



Department  
for Education

# **Review of post-16 qualifications at level 3 in England**

**Approvals process for academic and  
technical qualifications**

**July 2021**

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## Introduction

This document accompanies the government response to the second stage consultation as part of the review of post-16 qualifications at level 3. It is primarily aimed at awarding organisations, and outlines, at a high level, the principles of the approvals process for academic and technical qualifications, including when these qualifications will be approved for delivery. It also explains how the new funding approval process relates to accountability and post-16 performance tables. Further guidance, qualification approval criteria and funding approval criteria will be published later this year for qualifications to be taught from 2023.

We recognise the significant programme of change that is required to make sure the system is set up to deliver for decades to come, and we value the critical role and expertise of awarding organisations in helping us to achieve this. We will continue to work closely with awarding organisations throughout implementation of these changes.

## Qualifications to be taught from September 2023

In the consultation, we proposed that reformed qualifications that would sit alongside wave 1 and 2 T Levels would be available from August 2023. We have heard the concerns about the challenge of this ambitious timeframe and have decided to focus the first year of reform on those technical qualifications which align to employer-led occupational standards (standards) in the Digital route and enable entry into Digital occupations. These qualifications will be approved to be taught from 2023. All other qualifications approved through the review will be taught from 2024 or 2025, in line with the reform process.

All technical qualifications that align to standards in the Digital route and aim to enable entry to Digital occupations should be submitted by awarding organisations for approval to be taught from 2023. Any remaining technical qualifications which aim to support entry into a Digital occupation and are not submitted to the process will have their funding approval withdrawn from 2023. This process for approving technical qualifications will be led by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (the Institute).

This process will focus exclusively on technical qualifications aligned to standards in the Digital route which support entry into Digital occupations e.g. Cyber Security Technician. This route has been chosen as it addresses a government priority to close digital skills gaps. It also aligns with the approach taken for Higher Technical qualifications.

The approvals process for qualifications to be delivered from 2023 will be implemented by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), the Institute and Ofqual. The Institute will engage with stakeholders, including awarding organisations, in shaping the technical qualifications approval process to ensure it is fit for purpose, and any criteria relating to the approval of 2023 qualifications will be published later this year. Technical qualifications will need to meet approval criteria set by the Institute for each category of

qualification, including relating to the employer-led occupational standards and evidence of the need or demand for any qualifications they submit. Any qualification submitted for review must be on Ofqual's Register of Regulated Qualifications. Awarding organisations will also be required to submit qualification-related materials, which are likely to include specifications and assessment materials. These will be reviewed to ensure aspects such as:

- alignment of content to employer-led occupational standards<sup>1</sup>
- how the qualification will deliver its stated purpose
- how the size of the qualification is appropriate to both the content and the intended learners
- the validity of the assessments or assessment procedures.

As described below, subject to consultation, Ofqual may introduce additional conditions and guidance for qualifications that are approved for first teaching in autumn 2024 and 2025. Qualifications approved for 2023 will not initially be subject to the same Ofqual regulatory criteria that may be put in place to apply to qualifications approved for delivery from 2024 onwards. Therefore, these qualifications may be subject to some change in the following years to enable them to align with expectations across the wider review. Any issues of alignment between these qualifications and subsequent criteria will be managed pragmatically to avoid unnecessary disruption to providers or burden to awarding organisations.

## **Qualifications to be taught from September 2024**

The proposed full approvals process for reviewing and approving technical qualifications for delivery from 2024 onwards will follow a similar set of principles to those set out above. Subject to Parliament passing the relevant provisions of the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill, once those provisions are commenced the Institute will be able to approve further categories of qualifications, to be taught from 2024. The Institute will publish criteria for each category and we have asked that they aim to achieve as much consistency as possible between processes for each technical category.

Academic and technical qualifications to be taught from September 2024 will be subject to conditions set out by Ofqual. Ofqual will consult on their conditions for level 3 qualifications to be taught from 2024 and beyond later this year. ESFA will also publish funding criteria which will align with the intentions of the criteria and regulations set out by the Institute and Ofqual. Any requirements that are published for qualifications to be

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<sup>1</sup> To meet the test in section A2DA of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009

taught from September 2024 and 2025 will follow consultation from Ofqual and engagement and testing with stakeholders by the Institute.

The approvals process for qualifications to be delivered from 2024 will be staged, subject to further testing with stakeholders, to ensure it is fit for purpose. These stages are:

Type of qualification	Qualification review stage	Funding approval stage
<b>Academic</b>	ESFA will lead decisions as to the necessity of the qualification. Ofqual will lead the review of the quality of the qualifications.	Ofqual will submit analysis to the ESFA regarding the quality of the qualification. ESFA will conduct final checks and, subject to Ministerial agreement, confirm qualification funding approval.
<b>Technical</b>	Institute will lead approval decisions against their approval criteria and the relevant statutory tests. They will consider the necessity and demand for the qualification, and the quality, including reviewing qualification materials. Ofqual will submit analysis to the Institute on aspects such as qualification validity.	Institute will provide a list of approved qualifications to ESFA. ESFA will conduct final checks and, subject to Ministerial agreement, confirm qualification funding approval.

