

Executive Summary

This submission, by Baker Dearing Educational Trust (Baker Dearing) on behalf of the UTC programme, incorporates feedback from our employer partners (including JCB, founder of the first UTC) and UTC Principals (including three of the four Ofsted 'Outstanding' UTCs), as well as student leaver analysis undertaken by Baker Dearing. Our conclusions are:

1. Combined with the development of other employability skills, which already form part of a UTC curriculum, the **current post-16, Level 3 education landscape adequately prepares young people for the world of work**. This is evidenced by impressive UTC leaver destinations.
2. T Levels are fundamentally different qualifications. They should complement, rather than replace, the current offerings. **Removing existing technical qualifications will deprive many learners of the ability to progress to Level 3 technical study at age 16**, particularly those achieving grades 4-6 at GCSE, students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and SEND students.
3. The **flexibility to combine academic and technical qualifications, which the current system provides and is highly valued by UTC employer partners and students, will be lost**. Provision for students to adjust the mix of academic and technical study, by course size and subject, will no longer be available too.
4. It is too early to determine the success of T Levels. **Removing existing qualifications, particularly related to highly sought-after industries such as engineering, is a significant risk to the economy**. A longer transition period is needed.
5. To prepare young people for the working world, other measures outside of the qualifications landscape (in particular strengthened careers advice (Baker Clause) legislation; **compulsory post-16 work experience; and various work-readiness initiatives at post-16, such as oracy, teamwork and problem-solving**) are needed.
6. Preparing young people for the world of work must start earlier than at age 16. **Accountability measures such as Ebacc have squeezed vital technical and creative courses out of the pre-16 curriculum**. This must change.

About Baker Dearing and UTCs

Baker Dearing sits at the centre of the University Technical College (UTC) network. It provides coordinated support to, and advocacy for, the 47 UTCs. UTCs are state-funded schools for 14-18-year-olds which are required to provide a blend of technical and academic education. They exist because employers across a variety of STEM-related industries recognise that the widening technical skills gaps in their businesses are not being met by the current education system. A majority of a UTC's trustees must be nominated by employer and university sponsors.

Today, 17,500 UTC students study technical qualifications, which at post-16 are predominantly STEM-related. Over the last four years, about three-quarters of UTC leavers moving on to higher education have taken STEM-related degrees. Over the same period, one-fifth of leavers have secured apprenticeships in a technical field, three times higher than mainstream schools and colleges. Less than 3% of UTC leavers join the unemployed, one quarter of the national average.

1. Experience to date of T-Levels

As no students have yet completed T Levels, it is very early to assess the success of these qualifications. Currently, just two UTCs, The Leigh UTC in Dartford (Digital, 2020) and Thomas Telford UTC in Wolverhampton (Construction, 2021), are delivering T Levels. The following is feedback from **The Leigh UTC** on its experience to date:

“The Leigh UTC is ideally placed to deliver T Levels. With industry-standard resources, only small enhancements are required to meet new T Level specifications. However, there are challenges delivering the curriculum effectively, particularly converting a seemingly academic programme into a more practical-based one. The majority of students taking our T Level have the same mindset as those taking our BTEC qualifications, wanting a ‘hands on’ experience. Fortunately, we have staff experienced in setting up new programmes, working with employers and developing briefs that allow students to explore projects in more detail.

*The reality has, unfortunately, proved more problematic. **Retention rates in our first year offering T Levels fell by 45%, partially due to covid restrictions on work placements and partially due to the academic level required to succeed. Some students who joined the T Level would have been more successful with the BTEC IT qualification, which is less prescriptive and more flexible.** In our current Year 12 cohort, student retention is much higher, possibly due to experience gained from our first-year teaching T Levels.*

The T Level Transition Programme is vital for both engineering and digital: too many students join the UTC post 16 with little or no experience of either route. As a UTC, we deliver both engineering and digital at Key Stage 4, so those who stay with us are advantaged compared to new joiners at post-16.

