



Department
for Education

Post-16 Level 3 and Below Pathways

Government consultation

Launch date 20 October 2025

Respond by 12 January 2026

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Purpose of this consultation

The Post-16 Education and Skills Strategy set out our plans to introduce reformed qualifications pathways at level 3 and level 2, responding to the Curriculum and Assessment Review's evidence analysis and developing recommendations.

This consultation document gathers views on the government's proposals for the design of the new pathways for 16 to 19-year-olds, including:

- **A third, vocational pathway at level 3:** creating V Level qualifications. V Levels will sit alongside A levels and T Levels and will offer a vocational alternative to these academic and technical routes.
- **Two new pathways at level 2:** simplifying the current offer and providing a clear line of sight to both further study at level 3 and skilled employment through the Further Study pathway and Occupational pathway.

V Levels will blend applied learning with practical assessment, and their content will be linked to occupational standards set by Skills England. This will ensure V Levels are relevant to employers and have clear progression into employment, apprenticeships, or higher study.

The Further Study pathway and Occupational pathway will provide distinct routes to progression for level 2 students, either to level 2 careers, or further study.

Alongside this, we will continue to grow T Levels, so more students benefit from their strong outcomes.

The International Baccalaureate Diploma, Core Maths, Extended Project Qualification, Access to HE Diploma, Performing Arts Graded Examinations, GCSEs, A levels, Functional Skills Qualifications (FSQs), or Essential Digital Skills Qualifications (EDSQs) are not subject to these proposed reforms.

Who this consultation is for

The consultation is for anyone with an interest in post-16 education and training for 16 to 19-year-olds in England. This includes but is not limited to:

- students
- parents and carers
- employers
- awarding organisations
- schools, academies, further education colleges, sixth form colleges, university technical colleges
- universities and other higher education providers
- independent training providers
- headteachers and college principals
- teachers and lecturers
- careers advisers
- regulatory bodies
- equality organisations, including those representing the interests of students with special educational needs
- local, regional, city, and strategic authorities
- representative bodies, including employers' representative bodies and trade unions
- governors of education and skills providers

Issue date

The consultation was issued on 20 October 2025.

Enquiries

If your enquiry is related to the policy content of the consultation you can contact the team on: Post16Level3andBelowPathways.CONULTATION@education.gov.uk

If your enquiry is related to the Department for Education (DfE) e-consultation website or the consultation process in general, you can contact the DfE Ministerial and Public Communications Division by email: coordinator.consultations@education.gov.uk, telephone: 0370 000 2288 or via the [DfE Contact us page](#).

Additional copies

Additional copies are available electronically and can be downloaded from [GOV.UK DfE consultations](#).

The response

The results of the consultation and the department's response will be [published on GOV.UK](#) in 2026.

Respond online

To help us analyse the responses please use the online system wherever possible. Visit [DfE consultations on GOV.UK](#) to submit your response.

Other ways to respond

If for exceptional reasons you are unable to use the online system, for example because you use specialist accessibility software that is not compatible with the system, you may request an alternative format of the form.

By email

Post16Level3andBelowPathways.CONSULTATION@education.gov.uk

By post

Technical Education and Qualifications Reform Team
Department for Education
Great Smith Street
SW1P 3BT

Deadline

The consultation closes at 23:59 on 12 January 2026.

Key findings from the Post-16 Education and Skills Strategy and the Interim Curriculum and Assessment Review Report

The Curriculum and Assessment Review's ('the Review') interim report recognised A levels and T Levels as high-quality level 3 qualifications – with A levels supporting those who wish to study academic subjects and progress to higher education, and T Levels providing for those who wish to study technical subjects and progress within a specific employment sector.¹ The Review's interim findings reaffirmed the importance of A levels and described how T Levels are driving rigour, raising standards across the technical education system, and improving outcomes for those who take them. To build on the successes of existing academic and technical pathways, the Review recognised the need for a third pathway, to support students who do not study A levels or T Levels, as part of a system which is effective and simple to understand. Since the Review published their interim findings and next steps, we have been working with them to consider how best to take forward their findings.

The Post-16 Education and Skills Strategy responds to the Review's interim report and proposes to introduce V Levels – a new qualification– forming a third, vocational pathway at level 3 to sit alongside the technical and academic offer of T Levels and A levels. We will design V Levels to complement A levels and T Levels, providing an option for students who wish to study a broader programme including vocational subjects with an opportunity for more applied learning.

At level 2, the Curriculum and Assessment Review's interim report highlighted the over-representation of socio-economically disadvantaged and vulnerable students studying at level 2 in 16-19 education; with a quarter being eligible for free school meals, and students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) representing 29% of the cohort compared with 15% of all young people aged 19.² The Review's interim report noted that the biggest barrier to students progressing to level 3 is their prior attainment at key stage 4, especially in maths and English. It also heard that studying at level 2 for an additional year can support students to gain their maths and/or English level 2 and address wider barriers that prevent students from progressing directly to level 3 options. In addition to progressing to further study, the interim report highlighted the importance of supporting students looking to move to a level 2 occupation. It referenced a report by Skills England which found that more than 1 million of the 2.5

¹ [Curriculum and Assessment Review: interim report](#)

² [Curriculum and Assessment Review interim report - analytical annex](#)

million jobs in the UK in critical demand require qualifications that map to around level 2, which need work-related training on top of standard compulsory education.³

The Post-16 Education and Skills Strategy, therefore, set out the government's intention to reform the level 2 offer so that post-16 students who are studying at this level have access to high-quality education and training with a clear line of sight to further study or employment. The Post-16 Education and Skills Strategy set out proposals for level 2 reform comprising two distinct pathways: an Occupational pathway, to support progression into level 2 occupations; and a Further Study pathway, which supports access to education pathways at level 3.

³ [Curriculum and Assessment Review: interim report](#) citing [Skills England: driving growth and widening opportunities](#)

The case for change in 16-19 provision

Level 3

We have existing strong qualifications in A levels and T Levels providing opportunities for students in the academic and technical pathways. However, many 16-year-olds study level 3 qualifications that are not A/AS levels or T Levels. In 2024, 16% of 16-year-olds took these qualifications, with an additional 10% studying Applied General courses alongside A/AS levels.⁴ We know many students who take these qualifications have lower GCSE prior attainment compared to those who take A levels,⁵ and prefer learning and assessment which is more applied. They may also need time in their study programme to continue studying level 2 English and/or maths.

However, these qualifications have mixed outcomes for students.⁶ To help address this, new Alternative Academic Qualifications (AAQs) and reformed technical qualifications started to be taught in August 2025. AAQs were designed to support entry into higher education as part of a mixed programme with A levels, and the reformed technical occupational qualifications have further strengthened the ties to employer needs.

The system is still confusing though, and there is much further to go to improve quality, coherence, consistency, and parity of esteem between different qualification brands. Historically there has been no limit on the number of vocational qualifications and subjects awarding organisations can bring forward for funding. Despite exercises to remove qualifications with low and no enrolments there are still c.900 level 3 qualifications available for 16 to 19-year-olds.⁷ This proliferation has led to vocational qualifications differing in their structure and branding, with limited comparability between them – which is confusing when compared to clear A level and T Level subject choices. While A levels and T Levels continue to deliver well for their students, we do not have a coherent, simple to understand, and high-quality vocational pathway for the group of students who choose this option. As DfE works with experts to set the content for A levels and T Levels, we propose that the content for 16-19 vocational qualifications should now be set in a similar way, to support the consistent quality and coherence that students need.

⁴ [Participation in education, training and employment age 16 to 18](#)

⁵ [A level and other 16 to 18 results, Academic year 2023/24 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

⁶ [Curriculum and Assessment Review: interim report](#)

⁷ [Qualification Downloads - List of Qualifications approved for funding](#). Qualifications funded in academic year 2025/26. Excludes qualifications out of scope of the review: A/AS level, Access to Higher Education Diploma, Advanced Extension Awards, International Baccalaureate Diploma, Project, Performing arts graded examinations, and T Levels.

Progress on improving the technical pathway

T Levels were first introduced in 2020. They are already delivering fantastic results for thousands of young people, giving them the skills and confidence for further study, apprenticeships, or skilled employment. There are 21 T Levels available in subjects ranging from Digital to Health, with a new T Level in Marketing available from September 2025. The overall pass rate for T Levels in 2025 was 91.4% with almost two thirds of students achieving a merit or above.⁸

After completion, T Level students who progress into work are more likely to work in a field related to their course than students from comparable level 3 qualifications (approximately 7 out of 10). 71% of T Level students also agreed that their course prepared them for the workplace, which is greater than students on comparable level 3 courses, with differences of 10-15 percentage points.⁹

T Levels also provide a strong route into higher apprenticeships. Over two thirds of T Level students who take up apprenticeships go straight into higher or degree-level apprenticeships. This is far higher than for all level 3 students where the vast majority go on to do an apprenticeship at the same or lower level.¹⁰

As T Levels have rolled out, we have learned from the experience of early adopters and implemented further improvements. We are ensuring the content for each T Level meets the needs of industry, is achievable for students and deliverable at scale for providers. Examples of changes made so far include reducing the number of exams within the Education and Early Years T Level and significant reductions in the assessment time in Digital. As we continue to roll out refreshed specifications, we will identify areas where we can continue to make enhancements.

