

# Will abolishing BTECs mean reversing widening access to higher education?



A NEON report

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### What is NEON?

NEON is the professional organisation supporting those involved in widening access to higher education (HE). NEON enables those working to widen access to HE at all levels and in all sectors to affect change in their own organisations and communities.

Visit us at [www.educationopportunities.co.uk](http://www.educationopportunities.co.uk)

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**Acknowledgement: Cover Image by Ismail Ali – Ismail is studying at Sunderland College for a Pearson BTEC Level 3 National Diploma in Art and Design and is specialising in graphics.**

# Executive Summary

## Background

The government is intending to undertake significant reform to Level 3 qualifications. It wishes to create a binary system where students progress to employment, or further study, via A-Levels or the newly created T-Levels. The reforms include the defunding of the vast majority of Applied General Qualifications (AGQs) including the BTEC qualification. The aim of this report is to examine the impact of defunding these qualifications on widening access to higher education and social mobility.

This report examines UCAS data on HE participation from 2011 to 2020 and the findings from a survey of 48 members of the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON). The respondents are drawn from higher education providers (HEP) (including universities and Further Education Colleges) and also Uni-Connect partnerships.

## Key Findings

The key findings of this report are:

**Over a quarter of students from the lowest participation neighbourhoods may not enter HE under the new system.**

In 2020 of the 29,020 18-year-old students entering HE from the lowest participation neighbourhood quintile 30% entered with either BTECs or A-Levels/BTECs. The percentage of these students entering HE with these qualifications has fluctuated between 25 and 30% since 2011.

**A third of black students may not enter HE under the new system and a quarter of Asian**

In 2020 of the 12,615 18-year-old black students entering HE with A-Levels, 33% did so with either BTECs or A-Levels/BTECs. Of 18 year old Asian students entering HE 25% did so BTECs or A-Levels/BTECs compared to 21% of white students.

**Removing funding for BTECs may set widening access work back ‘years or even decades’.**

Over 90% of respondents felt that it was crucial for widening access to HE that the BTEC option was available to Level 3 students. The impact of removing BTEC funding on widening access was described by one as ‘devastating’ and several thought that it would put progress in widening access back by a significant period of time.

**Students entering HE under the new system may be less prepared for HE study.**

Over 70% of respondents felt that BTECs prepared students for HE study as well as, or better than, A-Levels. The teaching and assessment style of the BTEC was seen to be particularly good at preparing students to enter more vocationally oriented HE courses.

**Students from widening access backgrounds may be forced into T-Levels.**

Several respondents were concerned that students from widening access backgrounds, who may display an aptitude for HE later in their school career, would be labelled as 'T-Level learners' and not supported to aspire for HE study.

**T-Levels are not designed to support HE progression.**

No respondents were fully confident that T-Levels would provide a route either in themselves, or in combination with A-Levels to HE. All respondents wanted T-Levels to succeed but it will affect the success and viability of the qualification if it is perceived as a route that closes off rather than extends opportunities for learners.

## **The risk to widening access**

The final section of the report analyses the risk to widening access to HE presented by the shift to a binary Level 3 scenario. It concludes that it is possible that the progress made in widening access to HE over the last 10 years amongst those from low participation neighbourhoods may disappear and that:

- **the most likely outcome is that around five years' progress in increasing the numbers of students entering HE from the lowest participation neighbourhoods will be lost by the defunding of BTECs.**
- **it is almost certain that the proportion of students entering HE who are from black and Asian backgrounds will decrease.**

On the basis of the evidence in this report the government is strongly urged to re-consider its plans to defund Applied General Qualifications (AGQ) from 2024. It will have a negative impact on widening access to higher education and social mobility.

# 1. Background: Reform of Level 3 qualifications

The government is intending to undertake significant reform to Level 3 qualifications. It wishes to create a binary system where students progress to employment or further study via A-Levels or the newly created T-Levels. This approach is modelled on other systems, particularly in Europe, where students are directed to through this 'upper secondary' phase via two distinct routes.<sup>1</sup> In the context of this new model the government's present position is that only a small, defined set of applied general qualifications will continue to be funded. As their 2019 document *Review of post-16 qualifications at level 3 in England: Second Stage Government consultation* states:

***'With some limited exceptions, we propose to remove funding for qualifications that offer an applied or alternative form of study in an A level subject area'.***

