**[The Future of post 16 qualifications](https://committees.parliament.uk/work/1637/)**

**Introduction to Edge**

Edge is an independent, politically impartial foundation, working to inspire the education system to give all young people across the UK the knowledge, skills and behaviours they need to flourish in their future life and work. We work right [across the UK](https://www.edge.co.uk/research/practice-library/) with strong international links.

We have considerable experience in the post-16 space, and we use our strong [research base](https://www.edge.co.uk/research/practice-library/) and the evidence we collect from our [delivery work](https://www.edge.co.uk/edge-future-learning/) to develop clear [policy proposals](https://www.edge.co.uk/policy/policy-responses/) for the future. We also convene key organisations and academics to explore [skills shortages](https://www.edge.co.uk/research/projects/skills-shortages-uk-economy/) across the economy and explore the [principles](https://www.edge.co.uk/research/projects/principles-english-vocational-education/) around vocational and technical education philosophy.

1. **The experience to date of those taking or delivering T Levels, and how they can be made more accessible**

The first two waves of T-Levels were launched in 2020 and 2021 - as such, more information and evidence is needed before we can fully consider the accessibility of T levels. So this is the start of a long-term, ongoing conversation. This discussion will be particularly crucial from 2024 onwards when any eligible 16 to 19 provider will be able to deliver all T Levels, regardless of their Ofsted grade[[1]](#footnote-1). However, we do have two primary accessibility concerns based on: i) the structure of T-Levels and ii) the Industry Placement component

Firstly, we are concerned that T-Levels ask students to narrow their options and select a specialist subject early on. The current structure of T-Levels precludes students from blending technical and academic routes, where it is currently possible to study A-Levels and Applied General Qualifications, (such as a BTECs) together. As such, we would advocate to reduce the size of T-Levels so that they covered the equivalent of 2 A-Levels, rather than the existing 3 – with the possibility to combine their T level with one other A-Level or Applied General Qualification.

Second, there are challenges with the Industry Placements component, with particular concern for those with Special Educational Needs; students in rural areas with limited physical access to placements; students unable to attend in-person placements (e.g. due to personal health or caring responsibilities); and the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic which has required more home working. NFER sampled providers on their [‘readiness to deliver T-levels’](https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/4104/what_are_the_implications_of_covid_19_for_student_recruitment_to_t_levels.pdf) and the Industry Placement component is the area that providers feel least ready to deliver, followed by student recruitment.

1. **The strengths and weaknesses of the current system of post-16 qualifications**

**Strengths**

1. **Choice –** One strength of the current system is that it offers a range of choice to learners – with the options to study academic A levels, vocational T levels or a more blended option via Applied General Qualifications.
2. **Recognised Branding** –The current pathways are well known and established brands [for example A levels, Applied General Qualifications such as BTECS] and it can take 10-15 years for employers to trust a new brand. This must be taken into account with the new T levels where there is lack of awareness and speculation over their labour market value.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Weaknesses**

1. **We have an inflexible and binary model of academic versus vocational -** and we feel strongly that young people should be able to combine academic and vocational learning.

However, the binary model would be exacerbated by Government’s current proposal to remove the vast majority of Applied General Qualifications (AGQs). We are working together with the [#ProtectStudentChoice](https://www.protectstudentchoice.org/) campaign to avoid this outcome.

AGQs offer an important middle route for learners to mix academic qualifications with applied general qualifications (such as BTECs), thus developing a blend of academic and vocational skills. AGQs are also a popular route, with a higher proportion of students entering applied general qualifications in recent years.[[3]](#footnote-3)

However, the new T-level route is intended as distinct from A-levels with students in practice choosing one route or the other. This emphasises their differences, rather than the benefits of combining different types of learning.

