

Review of post-16 qualifications at level 3 and below in England

Principles – Purpose and necessity

How could we extend this clarity of purpose to all qualifications at level 3 and below so that the intended outcome for the student is clearer?

All qualifications should effectively prepare students for progression to further study and/or employment, whilst providing flexibility for young people to change their minds about future progression routes and occupations, and ensure their opportunities are not limited through lack of support to switch pathways. Higher levels of professional and technical education provided by institutions such as University Alliance members should be open to students through A-levels, T-Levels and a third, but no less valuable, route at level 3 which facilitates broad career-focused technical education as well as allowing for combined programmes. Access to impartial career education information, advice and guidance should be part of all study programmes and entry points from Key Stage 3 onwards. The range of different higher education learning environments should be better understood by CEIAG providers, as well as the diversity of high-quality technical qualifications available beyond level 3. For example, University Alliance institutions value and champion innovative teaching that allows students to practice professional skills and solve real-world problems. Understanding that there are progression routes that involve learning through a combination of theory and practice would be beneficial to a range of young people and adults.

Principles – Progression

What additional evidence or data could we use to determine whether current qualifications or types of qualifications, including Applied General qualifications, are delivering successful outcomes?

There is not sufficient evidence that the characteristics and rigour of AGQs are the cause of lower retention and attainment amongst this cohort. It is important to seek to unpick but not to underestimate the complex factors that inform access to and progression within higher education. Progression into and through higher education and degree outcomes are influenced by various factors other than prior attainment and the type of qualification studied at Level 3. As such data on retention and differential outcomes for students with AGQs needs to be contextualised. Narrow definitions of outcomes also risk undermining the individual, social and economic value of higher education.

The key aspects that need to be considered are the proportion of under-represented or disadvantaged students that have studied AGQs, including the importance of looking beyond single metrics of disadvantage to recognise the intersectionality of factors that can contribute to differential outcomes in this context, and qualification design. On the latter, the government should analyse the impact of the introduction of the new RQF BTEC Nationals on retention and success rates on degree programmes based on the data available in September 2020.

The progression of students with AGQs, particularly BTEC Nationals, to higher education has a significant impact on widening participation. Analysis by the Social Market Foundation (2018) shows that students are more likely to enter higher education with a vocational qualification if they come from an ethnic minority background; if their parents work(ed) in routine or manual occupations; or if they come from a low participation neighbourhood. Almost half (48%) of black students are accepted with at least one vocational qualification, and more than a third (37%) enter with only vocational qualifications. The effect of social disadvantage on students' access to HE is well documented, whereas the differential outcomes achieved as a result is more recent. Entering higher education should rightly only be part of the story, and improving retention and success is a policy priority across the UK. It is important that we continue to build on research, interventions and investment in addressing barriers to access, transition, retention and success, and ensure that BTEC students are not overlooked as a widening participation cohort. The government should also consider the availability and quality of different forms of bridging provision and help ensure the focus, funding and input exists to make a success of this provision.

Principles – Quality

Are there certain quality features, such as size (that is, number of guided learning hours) or assessment processes that should be given particular priority?

To meet the needs of a broad range of students, technical pathways should allow for diverse programmes made up of shorter qualifications, which can be combined with other qualifications and whose content could overlap with T Levels. We do not have data for all University Alliance institutions, but the data we have seen suggests that several of our members recruit based on mixed programmes of AGQs and A Levels (and in some cases this proportion is higher than those recruited with solely AGQs).

Applying our principles – Our broader ambitions

At level 3, what purposes should qualifications other than T Levels or A Levels serve: a) for 16 to 19 year olds? Please give reasons for your answer.

Based on the information we noted in question 8, qualifications other than A Levels or T Levels should prepare students for progression into higher education and/or employment, provide opportunities for both 16-19 year olds and adults to benefit from mixed and flexible programmes, and ensure that vocational education continues to be a vehicle for social mobility.

They should cover sectors that are not in scope for T Levels such as performing arts, sport, public services and travel and tourism. Students with AQQs study a wide range of subjects at University Alliance institutions, and whilst we do not have data for all University Alliance members, the subjects predominately studied by students with AQQs include creative arts subjects (such as music, media and film production) and sport and service management, alongside business, computer science and nursing & midwifery.

These qualifications should also ensure that progression routes to higher and degree level vocational career-focused education, and a range of qualifications exist in all regions in the UK. T Levels in all pathways will not be available in all parts of the country, and there are also substantial regional differences in participation of young people in higher education in England. The Social Market Foundation (2018) note that the median participation rate in London is 48% compared to 29% in the North East. However, there is also a North – South divide in the type of level 3 qualifications students undertake prior to attending university. Students are much more likely to enter higher education with a vocational qualification if they previously lived in the North East, North West, Yorkshire and the Humber and the West Midlands.

How should we determine “overlap” in relation to: a) overlaps with T Levels? Please give reasons for your answer. b) overlaps with A Levels? Please give reasons for your answer.

Overlap of subject content should not be considered an issue if the content is coherent for the size and approach of the qualification. As we suggested in question 11, shorter qualifications should be a feature of technical and vocational routes, and so smaller qualifications may have some overlap with T Levels whilst serving a distinct and important purpose. Until the detailed content of T Levels is confirmed it will be difficult to determine the level and nature of overlap with other qualifications, and we are concerned that the pace of reform could outstrip a fuller and more informed basis for decision-making. Where there is content overlap with A Levels, differences in learning approaches and application should be considered, as well as the other content and practical skills that are developed through the qualification.