There has been considerable concern raised by those from across sectors regarding the decision not to support an AGQ route, alongside A-Levels and T-Levels. As the Sixth Form Colleges Association states,

***'we do not agree that T levels and A levels should become the "programmes of choice for 16 to 19 year-olds taking Level 3 qualifications. We believe that the newly reformed, more rigorous, applied general qualifications (AGQs) have a vital role to play in the future qualifications landscape.'***<sup>2</sup>

Ofqual have also stated their worries about the proposed new system. As their response to the 2020 Review of post-16 qualifications at level 3 in England consultation states:

***'We recognise the potential benefits for all learners at level 3 from the proposed reforms... in recognising the benefits, we must also remain alert to the potential adverse impacts that these reforms may risk.'***<sup>3</sup>

Ofqual points in particular to the risks with regard to progression to higher education (HE). As they state:

***'the Department's consultation Impact Assessment estimates that the qualifications that may no longer be funded could account for around 62% of current non-A level 16 to 19-year-old enrolments at level 3 – and yet we know that the number of learners using qualifications other than A levels to access higher education is growing.'***

This research brief will focus on the potential impact on widening access to higher education of the removal of the AGQ route, with a specific focus on the role that BTECs play in enabling students from widening access backgrounds to enter HE. It draws on secondary analysis of data from UCAS from 2011 to 2020 which illustrates the extent to which students taking AGQ

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<sup>1</sup>Department of Education (2019) Review of post-16 qualifications at level 3 in England: Second Stage Government consultation

<sup>2</sup> For information on the Sixth Form Colleges Association's work here please go to: [www.sixthformcolleges.org](http://www.sixthformcolleges.org)

<sup>3</sup> Department of Education (2021) Qualifications Review Consultation Response - [Qualifications Review Consultation Response - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/qualifications-review)

originate from a widening access background. Alongside this secondary analysis the findings from a survey of 48 members of the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) are outlined. The respondents are drawn from higher education providers (HEP) (including universities and Further Education Colleges) and also Uni-Connect partnerships<sup>4</sup> canvassing their views on the impact of withdrawing support from AGQs on widening access.

It will show that discontinuing BTECs puts the progress that has been made over the last decade in widening access to higher education in England at risk and threatens the ability of the government to meet its future widening access targets.

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<sup>4</sup> For more information on the Uni-Connect programme please go to:  
<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/uni-connect/>

## 2. Widening access and BTECs: what the data shows

The consequence of withdrawing funding from AGQs is that a significant number of students who, on the basis of existing evidence, would appear likely to enter higher education either with AGQ's alone, in particular the BTEC qualification, or with a combination of BTECs and A-Levels will now need to either take A-Levels or enter holding T-Levels.

### 2.1 Students from low participation neighbourhoods

In 2020 over 45,000 18-year-old students entered HE with just BTECs or A-Levels/BTECs.<sup>5</sup> What is of particular concern is that a disproportionate number are drawn from widening access backgrounds. Table 1 below shows the percentage of those students entering HE in 2019 with BTECs or A-Level BTECs by Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) quintile. In order to differentiate by geographical areas of differing levels of participation the POLAR measure is used. The POLAR measure classifies areas across the UK based on the proportion of the young population that participates in higher education. POLAR classifies local areas into five groups – or quintiles – based on the proportion of 18-year-olds who enter higher education aged 18 or 19 years old.

Table 1 illustrates that around a quarter of students entering HE in 2019 from the lower participation neighbourhoods either enter with BTECs alone or A-Levels/BTECs. This proportion drops to less than 10% for those from the neighbourhoods where participation is the highest.

**Table 1: % of students entering HE with BTECs or A-Levels/BTECs by POLAR quintile 2020**

POLAR quintile	% of BTEC or A-Level/BTEC students
1	30
2	23
3	21
4	17
5	10

The percentage of students entering HE from low participation neighbourhoods via BTEC or A-Level/BTEC has been between 25 and 30% over the last decade. Table 2 shows both the numbers of students entering HE from low participation neighbourhoods since 2011 and the percentage of these students who enter with BTECs and A-Levels/BTECs. It shows that while there has been steady progress in the numbers entering HE from the lowest participation neighbourhoods since 2011 it is gradual. Table 2 illustrates that progress in widening access

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<sup>5</sup> UCAS (2020) UCAS Undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2020 - <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-sector-level-end-cycle-data-resources-2020>

to higher education on this measure is sensitive to even a relatively modest drop in the numbers of students entering HE from BTECs and A-Levels/BTECs which would see progress go into reverse.

