

## **UCAS' response to the Department for Education (DfE) 'Implementation of T levels' consultation**

UCAS is an independent charity providing information, advice, and admissions services to inspire and facilitate educational progression. We are best known for running undergraduate admissions services for around 400 universities and colleges. In 2017, we handled nearly three million applications for full-time undergraduate courses, from 700,000 students.

We aim to be a trusted choice for high quality information and advice about options for progression. Our information and advice services support young people making choices post-16, as well as people of all ages interested in undergraduate and postgraduate courses, including teacher training and, increasingly, apprenticeships and technical education.

UCAS is keen to emphasise the importance of enabling students to understand the education and progression choices they have, and to make well-informed decisions about these. This objective underpins our response to the Department for Education (DfE) consultation on the implementation of T levels.

The response to this consultation is based on the published information about T level programmes. Detailed information about the content of T levels is still to be determined, particularly regarding the make-up of qualifications that may form the core and occupational specialisms. As a result, while we can comment on the potential challenges facing progression to higher education, it is difficult to comment on distinct opportunities and routes. We'd be happy to discuss with the Department how particular components could be perceived by higher education providers (HEPs), as part of the further development of T level programmes.

We are pleased that the Department actively sought to engage with HEPs as part of this consultation, particularly by facilitating a roundtable event focusing on understanding current progression routes to HE, and how T levels could be incorporated. We would be happy to help facilitate further dialogue with the HE sector on T levels.

We would be willing to expand on any of the points raised in our response, and are looking forward to working with the Department to support T level implementation.

### **A high quality technical education option**

The extent to which students, teachers and advisers, and HEPs understand T levels will be critical to their success. This includes how they are structured, the skills and aptitudes developed, the experience of students undertaking these programmes, the use of qualifications in a T level, and the programme's utility for progression to higher education.

UCAS has taken a central role in communicating intelligence regarding qualifications and qualification reform, seeking to keep the HE, FE, and secondary sectors informed of developments, and working with them to navigate these significant changes. In addition to

raising awareness through conferences and events, UCAS has also produced a range of resources for providers, teachers and advisers, and students to explain qualification reform, and its impact on progression to higher education. These include survey work, guides, and additional resources which can be found on our [qualification reform](#) and [applying to HE with reformed qualifications](#) web pages. This work was recently evaluated at a qualification reform roundtable, which brought together representatives from schools, colleges and universities to reflect on the activities undertaken by UCAS and the wider sector, in preparation for general qualification reform, and to refine this approach for both vocational and technical education.

UCAS would be keen to help ensure HEPs – particularly those involved in the admissions process – are familiar with the new T level programmes, to ensure they are fully-informed regarding this provision.

UCAS is able to host extensive information and advice on [ucas.com](#) to raise awareness of T levels and their implementation, for all our customer groups – universities and colleges, teachers and advisers, and students. In addition, our regular communications reach a network of around 400 universities and colleges, and over 4,500 teachers and advisers. UCAS would be happy to explore the extent of this support, as the outcomes of the consultation and the implementation of T levels are finalised.

We'd also be happy to have discussions with colleagues from the Department about how T levels can be reflected in our wider qualification information services, such as our [Qualification Information Profiles \(QIPs\)](#)<sup>1</sup>, results processing (ABL)<sup>2</sup> and the UCAS Tariff, once further information is available about the composition of the programmes and qualifications that are included.

### **Flexible bridging provision**

Progression routes are often not linear, and students may progress incrementally, making decisions at key transition points, and commonly switching pathways. With this in mind, any system must be fluid enough to allow students to change pathway easily and follow their desired progression route, with the necessary transition arrangements in place.

UCAS has published two progression pathways reports, each with different aims, but both reinforcing the importance of flexibility in approach to educational routes. The 2016 report<sup>3</sup> concentrated on the Level 3 qualifications landscape, and was accompanied by information and advice tools, including video case studies<sup>4</sup>, to aid students in understanding the utility and progression routes for vocational qualifications. The 2017 report<sup>5</sup> examined incremental

---

<sup>1</sup> QIPs provide objective, comparable information about qualifications that admissions practitioners can use to inform their admissions decisions. They rely on a common format to provide a detailed overview of qualifications, and enable HE admissions staff to compare less familiar qualifications and programmes with ones that are more familiar. They include a range of information, such as size, grading, assessment, structure, and content, and accommodate a range of regulated UK and EU/international qualifications.

