



Department
for Education

Post-16 level 3 and below pathways

Government consultation response

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Introduction

The Post-16 Level 3 and Below Pathways consultation launched alongside the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper on 20 October 2025. This white paper built on the findings of the Curriculum and Assessment Review's interim report and set out the government's plan to introduce reformed qualification pathways at level 3 and level 2, including:

- **A third, vocational pathway at level 3:** creating V Level qualifications. V Levels will sit alongside A Levels and T Levels as a vocational offer for students with a strong element of applied learning and some practical assessment. Content will be set nationally and linked to occupational standards defined by Skills England in collaboration with employers. V Levels are for students who want to study a broad range of subjects, rather than specialise in one route. T Levels will continue to offer students a large qualification option where they wish to study a particular route.
- **Two new pathways at level 2:** simplifying the current offer and providing a clear line of sight to either further study at level 3 through the Further Study pathway or skilled employment through the Occupational pathway.

The Post-16 Level 3 and Below Pathways consultation provided further detail on the design and implementation of the new pathways at both level 3 and level 2 and gathered views on the government's proposals. This included the approach to the size of qualifications in the pathways, the most appropriate subjects for these qualifications, their interaction with occupational standards, the interaction between the level 2 pathways, the approach to the content and branding for the qualifications at both level 3 and level 2, and the transition to the new reformed pathways.

These reforms focus on classroom-based learning. Therefore, apprenticeships were not part of this consultation process but are an important part of the vocational and technical offer for 16 to 19-year-olds. We are working to ensure that the reformed system supports progression into apprenticeships and that the level 2 pathways complement foundation apprenticeships.

Consultation exercise

The Post-16 Level 3 and Below Pathways consultation was launched alongside the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper on 20 October 2025 and closed on 12 January 2026. It consisted of 34 questions, including closed and open questions. The consultation gathered views via an online survey and email.

Profile of respondents

We received 768 responses in total: 403 responses from individuals and 365 responses from organisations. The breakdown of respondents by category is set out in Annex B.

Stakeholder engagement

During the consultation period, the DfE also held a wide-ranging stakeholder engagement process. This included:

- 2 large-scale consultation webinars
- 2 in-person events, at Stafford College and Waltham Forest College
- 52 semi-structured interviews
- 10 webinars with industry bodies and representative organisations
- 5 presentations at conferences relevant to the sector

Throughout the consultation period we spoke directly to approximately 1400 external stakeholders. In total, we attended 88 events contributing to almost 120 hours of direct engagement during this timeframe. To promote our stakeholder events and encourage sector engagement and consultation responses, we used our own mailing list, consisting of approximately 1,500 contacts from a broad mix of stakeholders: FE colleges (including general further education and sixth-form), academies and other school sixth forms, independent training providers (ITPs), awarding organisations, employers, higher education institutions, and careers professionals. We also used the DfE Sector email bulletin, which is sent to all providers of education for students aged 16 to 19.

At each of the events, we gave a presentation explaining the contents of the consultation and allowed time for questions from attendees. At the in-person events and structured interviews, we developed a bespoke set of questions to foster in-depth discussion of the issues raised within the consultation.

It is important to note the stakeholder engagement was not part of the formal consultation process. We therefore strongly encouraged all participants across all modes of engagement to submit a formal consultation response online.

Who this is for

This consultation response is for anyone with an interest in post-16 education and training for young people in England. Some of the content of the consultation response is technical detail aimed at professionals working in the post-16 sector. It is important that we include this technical detail to demonstrate how the changes associated with the new qualifications landscape will be implemented. However, the summary of changes provided within this government response are relevant to a wide range of individuals and groups. The broad groups for whom these reforms will be most relevant include potential students, parents or carers, awarding organisations, providers and employers.

Supporting documents and next steps

The government response to the consultation is accompanied by the Transition Plan, which outlines how we will support the sector to move to the reformed qualifications. We know that the sector requires certainty regarding what qualifications are available and for how long, and therefore the Transition Plan also includes details on decisions on qualification funding approval for 2026 to 2027 and 2027 to 2028 academic years. Full details of the Transition Plan can be found on the [Post-16 level 3 and below pathways](#) consultation page.

The government will also publish an Implementation Plan by June 2026, which will set out further details on how the reforms to level 3 and level 2 post-16 pathways will be delivered. This will expand on the phased route-by-route approach outlined in this document and will include subject lists across V Levels, T Levels, Foundation Certificates and Occupational Certificates. It will cover:

- our approach to subject areas which do not sit neatly within the reformed landscape
- the proposed market approach for reformed qualifications
- further information on the appropriateness of how qualifications are combined in study programmes and how we will work with Ofsted to ensure students are taking the right mix of qualifications
- plans for information, advice and guidance to students, non-qualification activities to support vocational students, and performance measures

The case for change

We have strong qualifications in A Levels and T Levels that provide positive opportunities for young people who wish to take an academic or a technical pathway. We will go further by developing a more dynamic system of technical and vocational qualifications that supports students to succeed, regardless of which pathway they wish to take.

There are students who are clear on where they want to specialise, but there are students who may wish to keep their options open and combine academic and vocational study, or may do further study at level 2, before specialising. We want all students to have choices that provide course breadth, whilst having clear progression outcomes.

This approach is backed by evidence. Research by the Edge Foundation has shown that most people want students to be able to mix and match technical and academic courses.¹ Similarly, OECD evidence indicates that providing multiple post-16 pathways supports future careers, as traditional linear career paths are disappearing due to digitalisation, automation, and the green transition.² The OECD argues that ‘future-ready’ education systems must offer flexible, high-quality, and diverse options – combining general and vocational education – to help individuals adapt, re-skill, and navigate changing labour markets. In addition, a third pathway was supported by the Curriculum and Assessment Review that recommended a ‘revised third pathway at level 3 to sit alongside A Levels and T Levels’ recognising that 2 pathways (technical and academic) do not serve the needs of all students.³

Furthermore, to continue to support the government’s mission to drive economic growth and meet skills shortages, we need to ensure all qualifications deliver good outcomes for students. Labour market evidence shows that more than 1 million of the 2.5 million roles currently in critical demand in the UK require skills and qualifications broadly aligned to level 2⁴, but many existing level 2 qualifications attempt to serve too many purposes, providing weak preparation for employment, apprenticeships and level 3 study. Introducing 2 pathways, tailored to the progression aims of individual students, will better prepare students for progression into employment or further study at level 3.

We aim to have a qualification system that is rigorous, coherent and delivers strong foundations for students. That is why our reforms are underpinned by three principles:

- **Progression** – the qualifications that young people take between ages 16 to 19 must deliver positive outcomes, either enabling them to progress into further study at a higher level or into sustainable employment, linked where appropriate to the areas they studied.
- **Future proof** – each qualification pathway must be high quality and adaptable to future skills needs. Each qualification should be equally prestigious, so that whichever pathway students take, it is valuable and respected.

¹ [Advancing British Standards Polling - Final Report.pdf](#)

² [OECD](#)

³ [Curriculum and Assessment Review final report: Building a world-class curriculum for all](#)

⁴ [Curriculum and Assessment Review final report: Building a world-class curriculum for all](#)

- **Clarity of choice** – the pathways for students aged 16 to 19 must be easy to navigate, so that young people are able to make the right choice for them. We want students to have the information they need to choose a pathway that works for them to achieve their desired progression outcomes. Students should be able to make informed choices, whether they want to specialise or study a broader portfolio. They should be able to mix and match academic and vocational qualifications, depending on their needs and future plans, so we can better support and retain students on the right pathway for them.

Progression

Reforms are necessary to support students making choices that lead to better outcomes. We want to make sure that all qualifications are high quality, will engage students, and support their progression goals and career aspirations. This includes progressing them into work and higher study relevant to their 16 to 19 study programme.

The qualifications that students take should lead to good progression outcomes. We know that A Levels already provide students with a clear line of sight to university and further study. We also see T Levels provide strong outcomes for students either moving on to university, apprenticeships or work in a related field.⁵ We want all technical and vocational qualifications to lead to strong outcomes.

That is why we will work with employers and the sector to ensure that the level 2 Occupational pathway prepares students to enter and progress in employment, and that the Further Study pathway prepares students to progress and thrive at level 3. Greater clarity about pathways at level 2 will also support students at level 1 and entry level to step up successfully. We will also work with higher education institutions (HEIs) and others to ensure V Levels lead to higher education or related work, including apprenticeships.

To support progression, we are setting an ambition that in steady state, a student will be equally as likely to progress into level 4+ study whether they take A Levels or V Levels.

Future proof

We must set high standards and expectations for our vocational and technical qualifications, to achieve better outcomes for students, and deliver them and employers a prestigious, reliable system. We also want students to have the information they need to make an informed choice about which pathway is best for them.

To support high standards, we are setting an ambition that in steady state, a student that starts a course will be as equally as likely to complete a V Level as an A Level.

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/technical-education-learner-survey-2025>

Giving people the skills they need to succeed is at the heart of delivering this government's core missions on economic growth and breaking down barriers to opportunity. At level 3, V Levels will have a strong element of applied learning and include some practical assessment. For students who are not yet ready or clear about specialising in one occupation, it will enable students to study across more than one subject area. Students will also be able to mix and match V Levels and A Levels where they want to have breadth across vocational and academic disciplines. Content will be set nationally and linked to occupational standards defined by Skills England in collaboration with employers.

At level 2, the choice of the Further Study pathway and the Occupational pathway will enable students to build skills and confidence for level 3 study, or to prepare for successful, sustainable employment in a related field. The system will support more work-ready students, ensuring we support the government's mission of economic growth by meeting skills needs.⁶

OECD evidence indicates that traditional linear career paths are disappearing due to digitalisation, automation, and the green transition, and so "future-ready" education systems must help individuals adapt and navigate changing labour markets.⁷ We must therefore make qualifications future-proof. For example, we are developing V Levels to be adaptable which, like T Levels, can flex and change quickly to reflect the needs of the economy and different sectors. T Levels, V Levels, Foundation Certificates and Occupational Certificates will either be linked to or based on occupational standards that have been developed with employers, so that students will be studying qualifications relevant to an occupation, and with a clear purpose. These are qualifications that will be able to be updated and adapt over time, which existing offers have failed to do and so have become out of date.

Clarity of choice

We have seen, through our engagement during the consultation period, that clear pathways and qualifications offer for students is widely welcomed. Parents and teachers currently find it hard to explain the differences between the types of qualifications and their likely outcomes. The Curriculum and Assessment Review highlighted that polling conducted by the DfE among young people who received their 16 to 19 results in summer 2024 revealed that approximately 1 in 5 learners (19%) felt they lacked sufficient information and guidance to make well-informed subject choices.⁸

⁶ , [Advancing British Standards Polling - Final Report.pdf](#)

⁷ [OECD](#)

⁸ [Curriculum and Assessment Review Final Report - GOV.UK](#)<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/young-peoples-experiences-of-careers-information-advice-and-guidance>

Clear pathways and qualification choices help students make the right choice for them, which in turn leads to stronger engagement and fewer dropouts. Dropout rates for existing vocational and technical qualifications are substantially above A Levels which often means students having to start again, leading to lost learning time, a reduction in students' self-esteem and risks higher numbers not ending up in education, employment or training (NEET).⁹ Improved options and clear pathways will directly contribute to reducing the likelihood of students aged 16 to 19 becoming NEET.¹⁰

To support students' ability to make informed choices about the qualifications they are taking, we must enable better comparison of outcomes. We know that students do not always fully understand, and cannot easily compare, existing qualifications. Navigating such a complex landscape can also be particularly challenging for disadvantaged students and those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

Clarity around choices can lead to better decisions.¹¹ This is why reforms focus on two pathways at level 2 (entry to employment, or on to further study) and three pathways at level 3 (academic, vocational and technical). These options will be supported by a clear qualification identity that will make it far easier to explain each offer to students (more information is available in the diagram on page 13). There will also be a defined list of subjects and occupational areas, so students will be able to make the right, informed choices. Alongside this, we are transforming careers guidance and the delivery of work experience to ensure young people are supported onto the right pathway.

