

## **UNIVERSITIES UK T-LEVEL CONSULTATION RESPONSE**

### **SUMMARY**

Universities UK is generally supportive of the government's reforms to technical education, but holds concerns about the extent to which T-levels will prepare students for higher education study, the consequences of further reform to level 3 qualifications, and how sufficient information, advice and guidance will be provided to students to allow them to make well-informed choices.

Our response highlights:

- the key role that applied general qualifications play in widening access to higher education
- best practice from universities who have extensive experience of supporting students with applied general qualifications to achieve good outcomes
- the importance of engagement with higher education admission professionals as T-levels develop to ensure possible progression routes are understood
- the crucial role that accurate and timely information, advice and guidance will play in ensuring students make decisions about level 3 study based on their future career aspirations
- good practice from university collaboration with employers and local government structures to ensure they meet local skills needs

### **Do you agree that the principles outlined above are the right ones on which to base a review of level 3 qualifications we should continue to fund in the new system, alongside T-levels and A-levels?**

Universities UK partially agrees that the principles outlined are the right ones on which to base a review of level 3 qualifications. Any qualification, at any level should be of good quality and support progression to good outcomes.

However, while we recognise the advantages of a simplified system both for students and providers, we would encourage that the term 'distinct purpose' be interpreted in the broadest sense and not simply be defined by curriculum content or whether qualifications are academic or technical in nature. The needs of students, from all backgrounds, must be encompassed in any judgment about whether a qualification is truly necessary in the new, simplified system.

In this vein Universities UK believes that applied general qualifications should be retained in the level 3 qualification landscape. Applied general qualifications provide an important qualification route for a large number of students and, importantly, have contributed to widening access to higher education.

Statistics from UCAS show that for the 2017 application cycle only 61% of 18-year-old applicants to university courses held only A-level qualifications. 11% held BTECs only, and 8% held a combination of BTEC and A-level qualifications (UCAS 2017). The numbers entering higher education holding BTECs has also increased significantly in recent years. In 2015 3.5% of all UK 18-year-olds entered higher education with BTEC qualifications only – an increase of 1.7% since 2008 – while 2.8% held a mixture and entered higher education; this percentage has increased steadily by around 0.2% each year.

On average, students holding BTEC qualifications come from more disadvantaged backgrounds than their A-level counterparts (HEPI 2017). As such, the increased number entering higher education has played a significant role in widening access to and participation in higher education over recent years. For example, in 2012–13 18.5% of those entering higher education with BTEC qualifications came from the lowest participation neighborhoods compared to 11.5% of those entering higher education overall, and 42% came from a family where neither parent had gone to university. BTEC students entering higher education also tend to be male (55% compared to 44% of A-level students), to come from a black and minority ethnic (BME) background (26.3% compared to 16.3% of A-level students) and are more likely to have a disability (13.3% compared to 9.4%).

There have of course been concerns expressed about the relative strength of applied general qualifications in preparing students for higher education study and the extent to which they support progression and good outcomes in it. As highlighted by the recent York Consulting report for Ofqual into applied general qualifications, there is evidence that recent reforms to these qualifications will likely ease some of these issues and evidence that in some subject areas, such as art, social care and sport, applied general qualifications are favoured over A-levels by some higher education institutions (York Consulting, 2017). As noted in our response to question 28, higher education institutions are also doing a great deal to support the entry of students holding applied general qualifications and to ensure their progression. Many of these initiatives were highlighted in the recent Social Market Foundation report into vocational education and include summer schools, specialist modules, mentoring and information sharing between further education and higher education teaching staff (Social Market Foundation, 2018). It is also important to note that it is hard to disaggregate whether issues of progression and outcomes among applied general qualifications result from the qualification or the relatively more disadvantaged backgrounds from which these students tend to originate.

T-levels, as currently envisioned, will not be suitable to support progression to a wide range of higher education courses and will not fulfill the current role of applied general qualifications. As such Universities UK believes applied general qualifications should be retained in their current form and recent reforms allowed to embed before further change is considered.

**Should students be able to opt to take a higher-level maths qualification eg core maths, A-level maths, or work towards higher grades in GCSE even if T-level panels do not require it? What are the issues for providers in delivering this?**

Yes, Universities UK agrees that students should be able to opt to take a higher-level maths qualification even if T-level panels do not require it.

One of the key issues identified with accepting students with non-academic qualifications on degree courses by universities is that they lack the required mathematical or English language knowledge to succeed. As identified by UCAS some university admissions criteria for courses such as engineering require BTEC students to possess an A-level in mathematics or science due to concerns that the BTEC qualifications do not contain sufficient subject specific knowledge in these areas (UCAS, 2016). Enabling higher-level study of mathematics alongside T-levels may go some way to address the same concerns about the subject specific content of T-levels and enable the transition of T-level students onto certain degree programmes should they wish to do so.

**How can T-levels be designed in a way that enables students to progress onto apprenticeships?**

Any T-levels developed must be aligned with apprenticeship pathways at higher levels through continued strong engagement with the Institute for Apprenticeships. A clear understanding of which apprenticeships a specific T-level will allow progression onto is required ahead of their marketing to students as well as the current levels of supply and demand from employers for these apprenticeship programmes.

**How can T-levels be built to provide a solid grounding for, and access to higher levels of technical education?**

To ensure T-levels provide a solid grounding for, and access to higher levels of technical education engagement with admissions professional responsible for entry requirements to these programmes must be undertaken. This engagement must happen during T-level development to ensure programme structure and content can respond to suggested changes.

Any advice and comment received from these admissions professionals must also be used to form content of information, advice and guidance given to students when deciding whether to undertake T-level study and which programme is best suited to their future career aspirations.

