

OCR Policy Briefing

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T Levels consultation launched

The DfE has unveiled its long-awaited [proposals](#) for the implementation of T Level programmes.

The 48-page DfE consultation sets out how the government intends to move forward with T Levels so that they meet the aims of the [Sainsbury Report and the Post-16 Skills Plan](#), which heralded radical reforms to England's technical education system.

Offering "two world-class choices: A Levels and T Levels" after the age of 16, according to the proposals, each T Level programme will consist of 5 "components":

1. An approved technical qualification awarded by a licenced awarding body with core and occupational specialism parts and equal to the size of 3 A Levels
2. An external work placement of 45-60 days in duration, not necessarily in one block
3. Maths, English and digital requirements. The maths and English GCSE or Functional Skills qualification

can be achieved with any awarding organisation.

4. Any other occupation-specific requirements/ qualifications, as set out by the relevant T Level panel
5. Any further employability, enrichment and pastoral provision.

Proposals in the consultation also cover: HE/FE endorsement; the transition year; delivery; assessment; grading; certification; meeting local skills needs; Level 2 qualifications; adult learners; quality assurance; regulation; accountability measures; and procurement and contracting for awarding bodies.

The DfE expects to reduce the number of currently funded qualifications, and will also consider the role of Applied General Qualifications as part of the consultation.

The consultation runs in parallel with the current [review of higher Level vocational qualifications](#) (see article on page 3).

First T Level subjects announced for 2020

Digital, Construction, and Education and Childcare will be the first three T Levels developed for first teaching in September 2020.

This announcement was made as part of the DfE's [T Level action plan](#), which set out T Levels progress to date and confirmed next steps.

The subjects announced for further phases are:

- From 2021: Legal, Finance and Accounting; Engineering and Manufacturing; and Health and Science.
- From 2022: Hair and Beauty; Agriculture, Environment and Animal Care; Business and Administrative; Catering and Hospitality; and Creative and Design.

Occupational maps will be the "building blocks" for T Levels

Draft occupational maps, central to the reform of technical education, have been published in an additional T Levels [consultation](#).

Each of the 15 occupational maps sets out the occupations within the routes defined in the government's Skills Plan. By categorising different occupations in relation to the knowledge, skills and behaviours needed, these maps aim to provide a structure upon which T Levels will be built. Each route is broken down into pathways and clusters at three 'bands' to distinguish the level of skills required.

The immediate focus for the consultation is to identify any skilled occupations not currently captured and those that should be moved to different clusters or pathways.

The consultation points out that not all occupations are shown on the maps because not all occupations are suited to technical education and could, for example, be learnt on the job.

The maps will continually evolve with the Institute for Apprenticeships carrying out a series of reviews of each route. Following the consultation, an updated version of the maps will be published on the Institute's website.

Also in this issue: > T Level work placements > Skills summit > Industrial Strategy > Review of higher level technical education > Applied General Qualifications > Post-16 maths and English GCSEs > Autumn budget and maths > Drivers behind subject choices > GCSE Computer Science > Public exams under scrutiny > Careers Strategy > The Last Word > STOP PRESS: report round-up

ESFA introduces principles for T-Level work placements

A set of 'emerging' principles has been made available to institutions hoping to access funding for implementing work placements.

Whilst the large scale up of work placements won't be required for T Levels until 2020, the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) is making funding available for 2018/19 to ensure that capacity is being built in readiness for the roll out of technical routes.

ESFA admits that its principles - developed in consultation with employers and providers as part of a pilot exercise – may change by 2020. But for now, these are the principles that ESFA expects institutions to adopt, with a strong emphasis on pre-defined learning aims and outcomes. Principles include:

- The placement must be on average 50 working days in duration covering a minimum of 315 hours and within the academic timetable where possible
- It must be occupationally specific and focussed on developing practical and technical skills
- The provider must agree a structured work plan with the employer and meet with the student and

- employer formally at least twice to review progress
- The student must be considered work-ready to undertake a placement
- The placement must take place with an external employer
- Students with SEND must be able to access high quality external work placements
- GCSE maths/English must not be compromised.

The ESFA expects institutions to be forward planning for work placements for the next 2 to 3 years. Dedicated staff should be in place to source placements, existing staff should be re-trained, and students should undertake employability training to ensure work readiness.

