an A Level and can be taken in conjunction with A Levels. They will “complement and enhance the A level offer”, and be available in “strategically important” subjects, such as science, technology, engineering, maths, and those supporting the NHS, as well as subjects less well-served by A Levels.<sup>53</sup>

Small alternative academic qualifications will be considered for funding in the following subjects from 2025:

- Applied science
- Medical science
- Engineering and engineering principles or technology
- Health and social care
- Information technology
- Computing
- Subjects which support progression to degrees in healthcare professions allied to medicine, dentistry, and nursing

And in the following subjects from 2026:

- Uniformed protective services
- Policing
- British sign language studies
- Art, craft, and design
- Sound engineering
- Animation and visual arts
- Performing, production, and creative arts
- Music performance, production, and technology

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<sup>52</sup> Department for Education, [Guide to the post-16 qualifications landscape at level 3 and below for 2025 and beyond](#), April 2023, pp14-16

<sup>53</sup> Department for Education, [Guide to the post-16 qualifications landscape at level 3 and below for 2025 and beyond](#), April 2023, pp14-16



- Qualifications for music practitioners or the creative music industry
- Creative digital media production
- Digital games, film and video production
- Sport, exercise science, and physical activity
- Sporting excellence and performance

The Department for Education has said while it will not fund qualifications in subjects not on this list, it will consider funding small alternative academic qualifications in “exceptional cases” if they are in a subject area where there is no A Level.<sup>54</sup> In these cases, an awarding organisation will need to prove why an alternative academic qualification is needed, for example by demonstrating it will support progression to higher education courses that deliver strong graduate outcomes.

### Large alternative academic qualifications

Large alternative academic qualifications will be at least the size of two A Levels. They will be available in subjects where there are no T Levels, there is a need for a large qualification enabling entry to more specialist areas of higher education, such as performing arts, and there is a clear and direct progression link into higher education.<sup>55</sup>

Large alternative academic qualifications will be considered for funding in the following subjects from 2026:

- Performing arts
- Production arts
- Music
- Music technology
- Music performance and production
- Sport
- Sport and exercise science
- Sport and physical or outdoor activity
- Art and design

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<sup>54</sup> Department for Education, [Guide to the post-16 qualifications landscape at level 3 and below for 2025 and beyond](#), April 2023, pp16-17

<sup>55</sup> Department for Education, [Guide to the post-16 qualifications landscape at level 3 and below for 2025 and beyond](#), April 2023, pp17-18

- Art, design and media or communication
- Fine and applied art

### Qualifications not approved for funding

The Department for Education's guide to post-16 qualifications explains it will not approve certain subjects for funding as alternative academic qualifications if they are not on the above lists from September 2025.<sup>56</sup> This is because:

- they are more suited to a technical qualification
- there is already an associated A Level
- the qualification does not lead to good progression outcomes

The guide states:

This is a conscious choice by Ministers to further streamline the qualifications landscape and to ensure that wherever A levels and T Levels exist, students are channelled to these highest quality options.<sup>57</sup>

Analysis by the [Protect Student Choice campaign](#) argued 74 of the 134 applied general qualifications currently available would lose funding as a result of this policy.<sup>58</sup> This prompted letters from members of the House of Lords and school and college leaders in early 2023 expressing their concerns to the Education Secretary about the Government's reforms, and calling for these qualifications to be excluded from the quality review and new approvals process.<sup>59</sup>

The Government's response to these concerns did not confirm or deny the figures from the Protect Student Choice analysis, but said applied general qualifications must go through the funding approval process and meet the new criteria for alternative academic and technical qualifications.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Department for Education, [Guide to the post-16 qualifications landscape at level 3 and below for 2025 and beyond](#), April 2023, p6

<sup>57</sup> Department for Education, [Guide to the post-16 qualifications landscape at level 3 and below for 2025 and beyond](#), April 2023, p6

<sup>58</sup> Protect Student Choice campaign, [Protect Student Choice campaign briefing](#) (PDF), October 2023; "[Former education ministers write to Secretary of State following analysis that most BTECs will be scrapped](#)", FE News, 30 January 2023

