

# PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT  
GENERAL COMMITTEES

## Public Bill Committee

### SKILLS AND POST-16 EDUCATION BILL [*LORDS*]

*Fourth Sitting*

*Thursday 2 December 2021*

*(Afternoon)*

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CLAUSES 6 TO 13 agreed to, one with amendments.  
Adjourned till Tuesday 7 December at twenty-five minutes past  
Nine o'clock.  
Written evidence reported to the House.

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**Monday 6 December 2021**

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**The Committee consisted of the following Members:***Chairs:* †CLIVE EFFORD, MRS MARIA MILLER

† Ali, Tahir (*Birmingham, Hall Green*) (Lab)  
 Bradley, Ben (*Mansfield*) (Con)  
 † Burghart, Alex (*Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education*)  
 † Carter, Andy (*Warrington South*) (Con)  
 † Clarke-Smith, Brendan (*Bassetlaw*) (Con)  
 † Gwynne, Andrew (*Denton and Reddish*) (Lab)  
 Hardy, Emma (*Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle*) (Lab)  
 † Hopkins, Rachel (*Luton South*) (Lab)  
 † Hunt, Jane (*Loughborough*) (Con)  
 † Hunt, Tom (*Ipswich*) (Con)

† Johnson, Kim (*Liverpool, Riverside*) (Lab)  
 † Johnston, David (*Wantage*) (Con)  
 † Nici, Lia (*Great Grimsby*) (Con)  
 † Perkins, Mr Toby (*Chesterfield*) (Lab)  
 † Richardson, Angela (*Guildford*) (Con)  
 † Tomlinson, Michael (*Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty's Treasury*)  
 † Western, Matt (*Warwick and Leamington*) (Lab)

Sarah Thatcher, Bradley Albrow, *Committee Clerks*

† **attended the Committee**

## Public Bill Committee

Thursday 2 December 2021

(Afternoon)

[CLIVE EFFORD *in the Chair*]

### Skills and Post-16 Education Bill [Lords]

#### Clause 6

FUNCTIONS OF THE INSTITUTE: OVERSIGHT ETC

*Question proposed*, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

2 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Alex Burghart)**: It is good to be back, as we cross the halfway point in Committee proceedings for the Bill. Clause 6 provides an important oversight duty for the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education. It will ensure the overall coherence of the system of technical education and training, and will help to ensure that we have the right balance of provision to meet the skills needs of the economy. That includes apprenticeships, technical qualifications and other types of technical education, and training across all 15 technical routes.

Those routes underpin the institute's occupational maps. They are the groupings for occupations in relation to which apprenticeships and technical education might be approved by the institute. Routes include hospitality and catering, construction, creative and design. The clause places a duty on the institute to keep under review the technical education and training within its remit and, through that review, to consider the impact of its activity on the range and sufficiency of that technical education and training. That means that different types of technical education, such as apprenticeships and qualifications at different levels, will not be looked at in isolation.

The institute will consider whether there is anything further within its powers that should be done, or that should be done differently, to safeguard the coherence and sufficiency of the technical education and training in its remit. The institute may provide the Secretary of State for Education with reports on the range and availability of apprenticeships, qualifications and other technical education and training in the system, raising any matters that arise during its review.

In addition, the clause brings into the institute's remit other technical education and training that supports entry to occupations that are published by the institute in its occupational maps. That will allow the institute to play a role where education and training links to employer-led standards but does not lead to a qualification—for example, traineeships and skills bootcamps. That role might include, for example, advising or publishing guidance to support alignment with employer-led standards.

Aligning that type of provision to standards, where it is appropriate to do so, will create a joined-up system. It will benefit learners by supporting progression into

skilled jobs, as well as further technical training. The institute is best placed to have oversight of the system as a whole because it has oversight of the occupational maps that bring together the occupations for which technical education is appropriate. It guarantees that the employer voice is at the heart of our skills system.

**Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): We do not oppose clause 6. We tabled amendments on apprenticeships, but we are not opposed to the role of the institute in itself. It was an interesting debate, with some really valuable contributions from some of my colleagues. We also had another Conservative who enjoyed himself at a party, and another lesson about the importance of who we invite to our parties. It was very much in keeping with the debates of this week, but we do not oppose the clause.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 6 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

#### Clause 7

ADDITIONAL POWERS TO APPROVE TECHNICAL  
EDUCATION QUALIFICATIONS

**Mr Perkins**: I beg to move amendment 47, in clause 7, page 10, line 37, at end insert—

“(2A) Notwithstanding the provision in subsection (2), the Secretary of State will appoint by regulations a body other than the Institute to withdraw approval of a technical education qualification at Level 3.”

*This amendment requires the Secretary of State to appoint an alternative body to the Institute to approve the withdrawal of technical education qualifications at Level 3.*

**The Chair**: With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment 48, in clause 7, page 11, line 19, at end insert—

“(10) The Secretary of State must publish criteria to define what is meant by ‘high quality qualifications’, which can be used as a framework for future deliberations about any defunding of qualifications.

(11) Any future defunding of qualifications must be reviewed by an appointed independent panel of experts, against the criteria set out in subsection (10).

(12) The Secretary of State must publish the proposed list of Level 3 vocational and technical qualifications which are proposed to be defunded, based on the criteria as set out in subsection (10), within 3 months of this Act receiving royal assent.”

*This amendment would require the Secretary of State to publish the criteria for what they consider to be high quality qualifications worth funding and to set up an independent panel to determine this.*

**Mr Perkins**: The Government have decided to continue with Ofqual as a regulator of academic qualifications in England, and new powers are granted in the Bill to the institute to approve technical qualifications in the future. It is vital that both public bodies have the necessary statutory underpinning to carry out their roles effectively, and to ensure that there is no conflict of interest. We consider that the clause is insufficient, as it does not clearly define the roles of Ofqual and the institute in law to ensure a single regulatory framework, where all qualifications are regulated and treated in exactly the same way.

The Bill proposes a two-tier system of regulatory approval for qualifications, with Ofqual approving and regulating academic qualifications and the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education approving technical qualifications. We are worried that that may reinforce the apparent low public confidence in technical qualifications. Ensuring that technical qualifications have parity of esteem with academic ones has been a challenge for successive Governments, and it is precisely one of the things that T-levels set out to address. We are therefore concerned that Ofqual is established as the independent regulator for what are seen as the academic qualifications, with a different organisation for the technical qualifications. We believe that that creates an artificial divide between the two routes.

The roles to be played by Ofqual and the institute in regulating technical qualifications need to be clarified, because the Bill indicates that it will bring about a dual regulatory system. Ofqual is established as the independent regulator under the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009. That legislation introduced an independent regulator following a period of scandals and instability in the regulation of the qualifications and examination system.

There are worries that the Bill will introduce material conflicts of interest, because the institute will be the owner and provider of T-levels, as well as the regulator, with powers to decide which other technical qualifications might compete with T-levels and should be approved or withdrawn. For funding purposes, the organisation that owns T-levels will decide what happens to the other qualifications that exist. Our amendment seeks to address that and to give greater clarity on the different organisations and bodies.