The Agency “does not underestimate the scale of the challenge to create high quality work placement opportunities for all technical students in future”, and recognises the importance of securing willing employers to host placements. Institutions are expected to set out employer engagement strategies and build networks with local employers.

DfE skills summit launches partnership with employers

The Department for Education has hosted a [skills summit](#), which saw the launch of a new partnership between employers and the government “to deliver a skills revolution”.

The *Skills Partner* programme promotes employer involvement in helping to design and deliver reforms to technical and vocational education.

Supported by the CBI, the Secretary of State for Education hosted the skills summit event with industry and education experts on 30 November 2017 using the occasion to launch:

- The Skills Partner [statement of action](#) between government and employers
- The bid process for new [Institutes of Technology](#)
- The first seven Skills Advisory Panels in regions across England
- T Levels [panel membership](#)
- Career Learning pilots to encourage adults to return to learning.

Government highlights skills sectors to improve UK productivity

The [Industrial Strategy White Paper](#) has announced the government's intention to set up long term strategies in four sectors in a bid to tackle UK productivity.

[Construction, life sciences, automotive, and artificial intelligence](#) have been highlighted as having growth potential and being key to reviving productivity in the economy for a post-Brexit Britain.

A number of existing education-related strategies were

also highlighted in the White Paper. These build on the Autumn budget announcements of increased funding for maths and technical education, and the creation of a National Retraining Scheme to determine areas of the economy where new skills are needed.

Ensuring the supply of skills at a local level is also key in the Industrial Strategy. This will be supported by the creation of Skills Advisory Panels and Local Industrial Strategies.

Higher level technical education to be reviewed

The Department for Education is to review Level 4 and 5 technical qualifications.

The review will focus on how well the qualifications address the needs of learners and employers. It will consider progression to higher level technical education from T Levels, as well as looking at how these higher level qualifications work for those already in the workforce.

The review will cover the whole of Level 4 and 5 education, but with a particular focus on the following technical qualifications:

Level 4:

- Certificate of higher education (CertHE)
- Higher national certificate (HNC)
- Level 4 award
- Level 4 certificate
- Level 4 diploma
- Level 4 NVQ

Level 5:

- Diploma of higher education (DipHE)
- Foundation degree
- Higher national diploma (HND)
- Level 5 award
- Level 5 certificate
- Level 5 diploma
- Level 5 NVQ.

Stakeholders can get involved with the review and provide feedback by emailing the DfE via Level4-5.Team@education.gov.uk.

Learners 'enthused' by Applied Generals

A [research report](#) into users' views of Applied General Qualifications (AGQs) has found that learners are enthused by the 'applied' nature of AGQs.

Commissioned by Ofqual, the report looks into how AGQs are viewed, used and valued by stakeholders – learners, school and college staff, and Higher Education (HE). The research asked whether these qualifications are appropriate for entry to HE and whether improvements could be made to the current standards.

Conclusions from the research report include:

- Applied Generals fulfil an important role in providing pathways for students not suited to, or not inclined towards, more academic or more vocational programmes at Level 3.
- In some subjects, AGQs are preferred by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), but some HEIs believe that AGQ students enter HE at a comparative

disadvantage in their academic learning.

- Staff in schools, colleges and HEIs reported that AGQs are effective at developing students' team-working, organisation, time management, practical, interpersonal and presentation skills, all of which they agreed can be beneficial to HE study.
- The absence of significant examination components is a central part of the appeal of AGQs so schools and colleges have concerns about the recent increase in external assessment, implemented from September 2016.
- School and college staff are keen to see further AGQ results before making recommendations as to how the qualifications might be changed or improved.

Applied General Qualifications are Level 3 vocational qualifications, typically studied at Key Stage 5 and designed to enable access and progression to Higher Education.

Post-16 maths and English GCSEs: the challenges for colleges

A [DfE-commissioned report](#) has highlighted some of the many challenges that colleges face in the effective delivery and teaching of maths and English GCSE re-sits for 16 – 18 year olds.

According to the report, the factors that influence teaching and learning include:

- The variety in students' backgrounds and prior qualifications, particularly in view of the large numbers of students concerned.
- Differing levels of learner motivation to re-engage with the subjects and the challenges of cultivating more positive and confident student attitudes.
- Some students see resits as an opportunity to improve their attainment level and therefore engage more readily with the lessons – this is more true of maths than English.