**Table 1: Proposed approvals process stages for qualifications to be delivered from 2021**

## Qualification review stage

The initial focus of the qualification review stage will require awarding organisations to demonstrate how their proposed qualification is necessary in the future landscape. Awarding organisations will be asked to submit robust evidence to demonstrate necessity.

For technical qualifications, this will involve awarding organisations providing evidence as to how they have engaged with relevant employers to ensure their particular qualification will deliver what employers need, and that their qualification offers a suitable way of meeting demand for particular knowledge, skills and behaviours. Awarding organisations will also be expected to show how their qualifications align with employer-led

occupational standards to meet the relevant statutory test<sup>2</sup> – e.g. for qualifications providing competence, this will involve the qualification mapping to as many as possible of the knowledge, skills and behaviours listed on a standard that can be taught in an education setting. To ensure efficiency in the process and reduce the burden on awarding organisations, the Institute will review such evidence and any qualifications without a strong employer-related case for approval and a strong link to an employer-led standard (where relevant) will be filtered out.

Where an employer-led standard has not been developed, and it can be demonstrated that it would be appropriate to develop one (for example, there is evidenced employer need for education or training in that occupation), we have asked the Institute to consider how it can expedite the process for development of a standard. Once a standard has been developed, the Institute can consider the approval of qualifications against the standard in line with the process above.

There may also be technical qualifications that are aligned to occupations that will remain outside the current scope of the occupational maps but are in demand by employers. We want to ensure the availability of qualifications in occupations that are valuable to employers, and so have asked the Institute to explore how such scenarios are addressed through its occupational maps and approvals processes.

Technical qualifications will need to be approved by the Institute in order to be considered for funding approval by ESFA. The Institute's approval will focus on ensuring that qualifications will deliver these skills needed by employers. Ofqual will continue to have responsibility for awarding body recognition and to provide independent regulation of approved qualifications in live delivery to ensure that standards are maintained. The two bodies will collaborate to ensure that their respective processes and requirements do not impose unnecessary burden on awarding organisations. Ofqual will also advise the Institute during the approval process to ensure that qualifications are robust before approval is granted.

The Skills and Post-16 Education Bill will (subject to Parliament) embed the collaborative relationship between the Institute and Ofqual for technical qualification approval and regulation. This will streamline and reinforce the long-term stability of the regulatory framework for technical qualifications. The Institute will begin to set out these arrangements in more detail shortly.

For academic qualifications, ESFA will decide whether qualifications in the academic path are necessary, based on the qualification categories set out in the responses to questions 10-14 in the [consultation response](#). Large qualifications, including Applied

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<sup>2</sup> The statutory tests are subject to Parliament passing the relevant provisions of the Skills and Post 16 Education Bill.

General qualifications (AGQs) larger than one A level, will only be approved if there is clear evidence of links to specialist HE courses not well served by A levels. They will also only be approved if they do not overlap with T Level areas. This could include qualifications in areas such as performing and creative arts. We will also fund small qualifications (one A level size or smaller) that can be taken alongside A levels and AS levels as part of a mixed programme of study, if there is evidence they add value to A level study and will support progression to high quality HE courses that deliver strong graduate outcomes. They could include small qualifications in subjects with some overlap with A levels or T Levels, including STEM subjects such as engineering.

We will also set a high bar for demonstrating the value of having an additional subject in the range, particularly if they overlap with A levels, drawing on evidence of successful outcomes for students taking those subjects at the moment, and links to further study in priority subjects. It does not mean blanket approval for small qualifications in all areas that currently have AGQs.

For all qualifications (academic and technical), as part of the approvals process, awarding organisations will also be required to submit a range of qualification materials, which are likely to include the qualification specification and assessment materials. Any particular materials and evidence required will be set out in the criteria published by ESFA, the Institute and Ofqual. Each qualification will be reviewed to ensure it meets the new qualification categories and associated criteria, including that it has a distinct purpose and is high quality. In the case of technical qualifications, meeting the "distinct purpose" criteria will be achieved by meeting the specified statutory approval test for the relevant category of qualification, as that will indicate the outcomes that will be attained by a person who obtains the qualification. Meeting the relevant statutory tests will also ensure that the qualification will support progression to skilled employment. Academic qualifications will need to demonstrate that they add value to A level study and will support progression to high quality HE courses that deliver strong graduate outcomes. We will set out further detail of the required evidence when we publish approval criteria.

