

BTECs' future still in the balance

Martin Allen assesses the situation as the Skills Bill progresses through parliament

Widespread opposition to government plans to defund BTEC qualifications, ostensibly to make way for the new T-levels, led to the forming of a multi-organisational *ProtectStudentChoicealliance*, its representation stretching from teacher unions to the Association of Colleges. With the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill scheduled to pass through parliament, 118 cross-party MPs and peers supporting the campaign signed a letter to the new Secretary of State, Nadhim Zahawi.

In parliament, some of the most vocal opposition to the changes has come from members of the House of Lords - in particular former Secretaries of State for Education, Ken Baker, the instigator of the National Curriculum under Mrs Thatcher but now a campaigner for improved technical education, and David Blunkett, responsible for overseeing many of New Labour's education reforms. Also, David Willetts, who served as universities minister under David Cameron. Blunkett and Baker (*Guardian* October 13th) have also complained that the defunding proposals were hidden as 'secondary legislation' within the wider Bill, therefore making the funding changes difficult to debate.

But the Government rolled back their lordships' attempts to amend the Bill and secure the status of BTECs and other Level 3 technical/vocational qualifications, the contents of which are considered to overlap with the T-levels. At the Commons committee stage (before the legislation went for its final reading) Labour MPs cited the role that BTECs had played in providing alternative opportunities for entering higher education, but Tory members toed the government line.

Rather than accepting the Lords' fallback proposals to delay the funding cull for up to four years while T-levels were properly bedded in, Zahawi made a Commons statement explaining that the timetable for the introduction of the various T-levels would be extended by a year, by implication maintaining BTECs' current funding till the end of 2024. But Zahawi also commented that 'It is quite likely we will see many BTECs and other similar applied general-style qualifications continuing to play an important

role in 16-19 education, for the foreseeable future'. Only time will tell what he means by this. (It should be remembered that, in response to harsh criticism received during the 'consultation' stage, the Government at least promised to keep the decommissioning of technical qualifications 'under review'.)

The future of the T-levels is certainly not assured. The first set of results are not due until next summer, but even these will be for no more than a pilot group of students in just three areas, from a limited number of institutions. With the slow roll-out of the Ts (only seven of the 21 routes will now have started by the 2022/3 academic year), it will need several cohorts to assess the new qualification's viability, but also, and most importantly, its credibility with young people.

Immediate concerns about their implementation can be identified. Firstly, the Ts have been primarily designed to be delivered through FE colleges - originally through new 'specialist' institutions. This requirement has since been dropped, but of the initial two hundred providers listed by the Department for Education FE colleges make up 75 per cent, alongside a handful of sixth form colleges, schools and (the failed) University Technology Colleges. Most schools (where approaching 40 per cent of year 11s will continue their post-16 education, including thousands who will enrol on BTECs), despite the significant additional funding available, do not have the infrastructure to deliver more than one or two, particularly in areas like construction. Neither do they have the links with local employers to secure the 45 days of work placement that is required. Changes in labour market recruitment and training practices mean that increasingly colleges now find this difficult.

Of more general concern is the nature of the qualifications themselves. Like the vocational and technical qualifications they are designed to replace, the Ts have as much (maybe more) in common with academic A-levels as they do with the work-based apprenticeships. Students undertake 1200 hours of 'guided learning' (compared with a minimum 315

hours work placement), primarily in classrooms, take written examinations, and complete externally assessed projects. One of the criticisms made by Baker and Blunkett is that the T-levels are not work-based enough.

As significant, T-level entrance requirements are comparatively high - requiring five GCSE passes, including in English and maths. In other words, to enrol on a T-level a young person needs to have been relatively successful at Key Stage 4. In which case, in a period when gaining qualifications is so much about collecting 'currency', why are they likely to switch from the high status academic route to an unproven alternative? Key here will be the attitude of elite universities. Most, if not all, will want to 'recognise' the qualification, but this does not mean that students with T-levels will be admitted. In this respect, a major advantage of a BTEC is that it can be taken as a one, two or three unit qualification, each of which is equivalent to and can be studied alongside an A-level. Once again it will take more than one cohort of young people with a T-level (as their only qualification) to assess its standing.

While up to 30 per cent of school and college leavers applying to university have a BTEC award, in many cases this is in combination with at least an A-level. The learning and timetabling demands of a T-level mean that combinations of this sort are not possible. Arguably this is the result of a political decision to create a binary system of learning consistent with the more general direction of the 2021 Skills White Paper, which is now being enshrined in the Bill. In an interview with Schools Week (13th December), Ofqual boss Jo Saxton called for a 'much more mixed offering' for post-16 qualifications. (The Skills Bill confirms the position of the Institute of Apprenticeships as the sole authority responsible for both the implementation and the oversight of T-levels, with no role for Ofqual.)

Campaigns in defence of the BTEC qualification will continue. It is essential that these include those who are not necessarily against T-levels but are opposed to them serving as the only alternative to academic study. However, we also need to be aware of the greater inequities of the Bill. A Lords sub-committee has taken up the cause of those young people not following the academic route, arguing that the Bill does little to increase opportunities for the young unemployed. In addition to emphasising how student choice will be narrowed, Labour movement campaigners have highlighted how Tory proposals for post-16 learning will increase employer influence within Further Education and lead to greater privatisation and 'businessification' within the

sector. But in the context of a changing labour market and an increasingly polarised occupational structure, and with technological change destroying many 'middle jobs', there is also a need to reassess the role of technical/vocational qualifications and their potential benefit to young people.

