

Middlesex University London response to Review of post-16 qualifications at level 3 and below in England

10 June 2019

Purpose and necessity

How could we extend this clarity of purpose to all qualifications at level 3 and below so that the intended outcome for the student is clearer? Please give reasons for your answer, including any examples of how this may be achieved.

1. Middlesex University supports Government's efforts to reform technical education and raise parity of esteem with academic routes. We recognise the need to simplify the complicated technical education system however it will be important to ensure reforms remain focused on the needs of the learner. These needs are often by nature complex and varied with different needs at different times throughout the learner's life. This will mean that a system of education genuinely designed to meet the learner's needs will not fit into neat categories and structures or necessarily be simple. The tendency to separate academic and technical education routes into two simplistic alternatives does not adequately reflect the learner journey which often moves between academic and technical routes at different times in a learner's life. Permeability and flexibility between types of learning in our education system is vital if we are to enable progression through both A and T levels to higher level learning and achieve the goals in the Government's industrial strategy, namely to increase social mobility and productivity. The proposed binary divide at level 3 closes down choices and for students who are certain about their study to progress into and beyond level 3, but not necessarily clear about their path of study in level 4, such a binary divide will cause them to make decisions earlier than they would wish to.
2. The proposed introduction of two alternative routes would also prevent students from mixing applied general qualifications with A levels. This is an increasingly popular choice which keeps students' options open and provides a blend of academic and technical educational experience.
3. The creation of two binary routes and a tidy, inflexible education landscape would also make it harder for workers to adapt and upskill for the needs of the fourth industrial revolution. The future workplace defined by automation, digital technology and artificial intelligence requires a flexible system for lifelong learning that allows learners to continue acquiring and updating their skills throughout their lifetime.

Progression

What additional evidence or data could we use to determine whether current qualifications or types of qualifications, including Applied General qualifications, are delivering successful outcomes?

How could we better use data about student outcomes to monitor and assess the success of future qualifications?

4. BTEC Nationals provide an important and established progression pathway to higher education. Over 100,000 students a year progress with a BTEC either on its own or in combination with A levels. UCAS data shows that for the 2017 application cycle only 61% of 18 year old applicants held only A level qualifications with 11% of remaining applicants holding BTECs only and 8% a

combination of BTECs and A levels. As a higher proportion of students opting for BTECs come from disadvantaged backgrounds they also play a critical role in supporting social mobility, providing a pathway for disadvantaged students to progress through to higher level learning, either on an academic programme or a higher or degree apprenticeship.

5. Applied Generals also play a particularly important role in key subject areas. In 2017, 9 subjects account for 80% of all BTEC National students (Sport Studies, Business, Health and Social Care, ICT, Applied Science, Art and Design, Engineering, Creative Media and Public Services). In many subjects they are well established as alternatives to A levels, often preferred by higher education institutions.
6. The Applied Generals have recently been revised to meet DfE criteria to support better progression into higher education with the main cohort of students progressing with revised qualifications moving into higher education in summer 2018. It would be premature to withdraw these programmes before we are able to see the impact of those changes. We would urge Government to allow recent reforms to embed before considering further change.
7. BTEC qualifications play an important role at Middlesex University for a key part of our student demographic and in certain subject areas. Slightly more students - around one third – join Middlesex with just BTEC qualifications. 45% of male students at Middlesex enter with just a BTEC qualification and 32% of females. Our students from more deprived areas are more likely to hold BTEC qualifications with black students around twice as likely to hold BTECs than A Levels, white students are slightly more likely to hold A Levels than BTECs. Students studying in our Business, Science & Technology and Health & Education schools are significantly more likely to hold BTEC qualifications than A Levels. Students in the Law and Arts & Creative Industries schools are slightly more likely to have studied A Levels.
8. We would challenge the assumption that BTEC students perform less well and have a higher drop-out rate than A level students. This data is complex and there are many reasons why students drop-out. Students with BTEC qualifications are often from lower socio-economic backgrounds and have complex demands on their time such as financial and caring responsibilities. Such students may drop out of HE only to return to study after a couple of years once their life circumstances have changed which is not currently recorded or tracked. Improved collection of data by HESA would provide greater insight with closer alignment of UCAS and institutional HESA returns to ensure appropriate detail is captured to track and monitor how students with different qualifications perform through higher education.

