
Protect student choice by retaining BTECs alongside A levels and T levels

We reproduce below the text of Section 2 of the Sixth Form Colleges Association's SFCA Manifesto: Election 2024: Six Priorities for Sixth Form Education.

In July 2021, the government confirmed plans to introduce a two-route system of A levels and T levels where most young people pursue one of these Level 3 qualifications at the age of 16. As a result, the majority of applied general qualifications (AGQs) such as BTECs will be scrapped.

We believe that for a significant number of young people, BTECs provide a more effective route to higher education or skilled employment than A levels or T levels. They are popular with students and parents, respected by employers and universities, and provide a well-established route to higher education or employment - particularly for disadvantaged young people. Scrapping them would be disastrous for social mobility and the economy, and could leave at least 155,000 students without a suitable study programme.

Research from the Nuffield Foundation has found that a quarter of students enter university with BTECs, and that they are likelier to be from disadvantaged backgrounds. Research from the Social Market Foundation has found that 44% of white working-class students who enter university studied at least one BTEC and 37% of black students enter with only BTECs.

Employers value AGQs highly. For example, employers in the health service are clear that the T level in Health will only ever be able to complement, rather than replace, BTECs in Health and Social Care (45% of students currently enrolled on these qualifications could be left without a suitable study programme from 2025 under the government's plans.) Scrapping BTECs would be a devastating blow to the NHS workforce.

SFCA co-ordinates the #ProtectStudentChoice campaign - a coalition of 30 employer groups and

organisations that represent students, staff and leaders in schools, colleges and universities. The coalition is united by the belief that BTECs should continue to be available alongside A levels and T levels.

But in October 2023, the government announced that A levels and T levels would also be scrapped to make way for a new qualification, the Advanced British Standard. The plan to remove most BTECs remains unchanged.

The uncertainty and confusion caused by the unwelcome plan to transition to a two-route qualification system has been exacerbated by the new plan to transition to a single-route qualification system - a process the government believes will take a decade to complete.

To protect student choice, a commitment should be made to retain BTECs in the current three-route qualification system alongside A levels and T levels. There is a need to review the sixth form curriculum but that review should strengthen, rather than replace, the well-established and successful three-route system.

The era of having a job for life is over, and young people will change careers multiple times during their working lives. In that context, access to the sort of broad, flexible education provided by studying BTECs (that have only recently undergone a process of reform to make them more rigorous) will become even more important in the future.

DETAILED PRIORITIES

Pause: to address the enormous uncertainty currently facing young people (particularly those in

secondary schools), parents, schools, colleges, universities and employers, students should be able to enrol on any of the 134 existing applied general qualifications up to and including the 2026/27 academic year.

qualifications for reapproval or submit new AGQs where there is evidence of demand; this will ensure BTECs are available to young people well beyond 2026/27

Review: the complex and bureaucratic review of Level 3 qualifications should be refocused solely on ensuring awarding bodies can submit updated versions of the 134 existing applied general