Our high-quality staff can teach T Levels, including delivering the uplift in maths, science and English required to be successful. However, students starting programmes this September will find the level of maths to be higher than they expect.

We generally have higher numbers of students with SEN (14.2%). To date, both BTEC and T Levels have not been barriers for inclusion. We always ensure that our curriculum models are accessible for all. Students relish T Level work placements; however, establishing and running these placements smoothly can be very time-consuming and a drain on staff resources.

8 additional UTCs plan to commence T Levels in September, mainly in engineering. The slow uptake is best summarised by feedback from **UTC Portsmouth**:

“The college has not opted to offer T Levels at this stage. We are considering it, but are not yet committing given uncertainty around current qualifications, and the fact that engineering T Levels do not fit what our employer partners want as closely as the current qualifications.”

2. The Strengths and Weaknesses of the Current System of Post-16 Qualifications

2.1. Strengths of the Current System

There are significant tangible benefits to the current system:

2.1.1. Flexibility and choice: One of the material advantages of the present system is the possibility of accessing the academic and technical streams together. **Ron Dearing UTC** unequivocally endorses this and its resulting outcomes: “*Our **university and employer sponsors prefer students to study a combination of academic and technical qualifications**. This provides a broader range of knowledge and understanding, meeting the needs of industry and universities better than a purely technical route.*”

Our curriculum model, designed in close partnership with our university and employer sponsors, is extremely effective in developing the academic, technical, personal and employability skills that universities and employers require. Our student outcomes have significantly exceeded national averages, with a 100% success rate in students progressing onto positive destinations at age 16 and 18 and ‘zero NEETs’ over the last three years.”

The current breadth of courses and optionality enable students to select programmes most suited to their needs, interests and skills. This flexibility is highly valued, and encourages young people to continue their schooling. This is also highlighted by **Ron Dearing UTC**: “*A significant number of our students choose to study Technical Certificates in different subjects. Some choose to mix these with an A Level. Others take three Technical Certificates in three different subjects. If we are to increase the number of post-16-year-olds engaging with education, we must ensure they can study a range of different subjects.”*

Employers appreciate this as well, noted **Reading UTC**: “*The strength of our curriculum offer is being able to mix and match the qualifications our employers tell us support the knowledge and skills they need”.*

2.1.2. Value to employers: Critical to the current system is its contribution to beneficiaries, employers and universities. **JCB**, founder of the first UTC, JCB Academy, has indicated that employers both understand and appreciate the present approach: “*The current system works well with employers and learners having a clear idea of what they need to progress into apprenticeships or further/higher education.*

Getting learners ‘work ready’ and/or able to ‘compete’ for places for further/higher education has to do with: developing ‘can do, will do’ attitudes; working in teams, including taking differing roles, especially leading and presenting; and working with employers to get used to discipline and deadlines on varied challenges.”

Thomas Telford UTC agrees: “*Employers know and love BTEC, because they often use it for apprentices and many have come through that route and they do test students in a vocationally suitable way. This is what employers are interested in: less that a student can ‘ace’ an exam than that an employee has independence and problem-solving skills, finding answers when they don’t know something, in line with BTEC assessments.”*

2.1.3. Accessibility of post-16 Applied General Qualifications: Feedback from UTC Principals indicates that **many students, particularly those achieving lower GCSE passes (grades 4, 5 and 6), prefer sequential assessments afforded by BTECs and other Applied General Qualifications to terminal assessments. Long, ‘high-stakes’ examinations do not suit all learners.**

2.1.4. UTC leaver destinations – demonstration of the current system’s benefits: UTCs have built a strong track record of leaver destinations for students aged 18, as highlighted earlier. Critical to these impressive destinations is the current design of post-16 study programmes, which meets the needs of students as well as employers.