**Table 2: Students from POLAR 1 quintile entering HE via BTEC or A-Level/BTEC**

Year	No. of students entering HE from POLAR 1 quintile	No. of BTEC or A-Level/BTEC students	% of BTEC or A-Level/BTEC students
2011	21540	6145	28
2012	20230	4915	24
2013	20845	5495	26
2014	23225	6830	29
2015	24730	7430	30
2016	24980	7445	29
2017	25800	7545	29
2018	25310	6800	27
2019	26445	6660	26
2020	28885	7400	26

## 2.2 Participation by ethnic background

As with students from low participation neighbourhoods it appears that those from non-white backgrounds are more likely to enter HE with BTEC or A-Level/BTEC. Table 3 below shows the percentage of students progressing to HE in 2020 by ethnic group via A-Level, BTEC or A-Level/BTEC.

**Table 3: % of students entering HE in 2020 by ethnic group and qualification**

Qualification	Black students	Asian students	White students
A Level	67	76	79
BTEC	21	14	11
A Level/BTEC	12	10	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

As Table 3 demonstrates only a slightly higher percentage of Asian student's progress to HE via BTEC or A-Level/BTEC than white students. Nearly a third of all black students entering HE in 2019 did so with at least one BTEC. The proportion of black students entering HE with BTECs alone is nearly twice that of white students.



### 3. ‘Devastating’ – views of universities on removal of BTECs

An online survey of NEON members was undertaken in November/December 2020. There were five key findings from the survey, and these are described below:

**BTECs are essential to widening access to HE.**

Over 90% of respondents felt that it was crucial for widening access to HE that the BTEC option was available to Level 3 students. Responses pointed in particular to the potential narrowing of options that the new binary route would lead to and the existence of a cohort of students who do not fit with the two options that will be offered. There was also a strongly held view that removing the AGQ option would set back progress in widening participation ‘by years or even decades’.

*‘The BTEC is really important to widening participation. It is not realistic to assume that all students will take the standard A Level route. The proposed changes would undo a decade of focused BTEC work with widening participation cohorts who have benefited from a university experience and education.’*

**University of Leeds**

*‘We receive a number of applications from students studying both BTEC and A level qualifications. This combination can be important to the student and presents us with a good balance of qualifications which will not exist/continue under the current plans for T levels.’*

**University of Manchester**

*‘This is a short-sighted move that will massively impact the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who go on to HE. The impact on widening access of defunding BTECs will be devastating. This area lacks enough skilled and technical jobs to satisfy demand, there will be a lot of disappointed students who do not gain employment and won't be able to easily switch to university to make themselves competitive.’*

**Network for East Anglian Collaborative Outreach (NEACO)**

*‘The existence of BTECs is crucial. The presented alternatives of A and T Levels will exclude a proportion of WP learners, for whom the academic route is not the right one, but the specialised technical route is not either.’*

**Oldham College**

*‘Over 90% of our home students who applied in September 2020 came from a vocational background (BTEC, NVQ, VTCT, CACHE etc) meaning less than 10% came from purely an A level background.’*

**University College Birmingham**

*'BTECs are really important... many of the students I work with are studying BTECS and, as a vocational institution, this would dramatically affect us in terms of opportunities for these students.'*

**University of Brighton**

*'If the T levels don't sufficiently fill the gap left by BTEC the impact for widening participation could be significant. It is important to remember that a student who is not suited to A level study may also find T levels aren't the right route for them, making access to HE more difficult. There needs to be reassurance that removal of BTECs is not creating a barrier to HE and not leaving any students left without a route to university.'*

**Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU)**

*'Understanding of, and work to rectify, the gap between those doing different qualifications entry and success whilst at university is really now starting to take off and I believe that moves to remove the most popular alternative qualification so suddenly will push such vital work back many years or even decades.'*

**University of East Anglia**

*'The proposed changes would undo a decade of focused BTEC work with widening participation cohorts who have benefited from a university experience and education.'*

**Leeds Trinity University**

*'Widening participation in HE would be significantly reduced (by defunding BTECs) as students who are not able to take A-Levels or don't want a full academic route into HE would have no other option but to do T-Levels or an apprenticeship.'*

**Coventry University**

**A-Level options are not available in all areas.**

Some respondents highlighted the availability of A-Level routes in their areas as a barrier to widening access. A potential challenge of the T-Level is also ensuring that all options are available to all learners in every area of the country.