Level 2

The previous government had made limited progress in the reform of level 2 qualifications for 16 to 19-year-olds. Despite exercises to remove qualifications with low and no enrolments, there are still large numbers (c.1,600) of level 2 qualifications available for 16 to 19-year-olds.¹¹

⁸ [Provisional T Level results, Academic year 2024/25 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

⁹ [NatCen, NFER](#)

¹⁰ [Technical education learner progression survey 2024 - GOV.UK](#) '16-18 study leavers national level destinations' from '16-18 destination measures', [Permanent data table - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

¹¹ [Qualification Downloads - List of Qualifications approved for funding](#). Qualifications funded in academic year 2025/26. Excludes English For Speakers of Other Languages, Functional Skills, GCSEs, Other Life Skills Qualification, Performing Arts Graded Examination, and Project.

Providers have informed us that the different options available at level 2 are confusing for students and difficult for providers and awarding organisations to deliver. In addition, the T Level Foundation Year is serving as a broader pathway than originally intended, with around half of students progressing to level 3, but with low progression to T Levels specifically.¹² This indicates that a streamlined set of qualifications, offering clear progression routes, is needed to support progression to future level 3 pathways or into occupations at level 2.

¹² Data on the T Level Foundation Year can be found in the analytical annex to the [T Level Action Plan 2023 to 2024](#)

16-19 future system vision

The future 16-19 education system will comprise distinct pathways, each with a clear line of sight to the student's intended destination, be it further education and training or directly into employment, including as an apprentice. The pathways will include qualifications designed specifically for each pathway, which will allow students to acquire and demonstrate the knowledge and skills needed to thrive in work and education. Qualifications which lead to employment will be based on occupational standards to ensure students develop the skills employers and the economy need.

At level 3

In the current landscape, students have approximately 900 level 3 qualifications to choose from across several qualification types, including A levels, T Levels, Applied General Qualifications (AGQs), Alternative Academic Qualifications (AAQs), Technical Occupational Qualifications (TOQs), unclassified qualifications, and technical qualifications. Once the third, vocational pathway is introduced, the landscape will be much easier to navigate. Students will be able to choose between three main high quality qualification options that will provide them with opportunities to progress to further study and skilled work – with V Levels as the main vocational offer, T Levels as the main technical offer, and A levels as the main academic offer.

V Levels (vocational pathway) are for students who would like to explore sectors without specialising. V Levels will provide students the opportunity to pursue these interests further through related higher education or work including apprenticeships. V Levels will be applied, the same size as A levels, and will aim to cover the core knowledge and skills related to an employment sector.¹³ Students will be able to take V Levels in multiple subjects and in combination with other qualifications such as A levels or level 2 English and maths. Their content will be linked to occupational standards to support progression and ensure they meet employers' needs.

T Levels (technical pathway) are for students who are confident about the career they want to pursue, where it is right to take a single, large qualification (a T Level is the equivalent of three A levels) and want to progress into skilled employment in related roles, including as an apprentice at level 4 or above, or progress into further study. T Levels consist of a core covering knowledge and skills for employment sectors, with a specialism enabling learners to gain threshold competence in a particular occupation.

¹³ The Curriculum and Assessment Review will set out their different views on V Level sizes in their forthcoming report.

These combine with an industry placement with an employer to ensure students have the depth and breadth of knowledge and skills needed for progression.

A levels (academic pathway) are for students who want to pursue an academic pathway and career interests further through higher study. A levels are academic subject-based qualifications. They are designed to equip students with the knowledge, skills and understanding to progress to higher education, and to enable higher education providers and employers to identify student attainment and academic ability. Students choose a combination of subjects (typically 3 subjects) that suit their academic strengths and future goals and can also choose to study AS levels. **The purpose of A/AS levels is out of scope of this consultation.**

At level 2

Occupational Certificates (Occupational pathway) are for students who want to study for a particular occupation and need to develop their skills in a classroom-based setting, with the aim of progressing into employment in relevant level 2 roles.

Foundation Certificates (Further Study pathway) are for students who want to pursue further level 3 study, whether on T Levels, V Levels or A levels, but did not meet the entry requirement to progress directly, usually because they did not achieve five grade 4s at GCSE, including English and maths, at age 16. They therefore require more time to develop their knowledge and skills before moving up to the next level.

Setting out clear qualification options in this way should help students to understand their options and support teachers and careers professionals in giving good advice. At each level, **apprenticeships** will also be available for young people who are ready for work and want to enter a particular role. This includes the new **foundation apprenticeships**, which are jobs with training at level 2, providing a broad curriculum focusing on the knowledge, skills and behaviours needed for the job. They are an employment-based training offer that give young people a route into careers in critical sectors, enabling them to earn a wage while developing employability skills to support the transition from full time education to work, providing entry-level competence. **Apprenticeships and foundation apprenticeships are outside the scope of this consultation.**

DfE is committed to ensuring that students at entry level and level 1 have access to high-quality qualifications that support progression – whether into further study, employment, or the development of essential life and work skills. We will, in due course, consider whether reforms to qualifications at entry level and level 1 are required.

Although moving to a system of clearer pathways would mean more change to vocational qualifications, we think this is the right long-term decision – ultimately delivering more stability in the system and ensuring students have the qualifications

they need to succeed. The consultation below sets out our proposed approach to undertaking the changes required to bring in this reformed system. Given the scope of change, we want to ensure that your voices are heard and inform its design.

A new level 3 vocational qualification – ‘V Levels’

V Level policy intent

Two thirds of 16-year-old students study level 3 qualifications. Around 71% of those students undertake A level programmes and an additional 16% undertake mixed programmes of A levels and Applied General Qualifications.¹⁴ T Levels are growing in popularity and are providing a highly regarded technical programme for those who know which career they want to pursue, and who want to do this through employment, including as a higher apprentice, or through related higher education courses.

However, we are clear that A levels and T Levels do not accommodate all students’ needs and aspirations. We need a new applied offer which:

- caters for those who, like T Level students, excel when putting theory into practice, but are not ready to focus in one occupational area
- allows students the flexibility to study different vocational subjects, in a similar way to A level students who can study different academic subjects, so they can try out different interests before specialising further
- gives students the flexibility to combine V Levels together, and/or with A levels - and have space for maths and English retakes, should that be needed
- is offered in subjects related to specific employment sectors and designed to allow students to pursue career interests related to the subject, including relevant apprenticeships or higher education courses
- has nationally set outline content for better subject consistency and improved quality, and will provide a consistent approach to the development of all level 3 qualifications for 16-19 year olds

Students who study existing level 3 vocational qualifications typically have lower GCSE prior attainment than those who study A levels and do best when applying their learning.¹⁵ We believe that V Levels need to be attainable for the average student currently taking Applied General qualifications, based on their prior attainment. The section below on the design of V Levels provides further detail about how we propose these new qualifications could deliver on this policy intent.

¹⁴ [‘Participation Institutions and Qualifications’ from ‘Participation in education, training and employment age 16 to 18’, Permanent data table - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

¹⁵ [A level and other 16 to 18 results, Academic year 2023/24 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

V Level design

There is significant variability in the design of current vocational qualifications' content, assessment and grading – including between qualifications in the same subject. This creates a confusing qualifications landscape for students and parents, as well as employers and education providers.

We propose that V Levels will build on previous reforms, taking the best approaches from current qualifications. We are also clear that the content, assessment, grading, and other aspects of design must be more consistent. To ensure the quality and consistency of V Levels, we propose that:

- **Subjects** – will be based on evidence of need and be determined by DfE. A list of indicative subject areas, in scope for further testing, can be found on page 19
- **Content** – high-level outline content linked to occupational standards will be set nationally for awarding organisations to follow when devising qualification specifications
- **Assessment and grading** – Ofqual will set the design rules for V Level structure, assessment, and grading which each V Level must meet. In addition to the General Conditions of Recognition, these V Level specific conditions will be used to regulate awarding organisations' design and delivery of each and every V Level - in the same way that each A level is regulated

The following sections set out our proposals for each of these in more detail. Consultation questions related to each proposal follow each section.

V Level subjects

V Levels will support students to pursue career interests in a range of vocational subjects which enable them to apply knowledge and skills to achieve practical work-related outcomes. They will therefore be linked to occupational standards.

