



Department
for Education

A guide to post-16 qualifications at level 3 and below for the 2025 to 2026 academic year

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Summary

The document aims to:

- Provide an update on post-16 qualifications reform at level 3, following the Secretary of State's review of qualifications due to have public funding removed from 1st August 2024 and 1st August 2025.
- Provide information on the next phase of reforms, including the routes and subjects where we will approve new level 3 qualifications for delivery from 1 August 2026 and where we expect to remove funding from unreformed qualifications in these routes where we have invited replacements to be approved from 1 August 2026 as set out in Parliament on 12 December 2024.

Who this publication is for

This document is primarily aimed at providers of further education, awarding organisations and other interested stakeholders.

Introduction

The Department for Education (DfE) has been implementing reforms to post-16 qualifications at level 3 and below for the past few years. This has included the removal of public funding from over 5,500 qualifications with low or no enrolments completed by 2022. The introduction of over 20 T Levels with more to come on stream from 2025, and the introduction of [occupational standards](#) is also transforming technical education, ensuring it provides learners with the knowledge, skills and behaviours employers need.

Awarding organisations have been developing reformed qualifications in some key routes and subjects at levels 2 and 3 in line with these new standards and other new funding approval criteria introduced by the DfE. 74 new qualifications at level 3 and 66 at level 2 have now been approved for delivery from 1 August 2025.

In line with the government missions to spread opportunity and deliver the growth that our economy needs, in July 2024, the Secretary of State for Education announced a review of post-16 qualifications reform. This included an immediate pause to the removal of funding from level 3 qualifications due to take place in 2024 and 2025 to allow space for the review and its conclusions. This guidance document sets out the conclusions from that review, and the plans for continuing to reform 5 routes at level 3 – Health and Science, Care Services, Digital, Construction and Education and Early Years. Plans for reform to other routes and subjects at level 3, and reforms at level 2 and below, will be set out following the conclusions of the [independent review of curriculum and assessment](#), which will publish its recommendations in the autumn.

Conclusions of the review of post-16 qualifications reform at level 3

In July 2024, the Secretary of State for Education announced a [review into the reform of post-16 qualifications](#). The review considered the level 3 qualifications due to have public funding removed from 1st August 2024 and 1st August 2025. It aimed to ensure that qualifications reform supports the missions of spreading opportunity and supporting economic growth, to see where qualifications need to be retained for longer.

There were 9 routes in scope of the review: Health and Science (incl. Social Care); Construction and the Built Environment; Digital; Education and Early Years; Engineering and Manufacturing; Legal, Finance and Accounting; Business and Administration; Agriculture, Environmental and Animal Care; and Creative and Design.

The review considered which in scope qualifications should be retained for longer. This was based on an assessment of both learner need and employer demand, and took into account the reformed options that would be available (including the [74 new level 3 Alternative Academic Qualifications \(AAQ\) and Technical Qualifications](#)). **The review concluded that 157 qualifications at level 3 should be removed from the defunding list and have funding retained beyond 31 July 2025.**

Public funding will continue to be **removed from 216 qualifications that were on defunding lists, and this will happen on 31 July 2025**. These qualifications had fewer than 100 enrolments for three consecutive years and were therefore judged not to be needed.

The Department will not be implementing the previously proposed **rules of combination**.

Construction and the Built Environment

In the Construction and the Built Environment route, two of the construction T Levels ([Building Services Engineering for Construction](#) and [Designing, Surveying and Planning for Construction](#)) continue to grow and are meeting the needs of learners and the sector. The Onsite Construction T Level is also providing valuable education, industry experience and a positive route into employment to those who take it. However, its success has been limited because of a lack of overall demand for a large qualification at level 3. We have as a result concluded that the needs of learners and the economy are best met through apprenticeships and other classroom provision, including at level 2. We will, therefore, cease taking new enrolments for the Onsite Construction T Level, although those already taking it will be able to complete it as planned, and progress into positive destinations post-graduation.

We are retaining funding for one large qualification in site carpentry, and 11 medium and small qualifications to meet the needs of this important sector and ensure that we can support government missions around building high quality housing until reformed qualifications can be introduced. [These qualifications can be viewed here](#). We expect to reform the majority of qualifications in this route in 2025-26, at which point unreformed qualifications will have funding removed on 31 July 2026.

Health and Science

In the Health and Science route, all learners on the [Health T Level](#) develop the core knowledge and skills that are needed for entry to a range of health occupations, offering a structured pathway for learners. In the Health and Science route, we recognise that there is a need for qualifications that are aligned with the occupational standards in the Care Services route, and as a result, we will retain funding for 9 qualifications in health and social care until new qualifications in adult social care can be introduced.