2.2. Weaknesses of the Current System

Despite the material benefits outlined, the present system has certain shortcomings:

2.2.1. Too many qualifications: While optionality is welcomed, not all available alternatives are valued equally. In fact, **Ron Dearing UTC** notes: *“There are too many qualifications available; too many of these qualifications fail to prepare students effectively for the world of work.”*

2.2.2. Decline in pre-16 technical and creative subjects: The current priority for GCSEs is a knowledge-rich academic curriculum, the ‘Ebacc’, which has squeezed out technical and creative subjects. Over the past decade, this has substantially decreased study in these subjects. Not only is this bad for student choice, but also constraining exposure to technical subjects before age 16 does not allow students to *‘try before they buy’* at post-16.

2.2.3. Oracy, numeracy, and literacy deficits: Oral communication skills are often cited among the top gaps identified by employers. These skills, along with functional numeracy and literacy skills, are as important as good grades for young people to secure jobs and thrive in employment. However, they are not compulsory in post-16 education.

2.2.4. Qualifications insufficient to meet employers’ needs: UTC Portsmouth has highlighted that schools need to augment offerings, *“The current post-16 qualifications do not adequately prepare students for their next steps. We work closely with employer partners to determine how to add to qualifications to ensure that young people are work-ready. Ideally, we act as a bridge between industry and education. At present, employers feel that they have to re-teach their apprentices (except those from our college).”*

2.2.5. Limited work experience opportunities: Work experience had been compulsory for all 16-year-olds, but was made optional. Thus, few students now get work experience. Also, schools generally do not give planned preparation for the world of work, even when offering vocational qualifications. UTCs, on the other hand, address these shortcomings.

2.2.6. Inadequate student access to information about post-16 options: Secondary schools often do not give access to varied education providers to meet their students, limiting students’ exposure to, and resulting knowledge of, the alternatives available for education/training. The ‘Baker Clause’ must be strengthened to address this.

3. Benefits and Challenges of the Proposed Changes to Level 3 Qualifications

3.1. Benefits of Proposed Changes

3.1.1. Raise profile of technical education: Raising the profile of technical qualifications and introducing T Levels are welcome. Nationally, the number of young people undertaking apprenticeships is low compared to other successful systems, which the introduction of T-Levels may help to address.

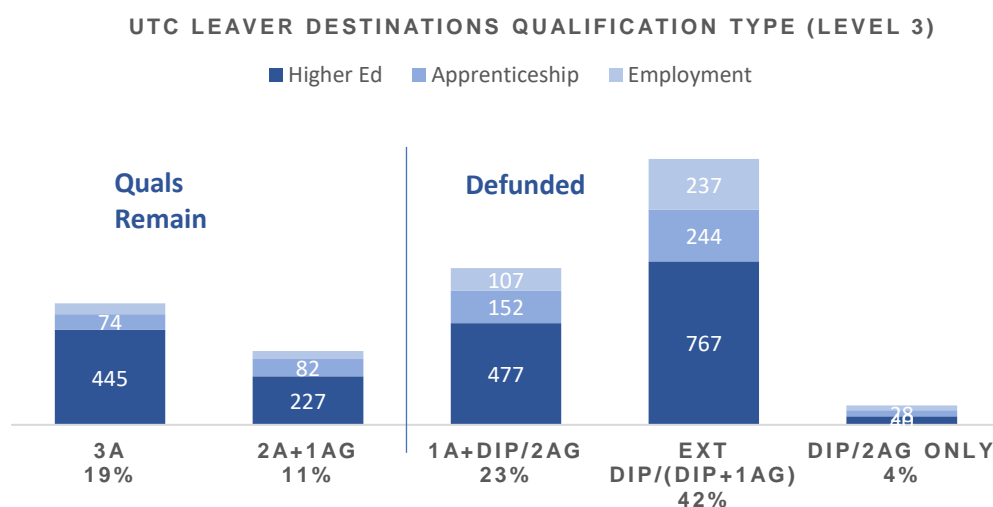
3.1.2. Reduction in number of qualifications: Over 4,000 Level 3 qualifications, including many duplications, are eligible for public funding. A significant number of courses do not adequately equip students for skilled work. Thus, the number of post-16 qualifications must be reduced.

