



A City & Guilds Group Business



Level 2 attainment and the review of Post-16 qualifications

Research report



Contents

Key messages	6
Executive summary	7
Introduction	14
Level 2 qualifications and attainment	16
The Government's review	32
Potential impact of the proposal	46
Conclusions and recommendations	54
Appendices	60

David Phillips

Foreword

There is a misconception amongst some circles that most people will leave full time education with all of the basic qualifications they need to go onto further study, pursue a career and live a fulfilling life, but sadly that isn't always the case. For many reasons ranging from simply not enjoying the school environment through to serious life challenges such as illness, disability, having caring responsibilities or living in situations that affect their life chances. In fact in 2019 a third of school leavers did not achieve a 'pass grade' 4 in their GCSE English and Maths.¹

For many decades, Level 2, as well as entry level qualifications providing basic workplace skills such as literacy, numeracy and digital skills have formed an important stepping stone for many who have not achieved all of the qualifications they needed whilst in full time education. Or simply for people who want to specialise in particular industries where knowledge at Level 2 is required to progress.

That is not to say that all of the qualifications that are currently available are fit-for-purpose. There are an array of very similar qualifications available as well as large numbers of qualifications that are close to being obsolete, with extremely low take up. This situation devalues other good level 2 qualifications that are on offer as employers and learners struggle to identify quality 'brand names' in the same way they can with GCSE's, A Levels and Degrees within the academic education system. Therefore, at City & Guilds Group we welcome the Government's move to streamline and simplify the further education system and bring parity with the academic system. But it must be done sensitively and in collaboration with those who have an intimate understanding of the Further Education sector and the groups of people that it serves. Otherwise, we could well be throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

We have produced this report in collaboration with Research Base in which we interviewed key stakeholders from the Further Education sector to get their opinion on the changes that were looming because we wanted to create a channel for their voices, which had not been clearly heard in this debate to date.

Without careful consultation from those with this knowledge, the proposed revisions to Level 2 and below qualifications could kick away the ladder for people who don't achieve at GCSE level. Whilst the heavy focus on full time courses at Level 3 could disadvantage older learners who have financial responsibilities and are unable to undertake full-time study if they find themselves out of work. We would like to see a more nuanced approach to post 16 education in the future with opportunities for people to retrain or just get 'a second chance' at all ages and stages of their lives.

When it comes to lifelong learning, the creation of progression opportunities should be the priority, which is why high quality level 2 qualifications – which provide a valuable route into work and skills for so many remain crucially important. We would also like Government to consider the realities of the lives of adult learners and create more flexible, part time and online learning solutions that will help to support learners of all ages and at all stages of their careers.

I hope that you enjoy reading this report and the recommendations that it contains and that it resonates in this important debate.



David Phillips
Managing Director
City & Guilds and ILM

¹The Independent: <https://inews.co.uk/news/education/headteachers-students-fail-gcse-english-maths-351770>

1 Key messages

1. Whilst the review of post-16 qualifications is greatly needed, in its current format is felt by many to carry significant risk, particularly to learners who are yet to achieve a Level 2 qualification.
2. The data on which both the review and the proposals is based fails to provide the full picture of the skills climate in England and excludes consideration of the value of Level 2 qualifications.
3. The interviews conducted as part of this report note the relationship between Level 2 attainment and socio-economic mobility, which is at risk should the Government proceed with its proposals.
4. Level 2 qualifications are perceived by stakeholders to offer great value to learners and employers, providing opportunities to develop key skills, both specific and general.
5. Level 2 attainment is viewed as a critical stepping stone for some candidates whilst being the ultimate goal for others, with many careers pathways accessible for people whose highest qualification is at Level 2.

2 Executive summary

In May 2018 the Government confirmed its plans to conduct a review of post-16 qualifications at level 3 and below in England. The stated aim of the review is to streamline the availability of qualifications at level 3 and below, ensuring that public funding only subsidises 'high-quality qualifications that serve a clear and distinct purpose.' The ultimate outcome of the review is anticipated to be far fewer qualifications approved for funding at this level for post-16 learners, which, consequently, should ensure that pathways into and through post-16 education are made clearer both for young people aged 16-19 and others working through the education system.

However, there are concerns over what this means in practice. With the government aim of making A Levels and T Levels the 'gold standard', there are potential issues around ensuring that post-16 learners still have a range of options to suit diverse needs and approaches, with fears that this review might become a 'top-down exercise in Whitehall which could lead to learners being cut off from valuable and relevant opportunities in their local communities.'²

City & Guilds commissioned this study, which was designed to consider the potential impact of the government review's anticipated recommendations by:

- Considering the relevance of level 2 qualifications for further attainment and career progression;
- Assessing the available data on the attainment of level 2 skills and qualifications across the UK, with a primary focus on England; and
- Considering the potential impact that defunding level 2 qualifications may have.

This report explores the findings of the literature review, data review and interviews conducted in order to explore these considerations, finding that whilst the Government's review is addressing a real need for educational reform, that the proposed means raise concerns for many stakeholders, with the assumptions on which the proposal stands potentially constructed with limited views of relevant data.

² FE Week - <https://feweek.co.uk/2020/02/13/williamson-announces-plan-to-scrap-5000-qualifications-but-will-anybody-notice/>

2.1 Assessing review assumptions

From the findings of the review of level 2 attainment across the UK, light touch assessment of the data on which the government review has been based and interviews with key stakeholders, the following assumptions have been identified on which it is assumed the Government has based its proposals:

Review assumption 1: The proposed transition year(s) will be effective in supporting level 2 attainment, preparing students who have previously failed to attain level 2 to move on to level 3.*

The proposal assumes that the majority of learners will move on to level 3 in the form of A levels and T levels, meaning those learners who have not previously attained the required level 2 qualifications will undertake the proposed transition year(s). Stakeholders interviewed for the study expressed significant doubt at the efficacy of this approach. Concern was also expressed for the fact that where some level 2 qualifications were currently already allowing learners to access employment, the transition year is seen as a transition to T levels only, affecting the potential pathways for learners for whom level 2 attainment might otherwise be sufficient.

Review assumption 2: The majority of learners aged 16-19 and beyond are already at, or can be supported to attain, level 2 in order to progress to level 3.

The Government has been clear in its aspirations for all learners to achieve level 3, as has the evidence on which it has based its proposal, namely the Sainsbury Review. Stakeholders interviewed believe this approach to be flawed as it is reliant on the assumption that learners who have not attained level 2 thus far will be able to move on to level 3 after a transition year, or are already functioning with level 2 skills.

Review assumption 3: The data on which the proposal has been based offers the full picture regarding the skills climate in England/the UK.

The proposal assumes that the data used as evidence in the proposal fully and accurately represents the skills climate. Whilst some drivers of the review were echoed by stakeholders, and interviewees were supportive of a review of the technical qualifications system, significant concern was expressed regarding the Government's use of and engagement with data generally, with one interviewee describing government engagement with data as a 'vener', and concern expressed about the basis of the details of the proposal.

Review assumption 4: Level 3 is required for progression into careers, or for meaningful professional development.

Considering the focus on level 3 attainment and the planned elimination of a large number of post-16 level 2 qualifications, the proposal assumes that in order to progress into a career, learners need to achieve level 3. Interviewees disagreed with this, stating that there are a huge majority of industries where the level 2 is a passport [to a job]', including construction, hospitality, catering, transport and childcare. Whilst many people would hope to progress to higher levels throughout their careers, which should of course be encouraged and supported, some of the workforce who enter at Level 2 are happy to remain in an entry level position throughout their careers. The value of the technical skills gained at level 2 were also raised by three interviewees, who felt that the skills learned at level 2 may be missed by transition directly to level 3.

Review assumption 5: T levels or A levels are appropriate for the vast majority of learners.

A further assumption of proposal is, in the withdrawal of funding for the majority of level 2 and 3 qualifications, that A levels and T levels will be suitable for the vast majority of learners. One policymaker highlighted that T Levels would not be suitable for all learners not taking the A level pathway, and that supporting individuals through a wider range of options would be more practical.

* Since this report was written, Government have proposed this transition year becoming two years.

2.2 Risks of the Current Proposal

With consideration of the proposal against the findings of this study and the assumptions listed above, the following key risks have been identified:

Missed opportunities at level 2

Learners may be put off by the focus on further education that exists in level 3, and as a result may miss the opportunity to develop skills at level 2. Level 2 can also be very useful to engage learners who may have disengaged earlier in life due to a poor experience of school or college or because of their personal circumstances.

Increase in NEET rates

Learners who have struggled with level 2 attainment may drop out of full time education as the jump to level 3 is perceived to be too high, risking an increase of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). This could be the same for adults who struggled to achieve whilst in the education system.

Adult learners may not be able to commit to a full time course

Adult learners may struggle to commit to full time education because of other commitments in their lives (i.e. mortgages, children) and may be put off returning for the same reason.

Lack of relevance of proposed policy

Limited or superficial engagement with a full range of data will see the introduction of policy that does not take into account the full skills climate, and as such does not address the real needs on the ground.

Skills deficits at level 2

Sectors for which level 2 is an appropriate entry point may see a drop in qualified entrants, contributing to a greater skills deficit.

Learners discouraged

The focus on A levels and T levels may discourage students for whom level 3 attainment is unlikely, or for whom returning to education serves a specific purpose (professional development, for example).

Loss of specialist pathways

The elimination of low and no enrolment courses, along with the potential withdrawal of funding for other level 2 and 3 qualifications, might see the loss of niche or specialist pathways, contributing to a skills deficit.

If we did not offer them level 2 qualifications, and for a lot of them level 1 as a stepping stone to level 2, they would not be able to access education at all. I do not know what they would do, I do not know where they would go. And it is almost as if they are invisible to the Government.'

- FE Interviewee

2.3 Recommendations and alternative proposals

The following recommendations were offered by the stakeholders interviewed for this study for how the post-16 education system might be improved without incurring some of the risks identified.

Stakeholder recommendations

Improving level 2 and foundation levels

Two policymakers spoke of the importance of improving qualifications at level 2 and below so that they reflect the skills needs and abilities of all individuals likely to take them. This should mean, in part, making sure that all levels have up to date and relevant technical as well as general strands. An FE interviewee spoke of the importance of giving learners a range of high-quality choices so that they could find something appropriate to their skills and career ambitions.

Smaller bite-sized courses / part time learning programmes also have a place

It is important to give learners who might not know what they want to do yet the opportunity to take smaller bite-sized courses. This will enable them to find out what opportunities are available to them in the world of work and what they are good at rather than forcing someone to commit to a longer course that might not be fit-for-purpose. Also we must not forget that a full time course might not be suitable for someone who has other commitments such as a mortgage or childcare and offer those people the opportunity to study more flexibly (i.e. in the evenings or weekends).

Improving progression pathways

It was stated that effective qualifications frameworks were based on detailed data and understanding of how individuals were likely to progress through the system:² 'So, where is it that the jobs [are]; what qualifications did you need to do those jobs? And then look at the other side, where people are and what qualifications they've got and then establish pathways through so that each of those stepping stones is available.'³

Changes to level 3 qualifications

Two interviewees suggested a different approach to teaching level 3 for young people who are not performing well at school or do not enjoy 'traditional' subjects.⁴ In one instance, it was recommended that the qualification be divided in a manner similar to pass degrees and honours degrees, or two versus three A levels, with one form of level 3 qualification offering a broader and less intense curriculum of core studies, enabling more students achieve some form of qualification. In the other instance, it was suggested that level 3 qualifications which focus less on the qualification than the whole experience are more effective. This was based on student testimonies of more vocational and less exam-focused courses: '[They say] if I would have had to go down any sort of traditional education route, where I was focused on examinations, I would not be where I am today.'

Preventing duplication and raising quality

While many interviewees were clearly concerned by the potential consequences of removing too many level 2 qualifications, it was also remarked that it was a good thing if the number of qualifications at each level was reduced for clarity and to ensure high quality, in line with thorough research on progression pathways to prevent exclusion of valued courses or individuals.⁵

Personal and social development

Two interviewees emphasised the value of providing skills related to personal and social development across all levels, for all learners, as a significant focus of any qualifications offering: 'so that's everybody at all levels, able to develop as informed, critical, healthy, skilled, engaged citizens and learners and workers all in one'.⁶

Additional insights

Social mobility: There is a connection between social mobility and level 2 attainment, as research suggests that level 2 attainment enables greater progress and socio-economic mobility.

Lack of value

Employers, higher education institutions and Government are generally thought to see a lack of value in level 2 qualifications and the content of level 2 qualifications is thought to be overlooked in favour of the quantity of qualifications provided and level attained.

Motivation and progression

Interviewees reported that for learners, level 2 offers an opportunity to progress to work or further education, as well as developing

confidence to see what they are capable of achieving. For students studying at level 1 or foundation, the opportunity to progress to level 2 was motivational.

Stepping stone

Interviewees felt that comparing the usefulness of level 2 qualifications was difficult because of the range of vocational and general forms. However, interviewees did think that level 2 qualifications acted as a stepping stone to further education, or as preparation for work.

Wider impacts

Level 2 qualifications are perceived to offer more than the qualification itself, with interviewees mentioning further positive impact including increased confidence, maturity and social skills.

Dividing responsibility

A Further Education professional suggested that each speciality area for qualifications could be the responsibility of a specific awarding body. Awarding bodies would then compete to be the official awarding body of each subject, preventing duplication or confusion, and ensuring that: 'rather than competing with each other, [awarding bodies are] competing for quality.'

Awareness of limitations in policy

One FE interviewee concluded that the UK has a different culture regarding education and skills than countries in Europe, for example, and as such cannot realistically expect all individuals to achieve level 3 across the board with just one policy change. The entire culture of employers, educators and learners would have to change, and whilst this might not be possible it should be acknowledged in policy development.

² Two policymaker interviewees

³ Dr Fiona Aldridge, Learning and Work Institute

⁴ Two FE interviewees

⁵ One policymaker interviewee

⁶ One FE interviewee

3 Introduction

3.1 Study objectives

In May 2018 the Government confirmed its plans to conduct a review of post-16 qualifications at level 3 and below in England. The stated aim of the review is to streamline the availability of qualifications at level 3 and below, ensuring that public funding only subsidises ‘high-quality qualifications that serve a clear and distinct purpose.’

