



Department
for Education

Review of post-16 qualifications at level 3 in England: Second Stage

**Summary document – what does this
mean for me?**

23 October 2020

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Review of post-16 qualifications at level 3 and below – what does it mean for me?

Over the past decade, evidence¹ has highlighted significant weaknesses in the quality of technical education. Action has already been taken, such as improving the way schools and colleges are held to account for their performance and the development of new T Levels. In parallel, we have improved A levels, but the time has come to go further if we are to realise the changes needed to give young people and adults the skills and knowledge they need to get a good job or progress to further study.

There are more than 12,000 different qualifications funded in England at level 3 (A level equivalent) and below. Students and employers face a bewildering choice over which is right for them. We have already started to tidy the landscape, removing qualifications that nobody takes. Our aim is to simplify the system so that young people and adults have clearer choices with improved lines of sight to skilled employment or further study, giving employers and students the confidence that every single qualification offered is high quality.

Background

Last year we consulted publicly on the key principles that should underpin our thinking as we review the qualifications on offer. We have responded to this consultation today and, in parallel, have launched another consultation that is focused just on level 3. Level 3 is the main exit point for most 18 year olds from school or college into the workplace or further study.

In our first consultation, we said that T Levels and A levels should in future be the programmes of choice for 16 to 19 year olds taking level 3 qualifications. We still believe this is right. T Levels have been developed with employers to give young people the skills they need to leave school or college well prepared to succeed in a job. A levels have consistently prepared students well for higher education. But we know that these cannot be the only options – this consultation describes the groups of qualifications that we think should be available to students in future alongside A levels and the new T Levels that have been introduced this year. It also sets out how we want to make sure that qualifications that are publicly funded consistently meet the high levels of quality that are needed to support students to fill their potential and to meet the needs of employers.

¹ [Review of vocational education: the Wolf report](#) (2011) and [Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education](#) (the 'Sainsbury Review') 2016.

Alongside our proposals for level 3 qualifications, we want to improve programmes of study and qualifications at level 2 (GCSE equivalent) and below. But before we do that, we think it is important to understand more about study at these levels and how it can best support students to progress, or to prepare them for employment if that is a more suitable outcome. That's why we will shortly be launching a separate call for evidence, so you can tell us what is working – in particular for those with special educational needs and disabilities, for whom we know these options are important – and what could be better.

Putting employers at the heart of technical education

We are strengthening the links between the classroom and the workplace to make sure that people leave college with the skills the economy and employers need. We are doing this by basing technical qualifications on employer-led standards. These standards describe the knowledge, skills, and behaviours that employers consider are essential. They already form the basis of apprenticeships. Linking technical qualifications to employer-led standards means students and employers can be confident that a qualification gives them the skills they will need to succeed.

Level 3 technical qualifications for 16 to 19 year olds

The introduction of T Levels from September 2020 is a significant step towards delivering high quality technical education with employers at the heart. They have been developed with more than 250 employers and are based on employer-led standards. As such they will provide young people with clearer and higher quality routes into skilled occupations as well as the best preparation for their future careers. T Levels have been developed in 24 subjects such as Digital Production, Design & Development, Health and Onsite Construction.

But we do need to simplify the choices available to young people alongside T Levels, and to make sure they are high quality. We think 16 to 19 year olds who want a classroom-based route to employment should be able to choose between a T Level or an alternative high quality qualification if there is no T Level available for their chosen career. The only other technical qualifications will be “additional specialist qualifications”, which can be studied alongside T Levels for students to build on and enhance their skills for more specialist occupations. This will mean that all technical qualifications should offer the firm prospect of a sustainable job and career.