I turn to amendment 48. It is essential for the Government to unveil what they deem to be useful qualifications before the Bill is passed. As with so much in the Bill, the Minister leaves a great deal to the imagination or to future clarification. Conservative Members have been remarkably trusting of what the Government have told them so far and have not told us a huge amount about what they think, with the honourable exception of the hon. Member for Great Grimsby. When it comes to the votes, however, we have seen that those Members are persuaded that the Minister will deal with everything later.

Amendment 48 would require a panel of experts to determine what a high-quality qualification is, ensuring that if qualifications are abolished, it will be left to those experts—working to criteria set by the Secretary of State—to understand whether that has been done because the qualifications lack the necessary qualities. There is a real concern in many people's minds that the Government are undermining BTECs and other level 3 qualifications by setting out to defend T-levels, on which they are getting small numbers of people, and trying to get rid of all the alternatives.

If the reason for getting rid of BTECs is, as the Government say, that the qualification is not of the necessary quality, let us see the evidence for that. Let us have a team of experts look at all the factors—people's ongoing progression routes, whether they get jobs after the qualifications, whether they can access universities and whether they are able to perform when they get to university—and let us see the criteria for establishing

whether qualifications are of high quality. So far, the approach seems to have been pretty much of the back-of-a-fag-packet kind.

The Minister's and the Secretary of State's predecessors initially stood at the Dispatch Box and said, "We're scrapping BTECs because they are of low quality." Then they said, "We're not going to get rid of them all, just some of them. We will get rid of the poor-quality ones." We say, reasonably, "All right, but people studying those qualifications today want to know whether what they are studying is of high quality or not."

**Tahir Ali** (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that a quality BTEC qualification would lead to skills and jobs? We should be focusing on BTECs, which have a good history, rather than getting rid of them and replacing them with something that is nowhere near as established.

**Mr Perkins:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. I know from what he said on Second Reading that this is a matter of significant personal interest to him because of his own and his son's history with BTECs, which he outlined. I am in exactly the same position. My son did a level 2 and a level 3 BTEC, having not done particularly well in GCSEs. He subsequently went on to university, completed his bachelor's degree and is now in the process of completing his master's. The BTEC provided a pathway and a bridge from—not to put too strong a point on it—failure in mainstream schooling to academic success. We know that BTECs have a history of turning around the lives of people up and down the country. This needs to be handled extremely carefully before decisions are taken that undermine those qualifications.

**Lia Nici** (Great Grimsby) (Con): I appreciate the hon. Gentleman allowing me to intervene. Do he and his colleagues not understand that BTEC is just a brand name of the Pearson group? Those high quality qualifications, those outcomes and those assessment criteria will go into things such as T-levels. They will just have a name change. Importantly, they will be led by employers and they will include essential work placements. We talk to members of the public about BTEC, but the only reason we do so is because BTEC is a brand name that has been out there for a very long time. Vocational and technical education will continue to be important.

**Mr Perkins:** What an interesting intervention. If the hon. Lady is saying that T-levels are simply a rebranding of BTECs—

**Lia Nici:** No, I did not say that.

**Mr Perkins:** I will allow the hon. Lady to clarify, because it is important.

**Lia Nici:** With respect, I did not say that. I said that BTECs are an overarching brand name. We have Cambridge Nationals, City & Guilds and so on, but what is important is the content of those qualifications. I am sure that what is of high quality in BTECs will be included in new qualifications such as T-levels.

**Mr Perkins:** I accept the clarification, and the hon. Lady makes an important point. If she is saying that not all level 3 qualifications are BTECs, I understand that, and I will come on to that when I speak to other amendments. There are many other important qualifications that are not BTECs, but BTECs make up the largest number of them, which is why many of us identify them in those terms. Both BTECs and T-levels are overarching brand names, if we want to put it in such terms. I have no objection to the brand names. If it is felt that T-levels will eventually be viewed with more regard by the public than BTECs—having the word “level” in them makes them sound more like A-levels—I am fine with that, but the Government initially trashed the BTEC qualifications without telling us which ones they thought were good or bad.

**Tahir Ali:** In my industry of engineering and where I come from, there is a saying: “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”.

**Mr Perkins:** Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes an important point.

**Lia Nici:** Will the hon. Gentleman allow me to intervene?

**Mr Perkins:** If I may, I will respond to my hon. Friend, who makes an incredibly important point. Even more worrying is the fact that the Government initially went out there and said, “This qualification is broken and we are going to replace it,” but when the sector more generally—86% of respondents to their consultation—said, “This is a huge mistake”, the Government said, “Okay, we will only get rid of some of it, not all of it.” When we ask which bit they will get rid of, they say, “The low-quality bit,” but when we ask which bit that is, they say, “We do not know; we are going to do a review.” That is no way to do policy. It needs to be done the other way around. Identify which of the qualifications are not working, do all the research, find out where people are not getting on to the courses and then start talking about why we are getting rid of the qualifications.

**Tahir Ali:** On the issue of quality, lawyers make a lot of money from the word “reasonable”. Similarly, how do you define quality? I challenge anyone to do that.

2.15 pm

**Mr Perkins:** That is an important point, and the amendment seeks to push the Government on it. They need to identify what those high-quality qualifications are, and quickly.

This is a point of real importance. The Government have started to undermine BTEC qualifications. It makes me genuinely angry, because people are studying for those qualifications now, and they are being told, “That thing you are doing may be pretty worthless and it might not take you anywhere. We don’t know yet, because we haven’t done the review, but we generally think that BTECs are not that great.” At the same time, employers out there are saying, “Well, I have trusted this qualification over many years and I think it is okay.” The Government are performing a review over three to four years. Students will be going on to the qualifications not knowing whether they will be undermined.

The Government really need to show us the evidence; do the research, if they have not yet done it; and come back with a list of the qualifications and what is going to be taken forward. That is what the amendment is designed to achieve.

**Lia Nici:** On the point about quality and outcomes, we want employers to lead this initiative, along with partners from training and education, because, as the hon. Gentleman has stated in his eloquent and long speeches, we want to ensure that people are trained in skills that are relevant to jobs. We know that we have a huge skills mismatch. We want our employers to be able to lead on that and say, “These are the training areas we want, now and in the future.”

**Mr Perkins:** I do not disagree with that sentiment, but when the vast majority of employers responding to the Government’s consultation say, “Don’t get rid of BTECs”, how does the hon. Lady arrive at the position that we are getting rid of them because that is what employers want? That is not what employers are saying. I agree that we must make sure we have qualifications that are relevant, but parroting that does not alter the fact that employers say they support BTECs.

**Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con):** I ought to declare that one of my children has a BTEC level 3 extended diploma and went on to university, and the other has a level 3 apprenticeship. I suggest that it is the hon. Gentleman who is undermining BTECs, because he is the only one who has made that point in our debates. The Minister said on Second Reading that we are reviewing BTECs only where they cross over with T-levels, because we do not want duplication of work.

**Mr Perkins:** It is a strange representation of my position to say that because a Minister stands at the Dispatch Box and describe something as poor quality, I am undermining that thing by referring to what the Minister said. I am trying to defend what in many cases is a valid and trusted qualification. As the hon. Lady knows, my children have had a similar experience to hers. It is for precisely that reason that I seek to defend the qualifications.

