



Department for Education

The Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP
Secretary of State for Education

Sir Ian Bauckham CBE
Chief Regulator, Ofqual

23 April 2026

Dear Sir Ian,

Breaking down barriers to opportunity is central to this government's mission to ensure that all students can access the skills they need to succeed. In March 2026, we published the Government's response to our public consultation on Post-16 Level 3 and below pathways, which built on the ambitions set out in the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper.

The reforms we set out seek to establish a high quality, distinctive vocational and technical offer that meets the needs of the intended cohorts, commands long-term confidence, and supports improved assessment practice across awarding organisations.

I am writing to you to outline my policy steers for the new suite of qualifications at Level 3 (V Levels) and Level 2 (Foundation Certificates and Occupational Certificates), and in relation to T Level assessment. These steers are intended to inform Ofqual's considerations of its regulatory approach ahead of your consultation on this.

Role of the new qualifications

V Levels are Level 3 qualifications for students aged 16 to 19 who wish to pursue applied and vocational study. They are intended to support progression to higher education, higher technical qualifications, and skilled employment with higher level training (such as an apprenticeship), and to be clearly distinct from A Levels and T Levels.

Level 2 pathways will comprise two qualification types supporting different learner destinations. Foundation Certificates will be broad, vocational qualifications supporting progression to related qualifications at Level 3. Occupational Certificates will be qualifications that support progression into employment in a relevant occupation.

These qualifications should be developed in a way to ensure that they are suitable for use in performance tables.

Qualification size and structure

Following our consultation, I have decided that V Levels will be 360 guided learning hours (GLH). This will enable broad study programmes, supporting combinations of more than one V Level subject, as well as mixed programmes with A Levels and Extended Project Qualifications, plus the continued study of English and/or maths

where needed. In a small number of subject areas, a greater volume of teaching and learning may be required to support progression into related, higher-level study. In such cases, though by exception, two V Levels may be permitted in a subject area. Although taught in combination as 'partnered' V Levels, these would be separate qualifications.

Foundation Certificate subjects will be sized between 240 and 300 GLH to allow appropriate depth for progression to Level 3 study, and with the size for each subject set by DfE. Occupational Certificates will be sized between 540 and 720 GLH and again, the size for each subject will be set within a range specified by DfE. Both qualifications will sit within a full study programme alongside English and/or maths where needed, as well as employability, enrichment and pastoral support.

Content expectations

All the qualifications will have nationally set content to secure consistency between awarding organisations, and this will be linked to occupational standards to support progression. For V Levels and Foundation Certificates, this will comprise the entirety of the content. For Occupational Certificates, it will comprise a proportion of the content, with a proportion also based directly on the relevant occupational standards. DfE will nationally mandate the skills within relevant occupational standards which must be covered by every AO in the proportion of Occupational Certificates which they set the content for.

The subject content set by DfE will make clear that awarding organisations must fully cover the nationally set content developed by DfE. Although their specifications may elaborate on this, such as where helpful for delivery or assessment, they should not remove content or amplify content in ways that compromise comparability or size.

Assessment principles

The structure and assessment of V Levels, Foundation Certificates and Occupational Certificates should reflect their distinctive purpose and the needs of the intended cohort.

The qualifications should have a modular assessment structure, so that assessment can take place at appropriate points during the course of study. While the intention of this is to motivate and engage students, I recognise that it needs to be balanced against manageability for schools and colleges, and also that it should not disrupt teaching and learning. In each case, the approach to modular assessment must support comparability and the securing of public confidence in these new qualifications. It must also support the maintenance of standards and progression for students, including in the case of V Levels decisions relating to entry into higher education.

Examinations set and marked by awarding organisations will play a part in the assessment of these qualifications and should reflect the applied nature of the qualifications. The applied and practical nature of the subject content will also require the use of a range of other assessment methods, which may include more practical task-based assessments.

