

CONSULTATION RESPONSE

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

PURPOSE AND NECESSITY

1. The clarity and purpose that the consultation proposal harks back to is the Skills Plan and a desire to offer clear choices BETWEEN high quality technical and academic options. This binary divide at level 3 is arguably too stark and, rather than opening up choices, will instead close them down. For students who have already made decisions about the next stage after level 3, this does not necessarily present any concern. However, for students who are certain about their study to progress into and beyond level 3, but not necessarily clear about their path of study in level 4, such a binary divide will cause them to make decisions earlier than they would wish too. For these students, there is often an attraction to mixing academic and technical/vocational education at level 3 to both enable them to maintain their options, but also to give them a richer, broader educational experience.
2. The implementation of new T levels means that students will not be able to mix these qualifications with any others they are taking at level 3. If this is accompanied by a removal of applied general level 3 qualifications such as BTEC Nationals then students are being denied choice and opportunity, and are potentially being filtered into courses and pathways that are not right for them simply because they are the only ones available. There is also the issue that in some areas of the country, T levels may not be available due to lack of employer capacity to commit to the workplace element of the curriculum.
3. One issue the consultation is not considering is how the secondary curriculum has been shaped in recent years in light of government policy decisions and preferences. Secondary schools are performance assessed against the number of successful Ebacc passes and progression to highly selective institutions, including a specific measure for enrollment at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. This influences the curriculum offered by secondary schools, and means that there is a heavy, possibly excessive focus on subjects that are deemed to lead to those narrow higher education outcomes. The consultation proposals regarding level 3, and the previous T levels development, appear to be trying to undo educational decisions taken at levels 1 and 2. However, some of the desired outcomes at level 3 in terms of ensuring progression to appropriate further study for students may be better achieved with a different level 2 curriculum. The lack of coordination and link between developments in the different educational phases causes disruption.

PROGRESSION

4. Students certainly need to have clear information about the nature, purpose, outcome and potential progression of any qualification they are taking. However, an assumption that A levels lead only to academic subjects at university and T levels only to higher technical study misunderstands the broad approach that many universities, especially modern universities, take when assessing the potential of applicants. Unnecessary and early specialisation could actually be to the detriment of students, and persuade them from progressing to the next stage of education. Applied general qualifications allow students to pursue a vocational approach that is broader than T levels, but still designed to provides a career-focused education in an area of the students' choosing. Being able to mix these qualifications with
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A levels, which is an increasingly popular option, gives a student a larger range of choice about future progression, as well as a broader educational experience. BTEC courses and other applied generals are also viewed favourably by students from disadvantaged and non-traditional backgrounds. Losing these as options could harm their progression to further study.

5. The consultation notes that some of the students have a higher rate of withdrawal from higher education. This may be the case, but it is possible that other factors are equally or more attributable for the withdrawal. There are many reasons for a student to withdraw from study, including academic, financial and health concerns. Universities, modern ones in particular, are extremely experienced in identifying and understanding student concerns that might lead to them withdrawing from study. In many cases, withdrawal is right at the time, but they will return to study at a later date. Ensuring that their earlier qualifications are not a barrier to this is essential. T levels may well mean that a student can only pursue a particular pathway once in receipt of that qualification, whereas an A level/Applied General mix could leave more options for return open to the individual.

QUALITY

6. High quality education is the right of every student. It is vital that qualifications have a clearly defined purpose and allow progression. However, it does not automatically follow that those qualifications should be directive, or so narrowly drawn that only limited options for progression are available for a student.
7. As stated earlier, an issue with the proposal to offer only A levels or T levels to students, with no ability to mix elements of each, is a restrictive choice and likely to result in a lower quality system overall in terms of the broad offer to students progressing to and through level 3. The nature of the T level programme restricts a student from undertaking any other qualification. This means it is only genuinely suitable for someone who is clear in their future direction. It also means that it is, to some extent, a lower quality offer than taking 3 A levels, given that the latter will keep open future options for an unsure student. A student that feels they have opted for the wrong A levels, or is not progressing in one of their three choices, will be able to alter that choice during their programme of study. They may also be able to take more than 3 A levels, so withdrawing from one would still leave them with a minimum level of achievement for progressing to higher education.
8. The offer for T levels is different. A student must pass all elements to achieve a T level. If they feel that they have made the wrong choice, or are struggling with one element, they risk total failure at level 3. There is, therefore, an extremely high cost associated with the wrong decision at T level. This has the potential to discriminate against those students who do not take A levels.

APPLYING OUR PRINCIPLES: OUR BROADER AMBITIONS

9. The consultation notes a desire to ensure that A levels and T levels are the two options of choice for students undertaking level 3 qualifications. This is likely to be restrictive to many students, and rather than opening up options, will potentially close them down for some students, particularly those who wish to continue with a blend of academic and technical education. This binary approach is likely to be a lower quality approach overall.
10. A broader three-part offer of level 3 qualifications will be of higher quality to a student, particularly to those who wish to pursue a non-A level educational track. Providing these qualifications are clear in their purpose and outcomes, and explain progression options, these three tracks can sit together:

- A Level, to develop academic subject-based knowledge and skills, and provide progression to further study in (usually) academic subjects
- Apprenticeships and T Levels, to develop specific knowledge and skills related to individual occupations and lead usually to them but also to further higher education study in technical subjects or to Degree Apprenticeships
- Applied general qualifications other than T Levels or A Levels, (e.g. BTEC Nationals), to develop knowledge and skills related to a broader sector in which specific occupations sit, leading to careers in those areas or further study in relevant higher education (e.g. Degree Apprenticeships, Foundation Degrees, degrees in vocational or professional subjects)

GETTING MORE PEOPLE TO LEVEL 3

11. As noted above, the secondary (key stage 3 and 4) curriculum has been revised, adjusted and adapted to meet future requirements. It is likely that the issues which concern the government – its belief that there are too many students pursuing academic options and not enough pursuing technical options – are caused not by an ill-designed level 3 curriculum offer, but by a restrictive, high-stakes level 2 curriculum. For many students, the focus on particular GCSE subjects creates barriers to progression which are often overcome through level 2 functional skills education rather than continual retakes of GCSE subjects.
12. Revising the level 3 offer and introducing a new binary approach without considering necessary revisions (in curriculum spread, performance measures, assessment approaches) is unlikely to be successful. The current approach in level 3 – both of allowing students to select one educational track or mix academic and technical/vocational education and of ensuring that whichever approach taken does not unnecessarily restrict future choice – has increased the number of people to move into level 3 qualifications. A binary approach may see the system fall back to one where only those pursuing academic subjects move into levels 3, 4 and beyond.