1. **The post-16 education landscape is complex and confusing** – and young people receive limited careers advice and guidance

This year’s [2021 Youth Voice Census](https://www.youthemployment.org.uk/dev/wp-content/themes/yeuk/files/youth-voice-census-report-2021.pdf) highlighted only 28.5% of young people rating the careers advice they received as ‘Good’ or ‘Excellent’.

More support and funding is needed to improve and embed careers outreach throughout schools. While a positive trend indicates that young people are hearing more about apprenticeships[[4]](#footnote-4), more must be done to signpost other opportunities such as Traineeships and T Levels.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Some examples of clear careers communication:

* Northern Ireland have developed [simple infographics](https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/Skills-in-Demand-Infographic.pdf) to highlight the skills in demand, employment projections and earnings potentials of different routes.
* The Dutch have developed a clear [video](https://www.iamexpat.nl/education/primary-secondary-education/dutch-school-system) explaining the routes through the school system.

1. **Lack of work experience and understanding of skills in the work place**

Exposure to the world of work is currently low. The 2021 [Youth Voice Census](https://www.youthemployment.org.uk/dev/wp-content/themes/yeuk/files/youth-voice-census-report-2021.pdf) highlighted only 28.9% of respondents agreeing that “My school supported me to develop the skills I need for the future”. This lack of work experience and employer engagement means that some young do not feel they are developing the skills needed for work.

Employer engagement should be integrated throughout the school experience with work experience opportunities embedded throughout. We would also advocate for more taster experiences – the T levels transition programme is a welcome addition, but we should also offer more structured pre-apprenticeship opportunities, learning from examples such as Scottish Foundation Apprenticeships and Junior Apprenticeships in Wales.[[6]](#footnote-6)

1. **The benefits and challenges of the Government’s proposed changes to Level 3 qualifications**

**Benefits**

Given the complexity of the current qualifications landscape, it is right that government are consulting on the large number of post-16 qualifications, in order to streamline and ensure the highest quality qualifications remain.

**Challenges**

1. **We have already seen rapid change in the qualifications landscape in recent years.** These reforms will add another layer of complexity across the sector. We must reach cross-party consensus on the future direction of travel and avoid piecemeal interventions.

It may be sensible to consider whether a ‘5 year, no change’ policy would enable the sector to implement current changes, without worry of future interventions. Or it may be better to pursue the creation of a Royal Commission or other cross-party body with real power to effect change to take a considered look across the whole qualifications and education landscape, and consider what more impactful, whole-scale reform of the system is needed. Our preference would be for the latter approach.

Also, in government’s quest for speed,there is danger thatwe prematurely withdraw a large number of already respected, high-quality qualifications (including many AGQs) before T levels have become established.It is clear that Government want the T level programme to become the flagship route into vocational education – but there are concerns over limited awareness and take-up of T levels. It is also unclear how students will progress after their T levels, with a number of Higher Education Institutions still to accept T levels onto their courses.[[7]](#footnote-7)

1. **Re-enforcing the binary divide between academic vs vocational –** AGQs are a popular choice[[8]](#footnote-8), contribute to the economy[[9]](#footnote-9) and are taught and recognised in more than 80 countries around the globe.[[10]](#footnote-10) It would make no sense to remove these valuable qualifications. We are concerned that by scrapping the majority of AGQs, government are reinforcing the binary divide between academic A levels and vocational T level qualifications and are working with the [#Protectstudentchoice](https://www.protectstudentchoice.org/) campaign to raise these concerns.
2. **Reforms must also consider impact on Level 2 qualifications.** There has been much discussion around Level 3 qualifications, with the introduction of the new Lifetime Skills Guarantee. However, some adults desiring to retrain, but who already have a Level 3 qualification, will be excluded from this.

Upskilling at higher levels should not come at the expense of basic skills and Level 2, so we urge Government to consider how the Level 2 pathway will be developed alongside any changes at Level 3.

1. **The extent to which the Government’s review of level 3 qualifications will impact disadvantaged groups… and what measures might be put in place to mitigate negative impacts**.