We will also improve reporting and provide better information about how qualifications in the post-16 system are performing.

To support clarity of choice, we are setting an ambition that in steady state, every student entering post-16 education will have a clear choice of high-quality pathways. At level 2, this means one of two level 2 pathways; and at level 3 between A Levels, V Levels and T Levels.

⁹ [A level and other 16 to 18 results, Academic year 2024/25 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

¹⁰ [Equalities impact assessment: Post-16 level 3 and below pathways - GOV.UK](#)

¹¹ [Rethinking post-16 course choice: developing a tool to measure curricular interest and support learner progression](#)

Executive summary

Purpose of this document

This document sets out the government's response to the Post-16 Pathways Level 3 and Below consultation in England which ran from 20 October 2025 to 12 January 2026.

In this government response, we summarise the responses received to each question via the online questionnaire and email responses. We then confirm our final policy decisions and arrangements for reform or highlight where further information will be outlined in the forthcoming Implementation Plan, to be published by June 2026.

A reformed landscape

Level 3 – V Levels

V Levels will be a broad applied and vocational qualification – replacing existing applied and vocational qualifications – and will be 360 guided learning hours (GLH). V Levels will be studied over two years, and a significant proportion of the qualification content will be applied in nature – supporting learning by doing.

V Levels' subject content will be set by DfE and will be linked to occupational standards. Depending on the scope of the occupational route, a V Level may cover the whole route, or only part of the occupational route. Some V Level subjects may include optional content. This will allow providers to adapt the qualification to meet the needs of their local areas and the interests and aspirations of their cohorts.

The government aims to have only one V Level in a subject. Depending on the occupational route, there could be more than one V Level subject in a route. In a very limited number of exceptional cases, where specific criteria (for example, related to progression) are met, we will consider whether a V Level may be 'partnered' with one other V Level from the same route. This would work in a similar way to how A Levels in Maths and Further Maths can be delivered together and would mean, in these limited cases, a maximum of two V Level subjects in the same route can be studied together for 720 GLH.

We are clear that partnered V Levels must offer a different choice to more specialist T Levels – which allow students to focus on a single employment pathway full-time and allow students to specialise in a specific occupation. We will not allow V Levels to be combined in ways that recreate a large technical programme within a single route where a T Level exists, to avoid overlap.

The government recognises that this is a systemic change and is committed to supporting the sector by sharing best practice, offering targeted guidance, and working collaboratively. Support will include regular, practical communications alongside tailored help for delivering mixed study programmes of three small qualifications. The government will work with the sector on the workforce impact of these qualification changes and will continue to invest in recruiting, retaining, and training members of the FE workforce while working with the sector on developing V Levels.

Level 3 – T Levels

T Levels are the best option for young people who know what general career path they would like to follow, allowing a student to spend their full study programme immersing themselves in the more detailed curriculum for their chosen route. As such, T Levels will be the only large qualification available for students who want a route-focussed post-16 choice in the reformed system. New T Levels will be clearly based on occupational standards in the same way as existing T Levels to support successful progression into a skilled, technical occupation. We will work with Skills England to explore the development of new standards where none currently exist but there is clear demand, to underpin new T Levels.

T Levels will retain their structure of a route-based core, an occupational specialism and an industry placement so that they continue to support high-quality progression. However, feedback from the consultation highlighted that to ensure T Levels can meet the needs of a wider range of sector subject areas, while also allowing more students to access them, we must go further to improve their deliverability alongside maintaining rigour. This document sets out further changes we will make to T Level assessment and industry placements to support their scalability while maintaining the high quality for which T Levels are known. We will also ensure that, where new T Levels are created, the technical qualification is no greater than 1080 GLH in the classroom, alongside the 315 hours for the industry placement and time for employability, enrichment and pastoral activity.

Level 2 – Foundation Certificates and Occupational Certificates

At level 2, this government response reiterates the importance of introducing two distinct pathways for students tailored to their intended destination; this is in line with responses to the consultation which were broadly positive about this change. This government response sets out that students will receive strengthened early programme support to help them choose the right level 2 programme at the start of their 16 to 19 journey, making use of good practice such as enhanced early diagnostic assessments and strong information, advice and guidance. Providers will also retain flexibility within the first 42 days of the funding eligibility period to assess needs, confirm programme suitability, and support students to transfer to the most appropriate pathway where necessary.

Further decisions regarding the size of the Foundation Certificate and the length of the Occupational pathway are set out in this response. The size of Foundation Certificates will be set to range from 240 to 300 GLH. This is a revised range, giving flexibility in GLH to support a well-balanced study programme that allows for subject-specific variation in size, leaves sufficient time for English and/or maths, ensures appropriate time for employability, enrichment and pastoral provision, enables supported preparation for level 3 and fits within the expected hours of a full-time study programme.

The Occupational pathway will remain as a two-year programme of study. The law requires that all young people must stay in education or training until at least their 18th birthday. The two-year pathway enables the Occupational Certificate to maximise occupational content from the relevant standard, whilst also supporting students who need the extra time to achieve their English and maths, and to build the resilience and confidence to enter and progress in skilled employment.

Level 3 and level 2 – branding

Across both level 3 and level 2 we are clear that simple, consistent and recognisable branding is important for the new qualifications. However, we will allow the inclusion of the name of the awarding organisation in the qualification title.

Transition to the future landscape

We intend to rollout the reformed qualifications on a route-by-route basis, where possible, with the introduction of the first routes in 2027/28 and the final routes in 2030/2031. An indicative timeline can be found on page 45. We will work with the sector to consider the appropriate approach for routes in areas such as catering and hospitality, hair and beauty and construction, to ensure there continue to be pathways into skilled employment in these trades and will set out more detail in our Implementation Plan.

Adult qualifications

This consultation focused on 16 to 19-year-olds. It is important that adults have access to high-quality qualifications that meet their needs. We have already introduced reforms to key routes for adults and will continue to work with colleagues across government, strategic authorities, awarding organisations and providers to ensure the qualifications landscape meets the needs of adult students. We will consider the next steps for adult qualifications (19+) in the future.

Future 16 to 19 level 3 and level 2 landscape

Level 3 or level 2 apprenticeships (work-based)	Level 2	<p>Further Study Pathway (classroom-based)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> For students who want to and are capable of progressing onto further study on a level 3 pathway, whether T Levels, V Levels or A Levels, after one additional year at level 2. Strong focus on English and maths, alongside other enrichment activity and exposure to level 3 study Includes a Foundation Certificate of 240-300GLH providing a balance of breadth and depth in a broad vocational area, with content set nationally Foundation Certificates focus on applied and practical learning, with content aligned to the level 3 options they support progression onto 	<p>Occupational Pathway (classroom-based)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> For students who want to enter a particular level 2 occupation and need to develop their technical knowledge and skills over 2 years, with the aim of progressing into skilled employment in relevant level 2 roles. Tailored to support progression to work, including employability and enrichment activity. Strong focus on English and maths Includes an Occupational Certificate, with broad introductory content based on the occupational standards and set nationally, as well as occupation-specific content. Size of the Occupational Certificate is driven by the relevant occupational standard 	
	Level 3	<p>V Levels (classroom-based)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide broad, vocational qualifications for students who wish to explore a range of routes. Comparable in size to an A Level, V Levels can be studied alongside other qualifications such as A Levels or an English or maths retake. Blend applied learning with practical assessment, and their content will be linked to occupational standards set by Skills England. Enable progression to related higher education or an apprenticeship. 	<p>T Levels (classroom-based)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The classroom-based technical route for students who know which broad career area they want to pursue. A single, large qualification equivalent to three A Levels. Based on occupational standards. Includes a 45-day industry placement. Combine route-specific core content with a specialist component that develops threshold competence in an occupation. Enable progression to related higher education, apprenticeships, or skilled employment. 	AS/A Levels

These new qualifications will be regulated by Ofqual. Ofqual will take steps to ensure that awarding organisations have the necessary capacity and expertise to successfully deliver these qualifications.

Questions analysis and government responses

This section provides a summary of the responses to each of the consultation questions and should be read alongside the consultation document ([available at GOV.UK](#)). The information summarises feedback from the online questionnaire and email responses. Questions 25 to 34 of the consultation were standard questions capturing respondent details, including their name and the capacity in which they were responding.

16 to 19 level 3 pathways

In the current landscape, students choose level 3 qualifications from across several qualification types which can vary in consistency and quality.¹² Once the third, vocational pathway is introduced, the landscape will be clearer. Students will be able to choose between three high-quality qualification types that will provide them with opportunities to progress to further study and skilled work – with V Levels as the applied and vocational offer, T Levels as the technical offer, and A Levels as the academic offer. Offering V Levels will mean students who want to study different subjects, but who learn best by doing – through applying knowledge and skills to achieve work-related purposes (rather than through academic study) – have a consistently high-quality qualification option.

Both vocational and technical qualifications will be designed to support entry into related employment (including apprenticeships) and further and higher education courses. However, under these reforms, they offer different levels of specialisation. Technical qualifications, such as T Levels, start broad but allow learners to specialise in a specific occupation, whereas vocational qualifications stay broad across an employment sector.

V Levels (vocational pathway) are for students who would like to explore sectors without specialising. V Levels will provide students with the opportunity to pursue their interests further through a range of progression outcomes, whether that is related higher education or work with training, including apprenticeships. V Levels will focus on applied learning and aim to cover the core knowledge and skills related to an employment sector. Students will be able to take V Levels in multiple subjects and in combination with other qualifications such as A Levels or level 2 English or maths. To meet their purpose as broad, applied and vocational qualifications, their content will be linked to occupational standards to support workplace-relevant transferable skills. They will prioritise attainment of skills such as problem solving and critical thinking to support progression to higher education. V Levels will not, on their own, provide threshold or occupational competence, as students who wish to develop this should consider a T Level, apprenticeship or level 2 Occupational Certificate.

¹² [Qualification Downloads - List of Qualifications approved for funding](#). Qualifications funded in academic year 2025/26. Excludes qualifications out of scope of the review: A/AS level, Access to Higher Education Diploma, Advanced Extension Awards, International Baccalaureate Diploma, Project, Performing arts graded examinations, and T Levels.

