

Workshop: V-Levels and Level 2 Pathways

Tammy Leipacher, NOCN Group

Jonathan Alton, NOCN Group

Navigating the Future: Post-16 Education Reform

- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-16-education-and-skills-white-paper>
- [Post-16 Level 3 and Below Pathways \(consultation\)](#)
- <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2025/10/new-v-levels-and-post-16-qualifications-explained/>



A Pivotal Moment for Post-16 Education

- The Department for Education has released a comprehensive white paper on Post-16 education and skills, launching a government consultation on the future of Level 3 and Below Pathways.
- This marks a fundamental shift in how England approaches vocational and technical education, with implications for learners, providers, employers, and awarding organisations alike.
- They are:
 - investing an extra £800 million in 16–19 education
 - establishing 29 new Technical Excellence Colleges focused on key industries.



The New Qualification Landscape

V Levels at Level 3

New flagship vocational qualifications designed to align closely with employer needs and national occupational standards

Occupational Certificates

Level 2 qualifications leading directly into jobs and apprenticeships with clear progression routes

Foundation Certificates

Level 2 qualifications providing essential skills and pathways for learners to prepare them from T-Levels etc.

The proposed framework represents a bold move towards a streamlined, employer-focused system that prioritises clarity and relevance.

Streamlining the Qualifications Landscape

900

Current level 3 qualifications

1,600

Current level 2 qualifications

V levels, Occupational Certificates and **Foundation Certificates** will address a critical challenge in further education by replacing the bewildering array of current qualifications.

This simplification will make it easier for students, parents, and employers to understand qualifications and their value, whilst ensuring quality and consistency across vocational education.

The New Level 3 Landscape

England's post-16 qualifications will change to provide clearer pathways for all learners. Students will choose from three distinct routes, each designed to meet different aspirations and learning styles.

A Levels

The established academic route for students pursuing university degrees and research-focused careers

T Levels

Technical qualifications combining classroom learning with substantial industry placements

V Levels

The new vocational pathway enabling exploration across sectors before specialisation

What V Levels Offer Students



Practical Learning Without Early Specialisation

Perfect for students who thrive putting theory into practice but aren't ready to focus on one occupational area like T Level students must.



Subject Flexibility

Students can study different vocational subjects simultaneously, similar to how A level students combine academic subjects, allowing them to explore varied interests.



Mix and Match Options

V Levels can be combined with A levels and include space for Maths and English retakes when needed, creating truly personalised study programmes.

V-Level Structure and Standards

Subject Areas

Offered in subjects related to specific employment sectors, including **Construction and the Built Environment**, designed to support progression to relevant apprenticeships or higher education courses.

Consistent Quality

Nationally set outline content ensures better subject consistency and improved quality across all providers, supporting a standardised approach to Level 3 qualifications for 16-19 year olds.

Comparable Size

Each V Level comprises 360 guided learning hours—the same as A levels—enabling students to combine multiple V-Levels or mix them with A levels in a manageable study programme.

Design and Assessment Framework

Content Design

- High-level outline content linked to **occupational standards** will be set nationally for awarding organisations to follow when devising qualification specifications.
- This ensures consistency whilst allowing awarding organisations flexibility in detailed design.

Regulatory Approach

- Ofqual will set design rules for V Level on:
 - Structure
 - Assessment
 - Grading.
- These **V Level-specific conditions** will regulate awarding organisations' design and delivery of each qualification—in the same rigorous way that each A level is regulated.

Assessment Principles: Rigour and Parity of Esteem



High Quality and Rigorous

V Levels are designed to hold **parity of esteem** with A levels and T Levels, ensuring they're valued by universities and employers alike.



Increased Non-Exam Assessment

V Levels will generally have a higher proportion of non-exam assessment compared to many A levels, supporting accessibility and valid assessment of practical application in various forms.



Applied Learning Focus

Non-exam assessment supports the core purpose of V Levels—enabling more applied learning that reflects real workplace contexts and demands.



Robust Quality Assurance

Where providers mark students' assessment evidence, awarding organisations will apply equivalent quality assurance methods to those used for A levels and T Levels.

V Levels within 16-19 Study Programmes

V Level qualifications will be funded through 16-19 study programmes. All programmes should provide structured, challenging learning that supports development and progression aligned with students' career plans.

1 Substantial Qualifications

V-Levels (alone or combined with A levels) form the substantial qualification component that stretches students and prepares them for the next level of education or employment.

2 English and Maths

Students who haven't yet achieved GCSE grade 4 in English or maths continue studying these essential subjects alongside their V-Levels.

3 Work Experience

Opportunities to develop career choices and apply skills in real working conditions, reinforcing the practical nature of V-Level learning.

4 Non-Qualification Activity

Additional support for learners with SEND, character development, broader skills, attitudes, confidence building, and progression support as needed.

Your Feedback and Views – V Levels

Strengths	Weaknesses
Opportunities	Threats

Consultation Questions

DfE are proposing V Levels will be 360 GLH to enable students to combine them with other V Levels and A levels. Where larger subjects are needed, we propose that these are offered through T Levels.

