

# Huge opposition to defunding BTECs

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July saw the publication of responses to DfE consultation on Level 3 post-16 qualifications. Though in reality this was always going to be a very limited exercise, as it had long been decided that academic qualifications were going to remain in their current form, with A-levels continuing to be the main route into HE, while government had announced that T-levels are 'the right choice for most 16-19 year olds who want to progress into skilled employment or onto higher levels of technical education', and that it would 'not be making any changes'.

So the specific intention of this second (and final) consultation was to seek views on proposals to not fund other technical qualifications if they provided 'proven additional and specific employment skills' not delivered by T-levels, but, more significantly, to discontinue funding qualifications that overlapped with the content of the Ts. The consultation document did not refer to them specifically, but many have considered BTECs to be in the firing line. Education unions had already combined with college bosses and school leaders to issue a joint statement calling for continued support.

Whilst a clear majority of those responding to the consultation still need to be convinced about the Government's plans for additional technical qualifications, there were huge majorities, approaching 90 per cent, against the scrapping of other vocational courses. Respondents also sent a clear message that students should be able to mix academic and vocational qualifications in the way BTECs allow, but which T-levels, because they are full-time non-divisible qualifications, will prevent.

Of course the old-style teacher-assessed BTEC qualifications no longer exist, with new Ofqual rules (part of Michael Gove's 'standards revolution') requiring a minimum of 25 per cent written external assessment. BTECs, part of Pearson's expanding empire, are also required to be more 'content' based (students on construction courses, for example, are now required to study trigonometry and Pythagoras). Nevertheless, the courses have remained popular. More than 200,000 16 to 18-year-olds take these courses every year, often studying in combination with an A-level (up to 30 per cent of UCAS applicants doing this).

In response, rather than risk an humiliating climb-down the Government has instead stated that

the future of other qualifications will be reviewed as the new waves of T-levels are introduced between now and 2024. BTECs' future will depend on whether the roll-out of the Ts takes place in line with what has been planned.

Originally intended to be delivered in FE colleges, 'high performing' schools are now being encouraged to apply to deliver T-levels, but there are serious funding and other resource issues still to be resolved. An additional £0.5 billion is promised over the roll-out period, yet college managers and teacher trade unions remain concerned about whether budgets are adequate and whether the T-levels will be funded by diverting resources from elsewhere. Few school sixth-forms (where over a third of the post-16 cohort is enrolled) will have the infrastructure to deliver more than one. There are other major operational issues. In particular, the Ts require compulsory work placements of 45 days during the two-year course duration, even though the shorter placements in current vocational qualifications are often difficult to arrange, because of an increased reluctance or the inability of employers to provide them.

The main issue will continue to be the lack of legitimacy of new vocational qualifications. New Labour's Special Diplomas claimed to have had extensive employer involvement in their design but it was never clear how many individual employers positively endorsed them. With low student uptake, they had already become an expensive white elephant by the time they were abolished by Michael Gove in his first week of office. It is likely that those students who can will continue to enrol for A-levels and not see T-levels, regardless of whether they carry UCAS points, as serious alternatives.

More generally, if wider changes to the economy and the labour market are considered, particularly the disappearance of many 'middling' technical jobs, it is debatable whether a specific 'vocational' route is needed at all. But in the meantime, ensuring that BTECs continue to exist will at least mean young people are not pushed into an 'A-level or T-level' impasse.