

UCAS response to the Department for Education review of post-16 qualifications at Level 3 and below in England – June 2019

UCAS is an independent charity that provides the UK's national undergraduate admissions service. Every year, we help around 700,000 students apply for full-time undergraduate courses, at nearly 400 UK universities and colleges.

As a highly trusted, independent charity, UCAS aims to provide a complete support package for students, teachers, and parents, to help young people decide if higher education (HE) is right for them, and to guide them through every step of the admissions process. Our programme of 52 UK-wide exhibitions reaches an annual audience of around 170,000 students, and we work with a growing range of partners to offer engaging and relevant content to students and advisers, including case studies, blogs, vlogs, storytelling, and comprehensive step-by-step guides, through many different channels.

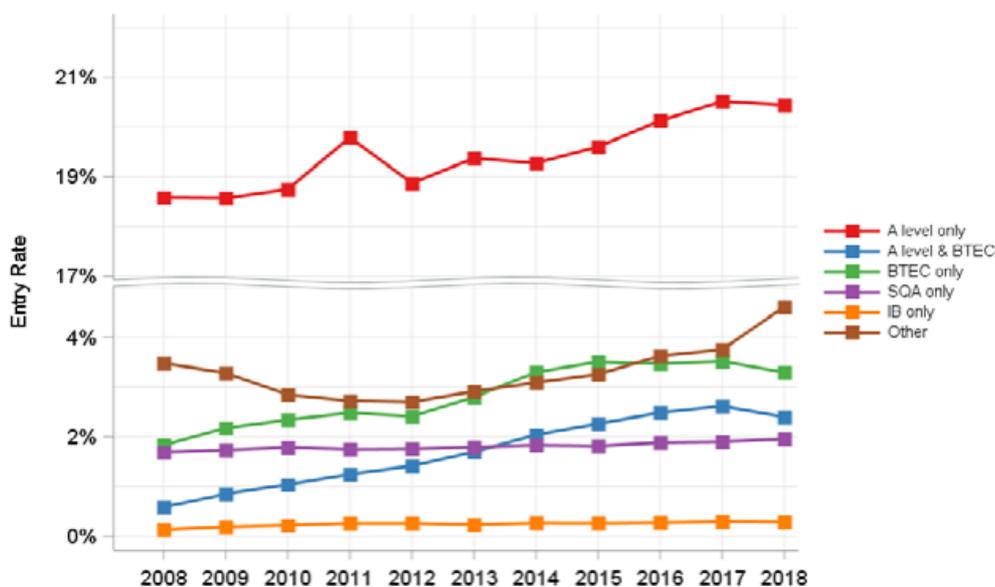
UCAS provides extensive information to all customer groups regarding qualifications, particularly at Level 3. This includes content for higher education providers regarding qualification reform, as well as information to students and advisers to aid their Level 3 choices. We remain keen to work with the Department and other stakeholders, to communicate changes in relation to qualifications to ensure all parties are suitably informed and able to respond appropriately.

The role of Applied General qualifications in progression to HE

As highlighted in our [response to the DfE implementation of T levels consultation](#), Applied General qualifications play an important and distinct role in supporting students progressing to higher education (HE), and make a large contribution to widening participation. Of the Applied General qualifications that facilitate progression to HE, BTEC qualifications are the most commonly used and will therefore be the focus of this analysis. However, UCAS recognises that other Applied General qualifications, such as OCR Cambridge Technicals, City and Guild's qualifications, and CACHE qualifications play an equally important role.

A levels remain the most common qualification held by 18 year old UK applicants, with 59.8 per cent of applicants in 2018 holding only A levels. As has been the case since 2008, the second most common single qualification type is BTECs, although the proportion of applicants holding only BTECs fell this year, to 10.1 per cent – a 1.0 percentage point decrease from 2017. There has also been a slight decrease in the proportion of applicants holding a combination of BTECs and A levels, from 7.9 per cent in 2017 to 7.2 per cent this year. 99.9 per cent of applicants holding SQA qualifications are from Scotland, and they comprise 6.3 per cent of UK applicants.

Figure 1: UK 18 year old entry rates by qualification type¹



The profile of BTEC students is relatively well defined, and any changes to the provision of Applied General qualifications should be mindful of these characteristics, and the potential impact on these students and their progression opportunities. For example, when compared to A level students:

- A greater proportion of BTEC students are from disadvantaged backgrounds: In 2018, of all UK accepted June deadline applicants with at least one BTEC qualification, 38% were from POLAR4 quintile 1 and 2 areas, compared to 25% of placed applicants holding one or more A level qualifications. When analysing this using the UCAS multiple equality measure (MEM)², of all English 18 year old accepted June deadline applicants with at least one BTEC qualification, 46% were from MEM quintiles 1 and 2, compared to 22% of placed applicants holding one or more A level qualifications.
- A greater proportion of BTEC students are mature students: In 2018, of all UK accepted June deadline applicants with at least one BTEC qualification, 23% were aged 20+ compared to 11% of placed applicants holding one or more A level qualifications.
- A greater proportion of BTEC students are BAME: In 2018, of all UK accepted June deadline applicants with at least one BTEC qualification, 33% were from ethnic minorities compared to 26% of placed applicants holding one or more A level qualifications.

Applied General and Tech level qualifications are accepted by a wide variety of HE providers to a number of degree courses, and at some providers, students holding BTEC qualifications make up a significant proportion of their full-time undergraduate intake. For example, in 2018, 25 higher education providers accepted over 1,000

¹ Further information can be found in [UCAS' End of Cycle report on qualifications](#).

² The multiple equality measure (MEM) brings together information on several equality dimensions, for which large differences in the probability of progression into higher education exist. These equality dimensions include sex, ethnic group, where people live (using the POLAR3 and IMD classifications), secondary education school type, and income background (as measured by whether a person was in receipt of free school meals [FSM], a means-tested benefit while at school). Further information can be found [here](#).

students holding at least one BTEC qualification, with BTEC students making up a significant proportion of the full-time undergraduate entry cohort at some institutions.

As such, any review of Applied General 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. UCAS would be happy to support the Department in further understanding the students that undertake these qualifications, and facilitate discussion with the HE sector to highlight what future progression routes may look like following the review.

Information and advice

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 HE. 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. UCAS would be keen to work with the Department to ensure that this information reflects the latest position in relation to qualifications and the outcome of the review.

In addition, UCAS is in the early stages of launching a ground-breaking approach to delivering personalised information and advice to students. When registering with UCAS, students will be able to build a personalised dashboard which is designed to guide them through the decision-making process step-by-step, providing immediate access to information, advice, and data-driven decision support tools. The dashboard is designed to help them narrow down their choices more easily based on their qualifications, preferences, and personal characteristics. This development forms part of our broader transformational work, which includes the development of a new undergraduate service. We would welcome discussions with the Department regarding provision of personalised qualifications information to students to better inform their post-18 learning journey, whether that be into HE, an apprenticeship or employment.