More important than defending the qualification per se—there probably are some good ones and some bad ones—is to say that the Government should not undermine it until they know what they are talking about. That is the most important point here. They should do the research and then come back and tell us what the policy is, not the other way around.

The Government have set us on a path towards T-levels by undermining the alternatives—I guess because their T-levels have not so far had huge take-up—and they have done so without actually knowing what they are talking about. The hon. Member for Loughborough says that all they are looking to do is prevent duplication. That is absolutely not the case. In so far as there is duplication and reason to believe that a T-level is a better path than an existing qualification—a BTEC, a Council for Awards in Care, Health and Education qualification, or anything else—I have no problem with that, but clearly the Government have set out to rubbish the existing level 3 qualification in order to promote their T-levels. They cannot now row back and say, “Oh, we’re only interested in duplication.”

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): We really do not need to get drawn into the merits of T-levels against BTECs—that is a false choice. For many young people in particular in this country, BTECs are their route through the education system. I have BTEC levels 3, 4 and 5. Does my hon. Friend recognise the 2018 research by the Social Market Foundation, which showed that 26% of university applications are from young people with a BTEC? It is a significant route into higher education.

**Mr Perkins:** I recognise that point, but this is an area of real worry for me. The Government have said explicitly that they want to reduce the number of people doing university degrees that they consider to have low value. Again, they have not told us which ones. A disproportionately high number of learners from deprived communities are doing BTECs rather than A-levels. I strongly suspect that seeking to reduce the number of people doing certain university degrees will disproportionately affect the cohort who do BTECs. Although my hon. Friend is right that a lot of students, such as my son, the child of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green, and the child of the hon. Member for Loughborough, have gone to university via BTECs, I fear that the number will reduce under the Government's expressed strategy to reduce the number of students doing university degrees that they do not think have value.

**Kim Johnson** (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): My hon. Friend has identified that young people from disadvantaged communities are likely to suffer. There will also be a disproportionate impact on both black students and students with special educational needs who use that route into education and higher education.

**Mr Perkins:** I am glad that my hon. Friend made that incredibly important point. She is right that BTECs, and the further education sector in general, have a far higher proportion of black and ethnic minority students than mainstream schools. They are incredibly important routes, and it is important that they are spoken up for, and that that difference is raised. Different students study in different ways. The Government have a real bias against anything that is not largely exam focused. They believe that only an exam focus gives someone a real qualification, and BTECs have been much more based on a student showing what they have learned over a two-year course, rather than just in a couple of weeks at the end of June.

Such qualifications have been a route for many people to improve their social mobility. That is why the campaign to defend them is so strong. We will talk about BTECs in more detail under future amendments, but amendment 48 seeks to provide that the Government

“must publish criteria to define what is meant by ‘high quality qualifications’, which can be used as a framework for future deliberations about any defunding of qualifications.”

It states:

“Any future defunding of qualifications must be reviewed by an appointed independent panel of experts, against the criteria” that the Secretary of State has set out. It continues:

“The Secretary of State must publish the proposed list of Level 3 vocational and technical qualifications which are proposed to be defunded, based on the criteria set out...within 3 months of this Act receiving royal assent.”

That amendment would make an important difference. First, the Secretary of State would tell us by what criteria he will continue to fund, or to defund, qualifications. Secondly, to ensure that the decisions are based on academic considerations rather than political ones, it would ensure that the independent panel of experts applies the criteria that he has put in place. Thirdly, it would ensure that the process for level 3 qualifications does not drag on endlessly.

The Government have started the process of undermining the qualifications by describing them as of low quality. That should not go on forever—within three months, we could have a list to say, “This is high quality, this is what you should study in future and this is what, under the criteria set out by the Secretary of State, we will no longer fund.” I find it hard to understand why people would vote against such an amendment. It is widely supported and I am interested in what response we will get from the Minister and others to the amendments.

**Andrew Gwynne:** I support the amendments because, as I alluded to earlier, I feel passionately about the role that BTECs can play. The way in which the Government have handled the whole withdrawal of BTEC qualifications is a lesson in how such things should not happen.

I therefore support including in the Bill that the Secretary of State should appoint, through regulations, a body other than the institute to withdraw the approval of technical education qualifications. It is important that, before moves such as those we have seen on BTECs, we have a proper and thorough assessment of the qualifications, in particular when they are well known and respected by not just the general population, but academia and employers. That is the whole point of BTECs: everyone knows what a BTEC is and people know what the different levels relate to. BTECs are accepted as a standard qualification in academia and in employment.

**Lia Nici:** I am concerned that the Opposition are concentrating on BTECs. BTEC is a brand—it is a commercial brand. In ordinary parlance, we might use it as a throwaway term for level 2 or level 3 qualifications, but I am concerned that the Opposition are supporting one brand when we have a multitude of brands. I wonder whether they have been pushed by the brand owner's lobbying—why are we talking constantly about BTEC and not about other level 2 and 3 providers as well?

**Andrew Gwynne:** I find that quite offensive—to suggest that Opposition Members have been lobbied by Pearson to support a qualification. It was not always Pearson's. The hon. Lady talked about a brand, but it was Edexcel before Pearson, and before that it was the Business and Technology Education Council, which is where the term BTEC comes from. The reason that I am standing here to defend BTECs is that I have BTEC levels 3, 4 and 5.

**Lia Nici:** With respect, so do I.

**The Chair:** Order.

**Andrew Gwynne:** I am not giving way to the hon. Lady, because I am still answering her. I have BTEC qualifications at levels 3, 4 and 5. I am proud to have gone through the BTEC route, and I want to ensure that the next generation of young people and, indeed, adults have

[Andrew Gwynne]

the opportunity to go through the BTEC route, which is well respected and recognised by academia. I think only one university in the whole of the United Kingdom does not accept students with BTEC qualifications. I tell the hon. Lady that any lobbying I have had has come from the local colleges in my constituency, because they are incredibly concerned that withdrawing the qualification completely takes away a route to university for many people.

**Lia Nici** indicated dissent.

**Andrew Gwynne:** The hon. Lady can shake her head, but I invite her to Ashton Sixth Form College and Stockport College, and she can get into the real world.

**Tahir Ali:** I take great exception to the word “brand” being used for the BTEC. The BTEC is not a brand; it is a qualification achieved by those who do not want to pursue an academic route. If BTEC is a brand, GCSEs are a brand, A-levels are a brand, BSc is a brand, masters degrees are a brand. It is nonsense, and it is abhorrent to even refer to BTEC as a brand. The only brands Government Members are interested in are the ones that cost a lot of money.

2.30 pm

**Andrew Gwynne:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right that BTEC is not a brand.

**Lia Nici:** It is a brand.

**The Chair:** Order.

**Andrew Gwynne:** From a sedentary position, the hon. Lady says that it is a brand. It is not a brand; it is a qualification. I took BTEC qualifications when they were managed by the Business and Technology Education Council. The gown that I proudly wore at Stockport College’s graduation ceremony in Manchester Cathedral was my BTEC higher national diploma gown—exactly the same gown that BTEC HND graduates wear today, even though it is a Pearson qualification.