V Levels will be for students who are still deciding which career path to take and who want to keep their options open. To allow for this, and to support a more varied study programme, we propose that V Levels are in subjects which can be delivered in 360 guided learning hours (GLH) – the same size as A levels.

This will mean students can select more than one V Level subject, so they can try out different vocational areas, and combine V Levels with A levels or further study in English or maths at level 2 – if that will support their progression.

By V Level subject, we mean the subject of the qualification, for example a V Level in 'Digital'.

V Level size

If a student chooses to focus on a specific sector, and so they study a qualification which constitutes a large part of their study programme, we recognise that they are making a definitive career-led choice.

It is important, therefore, that the qualification they study does justice to this decision, and enables them to progress to related employment or further study. As T Levels offer high levels of progression to related fields, we remain committed to these being the only large qualification, available in a broader range of subjects for students who have made this sector-specific post-16 choice.

Where students are less sure of their career choice, they should be taking a broader study programme, encompassing a range of subjects. To support the development of broad study programmes, we propose V Levels are not offered in qualifications which are bigger than A levels, so students are able to take multiple qualifications and have greater options.

At present there are a number of “medium size” qualifications. These sit across a wide spectrum of guided learning hours, larger than an A level but smaller than a T level. The DfE’s understanding is that most students who are studying medium sized qualifications continue on to other level 3 or below study in the same subject, effectively spending significant portions of their study programme in the same sector area. There are a wide range of reasons why this may be – some reflect student motivation (as students study a sector more, they enjoy it and decide that they want to specialise), some reflect provider confidence in student ability (providers may have concerns about the ability of a student to cope with a large qualification) and some reflect a student’s desire to study other subjects alongside (for example, studying an A level alongside a medium programme of study). However, it is challenging to form a clear picture of student behaviour in this space because of the “nested” nature of these qualifications.

Our starting assumption is that many of these students may be better off either clearly committing to a large programme of study or by allowing themselves greater breadth by studying multiple V Levels or A levels in different areas to create stronger programmes. However, we would like to test this assumption further through consultation with the sector.

We are proposing V Levels will be 360 GLH to enable students to combine them with other V Levels and A levels. Where larger subjects are needed, we propose that these are offered through T Levels.

1. In taking this approach, are there any risks or issues we need to be aware of?

2. Are there any particular issues for subjects or students that we need to be aware of as a result of not having medium sized V Levels?

Principles for selecting V Level subjects

As V Levels are vocational, they should only be offered in subjects which support the development of knowledge and skills that employers and the economy need. This is why they will be linked to occupational standards which are set by Skills England in consultation with employers - so we can be sure that study of V Levels provides a clear line of sight to careers.

We also recognise that progression to related careers for many V Level students may be via further study, whether that is through further education, apprenticeships or higher education. As such, to ensure a strong platform for progression, each subject will need to have currency with higher education providers.

To ensure this, we propose that each V Level subject:

- has clear evidence that it supports progression to relevant employment, including as an apprentice and related higher education courses
- is broad and focused on an employment sector rather than a specific occupation
- can be delivered in classroom-based settings within 360 guided learning hours
- includes a significant proportion of practical, applied content
- is likely to have sufficient learner demand to ensure they are viable for providers and awarding organisations to offer

V Level subjects will also need to support the coherence of the 16-19 qualification system overall, complementing the other pathways at level 3, and providing a clear pathway for students progressing from Foundation Certificates. Together, we want the range of V Level subjects on offer to:

- cover the main employment sectors of the economy – providing for a wide range of potential employment and higher education destinations
- relate to priority areas of the economy, such as those linked to the growth-driving sectors¹⁶

¹⁶ [Invest 2035: the UK's modern industrial strategy](#), and the [Assessment of priority skills to 2030 - GOV.UK](#)

- provide a clearly different post-16 choice, which complements rather than competes with A levels and T Levels, especially if offered in the same or similar subjects
- provide a clear progression pathway for students completing level 2 Foundation Certificates

We plan to apply these principles rigorously when selecting the subjects for development.

As V Levels are linked to occupational standards there will be subject areas that are in T Level areas. V Levels will be a distinct offer from T Levels and both qualifications are designed to provide students with a different offer. T Levels will continue to be the technical choice for those students who know which career they want to pursue and will take up a full study programme. V Levels, as small broad sector-based qualifications, are designed to be taken in conjunction with other V Levels, with A levels and potentially alongside English and maths qualifications. We have provided examples of this under the V Levels and the wider study programmes section.

Based on our initial analysis, the range of subject areas in scope could include the following:

- Agriculture, Land Management and Production
- Animal Care and Management
- Animation, Games Design and Visual Effects
- Arts, Craft and Design
- Business, Administration and Management
- Construction and the Built Environment
- Criminology
- Digital
- Education and Early Years
- Engineering and Manufacturing
- Finance and Accounting
- Legal Services
- Hair, Beauty and Aesthetics
- Health and Care Services
- Hospitality and Catering
- Media, Broadcast and Production
- Music and Music Performance
- Performing Arts
- Protective Services
- Sales, Retail and Customer Service
- Science
- Sport and Exercise Science
- Travel and Tourism

The list above is indicative, rather than final.

To help ensure V Levels are offered in the right subject areas, as part of our evidence gathering process, we are inviting your views. If you have evidence for how further subject areas will meet the principles above, please do provide it or, if you disagree with those on the list, we would welcome understanding your views.

3. Which subject areas do you think are most appropriate for delivery through V Levels?

Please provide evidence of relevance to employment sectors or further study.

V Level purpose and content

If the purpose of V Levels is to support progression for students who excel when putting theory into practice, we need to ensure the content of subjects supports that purpose. Therefore, we propose that:

- V Levels are linked to occupational standards so we can be sure the content is up to date, relates to the skills employers need and supports onward progression
- V Levels provide sufficient breadth to ensure students can move into a variety of destinations - enabling them to keep their career options open
- an appropriate proportion of each V Level's content is focused on application of the knowledge and skills to achieve practical work-related purposes; as each subject is different, we acknowledge that the proportion of applied content will vary between subjects, and some may naturally require more practical content than others

V Level assessment and grading

V Levels should be high quality, rigorous level 3 qualifications which hold parity of esteem with A levels and T Levels. Ofqual will consider the regulatory approach that best meets the policy intent for V Levels, including how they should be assessed and graded, and will consult on their plans in due course.

We expect that V Levels will generally have an increased proportion of non-exam assessment compared to many A levels. Non-exam assessment can support accessibility, allowing for valid assessment of practical application and can take a wide range of forms depending on the subject. Using non-exam assessment will support the purpose of V Levels – supporting more applied learning and assessment. Where providers are required to mark students' assessment evidence, we expect that awarding organisations will apply equivalent quality assurance methods to those used for A levels and T Levels.

In line with the approach used for A levels and T Levels, we expect the use of a consistent grading scale for V Level qualifications.

V Levels and the wider study programme

V Level qualifications will be funded through 16-19 study programmes. All 16-19 study programmes should be designed to provide students with a structured and challenging learning programme that supports their development and progression in line with their career plans. Study programmes should be individually tailored, and will typically combine these elements:

1. Substantial qualifications that stretch students and prepare them for education at the next level or for employment
2. English and maths, where students have not yet achieved a GCSE grade 4
3. Work experience to give students the opportunity to develop their career choices and to apply their skills in real working conditions
4. Other non-qualification activity, for example to support learners with SEND, to develop a student's character, broader skills, attitudes and confidence, and support progression

For students choosing a broad study programme with V Level qualifications, the qualification component can comprise just V Level subjects, or V Level and A level subjects. Where students have not yet achieved a GCSE grade 4 in English or maths, they could also combine a level 2 English or maths resit qualification with V Levels as part of their study programme. The choice of subjects and how they cohere will be important to support students' onward progression - for example, if students need to achieve qualifications in specific subjects to meet higher education provider admission requirements.

As such, information advice and guidance, and any guidelines about what subjects work best in combination, will need to be clear – especially as V Levels will also be new to higher education providers and employers. To support this, we will consider whether 'rules of combination' will be needed to ensure high quality study programmes that are coherent and lead to good progression outcomes. This would be beyond the standard use of 'discount codes' which ensure the qualifications with largely overlapping content count only once in performance tables.

4. How could current information, advice and guidance be improved or what new guidelines or measures should be developed to ensure that students are informed about subject selection and combinations?

