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**The Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP**

Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education

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James Kewin  
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20 March 2023

Dear James,

Thank you for your letter of 27 February, addressed to the Secretary of State, enclosing a letter co-signed by the leaders of 360 organisations, expressing support for the 'Protect student Choice campaign: do not withdraw funding for BTEC qualifications'. I am replying as the minister responsible for this policy area.

As the Secretary of State outlined in her response to your letter of 16 November 2022, the changes to post-16 qualifications at level 3 and below are designed to ensure that our qualifications system provides a ladder of opportunity for young people from all backgrounds. Our reforms are designed to ensure that young people have the highest quality study options available to them at level 3 and below. We are committed to putting A levels and T Levels at the heart of post-16 study because they are world-class qualifications that evidence shows will provide the best foundation for higher education or skilled employment.

You have asked us to consider removing the 134 applied general qualifications (AGQs) from this review. As the department has previously stated, all qualifications outside of A levels and T Levels that are in scope of the review must go through our new funding approval process and meet the new criteria for alternative academic and technical qualifications. This is to ensure that all publicly funded qualifications are of high quality, have a clear purpose, and lead to meaningful progression outcomes. This is a very important change that will benefit young people.

T Levels are based on employer-led occupational standards and have been designed by employers. Where there is not a T Level in a subject area, our reforms allow for the development of new occupational entry technical qualifications which are also based on these employer-led occupational standards. It is right that technical courses are based on these going forward to ensure that young people have the skills that employers need. It is also right that awarding organisations should have to be clear about purpose and progression, as well as demonstrating that their qualifications are supported by employers and higher education establishment. We will not, therefore, withdraw these AGQs from the reforms.

In your letter, you express concerns that many eligible AGQs will not be able to successfully navigate the necessary approval process. I do accept that awarding organisations may need to re-visit their qualifications to ensure that they meet the new criteria, which are designed to ensure quality and progression. Nevertheless, we have worked to ensure that the approvals process is as straight forward as possible for awarding organisations to navigate, with one submission that will be considered by the department, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE), and Ofqual.

We have clearly set out the requirements that awarding organisations must meet in the Funding Approval Manual published on GOV.UK. Both the department and IfATE are delivering bespoke sessions on the different elements of the new criteria. I hope you will agree that qualifications should meet conditions such as clarity of purpose and progression, which is what we are looking to achieve. I assure you that we will continue to support awarding organisations to ensure that submissions are high-quality, and students have an excellent choice of qualifications going forward.

Our reforms will provide high-quality opportunities for all, and I do not agree that young people will fall out of the system. The range of A levels, T Levels, and alternative academic and technical qualifications may be different to now, but it will be highly relevant to what our economy needs. Aligning technical qualifications to IfATE occupational standards, which were designed by employers, will give young people assurance that the qualifications they study will give them the skills that employers need. Similarly, alignment of alternative academic qualifications to strategically important subjects also ensures that young people study to support the skills our economy needs.

Where young people need help to reach level 3 study, we are offering the T Level transition programme. We are also reforming level 2 qualifications to ensure they focus much more on progression to skilled employment and level 3 study.

I also note your proposal to delay first teaching of approved qualifications by at least a year. We understand that this is significant change, but we believe that the long-term benefits are what is needed. Employers are facing a skills shortage that we must act to address. We must close the gap between what people study and the needs of employers.

In May 2024, we will produce a list of available qualification for first teaching in 2025. This list will be confirmed in July, which allows awarding organisations time to appeal any decisions. I have asked department officials to ensure they do everything possible to provide you and your members with the information you need in good time. We are working hard to ensure that you are provided with as much information as quickly as possible to help you make the transition, and with the support of the Further Education Commissioner, we are planning a series of events between now and the summer to support you with curriculum planning.

I am grateful for your kind invitation to meet to discuss this further. I would be delighted to accept. My office will be in touch to make the necessary arrangements. Officials in the department, IfATE, and Ofqual are working to ensure that colleges have the opportunity to discuss the reforms, and I would therefore also encourage you to join the information and discussion sessions planned to support you as you develop your plans.

Thank you for writing on this important matter.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Robert Halfon', written in a cursive style.

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