



State of the Nation Policy Briefing

Skills Reform

So, what seems to be going on with Government and the skills agenda and how it relates to higher education? On the skills reform overall, the Skills for Jobs White Paper has been described and positioned by officials as very much focused on the economy, on jobs and productivity, while recognising the role of FE in the NEET and social justice agenda and does not provide many references to HE though UVAC continually emphasises in terms of the key role that HE has in working with FE and other providers to ensure that the skills individuals need, the economy and employers need are delivered.

Part of the thinking behind the proposals in the White Paper is that on the basis of international comparisons, too few individuals take level 4 and level 5 technical qualifications. Arguments have been advanced that too many individuals take bachelor's Degrees. Ministers have been critical of the delivery of degrees that are not related to the needs of the jobs' market and have stated that too many graduates are employed in non-graduate jobs - typically one third of all graduates.

There is lots of work around what programmes cost at levels 4 and 5 and relating it to what apprenticeships cost and therefore how much funding Government allocates. It is clear language is changing as 5 years ago or more in apprenticeships, employers were in the "driving seat" and now they are being described as "being at the heart of the system".

T Levels

UVAC, following discussions with HEI members, Pearson and OCR submitted a very detailed response to the DfE Review of post – 16 qualifications at Level 3 in England: Second Stage, that closed at the end of January 2021. We are awaiting the Government response but expect little change to the rollout outlined HERE. UVAC has produced briefings, press articles, covered changes in webinars and discussed matters with UCAS colleagues and with members and Awarding Organisations through the UVAC HE and Awarding Organisations Vocational Qualifications Committee.

Review of Post-16 Level 3 Qualifications

The DfE consultation on the Review of post 16 qualifications at level 3 in England: second stage closed on end of January. A copy of UVAC's response can be found at <https://uvac.ac.uk/df-e-review-of-post-16-qualifications-at-level-3-in-england-second-stage-uvac-draft-response/>. Key proposals focus on the creation of three mainstream options for 16 – 18-year-olds, the academic option, A levels, the technical option, T levels and the work-

based option, Apprenticeships. This leaves a gap in the offer for individuals not wanting to undertake A levels who are unsure of their desired future occupation. Historically, the answer has been Applied Generals, the most well-known example being the BTEC National. Approximately 200,000 students took Applied Generals in 2018 (300,000 took A levels), with some taking a combination of both. Around 20% of 18-year-olds applying to university held at least one Applied General qualification. Opportunities to follow Applied Generals, if proposals outlined in the consultation are implemented, will be reduced significantly. UVAC has also noted the opportunities for 16 – 18-year-olds to follow T levels and Apprenticeships could, in the years following the pandemic be limited. T levels require employers to provide a 45-day industry placement and Apprenticeships require a job. UVAC's timeline for T level roll can be found at <https://uvac.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Reform-of-Level-3-Qualifications—Key-Proposed-Milestones.pdf>.

Changes in the offer for 16 – 18-year-olds will, in the medium to long-term, mean substantial changes to the qualifications/programmes followed by individuals applying to HE. This will have major implications for many HEIs, in terms of not just recruitment, but programme design and access and participation. T levels, have for example, been described as leading to Higher Technical Qualifications. Many HEIs have invested heavily in supporting progression routes from Applied Generals to HE and have recorded success in widening access and participation to underrepresented learners through such approaches.

Higher Technical Education / Qualifications

Higher Technical Qualifications - Awarding Organisations (HEIs and Ofqual regulated awarding organisations) can apply to the IfATE to have specific qualifications that deliver appropriate KSBs specified in employer occupational standards (developed under the auspices of the IfATE) awarded the “Higher Technical Qualification” quality mark.

HTQs will be smaller than bachelor's degrees and can be developed and delivered by a wider range of organisations. Cost is a massive (if underlying) issue. Ofqual regulated qualifications awarded the HTQ quality mark could be significantly smaller than a Certification of Higher Education or Foundation Degree and could be delivered by providers with different cost bases to HEIs. UUK and AoC are undertaking some work with Gatsby on the costs of HEI developed and delivered Higher Technical Qualifications. UVAC has been asked to provide support.

The Demand – Demand from individuals, particularly young people is very uncertain. Demand from employers is questionable but will undoubtedly vary by sector. HTQs could be attractive in some sectors where they meet an employer need and where they have PSRB support.

A Quality Mark NOT a Specific Type or Size of Qualification – the common characteristic of a HTQ is that a qualification has been mapped to the KSBs specified in an occupational standard with coverage of 60% or more of the KSBs specified in the standard. There is no standard credit size for an HTQ, and qualifications of different size (however defined) could be awarded the quality mark. This is very significant as Ofqual regulated qualifications (Pearson, City & Guilds etc.) could be significantly smaller than HEI qualifications. FECs and particularly ITPs have different cost structures to HEIs. Interestingly, the quality mark

criterion allows a level 5 qualification to be quality marked and mapped against a level 4 standard.

The Development and Application Process and Economies of Scale – Qualifications are approved individually by the IfATE. Awarding Organisations e.g., Pearson with a large number of centres across England have an advantage in the application process in terms of economies of scale over HEIs delivering HTQs directly or through a limited number of partner FECs.