The ultimate outcome of the review is anticipated to be far fewer funded qualifications at this level for post-16 learners, with funding withdrawn for any qualifications that are ‘poor quality and poorly understood.’⁴ This, consequently, should ensure that pathways into and through post-16 education are made clearer for both young people aged 16-19 and others working through the education system.

However, there are concerns over what this means in practice. With the government aim of making A Levels and T Levels the ‘gold standard’, there are concerns about ensuring that post-16 learners still have a range of options to suit their diverse needs and approaches, with fears that this review might become a ‘top-down exercise in Whitehall [which could] lead to learners being cut off from valuable and relevant opportunities in their local communities.’⁵

As such, this study has been designed to consider the potential impact of the government review’s anticipated recommendations by:

- Considering the relevance of level 2 qualifications for further attainment and career progression;
- Assessing the available data on the attainment of level 2 skills and qualifications across the UK, with a primary focus on England; and
- Considering the potential impact that defunding level 2 qualifications may have.

While the government review relates specifically to the qualifications available in England, the preliminary stages of this research included consideration of UK-wide attainment and the comparisons between countries, where possible, as a key focus. As such, the data review considers attainment in the England as well as Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland in order to compare the data available on level 2 attainment across each country, as well as identifying, as far as possible, where there are gaps. The key sectoral areas of focus when looking at attainment are: Literacy and Numeracy; Hospitality & Catering; IT & Digital; and Transport & Logistics.⁹

3.2 Approach

Methodology

This study has used a mixed methods approach composed of a literature review, data review and interviews with both policymakers and Further Education (FE) stakeholders. Findings from each have been triangulated and analysed in order to come to some conclusions regarding five key research questions:

1. What is the Government’s proposal?
2. What evidence is there to support or counter the Government’s proposed changes?
3. How well is the UK doing in terms of level 2 attainment?
4. What is the significance of level 2 attainment?
5. What is the potential impact of defunding level 2 qualifications on learners and social mobility?

Data for each sector was identified from national statistical sources at both UK and regional level. Five years’ of historical data was collected where possible to provide context. Sectors were defined using Ofqual Sector Subject Areas⁶ but it should be noted that UK nations define and categorise their skills data differently, so the resulting datasets for each region may not be fully comprehensive or directly comparable. Details of the full methodology can be found in Appendix A2.

Limitations

- Sectoral skills data was based on vocational and apprenticeship attainment data. This was not available for all regions, however. Attainment data by sector was not available for apprenticeships in Wales, with data on the number of programmes used as a substitute. Similarly, occupancy data had to be used in Northern Ireland. In addition, suitable sectoral vocational data for Scotland could not be identified.
- Dual-level qualifications (i.e. those at Level 1/2 and Level 2/3) have not been included in the figures given.
- Relevant apprenticeship data for Scotland was not available for 2019 at the time the data review was conducted. Figures have been estimated by calculating the average change in the previous years and projecting this forward.
- GCSE data is the primary data source for literacy and numeracy data for all regions apart from Scotland. However, literacy and numeracy statistics sourced from each region were presented in different ways so are not directly comparable.
- No relevant career trajectory data was available in Emsi for the IT and Digital sector.
- Due to the disruption caused by the COVID-19 crisis and the closure of schools and colleges, scheduling interviews with FE stakeholders was challenging. Though, in total, nine of the target 10 FE interviews were carried out, along with five of the target five for policymakers.

⁴ Post 16 level 3 and below qualifications review

⁵ Williamson announces plan to scrap 5,000 qualifications – but will anybody notice?

⁹ Sectoral focus determined by City & Guilds

⁶ Qualification descriptions

4 Level 2 qualifications and attainment

Key findings

1. Social mobility

There is a connection between social mobility and level 2 attainment, as research suggests that level 2 attainment enables greater progress and socio-economic mobility.

2. Lack of value

Employers, higher education institutions and Government are all thought to see a lack of value in level 2 qualifications and the content of level 2 qualifications is often overlooked in favour of the quantity of qualifications provided and level attained.

3. Motivation and progression

Interviewees reported that for learners, level 2 offers an opportunity to progress to work or further education, as well as developing confidence to see what they are capable of achieving. For students studying at level 1 or foundation, the opportunity to progress to level 2 was motivational.

4. Stepping stone

Interviewees felt that comparing the usefulness of level 2 qualifications was difficult because of the range of vocational and general forms. However, interviewees did think that level 2 qualifications acted as a stepping stone to further education, or as preparation for work.

5. Wider impacts

Level 2 qualifications are perceived to offer more than the qualification itself, with interviewees mentioning further positive impact including increased confidence, maturity and social skills.

4.1 Qualifications structure and learners

Structure

The National Qualifications Framework (NQF)⁷ recognises level 2 attainment as an educational standard sitting as part of nine recognised qualification levels (in addition to three antecedent 'entry levels'). Level 1 and below are considered 'low skills', levels 2-3 as 'intermediate skills' and level 4 and above as 'high level skills'.⁸ Level 2 qualifications are GCSEs at grades 9-4 (previously A* to C), an intermediate apprenticeship or equivalent.⁹ It is also a necessary standard of achievement for learners who wish to proceed to further or higher education, marking it as a significant point of entry for learners at both 16-19 and beyond.

In Scotland, however, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) outlines qualifications by level and credit. Levels range from 1-12, where level 12 is a Doctoral Degree. Scottish Nationals 1-3 are equivalent to entry level qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and a Scottish National 5 is equivalent to a level 2 qualification.¹⁰

Learner profile and numbers in England

A 2018 Ofsted study of level 2 curricula found that in 2016/17, there were 179,000 students taking level 2 vocational qualifications in England within the 16 to 19 age range.¹¹ Students taking level 2 vocational qualifications are more likely to be male than female (99,000 versus 75,000). While national data on other characteristics of these students is limited, the Children's Commissioner's Report highlights that this group disproportionately face learning

barriers such as special educational needs and/or disabilities, or being from disadvantaged backgrounds.¹²

Nationally, the achievement rate for level 2 qualifications taken by 18 year olds in England in 2016/17 was 81%,¹³ with the 19% failure rate indicating a broader issue with low attainment. One quarter of those pursuing a level 2 qualification at age 17 were still working towards a qualification of the same level a year later, and 8% had moved down a level, indicating that those studying level 2 qualifications at ages 16-18 are struggling to progress.¹⁴

Level 2 qualifications are also intended for adults returning to education to increase their employability. In July 2018, there were approximately 765,000 funded adults studying at level 2, and 930,000 adults studying below level 2. Reasons for adults wanting to take a qualification include the desire to re-engage with education and study after time away; studying alongside employment to bolster their skillset/workplace characteristics (such as confidence-building or management); or looking for a career change but lacking the required skillset for a change in industries.¹⁵

Just 39% of students pursuing a level 2 qualification at age 17 move on to a level 3 course afterwards. In fact, those individuals who study level 2 from the age of 16 are unlikely to be in any sort of funded education at age 19. The DfE refer to this pattern of repeating study, dropping back and switching courses as 'churn and repeat learning' and estimate that 20% of students entering further education at age 16 are stuck in this pattern of learning.¹⁶

⁷ England, Northern Ireland and Wales

⁸ Ambition 2020 Report

⁹ What qualification levels mean

¹⁰ Understanding the framework levels and credits

¹¹ & ¹³ Level 2 study programmes

¹² Almost one in five children left education at 18 last year without basic qualifications

¹⁴ Earning and Learning report

¹⁵ & ¹⁶ Review of post-16 qualifications at level 3 and below in England

Attainment levels: Literacy and numeracy

England¹⁷

In September 2019, the Children’s Commissioner for England published research which examined the number of children leaving English schools at 18 without reaching level 2.¹⁸ In 2018, this number was 98,799, representing 18% of the total cohort. This was a 28% increase in children leaving school without a level 2 qualification since 2015. The occurrence rate thus rose for the first time in over a decade, after continuously falling between 2005-2015. Many of these young people will have been in compulsory education for 14 years, with more than £100,000 of public money invested into their education, and yet the system has not supported them in achieving the qualifications they may need to find meaningful employment.¹⁹

These figures are despite the extension of the compulsory education age from 16 to 18 years in 2015 and a drop in 18 year olds outside of education, employment or training from 6.6% to 4% since then. The Department for Education believes these changes in attainment levels are the result of 2013/14 reforms introduced after the 2011 Wolf Review, which reduced incentives for schools to offer non-GCSE courses such as GNVQs. Following this research, the Children’s Commissioner formally requested that the Department for Education conduct an independent review into falling level 2 attainment, commit to reducing the number of children failing to achieve a level 2 qualification by the age of 19 within

five years and set out a clear action plan for improving opportunities for those who do not achieve five GCSEs by the age of 16, such as access to apprenticeships and vocational courses.²⁰

According to Department for Education statistics, published in April 2019, 84% of state-funded 19 year old learners were qualified to NQF level 2 in 2018.²¹ 70.7% of these 19 year olds were qualified to level 2 in English and Maths, a fall of 0.7 percentage points compared to 2017. The progression rate between 16 and 19 years old of those who had not achieved a level 2 qualification by 16 but had at 19 rose from 25.9% in 2017 to 27.2% in 2018.²²

In England, the percentage of 16 year olds attaining level 2 English at the age of 16 fell slightly overall between 2014 (71.2%) and 2018 (69.6%). However, this is offset by an overall increase in those who have attained the qualification by the age of 19. The largest increase in attainment between age 16 and age 19 was in 2016, where there was a 10.1 percentage point change in levels; the smallest was in 2014 where there was a 5.6 percentage point increase.

Level 2 English by GCSE or equivalent by age of attainment, state sector (%)

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Age 16	71.2	69.0	69.2	70.7	69.6
Age 19	76.8	77.9	79.3	80.4	79.5

The percentage of 16 years olds attaining a level 2 in maths reached 71.6% in 2016. There has since been a slight decrease, reaching 68.4% in 2018. Again, this is offset by a general increase in those who had attained the qualification by age 19. The largest percentage point change between attainment between the two ages was in 2018 (7.2) and the smallest in 2015 (2).

Level 2 Maths by GCSE or equivalent by age of attainment, state sector (%)

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Age 16	67.0	70.4	71.6	69.5	68.4
Age 19	70.5	72.4	75.6	75.9	75.6

Wales

The percentage of Welsh pupils attaining a level 2 threshold, including English/Welsh²³ and mathematics range from 55.4% in 2014 to a high of 60.3% in 2016.

Pupils attaining level 2 threshold including a GCSE pass in English/Welsh and Mathematics (%)²⁵

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
	55.4	57.9	60.3	55.8	56.6

^{17,21 & 22} Level 2 and 3 attainment in England

^{18,19 & 20} Almost one in five children left education at 18 last year without basic qualifications

^{23 & 24} Welsh as a First Language

²⁵ Examination results: September 2018 to August 2019

Northern Ireland²⁶

The percentage of pupils attaining GCSE English at grade A/7-C/4 rose steadily between 2014 (73%) and 2018 (80.2%). The percentage attaining the same grades in maths was lower; it was generally stable in the region of 66% for most years, increasing slightly to 68.1% in 2018.

GCSE Grade A/7-C/4 Attainment (%)

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
English	73	75.8	77.8	79.6	80.2
Maths	66.2	66.6	64.9	66.4	68.1

Scotland

In Scotland, SCQF5 Literacy unit attainment rose from 14,639 in 2015 to 23,028 by 2017. Numbers then fell by 40% to 13,496 in 2018 and recovered slightly to 14,401 in 2019. Numeracy attainment numbers followed a similar broad pattern, increasing from 21,830 in 2015 to 30,871 in 2017 before falling by 37% to 19,513 in 2018 and recovering to 23,032 in 2019.³¹

SCQF5 Unit Attainment³²

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Literacy	14,639	20,840	23,028	13,496	14,401
Numeracy	21,830	26,131	30,871	19,513	23,022

²⁶ Insites report

³¹ The Scottish Qualifications Authority does not offer an explanation for the 2018 drops

³² Statistics 2020

2018 GCSE / Level 2 statistics - England

18%

in 2018 almost a fifth of 16 year olds left education with no GCSE level 2 qualifications

30%

In 2018 30% of 16 year olds left school without gaining a level 2 in GCSE English

32%

In 2018 32% of 16 years olds in England did not attain level 2 GCSE Maths

765k

In 2018 there were approximately 765,000 funded adults studying at level 2

930k

In 2018 there were 930k funded adults studying below level 2

4.2 Perceived value of level 2 qualifications

Perceived value

Interviewees noted that assessing the usefulness of level 2 qualifications was complex because these qualifications come in diverse vocational and general forms, some of which are more useful than others.³³ However, all interviewees deemed these qualifications to be useful to a significant degree and the following comments were made in supporting that stance:

As a stepping stone

Level 2 qualifications are for many an essential educational stepping stone or springboard to further education such as level 3 and degree level courses.³⁴ They make these higher levels of education possible for school leavers who might otherwise have a low knowledge base and/or need to hone their skills or career plans: 'If you take them out, where's the step gone, where's the rung on the ladder gone? And people can't make the jump from rung to the next rung.'

'If we did not offer them level 2 qualifications, and for a lot of them level 1 as a stepping stone to level 2, they would not be able to access education at all. I do not know what they would do, I do not know where they would go. And it is almost as if they are invisible to the Government.'

- FE Interviewee

As important preparation for the labour market

Some level 2 qualifications prepare candidates for the labour market immediately after graduation, including in sectors like construction, hospitality, catering, transport and childcare: 'I think there's a huge majority of industries where the level 2 is a passport [to participation]. They give learners the skills and confidence they need to explore career options, find a career path that suits them and access a job or apprenticeship at entry level.³⁵ Three interviewees noted that level 2 teaches seemingly 'basic' technical skills which are needed for some professions more than higher qualifications:³⁶ 'Just because you've done a degree doesn't make you any good with a pair of scissors as a hairdresser. You have to start with the basics.' These skills cannot be learned by moving straight up to level 3.

'Bricklaying is a really good example. You don't need level 3 to get a job in bricklaying, you need level 2. Nationally numbers for level 3 are really low. Most students get a job with level 2 on a construction site.'