T Levels (technical pathway) are for students who know the broad career area they want to pursue. They offer students an in-depth study programme through a single, large qualification (a T Level is the equivalent of three A Levels) and a substantive industry placement, supporting progression into skilled employment in related roles, an apprenticeship (typically at higher levels), or higher education. T Levels consist of a core that covers knowledge and skills for employment sectors, with a specialism enabling students to gain threshold competence in a particular occupation. These are combined with an industry placement with an employer to ensure students have the depth and breadth of knowledge and skills needed for progression into a skilled technical role.

A Levels (academic pathway) are for students who want to pursue an academic pathway and career interests through higher study. A Levels are academic subject-based qualifications. They are designed to equip students with the knowledge, skills and understanding to progress to higher education, and to enable higher education institutions and employers to identify student attainment and academic ability. Students choose a combination of subjects (typically three) that suit their academic strengths and future goals and can also choose to study AS Levels. The purpose of A/AS Levels was out of scope of the Post-16 Pathways Level 3 and Below consultation.

V Level design

V Levels size – Questions 1 and 2

We are proposing V Levels will be 360 guided learning hours (GLH) to enable students to combine them with other V Levels and A Levels. Where larger subjects are needed, we propose that these are offered through T Levels. In taking this approach, are there any risks or issues we need to be aware of?

Are there any particular issues for subjects or students that we need to be aware of as a result of not having medium sized V Levels?

Summary of responses

Responses indicated broad support for the principle of introducing V Levels as a vocational pathway. However, responses indicated concern that there may be some subject areas where V Levels at 360 guided learning hours (GLH) are insufficient to deliver the depth, practical competence and technical content required in a range of vocational areas.

Responses suggested that qualification size could be determined by content and route requirements. Some responses acknowledged that the advantage of 360 GLH V Level size is to allow a mixed study programme of A Levels and V Levels, whilst retaining clear differentiation from the T Level.

The most frequently raised themes were:

- **The loss of medium-sized qualifications:** A majority of respondents raised concerns that removing medium-sized qualifications, typically those in the 400-720 GLH range, could create a structural gap or “missing middle” between V Levels and larger T Levels. Respondents generally wanted to ensure there was support for progression and options for students to study a broader subject area before committing to a specific occupational sector.
- **T Levels being unable to replace larger vocational routes under the current model:** Many respondents raised concerns that T Levels could not currently replace larger vocational qualifications fully. The three main reasons cited were provider capacity to deliver industry placements at scale, narrow occupational focus and gaps in level 3 occupational standards.
- **Risks to progression, recognition and credibility:** Concerns were raised about whether higher education institutions and employers would recognise and value a 360 GLH V Level, particularly where large vocational courses are already accepted by higher education institutions. Employers in some sectors also indicated that reduced qualification size could weaken their confidence in the pipeline of future workers.

- **Delivery and implementation challenges:** Providers and local authorities raised practical concerns about delivering a system based on 360 GLH V Levels. These included workforce constraints, particularly shortages of specialist staff; timetabling pressures, especially where students were also retaking English and maths; and the costs associated with specialist facilities. A smaller number of respondents discussed travel and transport as a delivery risk across multiple campuses, particularly in rural or geographically dispersed areas where providers rely on medium qualifications to sustain viable cohorts.

Additional themes raised regarding 360 GLH V Levels:

- **Equity and inclusion concerns:** Local authorities and some representative bodies argued that if larger qualifications defaulted to T Levels, students who were not ready for that route, including those with SEND, those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and those requiring additional time for English and maths, could find their options at level 3 narrowed to a study programme consisting of multiple qualifications, which was seen by those respondents as less suitable for these cohorts.
- **Insufficiency of 360 GLH to deliver the depth, practical competence, and technical content required in specific vocational areas:** These included performing arts, creative industries, screen industries, blacksmithing, engineering, construction, land-based studies, animal care, health and social care, and hair and beauty. Respondents suggested that these areas required sustained time for workshop practice, portfolio development, laboratory work and the acquisition of safety-critical competencies.
- **Progression to higher education:** Representative bodies suggested that, for some higher education routes, including science, engineering, sport, social science and creative degrees, a larger volume of applied subject learning was important for preparation and admissions confidence, and that 360 GLH alone might not provide sufficient depth.
- **Retention, step-off points and dropout risk:** Concerns were raised about the loss of meaningful step-off points for students whose circumstances changed during their programme. Respondents suggested that medium-sized qualifications had previously offered credible interim outcomes and that, without them, some students might leave larger programmes without a recognised achievement.

‘Although this would be a significant change to the current qualification landscape, the benefits of having qualifications that are equal in size outweigh the potential risks of not having medium sized V levels. The proposed approach will make it easy for students to combine A levels and V levels in different subjects to create a programme of study which meets their needs and which could have a more balanced and varied approach to assessment including more non-exam assessment.’ (NAHT)

Government response

V Level principles

We agree with respondents that V Levels must provide the basis for good educational outcomes and a distinct vocational choice alongside A Levels and T Levels. As such, V Levels will be developed to meet the following principles:

- **Allow for programme breadth:** We assume that students choose to take vocational subjects because they have an interest in exploring and potentially pursuing related careers. Study programmes featuring 2 or 3 different V Level subjects (for example, Digital and Engineering) mean students can pursue each of these interests further whilst keeping their options open. This also means students can combine V Levels with A Levels to create a mixed academic and vocational study programme.
- **Support related progression:** Broad programmes, including mixed V Level and A Level programmes, can allow students to pick subject combinations to meet progression requirements – predominantly to higher education. Where students have picked a V Level subject, presumably to explore a career interest, they will rightly expect attainment of the qualification to better enable them to pursue this career interest further at age 18 or 19 should they wish. Therefore, V Levels must ensure students can progress to related higher-level study, and where possible, related employment (for example, as an apprentice). In this way, by offering strong progression outcomes, V Levels should provide parity of esteem with A Levels and T Levels.
- **Sufficiently applied and vocational:** V Levels will have nationally set content, linked to occupational standards. To ensure the content properly relates to occupational standards and supports learning by doing, a significant proportion of the qualification content should be practical and applied in nature, and related to achieving defined work-related purposes.
- **Support system coherence:** V Levels must complement A Levels and T Levels, providing a distinct and highly valued choice. As V Levels are vocational, they should not be fully knowledge focused or specialise in an occupational area. Students wishing to develop threshold occupational competence should take a T Level, and for those who wish to develop full occupational competence they should take an apprenticeship. Those seeking to progress into a relevant level 2 role can take a level 2 Occupational Certificate.
- **Be attainable:** Students who are able to study a level 3 qualification, should be able to access V Levels if they want to and can progress to further study or employment. These broad study programmes will benefit those with SEND by providing greater flexibility in learning, quality and consistency of qualifications and choice of subjects to create a coherent and distinct study programme, enabling

them to progress onto related employment, apprenticeships and related higher education.¹³

V Level size and partner V Levels

Having carefully considered concerns raised and suggested alternatives proposed for the size of V Levels, the government intends to keep V Levels the size of A Levels, in order to ensure these principles are met. This is 360 guided learning hours per qualification (V Level or A Level) over 2 years. Where three qualifications are taken by a student, whether this is three V Levels, a mix of V Levels and A Levels, or three A Levels, this will total 1080 guided learning hours over two years.

The government aims to have only one V Level per subject. Depending on the occupational route there could be more than one V Level subject in a route. In a limited number of exceptional cases, we can see that study of more than one subject within the same employment route would be beneficial to students. Therefore, we propose that students should have the option to study two closely associated ‘partner’ V Levels (for example, in the way A Level students can study Maths and Further Maths) in the same employment route. This means that students could focus on a single employment route for 720 GLH.

However, we are clear that V Levels must provide a distinct offer and aim to meet the principles set out above, so this approach will only be considered in exceptional cases - for a small number of subject areas. We will not allow V Levels to be combined in ways that recreate a large technical programme within a single route where a T Level exists, in order to avoid overlap. Rigorous criteria (for example on progression to higher level study and only where content overlap with T Levels is limited) will need to be met. We will confirm the criteria and subject areas for consideration in the Implementation Plan.

For some subjects, V Levels may need to include optional content; as A Levels and existing applied and vocational qualifications do. In this way, although each student studies a V Level for 360 GLH, the scope of the available subject content which can be potentially covered through a V Level, could be larger than 360 GLH. This also has the advantage of allowing for V Levels in these subjects to be tailored to different employer and regional progression needs. As we develop content for each V Level subject, we will work with higher education institutions, 16 to 19 providers and employers to identify whether some content can be specified as optional or whether it all needs to be mandatory. Where content can be optional, we expect the approach to assessment taken by awarding organisations to be subject to regulations set by Ofqual – to ensure each option is of comparable demand.

¹³ Equalities impact assessment: [Post-16 level 3 and below pathways - GOV.UK](#)

In terms of larger sized qualifications, if students know what career area they want to pursue and so are focussed on a single subject area full-time, the T Level is the right option. However, we acknowledge respondents' desire to ensure T Levels are accessible to as many students as possible. In recognition of issues raised in the consultation, we plan to make further changes to T Levels to ensure every student who wishes to take this pathway can do so, where this is right for them. These changes are explained in detail in the T Levels section from page 24, and they include:

- further changes to how industry placements can be delivered
- improved manageability of assessment
- expanding the choice of T Level subjects available
- ensuring new T Level technical qualifications should not rise above 1080 GLH (plus industry placement and time for Employability, Enrichment and Pastoral Activity)

Sector impacts

The government acknowledges that this is a systemic change for the whole sector and that providers will be affected in different ways. We are committed to providing the necessary support and advice, learning from best practice in the sector, and working collaboratively with the sector to support the transition.

We will provide regular, targeted and practical communications and engagement with an emphasis on expert practitioner voices and advocacy (newsletters, toolkits, webinars, conference seminars, representative body convened groups, that illustrate how to plan for and deliver the new qualifications effectively). This will be supplemented by tailored support about how providers could develop and deliver a mixed study programme of three small qualifications. This will be delivered through bringing together a new sector-led group to help with sector readiness, the FE support contract which provides professional development and transition support for teachers, and in collaboration with regional teams, the FE Commissioner, and others.

We will work with the sector on supporting the FE workforce to deliver these qualification reforms. The Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper set out our ambitions to address workforce challenges to ensure we can deliver a sufficient and high-quality workforce. We will continue to invest in the workforce, supporting colleges to recruit and retain the expert teachers to meet demand and ensure that teachers are getting the high-quality training and support they need. We will continue to work with the sector on this as we develop our plans for V Levels.

Further detail will be set out in the Implementation Plan.

Assessment and grading

The assessment and grading of V Levels are a matter for Ofqual. To reflect the applied and vocational purpose of V Level qualifications, we believe the assessment approach should include a range of different methods. We also believe that the approach to grading should be simple, consistent across awarding organisations, and straightforward to understand for students, employers and HEIs. We are working with Ofqual, who will be consulting on the assessment and grading arrangements in due course.

V Levels subjects – Question 3

Which subjects do you think are most appropriate for delivery through V Levels?