<sup>59</sup> [Letter from peers to Education Secretary Gillian Keegan](#) (PDF), 25 January 2023; [Letter from heads and principles to Education Secretary Gillian Keegan](#) (PDF), 27 February 2023

<sup>60</sup> [Letter from Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education Robert Halfon to the Sixth Form Colleges Association](#) (PDF), 20 March 2023. See "[Students 'disempowered' as ministers dig in over BTEC defunding](#)", FE Week, 31 March 2023

## Technical qualifications

Alongside T Levels, the Government has said there will be three main types of technical qualifications:

- **Technical occupational entry and technical occupational progression:** qualifications that aim to support a student to enter or progress within a role. These qualifications will only be funded at 16-19 where they do not overlap with a T Level.
- **Technical additional specialist:** qualifications that allow a student to develop additional knowledge and competencies and specialise within a sector. These qualifications will build on knowledge covered by a T Level or other occupational entry qualification.
- **Technical cross-cutting function:** qualifications that allow students to develop skills that are relevant across occupations.<sup>61</sup>

## Timetable

- The date for awarding organisations to register their intention to submit level 3 qualifications to be funded from September 2025 onwards was 10 February 2023.
- The submission window for level 3 qualifications was open throughout July 2023.
- In cycle 1, the Department for Education will approve level 3 alternative academic and technical qualifications in subjects that align with wave 1 and 2 T Levels. A list of level 3 qualifications approved for funding to be taught from September 2025 will be published in May 2024.
- Awarding organisations will then be able to request a procedural review. A final list of qualifications approved for funding from September 2025 will then be published in July 2024.
- Cycle 2 will then cover all other level 3 qualifications to be funded from 2026, with a list of approved qualifications published in May 2025. Awarding organisations will be able to appeal any decisions ahead of the publication of final lists.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Department for Education, [Guide to the post-16 qualifications landscape at level 3 and below for 2025 and beyond](#), April 2023, pp21-24

<sup>62</sup> Department for Education, [Guide to the post-16 qualifications landscape at level 3 and below for 2025 and beyond](#), April 2023, pp7, 11-12; Department for Education, [Timeline for the approval of post-16 qualifications at level 3 for 2025](#), January 2023

## 5 Reaction to the Government's reforms

The Government's plan to reform level 3 qualifications to encourage students to choose either A Levels or T Levels at 16 has provoked a considerable reaction from the education sector and parliamentarians.

Concerns have been raised about the decision to remove funding for some applied general qualifications, especially BTECs, and the consequences this will have for student choice and accessibility.

### 5.1 Sector reaction

The [Protect Student Choice campaign](#), which is a coalition of 30 organisations from across the education and employment sectors, has called on the Government to rethink its reforms to defunding many level 3 qualifications.

Combined with cross-party parliamentary scrutiny of the reforms, including a [letter signed by 118 MPs and peers](#) and a series of ultimately unsuccessful amendments tabled to the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill, this pressure prompted the Government to commit to delaying the removal of funding by a year and issuing a series of clarifications about the policy.<sup>63</sup>

However, the Protect Student Choice campaign has argued the delay of a year to the timetable, and the fact the removal of funding for overlapping qualifications will apply to “only a small proportion of the total Level 3 BTEC and other applied general style qualifications”, are insufficient concessions. It has said:

On the first point, delaying a bad idea does not stop it from being a bad idea. And on the second, removing a small proportion of qualifications that a high proportion of students are enrolled on will still have a devastating impact. For example, in the sixth form college sector around 80% of applied general enrolments are in just 20 subject areas.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>63</sup> “118 MPs and peers write to Secretary of State for Education urging him to reassess plan to scrap BTECs”, FE News, 13 October 2021; Department for Education, [Skills and Post-16 Education Bill: Second Reading Opening Speech](#), 15 November 2021; Letter to House of Lords from the Education Secretary, [Skills and Post-16 Education Bill: technical education qualification reforms](#) (PDF), 6 April 2022

<sup>64</sup> Protect Student Choice campaign, [MP briefing: Protect Student Choice debate](#) (PDF), July 2022

