

The future of post-16 qualifications: written evidence submitted by the University and College Union

1.0 About UCU

- 1.1 The University and College Union (UCU) represents over 120,000 academics, lecturers, trainers, instructors, researchers, managers, administrators, computer staff, librarians and postgraduates in universities, colleges, prisons, adult education and training organisations across the UK.
- 1.2 UCU does not believe that the current 16-19 phase functions well for many of the young people our members work with. Over recent years the trend has been to make qualifications more exclusionary and elitist, with a binary divide growing between general and vocational education. We would welcome a more holistic approach to the curriculum that allows students to demonstrate a diversity of interests and ambitions. We should aim for an inclusive, participatory system, and not one based on rationing and elitism. We are very concerned about the direction of travel the government is pursuing in the reform of post-16 qualifications. We believe that the trends we have seen will be accelerated and lead to an even greater inequality in achievement and progression for some young people.

2.0 T Levels

- 2.1 UCU has significant concerns about the introduction of T Levels designed as a qualification available only to a minority of young people. The danger is that between the traditional academic education of A Levels and this more narrowly focused vocational education, there will arise an 'overlooked middle' of learners who are unable to access either. The government's proposal to simultaneously defund a substantial portion of applied general qualifications will compound this problem, and we discuss this further in section 4.0.
- 2.2 The T Level, as an alternative choice to A Levels, cannot meet the needs of all students. Not everyone who wishes to study vocational subjects wants to go into an occupational role. Many students want to pursue a mix of general and vocational qualifications. Even with the introduction of a T Level transition year, a more linear and externally assessed vocational route is likely to increase failure rates, and push some students who would follow the current applied general route into lower levels

of learning or out of learning completely. On top of this the substantial employer commitment to providing the necessary work experience required to pass a T Level, particularly amidst the fallout from the covid-19 crisis, and the geographical variation in the available levels of provision are going to restrict access to the offer. The government should be open that the T Levels are intended to be a more selective and smaller offer than current provision, which means there will be a large cohort of young people who are unserved and will find their progression prospects hampered.

- 2.3 Exclusion, rather than inclusion is therefore built into the design of T Levels. To help overcome this UCU recommends the continuation of the current applied general route, and the maintenance of the principle of mixed programmes. We should celebrate the achievement and progression of all students and not just a minority of high achievers. The language used around other routes is also important, and we would caution against the trend to denigrate existing options as not rigorous. This continues to feed the narrative that vocational options are soft or not as valid as academic options, an attitude that the government has stated it is opposed to.
- 2.4 There is also a question mark over the progression prospects for students undertaking T Levels, as the qualifications are not yet widely accepted for entry by higher education institutions.¹ Although institutions are responsible for their own admissions criteria, there is a key role for government, having decided to launch a new flagship technical qualification, in integrating the needs and views of higher education institutions in their design and development and ensuring timely and communication with institutions (and employers, students and parents and carers) to ensure they are widely understood and valued. The absence of a properly funded, independent information advice and guidance service also contributes to this communication gap. When we consider that underrepresented groups in higher education are more likely to have pursued vocational options to get there in the first place, it is crucial to the success of T Levels that they are not responsible for exacerbating structural inequalities.
- 2.5 For students who want to pursue T Levels there are measures that can be taken to support their achievement, such as providing adequate funding for the sector to deliver these demanding qualifications, giving teachers the opportunity to participate in meaningful CPD and addressing staff workload, stress and poor employment practices while also improving recruitment and retention of new technical teachers to support the delivery of the qualifications. The government

¹ <https://feweek.co.uk/confused-and-frustrated-most-universities-reject-first-cohort-of-t-level-students/>

should commit to tackling these issues through an overarching strategy that brings coherence to the reforms.

