Explaining post-16 qualifications: information for employers

Changes to post-16 qualifications

The post-16 qualifications landscape has changed in recent years, with more types of qualification on offer to students and the biggest shake-up of A levels seen in more than a decade.

Keeping abreast of the wide range of courses on offer can be challenging but the changes are intended to benefit both students and business.

Why the changes?

The total number of skill-shortage vacancies reported by employers has increased by 43% over the last two years. The UK is also falling behind other nations in qualifications league tables. To help address these issues, level 3 vocational qualifications are becoming better aligned with national skills demands and academic courses have been reformed to create a more rigorous qualification in response to university demands.

With vocational qualifications now considered by business¹ to be as important as academic ones, these changes, along with a wide choice of post-16 qualifications and pathways, help young people to develop the knowledge, skills and behaviours which match the labour market demands of today and the future; the nation needs to be producing highly skilled and capable individuals which will allow us to compete on an international stage.

¹ CBI
AS and A level reforms

Changes to AS/A levels are well underway with the first AS level results already out and the first new A level results due out in 2017. The last few subjects to be introduced will begin teaching in September 2017. It’s goodbye to some A levels in subjects such as statistics, media, health and social care, and archaeology which will no longer be available from 2017.

The standards of AS and A levels are not being changed - content, teaching and assessment are getting an overhaul but on average, students who would have received Bs previously will get a B in reformed subjects and unlike GCSEs, grading remains the same.

AS levels – no longer linked with A levels

One of the biggest changes is the decoupling of AS levels from A levels. AS level marks will no longer count towards a final A level grade. Before, a first-year student studying AS could carry on to study at A level in their second year with the first year AS marks counting as 50% of the final A level grade.

Under the new system, any student choosing to take AS level will not be able to convert it to an A level - it is a stand-alone qualification worth half the value of a full A level but less demanding.

Why change A levels?

The new A levels are intended to be more rigorous and linear, moving away from coursework towards end of course examinations. They will allow more time for studying and better prepare students for university or the world of work.

For a timetable on when the new A levels will be introduced: www.gov.uk/government/publications/get-the-facts-gcse-and-a-level-reform/get-the-facts-as-and-a-level-reform

Other post-16 qualifications

Subject-related/academic qualifications

You may see less familiar subject-related qualifications on a candidate’s certificate. As well as A levels, students wishing to study subjects may have the option of taking these qualifications:

International Baccalaureate (IB): an internationally recognised course taken by students all around the world. The IB Diploma is well respected by universities and could be an advantage for young people hoping to study or work abroad.

Cambridge Pre-U Diploma: students study a range of courses in a single qualification which develops in-depth subject knowledge, research skills and independent thinking. Like A levels, this fairly new qualification is a two-year course with exams at the end and can be done alongside other qualifications.

Extended Project Qualification (EPQ): an EPQ requires independent research and can demonstrate to an employer or university that a student is keen to expand their knowledge in a particular chosen area.
Vocational, technical or applied learning qualifications

Qualifications such as BTEC Diploma, Cambridge Technicals, NVQs (SVQ in Scotland), OCR and City & Guilds focus on a particular industry, combining practical study and experience of the workplace while developing skills and knowledge. These are no doubt familiar to you as an employer but they can also lead to further study, apprenticeships or higher education.

The Technical Baccalaureate (TechBacc)

This new qualification is awarded if students complete an advanced (level 3) programme that includes:

• an approved Tech Level qualification
• level 3 maths
• an extended project

Currently only available in a few work areas - engineering, early years, land, construction, digital and automotive - more industries will be added soon. The TechBacc demonstrates a student’s ability for independent study while providing them with experience of the workplace.

Technical Level Qualifications

You may have heard people talk about Tech Levels when discussing level 3 qualifications. These are relatively new on the scene and have been developed with employers to ensure they meet requirements for the workplace; they are also recognised as being good preparation for specific job roles. Some of the existing level 3 qualifications now have ‘Tech Level’ status.

Tech Levels are rigorous qualifications which give students an opportunity to develop specialist knowledge and skills to help them get an apprenticeship or job in an area such as engineering, IT or accounting, or to progress to a higher level qualification.

There are three types of technical and applied qualifications for 16 to 19-year-olds:

• level 3 tech levels which specialise in a specific technical job
• level 2 technical certificates which can lead to employment or progress to another tech level
• applied general qualifications which allow students to continue with general education at advanced level through applied learning

Tech Levels will be reported alongside qualifications such as A Levels and other vocational qualifications from 2018.

The importance of meaningful work experience

Following a report for the DfE\(^2\) which recommended increasing work-related provision for students aged 16 years and older, all students aged 16 to 19 are now expected to follow a study programme tailored to their career aspirations and prior attainment. With the aim of adding valuable experience in terms of helping young people make the transition from learning to work, this study programme must include planned work experience which is relevant to the programme they are following – whether an academic, vocational or mixed pathway.

With 66% of recruiting employers rating relevant work experience as being a critical or significant factor looked for in candidates\(^3\), this meaningful experience of work is aimed at addressing the skills shortages experienced in industry across a wide range of roles.

For more on study programmes and the work experience element, visit www.gov.uk/guidance/16-to-19-funding-study-programmes-work-experience

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\(^2\) Review of Vocational Education: the Wolf report
\(^3\) Employer Perspectives Survey 2014 UKCES
Moving on after post-16 learning

As mentioned earlier, qualification pathways are a lot less linear than a decade or two ago. Not only can students mix and match between vocational and academic qualifications in the same year, their next move may be to continue learning but switch to a different pathway or even to take a sideways jump, building on knowledge and experience.

Either choice can lead to an apprenticeship which can be accessed at different levels depending on the situation of the candidate. As well as being available at level 2 and 3 (intermediate and advanced apprenticeships), higher apprenticeships can lead to higher education-level qualifications, for example, HNDs and foundation degrees. Newer degree apprenticeships can lead to either a full bachelor’s or master’s degree.

It’s clear that there’s no ‘one size fits all’ when it comes to post-16 learning but whichever pathway a young person chooses, recent qualification developments mean that they should be better equipped for the future world of work.