Research shows that in 2019/20, 26% of students aged 16-18 were from ethnic minority backgrounds, 46% were female and 23% had a learning difficulty or disability[[11]](#footnote-11). Additionally, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to pursue vocational education[[12]](#footnote-12), therefore the Level 3 review must ensure that technical routes continue to support diverse students. We have concerns about 3 key reforms.

1. **Applied General Qualification reforms**

As mentioned, we are particularly concerned by the Government proposals to defund the majority of AGQs such as BTECs, and the impact that this will have on students from minority ethnic backgrounds, students with Special Educational Needs and students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Government Impact Assessment for the reform states that “those from SEND backgrounds, Asian ethnic groups, disadvantaged backgrounds, and males [are] disproportionately likely to be affected”[[13]](#footnote-13). BTECs are a vital tool for social mobility; research from the Social Market Foundation found that 44% of white working-class students that enter university studied at least one BTEC and 37% of black students enter with only BTEC qualifications[[14]](#footnote-14). Research by the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) suggests that level 3 qualification reform will “set access to HE back at least 5 years”[[15]](#footnote-15). Nearly a third of all 18-year-old students from areas with the lowest participation entering Higher Education in 2020 did so with at least one BTEC qualification, and a third of all black students. Therefore, if the current defunding of BTECs continues, this will provide a real challenge for groups of students and limit their opportunities for Higher Education.

1. **Introduction of T Levels**

The review must ensure that diversity across all student groups improves in T-Levels. Data from the DfE obtained through a Freedom of Information request shows that BAME students were alarmingly under-represented in the first year of T-Levels, 2020-2021[[16]](#footnote-16). The data shows that 14.2% of the cohort are from a BAME background with 84% from a white background. Of the 3 T-levels introduced in 2020, Construction reported the lowest proportion of ethnic minority learners at 10.2%. This is concerning as construction is a sector with historically low levels of ethnic minority representation. As Industry Placements are reliant on employers there is an inherent risk that organisational bias and culture will transfer through to the students selected for particular placements and their experiences. We would like to see employers working with providers to commit to embedding diversity and inclusion into Industry Placements.

1. **Apprenticeships**

We welcome the commitment from Government to work with IfATE to ensure that the mandatory qualifications policy align to meet the needs of apprentices, employers and industry. A critical part of this will be ensuring that any decision on mandatory qualifications maintains the high standard of apprenticeships whilst also ensuring that they do not restrict access for particular groups. We are concerned by recent analysis by FE Week[[17]](#footnote-17) which shows that the proportion of BAME 16- to 18-year-old apprentices is falling and made up just 7.7 per cent of starts in the first three-quarters of 2019/20, compared to over 20 per cent for other further education courses. Any changes to apprenticeship qualifications policies must be designed to support BAME students.

1. **The benefits and disadvantages of introducing a baccalaureate system in post-16 education**

We support the development of a broad and diverse curriculum, particularly a baccalaureate system which offers an opportunity for students to experience a wide range of subjects, a focus on technical and creative subjects and to build a portfolio of their wider skills including volunteering, extra-curricular and development opportunities. At Edge, we have consistently called for a baccalaureate type model in our [research reports](https://www.edge.co.uk/about-edge/publications-archive/14-19-education-a-new-baccalaureate/), [policy reports](https://www.edge.co.uk/documents/86/our_plan_for_14-19_education_updated_2019_0_QAINZ4L.pdf) and [policy responses.](https://www.edge.co.uk/news-and-events/news/edge-response-to-national-baccalaureate-trust-towards-a-national-baccalaureate-for-england-consultation/)

Below, we set out the key benefits and disadvantages of a baccalaureate model:

**Benefits:**

1. **Blending academic and vocational.** Young people should be able to combine academic and vocational education and would not be supportive of a purely academic or vocational route in the final two years of the programme. For example, combining with Applied General Qualifications enable the blending of academic and technical subjects. The Foundation Apprenticeship programme in Scotland also allows young people to gain industry knowledge and experience whilst at school; we would want to see similar opportunities replicated in a baccalaureate system.
2. **Skills.** We need a broader, more holistic education system to support young people to develop skills appropriate for the changing world of work. We would support a baccalaureate system which prioritises skills and behaviour development. For example, learning from the [Welsh Baccalaureate](https://gov.wales/welsh-baccalaureate) model which includes the ‘Skills challenge certificate’ gained through individual projects, and challenges in enterprise and employability, global citizenship and community.
3. **Apprenticeships.** We need additional support for pre-apprenticeships programmes to help young people develop the skills, experience and confidence that they need to move into work. There are lessons we can learn from Scotland’s Foundation Apprenticeship programme and the Young Apprenticeship programme which was scrapped in England in 2012[[18]](#footnote-18).

**Drawbacks**

1. **Challenges in transition.** Introducing a baccalaureate system for only post-16 risks making the transition between school and FE more challenging. We would like to see greater collaboration between schools and colleges to open up the possibility of longer course lengths. We would support a change to 4 year courses in principle but recognise that this would require commitment from schools and colleges to deliver this.
2. **Complexity with the wider system.** There are undoubtedly challenges with a radical overhaul of frameworks and assessment due to its close links to curriculum and pedagogy. We recognise that an introduction of a baccalaureate system would need to be embedded in wider structures.
3. **The benefits and disadvantages of a post-qualifications admission system.**

NA

1. **International examples of systems for post-16 education and qualifications.**

At Edge, we strongly believe in the importance of policy memory. So we have developed a [“Learning from the Past”](https://www.edge.co.uk/research/Learning-from-the-past/) series which explores a number of previous policies in the Technical and Vocational Education and Training space. Our aim is to understand how these policies worked, what successes and challenges they faced, and what lessons can be learned, in order to avoid re-inventing the wheel, or repeating mistakes from the past.

**Our offer to the Education Select Committee:** We would be delighted to offer an evidence session exploring past policies in the TVET space, and how current policy might learn from these examples.

**In terms of international good practice**, our recent joint publication ‘[Drivers of Technical excellence in the skills economy](https://www.edge.co.uk/research/projects/research-reports/drivers-of-technical-excellence-in-the-skills-economy/)’ explored how seven different countries (Austria, Brazil, France, Hungary, India, Japan, and South Korea) drive technical excellence. Here are some examples:

1. **Austria**

**Blending of theory and practice** – All programmes at upper secondary level, whether school-based or dual-track, combine Vocational Education and Training (VET) with general education and theory with practice. Work-based learning is central to VET, particularly in apprenticeships where learners spend 80% of their training time in a company. School-based VET is also practice-oriented, including learning in workshops, training restaurants and practice firms, complemented by mandatory work placements. ([Cedefop, 2021](https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-in-europe/systems/austria-2019))

1. **France**

**A drive to increase the uptake of apprenticeships**

Most importantly the recent 2018 ‘Law for the freedom to choose one’s professional future’, introduced the following initiatives:

* personal training accounts
* apprenticeships can start at any time of year
* 500 euro support for apprentices to gain a driving licence
* a 30 euro per month pay rise was introduced for apprentices below 20
* a vocational Erasmus programme to support 15k apprentices to go abroad is due to be rolled out by September 2022 (although this is likely to be delayed given the Covid-19 context)
* employment and diploma success rates published publicly to provide greater transparency

1. **Singapore**

**A move towards skills and lifelong learning** - Singapore has a sophisticated and well-resourced infrastructure to anticipate future challenges and make necessary changes to the skills system. In 2014, the Singapore Government developed the [SkillsFuture movement](https://www.skillsfuture.gov.sg/Home) which oversees a wide range of activities, designed to facilitate a culture of lifelong learning:

* + For young people this includes stronger career guidance, enhanced internships and individual learning portfolios.
  + For those in their early careers this includes apprenticeships and subsidies to continue education
  + For those in mid-careers it involves course fee subsidies, study awards and subsidies, and bite sized modular courses to rapidly develop new skills.