HTQ Funding – In the Skills for Jobs White Paper Government states: “From 2023, we will look to reduce funding for non-approved higher technical qualification” P36. Proposals to incentivise funding for Quality Marked HTQs have also been raised. This will obviously place non-approved qualifications at level 4 and level 5 at a significant disadvantage and impact on current provision. How the cost bases of HEIs vis-à-vis FECs/ITPs will enable HEIs to play a significant role potentially an issue. UUK/AoC/Gatsby are undertaking some work with the close involvement of DfE, that will help to inform government’s decision making, over the future funding of Higher Technical Education. UVAC is supporting UUK with this work, building on work UVAC has undertaken in respect of the costs of Degree Apprenticeship delivery.

The HEI Position on Higher Technical Qualification – UVAC has held several one-to-one meetings with HEIs on the subject of HTQs, is a member of the UUK Roundtable on HTQs and HTQs have focused on the agenda of several UVAC ‘State of the Nation webinars’. The position of the sector on HTQs can perhaps best be described as ‘uncertain’. HEIs are interested in seeing how progression from T levels to HTQs may work, how progression from HTQs to bachelor’s degrees could function, the role of HTQs in enhancing access and participation and how HTQs could meet skills needs, working with FECs/IoTs etc. Uncertainty, however, arises from lack of clarity in funding, whether HEIs will be able to compete with FEC/ITP provision and the level of demand from learners and employers. HTQs could emerge as a large-scale alternative to existing HEI vocational programmes displacing many programmes. Ministers certainly want to see a large-scale expansion of HTQs. How Higher Technical Qualifications are supported through the Lifelong Loan Entitlement will also be critical.

HEIs/Awarding Organisations Applying for the Quality Mark - Initial IfATE work in this area focused in the final quarter of 2020 on quality marking qualifications for occupations aligned to the digital routes i.e. employer developed standards. Future approvals will include construction and health and science routes in 2021. Thereafter rollout will reflect the pattern for the development and approval of T Levels. Although OfS is the quality assurance body for level 4 and level 5 provision (other than Apprenticeships) delivered by HEIs, we would not be surprised if Ofsted assumed a greater role in this area. Government felt OfS could not deliver a quality assurance approach for level 6 and level 7 Apprenticeships that met their needs, similar sentiments could develop for level 4 and level 5 technical education provision.

Distinguishing and Demonstrating the “Added Value” of an FHEQ HTQ – The HTQ quality mark process does not distinguish between FHEQ and Ofqual regulated qualifications. In contrast, the development and promotion of a Degree Apprenticeship clearly demonstrates the ‘added value’ of the degree within the Apprenticeship. Foundation Degrees have the advantage that they articulate with and lead to bachelor’s Degrees. IfATE colleagues have made clear to UVAC that they want to ensure HEI engagement.

The following is a list of those organisations that have submitted qualifications to the IfATE for the first round of applications focused on the digital pathway. The approval process started on September 2020 and the first qualifications will be available to learners from September 2022. The next pathways where applications are invited are construction and health care and science in 2021.

1. University of Plymouth - HND Computing
2. University of Plymouth - FdSc Computing
3. University of Plymouth - FdSc Software Development
4. Grimsby Institute of Further and Higher Education - FdSc Software Development
5. Grimsby Institute of Further and Higher Education - FdSc Digital and Technology Solutions
6. Staffordshire University - FdSc Computer Science
7. Leeds City College - Foundation Degree in Computer Science
8. Leeds City College - Foundation Degree in Software Development
9. Leeds City College - Foundation Degree in Cyber Security
10. BCS, The Chartered Institute for IT - BCS Level 4 Diploma in Data Analysis Tools and Concepts
11. The Open University - Diploma of Higher Education in Computing and IT
12. NCC Education - NCC Education Level 4 Diploma In Computing
13. New College Durham - FdSc Software Development
14. New College Durham - FdSc Computing with Networking
15. New College Durham - FdSc Business Computing
16. New College Durham - FdSc.Cyber Security
17. Warwickshire College - FdSc Computer Networks and Cybersecurity
18. Nottingham Trent University - Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE) Software Development
19. Newcastle College Group - FdSc Networking and Cyber Security
20. University Centre Somerset - Foundation Degree: FD Computing and Digital Technologies
21. Blackpool and Fylde College (Lancaster University) - FdSc Network Engineering (Systems Administration)
22. Pearson Education Ltd - BTEC Level 5 Higher National Diploma in Computing

Lifelong Loan Entitlement

One area where UVAC will need to focus more attention in addition to Apprenticeships, T Levels and HTQs, concerns Paragraph 77, of the Skills for Jobs White Paper, The Lifelong Loan Entitlement will deliver a major transformation in further and higher education .. useable for modules at higher technical and degree levels regardless of whether they are provided in colleges or universities .. space out studies, facilitate the transfer of credits

between different institutions.” We are expecting a formal consultation this year on the introduction, from 2025, of a Lifelong Loan Entitlement, equivalent to four years post-18 education.