The arguments that have been made against the Government's reforms to the funding of level 3 qualifications by the Protect Student Choice campaign and others include:

- The current three-route model (A levels, technical qualifications that lead to a specific occupation, and applied general qualifications that combine practical skills with academic learning) works well and should be retained. The 2011 Wolf Review, which the Government has used to justify its reforms to technical education, said BTECs are “valuable in the labour market and a familiar and acknowledged route into higher education”.<sup>65</sup>
- Removing funding from some BTECs may leave disadvantaged students without a viable progression pathway at the age of 16. The Department for Education's own equalities impact assessment said: “those from SEND backgrounds, Asian ethnic groups, disadvantaged backgrounds, and males [are] disproportionately likely to be affected” because they are highly represented on qualifications likely to no longer be available in future.<sup>66</sup>
- Many universities believe removing funding for BTECs will reduce participation in higher education among disadvantaged groups.<sup>67</sup> [Research published by the Social Market Foundation in 2018](#) showed students accepted to university from working-class backgrounds and/or minority ethnic backgrounds are more likely to hold a BTEC qualification than their peers.<sup>68</sup> The Foundation's report said:

a quarter of Asian students (24%), just over one in five (22%) of mixed students, and 37% of black students were accepted to university after completing only BTEC qualifications at Level 3.<sup>69</sup>

Research from the Nuffield Foundation, published in 2021, similarly found a quarter of students enter university with BTEC qualifications, and that they are more likely to be from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>70</sup> It concluded by saying “...without the availability of BTECs many disadvantaged students might not have attended university at all”.<sup>71</sup>

- T Levels are a welcome development and will strengthen the current suite of technical qualifications, but they are very different qualifications

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<sup>65</sup> Department for Education and Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, [Review of vocational education: The Wolf report](#), March 2011, p33

<sup>66</sup> Department for Education, [Review of post-16 qualifications at level 3 in England: Impact assessment](#), July 2022, p13

<sup>67</sup> NEON, [Will abolishing BTECs mean reversing widening access to higher education?](#) (PDF), February 2022

<sup>68</sup> Social Market Foundation, [Vocation, Vocation, Vocation: The role of vocational routes into higher education](#), January 2018

<sup>69</sup> Social Market Foundation, [Vocation, Vocation, Vocation: The role of vocational routes into higher education](#), January 2018, p18

<sup>70</sup> Nuffield Foundation, [Education Choices at 16-19 and university outcomes](#), January 2022

<sup>71</sup> Nuffield Foundation, [Education Choices at 16-19 and university outcomes](#), January 2022, p63

that students will pursue for very different reasons. BTECs should not have their funding removed “to make a success of T levels”, but instead should sit alongside the new qualifications.<sup>72</sup>

In September 2023, the [Protect Student Choice campaign published a report](#) (PDF) that accused the Government of using data “in a partial and misleading way” to understate the performance of applied general qualifications and overstate the performance (and potential uptake) of T Levels.<sup>73</sup>

The report estimated 155,000 young people (13% of all sixth form students in England) could be left without a suitable study programme from 2026 given the planned reduction in applied general qualifications and current growth of T Levels. The Protect Student Choice campaign said while it welcomes T Levels as another option for learners, the Government should “pause and review the implementation of its reforms and adopt an evidence-based approach to policymaking in this area”.<sup>74</sup>

## 5.2 Opposition parties

### Labour

In January 2022, a [Protect Student Choice campaign petition to stop the defunding of many level 3 qualifications](#) secured over 100,000 signatures, which led to a [debate in Westminster Hall on 18 July 2022](#). During the debate, Labour’s then-Shadow Minister for Further Education and Skills, Toby Perkins, said he welcomed T Levels but called on the Government to pause the process of defunding certain BTEC qualifications. He said:

The Labour party welcomed the introduction of T-levels. We want them to be a success and we hope that a future Labour Government will address the current flaws within them. I urge the Government, even at this late stage, to think again about the decision... There are a number of popular courses where educationalists and students tell us it would be deeply damaging if they were abolished.