**Lia Nici:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Andrew Gwynne:** We have heard enough from the hon. Lady. If she has nothing positive to add, I will not give way to her.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I would like to think that the hon. Lady does have something positive to contribute. I say that as an act of decency, really. Like many Members in this room, I am sure, I found inappropriate the accusation that myself and other Opposition Members could have received money for making claims in favour of—[*Interruption.*] Or that we were being lobbied to speak positively—

**Lia Nici:** On a point of order, Mr Efford. That is not what I said at all. However, there are other level 2 and 3 providers. We constantly hear about BTECs. There are high-quality providers of other qualifications. We want to move towards T-levels. That is what this is all about.

**The Chair:** That is not a point of order. However, if the hon. Lady wants to make a contribution on that point, she can catch my eye. Have you completed your intervention, Mr Western?

**Matt Western:** I simply urge the hon. Lady to retract what she said in her point about Opposition Members being lobbied by Pearson.

**Andrew Gwynne:** I agree with my hon. Friend. That is what I said in answer to the hon. Lady when she made the assertion. I will happily give way to her if she will withdraw those remarks.

**Lia Nici:** Thank you very much for allowing me to intervene. I reiterate that Pearson is the owner of the BTEC brand, and because BTEC was being used again and again, I suspected that lots of lobbying was going on. I did not say that any money was changing hands or that anything corrupt was going on. I did not say that.

**Andrew Gwynne:** I will accept the half-hearted withdrawal from the hon. Lady if she says that she now accepts that we have not been lobbied by Pearson in the way that she implied. She makes the very real point that there are other qualifications at this level. I have a City & Guilds qualification and a Royal Society of Arts qualification at those levels. She is absolutely right that other really good qualifications are available to people to study at levels 2 and 3, and beyond. However, the main and most respected set of qualifications at this level is currently BTECs. I get that the Government want to introduce T-levels, and I support the concept of T-levels, but the hon. Lady and other Government Members must understand that there are some young people for whom T-levels will not be suitable but for whom BTECs are. Having the opportunity to study at BTEC level will allow them to progress to higher education or employment. To take those choices away is a retrograde step.

We are not here to debate the rights and wrongs of what the Government want to do. We are here to debate a sensible amendment that would ensure that, if the Government want to change the framework of qualifications in the way that they say in respect of T-levels and BTECs, there is a thorough assessment of the need to do that.

**Jane Hunt** rose—

**Andrew Gwynne:** I will come to the hon. Lady in a minute. There may be a duplication of some qualifications where one of them is no longer required. In that case, it may well be the right decision to withdraw funding from the BTEC qualification and put it into the T-level qualification. There may well be, however, two qualifications with a similar outcome—BTECs and T-levels, for example—but with different routes that are suitable for different sets of young people, meaning that although they get to the same end point, their starting point is very different. We should not be denying that choice.

Frankly, there will be some qualifications where a BTEC is the only game in town and it excels in providing those qualifications. Those should be retained. We are talking about ensuring that there is a proper assessment when Ministers seek to make academic changes. I will give way to the hon. Lady and then to my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield.



**Jane Hunt:** That is very kind; I thank the hon. Member. He seems to be agreeing with the Minister this afternoon. To quote from *Hansard*,

“Our qualifications review is vital to ensuring that what is on the market is the best it can be. I am clear that T-levels and A-levels should be front and centre of the level 3 landscape, but I am convinced that we need other qualifications alongside them, many of which exist now and play a valuable role in supporting good outcomes for students. It is quite likely that many BTECs and similar applied general-style qualifications will continue to play an important role in 16-to-19 education for the foreseeable future.”—[*Official Report*, 15 November 2021; Vol. 703, c. 385.]  
I wonder what the hon. Member has to say on that.

**Andrew Gwynne:** I fully agree with the intentions, and I have just said as much. From speaking to colleges that serve my constituency, the reality is that, although they want to, they will not be able to continue with a whole string of BTEC qualifications. That is the point. Moving away from the rhetoric to the reality, college principals are saying that this will be a retrograde step. Amendment 48, which my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield spoke to, is about ensuring that there is a proper mechanism to assess these changes. When we are putting through big changes to a well-established sector, we need to make sure that we do not throw the baby out with the bathwater.

We must ensure that we do not undermine opportunities for young people. We must not undo the well-respected and long-standing route of a BTEC qualification. If there is such a decision, we need a proper, detailed assessment. It might not be BTECs next; it might be that somebody decides that City & Guilds is no longer required or that the RSA no longer needs to provide qualifications, and so on. The assessment would need to go through the process that my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield set out in an independent and considered way. Ministers and, ultimately, Parliament would then make a sensible decision about how the higher education framework should look.

**Mr Perkins:** My hon. Friend was talking a minute ago about different qualifications and cases where a BTEC is the only show in town. The hon. Member for Great Grimsby was saying that we should recognise that there are other level 3 qualifications. Does my hon. Friend agree that an example at level 3 is the CACHE qualification, which is undertaken by people who want to work in the early years sector? The CACHE qualification has a big work experience element, and there are many reasons why early years students might be more likely to choose it over a T-level. The Government seem to have decided that T-levels are the answer and that they should decide what else can fit around them, rather than the other way around, which would be to identify where the holes are and to introduce T-levels to replace them.

**Andrew Gwynne:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why it is sensible to have a mechanism to assess these things properly, impartially and in the round and present that information to Ministers and Members of Parliament.

I have not yet heard any argument about what useful qualifications are. Is my BTEC national certificate in business and finance a useful qualification? Is my BTEC higher national diploma in business and finance a useful qualification? I do not know. The Minister has not set out what a useful qualification is. Whether these things

could be done through T-levels or whether the BTEC option is a useful qualification—none of that has been set out. I want it set out independently, which is why I think it is really important that we get a mechanism in place that is independent and offers sound advice to Ministers and MPs.

As I have mentioned before, more than a quarter of higher education applicants—26%—come through the BTEC route. That is not insubstantial. I want to make sure that more young people and more adults come through an appropriate vocational route into higher education. If that is T-levels, great—let us get more people through T-levels into appropriate higher-level qualifications—but for many it will still be BTEC. It needs to be BTEC.

As my colleges are saying, we cannot undermine the ability to provide BTEC courses. At the moment, it is all T-level, T-level, T-level. BTEC is becoming an afterthought—and not necessarily a funded afterthought at that. That is my real concern, and it is why I am pleased to support my hon. Friend’s very sensible and modest but very practical amendments.

**Matt Western:** I do not want to rehearse points that have already been made, but I highlight the fact that BTECs are written into the Bill, which refers on page 10 to

“BTECs, AGQ or a Diploma”.

When we refer to BTECs, we are referring to them very honestly. There is no preference for any provider or qualification; they just happen to be a significant part of the skills agenda and, as I say, are written into the Bill.

**Alex Burghart:** May I make a small point of clarification? The hon. Gentleman says that BTECs are written into the legislation. They are, but only because of a successful amendment tabled by Lord Watson in the upper House. They are not in the Government’s original drafting of the Bill.