The wider study programme will provide the time and flexibility for students to retake one or both of English and maths alongside their main subject qualifications, should providers feel the student will be able to. As with the current programmes, providers will

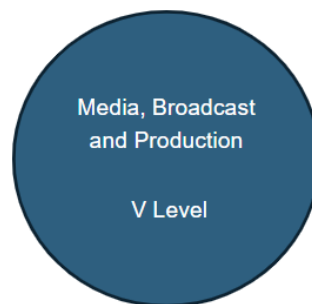
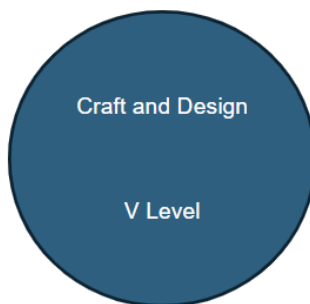
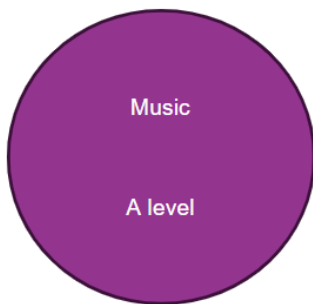
be free to set their own admissions criteria. Should students require more time and support to progress to level 3 then the Foundation Certificate will be there to support them in that transition.

Examples of subject combinations as part of a study programme:

Student A

2 V Levels and an A level

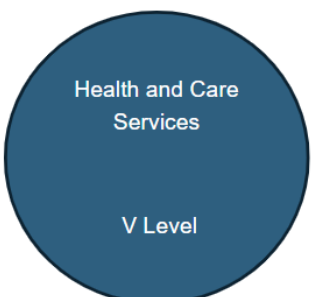
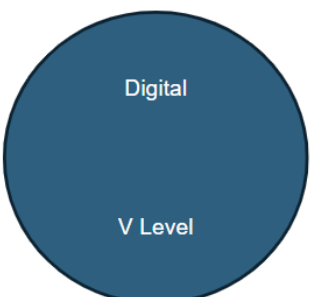
This student wants to get into either the creative arts or the media industry. They are interested in music and choose to do a mixed V Level/A level study programme. All qualifications are 360 GLH in size.



Student B

3 V Levels

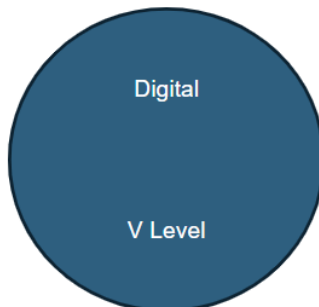
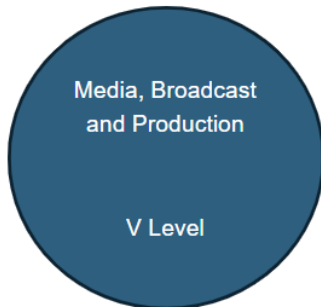
This student is considering working in either the health or fitness industry but also wants to learn more about the digital sector as they know that digital could also support their future career aspirations and future business goals. All qualifications are 360 GLH in size.



Student C

3 V Levels

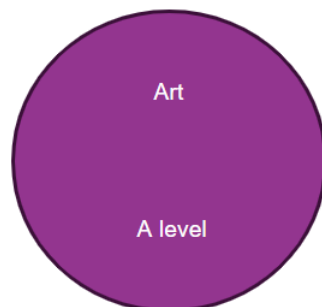
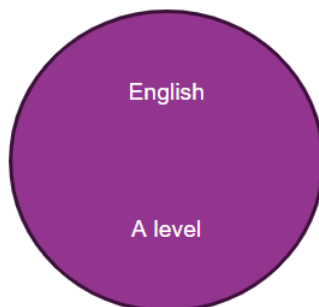
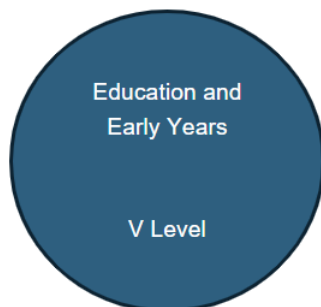
This student is interested in digital and media and (possibly combining the two) with a career in digital media. They combine these with business to help support their understanding of how organisations work. They take a range of V Levels to help them narrow down their options and to support their progression to the right HE course for them. All qualifications are 360 GLH in size.



Student D

2 A levels and a V Level

This student would like to work with children and enjoys art so wants to take a V Level with 2 A levels to understand more about their options of working in the sector. All qualifications are 360 GLH in size.



New T Levels in more subjects

Introduction

We know that some students have a clear idea of the career they want to work in and want to concentrate fully on a single technical subject area with progression options into work and further study.¹⁷

T Levels provide a strong offer for these students. T Levels are built on occupational standards and have industry placements that give students a crucial early introduction to their future professions. Through the outcomes of the [Review of Qualifications Reform](#) (12 December 2024) and the Post-16 Education and Skills Strategy (20 October 2025) the government has asserted its commitment to T Levels and ensuring more students have the opportunity to benefit from them.

Basing the content of large qualifications on occupational standards is key to supporting improved progression for students who wish to focus on a single sector. It means employers can be confident students will have the skills they need to enter occupations.

As T Levels mature, we are continuing to refine them to enhance deliverability whilst maintaining rigour and quality. The recent refreshes to the specifications for the earliest T Levels have seen us learn from the first years of delivery. We have made adjustments to rebalance content, for example ensuring that content in the Core that is only relevant to individual occupations is moved into the specialism. We have also looked to reduce duplication and the volume of assessment to help manageability at scale. We will continue to work with providers, Ofqual and awarding organisations to identify areas to refine delivery and keep administrative burdens to a minimum.

The government remains committed to T Levels, which enable learners to fully focus on the career they want to pursue and to progress to employment or further study in a particular industry. We propose T Levels will be the only large qualification for students who want a sector focussed post-16 choice. When considering new subjects, we will use Skills England's analysis to ascertain whether a large qualification is needed to meet the skills needs of the industry. If it is needed, we will explore how it could be added to the T Level portfolio.

We will approach this through exploring the best way to implement a T Level offering, and expect to roll out new T Levels in the following order:

¹⁷ Three in ten pupils and students in years 7-13 (30%) reported that they had a specific idea of the career or job that they want when they finish their education. Source [Parent, pupil and learner panel: 22/23 February wave](#) p8

- Introducing T Levels where there are level 3 occupational standards, current AGQs or Tech Levels and a T Level would be viable, but no T Level currently exists - for example Sports Science and Care Services.
- Introducing T Levels where there are occupational standards, but these are not at level 3, and adjustments to either the standards or the focus of the T Level would be required to meet the needs of students and employers - for example Production Arts and Music Technology.
- Developing occupational standards where they do not exist in the subject area in order to create a viable T Level - for example Performing Arts.

We propose working with employers, awarding organisations, further education providers and higher education providers to develop new T Levels in this wider range of subjects.

Introducing new T Levels where occupational standards exist

The strong performance of T Levels in terms of learner progression into relevant industries means there is a strong case for continuing to expand into new subject areas, enabling learners to meet threshold competence against employer led standards. We have already introduced a specialism in Project Delivery in Construction and the Built Environment this September and are planning to introduce a new specialism in Low Carbon Heating in 2026. Where large qualifications currently exist, and there are relevant standards a T Level could be developed against, we will consider the need for a large qualification and, where a large qualification is needed, develop a T Level or an additional specialism.

Introducing new T Levels in subjects where occupational standards are not at level 3

The shift to a system of pathways provides a clear opportunity to position all 'single subject' choices within the same pathway. Given the strong performance of T Levels supporting students' progression to related fields, we think that T Levels should be extended to more subjects currently offered through large qualifications, to make T Levels the clear pathway for students who know which career they want to pursue. This makes for a system with clearer choices for students. This includes subjects where occupational standards exist but are not at level 3, such as:

- Music Technology
- Production Arts
- Visual Effects

Offering T Levels in these pathways could enhance the offer in these subject areas, not least through the progression value generated for students through stronger links to employers – for example through the industry placement. In order to introduce these subjects, we will work with industry and providers to ensure there are valuable progression options for students, including access to higher education and potential apprenticeship routes directly linked to the T Level.

Introducing new T Levels in subjects currently without occupational standards (at any level)

We understand that occupational standards do not currently exist for some existing level 3 qualifications with scope to become new T Level subjects.

We will work with Skills England and the relevant industries to create relevant standards and explore how to create a viable T Level at level 3 that can equip students for progression into further study and, where possible, directly into relevant occupations. Through this development process we will look to ensure that these T Levels are the right fit for both employers and providers, in order to best serve students and meet ongoing skills needs.

Potential subjects include:

- Art and Design
- Performing Arts
- Music Performance

For all subjects being introduced as new T Levels, we will ensure these subjects are broad enough to warrant a large qualification and that Skills England analysis shows a demand for large qualifications in the sector, and subsequent progression options for students. As with all T Levels, these would be linked to relevant standards, with a broad sector-based core. The opportunity to study a specialism in depth and a substantial industry placement will be retained.

5. What factors should we consider when creating T Levels where there are currently no level 3 occupational standards? Please explain your answer.

We will also continue to consider the case for T Levels where there are not currently large classroom-based level 3 qualifications but where Skills England indicate there is employer demand, for example in Energy and Sustainability.