3.0 Preparing young people for work, or further and higher education

- 3.1 UCU members have a proud history of teaching and preparing young adults for employment as well as for a wide range of progression destinations in education. However there has been an increasing succession of market driven policies in further education, enforcing competition between colleges, schools and the higher education sector and confusing the needs of employers with the needs of employment. This has created a debased view of further education as limited to meeting the demands of employers. UCU believes these market-driven policies have undermined and disrupted the economic, as well as the cultural and social purposes of further education, squandering the proud history of further education staff's professional commitment to diverse and often deeply disadvantaged communities.
- 3.2 For UCU, the aims of education go far beyond the centralised and marketised regime of targets, performance indicators and assessments that dominate current policy and practice. A useful starting point in thinking about the preparation of young people for work or further and higher education is to ask the question: What are the understandings, knowledge, skills, attitudes, dispositions and capacities which should characterise an educated young adult in today's Britain?
- 3.3 Our students need to learn about their rights, citizenship, the role of trade unions, participating in democracy and environmental issues. This will help prepare them for employment and give them the skills they need to live in contemporary society. Furthermore an independent, personalised careers information, advice and guidance service is needed to help all young people identify and embark upon progression routes to their chosen destinations.
- 3.4 Keeping this in mind, it is clear that young people need a broad, inclusive and comprehensive curriculum. However the trend has been towards narrower curricula, time for students to engage in enrichment and wider learning has been squeezed, and qualification results still define success. Those pursuing an applied vocational education programme such as an apprenticeship also need to have the opportunity to engage in critical reflection and wider learning in addition to the skills and competencies specific to the occupational role. UCU's charter for jobs and apprenticeships sets out how this can be achieved².

² https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10208/UCU-apprenticeships-and-jobs-charter/pdf/Apprenticeships_charter_April19.pdf

- 3.5 Our transforming lives project³ examines the central role of the teacher in making a difference to quality teaching and learning and links the distinctiveness of further education in making a positive impact on individuals, society and the economy. There is often a great deal of groundwork to be done with students before they are able to fulfil their learning potential and progress to positive destinations, but this is not recognised within the structure of the current system or in funding:

Colleges should be re-positioned centrally as the non-linear model of education that is required for the twenty first century. Policy and funding need to acknowledge the important role colleges are playing by providing flexible and part time routes not just as an additional part of a linear system. Colleges have to re-build damaged learner identities as a precursor to providing courses and qualifications. This often operates at the level of re-engagement but is an essential first step. Nowhere is this recognised in the current funding model. Therefore, colleges need to be freed up from the prescriptive time-limits that are imposed on the courses they offer – that are imposed irrespective of the (educational and socioeconomic) backgrounds of the students they provide for. The vital restorative pedagogical work that further education teachers have to undertake means that additional time is necessary if students are to be given equal opportunities to achieve the qualifications they take. The annual cycle of funding is a part of the way colleges are straight-jacketed in what they are able to achieve. These cruel and unjust restraints fail to take account of student needs and reduce further education's potential to bring about social mobility.

4.0 Government's proposed changes to Level 3 Qualifications

- 4.1 UCU welcomes the commitment to a system that provides high-quality options to support individuals to fulfil their potential. We do however have a number of concerns over the government's approach to reform of level 3 qualifications. Firstly, as previously referred to, the narrowing of options for 16-19 year olds is not desirable. We should not be entrenching binary divides in education and we would welcome a more holistic approach to the curriculum that allows for diversity in interests, needs and ambitions.
- 4.2 The wider the choices available to young people, the better it is for their engagement and progression. Research undertaken between 2008-12 in two localities (Hodgson and Spours, 2013) suggested that mixed general and vocational programmes had a highly motivating effect on sections of the key stage 4 cohort

³ <https://transforminglives.web.ucu.org.uk/files/2019/09/TTL-in-further-education-Summative-report.pdf>

and increased their aspiration to study post-16, particularly at Level 3. We are not reassured by the recent statements by the new ministerial team at DfE that students will be able to study BTECs and other applied general qualifications as part of a mixed programme alongside A Levels because these concessions are highly caveated.

- 4.3 The concession only applies to the single, one A Level equivalent BTECs, and not the larger two A Level equivalents. So it may be possible to study one BTEC and two A Levels in the future, but much harder to study two BTECs and one A Level. The concession specifically does not mean 'blanket approval for small qualifications in all areas'. And we are still a long way from seeing a full list of specific qualifications that will continue to be funded in the future.
- 4.4 It is vital that the government uses the one year delay in introducing reform to develop a transparent process for determining the future of these qualifications that involves providers, students and employers. Funding should not be withdrawn unless there is clear evidence that the qualification is not valued by students or employers. An evidence-based approach, involving those directly involved in delivery, is essential if we are to have a qualification system that works for everyone.
- 4.5 The removal of so many qualifications from the scope of funding will also have a detrimental impact on the opportunities available to adults, especially those with SEND and protected characteristics. At this critical time for the recovery of the nation from covid-19 we surely should not be switching off so many chances for adults to learn. Adult participation in learning has already fallen off a cliff in the last decade and UCU cannot fathom how restricting the number of qualifications is going to help reverse this and bring people back into learning.