Beyond this, we will also retain funding for 11 qualifications in science-related subjects (including Applied Science, Forensics and Dental Technology) to give learners more options until reformed qualifications can be introduced. [These qualifications can be viewed here](#). We expect to reform the majority of qualifications in this route in 2025-26, at which point unreformed qualifications will have funding removed on 31 July 2026.

Digital

The [Digital Production, Design and Development](#) T Level provides young people with the core knowledge and skills for a career in software production and design. The T Level in [Digital Business Services](#) provides a technical route for young people wishing to progress to a career in IT, specifically in areas such as IT solutions or data analysis. The [Digital Support Services](#) is the ideal route for anyone wanting a career in digital infrastructure and support, leading to becoming an infrastructure technician or a role in IT support.

We are working with the T Level Awarding Organisation to make assessments more manageable, and plan to have the necessary changes in place for the next academic year. We are also introducing updated approaches for delivering T Level industry placements across the board, which will be particularly useful in supporting growth of the digital T Levels. This will be particularly important in the digital route. We will therefore keep funding for the six existing large digital qualifications until 2026, to allow time to embed these key improvements.

Beyond this, we will also keep funding for 13 smaller digital qualifications with less than 720 guided learning hours so that learners have a range of choices. [These qualifications can be viewed here](#). We expect to reform the majority of qualifications in this route in 2025-26, at which point unreformed qualifications will have funding removed on 31 July 2026. This approach allows colleges additional time to transition and embed key improvements.

Education and Early Years

In the Education and Early Years route, we heard strong support for the T Level, and so we will remove funding from existing large and medium qualifications (those with 421 or more guided learning hours) as planned in 2025. This will direct learners who want to study a large qualification in education and early years to the T Level as the highest quality option. The [T Level in this route](#) provides young people with the skills, knowledge and behaviours for skilled employment, higher level training or further study in the education and childcare sector. It includes two specialisms: Early Years Educator and Assisting Teaching, both combining classroom and practical learning.

Beyond this, we are also retaining funding for 6 smaller qualifications to support specific occupations such as teaching assistants, giving learners a smaller alternative which could be combined with other qualifications. [These qualifications can be viewed here.](#) We expect to reform the majority of qualifications in this route in 2025-26, at which point unreformed qualifications will have funding removed on 31 July 2026.

Engineering and Manufacturing

We will retain qualifications in Engineering and Manufacturing previously identified for defunding, until 2027. [These qualifications can be viewed here.](#) This will allow time to update the occupational standards which are designed by employers which underpin this large and complex route, and for an additional two years for providers to transition to the [Engineering and Manufacturing T Levels](#). It will also allow time for new qualifications which meet the needs of learners, providers and employers to be established. In 2027 we expect to remove funding from large qualifications (those with 720 guided learning hours or more), to direct learners to the T Level(s) in this route. We will publish further information about wider reforms in this route in due course, considering the recommendations of the Curriculum and Assessment Review.

Legal, Finance and Accounting

For the Legal, Finance and Accounting route, we will retain funding for all qualifications until at least 2027. In 2027 we expect to remove large qualifications (those with 720 guided learning hours or more), to direct learners to the T Level(s) in this route. We will publish further information about wider reforms in this route in due course, considering the recommendations of the Curriculum and Assessment Review.

Business and Administration

For the Business and Administration route, we will retain funding for all qualifications until at least 2027. In 2027 we expect to remove large qualifications (those with 720 guided learning hours or more), to direct learners to the T Level(s) in this route. We will publish further information about wider reforms in this route in due course, considering the recommendations of the Curriculum and Assessment Review.

Creative and Design

For the Creative and Design route, we will retain funding for all qualifications until at least 2027. In 2027 we expect to remove large qualifications (those with 720 guided learning hours or more), to direct learners to the T Level(s) in this route. We will publish further information about wider reforms in this route in due course, considering the recommendations of the Curriculum and Assessment Review.

Agriculture, Environment and Animal Care

For the Agriculture, Environment and Animal Care route, we will retain funding for all qualifications until 2027. In 2027 we expect to remove large qualifications (those with 720 guided learning hours or more), to direct learners to the T Level(s) in this route. We will publish further

information about wider reforms in this route in due course, considering the recommendations of the Curriculum and Assessment Review.

Next steps for level 3 reforms

As part of the conclusions of the review of post-16 qualifications reform, the government announced that reforms in the Health and Science, Education and Early Years, Construction and Digital routes, as well as the Care Services route would continue so that learners can study high quality newly reformed qualifications that are designed to support progression and, in the case of technical qualifications, are designed on the knowledge, skills and behaviours that employers have told us they need.

