

T Levels to carry UCAS points

T Levels will have the same UCAS points as three A Levels. This has now been confirmed by the Education Secretary as he set out the government's latest decisions on T Levels.

In what's being mooted as a defining [speech](#), Damian Hinds provided details of updates to the DfE's T Levels [action plan](#), which included plans for UCAS points for T Levels. "I want T Level students that want to, to be able to go to university to do relevant technical degrees", he announced, confirming that the government is stepping up engagement with Higher Education Institutions to find out how they might use T Levels for admissions purposes now that the outline content for the first T Levels has been published. Further discussions are taking place with UCAS to identify how points will be awarded per T Level pass, merit or distinction grade.

The updated T Level action plan provides progress on the policy development and implementation of T Levels and includes details of:

- The **next seven T Level programmes** to be taught from 2021:
 - Digital Support and Services T Level (Digital)
 - Digital Business Services T Level (Digital)
 - Onsite Construction T Level (Construction)
 - Building Services Engineering T Level (Construction)
 - Health T Level (Health and Science)
 - Healthcare Science T Level (Health and Science)
 - Science T Level (Health and Science).

In a change to the original action plan, T Levels in Legal, Financial and Accounting and Engineering and Manufacturing will now be introduced a year later from 2022 onwards.

- An updated list of [providers](#) who will offer T Levels from 2020 and beyond, now showing the pathways

they intend to offer.

- The evaluation of the [industry placement pilots](#) which ran during 2017/18 and tested different approaches to better understand what a meaningful placement looks like, and how to overcome the initial challenges of planning and implementation.
- Support for "a new generation of **Higher Technical Qualifications**" - a system of employer-led national standards for higher technical education. These existing and new qualifications will be in place from 2022 – ready for the first T Level students who have completed their two-year course. A consultation will follow in 2019 on how this approach will be delivered
- The reform of the **pupil destination performance measure** to show how many young people go on to study degrees, higher technical apprenticeships or higher technical qualifications.
- Support for [skills advisory panels](#). These local partnerships between public and private sector employers, local authorities, colleges and universities will assess what skills are needed in the local area. Every area will produce a local industrial strategy so that colleges are incentivised to develop skills that match local labour market needs.

Damian Hinds also promised more details of the **transition year** offer early in 2019, for those students not quite ready to start T Levels at age 16.

Following the announcement, The Institute for Apprenticeships launched a [consultation](#) on five new T Levels to be taught from 2021 covering draft outline content for Technical Qualifications in Building Services Engineering, Digital Business Services, Health, Health Science and Science.

Regulation of new Technical Qualifications confirmed

The [outcomes](#) of Ofqual's autumn consultation on the rules and guidance for the Technical Qualifications within T Levels have been published.

Most of the original proposals will be implemented unchanged, other than minor changes to wording to improve clarity. However, Ofqual has decided to make the following amendments to the conditions in light of the responses received:

Also in this issue: > More T Level news > Quality of marking > Grade standards > Grading in VTQs > Post-16 Level 2 curriculum > Adult basic digital skills > Variability in GCSE results > Maths Centres of Excellence > National Centre for Computing Education > Ofsted annual report > FE commissioner's annual report > *The Last Word* commentary > **STOP PRESS:** Ofqual report on summer series > National Reference Tests > UCAS end of cycle report > Marking, moderation and appeals consultation

- Marking assessments – Ofqual will provide additional guidance on factors an awarding organisation should consider when considering whether it is possible for it to mark an assessment itself in a way that is valid and manageable, or whether it might be necessary to permit centre-marking to secure this.
- Prior learning – Ofqual will clarify how an awarding organisation should consider whether it is possible to recognise prior learning or prior attainment for the Core across different Technical Qualifications.
- Total Qualification Time (TQT) – Ofqual will clarify how TQT should be calculated.

T Levels to be funded based on programme size

The DfE has published proposals for different rates of funding for different T Levels to reflect variations in programme size.

In a new [consultation](#), the government outlines its proposals for how funding will be distributed to providers for the delivery of T Levels from 2020.