*'Colleges in Kent and Medway no longer provide A Levels so BTEC qualifications are the main route to Higher Education for the 7000+ Level 3 students studying in FECs. Approximately 1400 FE student's progress to Higher Education each year with BTECs being the primary, and often sole, qualification. It is vital that the BTEC qualification is available as an option at Level 3. Without a BTEC option as part of their qualifications, many students in schools and colleges in Kent will not be able to easily progress to university.'*

**Kent and Medway Progression Foundation**

*'In this area there are no easily-accessed sixth-form colleges so there is no other option (than BTECs) for students who may wish to go to university but do not feel as if they fit in a school environment.'*

## Network for East Anglian Collaborative Outreach (NEACO)

**BTECs align strongly with HE study.**

There was a definite view amongst many respondents that BTECs, given their content, provided a better form of preparation for higher education study than A-Levels. This view, from those who work with students on a daily basis, provides an interesting counter point to the assumption in the government's Level 3 reform plans which is that BTECs provide an inferior form of HE preparation to A-Levels.

*'In some cases the BTEC is a better feeder into higher education than A levels. For example; having multiple modules with a range of assessment types such as coursework and presentations, these align to the range of assessments students could be given at university.'*

**University College Birmingham**

*'Many university courses reflect the structure of BTEC courses rather than A Levels; modular, coursework, alternative options to exams.'*

**Leeds Trinity College**

*'BTECs are especially suitable for students who prefer project and work oriented study and are not academically inclined but are still bright and capable of getting an HE qualification in a vocational degree. Another feature is that they are more accessible than A-levels (in terms of entry requirements) and social perception in some environments. They are also good preparation for the kind of 'hands on HE' that is likely to appeal to vocational students.'*

**York College**

*'I think it is extremely important that students have access to BTEC qualifications at Level 3. Many students thrive off studying qualifications in this way, a mixture of coursework and exam units which are coached through with their teachers.'*

**Brunel University**

**A binary system risks excluding widening access students from HE.**

The respondents believe that there are a particular group of students, many of whom are from widening access backgrounds, whose needs are met uniquely by BTECs. They are concerned that in the compulsory education system certain students are labelled, often early in their schooling career, as destined for higher education. There are other however who can and should enter higher education whose abilities emerge later and whose learning styles and abilities are met well by an AGQ such as the BTEC qualification. It is this group of young people who will be denied the opportunity to reach their potential via higher education.

*'Although the proposed T Levels may be beneficial for some, many students from WP backgrounds may be categorised as 'T Level students' from a young age. This could truncate their academic progress and potential and negatively affect the student's self-esteem and academic ambitions for the future.'*

**University of East London**

*'I think having only two routes will further entrench the problems with parity of esteem, with the "bright" students being pushed down the A Level route, whilst those not deemed capable of A Levels will be pushed towards T Levels and technical occupations.'*

**Oldham College**

*'The BTEC route is incredibly important. We have students who see college as their second chance. They complete their Level 2 qualification and just need that extra bit of support during their Level 3 qualifications before going into HE.'*

**East Kent College**

*'The decision to go to university is sometimes a late one, and for many WP pupils it won't even be on their radar when deciding which avenue to go down post-16. Effectively, the two routes mentioned will encourage (or force!) the young people to make a decision on their education two or three years down the line, at an age where they won't know what they want to do. Potentially this will then exclude WP pupils from HE altogether.'*

**Nottingham Trent University**

*'Our students are so diverse that having the ability to offer them a mixed approach means that they get a more accurate and useful level 3 education. There is greater "buy in" and fewer students drop out. As soon as you restrict this down to an academic and a non-academic route you apply far too much pressure at the ends of GCSE. They will pick the less scary option and prevent themselves considering HE options that they often go on to regret.'*

**Next Steps South West**

*'We believe this model would exclude a cohort of students from progressing to Higher Education. This group is more likely to be the widening participation cohort. The BTEC qualification bridges the gap between the A level route and T levels and gives universities a broader range of students from which to recruit from.'*

**University of Leeds**

**T-Levels may not be conducive to HE progression.**

It is acknowledged by the respondents that T-Levels are in their planning stage. It is also recognised that a well-defined 'vocational' route into education/employment would be beneficial for many young people. However, as it is presented T-Levels are seen as primarily a route into employment and not higher education. They are not viewed as presenting a qualification option that will allow students who would have previously taken BTECs to still progress to HE.