- FE Interviewee

As more than just a qualification

Level 2 courses can be essential for far more holistic reasons than a qualification or certificate could suggest, building confidence, maturity and social skills in the process: 'I think the qualification is only ever part of a wider programme and the thing that makes the biggest difference to young people, quite often, is the wider programme, the tutorial support, the enrichment... [These learners] find a skill, and that improves them as human beings, as young people, and gets them ready for the future.'²⁷ These courses can also provide a fresh start, giving learners who did poorly in their GCSEs the chance to try again, but they can allow them to move on and to start again from scratch on a skill or subject that interests them and suits their talents more.²⁸

'My experience of working with learners, and adult learners in particular, is that perhaps they've been through the school system and come out with nothing. Actually, a very low-level qualification can mean the world when they've had nothing before. Having something to their name gives them purchasing power both in terms of skills but also in terms of confidence and their ability to have agency and take control of their lives and to feel like they have achieved and they are successful. We mustn't diminish that.'

- FE Interviewee

There were mixed views from interviewees on whether there should continue to be so much significance placed on getting all young people to qualify at level 2 through taking GCSEs by the end of lower secondary school. On one hand, this acts as a useful benchmark to determine if individuals have the necessary essential skills for the workplace or for progression to level 3. On the other hand, these qualifications do not always correctly indicate if students have the applied skills, and can be flawed in terms of what they assess.²⁹ In addition, while achieving level 2 at some stage and in some way is preferable, this one size fits all approach may actually benefit schools aiming to meet key performance indicators more than individuals trying to learn skills.³⁰

Level two qualifications in more specialist subjects like those in the digital industry were considered not to be relevant enough to the employment landscape and lacked sufficient expertise among teachers. Therefore, they were deemed by one FE interviewee to be of less value. Another interviewee, while noting that level 2 was a useful resource in accessing education and/or employment for many learners, was concerned that too much of an emphasis has been placed on levels in the UK.³¹ Rather than also using level 2 qualifications as a stepping stone, this participant suggested that more qualifications in highly skilled industries could be three year courses.

³³ Two policymaker interviewees

³⁴ Three policymaker interviewees and five FE interviewees

³⁵ Two policymaker interviewees and five FE interviewees

³⁶ One policymaker interviewee and two FE interviewees

²⁷ & ²⁸ Three FE interviewees

²⁹ & ³⁰ One policymaker interviewee

³¹ One FE interviewee

Learner and employer perspectives

Learners

It was pointed out, however, that learners often do not know what is the best qualification for them;³² they want to work towards a qualification that will get them into steady work and earning, but they rely on their institutions to inform them of what these are.

In relation to pre-16 level 2 GCSEs, one interviewee commented that learners' impressions generally appeared to be negative because in subjects like maths there is perceived to be no real world application.

Employers

The Social Mobility Commission notes that GCSEs, as the most widely recognised qualification at level 2, have been adopted by employers as a clear criterion for recruitment and a standard measure for interpreting whether a candidate has the basic skills for entry level roles. Employers often fail to look deeper to consider which GCSEs are actually needed for the role in question.³³ A 2018 Ofsted report stated that 'it has become common practice to view the examination syllabus as the curriculum', which means it is the quantity and level of qualifications alone that is the focus of many employers, rather than the content of the courses and the skills they impart.³⁴

This was picked up on by one policymaker who stated that the qualifications with the highest brand awareness among employers when looking for job entrants are GCSEs, A levels and degrees. An FE interviewee suggested that level 2 qualifications that were not BTECs, City & Guilds or GCSEs have little to no brand awareness among employers, while another noted that in some sectors like digital, which need specialised skills, a level 2 qualification is simply not sufficient to enter the workplace in most roles. Others suggested that in many sectors employers would have a preference for entrants at level 3.⁵⁰

Nonetheless, in the service sector and in trades, individuals with level 2 qualifications are often highly valued and can make up the bulk of the workforce:³⁵ 'If the Government decided to abolish them for young people, or worse still abolish them for everyone including adults, I think there'd be a lot of very, very grumpy employers.'³⁶



³² One FE interviewee

³³ State of the Nation 2018-19

³⁴ Level 2 study programmes

³⁵ Two policymaker interviewees, one FE interviewee

³⁶ Professor Ewart Keep, SKOPE

4.3 Employment

Employment

In 2016, young people leaving full-time education with a level 2 qualification had an employment rate of 70%. This employment rate is almost 20 percentage points lower than those of their peers who leave full-time education with a level 3 qualification or attain higher education qualifications.³⁷ These employment figures contribute to a skills climate in which individuals who do not attain level 2 qualifications at school are often expected to re-sit these qualifications.³⁸ Despite this expectation, an Ofsted report has expressed concern that these students, 'have often been less visible than others in the post-16 system... and have been overshadowed by the larger and better understood majority who progress directly onto level 3 study after completing GCSEs'.³⁹

After completing a level 2 apprenticeship there is sometimes an option to move into full time employment with the company that offered the apprenticeship or with another relevant organisation. There is also the option to progress to a more advanced apprenticeship.⁴⁰

Research from 2014 highlights that achieving a full level 2 qualification increases lifetime earnings in employment by an average of 10% for 19-24 year olds and 8% for over 25 year olds relative to those individuals who started but did not complete a qualification at the same level.⁴¹ Similarly, achieving a full level 3 qualification increases lifetime earnings in employment by an average of 10% for all individuals aged 19 and above who started but did not complete a qualification at that level.

"If you were brought up in a middle-class home with middle-class parents you tend to get support at home in terms of reading, maths, etc., that enables you to do well at school. You tend to get engaged parents, you tend to get support to go on trips and visits to things that really enrich your life. If you don't come from that type of household, the evidence shows that you're less likely to get a good set of GCSEs. So what that means is, you are then more likely to need a level 2 qualification in order to achieve your dreams."

- FE Interviewee



³⁷ Earning & Learning Report

³⁸ Almost one in five children left education at 18 last year without basic qualifications

³⁹ Level 2 study programmes

⁴⁰ Apprenticeship Levels

⁴¹ Review of post-16 qualifications at level 3 and below

Social mobility and inclusion

There is a very deep connection between social mobility and level 2 attainment, according to most interviewees.⁵⁸ There is a significant quantity of research from bodies such as the Youth Commission that highlight the way level 2 attainment enables progress and mobility from a socio-economic perspective. Difficulties with attainment of level 2 at lower secondary stage when sitting GCSEs are exacerbated among the most disadvantaged, such as those with free school meals,⁴³ while private schools are able to teach and offer exams in ways which lend to higher scores.⁴⁴ One FE interviewee spoke of students from deprived backgrounds who joined their college at level 1 or 2 and stayed until ready to go through higher education.

The connection between social mobility and attainment of Level 2 can manifest in different ways:

Generational context

One policymaker thought that the divide between those with and without level 2 qualifications was growing from generation to generation. While older adults were able to get into the workplace with fewer qualifications and further training, the current generation of young people are not having the same experience: 'If you don't come out, particularly with a level 2 in English and maths, it's a massive barrier to further opportunities. So, it's really important as a determinant of where you go next.'⁴⁵

Regional context

One FE interviewee stated that there are fewer jobs in some regions, for example the North East. In those regions, gaining a level 2 qualification and starting a reliable job with decent prospects and salary is a goal and necessity for many.

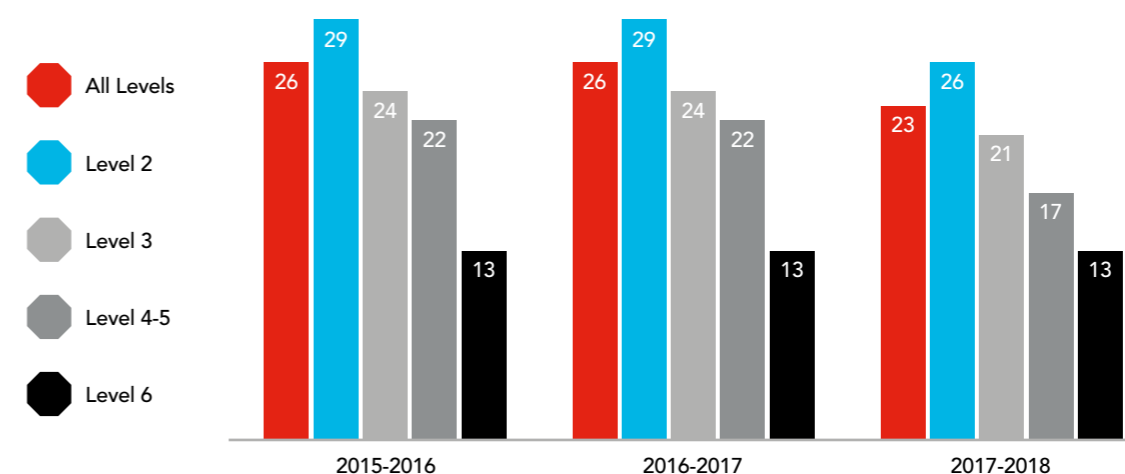
One interviewee believed that attainment of level 2 was a question of social inclusion, rather than mobility, since the latter involves moving into a higher socioeconomic grouping than one's parents, whereas social inclusion is a less specific goal.⁴⁶ This interviewee believed that level 2 attainment is essential to social inclusion because it remains the primary avenue into the labour force. For many, according to this participant, this is far more attainable than an extensive T level workload that is far harder than material covered at level 2 or in planned transition years.

Another interviewee remarked that it was access to education in general that was connected to social mobility. They believed problems with accessing education for disadvantaged young people could not be pinpointed on level 2 alone, and that level 1 and below were just as important for those who needed more time and support in their education because of their socioeconomic circumstances.

Apprenticeships held by disadvantaged students⁴⁷

Level 2 apprenticeships have the highest proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (29% of students in 2015-2016 and 2016-2017; and 26 % of students in 2017-2018). This is three percentage points higher than the overall proportion of disadvantaged apprentices in each year. The proportion of disadvantaged students falls for each consecutive apprenticeship level reaching only 13% of those undertaking Level 6 apprenticeships.⁴⁹

Proportion of each apprenticeship level held by a disadvantaged student (%)



The State of the Nation 2019 report notes that the number of level 2 and 3 apprenticeships, which are more likely to be taken up by those from disadvantaged backgrounds, decreased by 16% and 38% respectively in 2017/18. Contrastingly, higher level apprenticeships, which are typically undertaken by those with a more affluent background, grew by 32%. There is also concern that a reduction in level 2 apprenticeship offers, combined with a focus on T Levels (which will be level 3) will mean that options for those that don't hold a level 2 qualification by the age of 16 will shrink significantly.⁴⁸

In terms of specific apprenticeships, Level 2 Information and Communication Technologies is one of the top five apprenticeships for progression to high earning for disadvantaged students.

'Level 2 and 3 apprenticeships offer a 'foot on the ladder' for young people who have not done well in traditional school settings and, if they begin to disappear in favour of the newer higher level apprenticeships, it will hinder social mobility opportunities.'

- State of the Nation 2018-19: Social Mobility in Great Britain

⁵⁸ Four policymaker interviewees and eight FE interviewees

⁴² One FE interviewee

⁴³ Two policymaker interviewees, one FE interviewee

⁴⁴ One policymaker interviewee

⁴⁵ Dr Fiona Aldridge, Learning and Work Institute

⁴⁶ One policymaker interviewee

^{47 & 48} State of the Nation 2018-19

⁴⁹ Post-16 education: outcomes for disadvantaged students

4.4 Attainment rates by sector

Hospitality and catering

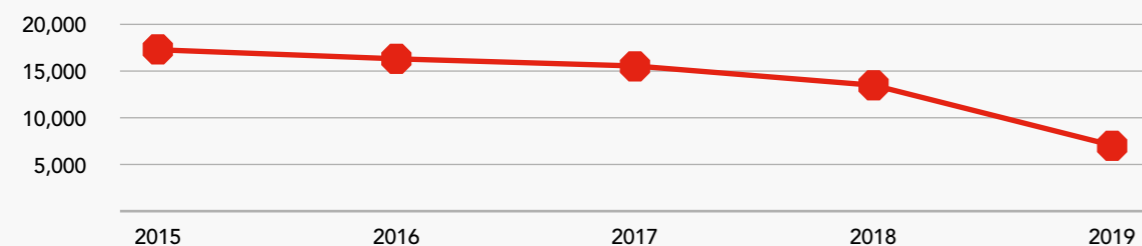
Hospitality and catering is one of London’s largest industries and 21% of the UK’s chefs work in London as of 2019 (55,000 chefs and cooks).⁵⁵ The number of chefs working in the city tripled between 2009-2019.⁵⁶ However, the industry is struggling to maintain talent as approximately 20,000 chefs leave the profession annually in the UK.⁵⁷ This is more than the numbers choosing to enter the profession, and a shortage may become more apparent following the UK’s exit from the European Union, as 85% of London’s chefs were born abroad.⁵⁸

While hospitality and catering is a highly in-demand field, research suggests that those who take Hospitality and Catering as a subject at age 14 tend to have the lowest prior attainment test scores.⁵⁹ In the decade between 2009-2019 the number of students taking Food Preparation and Nutrition at GCSE fell by 50% and now sits at a total of fewer than 50,000.⁶⁰

Overall apprenticeships⁶¹

The attainment numbers for level 2 apprenticeships in Hospitality and Catering have declined over the last five years, from 17,187 in 2015 to 13,363 in 2019. The sharpest fall was between 2018 (13,363) and 2019 (7,242) with a relative decrease of 46% between the two years.

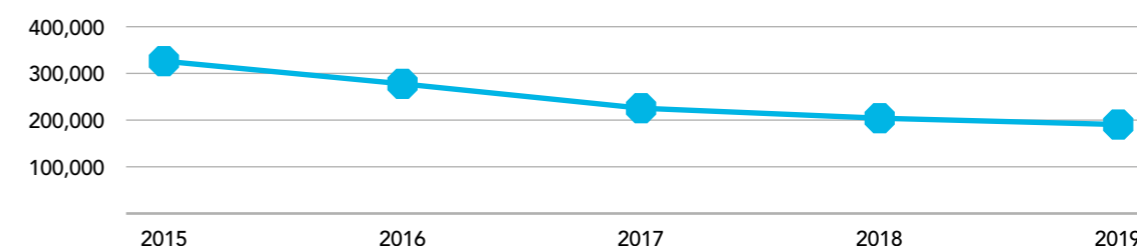
Hospitality and catering level 2 apprenticeships: UK



Overall vocational qualifications⁶²

The overall attainment numbers for Level 2 vocational qualifications in Hospitality and Catering have declined over the last five years, from 317,901 in 2015 to 192,575 in 2019. This is an absolute decline of 125,326 and a relative decline of 39% across the period.