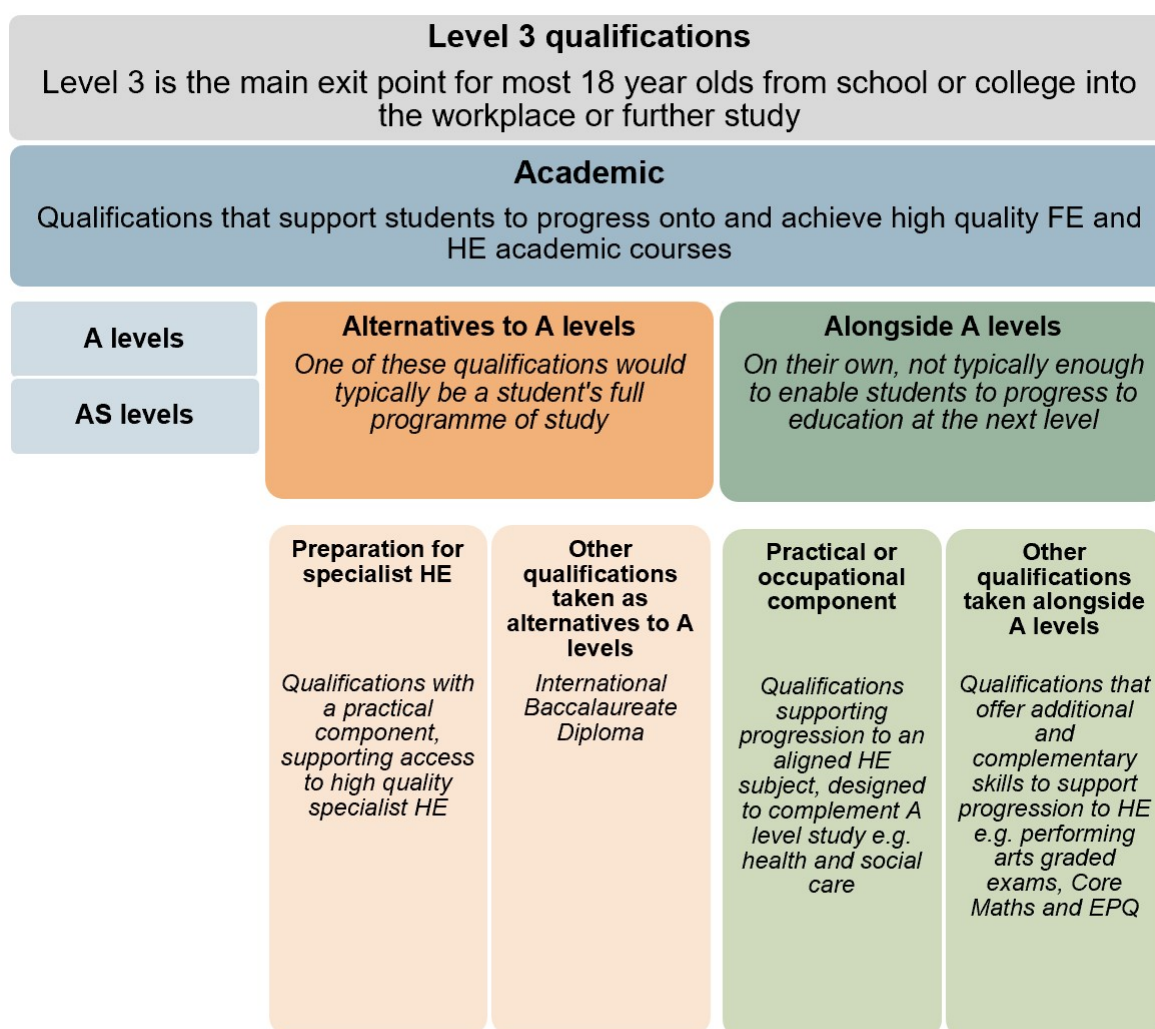
Level 3 academic qualifications for 16 to 19 year olds

We only want young people to take academic qualifications that give the best preparation to progress onto, and successfully complete, high quality HE courses. We

know that A levels offer excellent preparation for HE. However, our earlier consultation showed that, in some areas, other qualifications are a better option.