We want to ensure that our system of post-16 vocational and technical education is fit for purpose. Every MP in this debate, alongside the organisations championing the #ProtectStudentChoice campaign, want this too. Let the Government pause and put this decision on hold, and ensure that we have an evidence-based approach to its replacement. Let us not lose the qualifications that have real value to both employers and students.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> See Protect Student Choice campaign, [Protect Student Choice campaign briefing](#) (PDF), October 2023; [MP briefing supplement: Protect Student Choice debate](#) (PDF), July 2022

<sup>73</sup> Protect Student Choice campaign, [Desperate measures: data and the reform of Level 3 qualifications](#) (PDF), September 2023

<sup>74</sup> Protect Student Choice campaign, [Desperate measures: data and the reform of Level 3 qualifications](#) (PDF), September 2023, p4

<sup>75</sup> [HC Deb \[BTEC Qualifications\] 18 July 2022 c204WH](#)

In June 2023, in a letter to the Protect Student Choice campaign, the Shadow Secretary of State for Education, Bridget Phillipson, pledged that the next Labour Government would pause and review the removal of funding from many level 3 qualifications.<sup>76</sup> She said:

I and colleagues across the Labour Party have urged the government to focus more clearly on ensuring the success and spread of T-levels and of opportunities for all our young people. Labour recognises the instability that is being caused by the Government’s reckless treatment of our nation’s vital further education sector.

The next Labour government will ensure all students are able to complete their courses and will review the diversity of options at Level 3 before making further changes.

## Liberal Democrats

The Liberal Democrats share Labour’s opposition to the defunding of level 3 qualifications. The party’s education spokesperson, Munira Wilson, has described the reforms as “totally regressive and not thought through” and said:

Critically until the T Levels are bedded in, well understood both by students and employers and shown to be successful, rolling back BTECs in this way is really concerning.<sup>77</sup>

## 5.3

## Education Committee inquiry

In April 2023, the Commons Education Committee published a report on the future of post-16 qualifications.<sup>78</sup> It followed an inquiry launched in November 2021 that examined how effectively post-16 level 3 education and qualifications (such as A Levels, T Levels, BTECs, and apprenticeships) prepare young people for the world of work.

## Committee report

The report called for a “moratorium” on the defunding of Applied General Qualifications, saying:

Tried and tested Applied General Qualifications should only be withdrawn as and when there is a robust evidence base proving that T Levels are

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<sup>76</sup> “[Labour pledges to pause and review BTECs cull](#)”, FE Week, 27 October 2023

<sup>77</sup> “[Profile: Munira Wilson, Lib Dem education spokesperson](#)”, FE Week, 30 May 2023

<sup>78</sup> House of Commons Education Committee, [The future of post-16 qualifications](#), 28 April 2023, HC 55 Third Report of Session 2022–23

demonstrably more effective in preparing students for progression, meeting industry needs and promoting social mobility.<sup>79</sup>

While the Education Committee did hear some support for the removal of funding from applied general qualifications,<sup>80</sup> the vast majority of oral and written evidence was critical. Indeed, the report said it was rare for an inquiry to receive evidence expressing such a significant degree of consensus on a particular issue.<sup>81</sup>

There was particular criticism of the Government's definition of 'overlap', with calls for T Levels to complement, rather than replace, existing qualifications, because they have a distinct and different purpose.<sup>82</sup> Concerns were also expressed by witnesses to the inquiry about the possible impact on student choice, and the report said:

The removal of a large number of AGQs could therefore decrease choice and opportunities for young people, including those with aspirations to work in a sector to which they have no local access, and those who have not yet decided on their future direction.<sup>83</sup>

On T Levels, the committee's report said it did not believe the new qualifications currently struck the right balance between rigour and accessibility, with around one-fifth of the first T Level cohort estimated to have dropped out, and lower attaining students and students with special educational needs and disabilities particularly struggling with the new qualification.