Hospitality and catering level 2 vocational qualifications: England, Wales and Northern Ireland



⁵⁵ London’s booming food scene could turn sour without action on education and working conditions

^{56, 57 & 58} Kitchen Talent: Training and retaining the chefs of the future

⁵⁹ Social class, gender and ethnic differences in subjects taken at age 14

⁶⁰ How we can get the talent pipeline flowing properly

⁶¹ Apprenticeships and traineeships data

⁶² Ofqual, Qualifications Wales and Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment; plus calculations.

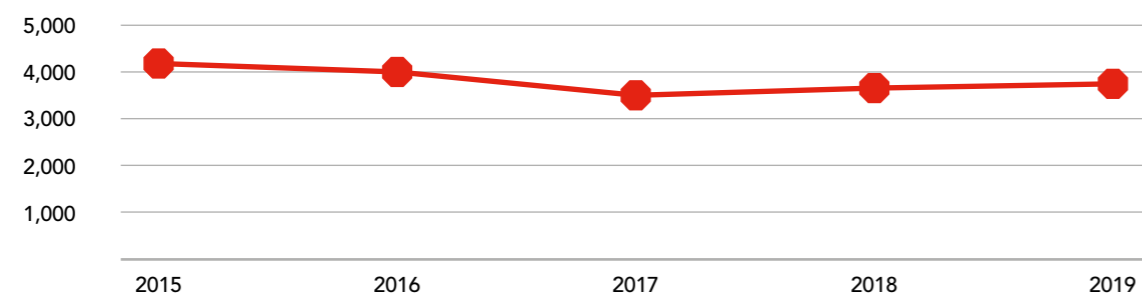
IT and digital

According to the most recent National Achievement Rate Table, in the year 2017/18, 71.6% of a cohort of 11,270 all age Information and Communication Technology candidates achieved their chosen qualification.^{63,64} The Government's statistical dataset for Education and Training breaks down ICT candidates into ICT for users and ICT practitioners candidates. It identified 16,615 candidates as achieving a level 2 ICT for users qualification and 2,473 as achieving a level 2 ICT practitioners qualification in 2017/18. By 2018/2019 these numbers were 13,403 for ICT for users and 2,748 for ICT practitioners.⁶⁵ 2019 entries for GCSE computing were up 7.2% on the previous year, with a 14% increase in female entries. Female entries were thus making up 21.4% of the total entry for that year.⁶⁶

Overall apprenticeships⁶⁷

The overall attainment level of level 2 IT and digital apprenticeships fell from 4,103 in 2015 to 3,475 in 2017. It then recovered to 3,718 by 2019. The relative decline across the full five year period was 9%.

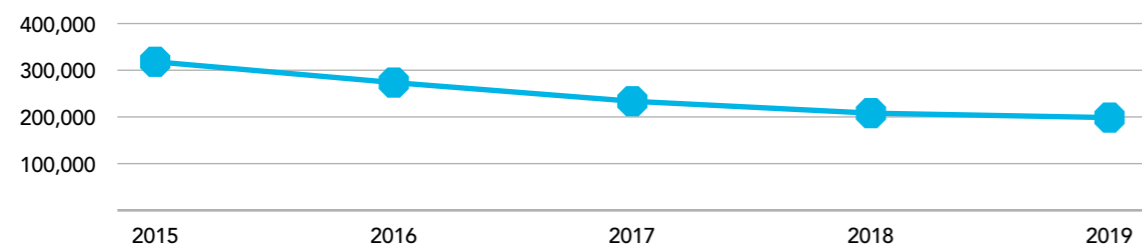
IT and Digital Level 2 Apprenticeships: UK



Overall vocational qualifications⁶⁸

The overall attainment numbers for level 2 vocational qualifications in IT and Digital have roughly halved over the last five years, from 142,177 in 2015 to 69,691 in 2019. This is an absolute decline of 72,486 and a relative decline of 51% across the period.

IT and Digital level 2 vocational qualifications: England, Wales and Northern Ireland



⁶³ & ⁶⁴ National Achievement Rate Tables March 2019

⁶⁵ Education and Training aim Achievement

⁶⁶ GCSE results: Increase in number of females taking computing

⁶⁷ Apprenticeships and traineeships data

⁶⁸ Ofqual, Qualifications Wales and Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment; plus calculations

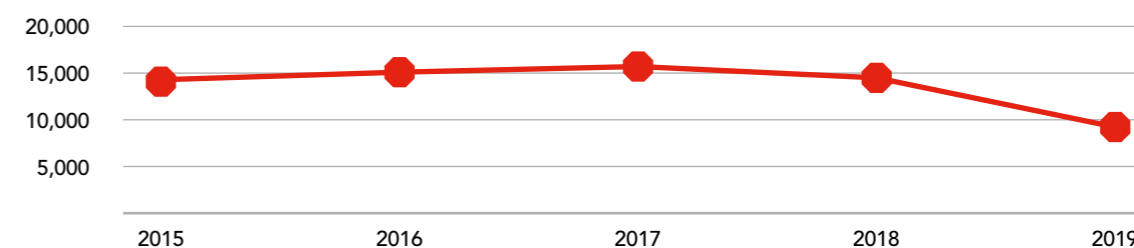
Transport and logistics

In the year 2018-19, 995 awards, 5,917 certificates and 2,606 diplomas were awarded at level 2, as well as 483 other non-regulated level 2 qualifications in transportation, operations and maintenance. The year prior, these numbers stood at 1,612 for awards, 5,239 for certificates, 1,888 for diplomas and 494 for other non-regulated awards, as well as 3 other regulated awards and 535 QCF units being achieved. This is a slight increase overall.⁶⁹

Overall apprenticeships⁷⁰

The attainment numbers for level 2 apprenticeships in transport and logistics have declined over the last five years, from 13,985 in 2015 to 9,007 in 2019. The sharpest fall was between 2018 (14,508) and 2019 (9,007) with a relative decrease of 38% between the two years.

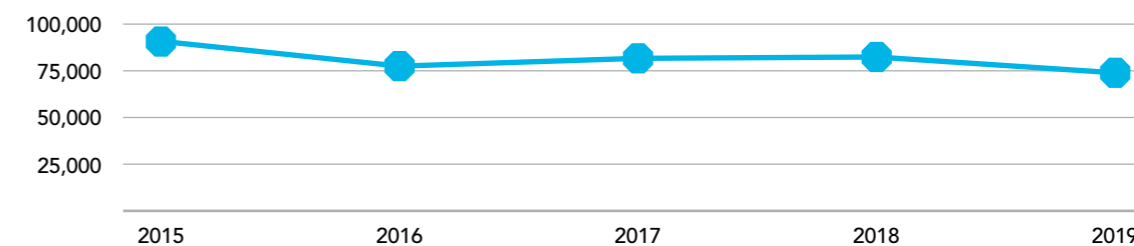
Transport and Logistics Level 2 Apprenticeships: UK



Overall vocational qualifications⁷¹

The overall attainment numbers for level 2 vocational qualifications in transport and logistics have declined by 16,726 over the last five years, from 89,154 in 2015 to 72,428 in 2019. This is a relative decline of 19% across the period.

Transport and logistics level 2 vocational qualifications: England, Wales and Northern Ireland



⁶⁹ Education and Training aim Achievement

⁷⁰ Apprenticeships and traineeships data

⁷¹ Ofqual, Qualifications Wales and Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment; plus calculations

5 The Government's review

Key findings

Validity of drivers

Both FE and policymaker interviewees echoed the importance of some of the Government's stated drivers of the review, suggesting their validity, including: skills gaps and social mobility; quality and consistency; and developing a climate for the success of T levels. However, interviewees also stated some concerns, citing false assumptions about the existing skills climate and a lack of government familiarity with level 2; flaws in evidence on which the proposal is based; a lack of consultation; and an over reliance on T levels.

Government use of data

Interviewees felt that the proposal was insufficiently backed by data, with the Government in 'huge denial' of the realities exposed by the data it does not use and it's engagement with data perceived to be superficial.

Evidence

Whilst some interviewees reported that the Government had proposed the changes to the system based on key supporting evidence including the qualifications available and the number of enrolments, all interviewees expressed a desire to see further evidence in at least one area of the review, with listed areas including: the evaluation of T levels; the purpose of qualifications; investigation into low attainment of level 2; and industry need.

Unconsidered factors

Stakeholders reported their understanding that several key factors had not been considered in developing the proposals, including that some roles do not require anything higher than level 2; the current high failure rate at level 2 (namely GCSEs); and unpopularity vs. specialisation in the assessment of qualification relevance.

Lack of consultation

Stakeholders reported the perception that the Government had failed to appropriately consult stakeholders in the process of developing the proposal in the past, meaning it lacked relevance in the 'real world setting'. The call for evidence expected in early 2021 will therefore be critical in contributing to Government thinking going forward.

5.1 Overview

In May 2018, the Government confirmed its plans to review post-16 qualifications at level 3 and below. The stated aim of the review is to streamline the qualifications available at this level,⁷² ensuring that public funds are only used to subsidise 'high quality qualifications that serve a clear and distinct purpose.' The overall objective is to offer a technical qualification system at level 3 and below on which stakeholders can rely and in which they can have confidence,⁷³ with the anticipated result being fewer funded qualifications at level 3 and below.⁷⁴

Principles for technical qualifications

The review has been underpinned by the Department for Education (DfE)'s key principles of quality, purpose, necessity and progression and contains proposals for ensuring early progress is secured and the system is properly regulated. The proposed principles for the technical qualifications system put forward for feedback in the consultation are:

- To ensure qualifications deliver well on their intended purpose;
 - To promote T and A levels as the qualifications of choice for 16-19 year olds, withdrawing funding for any qualifications that overlap with them; and
 - To ensure that post-16 qualifications below level 3 have a strong focus on progression to higher levels of study (in line with the Government ambition to see more people achieve level 3). For students for whom entering employment with level 3 or below is a good outcome, ensuring that study below level 3 imparts skills that grant access to a range of careers, with support mechanisms to re-engage, re-train and reeducate those who may want to return to further education at a later stage.⁷⁵
- To work towards giving students clearer choices, as well as ensuring that the qualifications meet an educational or skills need, and to build these needs into qualification design;
 - To offer clear progression routes to higher levels of study, technical excellence or high quality employment;
 - To ensure qualifications are good quality, with quality recognised as the content, design and size of the qualification aligning with and supporting its purpose;

⁷² Entry level, level 1, level 2 and level 3, excluding GCSEs, AS and A Levels, and qualifications that have recently been subject to or are in the process of reform or development.

⁷³ Post 16 level 3 and below qualifications review - Impact Assessments.pdf

⁷⁴ Post 16 level 3 and below qualifications review - Consultation Document.pdf

⁷⁵ Post 16 level 3 and below qualifications review - Consultation Document.pdf

5.1.1 Review and consultation structure

A consultation - the first of two that have been planned for this review - was held on the between March and June 2019, marking the first stage of the review.

The consultation allowed for stakeholders to offer their views on the principles that will guide the review, and provided evidence showing that strengthening the quality and comparability of the relevant qualifications for 16-19 year olds and adult learners would be of benefit.⁷⁶

This first stage invited opinions, thoughts and views on the general processes, guiding principles and broader considerations. Views were also sought on how removal of approved funding for qualifications that are already covered in newer T levels and Applied General Qualifications (AGQs) might affect the system and its users.⁷⁷ As part of the ongoing process, the decision was made in February 2020 to remove the approval for funding for approximately 5000 post-16 qualifications (more than 40% of the total) from August 2021 onwards, based on evidence laid out from former reviews, research papers and consultations.⁷⁸ The ESFA will continue to review qualifications on an annual basis going forward and will remove any with low take up.

The second stage will lay out proposals in more detail and present the criteria for determining which qualifications will be considered for funding. Additional opinions will be sought regarding the processes and timescales that will be implemented to effect these changes.⁷⁹

Response to first stage: Low and no enrolments

The Government published a response to the question of qualifications have low or no enrolment in February 2020. The key takeaways were as follows:⁸⁰

- 78% of 415 respondents agreed with the proposed government criteria for identifying qualifications with no enrolments. Those who answered no generally opposed the streamlining of qualifications or the proposed timeline of two years.
- A small majority of 406 respondents (52%) felt there were no specific reasons that a qualification with no enrolments should remain approved for funding. Those who answered yes and gave a reason suggested that such qualifications may be related to niche skills or industries and there may be future change in demand for certain roles or skills.
- 57% of 448 respondents did not agree that the Government should consider removing approval for funding from qualifications with low enrolments. Reasons given included retaining funding for qualifications related to niche skills and industries.
- 84% of 424 respondents felt there were specific reasons that a qualification with low enrolments should remain approved for funding, with a variety of reasons given.