*'It is important to remember that a student who is not suited to A level study may also find T levels aren't the right route for them, making access to HE more difficult.'*

**Liverpool John Moores University**

*'A T-Level has been designed for students who have an idea of a particular industry they wish to work in the future. The idea that T-Levels would be able to completely replace being able to choose and study a variety of BTEC/ vocational subjects does not make sense.'*

**Brunel University**

*'T-levels may offer a long-term replacement - but until they have the coverage and people have confidence in them then BTECs remain an essential ingredient in our qualification framework.'*

**Manchester Metropolitan University**

*'Will Russell Group universities support entry to a student with a good grade in a T level when there is no data about the progression and achievement of T level students on under-graduate courses?'*

**University of Bradford**

*'We are particularly concerned about the possibility that some widening access learners will not be supported to make informed decisions about their Level 3 choices, and could opt for a T Level on the basis that they would prefer a more practical learning style.'*

**Bournemouth University**

## 4. Summary – the risk to widening access

The Office for Students has, by its own admission, bold ambitions to narrow the gaps between different groups where access to higher education is concerned. While there is not a time bound target where narrowing the gaps in HE participation from those from lower and higher POLAR quintile areas is concerned, achieving such a narrowing is at the centre of its approach. The evidence shows that the proposal by the government to defund AGQ's and specifically BTECs presents a serious risk where achieving these ambitions are concerned. There are three possible scenarios with regard to widening access for young learners from low participation neighbourhoods from 2024 onwards after these qualifications are defunded. These scenarios and their likelihood are discussed below:

### Scenario 1

**The numbers of students from low participation neighbourhoods increases.**

Given the views of the experts who responded to the NEON survey, who work on a day-to-day level with students entering HE with one or more BTEC qualifications this scenario looks very unlikely at present. For it to happen in the present context, would require a combination of real, concerted focus on encouraging more students to take A-Levels from the lowest participation backgrounds and then go onto HE. The increased number of 18-year-olds may help here in the short term, but they are not spread evenly across the country or low participation neighbourhoods and in fact are concentrated in London where there are very few such low participation areas. This demographic increase will also slowdown in the latter part of the 2020s.

**Verdict: Highly unlikely**

### Scenario 2

**The number of students from low participation neighbourhoods decreases, setting progress back 10 years.**

If the number of students presently entering with one or more BTEC from low participation neighbourhoods was not to be replaced at all by those entering through the new binary system then conceivably the numbers entering from POLAR quintile 1 could go back to close to 2011 levels, relative to 2020. This does represent a reversal of nearly 10 years of progress. However, it is likely that some students who would have done BTECs do entirely A-Levels and possible that some enter with T-Levels. Widening access efforts will continue and universities will look to be flexible in their entry requirements assuming no restrictions are put in place here by government.

**Verdict: Possible**

### **Scenario 3**

**The number of students from low participation neighbourhoods decreases, setting progress back 5 years.**

Assessing the views of the respondents in the survey undertaken for this report alongside the points made in scenario 2 above this appears the most likely outcome. It is hard to estimate accurately how much of a decrease there will be, but a loss of half the number of students entering HE via the BTEC or A-Level/BTEC route would see, relative to 2020 levels, a return to 2015/2016 numbers entering from POLAR quintile 1.

**Verdict: Highly likely**

## **4.1 Participation by ethnic background**

Where students, entering HE from different ethnic backgrounds, are concerned the risk of fewer black students entering HE also appears high. The uneven distribution of black and Asian students across the country will be a factor here. The concentration of students from non-white ethnic groups in particular parts of the country implies that the local provision of A-Levels and T-Levels will be particularly important.

It looks almost certain though that as a result of the defunding of BTECs the proportion of students entering HE who from Black and Asian backgrounds will decrease.

## **4.2 What should be done?**

On the basis of the evidence in this report the government is strongly urged to re-consider its plans to defund Applied General Qualifications (AGQ) from 2024. They provide a valuable route into HE for thousands of young people for whom other routes may not be as viable. Strengthening vocational entry routes into education and employment is to be strongly supported – but not at the expense of black students and young people from the lowest income areas of the country who have the ability and desire to enter higher education.