**Matt Western:** I take the Minister’s point, but that decision was reached and agreed across the parties in the House of Lords. The Lords accepted that BTECs are a qualification, along with AGQs and diplomas. As a point of reference, that is a pretty honest point made by noble Lords, and we agree. I just clarify that we are not favouring one provider or qualification over another; we are simply using the parlance of the FE sector.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield mentioned, the issue is about criteria. I am really concerned, having spoken to colleges and universities in the higher education sector about the associations between FE colleges and universities. There are so many young people who may struggle through school and the normal academic process, but who have the chance to do a BTEC and rediscover learning and what is right for them. Qualifications such as AGQs and BTECs have provided a real opportunity for those young people. That is why we believe it is important that, rather than pursuing T-levels almost exclusively, as the Government have done, we should make a much more open choice available to young people. We are concerned about the move towards assessing the quality of level 3 courses and about what will be taken into account—hence our amendment.

2.45 pm

**Alex Burghart:** Let us get to the amendments themselves. Amendment 47 would require the Secretary of State to appoint an alternative body, rather than the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, to determine whether approval should be withdrawn from technical qualifications at level 3. The Government think this amendment is unnecessary. Institute approval is a mark of quality and provides currency with business and industry. It shows that employers demand employees who have attained the qualification, and that it delivers knowledge, skills and behaviours needed for particular occupations. Approval would be withdrawn when a qualification no longer meets the criteria against which it was approved and no longer delivers the outcomes that employers need.

It is entirely appropriate that approval and withdrawal of approval decisions based on the same set of criteria should be made by the same body. That body should undoubtedly be the institute. It is best placed to manage our system of technical qualifications and will actively involve employers when making approval and withdrawal decisions, including through its route panels of employers, who hold national sector expertise and knowledge of occupational standards. To be clear, the institute does not have the power to make funding decisions about qualifications. Those powers rest with the Secretary of State. However, we want to fund technical qualifications that hold currency with employers; institute approval will provide a robust basis for this.

Amendment 48 has three elements to it. The first is that the Secretary of State must publish criteria defining what is meant by “high quality” when it comes to deliberations around the defunding of level 3 vocational and technical qualifications. The second is that an independent panel of experts be appointed to review the defunding of any qualifications in accordance with these criteria. The final one is that a proposed list of qualifications in line to have their funding removed is published within three months of this Bill achieving Royal Assent.

On the first point, the Secretary of State was clear on Second Reading that the removal of funding for level 3 qualifications that overlap with T-levels will be based on the extent to which they overlap with T-levels. High-level criteria for the removal of funding for technical qualifications that overlap with T-levels were published in the summer alongside the response to the consultation. Further detail about those criteria will be published in the near future, alongside a provisional list of qualifications in scope for funding removal in 2024. These will include grounds for awarding organisations to appeal against the provisional decisions made the Department for Education.

On the second point, both Ofqual and the institute will play an important role in approving new and reformed qualifications independently from the Department, and the institute’s approval will be a necessary pre-requisite for funding decisions taken by the Department. There is no need for any further independent body being built into the system. On the third aspect of the amendment, we want to have transparent processes for the removal of funding for qualifications and the approval of new ones. I have already made it clear that we will shortly publish the first list of technical qualifications that are in scope for the removal of funding because they overlap

with T-levels. The funding of new and reformed qualifications will be based on strong quality standards, to be published next year, and decisions based on approvals involving two expert and independent organisations.

**Mr Perkins:** That was an interesting contribution from the Minister. On the first aspect of amendment 48, which calls for the Secretary of State to publish criteria to define what is meant by “high-quality qualifications”, he seemed to be saying that, effectively, that has already been published—although there will be more to be published in future. This is so obviously a moving situation; the Government are desperately trying to recover from the position that the previous Secretary of State has put them in. I think amendment 48 is a constructive way of supporting them to get out of the situation they are in.

It appears from what the Minister says that he does not need to vote for the amendment because that will happen anyway. If it will happen anyway, what is the problem with voting for the amendment? Having specific criteria to define what is meant by high-quality qualifications—removing the case-by-case approach and any political agenda, and once again enabling decisions to be made according to academic and, one might almost say, evidence-based criteria, which is what the Secretary of State told us he would be all about—would be entirely sensible, so I do not understand why the Minister will not vote for the amendment.

On the second part of our amendment, the Minister suggested that we do not need an independent body because we have IATE. The whole point about amendment 47 is that an organisation having ownership of a qualification and also being the referee on other qualifications is a pretty complicated and worrying situation. It is a bit like saying that Toyota, which makes electric cars, can also say whether everyone else’s electric cars meet the criteria.

**Alex Burghart:** It is worth bearing in mind that there really is not a conflict of interest here. The institute is not a market participant. Toyota manufactures and sells cars. The institute will not sell T-levels.

**Mr Perkins:** The Minister says that there is no conflict of interest. People in the sector believe that there is. Clearly it is a matter of opinion, but the perception of a conflict of interest exists. That is why we tabled the amendment, and I suspect it is why we were asked to do so.

The Minister suggests that he will vote against proposed subsection (12) of amendment 48, but at the same time he says, “Don’t worry. We’re going to publish it shortly. We don’t want to be committed to three months, but it will be shortly.” I do not know what the definition of shortly is if three months is too short. I understand that we are only in a position to press one of the amendments to a vote. We have not been given any encouragement by Government Members that they will support amendment 47, so even though we remain of the view that it would have been sensible, on advice I will withdraw it, but we will seek to divide the Committee on amendment 48. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

*Amendment, by leave withdrawn.*

**Alex Burghart:** I beg to move amendment 18, in clause 7, page 10, leave out lines 38 to 40.

*This amendment leaves out subsection (3) of section A2D6 (approved technical education qualifications: approval and withdrawal) to be inserted into the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009. The subsection was inserted at Lords Report.*

**The Chair:** With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendment 19.

**Alex Burghart:** Amendment 18 removes an amendment from the Opposition Benches of the Lords that sought to delay the withdrawal of public funding from level 3 qualifications until 2026. The Lords amendment is not needed. We listened to the issues raised in the other place and, as such, the Secretary of State announced an extra year before public funding is withdrawn from qualifications that overlap with T-levels, and before reformed qualifications that will sit alongside T-levels and A-levels are introduced. Our reform programme is rightly ambitious, but we know that it would be wrong to push too hard and risk compromising quality. I believe that that additional year strikes the right balance between giving providers, students and other stakeholders enough time to prepare while moving forward with our important reforms.

The changes are part of reforms to our technical education system that will be over a decade in the making from their inception, building on the recommendations in the Sainsbury review, published in 2016, which itself built on the findings of the Wolf review of 2011. Both reviews found that the current approach is not serving learners or employers well. It fails to incentivise the active involvement of business and industry in technical qualifications, whereas our reforms will place employers at the heart of the system. We need to ensure that we get this right, but it is also important that we act quickly to close the gaps between what people study and the skills that employers need.

T-levels are a critical step change in the quality of the technical offer. They have been co-designed with over 250 leading employers and are based on the best international examples of technical education. We have already put in place significant investment and support to help providers and employers prepare for T-levels. By 2023, all T-levels will be available to thousands of young people across the country, and over 400 providers have signed up to deliver them so far.