The Skills and Post-16 Education Bill will (subject to Parliament passing the relevant provisions) provide the Institute with the ability to introduce a moratorium on the approval of technical qualifications of a particular kind if they were of the view that too many had been approved. This will be subject to consultation with the Secretary of State for Education. The government's reforms aim to streamline the technical qualification landscape and ensure a high-quality offer which meets the skills needs of the economy. The Institute's approvals process and the government's proposals to defund qualifications that overlap with T Levels and A levels are designed to manage the proliferation of qualifications. The moratorium power is an additional lever the Institute would apply to targeted areas, should it be necessary.

## Funding approval stage

ESFA will have final responsibility for confirming whether the qualification will be approved for funding and will publish any funding-specific criteria for relevant qualifications in advance of each qualification review cycle. Prior to confirming funding approval decisions, ESFA will run additional checks to confirm funding eligibility and which offers qualifications may appear in. Following this, where ESFA approves the qualification for funding, it will publish that information so providers are aware, enabling the qualification to be available for delivery the following academic year.

Regardless of which year they are approved during the qualification review period, all qualifications will be approved for funding by ESFA until 31 July 2026, in order to give the sector clarity and stability to operate. As happens now, ESFA will operate a process to 'roll-over' qualification offers where qualifications continue to meet criteria; further details of how offers will be reviewed and 'rolled-over' will be published in due course.

## Communication and support

Working with the Institute and Ofqual, we intend to support awarding organisations through the approvals process by providing guidance and engagement such as webinars and other events. Awarding organisations will also be provided with feedback on submissions, where relevant and appropriate. At a suitable stage in the process, awarding organisations may be permitted an opportunity to resubmit a qualification that has previously been inappropriate for approval. We expect that 'in-cycle' resubmissions may only be possible where minor changes are required to meet the quality threshold. This will be confirmed when details of the approvals processes are published.

Awarding organisations will be given the opportunity to appeal each approval decision that is communicated through the process. Details of appeals processes will be provided when criteria are published for approval of qualifications.

Subject to an evaluation of the efficacy of the process, we expect the approach to approving qualifications beyond this period of transition to look similar in order to maintain a level of consistency and avoid further disruption.

As mentioned above, further guidance, qualification approval criteria and funding approval criteria for qualifications to be taught from 2023 will be published later this year, with further guidance and requirements for qualifications to be delivered from 2024 and 2025 published at a later date, following consultation from Ofqual and engagement and testing with stakeholders by the Institute.



## **Accountability and post-16 performance tables**

The Department for Education has responsibility for maintaining the lists of qualifications included in 16-19 performance tables. The new funding approval process will ensure that all qualifications are high quality, but while funding approval will be a pre-requisite for inclusion, it will not be sufficient. The Department will consider other factors, including the fit with the Government's broader policy priorities. The final decision on which qualifications should be included in performance tables will continue to lie with the Secretary of State. Full details of the process for adding qualifications to the performance tables, performance points and approach to discounting will be published alongside the funding approval criteria.

## Key dates for awarding organisations

Qualification funding year (1 Aug – 31 Jul)	Changes to funding approval for existing qualifications	Submitting qualifications for funding approval
2021/22	1 Aug 2021: Funding approval withdrawn for level 3 qualifications with no publicly funded enrolments.	Nov 2021: Guidance, qualification approval criteria and funding approval criteria published for qualifications approved for delivery from 2023.
2022/23	1 Aug 2022: Funding approval withdrawn for level 3 qualifications with no or low publicly funded enrolments.	Further guidance, qualification approval criteria and funding criteria will be published in 2022 for qualifications approved for delivery from 2024 and beyond.
2023/24	<p>1 Aug 2023: Funding approval withdrawn for technical qualifications that overlap with wave 1 and 2 T Levels.</p> <p>1 Aug 2023: Funding approval for technical qualifications which align to standards in the Digital route and enable entry into Digital occupations for both 16 to 19 year olds and adults that have been approved against technical qualification criteria.</p>	Further guidance, qualification approval criteria and funding criteria will be published in 2022 for qualifications approved for delivery from 2024 and beyond.
2024/25	<p>1 Aug 2024: Funding approval withdrawn for technical qualifications that overlap with wave 3 and 4 T Levels.</p> <p>1 Aug 2024: Funding approval for the relevant technical and academic qualifications (those aligning to remaining wave 1 and 2 routes, as well as Engineering and Manufacturing route)</p>	

Qualification funding year (1 Aug – 31 Jul)	Changes to funding approval for existing qualifications	Submitting qualifications for funding approval
	for both 16 to 19 year olds and adults that have been approved through the new approvals process.	
2025/26	1 Aug 2025: Funding approval for academic and technical qualifications which align to remaining wave 3, wave 4, and other outstanding qualifications for both 16 to 19 year olds and adults.	



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