5.1.2 Drivers of the review

The impact assessment that accompanied the consultation documents laid out some of the key reasons, based on the data sources referred to by the DfE, that the review has been deemed necessary. The technical education system has some 12,100 different qualifications approved for public funding for students aged 16 to 19 years. These include a wide range of qualification types with diverse purposes, and significant variety in qualification size (number of guided learning hours) and design features (e.g. forms of assessment, marking and moderation). There are also multiple qualifications of different types addressing similar occupational skill areas, with only light-touch regulation in place for the large majority.⁸¹ These components of technical education in England have resulted in a system that, as presented by the DfE:

- Is difficult to understand, with both students and employers unclear on skill levels and intended outcomes delivered by different qualifications, often of varying sizes, within the same level.
- Allows too many students to enrol on numerous qualifications at similar levels.
- Fails to support the growth in skills - particularly intermediate (level 3) and higher-level skills - that individuals and the wider economy need.⁸²

As such, the Government's case for change set out the basis on which the review has been deemed necessary.⁸³ The key drivers presented were skills gaps and social mobility; inconsistencies in qualification offerings; previous failed system improvements; ensuring the success of T Levels; and facilitating wider reform.⁸⁴ Some of these elements were echoed by both the policymaker and FE stakeholder interviews:

^{76, 77 & 79} Post 16 level 3 and below qualifications review - Impact Assessments.pdf

⁷⁸ Education ministers pull plug on 5,000 post-GCSE qualifications

⁸⁰ Qualifications and public funding

⁸¹ Excluding a small proportion (12%) is subject to tighter quality controls through the 16-18 performance table requirements

⁸² Post 16 level 3 and below qualifications review - Impact Assessments.pdf

^{83 & 84} Post 16 level 3 and below qualifications review - Case for Change.pdf

Skills gaps and social mobility

The government position is that offering high quality qualifications is essential to address significant skills gaps, as well as considering ways to aid social mobility. Policymakers interviewed echoed this, reporting that the aim of the review was to create opportunities for higher quality level 3 qualifications⁸⁵ in order to address the reported absence of sufficiently high-quality qualifications at level 3, despite the economic and personal benefits of these qualifications.⁸⁵

Quality and consistency

According to some interviewees, the government view driving the review and shared elsewhere was that there was a very high volume of qualifications, in particular at level 2 or below, that were not highly valuable in terms of returns of qualified and labour market ready graduates.⁸⁶ Assessing these qualifications and removing some would clarify the most useful and relevant qualification paths for both learners and employers and was one driver of the review: 'I think one of the very real challenges is that with so many qualifications available it's really hard for both individuals and for employers to know which is the qualification that will make a difference and when you see a qualification on a CV, what is that person able to do?'⁸⁷

'I am a big fan of substantial, relevant, and high quality qualifications. I think that in the past there has been a tendency for organisations to do small qualifications that didn't really have any value, that were put in place to help colleges or schools or providers to improve achievement rates, rather than to equip young people with the skills that they need for the future. So I think there was a need to have a look at the qualifications and make sure that the qualifications we have are fit-for-purpose.'

- FE Interviewee

Five interviewees suggested that if the reduction of qualifications at level 2 was carried out effectively and with proper stakeholder consultation and adherence to skills frameworks it could be a good thing.⁸⁸ Two specific reasons were given by stakeholders: firstly, because it was seen important to increase the number of those at level 3 or above entering highly skilled sectors like digital.⁸⁹ Secondly, because there was seen to be a surplus of lower quality qualifications.⁹⁰

Success of T Levels

A significant driver for the Government is the success of the new T levels, for which a coherent and streamlined system is essential. Interviewees noted how T levels were being held up as the gold standard of the new approach to balancing general and technical skills at level 3, and that in implementing this new qualification the Government would assess the appropriateness of the existing alternatives.⁹¹ Two of the FE experts believed that the Government was trying to show that A levels weren't the only valid path to sustainable employment at level 3, and that the T level was the technical and vocational equivalent.

Facilitating wider reform

Interviewees mentioned other problems with the current system and the need to find a broader solution for the post-16 education sector. One policymaker interviewee felt that the current delivery of level 2 qualifications was flawed, particularly around numeracy:⁹² 'I do know that for colleges, their number one problem around numeracy maths is attendance. A lot of kids just won't turn up, and then quite a few of them won't turn up for the exam, but some of them would turn up but they haven't been to any lessons and stuff. It's just quite a mess at the moment.'

Another interviewee emphasised that there was a need to find solutions to further education that would suit both young and adult learners, and a process that is holistic for learners: 'I think there are massive implications if there was a reduction in level two and below qualifications, if there are not enough opportunities for people to progress through. But if we are going to say that that's a key purpose for pre level three qualifications then they very clearly need to be associated with supporting progression rather than just being an end in themselves.'⁹³

Other perceptions

Some interviewees remained neutral at this stage on whether the Government's proposal captured the realities of the current post-16 education climate.⁹⁴ In addition to the stated aims of the Government, two FE interviewees reported that they thought that further drivers for change included the motivation to eliminate some choices because doing so might reduce registration and examination costs,⁹⁵ and the intention to further raise the bar on attainment by removing lower level qualifications below level 3 in order to focus on getting all individuals to level 4.⁹⁶

⁸⁵ One policymaker interviewee

⁸⁶ Four policymaker interviewees, three FE interviewees

⁸⁷ Dr Fiona Aldridge, Learning and Work Institute

⁸⁸ Four FE interviewees, one policymaker interviewee

⁸⁹ One FE interviewee

⁹⁰ Two FE interviewees

⁹¹ One policymaker interviewee, three FE interviewees

⁹² One policymaker interviewee

⁹³ Dr Fiona Aldridge, Learning and Work Institute

⁹⁴ Two policymaker interviewees, one FE interviewee

⁹⁵ One FE interviewee

⁹⁶ One FE interviewee

5.1.3 Concerns related to drivers of the review

Whilst some interviewees echoed the justifications given for the review by the DfE, as above, several also remained unconvinced about the validity of these drivers.⁹⁷ Some of these concerns included the following:

False assumptions about existing skills climate

Three interviewees believed that the Government may have had good intentions with its review, but that it was built on the false assumption that learners starting level 3 qualifications are already, or will be, competent at level 2.⁹⁸ It was also suggested that the Government should be conducting necessary whole system overhaul and starting more from scratch,⁹⁹ even though it has only recently made significant changes, because more change is needed, particularly at pre-16 level.¹⁰⁰

Flaws in the Sainsbury Review

It was also argued that the Sainsbury Review was flawed, and thus not a good basis for further reform.¹⁰¹ The two column level 3 qualifications structure of technical or general education (now T levels or A levels) was considered to be 'naïve' by one policymaker, who went on to suggest that the Sainsbury Review had begun paving the way for the removal of level 2 qualifications. Although, now there does seem to be a recognition within Government that there is a place for some Level 2 qualifications, whether there is a thorough understanding of which ones hold value is another question.

Over reliance on T Levels

The stripped back, dual focus on A levels and T levels could see the elimination of other valuable qualifications, such as the AGOs.¹⁰² 'I think [it] is showing there's significant lack of understanding of the sector and of learners and of the volume of learners that are currently on those types of qualification. I don't think colleges will be able to replicate that provision through T Levels.'¹⁰³

'I think there's a desire from Government to simplify the system, but you can't simplify something that is inherently complex. Education is complex as a sector because it has to be. We're trying to individualise a learner journey for millions of students, that's complex by it's very nature.'

- FE Interviewee

Lack of consultation with stakeholders

There was concern that the Government had not sufficiently consulted with stakeholders:¹¹⁷ 'They've made certain assumptions and then have gone ahead and acted on them.' As a result it was felt that the proposal lacked relevance in a real world setting. Three FE interviewees stated that from their experience employers are aware of the qualifications that are relevant to their subject area and subsequently know the people that they are trying to recruit without the need to replace these qualifications with T levels. One FE interviewee went on to say that colleges will not run level 2 courses if they do not need to and are working to support the complex individual needs of students.

Inappropriate assessment methods

One FE interviewee suggested that the Government should be moving away from examination culture when dealing with a scale-based qualifications system. They contended that technical and professional qualifications need to assess knowledge in a different way and it is this that should be a government priority.

Lack of government familiarity with level 2

One interviewee pointed out that there is a growing understanding in Government that level 2 qualifications can be valid and useful. However, this is hampered somewhat by a belief among interviewees that those in Government have not come into contact with such qualifications a great deal.¹¹⁸ One interviewee described post-16 qualifications as being perceived in Government as for 'other people's children' while another stated: 'It's fair to say that a lot of people in Government haven't actually experienced these qualifications or been through them so they are perhaps less aware of their value and their role in the market.'

⁹⁷ Two policymaker interviewees, four FE interviewees

⁹⁸ One policymaker interviewee, two FE interviewees

⁹⁹ One policymaker interviewee, one FE interviewee

¹⁰⁰ One policymaker interviewee

¹⁰¹ One policymaker interviewee and one FE interviewee

¹⁰² One policymaker interviewee and one FE interviewee

¹⁰³ One FE interviewee

¹¹⁷ Two FE interviewees

¹¹⁸ Three policymaker interviewees

5.2 Evidence

The Government's review builds on findings from a variety of previous publications such as the Wolf Review in 2011, the Sainsbury Review in 2016 and the post-16 Skills Plan in 2016.¹¹⁹ The fact that these pieces of research form the basis of this review was echoed by the policymakers interviewed for this study, of whom one mentioned the Wolf Review, and three the Sainsbury Review. Other sources of data were used as evidence to support the findings in the consultation. The majority of these are additional government papers, consultations and reviews, with the key sources as follows:

Ad-hoc statistical release

This was a supporting document to the consultation and provides an overall view of 16-18 year olds and the qualifications studied. Trends in enrolments for qualifications at level 3 and below are also analysed in this release to support proposals for system reform.¹²⁰

Post-16 skills plan

This document was released in 2016 and uses findings from the Sainsbury Review to put forward plans for reforming the education system particularly for post-16 learners so young people and adults feel supported to access sustained employment, as well as to meet the needs of the economy.¹²¹

T Level consultation

The T Level consultation response was also a trigger point for the Government to make plans to review post-16 qualifications approved for teaching at level 3 and below.¹²²

¹¹⁹ Post 16 level 3 and below qualifications review - Case for Change.pdf

¹²⁰ Students_and_qualifications_at_level_3_and_below_in_England.pdf

¹²¹ Post-16 Skills Plan

¹²² Post 16 level 3 and below qualifications review - Consultation Document.pdf

5.2.1 Perceptions of the evidence

Interviewees spoke of their understanding that the Government had made its proposed changes to post-16 education on the basis of the supporting evidence on the qualifications available,^{104/105} the number of enrolments in these qualifications,¹²⁵ and matched data focussing on progression and qualification returns.¹⁰⁶ The Government was also said to have been looking at reviews of the education system, and talking to employers and colleges about proposed changes.¹⁰⁷

In terms of quality and overlap, stakeholders reported the belief that courses have been assessed according to their content and overlap with the T level and other alternatives in the broad subject area.¹⁰⁸ In line with this, one interviewee suggested the Government was using labour market, employment and skills gap data to see where the system was falling short.¹⁰⁹ One FE interviewee added: 'I think [evidence gathering] has been less qualitative and there's been quite a reliance on the feedback from providers and professional bodies to help shape the government decisions.' Another noted that destination data is patchy and always a little out of date, so is not entirely reliable.¹¹⁰

One interviewee noted that there was a strong case that level 3 qualifications have stronger economic returns, while another stated that there was a strong economic case, supported by extensive data, for reform of the technical education system.¹¹¹ Interviewees expressed the belief that relevant data was available, but that it was more what the Government chooses to do with that data that was contentious:¹¹² 'I think it's more about whether reform

makes it better or worse and whether the reform is actually going to deliver what the Government wants rather than the case for reform.' One policymaker who did believe there was a clear case for reform suggested that any changes should take into consideration the interests of learners as well as the economy, be based on consensus and be paced carefully.

'There's some research showing how those students are less likely to be retained in degree courses, but they also have lower qualifications on entry so it's not surprising that they're on average, slightly less qualified. The story tends to be negative, but there's a positive story to tell about the way in which those qualifications engage learners who wouldn't otherwise be engaged in A levels and help them to succeed in higher education.'

- Policymaker Interviewee

¹⁰⁴ Two policymaker interviewees, two FE interviewees

¹⁰⁵ One FE interviewee referenced individualised learner record data (ILR)

¹²⁵ Two policymaker interviewees, four FE interviewees

¹⁰⁶ Two policymaker interviewees

¹⁰⁷ One FE interviewee each

¹⁰⁸ One policymaker interviewee, one FE interviewee

¹⁰⁹ One policymaker interviewee

¹¹⁰ One FE interviewee

¹¹¹ Policymaker interviewees

While it was argued the Government has used data to correctly identify the value of attaining a level 2 qualification, particularly in English and Maths, and moving on to level 3, they are leaving some key factors unaccounted for.¹¹³ These missing factors are laid out below:

Labour market information (LMI)

While level 2 and 3 qualifications open up career paths and increase earning potential, there are jobs in the economy that do not require a qualification above level 2 or even a level 2 qualification.¹¹⁴ Similarly, some vocational fields value qualifications from City & Guilds and BTECs, but no research has been conducted on this value.¹³⁵

The pre-16 grading system

A third of students continue to fail their GCSEs automatically on their first attempt in line with a grading system that marks to the curve and assigns pass grades to only the top two thirds of performers.¹¹⁵

Qualifications relevant to the post-16 climate

Many of the students who initially fail GCSE qualifications continue at level 2 during post-16 FE and in many institutions continue to be in numbers equal to or higher than those taking level three courses.¹¹⁶ There are also a substantial number of students in FE taking qualifications at level 1 or foundation level for whom level 3 is a far reach.

The post-16 cycle

For those in FE taking GCSE resits, a third once again fail.¹¹⁷ Meanwhile, those engaging with more technical subjects have often not been sufficiently prepared by their pre-16 education to use functional and technical skills in their new qualification.¹¹⁸

Local context

Educational needs continue to look different according to local context: 'The principle seems to have outweighed their consideration of the evidence on a local basis. You know, it's a national driven policy as far as I can tell.'¹¹⁹

Provision rates

In cases where participation falls for a particular course of study, this does not necessarily mean that students would not benefit from it. In some instances, this will be due to provision rates falling: 'I think, sometimes there is a confusion between whether something is demand or supply.'¹²⁰

Unpopularity versus specialisation

Similarly, the number of participants on a course does not always reflect its importance in offering specialised knowledge that contributes to society as well as an individual's learning and employability.¹²¹ 'In the rail industry a qualification like signalling is so technical and specific. I think there's only 12 signal experts in the UK but without them the whole UK rail system stops working. So you have to really understand that just because there's low volume, it doesn't mean that it's not an important qualification.'

Missing Evidence

All interviewees expressed a desire to see further research or data in at least one area related to the Government's review.