We have learned from past reforms that, for T-levels to embed successfully, we should not continue to fund all competing qualifications alongside them. That is what we did when we moved from apprenticeship frameworks to apprenticeship standards: the frameworks were removed. Apprenticeship standards are the same employer-led standards on which T-levels and higher technical qualifications are based, and soon there will be a broader range of qualifications as part of our ambition for a coherent system in which employers play a leading role throughout the technical qualifications landscape. The Government's amendment will allow those vital reforms to be implemented so that more young people and employers can benefit from a high-quality technical offer, with one extra year to help providers and other stakeholders to prepare. That extra year does not require legislation.

Amendment 19, which also stands in my name, seeks to reverse another amendment from the Lords. That amendment said that no student would be deprived of the right to take two BTECs, an applied general qualification, or a diploma or an extended diploma. All

learners should be able to attain the skills they need to succeed in higher education or progress into skilled employment. A-levels and T-levels will be the best academic and technical options for most 16 to 19-year-olds, and we want as many young people as possible to benefit from them. However, that does not mean that we are removing all applied general qualifications. We see a valuable role for such qualifications in the reformed landscape where there is a need for them and where they meet our new quality and other criteria. I assure Members that we recognise that there is a need for other qualifications—ones that provide knowledge and skills that are not covered by T-levels, or are less well served by A-levels.

In our response to the level 3 consultation in the summer, we set out the qualifications that we intend to fund alongside A-levels and T-levels. They include large academic qualifications, such as BTECs or similar, as a full programme of study in areas that do not overlap with T-levels and are less well-served by A-levels: performing arts or sports science, for example. Students will continue to be able to study mixed programmes, with applied general-style qualifications alongside A-levels, where there is a need and where they meet our new other criteria. That includes areas such as engineering, applied science and IT, in which T-levels are also available.

Successive reviews have found that the current approach has led to a complex and confusing market that is variable in quality, which does not serve students or employers well. Streamlining the qualifications landscape will help to simplify the market and provide students with both quality and clarity of choice. I therefore commend these amendments to the Committee.

**Mr Perkins:** This is a really important moment in the passage of this Bill, because Government amendments 18 and 19 seek to remove two of the most important amendments that were secured in the House of Lords. The Minister described the first of those as an Opposition amendment, but we should remember that it only passed because of the votes of Conservative peers, as well as Labour, Liberal Democrat and other peers. Indeed, the Conservatives who voted for that amendment included such renowned and respected peers as Lord Willetts, former Minister of State for Universities and Science, who was largely seen as one of the pioneers of policy in this area during his time in government; Lord Clarke, former Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer; and Lord Howard, former Conservative party leader. These are not people who often vote against the Government—well, Lord Clarke did quite a bit. *[Laughter.]* On the whole, they are not people who regularly vote against the Government. They do so only with the greatest of regret and the greatest of persuasion, so when people such as Lord Howard, Lord Willetts and Lord Clarke say that this is a moment for the Government to pause before they get this wrong, then joking aside, they should be listened to seriously.

**Matt Western:** Am I right in thinking that Lord Baker was also involved?

3 pm

**Mr Perkins:** Lord Baker made his support for this approach known. I think he was absent from the vote, but he very much supported the move towards protecting this. In fact, he described the Government's approach as "an act of educational vandalism".

[Mr Perkins]

The Government have made an important concession. It is not in the Bill, but the Secretary of State has agreed to an additional one-year moratorium on the defunding of level 3 qualifications. That is important, and I have two points to make on that. First, it means that level 3 qualifications will not be defunded in this Parliament. If anyone out there wishes to ensure that level 3 qualifications—they offer real student choice, are respected by the sector and understood by employers—are defended and maintained in the future, they will have the opportunity: they will be able to vote Labour in a general election. The fact that level 3 qualifications will not be defunded in this Parliament is an important concession. The opportunity to save the Government from that folly will be there in a general election, and we will push that argument very strongly.

Secondly, the clause that the Government are attempting to get rid of stated that there would be a four-year moratorium. We have heard that they are not having the four-year one, but they will have a one-year moratorium. Why not replace the words “four years” with “one year” in their amendment? At least then it would exist in the Bill. It seems churlish for the Government to say, “We will give you an assurance that we will do that, but we are still not going to have it in the Bill, even though we are offering you this commitment.” It is deeply disappointing that the Government have removed an amendment that enjoyed cross-party support in the other place. There are real concerns that the number of students currently doing alternative level 3 qualifications will not be well served going forward.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby was frustrated that Opposition Members kept referring to BTECs rather than recognising the variety of different level 3 qualifications, but it is important to say that BTECs are the largest number of those level 3 qualifications. Last year 230,000 students did a level 3 BTEC. The Government have an aspiration that in four years’ time there will be 100,000 students doing T-levels. It remains to be seen whether they will be successful in that. If they are, there will still be 130,000 students in four years’ time who will not have access to that qualification if those BTECs disappear, and that is why it is so important that we ensure those ladders of opportunity are not removed.

As our next amendment will show, when I will go into more detail, we need a lot more scrutiny of the success of T-levels before BTECs are defunded. We are still in the pilot phase. I will talk more about T-levels when we debate the next amendment, but before Members vote on this one, they need to understand that we are still only in the second year of the very first intake for those qualifications. Only three of the qualifications were actually started 15 months or so ago. Some of them are in the first weeks of being studied, and already the Government are making decisions about what will happen to the alternatives before the pilot has even taken place. It is like getting rid of a ship because you are in the process of starting to invent an aeroplane. It is an unreasonable way to operate.

There are real concerns around the narrow pathways devised for T-levels. BTECs are often a route to university for those who have chosen not to go down the A-level track.

On Government amendment 18, we believe that the House of Lords was correct to introduce the four-year moratorium, and the Government should respect that. If they do not, and they want us to believe that we can trust them that there will be a one-year moratorium, instead of a four-year one, why not put that in the Bill?

Government amendment 19 restricts additional opportunities for studying level 3 qualifications for people who have already got one. When the Prime Minister announced the lifetime skills guarantee at Exeter College, he talked about the need for people to retrain. It was at the height of the covid pandemic, and he said that some people are in areas that might not have a future, and that we need to allow them to retrain. The whole principle of the lifetime skills guarantee was around people retraining—perhaps they are in travel, tourism or hospitality, and we will move them to health and social care or engineering. However, when it comes to the guarantee, they cannot do that, because people are only guaranteed to do one level 3—if someone gets their level 3 at 19 and then wants to retrain at 40, they will have to pay for it. That will definitely be a barrier for people.

The Lords, very sensibly, introduced an amendment saying that

“no student would be deprived of the right to take two”

level 3 qualifications. We sometimes hear from Government Members about these perennial students who, if allowed to do these funded qualifications, would do qualification after qualification—although I do not believe such people really exist in any serious number. Whether someone in their 50s might do a degree as a matter of interest is a different matter, but no one does a level 3 vocational qualification just for the banter—they do it because it is a route to a job.