- Resitting examinations in the formal setting required is a stressful and emotional experience for some students.
- Providers with large numbers of ESOL or SEND students can struggle to provide the additional support that they require.
- Colleges located in coastal and rural settings presented travel challenges for students.
- Local socio-economic conditions can affect both the ability to recruit specialist teachers and student attendance.

The reports aims to build a better understanding of approaches and strategies to effectively plan and deliver post-16 maths and English provision, and how best to engage and teach this group of students.

Autumn budget promises boost for maths education

Schools and colleges will receive a funding uplift of up to £600 for every 16-19 year old studying academic Level 3 maths qualifications.

This announcement, in support of increasing participation in A Level Maths and Core Maths post-16, came as part of the Chancellor, Philip Hammond's [autumn budget](#), which promised further investment in maths education, including:

- Additional investment in maths post-16, including piloting approaches to improve GCSE maths resit results, and establishing FE Centres of Excellence to train maths teachers and spread good practice
- Increased funding for schools and colleges when students achieve a grade C rather than, as previously, a grade B in Further Maths A Level
- Additional funding for every 16-19 maths school,

enabling more to open across England.

Other highlights for education and skills in the Autumn budget were:

- £84m over the next 5 years to improve the teaching of GCSE Computer Science, including upskilling 8,000 computer science teachers, creating a new National Centre for Computing Education, establishing an online platform to support A Level teaching, and improving girls' participation in computing
- An additional £20m to help Further Education prepare to implement T Levels
- A national re-training scheme to determine areas of the economy where new skills are needed, initially focussing on construction and digital skills.

Perceptions of difficulty are not the main driver behind subject choices

Subject choices by students are driven mainly by enjoyment and usefulness, with perceptions of difficulty a lesser decision-making factor.

This is the conclusion from Ofqual [research](#) into whether perceptions of subject difficulty at GCSE and A Level might affect the subjects students choose to study.

The research showed that:

- Subject difficulty is taken into consideration when making qualification choices, but only in the context of individual student strengths.
- Student choices are more focussed on enjoyment and usefulness to satisfy university or career ambitions, rather than perceptions of subject difficulty. Students recognise that they are sometimes discouraged by their teachers, parents or friends from choosing subjects thought to be too difficult for them.
- Teachers do influence student choice but teacher advice is based on what each student would enjoy

and find useful for their future plans. Some teachers did occasionally discourage students from making certain choices because a failure to achieve high grades could have negative consequences for the school's performance measures.

- School policies are also influential; some schools choose not to offer certain subjects because they are seen to be too difficult, therefore preventing take up in those areas.

The research was carried out following concerns that fewer students may be entering STEM and modern language fields because the subjects might be perceived to be harder.

Conducted with 49 teachers and 112 students across 12 schools in England, the research forms part of Ofqual's larger [study](#) into the comparability of standards across different subject areas.

Assessment for GCSE Computer Science

A [consultation](#) has been launched on the future assessment arrangements for GCSE Computer Science.

Ofqual states that it has seen evidence that exam boards' rules for non-exam assessment in GCSE computer science are being broken, proving difficult to enforce. It also has wider concerns about the burden being placed on teachers by the non-exam assessment, and how "the

nature of the non-exam assessment may be leading to an approach to problem solving that does not reflect real-world programming practices".

OCR has produced [guidance](#) on what the changes in the consultation proposals might mean for schools and colleges. The deadline for the consultation is 22 December.

Public exams under scrutiny

The Education Select Committee is currently holding an [inquiry](#) into the integrity of public examinations.

As part of its role scrutinising the work of Ofqual, the initial session examined the “general issue of exam integrity”, and also allowed Select Committee members to question both the independent and state sectors; other witnesses included representatives from Cambridge Assessment International Education, the Independent Schools Council, Eton College, and the Department for Education at Oxford University.

A [video recording](#) of the session is available.

Dedicated careers leader in every school

Every school and college in England will have a dedicated careers leader by September 2018, according to the government’s new [Careers Strategy](#).

The plan to raise the quality of careers provision promises a single framework, with careers leaders using the [Gatsby Benchmarks](#), and the Careers and Enterprise Company taking on an expanded role.