Evaluation of T level pilots and existing alternatives

It was felt that more analysis needed to be done of the outcomes of the T level pilots in order to determine the likelihood of success in further roll out.¹²² In particular, more analysis needed be conducted on the transition year and how students who don't make the grade for level 3 will be supported.¹²³ Additionally, two interviewees expressed a desire to see more data and research on the value of current vocational qualifications at level 3 such as applied general qualifications and general vocational qualifications.¹²⁴ One went on to say they wanted graduate outcomes to be sufficiently tracked because, for example, in subjects like Applied Science, many students go on to university and find the course to be of as much value as a T level would likely be.¹²⁵

The purpose of a qualification

Two interviewees suggested that further research could evaluate what exactly should be the purpose of qualifications in general, so that the interpretation of what a qualifications should do does not become so narrow as only to focus on getting into a high salaried job role.¹²⁶ Qualifications should instead be about a more holistic improvement of skills and confidence: 'That's probably the most fundamental misunderstanding that we get from the bureaucrats, because they're not ... they're used to that academic pathway and a very simple line or progression.'¹²⁷

'I think that what we sometimes do as a country is we obsess about the qualification... and by 'we', I mean providers, the Government and awarding bodies... Whereas I think what we should obsess about is the programme of study. For me, it's quite often the things that wrap around the qualification that bring it to life.'

- FE Interviewee

Transitions and progressions

It was argued that research needs to get to the root of the problem and address OECD-backed findings by gathering more data on why more students don't successfully achieve level 2 during lower secondary education.¹²⁸ Further research on progression to university for those who took vocational qualifications at post-16 level should have nuance and consider the complexity of context:¹²⁹ 'There's a little research but it has been fairly superficial.'

Skills matching qualifications

It is important to gain insight into whether all 16 year olds, regardless of whether they have achieved their GCSE qualifications or not, actually have the skillset to be deemed at level 2 in core subjects like maths and English, in a manner that could be applied in the labour market.¹³⁰

¹¹³ One policymaker interviewee

¹¹⁴ One policymaker interviewee

¹¹⁵ Two FE interviewees

¹¹⁶ One policymaker interviewee

¹¹⁷ One policymaker interviewee, one FE interviewee

¹¹⁷ One policymaker interviewee

¹¹⁸ One policymaker interviewee

¹¹⁹ One FE interviewee

¹²⁰ Dr Fiona Aldridge, Learning and Work Institute

¹²¹ Three FE interviewees

¹²² One policymaker interviewee and one FE interviewee

¹²³ One FE interviewee

¹²⁴ One policymaker interviewee

¹²⁵ One FE interviewee

¹²⁶ Two policymaker interviewees

¹²⁷ One policymaker interviewee

¹²⁸ One policymaker interviewee

¹²⁹ One policymaker interviewee

¹³⁰ One policymaker interviewee



Understanding motivation and fostering greater engagement with all levels

More research could be conducted on why learners choose particular qualifications, level of qualification and institutions at which to take them. This could help tailor support services and future policy.¹³¹ It would help keep qualifications effective and valid if more students were engaged in taking them up across all levels, so that nobody was left behind. Future research could assess how more learners can be included and supported in: 'engaging with education and getting onto the ladder of progression, even if the qualifications are not directly linked to a work outcome.'¹³²

Switching sectors

There could be more research into career progression which takes into account that many people switch sectors or do not use their original qualification. This, however, does not mean that the initial qualification was worthless: 'The question is that what generic, general skills and aptitudes and competencies and abilities has that qualification helped you with that are non-context specific.'

Industry need

In some sectors, like digital, there is a significant lack of government data on what specific skills are needed to enter industry.¹³³ As a result, government funding is not assigned to qualifications in skills like cyber, which are highly in demand. More research in this area could increase understanding of how level 2 qualifications could act as appropriate stepping stones to much needed level 3 and even 4 qualifications in relevant skills.

¹³¹ One policymaker interviewee

¹³² One policymaker interviewee

¹³³ Two FE interviewees

5.2.2 Data and policy change

While interviewees identified several key sources of evidence for the Government's proposal,¹³⁴ there remained concerns about how this evidence was used, and what evidence had been omitted from government planning.¹³⁵ One interviewee described the Government's engagement with data as a 'veneer' that would have negative 'unintended consequences' by not using all of the evidence available,¹³⁶ while another suggests the DfE are in 'huge denial' of the realities exposed by the data they do not use.¹³⁷

It was also suggested that it was difficult to feed these ideas and concerns back to the Government.¹³⁸ One policymaker reported finding it difficult to engage further with the Government on this issue, as they would not change their tactics or viewpoint.

'It is always a bit difficult because obviously the Government will look at and have various reviews commissioned and undertaken and obviously they will choose to take whatever they want from that and steer it in a way that gives them the outcome that they want.'

- FE Interviewee

Policymakers were asked to discuss the way in which, to their knowledge, the Government normally uses data to feed into policy formulation. They expressed concern that the Government is, intentionally or not, selective in its use of the data that informs policy change, and this can have a negative impact on the quality of policy proposals.¹³⁹ While pilots of schemes like T levels were welcomed to determine whether they are a successful option, the government process of turning data into policy was deemed to

be opaque: 'There are [often] no progress reports, there's no research papers series.'¹⁴⁰

Collecting and using the right data was thought to be important in this area to achieve nuance in findings: 'We need to be able to make sure that they've equally got the experience of both providers and individual learners and employers.'¹⁴¹ The same policymaker also recommended looking beyond the traditional economic angle: while the government approach does take social justice into account, it often focuses primarily on assessing data through an economic lens. Thus, as an example, degree level qualifications returns are measured by expected salary after graduation. Many jobs with social value or necessity do not pay a great deal of money and in this framework associated qualifications would be considered ineffective purely because they do not lead to high earnings.¹⁴²

An FE interviewee noted that government consultations often attract the same obvious large sector players in their responses, and as a result the majority of people who should be engaged in reports on education and skills can end up not being consulted.¹⁴³

¹³⁴ Three policymaker interviewees, two FE interviewees

¹³⁵ Two policymaker interviewees, one FE interviewee

¹³⁶ One policymaker interviewee

¹³⁷ Professor Ewart Keep, SKOPE

¹³⁸ One policymaker interviewee, one FE interviewee

¹³⁹ Three policymaker interviewees

¹⁴⁰ Professor Ewart Keep, SKOPE

¹⁴¹ Dr Fiona Aldridge, Learning and Work Institute

¹⁴² Dr Fiona Aldridge, Learning and Work Institute

¹⁴³ One FE interviewee

6 Potential impact of the proposal

Key Findings

FE colleges

Interviewees generally felt that the proposal would have a negative impact on colleges and other learning providers, with withdrawal of funding requiring colleges to redesign their offerings and risk losing staff whose experience in taught courses does not translate to T levels, and a number of other training providers having to close as a result.

Learners

Significant concern was expressed regarding the likely impact of the proposals on learners, with key concerns including: lower engagement from students who feel level 3 is unattainable; a lack of alternative routes and career options; and the efficacy and appropriateness of the transition year(s) and T levels.

Transition year(s)

The proposed transition year(s) also concerned interviewees, who cited a lack of clarity of what the year (or two years) would look like and the demonstration of the 'naive' assumption that it could prepare all learners to commence level 3.

Impact on FE institutions

Stakeholders reported concerns that the proposed withdrawal of funding would have a significant negative impact on FE colleges.

Five of the nine FE representatives interviewed reported that their colleges were largely focussed on level 2 qualifications, so would need reshaping in order to survive the financial hit of the withdrawal of funding:¹⁴⁴ 'For the college itself I'm not sure how we would survive. I'm not sure what we would do. Because we have lots of apprentices, we have lots of adults, and we have a percentage of our learners on level 3, we have lots of foundation learning. But we have a large number of students that are on level 2, and if there is no provision for them, we'd obviously have to either resize the college to be a college that served a certain purpose.'

'I think the problem is that the fundamental thing the Government's trying to achieve is the right thing, which is more young people qualified to level 3 and above. My strong belief is the problem at level 2 is not the qualifications; it's the wrap-around of the qualifications, and that's been the thing that's been hit the hardest by government funding cuts.'

- FE Interviewee

One FE interviewee predicted that a number of training providers would no longer exist if level 2 qualifications were defunded, due to lack of demand and chronic underfunding. Another wondered what it would mean for college groups that managed apprenticeship options and was concerned it could make that work very difficult.¹⁴⁵ However, one interviewee was more positive about these possible changes to their institutional structure, and thought fewer qualifications could mean higher quality qualifications with fewer registration or examination fees.

In addition, one policymaker felt that there would be consequences with regard to employment in FE colleges as several level 2 taught courses do not map onto T level equivalents, meaning that people would be out of work. They also mentioned that there were several career paths that large numbers of young people tend to follow, but that there was no T Level that mapped onto these paths, such as retail.¹⁴⁶

In order to address some of these issues, interviewees offered thoughts on what was needed in order to support colleges through the changes with level 2 qualification provision.

¹⁴⁴ Two FE interviewees

¹⁴⁵ One FE interviewee

¹⁴⁶ One policymaker interviewee

Level 2 substitute equivalent

One policymaker interviewee felt that the colleges would be devastated if there was no replacement offer for level 2 qualifications, and another that colleges would need to be resilient and adaptable.¹⁴⁷

Resilience

One policymaker felt that there was a need for colleges to become more financially resilient and able to cope with the demands of learners.¹⁴⁸

Post-16 Education sector

One FE interviewee emphasised the need to have some stability and strategy to the post-16 education sector, and felt that often the levels of education were dealt with in an isolated way, rather than a holistic way.¹⁴⁹ 'What we're in danger of doing is just dealing with these things in sort of isolation, rather than looking at the coherence of how do we take young people from being school pupils to being young people that can play a key part in our society, from level 1, level 2, level 3, level 4, level 5, some going to university. And I think we sometimes look at those in isolation.' However, they felt optimistic that the new ministers for HE and FE in the DfE had joint responsibility for education strategy post-16.

One FE provider noted that the negative impact on FE colleges would be exacerbated by the COVID-19 outbreak and difficulties finding jobs or apprenticeships.

Impact on learners

Interviewees reported similar concerns about the impact of reduced level 2 qualifications on learners:

Less engagement from students

Four interviewees felt that there would be less engagement from students,¹⁵⁰ with one feeling that students would lose hope, as coming in at level 1 they can aspire to level 2, and then progress further later on. However, without level 2 as an in between, it leaves little for them to aspire to.¹⁵¹ Another stated: 'I don't think there's enough recognition of how some individuals could have become NEET [Not in Employment, Education or Training] without that level 2, or gone down a very different pathway. It's not always just about the statistics. If in every single region 10-20 learners would become NEET, what's the economic impact of that across regions?'

'So I think that a lot of the level 2 students that come to us at the moment will not come and therefore, my concern is, where will they go? There are not a large number of level 2 apprenticeships anymore as the alternative....If they are not in college and they cannot find an apprenticeship...we could have social disorder if we are not careful.'

- FE Interviewee

Lack of alternative routes

Five interviewees felt that there were limited other options for these students, who were not on an academic path and needed to be able to learn skills that they could achieve.¹⁵² 'Quite often level-2 learners have not had a particularly good experience at school, they have not particularly achieved well at school, they have got through it. And so they often come...to college because they can suddenly do something that they are interested in, rather than something that they have been told they have got to do, which is the case with the national curriculum. Students are quite excited about coming and doing something like brick work...because it is something they feel that they can do and achieve that.' One interviewee expressed concern that there were no other options for this level of learner without sufficient level 2 qualifications in FE, as there are not enough level 2 apprenticeships to accommodate them, and a policymaker interviewee felt that there would be negative effects if this step in progression was removed without a replacement option.¹⁵³

'I just think they would lose a bit of hope actually, because we can give them something which is within their grasp. If they work hard they can get to level 2 in most cases, we know that. Even if they come in through the entry level 1 route, they can aspire to level 2 and then at some time in the future they can hope to build on it. I think without a proper qualification at level 2, there's not a lot to aim at, there's not a lot to aspire towards.'

- FE Interviewee

Limitations of T Levels

Interviewees discussed T Levels as an option, but only for some of the students who otherwise would be taking level 2 qualifications, as they would not suit all due to the academic aspects of the courses.¹⁵⁴ 'I'm sure that there will be loads of young people who if you showed them the T level curriculum would look at it and say "Oh, I don't want to do that, it's way too hard, it's really boring, very academic a lot of it. I'm not interested in doing that, I want to go and get a job." ...So, I guess that they do the transition year. But then what do they transition to? Because there are no level twos available. The only thing that's available is A levels or T levels or an apprenticeship. And the chances of getting an apprenticeship given what's happening to the 16 to 19 apprenticeship numbers is not all that good.'¹⁷⁶

Impact of fewer options

In line with the Government's approach, one interviewee believed that learners might benefit from the proposed changes by having a smaller number of much higher quality level 2 qualifications to participate in; having fewer options in a pathway could stop institutions making decisions on qualifications based on cost or the ease with which students can pass.¹⁷⁷ However, they noted that their concern was not with the reduction of qualification pathway options (e.g. ten different options in bricklaying) but rather the removal of pathways (e.g. no option in watch making).

¹⁴⁷ Two policymaker interviewees

¹⁴⁸ One policymaker interviewee

¹⁴⁹ One FE interviewee

¹⁵⁰ Three FE interviewees and one policymaker interviewee

¹⁵¹ Two FE interviewees and one policymaker interviewee

¹⁵² Three FE interviewees and two policymaker interviewees

¹⁵³ One policymaker interviewee

¹⁵⁴ One FE interviewee and one policymaker interviewee

¹⁷⁶ Professor Ewart Keep, SKOPE

¹⁷⁷ One FE interviewee

Proposed transition year(s)*

Interviewees expressed some concern and confusion about the proposed transition year.¹⁵⁵ One policymaker was not clear on what the transition year (or years) would look like and was concerned that many experts in the field did not appear to know either: 'I have asked all sorts of people, "Well okay, what's in the transition year?" and I get slightly different answers, but it appears to be that it's maths and English and general learning skills. I naively had assumed that the transition year would probably include a level two qualification but at least some of the people I've talked to have indicated that that's not what they are thinking of at all.'

'I suspect that this is going to be one of those really painful processes whereby a very naïve design runs at great speed into the hard wall of reality and reassembles itself as gradually people realise that the transition year isn't going to be easy.'