**What good practice already exists in enabling learners with technical (rather than academic) backgrounds gain access to, and succeed on, degree courses?**

UCAS data shows that for the 2017 application cycle only 61% of 18-year-old applicants to university courses only held A-level qualifications (UCAS 2017). 11% held BTECs only and 8% hold a combination of BTEC and A-level qualifications. This means many universities have direct experience of enabling learners with diverse qualification backgrounds to access and to succeed on degree courses.

The 2016 UCAS *Progression Pathways* report highlighted the key challenges in managing progression to higher education with newer or less traditional qualifications (UCAS 2016). The challenges highlighted were:

- that a student's success is often highly dependent on the overlap of the subject they've studied at level 3 and their chosen degree subject as well as a university's knowledge of their previous subject knowledge and learning style
- a lack of transparent information from universities on whether specific qualifications are likely to meet their entry requirements
- level 3 providers' ability to give sufficient, informed application support to students
- the extent to which universities are able to provide specialised support to ensure successful degree outcomes which is both tailored to be inclusive and sensitive to students' needs

The UCAS report highlighted several examples of good practice in addressing these challenges including an example of bespoke bridging provision at the University of Northampton and level 3 providers developing so called 'Y-style provision' which consists of a broad first year followed by divergent pathways in a learner's second year of study, which allows them to specialise based upon their chosen higher education or career pathway.

These existing challenges highlight the urgent need for engagement with higher education admissions professionals as T-levels develop, ensuring sector-wide knowledge of curriculum content of newly developed T-levels and the likely learning styles of those with these qualifications. This will allow universities to make informed decisions about whether these qualifications will meet entry requirements for their

courses and in turn allow universities to share this information in a transparent and timely manner with prospective students and level 3 providers. In light of the government's recent Careers Strategy, which hopes to achieve more effective and joined up careers advice throughout different educational stages, these admission practices must be reflected in the careers advice that 14/15-year-olds receive with this advice updated as T-levels develop.

Based upon our current understanding of T-level programme development, Universities UK believes that T-levels are unlikely to contain the diversity or depth of subject knowledge to allow progression onto a wide range of degree courses. As such as it is crucial that funded bridging provision is created to ensure that a choice made by an individual at age 15 does not their limit future aspirations to a narrow employment pathway in which labour market demand will inevitably rise and fall. Universities UK also believes that T-levels must be accessible to adults returning to education. Clarity over how this will be achieved and how information, advice and guidance is delivered to this group is required.

**What information do you think will need to be provided to be able to market T-levels effectively to students and parents and how far in advance of first teaching will it be needed?**

As with any point of divergence in the education system students and their parents must be provided with high-quality information, advice and guidance. This is particularly important for post-16 choices which tend to narrow the breadth of subjects studied by individuals and which therefore have a large impact on further study or career options available to individuals upon completion of them. To do this effectively all possible progression routes from across T-level qualifications will need to be understood and fully explored before roll-out. As mentioned previously this requires timely engagement with higher education admissions professionals to ascertain the likely ability of T-levels to allow higher education entry including at what level, on which courses and at which providers.

Students and parents should also be provided with robust labour market intelligence that clearly demonstrates the current need and predicted sustained demand for the occupations T-level programmes are designed to cater for. One of the key advantages of a broader education, academic or technical, is the transferable skills students develop. This enables them to enter the employment market in a wide variety of occupations and to transfer between them as economic demand or personal choice or situation changes.

## **How do providers currently take account of local and national skills needs when planning their provision and how do they work with the existing structures that have responsibility for local skills planning?**

Universities use a variety of methods to take account of local and national skills needs when planning provision. This activity ranges from the inclusion of employers in curriculum design, business liaison (often through university careers services), to much larger partnerships which see universities collaborating with industry to open specific programmes or facilities.

In 2014 Universities UK undertook a piece of work jointly with UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) to explore how effective collaboration between universities and employers is achieved and the important stages in this process (Universities UK and UKCES, 2014). It found that collaboration is most effective when:

- it is driven by clear, demand-led business requirements which are understood by all parties
- it is approached as a strategic partnership between universities and employers
- the created products and programmes developed are appropriately tailored to a specific need not addressed through the mainstream education system
- collaborative ethos becomes part of the cultural norm

Universities and their representatives also work closely with representative industry bodies to share intelligence on national skills issues as well as with the government on issues related to workforce planning in the public sector, such as in the supply of teaching and healthcare professionals.

There is also significant university engagement with existing structures that have responsibility for local skills planning. The majority of Local Enterprise Partnerships boards have a representative from a local higher education provider, as well as increased representation on any skills specific sub-board.

Universities UK does, however, recognise the need for a better way to match the skills of education-leavers with employer demand at the local level and has previously advocated for it. This could involve the government supporting networks of local education providers, employers and stakeholders to encourage employer demand for highly-skilled employment and work experience, matching the best possible candidates to the opportunities, while ensuring these opportunities are more widely available than at present.

These networks could also monitor skills gaps at the local level, encouraging the collaborative development of courses and programmes to address local needs, and

help address disparities in high-level skills between local areas. They could also engage with local schools to provide a joined-up approach to careers advice and guidance from an early age, and build on the experience of the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP). The government should consider how the Skills Advisory Panels announced in its post-16 skills plan and Industrial Strategy White Paper could evolve to meet the need described above.

**How could any adverse impact be reduced, and are there any ways we could better advance equality of opportunity or foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not? Please provide evidence to support your response.**

The government's equality impact assessment expects that there will be an overrepresentation of individuals from a disadvantaged background on the technical route. As articulated in our response to previous questions information, advice and guidance will be even more important for these individuals to ensure that they choose the route that is correct for them and their career aspirations.