It plans to have a number of new funding bands to reflect the difference in the number of hours required over 2 years for T Levels.

In addition, the consultation sets out how the government intends to distribute the increased funding available for T Levels roll out, including:

- Recognition that T Levels will be larger programmes and will therefore attract more funding than existing study programmes.
- Confirmation that additional funding will be provided to support T Level students who have not yet met the minimum English and maths requirements.
- Details of how funding will be allocated to help providers set up the industry placements
- Providing extra funding for T Level students who are aged 18 to ensure that they can have the hours needed for larger T Level programmes.

The deadline for responses to the consultation is 19 February 2019.

Professional Development Programme for T Level teachers to be rolled out

A new professional development offer is being developed to help teachers prepare for the roll out of T Levels.

Developed by the Education and Training Foundation, the [programme](#) aims to ensure that teachers and trainers have the teaching skills, subject/industry knowledge and confidence needed to deliver T Levels from 2020.

The five key strands of the programme are:

- Teacher development programme: This will focus on pedagogy (core teaching skills and methods); practice (subject knowledge and subject specific

teaching); professional knowledge (industry and employability understanding for teachers); and developing teachers' capacity to embed maths, English and digital skills in technical teaching environments.

- Ongoing professional development needs analysis
- Understanding T Levels
- Knowledge hubs
- Organisational readiness.

Training is due to begin in Spring 2019.

Capital funding announced for T Level providers

Providers delivering the first tranche of T Levels from 2020 will be able to apply for capital funding, according to announcements made by the Secretary of State for Education, Damian Hinds.

£38 million will be made available to help ensure that providers have the equipment and facilities necessary to deliver T Levels.

The method for selecting eligible providers will be known in January 2019 with the funding following in the Spring, ready for use in September 2020.

The [providers short-listed](#) to benefit from the *Taking Teaching Further* funding have also been announced. This national initiative aims to attract experienced industry professionals with expert technical knowledge and skills to work in Further Education. The priority sectors for the initiative include the first T Level subjects: construction; education & childcare; and digital.

As well as teacher training, the programme will also provide funding for projects to explore how industry and FE can work together to develop local partnerships and collaborations.

Quality of marking remains stable

Marking consistency remains stable in England according to new [research](#) from Ofqual.

Ofqual's programme of research into the quality of marking aims to provide further understanding about the marking of GCSEs, AS and A Levels, identify good practice, and suggest ways in which improvements can be made.

"The challenge is to make marking as good as it can be in every subject, in the context of the style of the assessment", said Sally Collier, the Chief Regulator.

The published reports focus on online standardisation, hard to mark responses, marking versus comparative judgement and marking consistency.

The results of an Ofqual survey of over 18,000 examiners have also been published showing that:

- Survey respondents had an average of 10 years previous examining experience
- More than 99% of respondents were current or former teachers
- The average age of an examiner respondent was 47 years
- 96% of markers and moderators agreed that they were confident in their ability to mark or moderate accurately and reliably.

Grade standards will not be adjusted

Ofqual has decided not to adjust grading standards in A Level French, German and Spanish and physics, chemistry and biology.

This decision comes after extensive [research](#) into inter-subject comparability over many years following concerns that it might be harder to achieve top grades in these subjects compared to others.

Recognising that perceived grading severity could undermine confidence in these qualifications, Ofqual will

be working with exam boards to avoid the potential for these subjects to become statistically more difficult in the future.

Commenting on the concerns about the decline in take-up of A Level Modern Foreign Languages, Ofqual said that "lowering the grade boundaries is not the right way to make subjects more attractive to potential students". Further work will now be carried out, however, on grading standards in GCSE French, German and Spanish.

"Grading is not just a technical matter, but an educational one"

The first reports from Ofqual's exploratory research into the grading of vocational and technical qualifications confirms not only the challenges of defining exactly what good practice looks like, but also the huge potential of grading to engage or disengage learners and teachers.