Level 2 pathways

As set out above, we propose that there will be two dedicated Level 2 pathways for 16 to 19-year-olds in the future, each leading to a particular primary destination:

Further Study pathway - This will include qualifications called **Foundation Certificates**. Foundation Certificates will be for students who want to pursue further level 3 study via related T Levels, V Levels, A levels or apprenticeships. Students on this pathway will benefit from more time to develop their knowledge and skills before moving up to the next level.

Occupational pathway – This will include qualifications called **Occupational Certificates**. Occupational Certificates will be for students who are certain of their occupation but need to develop their skills in a classroom-based setting, with the aim of progressing into employment in relevant level 2 roles, including an apprenticeship.

We have used these titles so that students, providers and employers can readily understand the differing purposes of the pathways.

Within these pathways, students will take their own individual **study programmes** that reflect their specific subject interests and career goals and focus on preparing them for their intended primary destination.

Good targeting and support to ensure students are on the right pathway will be important, for example through good careers information, advice and guidance and effective early diagnostics. We recognise that there may be circumstances where students wish to transfer between the pathways and we want that to be achievable. For example, students may want to transfer at the end of the Further Study pathway to the Occupational pathway, or progress to level 3 or an apprenticeship midway through the Occupational pathway. We will consider how best we can support such transfers for these pathways.

We recognise that students do change their minds, and some students may wish to transfer between the Further Study pathway and the Occupational pathway. Others may have the opportunity to progress to level 3 or take up an apprenticeship opportunity mid-way through their Occupational Certificate.

6. How can the two pathways, and the two qualifications, be designed to make these transitions as easy as possible?

Level 2 Further Study pathway

Further Study pathway policy intent

This pathway will provide a high-quality route for those students studying at level 2 who have the ambition and capability to progress onto and succeed at level 3 study.

Students taking this pathway are likely to have a clear intention to progress to level 3, which could open the possibility of entering higher education or pursuing skilled employment at level 3, and have a level of prior attainment that makes progression to level 3 a realistic prospect after a further year at level 2.

We propose that there should be a single pathway supporting progression to T Levels, V Levels or A levels. The development of the new pathway will build on the T Level Foundation Year and Academic Progression Programme pilot. We propose that these existing progression programmes cease to exist in the future as separate programmes serving specific level 3 destinations with their own requirements.

The pathway will be delivered as a 16-19 study programme lasting for one year, with a strong focus on preparing students effectively for further study at level 3. Study programmes taken in this pathway will:

- include a new Foundation Certificate qualification (see below) in the student's chosen subject
- develop independent study skills through the Foundation Certificate, and build confidence and resilience to progress onto a level 3 pathway by providing exposure to level 3 teaching and assignments in a supportive environment
- provide high-quality, structured enrichment activities to ensure that students are well prepared to succeed at the next level of study. Providers will have the flexibility to design their own enrichment offer, but we will provide guidance on what types of activity would be appropriate in this pathway. This should include bridging the gap by giving students some experience of what it is like to study at level 3, which could be through sitting in on level 3 classes and doing some level 3 assignments
- have a strong focus on English and maths where students have not achieved a grade 4 in their GCSE. Students should be supported to achieve the grades that providers require to access level 3 study programmes. The Further Study pathway will allow time for the minimum hours as per the English and maths condition of funding and the recommended additional 35 hours for maths. We will also support all colleges to emulate the effective practice of the highest performing colleges when it comes to delivering 16-19 English and maths

We intend to introduce new subject-specific qualifications – Foundation Certificates – for this pathway. These will replace the previously planned T Level Foundation

qualifications and other progression qualifications, and will simplify the qualification choices available for students working towards progression to level 3.

Foundation Certificate design

Each vocational area will have a single Foundation Certificate.

We propose that Foundation Certificates should be taken over one year, within a broader study programme. Most students taking Foundation Certificates will be continuing to study English and/or maths, whether at GCSE or the proposed new 16-19 English and maths level 1 "preparation for GCSE" qualification, as well as undertaking wider enrichment, employability and pastoral activities and gaining exposure to level 3 study. To ensure Foundation Certificates are deliverable within a wider one-year study programme alongside other study programme elements, we propose that all Foundation Certificates will be 240 guided learning hours. This size will provide a good level of breadth and depth across the scope of a broad vocational area. It will also ensure that qualification size is consistent across subject areas. Students will choose one Foundation Certificate to take within their one-year study programme.

We expect most post-16 students on this pathway to study the vocational Foundation Certificates. However, as this pathway will also be for post-16 students who want to progress onto A levels, they will continue to be able to study relevant GCSEs instead of a Foundation Certificate, where that supports a student's aims and interests.

Foundation Certificates will be broad vocational qualifications specifically for post-16 students and will be different to GCSEs and Key Stage 4 Technical Awards, which are designed for pre-16.¹⁸ It is likely there may be some Foundation Certificates in vocational subjects where there are related Key Stage 4 Technical Awards and/or GCSEs, such as engineering. Where this is the case, Foundation Certificates will need to cater for students who may have studied a related subject at Key Stage 4, as well as students who are taking the vocational subject for the first time. We will consider how best we can design Foundation Certificates to cater for these cohorts and minimise any duplication as we consider the content of Foundation Certificates.

¹⁸ Technical Awards are an important part of the pre-16 qualification landscape, designed to be taken alongside GCSEs, which allow pupils to develop foundational knowledge and practical skills relevant to a sector or occupational group (e.g. health and social care), and at least 120 guided learning hours.

We're proposing that all Foundation Certificates are the same size – 240 guided learning hours – to ensure they are a consistent size and can fit within a one-year study programme allowing for English, maths and non-qualification activity such as employability, enrichment and pastoral support, and exposure to level 3 study.

7. In taking this approach, are there any risks or issues we need to be aware of?

Foundation Certificate subjects

We intend that Foundation Certificates will only be available for a nationally-set list of vocational subjects. By Foundation Certificate subject, we mean the subject of the qualification, for example a Foundation Certificate in 'Digital'. In deciding Foundation Certificate subjects, we will be guided by the subjects available for T Levels and V Levels, given that Foundation Certificates will primarily support progression onto these level 3 qualifications.

Our aim in deciding which Foundation Certificate subjects should be available is to ensure that:

- there are relevant T Levels and/or V Levels for students to progress onto
- the scope of a subject covers a broad enough vocational area to avoid narrow specialisation
- a subject is likely to have high enough potential demand from students wanting to take it at level 2 with a view to progressing to further study at level 3

Our proposed approach for identifying Foundation Certificate subjects will be based on the full list of T Levels and proposed V Levels. There will not be separate Foundation Certificates leading to T Levels, and separate Foundation Certificates leading to V Levels, in the same vocational area. We propose introducing Foundation Certificate subject areas that cover broad vocational areas which are likely to have enough potential demand to be viable as a subject. We will take into account how many 16-year-olds take level 2 qualifications in these vocational areas as their main subject of study, and the extent to which level 2 students in these subject areas subsequently progress to level 3.

By applying the above approach, we have identified the following initial, indicative list of potential Foundation Certificate subject areas, for further testing as V Level subjects are decided:

- Agriculture, Land Management and Animal Care
- Business, Administration and Law
- Construction and the Built Environment

- Creative, Media and Design
- Digital
- Education and Early Years
- Engineering and Manufacturing
- Health and Care Services
- Science
- Hair, Beauty and Aesthetics
- Hospitality and Catering
- Performing Arts
- Protective Services
- Sport, Fitness and Exercise Science
- Travel and Tourism

To help ensure Foundation Certificates are offered in the right subject areas, as part of our evidence gathering process, we are inviting your views.

8. Should any additional criteria be considered when selecting the subjects suitable to become a Foundation Certificate? If yes, what are they and why?

9. Are there any other potential subjects you think should be considered for Foundation Certificates? If yes, what are they and why?

Foundation Certificate content

We want to ensure that students taking different qualifications in the same Foundation Certificate subject have a comparable and consistent foundation in that subject to prepare them for further study.

To ensure consistency and quality for students, we are proposing that the DfE will set the national content for Foundation Certificates, for awarding organisations to follow when developing Foundation Certificate qualification specifications. This is the approach we are proposing for V Levels, and is also consistent with our approach for setting national content for the T Level Foundation Year (through the national technical outcomes).

Our intention is that Foundation Certificates will primarily support progression onto relevant T Levels and/or V Levels so there needs to be a clear alignment of content between Foundation Certificates and the range of relevant T Levels and/or V Levels they are supporting progression onto. T Levels and V Levels both include an element of applying knowledge and skills in a practical way to achieve work-related outcomes. We therefore propose that the content of each Foundation Certificate should also include the application of knowledge and skills to achieve practical outcomes. Further detail will be provided when we consult on Foundation Certificate subject content.