Other aspects of the Careers Strategy include:

- 20 new careers hubs in the most disadvantaged areas of the country
- Improved interaction between schools and businesses, with a particular focus on science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM)
- Trials of careers activities in primary schools to engage children from an early age in the wide range of available careers
- Specialist advice for long-term unemployed and those with additional needs

- Ofsted commentary on the provision of careers guidance in college inspection reports
- A strategy to communicate information about T Levels with parents, teachers, students and careers professionals as new technical options become available
- Improved use of destinations and outcomes data to support careers advice and decisions
- A new, improved National Careers Service website to include all careers information by the end of 2020.

In addition, as agreed in the Technical and Further Education Act, from January 2018, schools must give providers of technical education and apprenticeships the opportunity to talk to their pupils.

The DfE has also published [research](#) into how young people currently make education choices at the age of 16 and how advice and guidance interacts with these choices.

The Last Word

Paul Steer, Head of Policy, comments on some of the issues featured in this issue.

It’s all about choices

It seems that *choice* is a theme that runs throughout the recently issued [consultation on T Levels](#). Right at the start it sets out a grand vision of a ‘simplified’ system where 16 year olds can make a choice between two high quality, rigorous Level 3 options – A Levels or T Levels.

These two routes, more broadly defined as technical and academic, are binary – there is no blending of the two and this makes the choices at 16 absolutely critical. We must therefore welcome the new [proposals for careers advice](#) which may not be perfect but have to be an improvement on where we are now. The proposals include a commitment to providing advice to students about the new T Levels. This can help inform young people of all the options available to them, but must not become a mechanism for promoting the uptake of T Levels simply to meet policy objectives.

Of course, not all 16 year olds will be ready or suited

to either of these rigorous choices. With this in mind the Department recognises that there will be a ‘small number’ of 16 year olds who will not achieve Level 3 outcomes by 18, so some Level 2 qualifications will still be required for them to choose from. It looks like, in the fullness of time, these will be developed by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE). Indeed, the consultation makes it very clear that, in the end, all existing technical qualifications at Level 2 or 3 will be swept aside to make way for new T Levels and other IfATE developed programmes. That means a lot fewer qualifications to choose from.

Whereas the DfE acknowledges that some young people will need Level 2 programmes at 16, its T Level consultation also recognises that some 16 year olds choosing the academic or technical routes will need a bit of time to prepare. These will be offered a ‘transition year’ to help them develop their basic skills and to come

to a view as to which future choices best suit them. The consultation is very light on what a transition year might look like but it assures us that “Many providers already offer provision along these lines, and we would want to build on best practice”. Piloting will start in 2020.

Those who choose a T Level programme will be given a choice of 11 sectors or pathways. These routes are described within yet another consultation, this time about ‘[occupational maps](#)’. There has been unease from commentators about whether these sectors are quite right. They do not exactly mirror the way colleges traditionally divide themselves into different departments. And some things seem to be missing – notably Sport. Retail is absent, apparently on the basis that this is not a sufficiently technical area. Other traditional sectors, such as Health and Social Care seem to be dispersed across the new sectors. The maps themselves are part of wider work to be undertaken by IfATE, using its panels of employers, to design the content for both Apprenticeships and T Levels. These foundations need to be strong and robustly tested and the department must keep an open mind as to whether these 11 choices are quite right before it builds a whole system of choices predicated on them.

Within the 11 pathways there will be opportunities to specialise in the second year of study. However, it is interesting to contrast these 11 pathways with the range of choices open to someone opting for the academic route. There are 67 subjects to choose from (depending how you count them) and, in theory, a student can choose 3 - 4 of these in any combination. Our A Level programmes are often described as narrow and specialist in comparison with the broader baccalaureate style programmes offered in most other countries, but they clearly offer greater breadth than the highly specialist T Levels.

Furthermore, the academic route includes non-A Level provision, notably through what has been called Applied General Qualifications – these include OCR’s Cambridge Technicals and cover choices such as Sport, Health and Social Care, Business, and Digital Media. Applied General Qualifications continue to provide people with an opportunity to study a sector in depth and provide a successful and growing route into higher education. Students can choose to take them alongside A Levels or opt for larger versions, equivalent to three A Levels (like the T Levels), which can be taken as a whole programme.