Quality

Are the quality features listed under paragraph 55 the right starting point for framing future quality requirements for publicly funded qualifications? Please give reasons for your answer.

Are there certain quality features, such as size (that is, number of guided learning hours) or assessment processes that should be given particular priority? Please give reasons for your answer and if yes, please state which features should be a priority.

Are there particular quality principles that we should consider for adults? Please give reasons for your answer.

9. The quality features listed under paragraph 55 should be extended to ensure they provide sufficient flexibility for students to transfer from a vocational to an academic route. We would also argue that qualifications should be co-designed by employers and HE institutions to ensure they meet the needs of employers but also provide students with the necessary knowledge and skills to upskill later in life through academic qualifications aligned to the profession.

10. Guided learning hours should provide sufficient opportunity for students to gain a wider range of skills required for both vocational and entry into academic qualifications later in life. Assessment methods need to be rigorous, with a strong written and mathematical component, as there is insufficient opportunity to develop such skills as part of current qualifications and adults often lack confidence in key written and mathematical skills.
11. The A level route will keep open future options for an unsure student. A student that feels they have opted for the wrong A levels, or is not progressing in one of their three choices, will be able to alter that choice during their programme of study. They may also be able to take more than 3 A levels, so withdrawing from one would still leave them with a minimum level of achievement for progressing to higher education. The offer for T levels is different and a student must pass all elements to achieve a T level. If they feel that they have made the wrong choice, or are struggling with one element, they risk total failure at level 3. There is, therefore, an extremely high cost associated with the wrong decision at T level and this has the potential to discriminate against those students who do not take A levels.

Applying our principles: our broader ambitions

How should we determine “overlap” in relation to: a) overlaps with T Levels? Please give reasons for your answer. b) overlaps with A Levels? Please give reasons for your answer.

How could post-16 qualification reform and broader study best support more people to progress directly to level 3 after key stage 4?

12. It is useful to have some overlap between qualifications if alternatives are acting as a bridge between different routes and professions. As indicated above, it is important to avoid locking students into a specific route or profession with no option to easily switch between vocational and academic qualifications. A diverse range of qualifications to ensure students have opportunities to change direction throughout their lives. As indicated above, this is central to the economic and social mobility objectives set out in the Government’s industrial strategy.
13. As recognised in the Government’s Careers Strategy, high quality careers information advice and guidance for students and parents will be essential to ensure the successful implementation of T levels. There should be clear signposting within the curriculum to create awareness of the T level option and ensure that young people avoid shutting down options, for example by choosing academic subjects that will not feed into T level study. This is particularly important as the choices made about post-16 study will narrow further study and career options. Students of this age are still forming their identities and expectations of life so it is vital that early information is provided. Particularly important will be data on the labour market demand for the occupations supported by T levels, as well as information about progression to higher level learning including universities admission requirements. Middlesex University is playing a key role in its local area in raising aspiration and attainment through its outreach with local schools and FE colleges through its innovative programme Make Your Mark¹. Make Your Mark promotes progression pathways through school, college and higher level learning with a focus on technical routes such as apprenticeships, community events and a dynamic microsite.
14. As T levels are rolled out over the coming years it will be important to avoid confusion for learners over the role and status of level 3 qualifications such as BTEC Nationals which provide an important and established progression pathway to higher education for over 100,000 students a year.

¹ <https://makeyourmark.mdx.ac.uk/>

15. Universities have direct experience of recruiting students from a diverse range of qualification backgrounds to access and succeed in higher education. It will be important to engage with higher education admissions professionals on T levels. This will help ensure universities develop an understanding of T levels and are able to communicate entry requirements to prospective students and level 3 providers. It will also assist universities in meeting the specific needs of students progressing from these qualifications into higher education. Information around access to higher education from T levels should also be communicated to students further down the line who are making choices about level 3 study in schools and considering pathways and routes from T levels.

For more information please contact Jessica Strenk, Policy and Public Affairs Manager, at email: j.strenk@mdx.ac.uk.