Foundation Certificate assessment and grading

Ofqual will consider the regulatory approach that best meets the policy intent for Foundation Certificates, including how they should be assessed and graded, and consult on their plans in due course.

Foundation Certificates need to prepare students for T Levels and V Levels. They will inform decisions about a student's readiness to progress onto higher level study in a relevant subject area. Comparability and rigour will be important to support this, whilst ensuring the potential learner cohort expected to take Foundation Certificates is able to demonstrate the knowledge and skills they have obtained. In line with T Levels and V Levels, we expect a proportion of assessments to be set and marked by awarding organisations, with greater quality assurance where providers undertake marking of assessments. As appropriate, Ofqual will consider assessment on a subject-by-subject basis, recognising that the balance of assessment may in some cases need to differ between subjects. To aid navigability, we expect the use of a consistent grading scale for Foundation Certificate qualifications.

Preparing students for level 3 study

We want all students taking this pathway to be able to progress smoothly onto a level 3 qualification after their level 2 study programme. It is important that study programmes are designed to prepare students effectively for, and build their confidence to take, a step up. That is why we want study programmes to have a strong focus on preparation for level 3, including helping to bridge the gap by giving students the opportunity to experience some level 3 study. This is good practice which already happens in the 16-19 sector.

We think students need a structured element of their study programme that gives them this experience. This could take place, for example, over the final term of their study programme, through taking some level 3 classes and trying the assignments.

Level 2 Occupational pathway

Occupational Certificate policy intent

The Occupational pathway at level 2 will provide high-quality, focused preparation for students who want to enter employment at level 2. Students taking this pathway are likely to have made a conscious decision to progress into a level 2 occupation, rather than continuing to study at a higher level straight away, or they may have a level of prior attainment that makes it unlikely that they will succeed at level 3 at this stage, even after an additional year of preparation. The Occupational pathway will be delivered as a 16-19 study programme which includes a relevant technical qualification (Occupational Certificate) that develops the knowledge, skills and behaviours that employers need and will lead to sustainable employment for the students who complete it.

Having a clear line of sight to employment will allow the wider elements of the study programme to be tailored to support students to succeed in the workplace. We expect providers to continue to place a strong emphasis on English and maths studies where students have not achieved a grade 4 in their GCSE, and the study programme should allow space in the timetable for all of the recommended teaching hours. The study programme should be designed to develop additional employability skills, build confidence and resilience, and provide high-quality enrichment activities to ensure that students are work-ready on completion.

To allow space in the study programme for English, maths and important non-qualification activity, we propose that the Occupational Certificate should be delivered as part of a 2-year study programme. This is also in keeping with current legislation that requires students to remain in some form of education or training until the age of 18.¹⁹ The 2-year length of the Occupational pathway will also allow sufficient time for lower prior attaining students to study the proposed new 16-19 English and maths level 1 “preparation for GCSE” qualifications in year 12, if it is chosen as being the most suitable option. These qualifications were announced in the Post-16 Education and Skills Strategy and will be designed to consolidate the foundational skills and knowledge needed to prepare lower prior attaining students for the GCSE. Once students pass the level 1 qualifications, they will be able to progress onto the GCSE the following year.

¹⁹ Under Part 1 of Education and Skills Act 2008 young people aged 16 and 17 who have not attained level 3 qualifications of sufficient size are under a duty to continue in education or training until the young person's 18th birthday.

We understand there may be circumstances in which students will want to step off the Occupational pathway early, usually after one year of study. This will include progression onto a work-based training programme such as an apprenticeship or if the student decides and the provider agrees, to progress to a level 3 qualification.

We expect the Occupational pathway to last 2 years, in line with current legislation. However, we recognise that some students may have legitimate reasons for leaving the pathway early, such as progressing to a work-based training programme or moving on to a level 3 qualification.

10. Are there any other circumstances you believe would justify a student stepping off the pathway before completing the full 2 years? Please provide examples and explain why these should be considered.

Occupational Certificate content

Occupational Certificate qualifications will contain two elements:

1. Broad introductory core content that will provide an introduction to working in the sector and key transferable skills needed to succeed, and
2. Occupation-specific content that will deliver the knowledge, skills and behaviours to enable the student to work towards competence in their given occupation

Core content

We are proposing that introductory core content will be set by the DfE, using the occupational standards published by Skills England to guide this work. We will use experts to help us develop this content across multiple qualifications in the same sector area. This will ensure consistency in content across all qualifications in the same sector. For example, the same core content in construction would be relevant across bricklaying, plastering and carpentry; and might include an introduction to the construction sector, organisational structures, roles and responsibilities, working with others and skills relevant to the sector – such as taking measurements, units of measurement and conversions.

11. We are proposing that DfE sets introductory core content for Occupational Certificates which is shared across multiple related qualifications. Do you agree with this approach? Y/N

12. Please give reasons for your answer.

Occupational content

Occupation-specific content will be based on the relevant occupational standard published by Skills England. The occupational maps are developing all the time – for example, they can be updated to add new occupations in different areas as employers' needs evolve. A full list of the current level 2 occupational standards is available via the occupational maps.²⁰ We have listed below the standards that we believe are suitable to underpin 16-19 classroom-based provision based on the maps as they currently stand. In compiling this list, we have excluded standards where there is no evidence of demand from 16 to 19-year-olds for similar qualifications at the moment and where there is a need for specialist equipment that makes them difficult to deliver in a classroom environment. We have also excluded standards where there are specific requirements that make them unsuitable for 16-year-olds e.g. they require a driving licence, working at heights or with high voltage power systems. We have also considered whether the occupation is listed as being in high or elevated demand and have taken a view of whether the content is likely to be more suited to an apprenticeship.

We understand that there may be some areas where level 2 standards have not yet been developed. We will work with Skills England and industry to identify solutions to address any gaps in standards so that the level 2 Occupational pathway can continue to meet the needs of employers and students.

List of Occupations suitable for classroom-based provision:

1. Animal Care and Welfare Assistant - Animal Interaction and Handling
 2. Animal Care and Welfare Assistant - Operational/Reception Duties
 3. Animal Care and Welfare Assistant - Rehoming
 4. Animal Care and Welfare Assistant - Breeding
 5. Animal Care and Welfare Assistant - Veterinary Care Support
 6. Animal Care and Welfare Assistant - Wildlife Rehabilitation
 7. Dog Groomer
 8. Veterinary Care Assistant
 9. Equine Groom - Breeding
 10. Equine Groom - Non-Riding
 11. Equine Groom - Racing
 12. Equine Groom - Riding
 13. Land-based Service Engineer
 14. General Farm Worker - Crop Worker
 15. General Farm Worker - Livestock Worker
 16. Florist
 17. Horticulture or Landscape Construction Operative - Horticulture Operative
 18. Horticulture or Landscape Construction Operative - Landscape Construction Operative
-

²⁰ <https://occupational-maps.skillsengland.education.gov.uk>

19. Playworker
20. Adult Care Worker
21. Baker - Craft baker
22. Baker - Plant baker
23. Baker - Retail baker
24. Commis Chef
25. Production Chef
26. Food and Beverage Team Member
27. Hospitality Accommodation Team Member
28. Domestic Plumber*
29. Bricklayer
30. Carpentry and Joinery - Architectural Joiner
31. Carpentry and Joinery - Site Carpenter
32. Floorlayer
33. Painter and Decorator
34. Plasterer - Fibrous Plasterer
35. Plasterer - Solid Plasterer
36. Wall and Floor Tiler
37. Early Years Practitioner
38. Welder
39. Wood Product Manufacturing Operative
40. Food and Drink Process Operator
41. Textile Manufacturing Operative
42. Autocare Technician
43. Engineering Operative - Within a Fabrication Role
44. Engineering Operative - Within a Maintenance Role
45. Engineering Operative - Within a Materials, Processing or Finishing Role
46. Engineering Operative - Within a Mechanical Manufacturing Engineering Role
47. Engineering Operative - Within a Technical Support Role
48. Engineering Operative - Within an Electrical & Electronic Engineering Role
49. Healthcare Support Worker
50. Healthcare Science Assistant
51. Pharmacy Services Assistant
52. Community Activator Coach
53. Leisure Team Member
54. Barbering Professional
55. Hairdressing Professional
56. Beauty and Make-up Consultant
57. Beauty Therapist
58. Nail Services Technician
59. Assistant Administrator*

**occupational standard in development*

We will work with an expert panel, including Skills England and industry, to further develop and review the list of occupational standards in scope.

