



State of the Nation Policy Briefing

Programmes and Policies

The Technical Pathway - T Levels and Applied Generals – In its response to the second consultation *Review of post 16 qualifications at level 3 in England – Approvals process for academic and technical qualifications*, July 2021 Government has been clear that it wants the mainstream offer for 16 – 18 year-olds to be A Levels or T Levels. There will be some opportunity for smaller Applied Generals to be combined with A levels, but this will become an exception. Applied Generals, such as BTEC Nationals and Cambridge Technicals will become rare. Over time ([UVAC has published the timeline for changes](#)) this will have a substantial impact on the recruitment of students. According to Department for Education (DfE) figures, around 200,000 16 to 18-year-old students took Applied Generals or Tech Level qualifications in 2018, over 300,000 who took A levels, and with some students take a combination of both. Around a fifth of 18-year-old students applying to university held at least one such qualification.

Key sections in the DfE consultation response in July 2021 state:

“Large qualifications, including Applied Generals Qualifications larger than one A level, will only be approved if there is clear evidence of links to specialist HE courses not well served by A Levels. They will also only be approved if they do not overlap with T Level areas. This could include qualifications in areas such as performing and creative arts.”
p7

“We will also fund small qualifications (one A level size or smaller) that can be taken alongside A levels and AS levels as part of a mixed programme of study, if there is evidence, they add value to A level study and will support progression to high quality HE courses that deliver strong graduate outcomes. This could include small qualifications in subjects with some overlap with A levels or T levels, including STEM subjects such as engineering.” p7

“We will also set a high bar for demonstrating the value of having an additional subject in the range, particularly if they overlap with A levels, drawing on evidence of

successful outcomes for students taking those subjects at the moment, and links to further study in priority subjects. It does not mean blanket approval for small qualifications in all areas that currently have Applied General Qualifications.” p7

UVAC has long championed the value of choice at 16 and the fact that Applied General Qualifications provide a distinctive offer and have helped many individuals, including many from underrepresented cohorts access higher education. In press articles UVAC has welcomed the fact that there will continue to be some opportunities for young people to follow Applied Generals but regretted the reduction in choice.

Changes will be very significant in some subject areas, health and social care being a good example where there was significant progression to HE. T Levels are quite different to Applied Generals. T Levels require a 45-work placement and focus on employment. We suspect far fewer individuals will take T Levels than have in the past taken Applied Generals. Many individuals who would in the past have taken Applied Generals may take A Levels. For HEIs T Levels will pose a range of challenges. Cohorts are likely to be small and questions of the financial viability of designing programmes and undertaking outreach activities for T Level students will be apparent. The progression route for T Level students is often described as employment, Apprenticeships and Higher Technical Education.

Moving forward UVAC will:

- Provide briefings for our members on the rollout of specific T Levels, timescales and removal of funding for other qualifications. We will, with our Awarding Organisation partners and FE partners, seek to identify where T levels are being delivered and where progression pathways can be developed.
- Work with members and Awarding Bodies to outline the value of Applied Generals in specific subject areas and where they are of particular value in supporting progression to higher education.

[UVAC submitted a strong response](#) supporting T Levels but emphasising the value of and need to continue to fund Applied Generals.

Key issues include:

Whether HTQs are predominantly a Higher Education or Further Education

Programme – The publicity surrounding the launch of the HTE Growth Fund was rather ‘anti-HE’ the Secretary of State commenting: “We want to counter the myth that a degree is the only way to a good job.” While the IfATE wants HEIs to apply for the HTQ Quality Mark and deliver HTQs some organisations see HTQs as more of an FE than an HE offering. UVAC has emphasised the importance and value of degrees in the jobs market and argued for the need to create progression routes/top-ups between HTQs and bachelor’s degrees.