3.1.3. Address historic underfunding: The Government’s ambition to reform the post-16 qualification system has shone a spotlight on the historic chronic underfunding of technical courses. In 2019, The OECD identified the UK as one of just six countries spending “less per student on vocational educational programmes than on upper secondary educational programmes”. In particular, funding initiatives such as the ‘high value courses premium’, supporting delivery of Level 3 courses in subjects like engineering that lead to higher wages and a more productive economy, are welcome.

3.2 Challenges of Proposed Changes

T Levels are fundamentally different in structure to existing technical qualifications, and meet the needs of a narrow subset of young people engaged in technical study. However, rather than adding the complementarity offered by T Levels, the proposed changes remove existing technical and Applied General Qualifications, the resulting difficulties of which are highlighted below:

3.2.1. High percentage of students impacted by proposals: Baker Dearing has conducted extensive analysis of UTC leaver courses and destinations for summer 2020 and 2021, found in the chart below setting out courses studied and destinations of 3,434 18-year-old UTC student leavers. **In summary, 70% of UTC leavers completed Level 3 programmes which will not be available in the new qualifications landscape.**



3.2.2. Specific impact on ‘borderline’ learners: The more rigorous curriculum required by T Levels, coupled with enhanced work experience requirements, could pose accessibility difficulties; feedback from JCB confirms this: **“Our main concern is with ‘borderline’ learners who may not be capable of T Levels but could have coped with the Level 3 diploma. It should be noted that these learners have gone on to meaningful employment / apprenticeships. There is a risk that these learners will miss out on apprenticeship opportunities. The work experience in its current format gives us concern as it will be very difficult to arrange for the same number of learners that took the Level 3 diploma. Therefore, it is likely to exclude many good learners.”**

Thomas Telford UTC concurs, stating, **“Some students who currently successfully study a Level 3 BTEC Diploma or Extended Certificate would not cope with T Levels. Pace, amount of knowledge, and exam technique are a ‘tall order’, placing T Levels beyond the reach of many learners. BTECs suit students who may not be as academic (although often are) but are able to succeed through hard work and perseverance. Employers value this.”**

This view is confirmed by Baker Dearing analysis. **Across UTCs the ‘disenfranchised’ percentage, who currently take BTECs etc. but may struggle with the equivalent T-Level, is estimated to be as high as 40%, presenting a significant risk of fewer young adults feeding into essential, under-skilled technical sectors.**

3.2.3. Unattractive to employers: The Government “Skills for Jobs” white paper states: **“We will place employers at the heart of defining local skills needs..”**. Feedback from employers (Ron Dearing UTC sponsors) to Baker Dearing advises, however: **“As employers, we prefer our higher and degree-level apprentices to have studied a mixture of technical and academic qualifications”**. This view is shared across the 400 UTC employer partners.

3.2.4. Student choice restricted: Ron Dearing UTC clearly voices the views articulated by many others: **“Students studying T Levels specialise in one subject, for example the T Level in Engineering and Manufacturing. Many of our students don’t wish to specialise in one subject at age 16, preferring to study a wider range of subjects. Forcing students into a specialist technical route will inevitably deter many from taking technical qualifications. This conflicts with the DfE’s aim of increasing the number of students taking technical qualifications, also increasing the technical skills gap, not narrowing it.**

We also have serious concerns about T Levels replacing all large technical qualifications: T Levels require the same number of guided learning hours as three A Levels, three Technical Certificates or one Technical Extended Diploma. There is no T Level equivalent to a Technical Diploma which requires the same number of guided learning hours as two A Levels or two Technical Certificates.”