Grouping standards to set content

The range of subjects available as Occupational Certificates will be driven by the availability of level 2 occupational standards. To design introductory core content that serves a range of different qualifications we have grouped the available standards as follows:

Animal Care and Management

- Animal Care and Welfare Assistant - Animal Interaction and Handling
- Animal Care and Welfare Assistant - Operational/Reception Duties
- Animal Care and Welfare Assistant - Rehoming
- Animal Care and Welfare Assistant – Breeding
- Animal Care and Welfare Assistant - Veterinary Care Support
- Animal Care and Welfare Assistant - Wildlife Rehabilitation
- Dog Groomer
- Veterinary Care Assistant
- Equine Groom – Breeding
- Equine Groom - Non-Riding
- Equine Groom – Racing
- Equine Groom – Riding

Agriculture, Land Management and Production

- Land-based Service Engineer
- General Farm Worker - Crop Worker
- General Farm Worker - Livestock Worker

Horticulture and Floristry

- Horticulture or Landscape Construction Operative - Horticulture Operative
- Horticulture or Landscape Construction Operative - Landscape Construction Operative
- Florist

Finance and Administration

- Assistant Administrator*
- Credit Controller and Collector
- Accounts or Finance Assistant
- Customer Service Practitioner

Care Services

- Playworker
- Adult Care Worker

Catering and Hospitality

- Baker - Craft Baker
- Baker - Plant Baker
- Baker - Retail Baker
- Commis Chef
- Production Chef
- Food and Beverage Team Member
- Hospitality Accommodation Team Member

Construction (On-site)

- Bricklayer
- Carpentry and Joinery - Architectural Joiner
- Carpentry and Joinery - Site Carpenter
- Plasterer - Fibrous Plasterer
- Plasterer - Solid Plasterer

Construction (Finishing Trades)

- Domestic Plumber*
- Wall and Floor Tiler
- Painter and Decorator
- Floor Layer

Education and Early Years

- Early Years Practitioner

Engineering

- Welder
- Wood Product Manufacturing Operative
- Food and Drink Process Operator
- Textile Manufacturing Operative
- Autocare Technician
- Engineering Operative - Engineering Operatives Working Within a Fabrication Role
- Engineering Operative - Engineering Operatives Working Within a Maintenance Role
- Engineering Operative - Engineering Operatives Working Within a Materials, Processing or Finishing Role

- Engineering Operative - Engineering Operatives Working Within a Mechanical Manufacturing Engineering Role
- Engineering Operative - Engineering Operatives Working Within a Technical Support Role
- Engineering Operative - Engineering Operatives Working Within an Electrical & Electronic Engineering Role

Health and Science

- Healthcare Support Worker
- Healthcare Science Assistant
- Pharmacy Services Assistant

Sport and Leisure

- Community Activator Coach
- Leisure Team Member

Hair and Beauty

- Barbering Professional
- Hairdressing Professional
- Beauty and Make-up Consultant
- Beauty Therapist
- Nail Services Technician

We will work with experts, including Skills England and industry representatives, to further develop this approach and grouping.

Occupational Certificate design

Occupational Certificate size

Given the content of the Occupational Certificate qualifications is aligned to the occupational standards, we propose that the size of the Occupational Certificate should be driven by the size of the occupational standard upon which it is based, rather than setting a consistent size requirement. It is particularly important to recognise that this qualification will be part of a 2-year study programme which aims to be enriching and inspiring.

As these are technical qualifications that are designed to progress students towards occupational competence, we think that the occupational content should be the main focus of the qualification. Therefore, the size of the broad introductory core should be proportionate and should be less than 50% of the overall GLH.

We believe the sizes of each Occupational Certificate should be variable and driven by the occupational standard(s) it is linked to, as opposed to having a fixed size for all Occupational Certificates.

13. Do you foresee any challenges with this approach? (Y/N)

14. If so, what are they and how might they be overcome?

We are proposing the size of the broad introductory core content should be proportionate and should be less than 50% of the overall GLH.

15. Do you foresee any challenges with this approach? (Y/N)

16. If so, what are they and how might they be overcome?

Occupational Certificate assessment and grading

Ofqual will consult separately on the approach to regulation, assessment and grading for Occupational Certificates. As these qualifications will enable students to work towards occupational competence, it is likely they will have a significant element that is marked by schools and colleges, with quality assurance by awarding organisations. However, Ofqual will consider the approach to setting and marking across Occupational Certificates, including for the core content.

Qualifications at level 2 currently use a wide range of grading scales. This is confusing for students, parents and employers and makes navigating between different qualifications difficult. We will explore with Ofqual and Skills England how to move towards a more consistent grading scale for Occupational Certificates, taking into consideration comparability between qualifications and with reformed Apprenticeship Assessment grading.

Non-qualification activity

Work experience and other non-qualification activity, often referred to as employability, enrichment and pastoral activity, is a requirement for all 16-19 study programmes. We recognise that these activities are a vital way for young people to gain skills and strengthen their sense of belonging, supporting them to achieve and thrive whilst also breaking down the barriers to opportunity. We continue to believe this aspect of the curriculum is best designed and determined by providers.

To support providers with other non-qualification activity, we are working closely with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to publish a new Enrichment Framework by the end of 2025. The framework, which builds on the work of the sector, is being co-developed with a working group consisting of experts from further education, schools, youth, sports and arts organisations and research. It will support schools as well as further education and sixth form colleges, in developing their enrichment offer by identifying and reflecting effective practice and will provide advice on how to plan a high-quality enrichment offer more intentionally and strategically.

This support for wider employability, enrichment and pastoral activity will be particularly important for students with lower GCSE prior attainment and SEND, who may therefore benefit from more tailored support and/or increased engagement in extracurricular activity.

The opportunity to undertake work experience will also support young people studying vocational pathways which, by definition, are more career orientated. For example, work experience may be routinely used to support students' engagement with course content and help them make informed career choices.

We want to ensure that, as the new pathways are introduced, the work experience and other non-qualification activity aspect of the programme is the best it can be – whichever setting the student attends.

We are interested to hear your views on specific non-qualification activities which you think will support vocational students to achieve and progress.

17. What non-qualification activities do you think are successful at supporting vocational students to engage best in their course content in order to achieve in their course and progress to their stated destination?

Transition to the future landscape

The government is committed to ensuring that as many students as possible can benefit from the new level 2 and 3 reformed 16-19 system as soon as possible. We aim, therefore, to introduce new level 2 and 3 qualifications as soon as we can. We want to do this in a way that minimises impact to delivery whilst ensuring that the offer continues to improve for students.

We plan to achieve this by:

- **Rolling out new qualifications over a four-year period:** We're aiming for the first V Level, Foundation Certificate and Occupational Certificate subjects to be made available for first teach in 2027, with all V Levels, new T Levels, Foundation Certificates and Occupational Certificates available for first teaching by the start of the 2030/31 academic year. This phased approach means providers can implement changes to their curriculum in stages, incrementally, rather than all at once.
- **A route-by-route approach:** V Levels, Foundation Certificates and Occupational Certificates will, wherever possible, be rolled out together so that each route is reformed across both levels. A route-by-route approach will help to ensure, for example, that changes to careers advice can be clearly structured, and mean higher education providers and employers understand in which routes to expect students with new qualifications well in advance. In terms of progression from level 2 to 3, it also means Foundation Certificate students have a clear progression pathway to all level 3 options within the same route.
- **Delivery certainty:** We have heard from previous consultations how important it is to provide the sector with certainty so that awarding organisations and providers have the information and time they need to prepare for delivery. We will work with Ofqual and awarding organisations on our approach to development and roll-out to ensure providers have as much time as possible to prepare for delivery. We will confirm the order of routes and expected implementation timetable in the government response to this consultation, as well as the subjects we intend to prioritise for first teach in 2027.
- **As new qualifications are rolled out, we will remove public funding from existing 16-19 qualifications.** In planning how the system will transition to V Levels, Foundation Certificates and Occupational Certificates, we are aiming to reduce complexity whilst ensuring that students move to new, better quality, qualifications as soon as possible.

Level 3

- The government has been clear that students wishing to study a large qualification should study a T Level where they are on offer. We are confirming, therefore, that funding for all qualifications 720GLH and over in T Level areas will be removed in 2026 and 2027 in line with the conclusions of the Review of Qualification Reform in December 2024.
- The DfE will retain funding for qualifications between 421 GLH and 719 GLH in T Level areas until new V Levels are introduced for that area. The DfE will confirm the list of qualifications which will have funding removed soon.
- On small qualifications (those 420GLH or below), we will retain funding for existing qualifications until V Levels are introduced to replace them. We had announced that some qualifications were to have public funding removed to make way for new reformed qualifications entering the market - Alternative Academic Qualifications (AAQs) and Technical Occupational Qualifications (TOQs). To avoid forcing providers to swap to AAQs and TOQs, and then again to V Levels, we will retain funding for existing small unreformed qualifications like AGQs in those areas also. AAQs and TOQs will still be available and funded until V Levels are introduced. This means that providers can choose to deliver either existing unreformed qualifications such as small AGQs, or small reformed qualifications, such as AAQs or TOQS where they exist, minimising disruption to delivery as the system transitions to V Levels. **This means that if a small qualification was set to have funding removed in 2026 or 2027, this will now not occur until the relevant V Level is introduced.** The DfE will confirm the list of qualifications which will have funding removed soon.
- In current non-T Level areas, qualifications will remain funded until V Levels and new T Levels are introduced, and this applies to small, medium and large qualifications.
- Any defunding that has already occurred will remain unchanged, and the DfE will confirm which qualifications will be available shortly. It is important to remember that whether a qualification is available is also dependent upon the commercial decisions of awarding organisations on which qualifications they wish to offer.