Ofqual's [reports](#) exploring the policies, principles and practices related to grading vocational and technical assessments, show that grading raises highly technical challenges, such as standardisation, the relationship between grading and levelling, comparability, weighting, and transparency, which are further complicated by their operational nature and concept.

The research aims to provide insight into the variety of grading practices in operation in vocational and technical qualifications, and to consider what issues might arise in relation to the different approaches.

The work represents the first outputs from a programme of research designed to improve collective understanding of how grading is, and can be, accommodated in the assessment of technical and vocational education and training, particularly in light of increasing government policy to promote grading in vocational and technical qualifications and apprenticeships.

Ofqual has also conducted [research](#) into some 'older style' Applied General qualifications, with a particular focus on those with 100% internal assessment, and is calling on Awarding Organisations to address the risk of potential grade inflation in these legacy qualifications. The research did not include the new Applied General qualifications introduced in 2016 that were developed with increased external assessment.

Post-16 Level 2 students “less visible” than others

“In the corridors of Whitehall and Westminster, post-16 Level 2 students risk being seen as ‘other people’s children’. As a result, they have been overshadowed by the larger and better understood majority who progress directly onto Level 3 study after completing GCSEs”.

This is the headline from Ofsted’s recent [research](#) into the curriculum available to post-16 Level 2 students – around 170,000 learners each year, mostly in FE colleges.

The report commentary from Amanda Spielman, Chief Inspector, claims that the education sector “has lost its understanding of curriculum” and that the focus on assessment without consideration for curriculum has been particularly constraining for Level 2 study programmes.

A number of recommendations are made for colleges in the report to improve the Level 2 curriculum including:

- Work with local employers in the design of the curriculum, to assess learners and to provide meaningful work experience.

- Evaluate the benefits of programmes by tracking destinations, particularly about employment to different industries, make that data more available to potential students, and evaluate whether Level 2 learners improve their progression into careers by going on to take a level 3 qualification.
- Recognise the importance of promoting personal, social and employability skills and give greater emphasis to building learner confidence and self-esteem.

The report, which is part of Ofsted’s programme of research into the curriculum at all stages of education, also calls for the government to:

- Review the policy requiring students who have not achieved well pre-16 in English and maths GCSEs, to continue to study these subjects at GCSE post-16
- Learn from good practice in Level 2 programmes to help design the transition offer in T Levels.

Improving adult basic digital skills

The DfE is seeking views on plans to improve adult basic digital skills.

The [consultation](#) covers:

- The draft national standards for basic digital skills
- The introduction of basic digital skills qualifications at two levels – ‘beginner’ and ‘essential’
- The addition of a national entitlement to basic digital skills, mirroring the existing entitlements for English and maths.

Feedback received will inform how the government develops and delivers improved adult basic digital skills training.

The consultation follows the government’s 2017 UK [Digital Strategy](#) which set out an ambition for everyone to have the core digital skills they need to participate in life and work, and the announcement earlier this year for full funding for adults who need to take basic digital skills courses from 2020.

Ofqual is running a parallel [consultation](#) on how it proposes to regulate the new basic digital skills qualifications. The Ofqual consultation seeks views on the qualifications’ defining characteristics, including their design, delivery and awarding, and on a proposed approach to maintaining standards.

Changes in candidate profile influence centre year-on-year GCSE results

Centres with a change in the number of students between years, and a change in their ability, are more likely to experience variability in GCSE outcomes. This is one of the findings from a [study](#) by Ofqual as it continues its research into the year-on-year variability of GCSE results at centre level.

Other findings from the study include:

- Whether a centre is stable or variable in one year is a predictor of stability or variability in the following year.
- Centres who experience positive volatility in one year are likely to experience negative volatility in the next.
- A significant amount of variability is not predictable – there are some features within centres that are

difficult to capture such as changes in timetabling or to staff.

- Measures of socio-economic status have little or no bearing on year-on-year centre variability.
- The comparable outcomes approach to awarding examinations does not have a systematic negative impact on centres with higher proportions of low socio-economic status candidates.