Oral and written evidence provided to the inquiry is [available on the inquiry's webpage](#).<sup>84</sup>

## Government response

In its response to the committee's inquiry, published July 2023, the Government said it was reforming level 3 qualifications because "too many qualifications have low and no enrolments, are not sufficiently based on IfATE's employer led occupational standards, and do not progress young people to related occupations."<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> House of Commons Education Committee, [The future of post-16 qualifications](#), 28 April 2023, HC 55 Third Report of Session 2022–23, para. 141

<sup>80</sup> House of Commons Education Committee, [The future of post-16 qualifications](#), 28 April 2023, HC 55 Third Report of Session 2022–23, para. 115

<sup>81</sup> House of Commons Education Committee, [The future of post-16 qualifications](#), 28 April 2023, HC 55 Third Report of Session 2022–23, para. 119

<sup>82</sup> House of Commons Education Committee, [The future of post-16 qualifications](#), 28 April 2023, HC 55 Third Report of Session 2022–23, para. 120-121

<sup>83</sup> House of Commons Education Committee, [The future of post-16 qualifications](#), 28 April 2023, HC 55 Third Report of Session 2022–23, para. 125

<sup>84</sup> House of Commons, [The future of post-16 qualifications](#)

<sup>85</sup> House of Commons Education Committee, [The future of post-16 qualifications: Government response to the Committee's Third Report of Session 2022–23](#) (PDF), 5 July 2023, HC 1673 Fourth Special Report of Session 2022–23



The response argued there was no clear relationship between the qualifications taken by some learners and employment in specific industry sectors, with the retail sector the most likely destination for those in sustained employment for many qualifications. The Government therefore rejected the committee's call for a pause to the reforms and said it was confident they "will increase outcomes for learners and build a strong pipeline of skills for the future."<sup>86</sup>

Commenting on the Government's response, the chair of the Education Committee, Robin Walker, said:

The Government's response to our detailed and strongly evidenced recommendations was disappointing and gives the impression of prioritising saving face over ensuring its reforms are carried out in the interests of young people. The committee has made constructive suggestions and stands by them to ensure that our post 16 qualifications deliver for as many young people as possible.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> House of Commons Education Committee, [The future of post-16 qualifications: Government response to the Committee's Third Report of Session 2022-23](#) (PDF), 5 July 2023, HC 1673 Fourth Special Report of Session 2022-23

<sup>87</sup> Education Committee, [Education Committee blasts 'disappointing' Govt response to T Levels report](#), 5 July 2023

## 6 The Advanced British Standard

### 6.1 Background

In 2021, the education think tanks EDSK and the Education Policy Institute both published reports arguing there had been a significant narrowing of subject knowledge at level 3.<sup>88</sup> The EDSK report called for, among other things, a ‘baccalaureate’ style qualification for all learners in state-funded schools and colleges in England at ages 15 to 18.<sup>89</sup> A ‘British Baccalaureate’ was also one of the central recommendations of the 2022 Times Education Commission.<sup>90</sup>

A baccalaureate refers to a qualification model with a broad set of required subjects and an emphasis on holistic, extracurricular learning, so students can develop skills and knowledge across a wide range of disciplines.<sup>91</sup> A number of countries have post-16 curricula that could be broadly described as baccalaureate-style, including the [Leaving Certificate in Ireland](#).

#### The International Baccalaureate (IB)

The International Baccalaureate (IB) was developed in the 1960s and 70s and is now taught in 143 countries around the world. There are two programmes of study for students aged 16 to 19. While the Diploma Programme is popular in independent schools in the UK as an alternative to A Levels, it has generally had little take up in state schools and colleges.<sup>92</sup>

#### The IB Diploma Programme

The Diploma Programme comprises a ‘[core element](#)’ and [six subject groups](#).

- The core is made up of three required components (theory of knowledge, an extended essay, and ‘creativity, activity, and service’, which is informal learning done outside of the classroom). These “aim to broaden

<sup>88</sup> EDSK, [Re-assessing the future \(part 2\)](#), April 2021; Education Policy Institute, [A narrowing path to success? 16-19 curriculum breadth and employment outcomes](#), September 2021

<sup>89</sup> EDSK, [Re-assessing the future \(part 2\)](#), April 2021

<sup>90</sup> Times Education Commission, [Bringing out the Best: How to transform education and unleash the potential of every child](#) (PDF), 2022

<sup>91</sup> House of Commons Education Committee, [The future of post-16 qualifications](#), 28 April 2023, HC 55 Third Report of Session 2022–23, para. 159, 179

<sup>92</sup> There were around 3,500 entries for the IB Diploma Programme in England in summer 2021: House of Commons Education Committee, [The future of post-16 qualifications](#), 28 April 2023, HC 55 Third Report of Session 2022–23, para. 160

students' educational experience and challenge them to apply their knowledge and skills".