Even if that was true, and we accepted that there must be a limit on it somewhere, the peers did introduce a limit. They simply said that for a lifetime skills guarantee to be worthy of the name “guarantee”, we have to let people do a second qualification if they need to retrain at some point. The Government are getting rid of that. We have just heard from the Minister; I would be very interested to understand why he thinks that someone who did a level 3 qualification 10 or 15 years ago and now wants to do a different level 3 should not be able to do that. He is proposing Government amendment 19, which scraps the right for people to do a second qualification, without, as far as I can recall, referring to it in any sort of detail whatever. People will be pretty disappointed with that.

More than 9 million jobs are currently excluded from the lifetime skills guarantee, which we will go into in more detail later. When whole sectors such as tourism and hospitality have been left out, it is a misnomer and a misrepresentation to call it a guarantee. It is an aspiration and nothing more.

I strongly oppose Government amendment 18, which removes the very sensible moratorium to protect level 3 qualifications, until the Government have worked out what the hell they are doing. I also oppose Government amendment 19, which removes the assurance that a student who has done a BTEC or any kind of level 3 qualification will be able to access a second one if, in the future, they need to.

**Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): I support the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield on the Front Bench. Yet again, I find myself agreeing with the Lords in their amendments, which, as a republican, is sometimes quite tricky. However, as my hon. Friend said, these eminently sensible amendments were put forward with cross-party agreement.

I find it fairly odd that Government Members want to restrict competition. For a party that seems to have market competition at the heart of many of its policies, I find it strange that they are trying to narrow it and not allow students to have choice.

**Mr Perkins:** I slightly challenge my hon. Friend's idea that this is a party that is in favour of market competition. We know it is in favour of a short list of one, devised by who knows the relevant Minister. They claim to be interested in market forces, even if their policies often do not follow that idea.

**Rachel Hopkins:** I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. It is a pity that the cameras are not in this Committee room or he would have seen my wry smile in response to his comments. The reason behind wanting to ensure that applied general qualifications—BTECs—are still available for a longer period of time, in greater breadth, is all about student choice. Ultimately, this is a Bill about skills and post-16 education, which should have students at its heart. That is why I want to make the case to retain those Lords amendments and the case against the Government's proposed amendments to take them out of this Bill.

On retaining the moratorium for four years before any change to the breadth of BTECs, I want to query a point that the Minister made, which I hope he can clarify. He referred to the Wolf report and the Sainsbury report. The briefing I have received from the Sixth Form Colleges Association, which I have worked with as the governor of a sixth form college, rightly flags up that the Wolf report says that BTECs are

“valuable in the labour market, and a familiar and acknowledged route into higher education”.

The Sainsbury report did not consider BTECs or A-levels as “reform of this option falls outside the Panel's remit”.

So, the Department's case for scrapping BTECs rests on one report that rated them highly—

“valuable in the labour market”—

and another report that did not look at them at all. I would be grateful for some clarity on that point in the Minister's subsequent comments.

On the second part, around being able to study for a second level 3 qualification, the case was made very well by my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield. As only a recent entrant to this place, I have spent my whole career in the workplace with people who want to better their careers. Looking at the pace of change of within the workplace over the last 10 or 20 years, many staff I worked with may have had some sort of qualifications—BTECs or whatever—but they needed to up their digital skills to become managers and to start leading teams. This amendment would mean that they would not have been able to do that if they wanted to take their career further. I think that shows a complete lack of understanding of what the world of work can be like for many people.

If people do not have money or savings, they will not be able to do that, which goes against everything that I want to see for people and social mobility, so that poor working class people in my town can get on and they are not held back by the short-sighted, narrowing of opportunities that these amendments from the Lords sought to prevent. The Government are seeking to narrow opportunities in the Bill.

One point made by my hon. Friend was that some areas are not included in these proposals. In Luton South, we have the town centre, which has lots of retail, hospitality, pubs and hotels, particularly linked to Luton airport, but the area would not be included. That is so narrow and makes me think, “Well, what is this all about?” Is it all about a two-way street, where someone who is poor will go and do technical qualifications, and someone who is able and has connections can go and do A-levels? The gap will not be filled by many of the applied general qualifications, which reflect the workplace.

It is not just about the qualification at the end; it is also about how the assessment takes place throughout the course of the qualification and the different assessment methods. I want to see that recognition. The point was raised earlier that it is not just about some exams at the end of two years, regardless of whether people are following a technical or an A-level route.

I would be interested to hear from the Minister about some the requirements around the T-levels with regards to employer placements, and the spread and availability of them. We appreciate that we are in the pilot phase of some of those T-levels, but that is why it is so important to ensure sufficient review of how T-levels have rolled out and how the success of the students taking them has manifested itself.

Will there be sufficient placements for students? That is one question and, to link back to much of the debate we had on Tuesday about the formation of the skills plans, another is how will students travel to those placements? When education maintenance allowances were taken away from many students, they could not afford a bus fare. To be aspirational for many of our students, they might have to travel out of area—I speak as someone who represents a town, but other colleagues have talked about smaller towns, villages and other areas—but how will they travel and get about?

3.15 pm

We need to have much more evidence of the success or otherwise of T-levels before we move in any way to withdraw successful vocational qualifications that already exist, BTECs or applied general qualifications. That is why I support the amendments and oppose the Government proposals to remove them.

**Andrew Gwynne:** My hon. Friend is touching on something that is important, but often overlooked about BTECs. Yes, they can be done as full-time qualifications, but many people do them on day release. People are already in employment, and they are released on a day to get a level 3, level 4 or level 5 qualification to make progress. Do we not absolutely have to keep that in the system?

**Rachel Hopkins:** Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes a fantastic point. That is so vital, in particular for people with more flexible arrangements in the workplace.

[Rachel Hopkins]

The pandemic has shown that people can work more flexibly through need, as much as through preference. For many, that day release is important. Many further education colleges work with local employers in their areas to ensure that the qualifications and the day releases meet the need. We must ensure that that can continue. We must not—as the phrase goes—throw the baby out with the bathwater. I hope that the Minister will address my points in his closing remarks.

**Andrew Gwynne:** I rise to support the Opposition's quest to retain their lordships' amendments to the Bill. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield said, the amendments are common sense. As someone who grew up in the 1980s and 1990s, the very figures he mentioned, who now sit in the other place, were leading lights of the Governments of the late Baroness Thatcher and John Major. They have huge knowledge in these areas—whether I agree with them or not politically.

No one can deny that Lord Baker was an Education Secretary of some standing. He knows what he is talking about. No one can say that Lord Clarke is not a man of great knowledge and understanding in these areas. Other former Ministers of those Administrations and a former leader of the Conservative party know what they are talking about when it comes to these issues.

**Matt Western:** So many senior experienced educationalists from previous Administrations over the decades—notably on the Conservative side, but also the likes of Lord Blunkett—came together. They understand the sector, and the fact that they have concluded and agreed on why such qualifications need to be retained is most telling.

**Andrew Gwynne:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I was going to come on to the Labour support in the House of Lords for the amendments. It is absolutely right that, when it comes to replanning a whole part of the further education sector, we should get that cross-party unanimity as far as possible. We want these changes to succeed, to last and to live through the current Government and future Administrations, as BTECs have done.

**Mr Perkins:** To reinforce my hon. Friend's point, he talks about Lord Howard, the former leader of the Conservative party, who voted for the amendment. For once, actually, I am thinking what he is thinking.