**Working together with industry –** Together with industry, the Singapore Governmenthas also developed[Jobs Transformation Maps](https://www.wsg.gov.sg/for-employers/jobs-transformation-maps.html) (JTMs) providing insight on the impact of technology and automation on the industry and workforce. These maps identify which technologies are driving change, the impact on individual jobs, and how employers can transform jobs, and workers acquire new skills amid this changing landscape.

1. [T Level Action Plan 2021](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1042614/2021_T_Level_Action_Plan_Formatted_Clean_Version_15_Dec.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [T Levels: 9 in 10 providers miss enrolment targets (feweek.co.uk)](https://feweek.co.uk/t-levels-9-in-10-providers-miss-enrolment-targets/) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [A level and other 16 to 18 results, Academic Year 2020/21 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK (explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk)](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/a-level-and-other-16-to-18-results/2020-21) 55.3% students entering AGQs in 2020/21 compared to 36.9% in 2018/2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 85.8% had had apprenticeships discussed with them in the [2021 Youth Voice Census](https://www.youthemployment.org.uk/dev/wp-content/themes/yeuk/files/youth-voice-census-report-2021.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [youth-voice-census-report-2021.pdf (youthemployment.org.uk)](https://www.youthemployment.org.uk/dev/wp-content/themes/yeuk/files/youth-voice-census-report-2021.pdf) 65.5% young people had never had traineeships discussed with them, and 72.7% had never had T levels discussed with them [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [edge20e2809320apprenticeships20report2028final20-20web29\_41nXjVp.pdf](https://www.edge.co.uk/documents/87/edge20e2809320apprenticeships20report2028final20-20web29_41nXjVp.pdf) pg 32 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. [Universities can’t afford to make the same admissions mistakes with T Levels as they have with the BTEC - HEPI](https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2022/01/11/universities-cant-afford-to-make-the-same-admissions-mistakes-with-t-levels-as-they-have-with-the-btec/) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 16.7% of students mixing academic level 3 qualifications with Applied General or technical qualifications - Department for Education. (2018). Revised A level and other 16-18 results in England, 2016/2017 - SFR 03/2018, 25 January 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Applied General Qualifications overall contribute £180m annually to GDP - [Annual qualifications market report: academic year 2019 to 2020 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/annual-qualifications-market-report-academic-year-2019-to-2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. [Annual qualifications market report: academic year 2019 to 2020 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/annual-qualifications-market-report-academic-year-2019-to-2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. [AoC Key Facts 2019/20](https://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/AoC%20College%20Key%20Facts%202019-20.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. [Inequalities in education, skills and incomes in the UK and the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic](https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BN-Inequalities-in-education-skills-and-incomes-in-the-UK-the-implications-of-the-COVID-19-pandemic.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. [Impact Assessment of Level 3 review](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-post-16-qualifications-at-level-3-in-england) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. [Vocation, Vocation, Vocation report](https://www.smf.co.uk/publications/the-role-of-vocational-routes-into-higher-education/) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. [NEON research on HE access](https://www.educationopportunities.co.uk/news/new-report-shows-level-3-qualification-reform-will-set-access-to-he-back-at-least-5-years/) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. <https://feweek.co.uk/alarming-lack-of-bame-students-in-first-year-of-t-levels/> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. [FE Week analysis](https://feweek.co.uk/anger-and-dismay-as-bame-apprenticeship-figures-fall/) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. [Learning from the past Paper No. 3 (edge.co.uk)](https://www.edge.co.uk/documents/146/Young_Apprenticeships_Learning_from_the_past_Paper_No._3.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-18)