- Students then choose one subject from five groups, including language and literature; language acquisition; social sciences; experimental sciences; and maths. They can then also choose an arts subject from a sixth group, or an additional subject from the other five groups.

### The IB Career-related Programme

The career-related programme allows students to take at least two Diploma Programme courses in any of that programme's subject groups, alongside a [core element](#), which includes personal and professional skills development, an extended project, and language development.

It also comprises '[career-related studies](#)', which allows students to take a career-related qualification – typically an Applied General Qualification in England – that “provides the opportunity for students to learn about theories and concepts through application and practice while developing broad-based skills in authentic and meaningful contexts.”

The Education Committee's 2023 inquiry on post-16 qualifications considered the merits of a post-16 baccalaureate model, noting it offered opportunities for curriculum breadth, continued study of maths and English, and an emphasis on developing key employability skills, such as “communication, critical thinking and interdisciplinary thinking”.<sup>93</sup>

While the report said there was little appetite for more reforms to the post-16 system in the short-term given recent and ongoing changes to qualifications and standards, it called for the Department for Education to establish “an independent expert panel, reflecting a wide range of educational perspectives, to conduct a full and considered review into the possibility of adopting a baccalaureate model in England.”<sup>94</sup>

## Rishi Sunak's plans for post-16 education

Rishi Sunak first announced his ambition to overhaul 16 to 19 education as part of his unsuccessful bid for the Conservative Party leadership in 2022. During the campaign he outlined plans for a 'British baccalaureate', which would involve students studying English and maths up to the age of 18.<sup>95</sup>

In October 2022, an article in the Times said the now Prime Minister Rishi Sunak was planning “a radical set of reforms to transform the nation's

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<sup>93</sup> House of Commons Education Committee, [The future of post-16 qualifications](#), 28 April 2023, HC 55 Third Report of Session 2022–23, para. 159

<sup>94</sup> House of Commons Education Committee, [The future of post-16 qualifications](#), 28 April 2023, HC 55 Third Report of Session 2022–23, para. 179

<sup>95</sup> “[Rishi Sunak as prime minister: What will it mean for schools?](#)”, TES, 24 October 2022

education system”, which would include a new baccalaureate-style model of education at 16.<sup>96</sup>

A year later, on 4 October 2023, Rishi Sunak announced the ‘Advanced British Standard’ (ABS) at the Conservative Party Conference.<sup>97</sup> On the same day, the Department for Education published a policy paper on the ABS.<sup>98</sup> The paper set out the reforms the Government had made to the post-16 education system so far, and explained the ABS would be “a new Baccalaureate-style qualification that takes the best of A levels and T levels and brings them together into a single qualification.”<sup>99</sup> It argued this was necessary because:

- Academic and technical routes still lack parity of esteem, with technical routes less well-understood than traditional academic options.
- 16- to 19-year-olds in England have fewer teaching hours than those in other countries, which particularly affects the most disadvantaged students who have fewer resources for independent study.
- 16- to 19-year-olds in England also study a much narrower range of subjects than their international counterparts.
- Too many students leave education and training without the basic maths and English skills needed to succeed in life.<sup>100</sup>

## 6.2

## Proposals for a new 16 to 19 qualification

The Government’s intention is for the Advanced British Standard to combine and replace A Levels and T Levels with a new, single qualification at age 16.<sup>101</sup> Apprenticeships will continue to be available for those looking to enter the workforce through ‘on-the-job’ training.