1. In taking this approach, are there any risks or issues DfE need to be aware of?
2. Are there any particular issues for subjects or students that DfE need to be aware of as a result of not having medium sized V Levels?

Two Distinct Pathways at Level 2

New options are being introduced to better match student aspirations and provide targeted support for progression beyond Level 2.



Occupational Pathway

For students aiming to move straight into skilled employment or apprenticeships after Level 2



Further Study Pathway

For students planning to progress onto Level 3 courses such as A levels, T Levels, or V levels

Both pathways are designed for 16–18-year-olds and provide a clear structure that supports individual goals and builds confidence.

Occupational Certificates at Level 2

Who Is This Pathway For?



Career-Focused Students

Young people who have made a conscious decision to enter a level 2 occupation rather than continuing immediately to level 3 study



Building Foundations

Students whose prior attainment suggests they need additional time and support before progressing to level 3 qualifications



Employment Ready

Learners seeking high-quality preparation that leads directly to sustainable employment in their chosen occupation

A pathway to employment for 16-19 students seeking direct entry into skilled occupations

Occupational Certificates: Construction Sector Occupations

On-Site Construction

- Bricklayer
- Carpentry and Joinery - Architectural Joiner
- Carpentry and Joinery - Site Carpenter
- Plasterer - Fibrous Plasterer
- Plasterer - Solid Plasterer

Finishing Trades

- Domestic Plumber
- Wall and Floor Tiler
- Painter and Decorator
- Floor Layer

The Study Programme Structure

A Comprehensive Two-Year Journey

Occupational Certificates are delivered as part of a structured 16-19 study programme spanning two full years. This extended timeline provides crucial benefits:

- Sufficient time to develop genuine occupational competence
- Space for lower prior attaining students to study new Maths and English programmes
 - Level 1 "preparation for GCSE" English and Maths qualifications
- Opportunity to build both technical skills and essential employability attributes

Two Essential Elements in the Qualifications

1

Broad Introductory Core Content

- An introduction to working in the sector
- Develops key transferable skills needed to succeed across multiple occupations within the same industry area
- Set by the DfE, guided by occupational standards published by Skills England working with sector experts covering sector introduction, organisational structures, roles and responsibilities, working with others, and relevant skills such as taking measurements and unit conversions
- Less than 50% of overall guided learning hours

2

Occupation-Specific Content

- Delivers the precise knowledge, skills, and behaviours required to enable students to work towards competence in their chosen occupation
- Derived from Skills England's Occupational Standards
- More than 50% of overall guided learning hours

Assessment and Quality Assurance

Robust Centre Assessment

As these qualifications enable students to work towards occupational competence, they include a significant element marked by centres, with rigorous quality assurance provided by awarding organisations.

This approach ensures authentic assessment of practical skills in realistic workplace contexts

Moving Towards Consistent Grading

01

Current Challenge

Level 2 qualifications currently use a wide range of grading scales, creating confusion for students, parents, and employers

02

Collaborative Solution

The DfE will work with Ofqual and Skills England to develop a more consistent grading scale for Occupational Certificates

03

Key Considerations

Ensuring comparability between qualifications and alignment with reformed Apprenticeship Assessment grading standards

Your Feedback and Views – Occupational Certificates / Pathway

Strengths	Weaknesses
Opportunities	Threats

Consultation Questions

DfE expect the Occupational pathway to last 2 years, in line with current legislation. However, they recognise that some students may have legitimate reasons for leaving the pathway early, such as progressing to a work-based training programme or moving on to a level 3 qualification.

10. Are there any other circumstances you believe would justify a student stepping off the pathway before completing the full 2 years? Please provide examples and explain why these should be considered.

Your Feedback and Views – Occupational Certificates / Pathway

11. DfE are proposing that they set the introductory core content for Occupational Certificates which is shared across multiple related qualifications. Do you agree with this approach? Y/N
12. Please give reasons for your answer to Q11
13. DfE believe the sizes of each Occupational Certificate should be variable and driven by the occupational standard(s) it is linked to, as opposed to having a fixed size for all Occupational Certificates. Do you foresee any challenges with this approach? Y/N
14. If so, what are they and how might they be overcome?
15. DfE are proposing the size of the broad introductory core content should be proportionate and should be less than 50% of the overall GLH. Do you foresee any challenges with this approach? (Y/N)
16. If so, what are they and how might they be overcome?

Foundation Certificates at Level 2

Who are Foundation Certificates For?

Target Students

Foundation Certificates are designed for level 2 students who demonstrate both the ambition and capability to progress successfully to level 3 study. These students typically have clear intentions to advance their education and possess prior attainment levels that make level 3 progression a realistic prospect after an additional year at level 2.

Future Pathways

This qualification opens doors to multiple progression routes, including T Levels, V Levels, or A levels. Students may ultimately pursue higher education or skilled employment at level 3, making this a crucial stepping stone in their educational journey.

One-Year Study Programme Structure

01

Foundation Certificate Qualification

Students undertake a new Foundation Certificate in their chosen vocational subject, providing subject-specific knowledge and skills.