Summary of responses

The most frequently raised themes were:

- **Principles for subjects:** Responses indicated broad support for V Levels in applied, sector-based subjects where students would benefit from breadth, transferable skills and progression flexibility. Respondents also noted that subject appropriateness should be determined by delivery capacity (for example, facilities available to providers, timetabling challenges, and workforce). Local and strategic authorities framed subject choice particularly through a place-based lens.
- **Indicative list of subject areas and size concerns:** Respondents commonly identified V Levels as suitable in the areas set out in the indicative list of the consultation. Nonetheless, a strong theme was that a single 360 GLH model might not be appropriate for all subjects. This was raised primarily in relation to creative, performance and portfolio-based subjects, construction and engineering, land-based studies, and other specialist technical areas.
- **Additional subjects proposed by respondents:** There were additional subject areas which were stated by respondents as appropriate for delivery through V Levels but were not covered in the indicative list. These include Applied Science variants; Environmental / Sustainability / Green Skills; Food and Nutrition / Food Science; Logistics / Supply Chain; Marketing; Psychology / Applied Psychology; Sport; Recruitment / Talent Acquisition; Trades like Electrical Installation; Plumbing; and Motor Vehicle.

‘V Levels are most appropriate for broad, transferable sectors where learners benefit from exploration before specialisation.’ (Greater Manchester Learning Provider Network)

Government response

In the consultation we set out an indicative list of subject areas that could be the basis for V Level subjects. The responses generally indicated broad support for V Levels in the subject areas we set out in the consultation document, and that students would benefit from breadth, transferable skills and progression flexibility. We also received a wide range of potential additional subjects for V Levels.

We have drawn out the full list of subjects suggested from the responses, along with the subject areas set out in the consultation document, and are now in the process of conducting further in-depth subject analysis to identify which subjects are likely to be viable to become a V Level. We will be publishing more details about available subjects in the Implementation Plan.

We agree with respondents that some employment routes have more occupations, and so more potential knowledge, skills and understanding to learn than others. As such, for routes with extensive content, we may expect to develop more than one V Level. In these cases, we expect each V Level subject to be entirely distinct – with minimal overlap with other V Level subjects. However, as is the case now, if V Level subject content does overlap, discounting may need to be applied to avoid ‘double counting’ and ensure study programmes offer sufficient breadth. As set out above, in exceptional cases, V Levels may be ‘partnered’ to ensure sufficient depth and breadth, and some V Levels may include optional content.

V Levels and the wider study programme – Question 4

How could current information, advice and guidance be improved or what new guidelines or measures should be developed to ensure that students are informed about subject selection and combinations?

Summary of responses

The most frequently raised themes were:

- **Nationally consistent guidance on V Levels and the qualifications landscape:** Respondents emphasised the need for clear, government-led and consistent national guidance explaining what V Levels are, and how they differ from A Levels and T Levels. Respondents outlined the importance of ensuring that guidance positions V Levels as a positive choice rather than an alternative for those unsuited to academic study.
- **Clear progression pathways and early confirmation of higher education recognition and UCAS tariff points:** Respondents stressed that universities must confirm recognition of V Levels – including UCAS tariff points, grading structures and accepted subject combinations – before students make post-16 choices. They also called for explicit progression mapping to higher education courses, apprenticeships and employment.

- **Guidance on study programme construction and subject combinations:** Respondents raised the need for guidance on how V Levels could be combined with A Levels, English and maths resits and other qualifications to form coherent study programmes.
- **Training for careers advisers, teachers and school staff:** Respondents emphasised the need for training to ensure they can provide accurate, impartial guidance on V Levels and overcome entrenched biases favouring A Levels. They also highlighted the importance of engaging students and parents earlier – ideally from key stage 3 – to build awareness of vocational pathways and shape informed choices.

‘There needs to be considerable investment in upskilling teachers, parents and carers, post-16 providers and employers in any new post-16 vocational landscape, alongside academic and other routes (such as direct employment).’ (STEM Learning)

Government response

We know how important information, advice and guidance will be for the reformed qualifications and recognise the strength of this feedback. We are therefore working to ensure the guidance is comprehensive and are giving particular consideration to the call for clear national guidance, clear progression pathways and confirmation of higher education tariff points, guidance on subject combinations, and training. We are also working closely with higher education providers and representative bodies such as Universities UK to ensure that V Levels have clear progression routes into higher level study.

Further information on non-qualification activities will be provided in the Implementation Plan.

T Levels

T Levels – Question 5

What factors should we consider when creating T Levels where there are currently no level 3 occupational standards? Please explain your answer.

Summary of responses

The most frequently raised themes were:

- **Understanding the sector:** Responses indicated that there should be a clear evidenced case for T Levels to be developed in areas without level 3 occupational standards, and that the first step should be to understand why level 3 occupational standards were absent in a given route.
- **Labour market demand:** Respondents gave a dominant view that credible labour-market demand, identifiable level 3 job roles or explicit progression value, and deliverable (and credible) placements should be treated as minimum conditions for proceeding. Several employers expressed support for the development of T Levels in specific sectors where they aligned with clear workforce strategies.
- **Employer co-design:** Respondents consistently said that T Level development should be co-designed with employers in a way that was representative of the sector, including small or medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), freelancers and sector bodies, not just large firms.
- **T Level alternatives:** A recurring theme was that, where subjects are without level 3 occupational standards, alternatives should be considered, such as a large V Level or the utilisation of professional frameworks and cross-sector competency models.
- **Assessment:** Some respondents raised concerns about how T Levels developed without existing occupational standards would be assessed. Careful consideration is needed to ensure assessment approaches reflect the nature of work in the relevant sector. The need for robust quality assurance across awarding organisation assessment and delivery was also raised.

‘First, the absence of a level 3 occupational standard should not be interpreted as a lack of employer demand or progression opportunity.’
(National Federation of Roofing Contractors)

‘We welcome the proposal to introduce T Levels in Art and Design, Performing Arts, and Music Performance.’ (Arts Council England)

Government response

T Levels are designed in collaboration with employers to ensure young people have the skills they need to progress into their chosen sector. We currently have T Levels across 21 subjects. The main destinations for students who have completed a T Level were paid work (40%), a university degree (34%), or an apprenticeship (14%).¹⁴ T Levels are already showing good progression outcomes, with more students continuing in related work or study compared to other level 3 technical courses.¹⁵ We are confident that T Levels are the right choice for students who know what broad career area they want to pursue post-16, and would therefore benefit from a large, in-depth study programme. T Levels will therefore be the only large (1080 GLH) qualification available for students who want a sector-focussed post-16 choice in the reformed system.

Responding to feedback that new T Levels must be designed with understanding of the sector, we will also retain the principle that T Levels should be clearly based on occupational standards, to support successful progression into a skilled, technical occupation. We will therefore continue to work with Skills England to develop new standards where these do not currently exist, and there is evidence of demand and a clear progression route to a skilled occupational role. This will include basing some T Level content on standards not at level 3, by developing content and assessment from the standard that is appropriate for students on a level 3 programme. This is because these standards are based on recognised occupations in that sector and T Levels developed from these standards will support progression to level 4 and above, including apprenticeships in that sector. We will also ensure that new T Levels have input from employers of all sizes in the industry and are cognisant of labour market demand.

Through the consultation feedback, we also heard that while T Levels are valued for their rigour and excellent progression outcomes, placement capacity, the size and nature of T Level content and assessment is seen as a significant barrier to the development of new T Levels, and growth of existing T Levels. This theme came through particularly strongly in consultation events and interviews where stakeholders recognised that the content of a T Level was broadly right when considering any of the existing large qualification areas. Their reservations primarily centred on the deliverability of the qualification and the risk that expanding the model into new subject areas could exacerbate these risks further. This is consistent with feedback from many existing T Level providers who, whilst delivering strong outcomes from their T Level portfolio, struggle to scale their delivery beyond existing levels. Therefore, for both new and existing T Levels – we will make further changes with the intention to enhance accessibility for students, manageability for providers and support scalability.

This will enable more students to access these qualifications and the excellent progression opportunities they bring, where that is the right option for them. The overall

¹⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/technical-education-learner-survey-2025>

¹⁵ NatCen NFER study – data in the study is related to the first 4 T Levels

structure of T Levels, consisting of a broad-based core covering sector knowledge and skills, an occupational specialism providing entry level competence for work, and a high-quality industry placement remain – but we know further improvements to delivery are required.

Industry placements must still be overseen by an employer or employers, last a minimum of 315 hours to give students a substantive opportunity to put the skills and knowledge they have learned in the classroom into practice, and clearly support wider qualification outcomes. Within this framework providers will be responsible for determining how placements should be carried out to best meet the needs of their students. This means, for example, more scope to involve multiple employers, utilise group projects overseen by an external employer or take further advantage of remote working opportunities, where a provider deems this appropriate. Providers will need to ensure all industry placements continue to be high quality and support the learning outcomes and assessment of the T Level. We will publish updated industry placement delivery guidance to reflect this new framework by June 2026.

On size and assessment, we will work closely with Ofqual and awarding organisations to ensure T Levels are more manageable for providers to deliver at scale. We will do this by reducing content where it is not absolutely necessary to demonstrate threshold competence, and by reducing the assessment burden for providers, particularly focussing on reducing the staff hours required to deliver and administer assessments. As part of this we are asking Ofqual to consult on allowing students to retake Core exams individually, where required, rather than requiring students to retake a full set of exams where one core element has not been achieved. We will also ensure that all new T Levels are no greater than 1080 GLH alongside the minimum 315 hours industry placement to support deliverability. Alongside this we will continue to manage down the size of existing T Levels where there is unnecessary content and complexity.

We have seen an increasing proportion of students with SEND taking T Levels. We believe that the further changes that we are proposing will allow us to support more students with SEND to successfully access and complete a T Level. Moving forward, to ensure these changes have impact and we continue to widen access to T Levels, we will set up a T Level improvement group consisting of sector leaders and education experts. This group will consider whether we have struck the right balance of recognising the performance of students who complete some, but not all, of a T Level, as well as considering future policy changes to enable more students to access these qualifications.

We will continue to test the viability of new T Levels in the sector subject areas listed on page 45, according to the principles above – including consideration of whether further design flexibilities are required and proportionate. Further information on new T Level subjects will be set out in the Implementation Plan.

16 to 19 level 2 pathways

The current landscape includes many level 2 qualifications which are designed to prepare students to progress to level 3 study, and to move into employment or apprenticeships. By serving multiple purposes, many existing level 2 qualifications lack a clear overall focus, and we have heard that students, families and employers find this makes the landscape difficult to navigate. We will introduce two dedicated level 2 pathways for 16 to 19-year-olds, each leading to a particular primary destination:

1. **Further Study pathway** – For students who want to pursue level 3 study via related T Levels, V Levels or A Levels. Students on this pathway will benefit from more time to develop their knowledge and skills before moving up to the next level. Students will study a Foundation Certificate, a one-year vocational qualification that provides broad scope in a specific vocational area. To ensure consistency and quality for students, the department will set the content for Foundation Certificates, which awarding organisations will follow when developing Foundation Certificate qualification specifications. Students will take a single Foundation Certificate alongside any required English and/or maths study, a strong package of enrichment, employability and pastoral activities, and exposure to Level 3 content.
2. **Occupational pathway** – For students who are clear they want to progress into level 2 employment or an apprenticeship but need to develop their skills. Within this pathway students will study a single Occupational Certificate, a technical qualification which provides an overview of the sector and key transferable skills alongside occupation specific content that develops the knowledge, skills and behaviours needed for students to work towards competence in their chosen occupation. Occupational core content will be set nationally by the Department for Education, drawing on occupational standards and developed with sector experts to ensure consistency across related qualifications. Alongside the qualification, students will continue English and/or maths if they have not yet achieved a grade 4 at GCSE, build employability skills, confidence and resilience, and take part in enrichment activities that prepare them for work.