Level 2

- For future qualifications at level 2, as we roll out the completely reformed routes, we will remove public funding from existing qualifications in that route. We will not have a period of overlap between old qualifications and new. We think it is important that young people have access to the introductory core content in Occupational Certificates, so funding approval for 16 to 19-year-olds will not be granted for qualifications that do not contain this nationally set content. This will include removing 16-19 funding approval from Technical Occupational Entry and Extended Technical Occupational Entry qualifications.

We plan to roll out V Levels, Foundation Certificates, and Occupational Certificates together by route, to ensure coherence across levels and clear progression.

18. Do you think this is the best approach? Are there alternative rollout strategies we should consider, or any unintended consequences we might be overlooking?

The new V Levels, Occupational Certificates and Foundation Certificates will all be funded in line with the current offer at level 3 and level 2 through the 16-19 study programme.

The International Baccalaureate Diploma, Core Maths, Extended Project Qualification, Access to HE Diploma and Graded Examinations and at level 2, GCSEs, A levels, Functional Skills Qualifications, Higher Project Qualifications and Graded Examinations are outside these reforms and will continue to be funded for 16 to 19-year-olds.

Approach to setting content

V Levels

We want to ensure the quality and progression outcomes for students who study V Levels will be as good as it is for those who study A levels and T Levels. For this to be true, the content of the qualifications will need to be appropriately demanding for a level 3 qualification and align with the applied purpose of the qualification.

The content for both A levels and T Levels is set centrally by DfE working with experts. This is then used by awarding organisations to detail the taught content which is set out in the qualification specification. This approach has helped to ensure these qualifications are high quality, and we intend to take a similar approach for V Levels and Foundation Certificates. Their outline content will also be linked to occupational standards and then set nationally by DfE. Through this, V Levels in the same subject area will be more comparable and will, overall, support parity of esteem between V Level, A level and T Level qualification brands.

Level 2 pathways

We want to ensure that students at level 2 undertake high quality qualifications which prepare them successfully for their intended destinations, whether that is further study or skilled employment.

Foundation Certificates will support progression to all relevant level 3 qualifications and will have their content set by DfE, similar to the approach for V levels. Occupational Certificates will include a proportion of introductory core content, which will be set by DfE working with experts and which is relevant across multiple qualifications within a

sector. The remainder of the qualification will be guided by the content of the occupational standards to ensure it delivers the skills that employers need.

Co-design approach

In setting outline content, we want to work closely with awarding organisations and education providers to ensure the content supports valid assessment and is manageable to deliver. We plan to engage interested providers and awarding organisations alongside the consultation process. We will also plan to use consultation events and other engagement activities to work with:

- employers, higher education providers and their representative organisations (to make sure that progression outcomes will be secured); and
- where possible, students, to make sure that V Levels, Foundation Certificates and Occupational Certificates are fulfilling and are designed to meet their purpose.

We also plan to use Artificial Intelligence to inform the development of first drafts of content, quickly identifying common knowledge and skills statements, by assimilating multiple sources including occupational standards. Following this overall consultation, due to close 12 January 2026, we will also consult on the draft outline content for the first subjects in 2026.

This approach will ensure we make the best use of this consultation as well as providing opportunities for more targeted input from organisations that want to be part of the development of the new qualifications and are able to commit to their delivery in 2027.

Alongside the work to develop content in the first subjects (for first teach in September 2027), we will also need to consider the approach to delivering content and qualifications over subsequent years. We will use the approach tested through tranche 1 to inform this process and will provide further information on subsequent tranches in the government response.

19. What steps should we take to ensure the outline content for V Levels, Foundation Certificates and Occupational Certificates is high-quality across subjects and awarding organisations?

Transition from the T Level Foundation Year to the Further Study pathway

The Further Study pathway, and new Foundation Certificates, will be rolled out across the tranches. During the transition to full rollout across all subjects, we want to ensure students can continue to access high quality provision to support progression to further study at level 3. We plan to achieve this by:

- In 2026, the T Level Foundation Year will continue in its current form.
- From 2027, we will call it 'Foundation Year' to make it clear that it supports progression to other level 3 options as well as T Levels. We will also strengthen the Framework for Delivery from 2027 to increase its focus on preparation for level 3 study, and we propose to remove the option for providers not to include a qualification in the programme.
- The Foundation Year will gradually be replaced by the new Further Study pathway, and Foundation Certificates, as that is rolled out across the tranches. Once the Further Study pathway has been rolled out in a particular subject, the Foundation Year will no longer run in that subject.

These transitional changes recognise that the T Level Foundation Year is already helping students to progress onto a range of level 3 options, whilst also building on the strengths of the programme and evolving it towards the future direction of the Further Study pathway.

V Level, Foundation Certificate and Occupational Certificate branding

One of the purposes of the introduction of the pathways at level 3 and level 2 is to simplify the landscape by aligning qualifications and pathways with their intended destination. We want qualifications to be easily recognisable so that students, parents and providers are confident they are choosing the right qualification to meet students' needs. We therefore propose there is no awarding organisation branding on V Levels, Foundation Certificate and Occupational Certificate titles. We will provide guidance on titling conventions which awarding organisations will need to follow for the reformed qualifications.

We're proposing that there is no awarding organisation branding for V Levels, Foundation Certificate and Occupational Certificate titles, to make qualifications easier to understand.

20. Do you foresee any problems with this? How could we mitigate these?

Students aged 19 and over

Impact on adults

It is important that adults have access to high quality qualifications that meet their needs. We have already introduced reforms to key routes for adults, including education and early years, health, construction, engineering and digital. We will continue to work with colleagues across government, strategic authorities, awarding organisations and providers to ensure the qualifications landscape meets the needs of adult learners. This consultation focuses on 16 to 19-year-olds. We will consider the next steps for adult qualifications (19+) in future.

Equalities Impact

In accordance with the Equality Act 2010, Ministers must have “due regard”, when making decisions, to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination; advance equality of opportunity; and foster good relations, in relation to protected characteristics. The DfE has been taking this requirement into account in developing these proposals and will use findings from this consultation to develop a full assessment. The relevant protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

Question on equalities

21. Could any of the proposals have an impact – positive or negative – on people with any of the following protected characteristics?

[Drop down for each characteristic: Yes / No / Unsure. If Yes, please explain.]

- Age
- Disability
- Gender reassignment
- Marriage and civil partnership
- Pregnancy and maternity
- Race
- Religion or belief
- Sex
- Sexual orientation

22. What action could help reduce any negative impacts you identified in the previous question?

[Select any protected characteristics + free text box]

23. Are there elements of V Levels or Foundation and Occupational Certificates that are required in your view to increase accessibility or improve outcomes for those with SEND? [Free text box]

24. Are there any other equality-related impacts you think we should consider?

[Free text]

Annex – Privacy notice

Privacy notice

For the purposes of your response, other than where we may request, on a voluntary basis, contact details for the purpose of clarification, or demographic information about yourself for the purposes of equality impact assessment, we do not seek provision of personal data from which you or others can be identified. Your responses, including any personal data, may be shared with a third-party provider, or other government department or organisation acting on behalf of the DfE under contract or an equivalent agreement, for the purpose of analysis and summarising responses for us, for which a data processing agreement will be in place, and may use technology, such as artificial intelligence. If this technology is used, it will be done to exclusively assist with analysis, summarisation, or categorisation of responses, and appropriate safeguards will be set in place to ensure fairness, accuracy, and security. If this technology is used, it will not be used for automated decision-making that might affect individuals. An anonymised version of responses in a list or summary of responses received, and in any subsequent review reports, may be published. We may also share your personal data where required to by law. You can leave out personal information from your response entirely if you would prefer to do so. For further information on how DfE processes personal data, please see: [Personal information charter - Department for Education - GOV.UK](#)

Confidentiality

Information provided in response to this consultation, including personal data, may be subject to publication or disclosure e.g. under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the Data Protection Act 2018, or the Environmental Information Regulations 2004. If you want all, or any part, of a response to be treated as confidential, please explain why you consider it to be confidential. If a request for disclosure of the information you have provided is received, your explanation about why you consider it confidential will be considered, but no assurance can be given that confidentiality can be maintained. An automatic confidentiality disclaimer generated by your IT system will not, in and of itself, be regarded as binding on the DfE.

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