02

Independent Study Skills

Development of confidence, resilience, and independent learning capabilities through exposure to level 3 teaching methods and assignments in a supportive environment.

03

Structured Enrichment

High-quality enrichment activities prepare students for success at level 3, including experiences such as sitting in on level 3 classes and completing level 3 assignments.

04

English and Maths Focus

Strong emphasis on achieving grade 4 GCSE where not yet attained, with dedicated time for minimum funding requirements plus recommended additional hours.

Foundation Certificate Specifications

1

240 Guided Learning Hours

All Foundation Certificates are set at 240 guided learning hours to ensure deliverability within a one-year study programme alongside other essential elements.

2

Broad Vocational Qualifications

These qualifications are specifically designed for post-16 students and differ from GCSEs and Key Stage 4 Technical Awards in structure and purpose.

3

Nationally-Set Subject List

Foundation Certificates are available only for a nationally-determined list of vocational subjects, including **Construction and the Built Environment**.

4

Single Subject Pathway

There will not be separate Foundation Certificates for T Levels and V Levels within the same vocational area, ensuring consistency and clarity.

Supporting Progression

Level 3 Exposure

Provides structured exposure to level 3 study through carefully designed bridging activities.

Students gain valuable experience by participating in level 3 classes, tackling level 3 assignments, and developing the resilience needed for more demanding coursework

Minimum Hours Met

Programmes allow sufficient time for the minimum hours required by the English and Maths condition of funding.

Students who have not yet achieved grade 4 in GCSE English or Maths receive targeted support to reach the grades required by providers for accessing level 3 study programmes.

Effective Practice

A supportive approach builds confidence whilst developing the independent study skills essential for success at the next level.

Providers have flexibility to design enrichment offers that meet their students' specific needs whilst following national guidance on appropriate activities.

Clear Progression Routes

1

Foundation Certificate

Level 2 qualification in chosen vocational subject

2

Level 3 Progression

Clear alignment to T Levels and V Levels

3

Future Success

Higher education or skilled employment

Foundation Certificates primarily support progression onto relevant T Levels and/or V Levels, with content carefully aligned between Foundation Certificates and the range of relevant level 3 qualifications. This ensures students are thoroughly prepared for their chosen progression route.

Quality and Consistency Standards - Content

The DfE sets the national content for all Foundation Certificates, which awarding organisations must follow when developing qualification specifications. This approach mirrors the rigorous standards applied to T Levels.

Assessment Approach



Mixed Assessment Model

A proportion of assessments (though not all) will be set and marked by awarding organisations, ensuring national consistency and quality standards.



Quality Assurance

Enhanced quality assurance processes apply where providers undertake marking of assessments, maintaining rigorous standards throughout.



Subject-Specific Consideration

Ofqual reviews assessment requirements on a subject-by-subject basis, recognising that the balance of assessment may need to differ between subjects to best assess knowledge and skills.

Your Feedback and Views – Foundation Certificates / Further Study Pathway

Strengths	Weaknesses
Opportunities	Threats

Consultation Questions

DfE are proposing that all Foundation Certificates are the same size – 240 guided learning hours – to ensure they are a consistent size and can fit within a one-year study programme allowing for English, maths and non-qualification activity such as employability, enrichment and pastoral support, and exposure to level 3 study.

7. In taking this approach, are there any risks or issues DfE need to be aware of?

A Summary – The Occupational Pathway

Building Skills for Employment

A two-year, employment-focused programme to equip students with the practical skills and real-world experience needed to succeed in work.

- Training designed around real jobs and industries
- Hands-on experience that builds workplace confidence
- Direct progression to skilled jobs or apprenticeships
- Preparation that makes students genuinely work-ready



A Summary – The Further Study Pathway

Designed for students who need additional time to prepare for Level 3 study, this pathway strengthens foundational skills and builds academic confidence.

01

Strengthen Core Skills

Focus on building essential knowledge and study skills at a manageable pace

02

Build Confidence

Create a supportive environment where students develop self-belief and readiness

03

Progress to Level 3

Transition successfully to A levels, T Levels, V levels, or other advanced courses



What Are V Levels?



- V levels represent a significant shift in vocational education. These new Level 3 qualifications provide a **flexible pathway** for students who wish to explore different sectors before committing to a specific area of specialisation.
- Unlike the narrow focus of T Levels, V levels allow learners to discover their interests and strengths across multiple industries, making informed decisions about their future careers.
- This exploratory approach recognises that not all 16-year-olds are ready to choose a single career path.

Your Feedback and Views – The White Paper

17. What non-qualification activities do you think are successful at supporting vocational students to engage best in their course content in order to achieve in their course and progress to their stated destination?
18. DfE plan to roll out V Levels, Foundation Certificates, and Occupational Certificates together by route, to ensure coherence across levels and clear progression. Do you think this is the best approach? Are there alternative rollout strategies we should consider, or any unintended consequences we might be overlooking?
19. What steps should DfE take to ensure the outline content for V Levels, Foundation Certificates and Occupational Certificates is high-quality across subjects and awarding organisations?