The £18 million HTE provider growth fund announced by the Secretary of State in June 2021 posed eligibility problems for some HEIs and is currently more inclusive of FECs. To qualify for funding an HEI must have a good or outstanding Ofsted grade (for Apprenticeship) if inspected and of more significance to the sector be delivering level 4 and 5 technical education provision which relate to their intended HTQ offering. That is an HEI cannot use the Growth Fund to move into level 4 and 5 technical education provision. In contrast, the fund criteria allowed for FECs delivering T levels in the same occupational areas to use the fund to expand into higher technical qualification delivery. UVAC have raised this anomaly with ESFA/DfE colleagues.

Uncertainty regarding Employer and Particularly Learner Demand – Government is clear that it wants more level 4 and 5 technical qualifications to be delivered and contrasts the far lower proportion of individuals with or taking level 4 and 5 technical qualifications in England with other OECD countries. Whether employers and particularly individuals will be convinced as to the value of HTQs is open to question. The likelihood is that where there is good PSRB support linked potentially to a licence to practice the HTQ could attract considerable interest. In some sectors strong employer support may also lead to take-up. Take up is likely to vary considerably between sectors with strong take-up in sectors such as health and social care. HEIs, however, understandably have concerns re potential cohort size, competition from independent and further education providers with lower cost bases and how this relates to a return on investment and financial viability.

Uncertainty over Funding – Government has made clear that it will financially disincentivise the delivery of level 4 and 5 technical qualifications that do not secure the HTQ Quality Mark. No further detail is, however, available as to what this means. Currently existing HE and FE funding and the loans system applies to HTQs. In this context it is important to note that HTQs are not a type of qualification, but instead a quality mark applied on successful application to existing/newly validated FHEQ and Ofqual regulated level 4 and 5 qualifications that meet the HTQ criteria. The lack of clarity on funding and uncertain demand means many HEIs are not engaging or keeping a ‘watching brief’ on the HTQ agenda.

Unclear National Marketing and Communications Approach – Other than the low-key launch of an IfATE HTQ Quality Mark logo there has been little national marketing and communications activity for HTQs. This is in marked contrast to the rollout of T Levels where the Government has invested in substantial marketing activities. Plans for future marketing activity are unclear. In June 2021 the IfATE/DfE revealed the logo for the HTQ quality mark:



HTQ Application Process – Discussions with HEIs who have applied for the HTQ Quality Mark suggest the IfATE has been supportive and flexible in the application process. The Apprenticeship Trailblazer process was, however, seen as slow and

bureaucratic in its early years and past perceptions concerning IfATE processes may be off putting for HEIs considering applying for the HTQ Quality Mark.

Occupational Standards** – To gain IfATE approval HTQs are mapped against occupational standards. Occupational standards are developed by employer Trailblazers and originally focused on defining the knowledge, skills and behaviours developed through a work-based Apprenticeship required to be occupationally competent. Unlike Apprenticeships that are work-based, HTQs are classroom-based qualifications. Currently the IfATE is adopting a mapping process where a qualification delivers the KSBs specified in the occupational standard. Initially the focus was ensuring a threshold of 60% of the KSBs specified could be delivered by the prospective HTQ. The approach now is 100% mapping of the KSBs that can be developed through a classroom-based programme. Occupational standards can also vary in quality, particularly some developed in the early stages of the development of Apprenticeship standards. They can also be dated and focused on the KSBs employers believed were required when the standard was developed rather than the skills needed in the future. To address such issues the IfATE is now taking a more interventionist approach and has for example reviewed existing Occupational Standards in the context of the Net Zero and Green Jobs agenda.