Cambridge Assessment has also carried out [research](#) into this area which agrees that year-on-year variability is due to well-known predictive influences and because of differences in the profile of student ability.

Maths Centres of Excellence named

The colleges which will become maths Centres of Excellence have been announced.

Maths Centres of Excellence will be established in 21 [post-16 institutions](#) - one in every region of England. The Centres of Excellence programme aims to design new teaching approaches to improve the quality of basic maths provision for low attaining young people over the age of 16 over the next five years.

The Centres will develop high quality teaching resources, build teachers' skills, and spread best practice through maths networks.

The Centres for Excellence programme is part of the government's response to the [Smith Review](#) of post-16 maths education.

National centre for computing education to be established

The UK's first [National Centre for Computing Education](#) will aim to improve the teaching of computing and drive participation in computer science.

A consortium made up of STEM Learning, the British Computing Society and the Raspberry Pi Foundation, has been chosen as the provider for the project, which is backed by £84million of government investment. The Centre will work with the University of Cambridge, and Google will also support the project with further funding.

It will operate virtually through a national network of up to 40 school-led computing hubs to provide training and resources to primary and secondary schools, and an intensive training programme for secondary teachers without a post A-Level qualification in computer science.

The Centre will start working with schools across England later this year, giving teachers subject knowledge and support to teach the computing curriculum.

Inspection framework to include greater emphasis on the curriculum

"Teaching pupils and making sure they learn the right things" will be at the centre of the proposed new inspection framework, according to Ofsted's [annual report](#).

In the report's opening statement, the Chief Inspector Amanda Spielman concludes that: "The substance of education is the curriculum. It makes no sense to think about education without it. Yet in recent years that substance has lost out to performance tables and data in the priorities of many in the sector." Ms Spielman proposes that Ofsted will use the new inspection framework - to be consulted on early in 2019 - to take more account of what is taught, allowing teachers to get on with their "core role" of designing and delivering the curriculum.

The annual report also acknowledges the rapidly changing FE and skills sector due to apprenticeships, college mergers and from 2020, T Levels, and highlights concerns about the financial sustainability of the college sector, and the impacts on provision.

Ofsted continues to question the effectiveness of the government's policy to require learners who have not achieved a grade 4 GCSE in English and/or mathematics at 16 to continue studying for a qualification in these subjects. The annual report says that English and maths should be pitched as a core part of vocational training in FE rather than as a punishment for not achieving the required grade previously.

FE Commissioner heralds another challenging year ahead for colleges

FE colleges face another year of real challenge. That's the message from Richard Atkins, the Further Education Commissioner, in his [annual report](#).

The report highlights some of the achievements made in strengthening the FE sector in 2017/2018 but also highlights the challenges that remain to be addressed. These include T Levels implementation and apprenticeship reform which will continue to force colleges to keep adapting, according to the Commissioner.

The Commissioner also highlights the financial difficulties that failing colleges face and the "risks to the communities they serve".

The FE Commissioner, an independent advisor to ministers, has a remit to support colleges in improving quality and to assess the leadership and governance of colleges that have serious weaknesses in quality or financial health.

The Last Word

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

A glance through this month's bumper issue of *OCR Policy Briefing* gives a good indication of what to expect in the world of qualifications for 2019.

The recently updated T Level Action Plan reveals a major programme of work that is gathering momentum. The multiple strands of activity covered by the plan and accompanying announcements from the Secretary of State are impressively comprehensive. This includes details of colleges, schools and other providers eligible for delivering the first wave of T Levels in 2020, analysis and lessons learned from industry placement pilots, plans to develop higher level technical qualifications, new accountability measures to cover achievements in T Level programmes, the establishment of Skills Advisory Panels, proposed funding arrangements, Ofqual's announcements about its approach to regulating T Level qualifications, arrangements for recruiting and supporting T Level teachers, and, perhaps one of the simpler achievements, agreement that UCAS points will apply to T Level qualifications.