Students doing the ABS would study either predominantly academic options, predominately technical options (including an occupational specialist route), or a combination of both. The academic options will be based on the content and academic rigour of A Levels so they support progression to higher education. The technical options will be based on the content of T levels and occupational standards designed by employers and the Institute for

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<sup>96</sup> “[British baccalaureate among Sunak education policy reforms](#)”, The Times, 26 October 2022

<sup>97</sup> “[Advanced British Standard: Sunak qualification will replace A-levels and T-levels](#)”, BBC News, 4 October

<sup>98</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard](#), 4 October 2023. See also Department for Education Hub blog, [The Advanced British Standard: Everything you need to know](#), 5 October 2023

<sup>99</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard](#), 4 October 2023, p7

<sup>100</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard](#), 4 October 2023, pp6-7

<sup>101</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard](#), 4 October 2023, p29

Apprenticeships and Technical Education. They will support progression into higher technical education, apprenticeships, and employment.

The Advanced British Standard would consist of:

- A common core in which all students would study English and maths at an appropriate level and depth.
- A choice of academic and technical subjects that come in different sizes.
- Non-qualification time which would include enrichment, pastoral, and employability activities for all students, and a relevant industry placement for students preparing for a technical occupation.

The major ways the ABS would change the current system include:

- While most A Level students currently take only three subjects, most students doing the ABS would study five subjects. This would be a mix of bigger and smaller subjects, called ‘majors’ and ‘minors’, with students typically doing three major subjects and two minor subjects. Students wishing to specialise will be able to take a major in their chosen sector alongside a ‘double major’ in their occupational specialism (for example, a major in health and a double major in adult nursing).
- Maths and English will be available at different levels and depths with a clear minimum expectation for all students at age 16. This will be done by ensuring two of a student’s ABS subjects include maths and English, to at least minor level.
- Teaching time will be increased by 15% for most students (equivalent to an extra two and half hours per week) compared to a typical three-subject A Level study programme. This would mean at least 1,475 teaching hours over two years, moving the time spent in the classroom for students in England closer to international standards. This will be achieved through more funded teaching hours.<sup>102</sup>

## When will changes happen?

The Government has said it will take around a decade to implement the Advanced British Standard fully. In the meantime, T Levels will continue to be rolled out and the number of other level 3 qualifications available will be reduced through the removal of public funding, as set out above.

The Government has said it will launch a formal consultation “on the approach and design of our new qualification, and the accompanying work to

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<sup>102</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard](#), 4 October 2023, pp28-34

strengthen the system to deliver it” in autumn 2023.<sup>103</sup> This will inform a White Paper due to be published in 2024.<sup>104</sup>

To achieve the aims of the Advanced British Standard, the Advanced British Standard policy paper also set out associated funding of £600 million over two years, largely focussed on boosting teacher recruitment and retention. This includes:

- An investment of around £100 million a year to provide a tax-free bonus of up to £6,000 a year to all teachers in the first five years of their career, amounting to a total bonus of £30,000. This will be available for teachers who are teaching “key shortage subjects” (such as maths, science, engineering, and digital subjects) and working in disadvantaged schools and all further education colleges.
- An additional £150 million will be made available each year to increase investment for students retaking English and maths GCSE, as well as for apprentices who have not gained their level 2 qualification in these subjects.
- An additional £40 million will be invested in the [Education Endowment Foundation](#), so it can create and share evidence for teachers and leaders on what works to support outcomes for 16- to 19 year-olds, with a particular focus on approaches that work best to narrow gaps in attainment.
- An additional £60 million of funding will be made available for maths education over the next two years. Some of this funding will be used to expand the reach of Maths Hubs in order to train more teachers in ‘[mastery in maths](#)’ techniques for post-16 education. The rest of the funding will be used to increase the Core Maths and Advanced Maths Premium and invest in a digital platform for tutoring in Core Maths, so colleges and schools can deliver maths to more students aged over 16.<sup>105</sup>

## 6.3

## Reaction

### Labour

Labour’s Shadow Schools Minister, Catherine McKinnell, criticised the announcement of more reforms to 16 to 19 education given the current issues

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<sup>103</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard](#), 4 October 2023, p39; Department for Education Hub blog, [The Advanced British Standard: Everything you need to know](#), 5 October 2023

<sup>104</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard](#), 4 October 2023, p39

<sup>105</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard](#), 4 October 2023, pp37-38

facing the sector, including school building safety and maths teacher shortages.<sup>106</sup>

Speaking at a fringe event at the Labour party conference, the Shadow Education Secretary, Bridget Phillipson, said the decision to replace T Levels was “staggering”, and described the ABS as “undeliverable in its current form”.<sup>107</sup>

## Education sector

The announcement of the Advanced British Standard has attracted a mix of praise and criticism from the education sector, with many commending the principles of the proposed reforms, but suggesting current issues in the sector make it unrealistic.

