

# Ark Position Paper on the Level 3 Landscape

## The current landscape

The English post-16 system was initially designed around A-levels. As more and more young people decided to stay in education after 16, an increasingly complex array of alternatives sprung up, with ultimately thousands of more vocational qualifications available. Now that staying in education after GCSEs is compulsory fewer than half of students do A-levels, but the vocational side of the system remains incredibly complex and hard to navigate. Substantial reductions in funding for post-16 education over the last decade – a 28% real-terms cut for school sixth forms - have reduced the number of contact hours students have outside of funded qualifications, making their design and delivery even more critical for young people's future life chances.

The Government are attempting to create a clearer vocational alternative to A-levels with the introduction of T-levels. These are large two-year qualifications, worth three A-levels, that include a substantial (45 day) work placement and designed in collaboration with industry. The intention is that these become the main “level 3” alternative to A-levels, and ultimately build a similar level of brand recognition and status. There will still be alternative options for the substantial minority of young people who are not ready to start a level 3 course after finishing GCSEs.

As part of the process of moving to this “two-tier” level 3 landscape, the Department for Education (DfE), has proposed to stop funding other level 3 qualifications that “overlap” with T-levels. The aim is to significantly reduce the complexity of the system while raising the status of T-levels as the primary alternative to A-levels, and ensuring take-up.

Many post-16 providers have expressed concern that the initial timetable for stopping alternative qualifications was too rapid and, as a result, the DfE announced, in November 2021, that they were delaying the process until 2024. At the same time, they removed the requirement to complete level 2 qualifications in Maths and English in order to get a T-level, as this was seen as a significant barrier to uptake, and successful completion.

There remains concern, though, that by removing “overlapping” level 3 qualifications, the DfE will be limiting options for young people who neither want to do A-levels nor are ready to commit to a T-level that is targeted at a specific industry, with a lengthy work placement. In particular the popular level 3 BTECs – one of a range of “Applied General Qualifications” – offer a more general grounding in skills that can be applied across a range of industries and offer an established pathway to higher education.

Alongside the delays announced in November, the Government have softened their language on removing funding from other qualifications. The Secretary of State has said “it is quite likely we will see many BTECs and other similar applied general style qualifications continuing to play an important role in 16 to 19 education, for the foreseeable future.” But at the moment, the official plan is still to remove funding from most of these programmes in 2024, albeit that the detailed process for doing so has not yet been set out.



## Ark's proposals

We share concerns that moving to a two-tier system, where most young people do either A-levels or T-levels, would narrow options too much. While T-levels will be the right qualification for those who are clear about the industry they want to work in, many students have not made that decision when they start their post-16 study. The under-informed choice of a specialist pathway could lead to substantial drop-out and inappropriate learning for future work and education. We believe it is important to preserve a third route for more general vocational qualifications that support a wide range of skills sought after by employers, while also keeping the route open to higher education. After all, most graduate jobs do not require specific technical qualifications.

Research published by the Nuffield Foundation last month, demonstrates that BTEC students are successful across a range of university outcomes. However, the research demonstrated that BTEC students were almost twice as likely to drop out before their second year compared to similar students who had done A-levels.

We also share some of the DfE's concerns around the national level outcomes for young people who do Applied General Qualifications but believe there are other ways to improve these beyond removing the route altogether. At Ark we have developed a Professional Pathways programme that offers a comprehensive wrap-around curriculum that runs alongside the level 3 BTEC. This includes work readiness lessons, covering key skills like financial literacy and teamwork, as well as supporting applications for higher education and work. It also includes regular engagements with employers and four student conferences – these events give students the opportunity to network with professionals and practise the essential skills embedded into the work readiness curriculum.

Independent evaluation of the impact of the programme on post-18 outcomes has shown that Ark Professional Pathways students rated their understanding of higher education and employment, and their preparation in key skills, more highly than did A level students. These outcomes do not reflect the stereotypical view of BTEC as 'second-best'. 40% of Pathways leavers in 2021 got into courses at "top third" universities showing this kind of programme can offer a route to higher education, particularly for students from non-traditional backgrounds and challenging socio-economic contexts. Further, since introducing the programme, the number of BTEC students sustaining their higher education destination has significantly improved.



## Recommendations:

- The DfE should formalise a third level 3 pathway for post-16 students, alongside A-levels and T-levels, based on existing applied general qualifications like BTECs.
- This third pathway should include funded wrap-around support to support progression to higher education and work.
- The DfE should work with employers to support this third pathway, not just T-levels, including providing less intensive opportunities for students to apply their learning in workplace/industry settings.
- The DfE should work with employers to develop a consistent application process for apprenticeships. A predictable timetable would allow applications to be scheduled alongside sixth form study and reduce uncertainty for young people studying vocational qualifications.
- Universities should work with the DfE and schools to ensure as many courses as possible are accessible to young people who have taken general qualifications or T-levels; as well as a more coherent approach to messaging and delivery of degree apprenticeships.

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## More about Ark Professional Pathways

To find out more about Professional Pathways, take a look at [our website](#) or read [our overview](#) of the programme.