This is an impressive list but, of course, there is always more to be done - Damian Hinds has promised future announcements about the 'transition year' - a programme to support people entering post-16 education who, for a variety of reasons, are not yet ready to embark on a full Level 3 programme. This is hardly new territory - such young people have always existed and schools and colleges have developed many approaches to supporting them. There is an opportunity here, though, to establish a more formally recognised (and properly funded) approach. We await details in the coming year.

Meanwhile, the DfE must continue its wise approach to managing the arrival of T Levels in a contained and phased manner. For T Levels to be a success and for the interests of the first T Level students to be protected, we have to guarantee quality in all aspects of the programme from the outset. This is why it was the correct decision to delay two of the pathways originally scheduled for first teaching in 2021.

Unlike T Levels, the new, reformed A Levels and GCSEs are now largely in place. We are now in a phase of reviewing how the qualifications are bedding in and what changes or improvements might be needed. This on-going monitoring as carried out by the regulator, Ofqual, working in conjunction with the exam boards, has resulted in the publication of some interesting technical reports. Examples of this include two investigations into comparability – one looking at A Levels in French, German and Spanish, and one looking at the A Level sciences. Questions about the level of difficulty of one subject in relation to another are always fraught with complexity and contention. For example, the perceived

difficulty of language qualifications is blamed by some for the continuing decline in uptake of these subjects. In its report, Ofqual makes the case for the status quo whilst promising further monitoring and research in the coming years. It also argues that it would be wrong to lower standards in order to make a particular subject more popular.

In another report, Ofqual looks at the quality of marking of examiners and the outcomes of reviews of that marking. The conclusions of its latest report are reassuring although the report highlights the well-known difficulties of arriving at consistent views of what should be the 'right' mark for extended essays in subjective subjects such as English. Getting the right balance between exams that encourage and reward creative, individual thinking and exams which have only one 'correct' answer will always be a challenge. Nevertheless, this is an important matter and we the exam boards and the regulator are right to continue this conversation in an open and transparent way and to remain open at all times to exploring new ways of improving the quality and consistency of marks across all subjects.

So far, the technical evidence seems to suggest that reformed qualifications are performing well. Some subjects may be subject to further change, sometimes at short notice, as we have seen with Computer Science GCSE, but, overall, we seem to be heading for a period of stability where hopefully there will be time to work on system improvements and issues of key importance such as comparability or quality of marking.

If general qualifications look set for a period of bedding in, vocational qualifications are heading for yet another period of review. We are expecting the DfE to launch a consultation on the future of vocational qualifications early next year, probably in February, but with further reviews and consultations to follow. The aim is to ensure that the DfE funds far fewer vocational qualifications than it does now, leading to a simpler more rational qualifications system. We anticipate that it will consult on criteria for determining which qualifications should survive such a review - criteria covering such things as purpose, market recognition, 'rigour' and relationship to any future T Level qualifications.

The review is ambitious, with the intention, probably in the following order, to review all post-16 Level 3 vocational qualifications, including Applied General Qualifications, higher level vocational qualifications, Level 2 and below, and then pre-16 vocational qualifications used in school performance tables. Not only is this a big undertaking in terms of the volumes of qualifications involved, but it is also forces difficult questions about the range and purpose of qualifications and the sorts

of learning we wish our young people to have access to. The process of consultation may start next year but reaching decisions and implementing them looks set to be long and drawn out.

The thinking around what is needed in the 'Level 2 and below' provision for 16-19 year olds seems under-developed. The answer will need to be much more sophisticated than providing the proposed transition year. Ofsted has pointed this out in its thematic review of this provision whilst also making the strong case that young people who find themselves in this category of provision are often treated by politicians as 'other people's children'.

Of course, the DfE and Ofsted are not the only bodies turning their gaze to vocational qualifications. The teams within Ofqual with responsibility for vocational qualifications have doubled over the last year or so. Quite rightly, Ofqual is keen to play its part in informing the review of all vocational qualifications. It has already

committed to a full review of non-examined assessment in vocational qualifications. Local assessment by teachers or trainers 'in-situ' has long been a critical part of vocational qualification design, but of late, there has been a loss of faith in it from some regulators and policy makers. In a high stakes, highly accountable system, concerns have grown about the risks of malpractice or poor practice where responsibility for assessment and some of its quality assurance rests with institutions which are also rewarded for the outcomes. It is still early days but this issue is bound to rise up the agenda next year as the review of vocational qualifications gathers pace.