- Professor Ewart Keep, SKOPE

The proposed transition year was also described as 'naïve' by a policymaker who did not believe in the premise that everyone can start level 3 after completing the year: 'Those that are looking at it are saying, with a bit of triage we can get someone ready to go into a level 3 and they don't need a certificate or anything...It's just a fundamental misunderstanding of the importance of a full range of Level

2 programmes.'¹⁵⁶

FE interviewees argued that a significant proportion of students struggle to attain level 2 in subjects like English and maths in secondary school.¹⁵⁷ They expressed concern that if the transition year was weighted towards English and maths then learners would continue to find motivation and attainment difficult and likely not be able to reach level 3 understanding in less than two years in post-16 education.¹⁵⁸ 'To take a qualification out of level two for a learner who is most likely to be from a deprived background and to have experienced academic failure; to then make them resit the exams that they've failed, that they likely don't like doing and remove the qualification or say study that for 12 months but there's nothing at the end of it; that's going to impact learner motivation. I think there'll be issues of attainment across the country.'

'It does not serve anywhere near the same purpose as a level 2 qualification currently does, which is about transition to employment. So for me this is designed entirely to transition to a T level. In its own right it has no standing. Which is fine but what do you do for those young people where level 2 is the right standard?'

- FE Interviewee

One FE interviewee commented that not enough research had been done to ensure the transition year would benefit students: 'You've got to be pretty certain [the students are] going to succeed and get up to that standard...I don't think we can do that scientifically enough to be confident in advising the kids. So, you're giving them some dubious advice if you're not careful, which might be out to reach recruitment targets rather than what's best for the student.'¹⁵⁹ Another FE interviewee continued that for many of these individuals a better option is taking more practical subjects from lower levels and building up to getting a job in something that they are more confident in.¹⁶⁰

One policymaker had a generally positive view of the proposed transition year. They felt that the designed principles were sensible, based on good practice and encouraged successful progression to level 3. As a caveat, they noted that there likely needs to be more time spent investing the development of the transition year to ensure it is a successful programme. Others reserved their judgement on how well a transition year would work, saying they would wait until they knew more about it but that it would have to be a 'genuine enabler' for students if it was to work.¹⁶¹

Key demographics

FE interviewees generally believed that the most affected by the proposed changes of reducing the number of level 2 qualifications would be the students who were struggling the most with school before reaching post-16 level:¹⁶² 'I think it's the marginal students, in every sense of that word. So the less able who don't really want yet more academic type work thrust at them.' One interviewee remarked that reducing the choice of offerings for the most disadvantaged could compound that disadvantage.¹⁶² Another went on to say that all of those achieving fewer than full straight As at school would be at risk with reduced choice at level 2.¹⁶³

It was also stated that there is a need to focus on engaging these individuals who are less interested in subjects like history, maths and geography but blossom at college when they have the opportunity to try new things.¹⁶⁴

'The mass withdrawal of level 2 qualifications would be devastating if there was nothing in its place. If there's a transition programme that's well designed, fit for purpose and can include existing high quality qualifications that might be a really good step forward but just withdrawing a whole swathe of qualifications would be devastating and leave lots of learners high and dry.'

- Policymaker Interviewee

¹⁵⁵ Two policymaker interviewees and six FE interviewees

¹⁵⁶ Mark Dawe, AELP

* Since this paper was first drafted the Government is now considering a two year transition period

¹⁵⁷ Four FE interviewees

¹⁵⁸ Two FE interviewees

¹⁵⁹ One FE interviewee.

¹⁶⁰ One FE interviewee.

¹⁶¹ Two FE interviewees

¹⁶² Five FE interviewees

¹⁶² One FE interviewee

¹⁶³ One FE interviewee

¹⁶⁴ One FE interviewee

Social and economic impact

Policymakers offered thoughts on how they thought the proposed changes might impact broader social and economic conditions.¹⁶⁵ They once again expressed concern in regard to how, if qualifications were removed without appropriate planning and support, the system would work for some and not all and the most vulnerable from the lowest socioeconomic groups would be most negatively impacted.¹⁶⁶ There was also concern that niche industries could suffer from a lack of qualified individuals with essential specialisms which are valuable to the community at large, like stonemasonry.¹⁶⁷ One interviewee also raised some logistical questions, such as how strange it would be if level 2 apprenticeships continued but no such qualifications were offered at FE colleges and whether level 2 qualifications for those aged 19+ would still be considered valid and good value for money.

'If [the Government] ensure that a set of qualifications are available that add value and support the needs of learners and employers then there is significant value to be achieved both for the sector and for the people they serve. If they get it wrong and we take away qualifications that enable people to progress, secure work, develop skills or improve productivity then it will have a significant negative effect for individuals, businesses and the economy.'

- FE Interviewee

Social mobility

Overwhelmingly, interviewees believed that there was a significant relationship between social mobility and level 2 attainment.¹⁶⁸ The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission previously reported that having literacy and numeracy to level 2 is one of the key protective factors in terms of preventing young people becoming NEET.¹⁶⁹

As listed above in section 4.3, with difficulties in the attainment of level 2 at lower secondary stage exacerbated among the most disadvantaged students,¹⁷⁰ the jump to level 3 is likely to pose significant challenges, even with the introduction of the transition year. Additionally, level 2 apprenticeships have the highest proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds,¹⁷¹ with that proportion falling for each consecutive apprenticeship level until just 13% at level 6.

The impact of withdrawing funding for level 2 qualifications, as such, is potentially significant in terms of both social mobility and social inclusion, with fewer options for students from disadvantaged backgrounds limiting social potential.

'My strong belief is the problem at level 2 is not the qualifications; it's the wraparound of the qualifications, and that's been the thing that's been hit the hardest by government funding cuts.'

- FE Interviewee

¹⁶⁵ Three policymaker interviewees

¹⁶⁶ Two policymaker interviewees

¹⁶⁷ One FE interviewee

¹⁶⁸ Four policymaker interviewees and eight FE interviewees

¹⁶⁹ Social mobility: the next steps

¹⁷⁰ Two policymaker interviewees, one FE interviewee

¹⁷¹ 29% of students in 2015-2016 and 2016-2017; and 26 % of students in 2017-2018

7

Conclusions and recommendations

7.1 Assessing government assumptions

From the findings of the review of level 2 attainment across the UK, light touch assessment of the data on which the government review has been based and interviews with key stakeholders, the following assumptions, on which the Government has based its proposals, have been identified.

Government assumption 1:
The proposed transition year(s) will be effective in supporting level 2 attainment, preparing students who have previously failed to attain level 2 to move on to level 3.

One assumption of the proposal is that the majority of learners will move onto level 3 in the form of A levels and T levels, meaning those learners who have not previously attained the required level 2 qualifications will undertake the proposed transition year (or years). However, several of the stakeholders interviewed expressed significant doubt at the efficacy of this approach.

Concern was also expressed for the fact that where some level 2 qualifications were currently seen as a transition to employment, the transition year is seen as a transition to T levels only, affecting the potential pathways for learners for whom level 2 attainment would otherwise be sufficient.

Government assumption 2:
The majority of learners aged 16-19 and beyond are already at, or can be supported to attain, level 2 in order to progress to level 3.

The Government has been clear in its aspirations for all learners to achieve level 3, as has the evidence on which it has based its proposal, namely the Sainsbury Review. Stakeholders interviewed believe this approach to be flawed as it relies on the assumption that learners who have not attained level 2 thus far will be able to move on to level 3 after a transition year (as above), or are already functioning with level 2 skills.

Government assumption 3:
The data on which the proposal has been based offers the full picture regarding the skills climate in England/the UK.

The proposal is based on the assumption that the data used as evidence in the proposal accurately represents the skills climate. Whilst some drivers of the review were echoed by stakeholders, and interviewees were supportive of a review of the technical qualifications system, significant concern was expressed regarding the Government's use of and engagement with data generally, with one interviewee describing government engagement with data as a 'veneer', and concern expressed about the basis of the details of the proposal. Interviewees also expressed concern at the areas of evidence they felt to be missing, including: evaluation of T levels; purpose of qualifications; investigation into low attainment of level 2; and industry need.

Government assumption 4:
Level 3 is required for progression into careers, or for meaningful professional development.

Considering the focus on level 3 attainment and the implied elimination of post-16 level 2 qualifications, the proposal also makes the assumption that in order to progress into a career, learners need to achieve level 3. Stakeholders interviewed disagreed with this, with there being 'a

huge majority of industries where the level 2 is a passport [to participation]', including construction, hospitality, catering, transport and childcare. The value of the technical skills gained at level 2 were also raised by three interviewees, who felt that that the skills learned at level 2 may be missed by transition directly to level 3.

Government assumption 5:
T levels or A levels are appropriate for the vast majority of learners.

Finally, one key assumption made by the government proposal is, in the withdrawal of funding for the majority of level 2 and 3 qualifications, that A levels and T levels will be suitable for the vast majority of learners. One policymaker interviewed highlighted that T Levels would not be a suitable for all learners not on the A level pathway, and that supporting individuals through a wider range of options would be more practical: 'I mean, the bottom line is, there'll still be this group of individuals that need training and support; I don't think they will be walking into a college to do their transition year to go onto a T level. So they will still need support through some other programme. And, you know, rather than throwing the hundreds of millions at T levels, it would be better off if it spread a little more widely.'¹⁷²

In addition, T levels will initially only be offered to learners aged 16-19, risking a potential deficit of options for adult learners.

¹⁷² Mark Dawe, AELP

7.2 Risks

With consideration of the proposal against the findings of this study and the government assumptions listed above, the following key risks have been identified:

Missed opportunities at level 2

Learners may be put off by the focus on further education that exists in level 3, and as a result may miss the opportunity to develop skills at level 2.

Failure of transition year

Similarly, there are significant concerns about the possibility of preparing students who have previously failed to attain level 2 to commence level 3. And indeed a question around whether achievement of a level 3 is appropriate, or necessary, for all learners.

Increase in NEET rates

Learners who have struggled with level 2 attainment may drop out of full time education as the jump to level 3 is perceived to be too high, risking an increase of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). Similarly, adult learners who struggled in full time education may decide not to return for the same reason.

Lack of relevance of proposed policy

Limited or superficial engagement with a full range of data will see the introduction of policy that does not take into account the full skills climate, and as such does not address the real needs on the ground.

Skills deficits at level 2

Sectors for which level 2 is an appropriate entry point may see a drop in qualified entrants, contributing to a greater skills deficit.

Learners discouraged

The focus on A levels and T levels may discourage students for whom level 3 attainment is unlikely, or for whom returning to education serves a specific purpose (professional development, for example).

Loss of specialist pathways

The elimination of low and no enrolment courses, along with the potential withdrawal of funding for other level 2 and 3 qualifications, might see the loss of niche or specialist pathways, contributing to a skills deficit.



'If [the Government] ensure that a set of qualifications are available that add value and support the needs of learners and employers then there is significant value to be achieved both for the sector and for the people they serve. If they get it wrong and we take away qualifications that enable people to progress, secure work, develop skills or improve productivity then it will have a significant negative effect for individuals, businesses and the economy.'

- FE Interviewee



7.3 Recommendations and alternative proposals

With consideration of the proposal against the findings of this study and the government assumptions listed above, the following key risks have been identified:

Improving level 2 and foundation levels

Two policymakers spoke of the importance of improving qualifications at level 2 and below so that they reflect the skills needs and abilities of all individuals likely to take them. This should mean, in part, making sure that all levels have up to date and relevant technical as well as general strands. An FE interviewee spoke of the importance of giving learners a range of high quality choices so that they could find something appropriate to their skills and career ambitions.

Improving progression pathways

It was stated that effective qualifications frameworks were based on detailed data and understanding of how individuals were likely to progress through the system:¹⁷³ 'So, where is it that the jobs [are]; what qualifications did you need to do those jobs? And then look at the other side, where people are and what qualifications they've got and then establish pathways through so that each of those stepping stones is available.'¹⁷⁴

Changes to level 3 qualifications

Two interviewees suggested a different approach to teaching level 3 for young people who are not performing well at school or do not enjoy 'traditional' subjects.¹⁷⁵ In one instance, it was recommended that the qualification be

divided in a manner similar to pass degrees and honours degrees, or two versus three A levels, with one form of level 3 qualification offering a broader and less intense curriculum of core studies, enabling more students achieve some form of qualification. In the other instance, it was suggested that level 3 qualifications which focus less on the qualification than the whole experience are more effective. This was based on student testimonies of more vocational and less exam-focused courses: '[They say] if I would have had to go down any sort of traditional education route, where I was focused on examinations, I would not be where I am today.'

Preventing duplication and raising quality

While many interviewees were clearly concerned by the potential consequences of removing too many or all level 2 qualifications, it was also remarked that it was a good thing if the number of qualifications at each level was reduced for clarity and to ensure high quality, in line with thorough research on progression pathways to prevent exclusion of valued courses or individuals.¹⁷⁶

Personal and social development

Two interviewees emphasised the value of providing skills related to personal and social development across all levels, for all learners, as a significant focus of any qualifications offering: 'so that's everybody

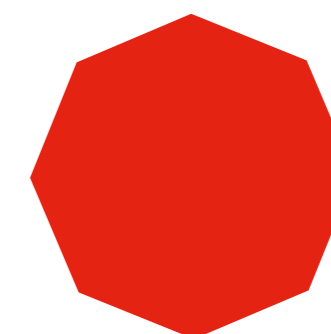
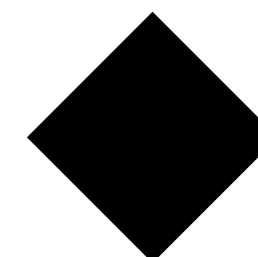
at all levels, able to develop as informed, critical, healthy, skilled, engaged citizens and learners and workers all in one'.¹⁷⁷

Dividing responsibility

A Further Education professional suggested that each speciality area for qualifications could be the responsibility of a specific awarding body. Awarding bodies would then compete to be the official awarding body of each subject, preventing duplication or confusion, and ensuring that: 'rather than competing with each other, [awarding bodies are] competing for quality.'

Awareness of limitations in policy

One FE interviewee concluded that the UK has a different culture regarding education and skills than countries in Europe, for example, and as such cannot realistically expect all individuals to achieve level 3 across the board with just one policy change. The entire culture of employers, educators and learners would have to change, and whilst this might not be possible it should be acknowledged in policy development.