***Occupational Standards** define the knowledge, skills and behaviours needed to be occupationally competent in a particular occupation. They are developed by employer led Trailblazers under the auspices of the IfATE. Originally their purpose was to act as the basis for the development of an Apprenticeship. Since their introduction their use has expanded, they act as the basis for T levels, to achieve the HTQ Quality Mark Awarding Organisations/HEIs must map a technical qualification against a standard and demonstrate it delivers the KSBs a classroom-based programme could be expected to deliver. 134 Occupational Standards have been developed at levels 6 and 7 covering a large proportion of key occupations. Unlike at levels 4 and 5, at levels 6 and 7 there has been less emphasis or incentive to use occupational standards as a basis for developing provision. In addition to the widening of their use a key trend has been greater IfATE intervention in the development and revision of occupation standards. This partly reflects the change in policy from employers being in the 'driving seat' to employers being at the centre of provision development. IfATE has, for example, reviewed occupational standards from the perspective of the green jobs and net zero agenda. In press articles UVAC has outlined the value of occupational standards as a flexible tool and one of several resources in supporting the development of level 6 and 7 occupational HE provision.*

Occupational Maps - IfATE is being asked to consider fostering the development of new occupational standards where gaps in Occupational Maps are apparent and to support revision to meet economic and societal objectives e.g., the Green Jobs and Net Zero agenda. Occupational Maps could develop as career maps including information on wage returns and the benefits of particular options. UVAC held a consultation webinar with the IfATE on Occupational Maps at our [June State of the Nation address](#) and has provided an [extensive response to the recent IfATE consultation](#).

IfATE Degree Apprenticeship Consultation – UVAC has worked closely with IfATE, UUK and several HEIs on the future Degree Apprenticeship model and welcomed the changes that broadly reflect the position we have been advocating for several years. Our response is available [HERE](#). The five key changes/principles are:

- **Mandatory qualification policy** – recognition of the value of a degree in an Apprenticeship and support for Trailblazers to specify a mandatory degree in an Apprenticeship. Under the last Apprenticeships and Skills minister and last IfATE chief executive the policy was to prevent Trailblazers from specifying a degree in an Apprenticeship unless it was a requirement to practice or not to include a degree would materially disadvantage an individual in the employment market.
- **Degrees within Degree Apprenticeship fully integrate** with on-the-job training delivered through the Apprenticeship.
- **Degree will reflect KSBs** – degrees used to deliver the Degree Apprenticeship will be designed, delivered, and validated based on the KSBs specified in an Apprenticeship standard.
- **All Degree Apprenticeships will be based on the integrated model** – that is the integration of the degree and work-based learning, on and off the job learning and the degree will be used to deliver the EPA.
- **Integrated Degree Apprenticeship use modules of the degree to deliver the EPA.** Under the reformed model EPA will include assessment by occupational and industry experts

The Position of Degree Apprenticeships - Previous Ministers (were) and the IfATE are very supportive of Degree Apprenticeship. This is in marked contrast to the position 2 years ago under Minister Milton and the then IfATE Chief Executive, Sir Gerry Berragan who had questioned the growth and focus of Degree Apprenticeships.

Three concerns are, however, apparent:

- **Social Mobility** – Ministers are concerned that take-up of Degree Apprenticeships disproportionately benefits the middle class. UVAC and the wider HE sector need to demonstrate the contribution of Degree Apprenticeship to social mobility, levelling up and diversity.
- **SMEs** – Ministers are concerned about the relatively low-level take-up of Degree Apprenticeship among SMEs.
- **Affordability and Funding Bands** – The Treasury is taking a significant interest in Apprenticeship. Affordability is a medium to long-term concern for Degree Apprenticeship.

Lifelong Loan Entitlement, National FE and HE Credit System and the Potential for Short Courses – The Skills and Post 16 Education Bill supported the introduction of a Lifelong Loan Entitlement designed to transform the current student loans system so that adults can access a flexible loan entitlement to the equivalent of 4 years of student loans for higher-level study and training at college or university. This will allow funding to be used for short courses and underpin the introduction of a national FE and HE credit system.

On 25 August OfS launched the £2 million [*Higher Education Short Course Trial Challenge Competition*](#). The trial will support up to 20 HE providers develop and adapt existing level 4, 5 and 6 courses into short courses (of 30 or 40 credits). Level 4 and 5 courses are to be aligned with Occupational Standards. The purpose of the fund is to test the demand for short courses and enable a new student finance offer to be tested ahead of the rollout of the Lifelong Loan Entitlement in 2025.