Predicting the future is a mug's game at the best of times, so please treat these tentative views of where qualifications might be headed in the next year with the right spirit of scepticism. In the meantime, everyone at OCR Policy wishes you all the best for the Christmas holiday.

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Summer series was successful, says Ofqual

Ofqual has concluded that the 2018 summer series was "successful, well planned, and effectively delivered".

This successful delivery of qualifications by exam boards comes despite 2018 being one of the biggest years of reformed qualifications, according to Ofqual's [summer report](#) on GCSEs, AS and A Levels. The report provides an overview of exam boards' planning, administration and marking, together with a summary of the awarding process and post-results activities.

The report shows that exam results continued to be stable with variability in school and college results similar to previous years. This, says Ofqual, suggests that teachers and students responded well to the considerable reforms.

Most exams taken this summer were in reformed qualifications - 94 of them, with marking and results completed on time. 14.7 million scripts were generated by 1.3 million students and 6.2 million certificates were awarded.

The report highlights particular areas that Ofqual will increase its monitoring for next year's exams including a review of:

- assessment materials for reformed GCSE and A Level qualifications awarded for the first time this summer
- optionality and predictability in reformed qualifications
- how exam boards are using their assessment strategies in the on-going delivery of their qualifications

- the extent to which exam boards have fully embedded improvements in their quality of marking and reviews of marking
- those subjects where there is a particular pattern of grade changes following requests for a review or marking or moderation
- exam boards' investigation and management of malpractice allegations
- the extent to which exam boards have made improvements to their safeguards around teacher involvement in the development of confidential assessment materials.

NRT shows improvements in maths

Results from the 2018 National Reference Test show an increase in performance in maths, according to new [information](#) published by Ofqual.

National Reference Tests in maths and English language are taken by students in a sample of schools each March and provide additional evidence about students' performance over time in those subjects.

The improvement in maths in 2018 is in line with expectations as schools get used to new qualifications, say Ofqual.

The tests showed a slight decrease in performance in English, although the differences were not statistically significant.

From 2019 onwards, the NRT results will provide an additional source of evidence for awarding decisions in GCSE English language and maths.

Qualifications accepted by Higher Education continue to diversify

The number of 18 year olds not holding just A Levels and accepted on to Higher Education courses increased in 2018, according to UCAS' [end of cycle report](#).

The report which provides an in-depth analysis about who's applying and getting in to HE, changing patterns of recruitment, and the impacts of qualification and market reforms, shows that applicants with Cambridge Technicals, Cambridge pre-University, Extended Project and alternative vocational qualifications are being accepted into Higher Education.

UCAS believes this could indicate:

- A diversification of the qualifications that HE providers will accept
- A growing acceptance of vocational qualifications as a measure of academic ability
- A Higher Education market with increasingly high levels of competition between providers
- The results of Widening Participation activities.

A Levels (alone) remain the most common qualification type held by applicants at nearly 60%, with 88% of those being accepted into HE.

Acceptance rates among applicants achieving a lower A

Level grade have continued to grow. There were more placed applicants missing their predicted grades by three or more grades in 2018 than in previous years.

The second most common qualification type from applicants is BTECs although the proportion applying with this qualification alone fell to 10.1% - a 1% decrease from 2017.

New proposals for marking, moderation and appeals rules

Ofqual is consulting on changes to its rules for GCSE, GCE and Project Qualifications around how exam boards must conduct:

- reviews of marking
- reviews of moderation
- appeals.

The [proposed changes](#) respond to issues which have arisen during the first two years of operation of the rules, aim to make the rules easier to follow and bring them in line with a version of the rules which have been introduced for Technical Qualifications.

The deadline for consultation responses is 25 January 2019.