This is likely to include assessments marked by teachers. The quality assurance arrangements that awarding organisations put in place in relation to this must secure

fairness and consistency of marking, with sufficient control of standards to secure public confidence. Risks to authenticity of students' assessment evidence, such as those associated with the use of generative AI, should also be addressed. I therefore expect a balance of assessment methods to be used, with appropriate consideration given to manageability for schools and colleges and the impact on teaching and learning.

We should encourage awarding organisations to be innovative in determining their approaches to assessment. There must be appropriate arrangements in place to ensure manageability for schools and colleges.

For V Levels, in terms of the timing of assessment, I would expect assessment across both years of the qualification, with a significant proportion of the assessment in the second year. Assessment should support both the maintenance of standards and reflect the applied and vocational nature of the qualification.

Grading

For each qualification type, awarding organisations will be expected to use a common grading scale. Whilst the detail of the grading scales is a matter for Ofqual to determine, I set out some steers for each qualification type below.

For V Levels, the grading scale should recognise the full range of achievement of the intended cohort and be straightforward to interpret in line with other qualifications a learner may be taking to support UCAS tariff allocation.

I support Ofqual's intention to consult on the use of an N grade within the grading scale, and their plans to keep this under review.

Similarly, for Foundation Certificates and Occupational Certificates, the grading scales should be straightforward for students, education institutions and employers to interpret, and should recognise the full range of achievement of the intended cohort.

Introduction of the new qualifications

I ask Ofqual to use its regulatory powers to take steps to ensure that awarding organisations have the necessary capacity and expertise to successfully deliver these high-quality, national qualifications that will play a key role for students. I also ask Ofqual to determine an appropriate regulatory approach to ensure the quality of the qualifications themselves ahead of delivery.

In that regard, this letter serves as formal notification that I authorise Ofqual to accredit Level 2 Occupational Certificates with immediate effect. This is in accordance with the power set out in section 138(1ZA) of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009 that applies to technical qualifications. Vocational qualifications (V Levels and Foundation Certificates) do not require this authorisation.

Reforms to T Level assessment

To ensure that T Levels are accessible at scale, we are continuing to refine them to support deliverability, whilst maintaining rigour and quality. We are therefore

proposing additional measures to reduce assessment burden on providers and students.

The Core component of the Technical Qualification in each T Level comprises Core Exam(s) which cover knowledge of a sector, and an Employer Set Project (ESP) which covers applied knowledge and skills. The majority of T Levels have two Core exam papers and, presently, both policy and the related regulatory conditions state that students must be entered for all papers in a single series. This is the case for first attempts and for any subsequent resits. I am keen to ensure that students have the flexibility they need to achieve the best possible outcomes whilst retaining quality. Therefore, I am asking Ofqual to consult on allowing students who choose to resit to sit individual papers rather than a full set of exams should they wish to do so.

L2 and L3 Subject coverage and rollout

I expect the first tranche of new qualifications for first teaching in 2027 to include:
V Levels: Digital Systems and Data; Accounting and Finance; Education.
Foundation Certificates: Digital Systems and Data, Education and Early Years
Occupational Certificates: Culinary Skills, Hospitality, Early Years Practitioner.

Further subject areas for all new qualifications will follow from 2028 onwards, informed by ongoing policy development and engagement with the sector.

Titles and branding

To ensure clarity and public recognition, awarding organisations should use single, consistent national titles that clearly identify each qualification type. Awarding organisations may include their name on the qualification but should not apply additional branding beyond this.

Working together

I recognise the importance of close collaboration between the Department for Education and Ofqual as these reforms are developed and taken forward. Officials will continue to work closely with your teams as you prepare consultations on assessment and grading and develop the associated regulatory arrangements. I am grateful for Ofqual's continued engagement and expertise in helping to ensure these qualifications are high quality, trusted and fit for the future.

Yours sincerely,



**The Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP
Secretary of State for Education**