Within these pathways, students will take their own individual study programmes that reflect their specific subject interests and career goals, with a focus on preparing them for their intended primary destination. We expect students to study either a single Foundation or Occupational Certificate as part of their study programme. In addition to the qualifications being studied, level 2 students are required to continue studying maths and/or English if they have not reached grade 4 at GCSE by the end of key stage 4. Just 10% of 16-year-olds at level 2 achieved grade 4 in these subjects at GCSE,¹⁶ and the additional time needed for maths and English must be considered when planning study

¹⁶ [Curriculum and Assessment Review Final Report - GOV.UK](#)

programme hours. Notably as 28% of students on level 2 programmes have SEN¹⁷, providers will also have the flexibility to use study programme hours to offer additional support, adapted delivery, or extended teaching time. This flexibility ensures learners with SEND can consolidate skills, access tailored learning, and progress toward their chosen destination at a pace suited to their individual needs.

Greater clarity about the pathways available at level 2 will also help students learning at level 1 and entry level to better understand their options for progression.

Assessment and grading

The assessment and grading of Foundation and Occupational certificates are matters for Ofqual. To reflect the purpose and intended progression destinations of each qualification type we believe the assessment approach should include a range of different methods. We also believe that the approach to grading for both qualification types should be simple, consistent across awarding organisations, and straightforward to understand for students and employers. We are working with Ofqual, who will be consulting on the assessment and grading arrangements in due course.

Pathway Purposes

Overall, respondents welcomed the greater destination clarity provided by the proposed post-16 level 2 pathways. Respondents felt that the Occupational and Further Study pathways clearly set out the intended outcomes for students – whether direct progression into level 2 skilled employment or apprenticeships or onward progression to study – and that this clarity would support more consistent and higher quality provision, as well as better informed choices for students.

Across both pathways, respondents also placed strong value on the additional elements of study programmes designed to strengthen students' readiness for their next destination. This was seen as a key requirement for level 2 students as those studying at level 2 have different characteristics from their level 3 peers and are more likely to face additional barriers. The wraparound features of the pathway design were viewed as essential, supporting smoother transition, improved preparedness and ultimately stronger outcomes for students progressing either into employment or to level 3 programmes. We also have taken note that the qualifications within the pathway must be designed to be engaging and of interest to students. Providers raised concerns about the feasibility of delivering two pathways, with some indicating that the expected cohort is likely to be too small to make dual delivery viable in some cases. Providers also emphasised the added complexity of offering two pathways within the same subject area, noting the significant challenges this poses for staffing, resource planning, and timetabling.

¹⁷ [Curriculum and Assessment Review Final Report - GOV.UK](#)

We have listened carefully to these views and have taken them into account in addressing the questions below.

Level 2 pathways – Question 6

We recognise that students do change their minds, and some students may wish to transfer between the Further Study pathway and the Occupational pathway. Others may have the opportunity to progress to level 3 or take up an apprenticeship opportunity mid-way through their Occupational Certificate.

How can the two pathways, and the two qualifications, be designed to make these transitions as easy as possible?

Summary of responses

The most frequently raised themes were:

- **Shared foundational content across both pathways:** Respondents raised the need for both pathways to share core content at the beginning, outlining that shared core content would give students a stable base so that if they choose to switch, they retained credit and competence rather than starting over. Respondents also noted that clear progression maps and flexible entry and exit points were essential.
- **Modular design and credit transfer mechanisms and recognition of prior learning:** Respondents raised the need for modular or unit-based qualification design so that learning could be transferred between pathways, allowing partial achievement to be formally certified to prevent students losing progress. Respondents also raised the idea of recognised exit points at the end of year one to support transitions.
- **Funding and accountability systems that support pathway transitions:** Respondents mentioned that transitions would only work if funding systems did not penalise movement between pathways. Mid-year transfers are currently treated as withdrawals, which impact achievement data and funding.

‘Clear progression maps and flexible entry/exit points are essential so that learners can move without penalty if they change goals or secure an apprenticeship mid-way.’ (Respondent)

‘We do need to recognise that a student moving from a level 2 course to an apprenticeship mid-way through a course is a success, and not to penalise the student or the College.’ (Federation of Master Builders)

Government response

Respondents told us that having two clearly defined routes helps students understand the positive opportunities available to them, whether they wish to move directly into skilled work at level 2 or progress to level 3. However, it was emphasised that students' decisions at 16 can be shaped by a wide range of personal factors, and therefore providers must retain the flexibility to support changes in direction where appropriate.

Funding flexibilities already allow students to change course, and they will continue to apply for students on the level 2 pathways. This includes flexibility within the first 42 days of the funding eligibility period, allowing the initial six-week period to be used as effectively as possible to identify student needs, confirm the suitability of programme choices, and support students to transfer onto the pathway that best fits their ambitions and circumstances where appropriate. To support this, we propose strengthening the support available to students at the start of their programme so that they begin their post-16 journey with a clearer understanding of their options and a more secure foundation for success. We will draw on and share existing good practice, including approaches such as enhanced early diagnostic assessments. We will also consider what further information and guidance may be needed to ensure that students are well informed about each pathway and how it aligns with their goals and interests.

Respondents also highlighted that supporting students' transition across pathways should be a central design consideration. We have taken this on board, and to support this we are developing the Foundation Certificate and Occupational Certificate in parallel. This approach allows us to build intentional alignment between the two qualifications from the outset. Designing both qualifications in parallel will increase opportunities for co-teaching by allowing us to identify areas of natural overlap early.

We have heard the feedback on accountability and will explore further, noting that the department has made a commitment to consult on a consistent way of measuring performance across all 16 to 18 students in the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper. We will work closely with providers on these measures and will set out further detail in the Implementation Plan.

Foundation Certificate design

Foundation Certificates size – Question 7

We're proposing that all Foundation Certificates are the same size – 240 guided learning hours – to ensure they are a consistent size and can fit within a one-year study programme allowing for English, maths and non-qualification activity such as employability, enrichment and pastoral support, and exposure to level 3 study. In taking this approach, are there any risks or issues we need to be aware of?

Summary of responses

The most frequently raised themes were:

- **One-size-fits-all approach:** Whilst there was some support for the consistency of a standardised 240 GLH model, a significant minority of respondents stated that a fixed model could not adequately accommodate the varying demands of different sectors and the diverse starting points of level 2 students. Progression to level 3 was raised as an issue as 240 GLH might not allow for sufficient time for specialisms, applied learning and work readiness. Respondents also argued that it could limit opportunities for practical and specialist skill development and therefore undermine student safety and employer confidence.
- **English and maths:** A strong theme from providers and representative bodies was that, with up to 200 hours potentially reserved for English and maths resits, Foundation Certificates risked becoming 'holding courses' with marginal vocational content leading to disengagement from students.
- **SEND and vulnerable students:** A fixed 240 GLH without modules risks disadvantaging vulnerable students, those with SEND, low prior attainment, English as an additional language, those with care experience, and those transferring mid-year, as it limits time for consolidation of learning.
- **Assessment burden:** Contributors suggested that assessment design needed to allow sufficient time for students to embed practical skills before being assessed.
- **Funding, timetabling and delivery pressures:** Respondents raised concerns that a 240 GLH core left up to 340 hours remaining to reach the 580 GLH funding band, creating pressure to deliver large volumes of non-qualification activity without clarity, resourcing or quality assurance. This would create workload pressure, timetabling problems and under-resourcing.

'The vocational subject is the primary "hook" that re-engages students with education... If the study programme becomes too dominated by GCSE resits, there is a substantial risk to attendance and retention.'

(Newcastle and Stafford Colleges Group)

'A balance of theory and practical assessment would need to be carefully considered, as any topic which is vocational needs that time "on the tools" to build skill levels.' (Catch)

Government response

We have listened carefully to concerns expressed through the consultation and, in response, we are proposing to set the size of Foundation Certificates within a range of 240 to 300 GLH in a single year. This revised range is designed to strike the right balance within full time post-16 study programmes, ensuring that qualification time, time to study English and maths where needed, and wider non-qualification activities – such as enrichment, employability and pastoral (EEP) support, which may include relevant work experience – can be effectively accommodated. The range also allows subject size to vary according to the needs and breadth of each subject, responding to feedback that some areas require more time to deliver high-quality learning and to support skills development. The department will be developing the content with a wide range of experts, practitioners and employers to ensure this delivers the right outcomes for students and supports their level 3 progression choices.

We also recognise that most level 2 students will continue studying English and/or maths, and study programmes must accommodate the minimum required 100 hours per subject, as well as the recommended additional 35 hours for maths. This change additionally responds to the flexibility concerns raised for students with SEND or other forms of disadvantage, ensuring that their individual needs can be met within a manageable and balanced timetable. Ensuring that Foundation Certificates fit appropriately within the overall programme hours is essential to providing students with the right balance between an inspiring, enriching vocational qualification and the wider study programme.

By setting Foundation Certificates at 240-300 GLH, we aim to support a well-balanced study programme that:

- Provides meaningful vocational area content and practical learning
- Allows for subject specific variation in size
- Leaves sufficient time for English and/or maths
- Ensures appropriate time for EEP provision
- Enables supported preparation for level 3
- Provides flexibility for students with SEND or other forms of disadvantage
- Fits within the expected hours of a full-time study programme

We believe this range offers the flexibility and structure needed to meet the diverse needs of level 2 students while maintaining a deliverable model for providers.

Foundation Certificate subjects – Questions 8 and 9

Should any additional criteria be considered when selecting the subjects suitable to become a Foundation Certificate? If yes, what are they and why?

Are there any other potential subjects you think should be considered for Foundation Certificates? If yes, what are they and why?

Summary of responses

Should any additional criteria be considered when selecting the subjects suitable to become a Foundation Certificate?	Percent
Yes	73%
No	27%
Total	100%

The most frequently raised themes were:

- **Progression criteria:** Most responses indicated a need for additional criteria beyond alignment with T Levels and V Levels. The most consistent theme was that Foundation Certificate subjects should only be created where there were clear, credible routes into level 3 qualifications, apprenticeships or defined employment, aligned to national and local demand and growth areas with employer or sector consultation.
- **Deliverability criteria:** Respondents also emphasised the need to consider deliverability, both in terms of what subjects could be delivered appropriately in 240 GLH (for example, some subjects in highly technical vocational areas might not be able to be delivered meaningfully), but also in terms of provider capacity (staff, facilities, equipment).
- **Content criteria:** Respondents stated that Foundation Certificate subjects should provide wide sector exposure to explore options and make informed choices before committing to specialist level 3 routes. They also raised the need to ensure the subjects should have social value and local impact, and should be accessible for SEND, low prior attainment and disadvantaged students, as well as consider mental health, wellbeing and personal development.
- **Landscape criteria:** Respondents also stated a need to avoid duplication with existing provision, as well as a gap in provision (which is why timing and sequencing the rollout of qualifications was seen as important). Likewise, some respondents suggested building on existing successful qualification models instead of reinventing content from scratch.