Thomas Telford UTC also notes: **“Extended Certificates have mandatory units. Students often find these units dry and if anything might lose interest. The Diploma, by contrast, has optional units. All of these units are more interesting to students and more pertinent to employers. If we lose the Diploma, we are only left with the ‘drier’ units that do not inspire.”**

3.2.5. Pace of introduction: It appears that funding for BTEC diplomas and extended diplomas will be removed from September 2025. The equivalent T Levels will be launched in September 2022, with the first cohort of students taking T-Levels completing their courses in 2024. Only at this stage can both students and employers learn whether the T Level is working. **A longer period of transition is needed before funding for BTECs in priority subjects, and similar qualifications, is removed.**

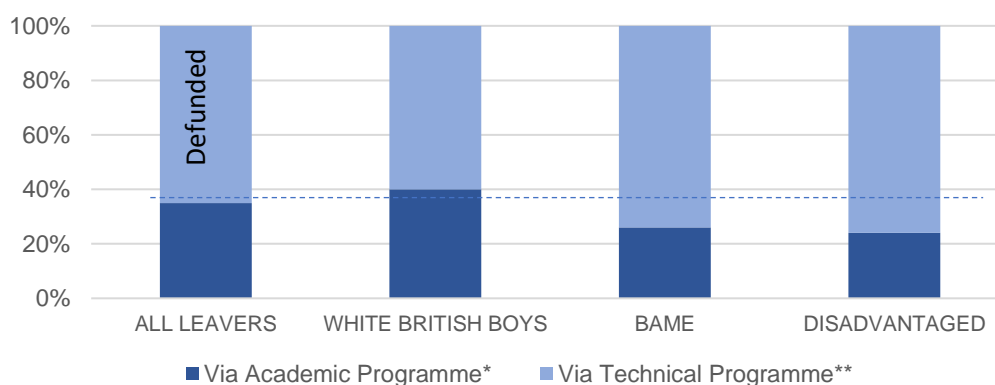
4. Impact on Certain Student Groups

Current educational provisions facilitate accessibility for many diverse groups of students, which will be meaningfully impaired by the proposed changes, as clearly illustrated by **Ron Dearing UTC**: *“Students with SEND, mental health needs, complex home backgrounds and/or those who need to work part-time alongside studying for their qualifications will be unable to cope with the number of guided learning hours required to study a T Level. If current alternatives no longer exist for these vulnerable cohorts, it is highly likely that they will be discouraged from continuing in education post 16 or be forced to drop out prior to finishing their course.”*

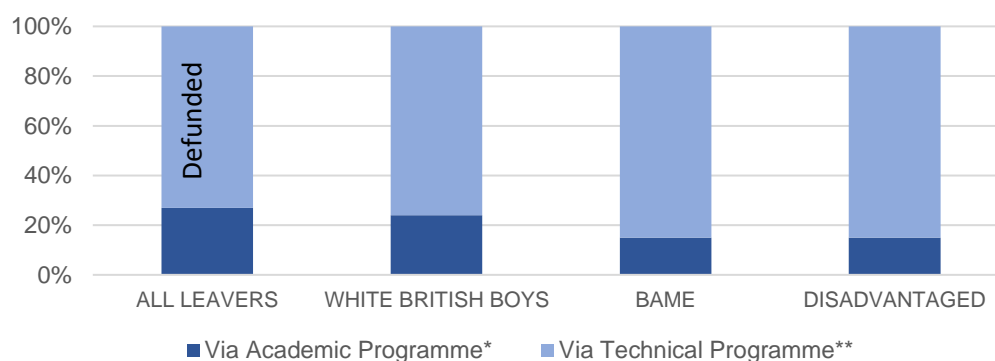
Baker Dearing’s analysis of UTC student leaver destinations (cited above) also shows that the changes to Level 3 qualifications will disproportionately impact disadvantaged groups and students from minority ethnic backgrounds.

In particular, while 65% of students starting university took studies which will be discontinued due to defunding, this figure rises to 74% for BAME students and to 76% for the socio-economically disadvantaged. Furthermore, 73% of those joining apprenticeships completed programmes which are scheduled for defunding, and this jumps significantly to 85% for both BAME and socio-economically disadvantaged students. This is shown below:

Route to Higher Education : UTC students



Route to Apprenticeship : UTC students



* 3 A Levels and 2 A Levels + 1 Applied General Qualification

** Level 3 Diploma + 1 A Level and Level 3 Extended Diploma and 2+ Applied General Qualifications.