Awarding organisations are now being asked to submit reformed qualifications in these routes in spring 2025. Where we are inviting replacement qualifications to be submitted for funding approval from 1st August 2026, unreformed qualifications in these routes will have public funding removed on 31 July 2026.

The department recognises that there are some instances where the rapid review returned qualifications to funding and awarding organisations will not have had the necessary preparation time to bring forward reformed alternatives for the Spring submission window. Consequently, we have not included those in our list of qualification areas where we will accept submissions. Following the output of this round of funding approvals and the conclusions of the curriculum and assessment review, we will provide further information about plans for reforming qualifications, including qualifications in the above routes where we are not inviting reformed replacements to be submitted in the Spring. This will include whether replacement qualifications are required and timescales for further reform, with the exception of large qualifications in T Level routes, which will have funding removed as per the timescales set out in the conclusions of the review of qualifications reform. Where education providers are still using large qualifications in T Level areas, they should be making preparations to ensure they are ready for when public funding is removed from these qualifications, as set out in the summary of the rapid review above.

Awarding organisations should make full use of this Spring submission round to submit replacement qualifications in areas where we will accept them – further detail is set out in the [funding approval manual](#). The spring submission timescale will support the assessment and approval of reformed qualifications so that we can notify providers at the start of the 2025-26 academic year about qualifications that will become available for delivery on 1 August 2026 and also to confirm the qualifications, where funding will be withdrawn on 31 July 2026.

Reformed qualifications that will be considered for public funding in these routes must either be small AAQs (150-420 GLH) for all funding offers (16-19 and 19+), or technical occupational entry qualifications (TOQs) and based on employer-designed occupational standards and technical additional specialist qualifications.

Subjects where small AAQs will be considered for funding approval in Spring 2025 include:

- Applied science
- Medical science
- Human biology
- Early years
- Health and social care
- Information technology
- Computing
- Subjects which support progression to degrees in healthcare professions allied to medicine, dentistry, and nursing
- Building and construction
- Child development and well-being
- Direct learning support
- Teaching and lecturing

Table 1 below outlines the routes and technical qualification categories considered for funding in 2026.

Route	Occupational entry		Additional specialist
	16 to 19	19+	16 to 19 and 19+
Care Services	All occupational standards	All occupational standards	All occupational standards
Construction and the Built Environment	Only those occupational standards not covered by T Levels		
Digital			
Education and Early Years			
Health and Science			

Table 1: Routes and technical qualification categories considered for funding 2026

Awarding organisations will be required to submit qualifications data and supporting documentation via GalaxKey (AAQs), or Cognito Forms (TOQs). [Additional guidance on the funding approval process](#) and the next round of approvals is available.

The functions currently carried out by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) related to technical qualifications, including the review and approval of qualifications, will be transferred to the Secretary of State for Education by the IfATE Bill. Where appropriate, Skills England will take these functions on, and more information about the role that Skills England will play will be available in due course. The new level 2 and 3 qualifications that have already been approved by IfATE will remain; the establishment of Skills England will not render existing approvals void.

Before AAQs and TOQs are approved for public funding, the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) reviews qualifications and provides feedback to DfE and IFATE which is taken into account when making decisions on qualifications approvals. This is a key aspect of ensuring that the quality of qualifications improves. Through the development of new AAQs and TOQs, learners can be confident in high quality qualifications that will support progression to higher education (HE) or to skilled employment.

Details of the AAQs and technical qualifications that meet the DfE's funding approval criteria will be published in September 2025 and will become available for delivery from 1 August 2026, alongside the 74 reformed qualifications already approved from 1 August 2025 in Health and Science, Education and Early Years, Engineering and Manufacturing, Construction and Digital.

Reforms in other routes and subjects at level 3, including Travel and Tourism; Criminology; uniformed protective services, performing arts, Engineering and Manufacturing, Legal, Finance and Accounting, Business and Administration, Creative and Design, and Agriculture, Environmental and Animal Care will not proceed until the findings of the curriculum and assessment review have been published. This review seeks to address the key problems and hard to overcome barriers to achievement in the curriculum and assessment system from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 4 and 16-19 education. It will publish recommendations in Autumn 2025, including on how to ensure rigorous and high-value qualification pathways are available for all at 16 to 19.

Current qualifications in other routes and subjects at level 3 will remain funded where they are operationally available, until at least 2027.