Recent changes in performance tables mean that the assessment model for Applied Generals must now include a substantial externally examined component. Whereas this clearly works well for some students, we believe that this form of assessment can provide a barrier to achievement for a significant portion of talented young people. For this reason, we are committed to continuing to provide alternative vocational qualifications which do not feature such a high level of external assessment. It remains to be seen how long these will continue to be funded, but what is clear is that they are extremely popular, fulfil a need, and, as demonstrated in the recent [report on Applied Generals](#), are valued by many universities as a well-trodden path to higher

education. However, the T Level consultation suggests that government policy is to prefer qualifications, including T Levels, that have a high proportion of external assessment. In the future, other models of assessment may not be among the available choices.

We learn from the T Level consultation that even Applied General Qualifications, despite their high level of external assessment, are to be subject to review. This is despite the fact that they were reviewed recently and the Minister of State for School Standards, wrote to Ofqual earlier this year at the conclusion of this review stating: “It is my intention that AGQs should continue to provide pupils with a route to university, either in conjunction with A Levels or on their own”.

IfATE, and government policy in general is strongly wedded to the notion that T Levels must be employer led – a mantra that is repeated over and over in the T Level consultation. Anyone with a policy memory will know that this has consistently been the policy back to the days of David Blunkett when he introduced the new employer-led Modern Apprenticeships. The occupational standards that underpinned NVQs were developed by sector bodies that were required to consult deeply and widely with employers. The content of 14-19 Diplomas were developed by Diploma Development Partnerships which were, again, largely employer led. The trailblazer apprenticeships (the ones that have just experienced a drop in uptake of 59% and were described by Lord Sainsbury – inventor of the T Levels - as seeming to “overlap significantly with others, be firm- rather than occupation-specific, and/or contain insufficient technical content”) were developed by employer panels.

Finally, to emphasise the point that the thrust of the T Level consultation has very much been about limiting choice in favour of fewer, simpler options, we should look at the section that proposes a model of franchising each of the pathways to single exam boards. This means that, when it comes to T Levels, there will be only one choice of exam board per qualification. Such a model could provide an opportunity for government to procure services in line with tightly specified requirements and might drive down costs or increase levels of service, although no government’s track record for procuring services in this way is brilliant. The Department commissioned its own [independent report](#) on the proposed model which warned against the risks of creating an ossified system where it would be difficult to switch from one exam board to another at the end of a contract. The consultation itself acknowledges the risks that the model could create monopolies and put potential future competitors out of the game. The A Level model shows that competition can be effective and that the purported risk of a race to the bottom, in which exam boards compete to provide the ‘easiest’ exams, can be dealt with through strong regulation. There is a real risk that, if the franchise model goes ahead, it could create a system where there is no choice of exam board for schools and colleges, for learners and, ultimately, for the state – and that is what they call Hobson’s choice.

Report round-up

There's been a raft of education and skills reports published within the last week, in the run up to the Christmas break. Here's a quick round up:

1. [Improving social mobility through education](#) – The DfE's national action plan to support children and young people to reach their full potential, regardless of background. The plan contains a specific "ambition" for high quality choice at age 16.
2. [Economic value of GCSEs](#) – This DfE analysis estimates the potential value to the economy if more disadvantaged children achieved at least 5 good GCSEs, including English and maths, with the results presented by region.
3. [Review of summer series](#) – Ofqual's broad overview of exam planning, administration, marking, the awarding and post-results processes.
4. [National Reference Tests](#) – Further details from Ofqual on the first national reference tests in English and maths which were conducted earlier this year.
5. [Teacher involvement in developing exam papers](#) – Ofqual's interim report with suggestions for addressing potential risks, but with a clear indication that the exam system benefits from the contributions of teachers.
6. [Comparability between exam board qualifications and the maintenance of standards over time](#) – Three further reports have been published as part of Ofqual's continuing work around comparability.
7. [DfE Single Departmental plan](#) – The Department for Education sets out its objectives and how they will be achieved. The plan highlights reforms to technical education and investment in the Further Education sector.
8. [Ofsted annual report](#) – The Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman, launched her first annual report. The overall quality of education is good and improving says the report, but there are some remaining areas of concern around underperformance, social mobility and challenging circumstances.
9. [Higher Education applications](#) – UCAS' end of cycle report provides analysis about who's applying and getting in to HE, changing patterns of recruitment and the [impacts of qualification](#) and market reforms.