Are there any other potential subjects you think should be considered for Foundation Certificates?	Percent
Yes	62%
No	38%
Total	100%

The most frequently raised themes were:

- **Purpose of Foundation Certificates:** Respondents stated that Foundation Certificates should reflect the full breadth of the curriculum rather than narrow sectors, and that widening participation, including subjects which might provide a context for developing confidence, teamwork, communication, digital skills and motivation, should be a core consideration, as should labour-market alignment with local economic conditions.
- **Additional subjects proposed:** The most frequently requested subjects were the construction trades, followed by digital and IT, business and enterprise, media, hospitality and catering, engineering, sport and fitness, health and social care, hair and beauty, performing arts, green skills and sustainability, and electrical. These subjects were typically justified on grounds of student demand, progression alignment and labour market relevance. Awarding organisations also argued that digital literacy, finance, enterprise and employability-focused subjects should be included so that all students gained core workplace skills regardless of vocational direction.
- **No additional subjects:** There was a substantial minority of respondents who indicated no additional subjects were needed. These respondents were concerned about ensuring quality and deliverability before adding new areas.

‘Subjects should be driven by purpose. A Foundation Certificate should be available where there is a V Level or T Level to progress to’ (RSL Awards)

‘Subjects selected for Foundation Certificates should be able to reflect regional labour market priorities and local progression opportunities. This ensures learners can transition smoothly into Level 3 programmes that meet employer demand.’ (Cambridge Regional College)

Government response

In the consultation, we set out an indicative list of subject areas as the basis for Foundation Certificates. Respondents generally expressed support for the broad vocational subject areas, noting that they would offer students valuable breadth, transferable skills, and sector exposure to support future progression choices. Many respondents also commented on the criteria for selecting subjects; overall, there was strong agreement with our proposed focus on student demand, clear progression routes, and an appropriate balance of breadth and depth. Several of the subjects suggested by respondents were already included in the consultation document, which we interpret as an endorsement of our initial proposals.

Alongside this feedback, we received a wide range of additional subject suggestions for potential Foundation Certificates. We have collated all suggested subjects and, together with the subject areas initially proposed, are now undertaking further in-depth analysis to determine which subjects are likely to be viable.

We will reflect the consultation principles in developing our final proposals and will take account of the wider subject suggestions received. More details about subjects that will be taken forward will be published in the Implementation Plan.

Occupational Certificate design

Occupational Certificate duration – Question 10

We expect the Occupational pathway to last 2 years, in line with current legislation. However, we recognise that some students may have legitimate reasons for leaving the pathway early, such as progressing to a work-based training programme or moving on to a level 3 qualification.

Are there any other circumstances you believe would justify a student stepping off the pathway before completing the full 2 years? Please provide examples and explain why these should be considered.

Summary of responses

The most frequently raised themes were:

- **Personal, health, wellbeing and caring responsibilities:** Health issues, both physical and mental, were consistently cited as legitimate reasons for early exit across all respondent groups. Caring responsibilities were also prominently raised.
- **Exceptional personal circumstances:** Respondents consistently cited personal circumstances as legitimate reasons for early exit, emphasising that these were often outside the student's control and should not result in students leaving with no recognised achievement.

- **Securing employment or apprenticeship:** One theme raised concerned progression into employment or apprenticeships as a justified and positive reason for stepping off early. There was strong consensus that securing a job or apprenticeship mid-programme represented successful progression aligned with the purpose of the Occupational pathway.
- **Progression to higher-level study and early readiness for level 3 progression:** Some respondents noted that students who demonstrated sufficient competence and readiness should be permitted to exit early, particularly where they had achieved the skills and knowledge required for their intended destination.

‘Young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds leading complex lives, will encounter many potential reasons to leave including caring duties, poor mental health, pressure to contribute to household income, etc.’ (Greater Manchester Combined Authority)

Government response

We have listened carefully to concerns expressed through the consultation responses and in our conversations with stakeholders. Overall, respondents were broadly in favour of the two-year programme but did raise legitimate circumstances in which early step-off is appropriate, such as apprenticeships, which we flagged in our initial consultation, or a job with sufficient training to meet the legal requirement to stay in education or training until a student’s 18th birthday.

Providers also flagged that some students may have exceptional personal circumstances which lead them to leave a programme early. There is existing guidance to support how providers deal with exceptional personal circumstances and this guidance remains unaffected by the introduction of new qualifications.

The two-year pathway enables the Occupational Certificate to maximise occupational content from the standard, whilst also supporting students who need the extra time to achieve their English and maths and building their resilience and confidence to enter employment. A two-year pathway also allows the flexibility of Occupational Certificate size, which we further address in questions 13 and 14, to accommodate the needs of different occupational standards.

It is important to note that the law requires that all young people must stay in education or training until at least their 18th birthday, and so the length of the Occupational pathway allows students and providers to meet this requirement. We have listened carefully to respondents’ views and will consider how best to support students’ positive progression, wellbeing, safety and the needs of students with SEND or those who are disadvantaged, including through the effective use of EEP and non-qualification activities.

We will provide further detail in the Implementation Plan.

Occupational Certificate core content – Questions 11 and 12

We are proposing that DfE sets introductory core content for Occupational Certificates which is shared across multiple related qualifications. Do you agree with this approach? Please give reasons for your answer.

Summary of responses

We are proposing that DfE sets introductory core content for Occupational Certificates which is shared across multiple related qualifications. Do you agree with this approach?	Percent
Yes	71%
No	29%
Total	100%

The most frequently raised themes were:

- **Comparability:** Respondents consistently highlighted that a shared introductory core would bring consistency, comparability and transparency to level 2 qualifications. This would help employers, parents and students understand what every Occupational Certificate guarantees, regardless of provider or awarding organisation. It would also simplify curriculum planning, and quality assurance. However, there was overwhelming demand across respondents for co-design of the core content.
- **GLH proportionality:** Respondents emphasised that core content must remain proportionate. Students chose Occupational Certificates because they want to train for a specific career, and if too much time is taken by generic core content, especially alongside English and maths, it would reduce time for hands-on specialist training.
- **Existing frameworks:** Respondents noted that a common core would make it easier to map qualifications to Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs), employer expectations and careers advice, simplifying careers education. However, some respondents also noted that core content was already defined through statutory sector bodies, professional standards and occupational frameworks and that these existing standards should be used as the basis for any shared core.
- **Student mobility:** Respondents strongly supported introductory core content as it would protect students who switched pathways from duplicated learning and demotivation. It would also allow students to transfer between related pathways without being penalised, supporting retention and reducing the risk of students leaving education.
- **Implementation support:** Concerns were raised about the practical challenges of implementing DfE-set core content across the further education sector. Respondents

noted that effective delivery would require comprehensive guidance, training resources and professional development to ensure consistent, high-quality teaching.

‘A shared introductory core ensures consistency and portability’
(Chartered Management Institute)

Government response

Respondents were broadly supportive of an introductory core shared across related Occupational Certificates, noting benefits for comparability, transparency and curriculum planning. We recognise concerns around proportionality, particularly the need to ensure shared content does not crowd out specialist, hands-on training that students value, and the importance of supporting student mobility between qualifications and pathways. We also heard concerns about the risk of introductory core content becoming too generic or being developed in isolation by the department. Respondents also highlighted practical considerations around delivery, assessment and implementation.

We know from employer responses and engagement that employers value sector-wide understanding because it enables students to grasp their role and how it connects with colleagues. It also better prepares students for progression and future career change.

We will continue with our proposal that introductory core content will be set by the department. Introductory core content will be designed with the occupational standards published by Skills England as a foundation. We will involve sector experts, including employers, awarding organisations and providers, in an open and iterative process, including structured engagement at key development points and testing of draft content. This approach is intended to ensure that the content remains proportionate and meaningful.

Further information on core introductory content for Occupational Certificates will be set out in the Implementation Plan.

Occupational Certificate size – Question 13 to 16

Question 13 and 14. We believe the sizes of each Occupational Certificate should be variable and driven by the occupational standard(s) it is linked to, as opposed to having a fixed size for all Occupational Certificates. Do you foresee any challenges with this approach? If so, what are they and how might they be overcome?

Summary of responses

We believe the sizes of each Occupational Certificate should be variable and driven by the occupational standard(s) it is linked to, as opposed to having a fixed size for all Occupational Certificates. Do you foresee any challenges with this approach?	Percent
Yes	62%
No	38%
Total	100%

The most frequently raised themes were:

- **Provider timetabling and resourcing difficulties:** The most frequently raised concern across all respondent groups was that variable qualification sizes would create practical challenges for planning and delivering coherent 16–19 study programmes.
- **Complexity for students, parents and advisors:** A concern raised was that variable qualification sizes would create confusion for students, parents and those advising on qualification choices. Respondents highlighted that smaller certificates could be perceived as lower value, and that students might choose shorter qualifications simply to complete more quickly, regardless of occupational fit.
- **Funding and accountability system misalignment:** Respondents emphasised that variable qualification sizes could disrupt funding models and threaten financial viability.
- **Impact on student choice and progression pathways:** Respondents raised concerns about the impact of variable sizes on progression pathways and transitions between qualifications. There were concerns that inconsistent sizing could hinder understanding and recognition of courses.

Government response

We will continue with our proposal to develop Occupational Certificates with variable sizes, recognising that it will be part of a two-year study programme which will include English and maths, other support tailored to preparing students for entry to work and which aims to be enriching and inspiring.

We recognise the challenges raised in responses regarding timetabling, resource and parity of qualifications across occupational routes. We have also taken on board the concerns around the viability of delivering qualifications in routes with a significant volume of standards, alongside the Further Study pathway. To mitigate these challenges, we will work with Skills England and experts from the sector to explore how best to group occupational standard content and establish how best to ensure variable GLH is deliverable in practice, including consideration of a range, series of bands, and a maximum GLH for Occupational Certificates.

We recognise that some subject areas do not have level 2 occupational standards, and we will continue to work with Skills England and employers to explore possible solutions, so that the level 2 Occupational pathway can continue to meet the needs of students and employers.

Further information on core Occupational Certificate size and subjects will be set out in the Implementation Plan.

Question 15 and 16. We are proposing the size of the broad introductory core content should be proportionate and should be less than 50% of the overall GLH. Do you foresee any challenges with this approach? If so, what are they and how might they be overcome?

Summary of responses

We are proposing the size of the broad introductory core content should be proportionate and should be less than 50% of the overall GLH. Do you foresee any challenges with this approach?	Percent
Yes	47%
No	53%
Total	100%

The most frequently raised themes were:

- **Risk that generic or excessive core content undermines occupational focus and student engagement:** Respondents raised concerns that even a core capped below 50% could undermine engagement if the content was generic rather than occupationally relevant.
- **Core content must be occupationally contextualised to remain meaningful:** Respondents emphasised that core elements should be clearly framed within chosen occupation rather than delivered as standalone generic content.
- **Need for sector-led flexibility, defined ranges and exception processes:** Respondents across awarding organisations, representative bodies and local authorities argued that setting content proportions required sector-by-sector judgement rather than a rigid cap.
- **Risk that a reduced core disadvantages students needing strong foundations:** Some respondents raised concerns that limiting introductory core content could disadvantage students who needed more foundational learning before specialism. Students with SEND, care-experienced students and those consolidating level 2 were highlighted as potentially needing more time on core skills.