Criteria and requirements for alternative academic qualifications

Alternative Academic Qualifications (AAQs) are new qualifications that will be available for delivery from 1 August 2025, offering a blend of academic, applied and vocational learning in a range of subjects at level 3 that are strategically important (such as STEM and those supporting the NHS) or in subjects less served by A levels. A levels are world class qualifications and provide the best preparation for HE in most academic subject areas. That is why A levels will continue to be at the core of 16-19 academic study programmes. AAQs are designed to complement and enhance the A level offer, helping to ensure learners have a route into high-quality degree courses that utilises different assessment types, whilst ensuring a core 40% via examination.

It is vital that AAQs command the confidence of learners, parents, employers and educators as reliable and valid measures of knowledge and skills achieved. Ofqual will review qualification materials as part of the approval process and provide feedback to DfE

To be approved for funding as an AAQ, qualifications will need to meet criteria, as set out in the [Funding Approval Manual](#). These criteria include supporting entry to HE and

minimum requirements around independent assessment and mandatory content. These new qualifications can also be designed to meet a mixture of learning styles, including applied, vocational and academic.

When developing a qualification in these subjects, awarding organisations will consider whether it aligns to a level 3 occupational standard. If it does, the qualification is likely more suited to be a technical qualification and less likely to be approved as academic, without a clear case that the content is academically focused and has a clear and direct link to related HE courses.

The new level 3 AAQs are now on UCAS' Tariff tables for the next academic year. The DfE is working with UCAS and universities to ensure that they understand the new qualifications landscape. The latest UCAS tariff tables are available at [UCAS Tariff - All You Need to Know](#), with background information and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs).

Criteria and requirements for technical qualifications

New technical qualifications are based on occupational standards co-designed by employers. This will ensure that the skills needs of business and industry are better served and that clear progression pathways are created, delivering the outcomes learners need, either to enter into a skilled job, or to progress within a skilled career. This distinguishes them from existing technical and vocational subjects which have not been explicitly designed against employer-led occupational standards and reflects the intention that these standards should be the bed-rock of T Levels and other technical qualifications going forward.

T Levels are the best large qualifications at level 3 for 16-19 learners. In this submission round, we are only accepting technical qualifications against standards not covered by a T Level for 16 to 19 but will accept qualifications against standards covered by T Levels for adult funded offers. All standards that are covered by a T Level are clearly marked in the occupational maps.

In this submission round we will **only** accept Technical Occupational Entry and Additional Specialist qualifications, in the routes set out in table 2.

Technical occupational entry qualifications (TOQs) aim to support a learner to enter into a specific occupation or role. They are based on a specific occupational standard and must cover the key skills, knowledge and behaviors in the standard to provide occupational competence for example, Low carbon heating technician, Adult care worker or Personal trainer. These qualifications can be available for learners aged 16-19 and adults. But if the qualification supports entry into [occupations covered by T Levels](#), they will be funded adults only.

Technical additional specialist qualifications are another type of technical qualification. These are specialist level 3 technical qualifications for post 16 learners and adults, which go beyond the contents of an occupational standard and allow a learner to develop additional knowledge and expertise to specialise within a sector. These qualifications build on knowledge covered by a T Level or other occupational entry qualifications. For example, low-carbon construction design building on the Design, Surveying and Planning for Construction T Level.

Awarding organisations can develop Technical Additional Specialist qualifications to be submitted for funding approval in all of the above routes.

Further information on these qualification categories is available in the [Approvals categories and associated criteria and guidance](#).

The new level 3 technical qualifications are now on UCAS' Tariff tables for the next academic year. The DfE is working with UCAS and universities to ensure that they understand the new qualifications landscape. The latest UCAS tariff tables are available at [UCAS Tariff - All You Need to Know](#), with background information and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs).

Level 2 and below

Qualifications at level 2 and below are a vital part of our further education landscape – not just for their value to the economy but also for their potential to improve social mobility, inclusion, and lifelong learning. We recognise the diversity of the cohort studying at level 2 and below and that individuals who take these qualifications may have very different backgrounds, prior achievements, needs, aspirations and motivations. They are also more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds or have special educational needs or disabilities. It is vital that these learners can access, and benefit from, high-quality provision that provides the support they need to unlock their potential and that offers excellent progression opportunities.

In September 2024, we published a list of [new technical qualifications at level 2](#) that will support those who want to enter key level 2 occupations in construction, education, engineering and health. In total, 66 new technical qualifications were approved for funding from August 2025, and these will continue to be introduced as planned. The only qualifications at level 2 that will have funding approval removed in 2025-26 are those which an awarding organisation has told us will be directly replaced by one of these reformed technical qualifications.

Future decisions on further reforms at level 2 and below will take into consideration the outcomes of the curriculum and assessment review which will publish its recommendations in the Autumn.



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