The General Secretary of the Association of School & College Leaders (ASCL), Geoff Barton, praised the proposed breadth of subject choice and the ambition to place equal importance on studying academic and vocational qualifications.<sup>108</sup> Similarly, some academics have cautiously welcomed the proposals, stating they will place academic and vocational qualifications on an equal footing, ending the “unnecessarily divisive” current system where students must choose between one or the other to the detriment of future educational and career options.<sup>109</sup>

However, other school and college leaders criticised the policy for failing to address the immediate issues of financial sustainability of schools and colleges, teacher shortages, and student re-engagement with learning post-Covid.<sup>110</sup> Deputy chief executive of the Sixth Form Colleges Association James Kewin, has argued the Advanced British Standard has been proposed primarily for electoral rather than educational reasons. He called for a “genuine, inclusive and wide-ranging consultation about the long-term future of 16-19 education, starting from first principles”.<sup>111</sup>

College chief executive Jackie Grubb, writing in FE Week, said the increase in teaching time will amount to a 315 hour increase in curriculum time for further education colleges, which means a significant increase in the amount of teaching staff.<sup>112</sup> While praising the announcement of a £30,000 bonus in total for new teachers, Grubb said retaining existing teachers was equally

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<sup>106</sup> [“School leaders criticise Sunak post-16 ABS reforms”](#), Schools Week, 5 October 2023

<sup>107</sup> [“Labour: Sunak’s Advanced British Standard plans ‘careless’ and ‘undeliverable’”](#), FE Week, 9 October 2023

<sup>108</sup> [“Teacher shortages make Rishi Sunak’s Advanced British Standard a pipedream”](#), TES, 5 October 2023

<sup>109</sup> [“Advanced British Standard: Sunak’s proposed replacement for A-levels and T-levels could make education less divisive”](#), The Conversation, 5 October 2023; [“Colleges should cautiously embrace the Advanced British Standard”](#), FE Week, 5 October 2023

<sup>110</sup> [“School leaders criticise Sunak post-16 ABS reforms”](#), Schools Week, 5 October 2023; [“Qualifications reform can’t put politicians’ interests above learners”](#), FE Week, 12 October 2023

<sup>111</sup> [“Qualifications reform can’t put politicians’ interests above learners”](#), FE Week, 12 October 2023

<sup>112</sup> [“Colleges should cautiously embrace the Advanced British Standard”](#), FE Week, 5 October 2023

important and only achievable through a significant pay rise.<sup>113</sup> She went on to say the announcements to continue maths until 18 and increase teaching time similarly necessitated more maths teachers, as well as more physical space in colleges, both of which therefore require more investment in further education.<sup>114</sup>

These views were echoed by Geoff Barton, who highlighted the current teacher shortage and said the announcement of a £30,000 bonus is a “piecemeal initiative”, when instead there needed to be substantial policy and investment in teacher pay, conditions, and school funding to make the ABS viable in terms of teaching.<sup>115</sup>

Questions have also been asked about implementation. Academic Elizabeth Gregory, writing in the Conversation, argued the success of the ABS would depend on how well GCSEs prepared students for post-secondary education.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> [“Colleges should cautiously embrace the Advanced British Standard”](#), FE Week, 5 October 2023

<sup>114</sup> [“Colleges should cautiously embrace the Advanced British Standard”](#), FE Week, 5 October 2023

<sup>115</sup> [“Teacher shortages make Rishi Sunak’s Advanced British Standard a pipedream”](#), TES, 5 October 2023

<sup>116</sup> [“Advanced British Standard: Sunak’s proposed replacement for A-levels and T-levels could make education less divisive”](#), The Conversation, 5 October 2023



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