‘Allowing Occupational Certificate sizes to be driven by Skills England occupational standards reflects the reality that different roles require different depths of training and competence.’ (Animal Focused Alliance)

‘Agree core content should be <50%. The 'Vocational Hook' (practical work) must remain dominant to prevent disengagement.’ (Respondent)

Government response

While respondents recognised the potential benefits of a proportionately sized introductory core, such as developing essential knowledge and supporting smoother progression into specialist content, many cautioned that the success of this approach would rely on the quality and relevance of the core itself.

We recognise that students choose occupational routes for practical, hands-on learning, and that extended periods of theory content could undermine motivation and retention, particularly if delivered across multiple subjects, which is why we will work collaboratively with awarding organisations and sector experts on content development from the earliest stage. Our approach to design will ensure the shared core content achieves the right balance between providing key transferable skills and occupational focus, while being proportional to skilled occupational content and the route it sits within. The structure of the Occupational pathway will allow providers to offer more support to students with SEND or those who are disadvantaged as needed, including spending more time on core skills.

We have also listened to concerns raised about the viability of delivering Occupational Certificates, so our work with Skills England and sector experts will also explore the most appropriate ways to approach subjects and grouping of content. This will seek to maintain consistency across each route, while ensuring that core content is meaningfully contextualised and deliverable in practice.

Further information on core introductory content for Occupational Certificates will be set out in the Implementation Plan.

Questions regarding both level 3 and level 2 pathways

Non-qualification activity – Question 17

What non-qualification activities do you think are successful at supporting vocational students to engage best in their course content in order to achieve in their course and progress to their stated destination?

Summary of responses

The most frequently raised themes were:

- **Work experience and employer engagement:** The most consistent theme was that non-qualification activities were most effective when they connected learning directly to real workplace contexts and employer engagement.
- **Personal development and employability skills:** Respondents identified CV writing, interview preparation, careers coaching, and portfolio development as key activities supporting successful transitions into employment, apprenticeships and further study.
- **English and maths support:** Contributors noted the value of English and maths delivered in context with vocational learning. Respondents noted that contextualised English and maths, applied to the subject, helped students see the relevance of these skills to their vocational area.
- **Enrichment and extracurricular activities:** Respondents highlighted enrichment activities, trips and visits as valuable for engaging vocational students. Educational visits, including local, national, and international experiences through schemes such as the Turing Scheme, broadened horizons and promoted cultural awareness.

‘The most successful non-qualification activities (NQAs) for vocational students are those that explicitly bridge the gap between classroom theory and industry practice, developing the professional maturity, confidence, and employability skills crucial for both course success and progression.’ (OPITO Ltd)

‘CV writing, career coaching, applying for jobs or in H.E, team building, communication and presentation skills, carrying out research, work experience (where possible), financial planning are all useful non-qualification activities required for life and work.’ (NCTJ Training Ltd)

Government response

Students whole study programmes, and not just their specific qualifications, are important to both their confidence and progression, and we must develop their soft skills alongside providing high-quality qualifications. We will use the insights from the consultation responses to inform our work as we continue to develop the wider reform programme. We will explore how best to enable the delivery of non-qualification activity that supports vocational students to engage and achieve in their course and progress to positive destinations.

Across the level 2 Occupational pathway study programme, and level 3 study programmes that include V Levels, we will consider how best to support providers to deliver work experience placements which are related to the sector of the qualification which the student is studying. This is in line with the Department's ambition to ensure that every pupil has access to two weeks' worth of multiple, meaningful and varied workplace experiences during their secondary education.

We will consider further how these activities can be appropriately supported, signposted and delivered within the wider system, including for students with SEND and disadvantaged students. We will also consider how to ensure sufficient flexibility for providers to tailor their approaches to their local context and students' needs. The support surrounding the reformed qualifications in the new pathways at level 3 and level 2 is key to helping all students achieve their progression aims.

Transition to the future landscape – Question 18

We plan to roll out V Levels, Foundation Certificates, and Occupational Certificates together by route, to ensure coherence across levels and clear progression.

Do you think this is the best approach? Are there alternative rollout strategies we should consider, or any unintended consequences we might be overlooking?

Summary of responses

The most frequently raised themes were:

- **Route-by-route support:** The most consistent theme was that route-by-route rollout would make progression explicit and easier to navigate. Providers valued clear progression and employers emphasised end-to-end visibility. Respondents also stated that this approach would allow focus on fewer routes at a time, which made implementation more manageable and would enable a better alignment to occupational standards. Nonetheless, respondents stated that routes differed in maturity and sector-specific readiness should be considered (for example, strength of occupational standards, clarity of progression, etc.) and warned that a route-by-route

rollout created dependencies in which delays or weaknesses could disrupt the pathway.

- **Timeline and funding concerns:** Many respondents raised challenges with a 2027 first-teach timeline around developing and implementing new qualifications. Respondents raised concerns that rushed and poorly planned implementation could impact negatively on the quality of the qualifications and employer confidence, particularly where professional standards are critical. Furthermore, many respondents stressed the need to continue funding 1080 qualifications until the new routes were established.
- **Importance of communication:** Respondents stated that a successful rollout depended on early and clear messaging with stakeholders, including students, parents and providers. This should include transition guidance and readiness checks instead of making assumptions about capacity.
- **Alternative approaches:** Respondents also proposed alternative or modified approaches. These included piloting a small number of routes before scaling, aligning timelines with other reforms, and regionally tailoring pathways to maximise place-based relevance and delivery capacity.

‘Rolling out V Levels, Foundation Certificates, and Occupational Certificates together by route is a sensible approach that supports coherence across levels and clear progression for learners. This strategy enables students, providers, and employers to comprehend the entire pathway available in each [sector]’ (Excellence, Achievement & Learning Limited)

Government response

We have heard that rolling out the new qualifications by route will provide clarity of progression and make implementation more manageable. We therefore intend to rollout the reformed qualifications on a route-by-route basis. **Below is an indication of the routes in which new qualifications will be introduced and an indicative timeline.**

The list of qualification types for each route is indicative and subject to further testing. However, we know that early and clear messaging is important, which is why further guidance, and more detail about qualifications and planned timelines, will be set out in the Implementation Plan.

	Occupational Certificates	Foundation Certificates	V Levels	T Levels
2027/28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Catering and Hospitality - Education and Early Years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Digital - Education and Early Years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Digital - Education and Early Years - Finance and Accounting (as part of Legal, Finance and Accounting route) 	
2028/29	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Business and Administration - Care Services - Construction and the Built Environment - Digital¹⁸ - Engineering and Manufacturing - Finance and Administration - Health and Science - Sports and Leisure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Business, Administration and Law - Care Services - Construction and the Built Environment - Engineering and Manufacturing - Health and Science - Sports, Fitness and Exercise Science 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Business and Administration - Care Services - Construction and the Built Environment - Engineering and Manufacturing - Health and Science - Legal (as part of Legal, Finance and Accounting route) - Sales, Marketing and Procurement - Sports, Fitness and Exercise Science 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Care Services - Sports, Fitness and Exercise Science
2029/30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Agriculture, Environmental and Animal Care - Hair and Beauty - Horticulture and Floristry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Agriculture, Environmental and Animal Care - Catering and Hospitality - Hair and Beauty - Protective Services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Agriculture, Environmental and Animal Care - Catering and Hospitality - Hair and Beauty - Protective Services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Catering and Hospitality - Expansion of Creative and Design - Hair and Beauty - Protective Services
2030/31		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Art and Performing Arts - Creative and Design - Travel and Tourism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Art and Performing Arts - Creative and Design - Travel and Tourism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Art and Performing Arts - Travel and Tourism

¹⁸ As there is no L2 occupational standard in digital, we are exploring whether this qualification could align with the assistant administrator standard leading to a digital administration role.

DfE will continue to refine the range of subjects to ensure they relate to the priority areas of the economy, such as those linked to the growth-driving sectors as set out in the Industrial Strategy.

We will continue to consider the appropriate approach for routes in areas such as catering and hospitality, hair and beauty and construction, to ensure there continues to be pathways into skilled employment in these trades and will set out more detail in our Implementation Plan.

We recognise that the ambitious timeframe for the first delivery of the new qualifications has been raised by the sector. We are working rapidly, making use of cutting-edge approaches in qualification design (including artificial intelligence) and learning from what already works well in the existing qualification landscape to streamline our processes so that the sector has the information and resources as early as possible. We have also engaged with Ofqual from the outset in developing this qualification framework.

Approach to funding approval for existing qualifications

We know that the sector requires certainty regarding what qualifications are available and for how long. That is why alongside this government response to the Post 16 Pathways consultation we are announcing the decisions regarding the timetable for changes to funding approval for qualifications in the 2026 to 2027 and the 2027 to 2028 academic years. This announcement additionally sets out the transition support available for the sector. We will set out more details about further changes to funding approval of existing qualifications in the Implementation Plan. Full details of the Transition Plan can be found on the [Post-16 level 3 and below pathways](#) consultation page.

Ensuring quality content – Question 19

What steps should we take to ensure the outline content for V Levels, Foundation Certificates and Occupational Certificates is high quality across subjects and awarding organisations?

Summary of responses

The most frequently raised themes were:

- **Varied definitions of quality.** Respondents framed quality differently depending on their role in the system. Providers focused on teachability and feasibility, awarding organisations emphasised regulatory clarity and comparability across awarding organisations, employers framed quality primarily through trust and clarity on what qualifications represented.
- **National consistency and assessment alignment.** Respondents stated that strong national parameters and standardisation were essential to prevent drift and inconsistency across awarding organisations. This was particularly true for assessments: early alignment between content development and assessment design

was presented as key. Furthermore, employers and providers were clear that assessment should authentically demonstrate capability rather than rely on superficial measures.

- **Input from stakeholders:** Respondents stated the need to draw from different sources. In general, qualifications should be recognised by employers and higher education institutions, which involves working with employers, including SMEs, and HE providers to validate content. Professional and learned bodies emphasised that quality in regulated professions or safety-critical occupations involved content which covered ethics, regulation and safety-critical standards. Local authorities stated the need of co-designing the qualifications and aligning them with local realities.
- **Deliverability:** Respondents warned against overly demanding specifications, and awarding organisations and providers emphasised that quality should be understood as fitness for purpose. In general, respondents stated that content which looked good on paper but could not be taught effectively was not high quality in any meaningful sense.
- **Feedback loops and iterative process:** Respondents framed quality as requiring feedback loops, including from students, making iterative improvements and developing adequately over realistic timelines.

‘Providers should have access to detailed assessment guidance, exemplars, and clear descriptors.’ (Into Film)

Government response

We will ensure the outline national content for V Levels, Foundation Certificates and Occupational Certificates is high quality across subjects and awarding organisations, continuing the work we have already begun to co-design and test our content development process and principles with Ofqual, awarding organisations, providers, employers and HEIs.

We will work with awarding organisations to develop content, aligned to work-related purposes and learning outcomes drawn from intelligence provided by Skills England. This content will be tested and improved following input and discussion with employers, providers and HEIs to ensure it is manageable for providers to deliver and meets the specified progression outcomes for each qualification.

This will allow for recognition across the qualifications by students, employers and HEIs of their quality and will support the relevant progression either into employment or further study.