5.0 A baccalaureate system

- 5.1 In order to have an inclusive programme of study for 16-19 year olds we need to reject stratification, and instead of putting our energies into cutting qualifications and introducing elite pathways we should be developing a unified, multi-level programme of study enhancing both the practical and theoretical capabilities of students together with collaboration between education providers to provide the highest quality of education to all.
- 5.2 The obsession with exams and grades has forced students to follow narrowly based criteria to pass exams at the expense of developing critical thinking, independent learning and research skills. We need to move away from the narrow confines of exam syllabuses and instead build a system based on trust and inclusion. Instead of teaching to the test, we should look at project-based work designed to develop a

breadth of skills and knowledge. Teachers can then be freed up to teach creatively and engage their students. Teacher stress and workload is at an all-time high, and reducing the high stakes accountability that exams engender will be a key part in relieving some of this pressure.

- 5.3 UCU believes that the creation of a broad and inclusive curriculum for all 16-19 year olds implies acknowledgement of the central importance of the lecturer as a creator as well as a deliverer of the curriculum. Lecturing staff need the professional autonomy to create additional, coherent and relevant learning experiences, particularly with often reluctant and disadvantaged learners.
- 5.4 UCU believes that teachers' professional judgements should be valued and given a central role in assessment. We should trust teachers to bring out the best in their students, inspiring them by delivering a varied and interesting curriculum in ways that motivate them and are relevant and exciting.
- 5.5 The covid-19 crisis has shown how the current exam and qualifications model is not fit for purpose. Inequalities and exclusion are built into the system. It needs people to fail to maintain credibility. External, timed, high stakes examinations are past their sell by date and instead we should inspire young people with project based creative curricula that spark their intellectual interests, develop critical thinking skills and give a good grounding for the future with broad based, transferable education and skills.

6.0 Post Qualification Admissions

- 6.1 For several years UCU has been arguing for an overhaul of the university admissions system. This has been motivated by a concern amongst our membership that the current admissions system – based heavily on inaccurate predicted grades⁴ - is fundamentally unfair, poorly understood and lacking in transparency. Our full report 'Post Qualification Applications: A student centred model for higher education admissions in England, Northern Ireland and Wales' is available for the committee to read.⁵
- 6.2 UCU supports a move to a model where students know their Level 3 results before they apply to HE. This would have a positive impact on students because they would be able to determine their next steps on the basis of their actual achievement rather than estimates of their potential. In particular, it would bring benefits for high achieving students from less advantaged backgrounds, who tend to have their

⁴ https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/8409/Predicted-grades-accuracy-and-impact-Dec-16/pdf/Predicted_grades_report_Dec2016.pdf

⁵ [Post Qualification Applications: A student centred model](#)

grades under-predicted under the current system, thereby potentially limiting their likelihood to apply to the most selective institutions.⁶

- 6.3 At present, we have a higher education application cycle which is little more than a set of dates where students have to complete the process of application to higher education. A higher education admissions system should be more than a cycle. It should be a set of support structures that enables students to make decisions about their higher education course and institution. It begins well before any application is made and includes preparation for as well as induction to higher education study.
- 6.4 Evidence from the Higher Education Policy Institute/Advance HE Student Academic Experience Survey in 2020⁷ suggests that over a third (36%) of students are not happy with their choice of course and university. An even higher proportion of Black (55%) and 7 disabled (40%) students and those who enter via clearing are unhappy with their choices. A move to PQA would better ensure that students are empowered to choose which courses best suit their needs, abilities and aspirations. PQA would also remove the need for predicted grades which disadvantage high-attaining students from less advantaged backgrounds. It would also have significant benefits for staff involved in university admissions by removing the pressure on teachers to produce predicted grades.
- 6.5 Much of the concern expressed about a move to post-qualification applications relates to the provision of support to students during the application and offer-making period during the summer months. UCU is clear that the provision of significantly enhanced information, advice and guidance (IAG) to students is crucial to the success of any reformed admissions system. IAG would be front-loaded to ensure that by the time students finalise their applications and decide on offers in August/September they would have established clear preferences and have the skills to cope if their results/offers differ from expectations, thereby minimising the support required from staff.

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⁶ https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/8409/Predicted-grades-accuracy-and-impact-Dec-16/pdf/Predicted_grades_report_Dec2016.pdf

⁷ <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/student-academic-experience-survey-report-2020>