

Campaign briefing for MPs

September 2021

Background

- Young people in England can currently choose between three types of Level 3 qualification at the age of 16: academic qualifications such as A levels, technical qualifications that lead to a specific occupation, and applied general qualifications such as BTECs that combine the development of practical skills with academic learning.
- In July, the Department for Education [confirmed](#) plans to replace this three-route model with a two-route model of A levels and T levels (a new suite of technical qualifications), where most young people pursue one of these qualifications at the age of 16. As a result, funding for the majority of BTEC qualifications will be removed.

The case to #ProtectStudentChoice

- The [#ProtectStudentChoice campaign](#) coalition of 15 organisations that represent and support staff and students in schools, colleges and universities is deeply concerned about this plan. In our view, it is far too simplistic, and many young people will continue to be better served studying a BTEC rather than an A level or T level-only study programme. The current three-route model works well and should be retained – particularly as BTECs have recently undergone a rigorous process of reform.
- A huge number of young people will be affected by this change. We estimate that at least 30% of the 864,304 16- to 18-year-olds [studying](#) a Level 3 qualification in England are pursuing a BTEC qualification (either alongside A levels or as a standalone study programme) – some **259,291** students. The government plans to start removing funding for BTECs from **2023**.
- Scrapping BTECs will leave many students without a viable pathway at the age of 16 and will hamper progress to higher education or skilled employment. Disadvantaged young people are amongst those with the most to lose from this plan, a conclusion from DfE's own [equalities impact assessment](#): *“those from SEND backgrounds, Asian ethnic groups, disadvantaged backgrounds, and males [are] disproportionately likely to be affected”*.
- BTECs are engines of 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.
- It is impossible to square the government's stated ambition to 'level up' opportunity with the plan to scrap most BTECs, including all larger versions of the qualification that are deemed to overlap with A levels or T levels (**86%** of respondents to the government's recent [consultation](#) disagreed with the proposal to remove funding for qualifications on this basis).
- The government hopes that scrapping BTECs will help to increase the number of students taking its new T level qualifications. But even though BTECs are available in similar subjects, they are a different type of qualification that provide a different type of educational experience. Scrapping them is more likely to lead to an increase the number of young people taking A levels or dropping out of education altogether.
- T levels have been operating for one year and are currently studied by around **1,500** students. BTECs have been operating for decades and have a proven track record in helping young people progress to higher education or employment, and in meeting the skills needs of employers. T levels are a welcome development and will strengthen the current suite of technical qualifications, but they should sit alongside, rather than replace, BTECs in a three-route qualification model.

Our response to the government's response to #ProtectStudentChoice

- **“The government is streamlining post-16 qualifications”.** Streamlining is often linked to what the DfE consultation described as a “bewildering choice” of qualifications. This may be the case with technical qualifications but is simply not the case with BTECs. For example, there are only 39 subjects available across the entire sixth form college sector. A local college or school sixth form will typically offer a fraction of this number. Ministers may find this sort of choice bewildering, but there is little evidence that students do, or that employers are confused by the current range of BTEC qualifications.
- **“The government is improving the quality of post-16 qualifications”.** BTEC qualifications have recently undergone a rigorous process of reform. They are popular with students, respected by employers and provide a well-established route to higher education or employment. The government claims that T levels are a “gold standard” improvement, but they are a different type of qualification. Many students will not be willing or able to enrol on such a large, occupation-specific qualification at the age of 16. And even if it made educational sense to do so, withdrawing funding for BTECs from 2023 while just 1,500 of the 864,304 Level 3 students in England are currently enrolled on a T level, risks leaving many young people without the choice of an appropriate qualification.
- **“The case for change is strong” usually citing the [Wolf Review \(2011\)](#) and [Sainsbury Review \(2016\)](#).** The Wolf Review said BTECs are “valuable in the labour market and a familiar and acknowledged route into higher education”. The Sainsbury Review did not consider BTECs or A levels as “Reform of this option falls outside the Panel’s remit”. So the Department for Education’s “case for change” for scrapping BTECs rests on one report that rated them highly and another that did not look at them at all.
- **“The government will fund a range of qualifications to be taken alongside or as alternatives to T Levels and A levels in future”.** DfE has been clear that this will be a “small range” and that T levels and A levels will remain the “qualifications of choice” for most young people. The consultation response states that, with only a small number of exceptions, “Larger academic qualifications (including applied general qualifications larger than one A level) will not be funded if they overlap with T Levels or A levels”. So while a small number of 1 A level equivalent BTEC qualifications will remain, most 2 and 3 A level-equivalent BTECs will be scrapped.
- **“We have consulted in two stages on reforms to level 3 qualifications alongside T Levels and A levels and have listened to feedback at each stage of the review”.** DfE may have listened to feedback, but it has not acted on it. For example, 86% of respondents to the consultation disagreed with the proposal to remove funding for qualifications that were deemed to overlap with A levels or T levels. This remains a fundamental part of the government’s approach. In many cases, DfE is taking the opposite course to that suggested by the majority of respondents to its consultation.

Conclusion

- The way to boost the number of students taking a new, untested qualification (T levels) is not to remove an existing, well-established one that has a fundamentally different purpose (BTECs). Schools, colleges, universities and employers are extremely concerned that years of work developing and refining successful progression pathways based around BTECs could be undone through a misguided, top-down rationalisation of qualifications.
- The three-route qualification model works well and should be retained. Students should continue to have the choice to study BTEC qualifications. Removing this option would be disastrous for students, social mobility, employers and the economy. The government must rethink its plan to scrap BTECs and provide assurances that they will continue to be available to students alongside A levels and T levels in the future.
- For more information about the #ProtectStudent Choice campaign visit: www.protectstudentchoice.org