We will ensure that subject content meets Ofqual’s requirements for adoption into its regulatory framework and will also seek views from the sector and from students through consultation, before the final version is published.

V Level, Foundation Certificate and Occupational Certificate branding – Question 20

We're proposing that there is no awarding organisation branding for V Levels, Foundation Certificate and Occupational Certificate titles, to make qualifications easier to understand. Do you foresee any problems with this? How could we mitigate these?

Summary of responses

The most frequently raised themes were:

- **Varied interpretation of the proposal:** Respondents interpreted the proposal differently. Most awarding organisations assumed it meant removing all awarding organisation identification from qualifications, rather than removing only product brand names. Under this interpretation, they raised concerns about regulatory implications, loss of quality signalling, and reduced trust.
- **Support for the proposal:** Many respondents were in favour of the proposal, particularly providers who either expressed no concerns or actively welcomed the proposal. In general, respondents supporting the proposal argued that consistent naming would improve clarity for students, particularly disadvantaged students, parents and employers. Nonetheless, conditions were commonly attached. These included the need for national quality assurance to underpin the new qualifications, clear communication with employers and higher education institutions, and that implementation should be phased rather than rushed.
- **Main concerns:** Regardless of the interpretation, several respondents were concerned about losing well-established product brand names that carried recognition among employers, higher education institutions and internationally. There were concerns that employers might not immediately recognise or trust new titles, and that higher education admissions teams also relied on brands. Additionally, some respondents argued that removing branding might imply all qualifications were identical when meaningful differences existed between awarding organisations. This could undermine informed choice. Proposed mitigations included a sustained national communications campaign, published quality metrics, early and active engagement with stakeholders, and clear equivalence charts.

‘This is a welcome development and should be a key driver in simplifying the landscape. Instead of hundreds of confusing vocational qualifications, there is the opportunity to have standardised, easy-to-understand routes and pathways.’ (Birmingham City Council)

Government response

We are clear that simple, consistent and recognisable branding is important when establishing confidence in these new pathway qualifications and providing clarity of understanding with students, providers, employers and HEIs. We will allow the inclusion of the name of the awarding organisation in the qualification title. We agree that concerns around the exclusion of product brand names can be mitigated through sustained communications, national content and regulation by Ofqual, to support quality and consistency between qualifications and the inclusion of qualifications within performance tables.

Branding for V Levels, Foundation Certificates and Occupational Certificates will follow the same principles. These principles should allow differentiation by awarding organisation, level and subject, with the product name of the qualification being limited to the name of the pathway qualification itself. This reflects existing practise across general qualifications and ensures consistency of approach.

Impact on adults

As set out in the consultation document, it is important that adults have access to high-quality qualifications that meet their needs. We have already introduced reforms to key routes for adults, including education and early years, health, construction, engineering and digital. We will continue to work with colleagues across government, strategic authorities, awarding organisations and providers to ensure the qualifications landscape meets the needs of adult students. This consultation focused on 16- to 19-year-olds. We will consider the next steps for adult qualifications (19+) in the future.

Equalities – Questions 21 to 24

Could any of the proposals have an impact – positive or negative – on people with any of the following protected characteristics? Age; Disability; Gender; reassignment; Marriage and civil partnership; Pregnancy and maternity; Race; Religion or belief; Sex; Sexual orientation

What action could help reduce any negative impacts you identified in the previous question?

Are there elements of V Levels or Foundation and Occupational Certificates that are required in your view to increase accessibility or improve outcomes for those with SEND?

Are there any other equality-related impacts you think we should consider?

Summary of responses

The most frequently raised themes were:

- **Disability and SEND:** Respondents identified assessment methodology as the most critical factor determining accessibility – heavy reliance on written examinations would disproportionately disadvantage SEND students who might excel in practical application but struggle with traditional exam formats. There were also concerns about accessibility of industry placements, which should be flexible. In general, respondents stated that accessibility must be built into qualification design from the outset.
- **Economic disadvantage:** Respondents emphasised that students from lower-income background might be disproportionately affected by reforms that reduced local provision, increased travel-to-learn distances, or relied on unpaid industry placements. Geographic inequality featured prominently and respondents raised concerns about a postcode lottery in placement access, with disadvantaged students facing limited employer engagement opportunities.
- **Age and adult students:** Respondents raised concerns that current age restrictions on funding excluded students aged nineteen and over from accessing T Levels and potentially V Levels. Respondents suggested removing age caps, extending study programme funding and funding mature students without rigid age-based limitations. Respondents also identified specific support needs for adult students returning to education.
- **Other protected characteristics:** Some respondents raised concerns about the impact of proposals on students from ethnic minority backgrounds. In general, a concern was the potential disruption of progression pathways for these students. Respondents argued that transition must be managed carefully to avoid a gap where students lack suitable progression routes. Respondents also raised concerns about ensuring curriculum content and materials reflected the diversity of the UK and its communities. A small number of respondents raised concerns about the impact of

proposals on students with religious beliefs. Respondents called for flexible scheduling for prayer and religious observance, and dietary accommodation as necessary for residential or placement settings. Additionally, respondents called for safe inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ students, with specific safeguarding and anti-harassment policies in place.

- **Mitigations:** Respondents across multiple protected characteristics called for varied assessment approaches. Respondents also proposed modular and credit-based qualifications structures and flexible placements and work experience models. They also called for ongoing monitoring and equality impact assessment to track outcomes by protected characteristics and identified the need for training for teachers and staff on inclusive practice, reasonable adjustments, and the delivery of new qualifications.

Government response

We have published an equalities impact assessment alongside the government response to the consultation.

At this stage in our analysis, we expect that introducing the new pathways would have a positive impact for all students aged 16 to 19, with no disproportionate effect on any groups of students sharing a protected characteristic.

We do not anticipate any negative impacts of introducing the new pathways on any groups of people, but we will carefully consider the impacts on different groups of students as we design new qualifications at level 2 and level 3.

Annex A: List of questions

Number	Question
Q1	We are proposing V Levels will be 360 GLH to enable students to combine them with other V Levels and A Levels. Where larger subjects are needed, we propose that these are offered through T Levels. In taking this approach, are there any risks or issues we need to be aware of?
Q2	Are there any particular issues for subjects or students that we need to be aware of as a result of not having medium sized V Levels?
Q3	Which subject areas do you think are most appropriate for delivery through V Levels? Please provide evidence of relevance to employment sectors or further study.
Q4	How could current information, advice and guidance be improved or what new guidelines or measures should be developed to ensure that students are informed about subject selection and combinations?
Q5	What factors should we consider when creating T Levels where there are currently no level 3 occupational standards? Please explain your answer.
Q6	We recognise that students do change their minds, and some students may wish to transfer between the Further Study pathway and the Occupational pathway. Others may have the opportunity to progress to level 3 or take up an apprenticeship opportunity mid-way through their Occupational Certificate. How can the two pathways, and the two qualifications, be designed to make these transitions as easy as possible?
Q7	We're proposing that all Foundation Certificates are the same size – 240 guided learning hours – to ensure they are a consistent size and can fit within a one-year study programme allowing for English, maths and non-qualification activity such as employability, enrichment and pastoral support, and exposure to level 3 study. In taking this approach, are there any risks or issues we need to be aware of?
Q8	Should any additional criteria be considered when selecting the subjects suitable to become a Foundation Certificate? If yes, what are they and why?
Q9	Are there any other potential subjects you think should be considered for Foundation Certificates? If yes, what are they and why?

Number	Question
Q10	We expect the Occupational pathway to last 2 years, in line with current legislation. However, we recognise that some students may have legitimate reasons for leaving the pathway early, such as progressing to a work-based training programme or moving on to a level 3 qualification. Are there any other circumstances you believe would justify a student stepping off the pathway before completing the full 2 years? Please provide examples and explain why these should be considered.
Q11 and 12	We are proposing that DfE sets introductory core content for Occupational Certificates which is shared across multiple related qualifications. Do you agree with this approach? Please give reasons for your answer.
Q13 and 14	We believe the sizes of each Occupational Certificate should be variable and driven by the occupational standard(s) it is linked to, as opposed to having a fixed size for all Occupational Certificates. Do you foresee any challenges with this approach? If so, what are they and how might they be overcome?
Q15 and 16	We are proposing the size of the broad introductory core content should be proportionate and should be less than 50% of the overall GLH. Do you foresee any challenges with this approach? If so, what are they and how might they be overcome?
Q17	What non-qualification activities do you think are successful at supporting vocational students to engage best in their course content in order to achieve in their course and progress to their stated destination?
Q18	We plan to roll out V Levels, Foundation Certificates, and Occupational Certificates together by route, to ensure coherence across levels and clear progression. Do you think this is the best approach? Are there alternative rollout strategies we should consider, or any unintended consequences we might be overlooking?
Q19	What steps should we take to ensure the outline content for V Levels, Foundation Certificates and Occupational Certificates is high quality across subjects and awarding organisations?
Q20	We're proposing that there is no awarding organisation branding for V Levels, Foundation Certificate and Occupational Certificate titles, to make qualifications easier to understand. Do you foresee any problems with this? How could we mitigate these?
Q21	Could any of the proposals have an impact – positive or negative – on people with any of the following protected characteristics? If yes, please explain.

Number	Question
Q22	What actions could help reduce any negative impacts you identified in the previous question?
Q23	Are there elements of V Levels or Foundation and Occupational Certificates that are required in your view to increase accessibility or improve outcomes for those with SEND?
Q24	Are there any other equality-related impacts you think we should consider?
Q25	What is your full name?
Q26	What is your email address?
Q27	Are you happy to be contacted directly about your response?
Q28	Are you responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?
Q29	We may identify direct quotes to include in the published government response – may we use your feedback in this way? May we use your quotes?
Q30	Would you like us to keep your responses confidential?
Q31	If you're responding as an individual, how would you describe yourself?
Q32	Which local authority in England are you based in?
Q33	What is your organisation's name?
Q34	If you are responding on behalf of an organisation, which of the following best describes who/which part of the sector your organisation represents?

Annex B: Respondent demographics

Respondents: Organisations	Count
Further education (FE) colleges	90
Other organisation type	57
Schools (including academies, voluntary-aided schools, voluntary-controlled schools, foundation schools and community schools)	30
Sixth-form colleges	30
Awarding organisations	29
Representative bodies	28
Unions and representative organisations	19
Employers	16
Learned societies or professional representative bodies	13
Training providers	13
Higher education (HE) institutions	11
Organisations that support schools and colleges	10
Local authorities or strategic authorities	7
Bodies representing schools and colleges	4
Other post-16 providers	4
Governing bodies	2
Providers and delivery organisations	2
Respondents: Individuals	Count
Teacher or lecturer	204
Other	113
Headteacher or principal	19
Support staff	14
Parent, carer or guardian	13
Special educational needs professional	7
Governor	3
Student	3
Not answered	27

For the purposes of the analysis, respondents were grouped as follows:

Grouping	Count	Percentage
Individual: Teaching, Training, Awarding Organisation	253	33%
Providers and Delivery Organisations	180	23%
Individual: Parent, Student, Governor, Other	150	20%
Representative Bodies	76	10%
Other organisations	57	7%
Awarding Organisations	29	4%
Employers	16	2%
Local authorities or strategic authorities	7	1%



Department
for Education

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