¹⁷³ Two policymaker interviewees
¹⁷⁴ Dr Fiona Aldridge, Learning and Work Institute

¹⁷⁵ Two FE interviewees
¹⁷⁶ One policymaker interviewee

¹⁷⁷ One policymaker interviewee. One FE interview



Appendices

A1. Data tables

Hospitality and catering

Apprenticeships by nation¹⁷⁸

England, Northern Ireland and Scotland all saw a decline in the attainment of Level 2 apprenticeships between 2015 and 2019. England saw both the largest absolute decline (9,434) and the largest relative decline (68%). In Scotland, there was a relative decline of 26% and in Northern Ireland, it was -9%. Wales, however, saw a relative increase of 9% across the five year period, from 690 in 2015 to 755 in 2019.

Hospitality and catering apprenticeships by nation

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
UK	17,187	16,643	15,624	13,363	7,242
England	13,942	13,494	12,449	10,246	4,508
Wales	690	750	750	985	755
Northern Ireland	541	526	698	527	491
Scotland	2,014	1,873	1,727	1,605	1,488

Vocational qualifications by nation¹⁷⁹

England, Wales and Northern Ireland each saw declines in attainment numbers across the five years from 2015 to 2019. Although England recorded the highest absolute fall in attainments (112,660), the largest relative decline (49%) was recorded in Northern Ireland, where attainment numbers dropped from 15,421 in 2015 to 7,940 in 2019.

Hospitality and catering vocational qualifications by nation

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
UK	317,901	277,369	228,152	210,560	192,575
England	281,640	250,490	205,380	186,445	168,980
Wales	20,840	16,835	16,605	16,035	15,655
Northern Ireland	15,421	10,044	6,167	8,080	7,940

¹⁷⁸ Department for Education, StatsWales, Department for the Economy and Skills Development Scotland; plus calculations. Scottish data for 2019 is an estimate as required data was not available – see method section for approach used.

¹⁷⁹ Ofqual, Qualifications Wales and Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment; plus calculations.

IT and digital

Apprenticeships by nation¹⁸⁰

All UK regions saw an overall decline in the attainment numbers for Level 2 apprenticeships over the five year period. The largest absolute decline between 2015 and 2019 was in Wales (315) with the largest relative decline was seen in Northern Ireland (49%) - here, numbers fell sharply from 119 in 2017 to 39 in 2018.

In Scotland, the very low numbers of those attaining Level 2 qualifications is likely due to the fact that the majority of apprenticeships in this area run at a higher level. In 2018, for example, there were 801 recorded achievements across all levels, of which 642 were at Level 3.

IT & digital apprenticeships by nation

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
UK	4,103	3,937	3,475	3,605	3,718
England	2,738	2,729	2,353	2,156	2,705
Wales	1,290	1,075	995	1,410	975
Northern Ireland	74	129	119	39	38
Scotland	1	4	8	0	0

Vocational qualifications by nation¹⁸¹

England, Wales and Northern Ireland each saw declines in attainment numbers for vocational qualifications across the five years from 2015 to 2019. England recorded the highest absolute fall of 68,795 between 2015 and 2019 while Wales saw the largest relative decline of 58% - here attainment levels fell from 4,660 in 2015 to 2,415 in 2019.

IT & digital vocational qualifications by nation

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
UK	317,901	277,369	228,152	210,560	192,575
England	281,640	250,490	205,380	186,445	168,980
Wales	20,840	16,835	16,605	16,035	15,655
Northern Ireland	15,421	10,044	6,167	8,080	7,940

¹⁸⁰ Department for Education, StatsWales, Department for the Economy and Skills Development Scotland; plus calculations. Scottish data for 2019 is an estimate as required data was not available – see method section for approach used.

¹⁸¹ Ofqual, Qualifications Wales and Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment; plus calculations.

Transport and logistics

Apprenticeships by nation¹⁸²

Level 2 apprenticeship attainment levels fell in both England and Scotland between 2015 and 2019. England saw a relative decline of 36% from 13,379 to 8,591 while numbers in Scotland fell by roughly 50% from 506 to an estimated 251. Attainment levels stayed generally stable in Wales. Northern Ireland was the only region to see growth in attainment with a 260% relative increase between 2015 (25) and 2019 (90).

Transport & logistics apprenticeships by nation

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
UK	13,985	15,285	15,865	14,508	9,007
England	13,379	14,782	15,424	14,074	8,591
Wales	75	75	45	75	75
Northern Ireland	25	31	49	60	90
Scotland	506	397	347	299	251

Vocational qualifications by nation¹⁸³

Vocational qualification attainment rates at Level 2 fell in England, Wales and Northern Ireland between 2015 and 2019. The largest absolute decline was in England (14,815) whereas the largest relative decline was in Wales (48%) where numbers fell from 3,660 in 2015 to 1,885 in 2019.

Transport & logistics vocational qualifications by nation

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
UK	89,154	77,089	81,987	82,839	72,428
England	84,575	72,405	77,865	79,590	69,760
Wales	3,660	3,835	3,275	2,390	1,885
Northern Ireland	919	849	847	859	783

¹⁸² Department for Education, StatsWales, Department for the Economy and Skills Development Scotland; plus calculations. Scottish data for 2019 is an estimate as required data was not available – see method section for approach used.

¹⁸³ Ofqual, Qualifications Wales and Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment; plus calculations.

Career trajectories

Course completions vs job openings¹⁸⁴

There were 89,779 course completions for Level 2 Transport Operations and Maintenance courses between 2015 and 2020. This is an absolute difference of 35,404 compared with the number of annual openings that require a Level 2 qualification across the period (125,183). Similarly, there were 34,750 Level 2 course completions within Warehousing and Distribution compared with 78,747 annual openings where a Level 2 qualification was required. This is a shortfall of 43,997.

This suggests there are good opportunities for those that have completed qualifications in these areas to find relevant work afterwards.

Transport and logistics: Completions vs job openings

	Completions	Annual Openings	Variance	Variance (%)
Transportation and logistics	89,779	125,183	35,404	39%
Operations and maintenance	34,750	78,747	43,997	127%
Warehousing and distribution	75	75	45	75

Job growth and wages¹⁸⁵

Overall, the number of UK jobs in Transportation Operations and Maintenance that require a Level 2 qualification increased by 5% between 2015 (1,427,960) and 2020 (1,499,506). The median wage for such positions was £25,718. In Warehousing and Distribution, the number of jobs increased by 8% from 1,015,332 in 2015 to 1,094,172. The median annual wage for such positions was £23,400.

Transport and logistics: Completions vs job openings

	UK Jobs (2015)	UK Jobs (2020)	% Jobs Growth	Median Annual Wages
Transportation and logistics	1,427,960	1,499,506	5%	£25,718.42
Operations and maintenance	1,015,332	1,094,172	8%	£23,400.12
Warehousing and distribution	75	75	45	75

¹⁸⁴ City and Guilds RY16 Dataset via EMSI Course Vision tool

¹⁸⁵ City and Guilds RY16 Dataset via EMSI Course Vision tool

A2. Detailed methodology

Research framework

Research questions		Lit review	Data review	Policy interviews	FE interviews
What is the Government's proposal?	What is the consultation for?				
	What does the consultation propose?				
	Why has this been proposed now?				
What is the evidence to support the Government's proposed change?	What data is available to support the basis of the Government's proposal?				
	What other evidence is used by the Government in their consultation documents?				
	How is data used to inform policy change?				
How is the UK doing in terms of level 2 attainment?	Literacy				
	Numeracy				
	Hospitality & Catering				
	IT & Digital				
	Transport & Logistics				
	Are there gaps in the data? Why?				
What is the significance of level 2 attainment?	Who are level 2 qualifications for?				
	What do level 2 qualifications do; how are they used?				
	How are level 2 qualifications viewed?				
	What is the relevance of level 2 qualifications in terms of further attainment and career trajectories?				
	What is the relationship, if any, between level 2 attainment and social mobility?				
What is the potential impact of defunding level 2 qualifications on learners and social mobility?	Who are the key stakeholders who will be affected by the proposed changes?				
	What impact might the proposed changes have?				

Methodology

Literature review

The literature review consisted of desk-based research to identify the scope, basis and grounds of the Government's proposal; identify the evidence to support the proposed changes; and review of the relevance and impact of level 2 qualifications and attainment.

Key sources included:

- Documents related to the Government's consultation.²¹⁰
- The report of the Children's Commissioner: Briefing: the children leaving school with nothing.²¹¹
- Feel Poor Work More.²¹²
- Post-16 skills plan and independent report on technical education.²¹³

Data review

A light touch review was conducted, through which level 2 attainment in each of the four nations of the UK was considered in key sectors identified by City & Guilds: Literacy and Numeracy; Hospitality & Catering; IT & Digital; Transport & Logistics.

Data for each sector was identified from national statistical sources at both UK and regional level. Five years worth of historical data was collected where possible to provide context. Sectors were defined using Ofqual Sector Subject Areas.²¹⁴ It should be noted, however, that UK regions define and categorise their skills data differently so the resulting datasets for each region were not comprehensive nor directly comparable.

Interviews

A number of interviews facilitated further investigation into some of the key research questions; interview discussion guides were designed once the initial desk research was carried out. Interviews were carried to over the telephone, recorded and transcribed, taking between 30 and 45 minutes.

A target of 15 interviews was set; five with policymakers, and 10 with FE principals/ stakeholders. Due to the disruption caused by COVID-19, only nine FE interviews were conducted, although all policymaker interviews were carried out.

A3. Data used in the review

Data referenced in the review documentation

The Case for Change that accompanies the consultation documentation refers to several sources of information utilised for the review:¹⁸⁶

- Independent reviews: Wolf Review and Sainsbury Review.
- Department of Education documents such as 'ESFA list of qualifications approved for funding 16 to 19', 'what different qualification levels mean' etc.
- Employer Skills surveys.
- BIS research papers.
- UCAS end of cycle reports.
- HESA articles/reports.
- CBI reports such as Pearson education and skills annual reports and 'Skills Needs in England: The Employer Perspective'.
- OECD documentation from Education at a Glance.
- Charities articles/reports from the Social Mobility Foundation.
- Other private sector affiliates such as London Futures papers via Deloitte.
- Individual authors such as the Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices by Taylor and 'Effective curriculum practice at below Level 2 for 16/17 year olds' by Williams.
- Other governmental department reports such as HM government evidence papers on industrial strategy and Commission for Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning reports (as well as Ofqual reports).

²¹⁰ Review of post-16 qualifications at level 3 and below in England

²¹¹ Almost one in five children left education at 18 last year without basic qualifications

²¹² Feel poor, work more

²¹³ Post-16 Skills Plan

²¹⁴ Types of regulated qualifications

¹⁸⁶ Post 16 level 3 and below qualifications review - Case for Change.pdf

The Wolf Review

The Wolf Review assessed the state of education for learners in 2011 with a focus on vocational education options and other elements of post-16 education. It found that many young people are moving between education and short-term employment because of the difficulty in finding full-time, permanent work and not knowing what course can help progress them. Low-level vocational qualifications are common in post-16 learners, which the review finds to hold little labour market value; the review estimated that a minimum of 350,000 learners get little/no benefit from the post-16 education system. Under 50% of learners have English and maths at ages 15/16 and 18. It is reported in this review that these are some of the reasons why young people are not securing employment or higher-level education/training, which triggers a need for change across post-16 qualifications. Three principles of reform were established within the review:

1. The education system has no business tracking and directs 14-16 years olds into ineffective programmes.
2. There is a need to ensure people have access to accurate and useful data to help inform decisions. This could include readily available information for everybody on courses and institutions that offer high quality education. This is related to good careers guidance and advice as well as how the Government reports on performance.
3. The system needs to be streamlined and simplified, avoiding micro-management and rising 'bureaucratic' costs for the English vocational education system.

A set of 27 recommendations came from the Wolf Review; such as recommendation 4: 'DfE should review current policies for the lowest-attaining quintile of pupils at Key Stage 4, with a view to greatly increasing the proportion who are able to progress directly onto Level 2 programmes at age 16.'

The Sainsbury Review¹⁸⁸

The Sainsbury Review took place in 2016 and assessed technical education in England calling for reform based on the authors' findings, broken down by themes:

Technical education within the education and training system

this involves a number of considerations. Setting the system up correctly to create benefit for individuals and employers; delineating technical options from academic options but allowing movement between the two; consider adult learners as well as young people.

A system of technical education routes:

using labour market information to propose well-defined routes for learners (15 technical education routes are recommended which combine employment- and college-based technical education at levels 2-5).

Governance and standards

to create a common framework of standards to ensure integration across college- and employment-based learning. Offer employers a stronger role in standards-setting and involve panels of professionals to give advice as part of the Institute for Apprenticeships.

The qualifications market

create an efficient process to develop qualifications to meet industry standards.

Route content

build on international content standards but offering a broad curriculum initially, the increasing a route into a specialised field for learners to achieve higher levels of skills and knowledge. Incorporate 'exit requirements' for English and maths in colleges.

Qualifications and certifications

ensure these adequately reflect the capabilities of learners to employers and are nationally recognised for each technical route.

Transition year

introducing this to allow learners who are not ready to access a technical route at 16 to prepare for additional study and/or employment.

Wider systemic requirements

such as the introduction of the Gatsby benchmarks for careers guidance in schools and colleges and reviews of the National Careers Services. Support through adequate funding and expert teachers and lecturers with the offer of industry-standard facilities for learners.

¹⁸⁷ Review of Vocational Education – The Wolf Report

¹⁸⁸ Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education



A City & Guilds Group Business

City & Guilds

Our vision is for a world in which everyone has the skills and opportunities to succeed.

We support over four million people each year to develop skills that help them into a job, develop on that job and to prepare for their next job.

As a charity, we're proud that everything we do is focussed on achieving this purpose.

Through our assessment and credentialing, corporate learning and technical training offers, we partner with our customers to deliver workbased learning programmes that build competency to support better prospects for people, organisations and wider society.

We create flexible learning pathways that support lifelong employability, because we believe that people deserve the opportunity to train and learn again and again – gaining new skills at every stage of life, regardless of where they start.

Our foundation activities amplify our purpose by helping to remove barriers to getting into a job, celebrating best practice on the job, and advocating for jobs of the future.



The Research Base

This study was carried out by The Research Base commissioned by City & Guilds. Research Base are an international research consultancy based in London and Brighton. We provide research, market intelligence and evaluation services to a range of clients operating in the fields of education and skills, third sector/international development and business. Our clients consist of education providers, national and international charities, governments and multinational businesses.