<sup>2</sup> Awarding organisations have an agreement to let UCAS have exam results before their publication date. This allows providers that have signed and agreed to the results embargo agreement, to make Confirmation decisions for applicants with pending exam results in time for publication day.

<sup>3</sup> [www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/progression\\_pathways\\_report\\_final\\_v2\\_0.pdf](http://www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/progression_pathways_report_final_v2_0.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [www.ucas.com/advisers/guides-and-resources/qualification-reform/progression-pathways](http://www.ucas.com/advisers/guides-and-resources/qualification-reform/progression-pathways)

<sup>5</sup> [www.ucas.com/progression-pathways-2017](http://www.ucas.com/progression-pathways-2017)

routes and pathways through higher education, including routes that may be combined with work. Both reports provide an overview of the support and transition arrangements in place for students that follow these pathways. Progression challenges were also noted for each of the pathways examined, with the flexibility of incremental completion, and being able to study alongside employment, acknowledged as particularly important in supporting widening participation.

At present, the proposed T level implementation presents a largely binary approach. While it does propose a bridging provision, it is not clear how this might be implemented, who will deliver the provision, and what this will entail. It is vital that this bridging provision does not become a barrier to migration between progression routes, and that these programmes are fully understood by students, teachers, and advisers.

UCAS would be keen to support the Department in taking forward the new technical routes, as well as scoping the bridging provision to ensure movement between pathways remains accessible. This will be of still greater importance for less supported students, who may follow less traditional pathways to their ultimate destination.

It is also important to highlight that vocational and technical education and learning is a feature of higher education, with many degrees offering vocational pathways, and including technical content. UCAS would encourage the Department to work closely with the higher education sector in scoping the bridging provision, to ensure students are able to progress to higher education, and are sufficiently prepared for the transition.

### **The best possible support opportunity for young people**

This year, 3.5 per cent of UK 18 year old students were accepted into higher education with BTEC qualifications<sup>6</sup> (for comparison, 20.5 per cent of UK 18 year old students were accepted to higher education with A levels only). This is a slight increase of under 0.1 percentage points from last year. However, when considered across a longer period, BTEC entry rates have grown substantially – by 1.1 percentage points since 2012, and by 1.7 percentage points since 2008. In addition, 2.6 per cent of UK 18 year old students were accepted into higher education holding a combination of A levels and BTECs. These, and other vocational qualifications, are an increasingly common progression route to HE.

Vocational qualifications – in particular, BTEC qualifications – also play an important role in widening participation and access to higher education. Recent research indicates that 66 per cent of students entitled to free school meals completed a vocational course at Key Stage 5 in 2015<sup>7</sup>, and almost 43 per cent of students achieving a degree following completion of a BTEC are aged 27 or above<sup>8</sup>. HEPs are making efforts to improve the success and retention of BTEC students when they start their degree courses, through transition and study skills provision, and other support measures, as highlighted in our progression pathways report.

---

<sup>6</sup> [www.ucas.com/file/140421/download?token=OxgSmnRV](http://www.ucas.com/file/140421/download?token=OxgSmnRV)

<sup>7</sup> [www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Hepi\\_Reforming-BTECs-Report-94-09\\_02\\_17-Web.pdf](http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Hepi_Reforming-BTECs-Report-94-09_02_17-Web.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> [www.offa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Literature-review-of-research-into-WP-to-HE.pdf](http://www.offa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Literature-review-of-research-into-WP-to-HE.pdf)

Applied General qualifications were last reviewed in 2017<sup>9</sup>. The timing of this review meant this focused on the interim reformed or legacy versions of Applied General qualifications, and their impact on entry to higher education, as HE providers had not received the first cohort of students holding reformed versions of the qualifications. It would be prudent to include HEPs in any future review of vocational qualifications (both at Level 2 and Level 3, but particularly Level 3 Applied Generals and Tech levels) when they are better experienced with reformed versions and have sufficient evidence to inform their judgements.

Applied General and Tech level qualifications are accepted by a wide variety of HE providers to a number of degree courses. As such, any review of vocational qualifications should be mindful of the role that these qualifications currently play in progression to HE and the cohort of students that typically undertake them, particularly if T level implementation results in a binary choice at Level 3. UCAS would welcome the opportunity to contribute to any such review.

---

<sup>9</sup>[www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/660804/Applied\\_General\\_User\\_Research.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/660804/Applied_General_User_Research.pdf)