The consultation sets out our plans to simplify choices for young people taking academic qualifications. We plan to remove qualifications that overlap with A levels. We are proposing there should be qualifications that can be taken instead of A levels, but only if they help young people access specialist HE courses, such as our providers of world leading arts education. We expect these will be limited in number. The consultation also describes the type of qualifications we believe young people should be able to take alongside A levels, as shown in figure 1 below. We propose these should only exist if they support progression to high quality HE courses and cover different content to A levels.

Figure 1: Proposed level 3 academic landscape



Adults

It is also vital that adults are supported to retrain or re-skill in the skills the country needs, so they are able to gain employment or to progress in the workplace. The consultation sets out our plans for the qualifications that should be available to adults. It proposes T Levels should be available for adult learners but that there should also be a range of technical qualifications available to them which are backed by employers and meet their needs. These will be for adults who need more flexibility or have prior experience which means they do not need the full content of a T Level programme.

We propose the same academic route should be available for 16 to 19 year olds and adults because these qualifications offer the best preparation to progress onto and successfully complete high quality HE courses. The academic offer for adults should continue to include the Access to HE Diploma.

Ensuring level 3 qualifications are high quality

This reform is about taking a quality first approach so students of all ages can be confident their qualification is high quality. The consultation sets out our plans for making this happen – we will work with Ofqual and the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education to ensure every qualification meets our new quality requirements. We expect the process of reform will take place in a phased way, with reformed technical qualifications ready for teaching from 2023 onwards, and reformed academic qualifications ready for teaching from 2024.

What happens now?

2020

Autumn: Share your views through the level 3 consultation and level 2 and below call for evidence.

[Wave 1 T Levels](#) launch in selected providers.

2021

Spring: Second stage consultation government response published, setting out our firm plans for reform. Qualifications begin to be reformed.

Summer: Public funding withdrawn for qualifications with [no enrolments](#).

2022

Summer: Public funding withdrawn for qualifications with [low or no enrolments](#).

Autumn: [Wave 3 T Levels](#) available to students completing GCSEs in summer 2022.
[Approved digital HTQs](#) launch.

2023

Autumn: [Wave 4 T Levels](#) available to students completing GCSEs in summer 2023.
Reformed level 3 technical qualifications ready for teaching.

2024

Autumn: National rollout of T Levels.

Reformed level 3 academic and adult qualifications ready for teaching.

How will I benefit from these reforms?

You are an adult thinking about improving your skills...

Our reforms will ensure that adults have access to high quality qualifications that are flexible enough to meet their varying needs. Recognising adults are not typically undertaking full time study, we propose that technical qualifications allow for modular delivery and recognise prior learning. Technical qualifications designed for adults will be aligned to employer led standards, supporting adults to upskill, retrain and progress into employment or further study. These qualifications will give adults the skills employers need.

You are a young person or parent/carer...

Our reforms will make sure every student has the opportunity to gain the skills needed to enter employment or progress to higher levels of education. The new, high quality system will strengthen the links between classroom and workplace, with technical qualifications based on employer led standards and academic qualifications giving the best preparation to do well at university. The choices available after completing GCSEs or other level 2 qualifications will be simpler, offering clear progression routes that will help them realise their ambitions.

You are a post-16 provider...

From 2024, T Levels and A levels will be the qualifications of choice for classroom based study. Simplifying the system will make it easier to navigate and linking qualifications to employer led standards will give providers confidence they are developing an offer that meets the local area and student needs.

You are an employer...

Many employers struggle to find people with the skills they need or understand exactly what skills and experience a candidate will have gained from a particular qualification. Our reforms will address this, developing a system based on employer led standards and occupational competence. The high quality streamlined qualifications offer will be easier to understand and give young people the skills, knowledge and behaviours employers need. A flexible system for adults will support retraining and upskilling, enabling more adults to progress to higher technical education where many of our skills gaps are.



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