Higher and Degree Apprenticeship

UVAC is very engaged with both ESFA and IfATE. UVAC has regular KITs with ESFA’s Director of Apprenticeships and IfATE’s Chief Executive. UVAC has a fortnightly meeting with ESFA’s Head of Funding on issues such as eligible/ineligible costs, portable apprenticeships, levy transfers and funding SMEs. UVAC typically holds 2 or 3 meeting a week with ESFA colleagues on all aspects of operational policy. Regular meetings are also held with IfATE colleagues.

While organisations such as Ofsted have undertaken substantial work on developing their role in Higher and Degree Apprenticeship, OfS/QAA have had *some* engagement.

Inspection

Discussion and preparatory work with Ofsted progresses well. UVAC is supporting Ofsted to contextualise inspection at HE level (e.g., revisions to the inspection handbook, paper on contextualisation, recruitment and training of new inspectors etc.) and have been encouraged by their approach. Work is still needed to ensure that inspection reflects the integrated Degree Apprenticeship model. Ofsted argue that their approach focuses on inspecting the ‘quality of the training full stop’ and that they do not consider the degree or academic standards. Dialogue is ongoing, in response to the following issues raised by UVAC re the Inspection Handbook, Ofsted acknowledged our arguments:

“Contextualisation is key - I thought the slide presented on contextualising inspection for levels 6 and 7 was excellent. If this could be developed into a short, published Ofsted paper (2 – 4 sides) to complement the Inspection Handbook this would be of immense value to levels 6 and 7 providers, and I suspect inspectors. This would also help address some of the points below.

I understand that the Inspection Handbook is a high-level document designed to encompass a range of provision types. It can, however, come across as developed primarily for provision focused on young people and lower-level provision, with a few technical amendments made to encompass levels 6 and 7. As examples:

P25 reference is made to parents and carers etc., but no reference is made to PSRBs? See also P45. I think the balance of the handbook is too skewed towards lower-level provision/young people. Some level 6 Degree Apprenticeships will be of fundamental importance e.g., Registered Nurse or Police Constable. What a parent or carer may think of the provision here is rather less important than the view of the PSRB!! But the PSRB is not referenced.

P45 – “Ofsted inspects apprenticeship training, not degrees” - I do think some work is needed on the approach/wording here. High academic standards and the degree are an integral (and integrated) part of the Degree Apprenticeship

and surely Ofsted must consider how the degree delivers the KSBs? In a Degree Apprenticeship, high academic standards are essential to the delivery of a high-quality training programme. What I do understand is that Ofsted does not regulate or review the degree/degree provider. Perhaps Ofsted's approach/focus is the quality of the training while recognising that academic standards appropriately underpin the delivery of the Apprenticeship training?

I think there is a need to reference the respective role of organisations in QA e.g., OfS/QAA, IfATE and PSRBs. OfS is still the regulator and should have substantial interest in how, for example, Apprenticeships contribute to Access and Participation Plans. No mention of the TEF? I understand that Ofsted is inspecting Apprenticeship and that TEF is institution wide, but surely TEF says something about teaching in an institution?"

In response to a demand from the sector UVAC is providing webinars and related support on preparing for inspection including on Self-Assessment and Quality Improvement Plans.

External Quality Assurance of End Point Assessment

Under new arrangements, from Summer 2022 Ofqual will provide External Quality Assurance (EQA) for all Apprenticeships except integrated Degree Apprenticeships. For integrated Degree Apprenticeships external quality assurance will be provided by OfS through the QAA. There are a limited number of exceptions to the above arrangements for Higher Apprenticeships where a statutory regulator will provide EQA. UVAC has raised the proposed approach to End Point Assessment with OfS/QAA. Unlike for the Ofqual approach, there is very little publicly available information on OfS/QAA plans. There is guidance for end point assessment organisations written by Chris Scriven, who delivered the pilot in 2019 on behalf of OfS/QAA and an EQA 'provider readiness checklist' but it is unclear how this is being factored in to work in progress with both the ESFA and IfATE. We have also registered our concerns over the limited information on the OfS/QAA approach to EQA and potential HEI concerns with ESFA/DfE and the Chief Executive of IfATE.

Funding

Dialogue continues with ESFA/IfATE on funding approaches to Apprenticeship – eligible/ineligible costs and the IfATE process for recommending funding bands to ministers. A UVAC/ESFA roundtable on the new portable Apprenticeships announced by the Chancellor was held in March.

Other Activities

Elsewhere we are working with ESFA on a "Training Provider Roadmap" and an "End Point Assessment Roadmap". With IfATE, UVAC is exploring how optional specimen training plans could be part of the work undertaken by Trailblazers. UVAC is liaising with ESFA on the refresh of the Register of Apprenticeship Training Providers (RoATP) and rolling out support as part of our webinar programme. UVAC held a joint webinar with ESFA for HEIs on 'accelerated', 'front-loaded' and 'portable' Apprenticeships and the role of ATAs. ESFA have also expressed an interest in working with UVAC on supporting more SMEs access Apprenticeships, Green Apprenticeships and supporting social mobility and diversity.

May 2021