**Andrew Gwynne:** I can see what my hon. Friend did there. For once, I agree not only with my hon. Friend—I always agree with him—but with the noble Lord Howard. Of course, he did not need to be asked the question 46 times to give the answer that we wanted.

I went through the BTEC route. For the Committee's benefit, I will not go into all that again, but I believe that it is still a viable route for so many people—young people in particular but also adults—who want to better themselves and pursue a new career. To take away some of these options in the way in which the Government seek is regressive. My hon. Friend the shadow Minister is right that if the Government will not accept a four-year moratorium—even though they should—they should place the one-year moratorium in the Bill so that that is clear. I support their lordships fully on this issue.

I get what Ministers are saying about the risk of compromising quality, but nobody has ever made the case to me that the BTECs at my local colleges—Stockport College, Tameside College and Ashton Sixth Form College—are compromising quality. They give young people and adults some of the best opportunities to better themselves and reskill themselves.

**Rachel Hopkins:** The point about the quality of these qualifications has already been made. So many young people get to really good universities on a BTEC qualification, and surely those universities would not accept qualifications that were not up to scratch.

**Andrew Gwynne:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I believe that just one university in the whole of the United Kingdom does not accept BTEC qualifications, and it is not Oxford or Cambridge—they do. If these qualifications are good enough for Oxbridge, they obviously set the standard that academia wants to see.

It is more than that. BTEC is about more than reaching the same standards in theory as A-levels or years 1 and 2 of an undergraduate degree. There is also the experience and opportunities that BTECs bring to the people studying them, which academic qualifications—and possibly even T-levels—cannot.

I want the Minister think about the fact that some colleges are requiring GCSEs in English and maths to be considered for a T-level qualification. That is fine, but what about those who do not have those qualifications but do have a whole string of other GCSEs at the equivalent of grade C and above, in old money? Do we really want to hold back our young people and keep them doing resits until they can get on to a T-level qualification, or do we want them to progress through T-levels and possibly study for English or maths resits at the same time? That really concerns me. I see colleges in Greater Manchester suggesting those entry requirements for T-levels, even though that is not necessarily the Government's intention. We must look at that.

With BTEC, students who did not have GCSEs had the opportunity of going through a BTEC first before progressing to BTEC national and BTEC higher national. It is really important that we do not take opportunities away from young people. We should be increasing opportunities.

**Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con):** I just want to be clear that, on Second Reading, the Secretary of State indicated that the requirements for maths and English were being removed. I just want to make sure that the hon. Gentleman has not misunderstood that or is trying to suggest otherwise.

**Andrew Gwynne:** No, and I said clearly that that is not the intention of Ministers, but it is already happening de facto on the ground. Although colleges do not need to consider whether someone has English or maths qualifications, some are saying that they want people to have them. We have to ensure that that does not happen. At this early stage, the Minister can use his influence to ensure that colleges stick not only to the spirit of what was said on Second Reading but to the letter of what we want, which is no young person missing out on the opportunity to follow the BTEC further education route, as is currently the case.

Lastly, I will talk about depriving people of the right to take two BTECs, AGQs, diplomas or extended diplomas. In the good old days, when someone left school and went to work in what was likely to be their job for the entirety of their working life before they retired, these things did not matter. Today, the workplace and employment market are incredibly fluid. We cannot guarantee a job for life in 2021, and we certainly cannot guarantee that there will be a job for life in a decade's time, or even two decades' time. People going through college now cannot be guaranteed that they will remain in one job for the whole of their career. The reality is that they will have lots of jobs. The world of work will change, the challenges for people in the workplace in the future will change, and the way we work will change, so the way we learn about advances in technology and new job opportunities has to change as well. It may well be that somebody is currently employed in an area that will not exist in 10 years' time. Are we seriously going to deny them an opportunity to reskill in a whole new area of work that is currently unforeseen but might develop? Are we really going to be so rigid as to say that somebody cannot go back to college to do a qualification at the same level as the one they got 20 years ago but is no longer relevant to modern-day work?

I support the Lords amendment. It is absolutely sensible for the future, because we do not know what the future holds. Are we really going to hold back a proportion of the workforce who might have to retrain or start literally from scratch and do another level 3 qualification in a whole different area because the level 3 qualification they did 20 or 30 years ago is no longer relevant to the modern world of work? That is absolutely crazy.

**Lia Nici:** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I have been bobbing up and down a lot. I feel that I need to bring a little bit of balance to proceedings. I am concerned that people listening to the debate will be full of fear and dread about what may be happening. My concern is that the mantra has been that BTECs are going, it will be terrible, it will hold everybody back and working-class young and older people will not be able to do anything. That really is not a proper representation of what is happening.

We have had A-levels in our education system for many decades. They are not a brand. They are a qualification. T-levels will mean that vocational qualifications will be better understood. Not only will they be high quality, but they will have been shaped in part by our LSIPs and employers.

3.30 pm

**Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con):** Is it the case, like it is for me, that when my hon. Friend talks to employers in her constituency they often say, "We've got the jobs, but haven't got the skills locally"? The Bill will play a big part in changing that.

**Lia Nici:** My hon. Friend is right. A huge number of jobs are available. What we need to do now, and the Bill will enable us to do it, is pivot on an axis to ensure that employers are fully involved. We have some very good education providers in post-compulsory technical that work with employers, but a lot more work needs doing. When I go to see employers in my constituency, they all

say that they have jobs available but cannot get people with the right skills. We have to do something about that, not only for our employers and our economy but for our constituents.

My constituency of Great Grimsby is the most wonderful place to live, but our skill levels are not where they need to be, for people in and out of work. If we are to level up for everybody across the country, particularly in my home town of Great Grimsby, T-levels will be a fantastic way for us to move forward. Apprenticeships are also extremely valuable, as people can earn while they learn. I am extremely concerned that we seemingly have a moral panic to try to get headlines to worry young people. I say to young people, and older people who are looking to train to level 3 qualifications, that it is not the disaster that it is being portrayed as for the sake of headlines.

There is a reason we do not want a long moratorium on such things as BTECs, which the Opposition are mentioning over and over again. I have worked in further education for 22 years. I have taught secondary school students and lectured at higher education level, and I happen to have a diploma at level 3, level 4 and level 5—a higher national diploma—one of which happens to be a BTEC. We want to ensure that education providers know exactly what is happening with a deadline. They are now ready to pivot on that. I have been talking to my biggest provider, Grimsby Institute of Further and Higher Education, and its experience of T-levels so far is utterly outstanding.

**Tahir Ali:** The hon. Member mentioned jobs in her constituency. I am aware that fishing is a significant sector in Great Grimsby. Will there be a T-level in fishing or swimming?

**Lia Nici:** I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. Great Grimsby has a history of fishing. Actually, it was the Icelandic cod wars and joining the EU that ended our fishing industry. We still have a very important fish processing industry that employs around 5,000 to 6,000 people in the town directly. I am working with the fishmongers' association, Seafish, and my local colleges and industry to look at new apprenticeships and T-levels, so he is right: I am working on that. It is extremely important, because we have lots of people in our communities who are working at extremely high levels and have no qualifications. We need to consider not only people who are new into the workplace but those who are working and are specialists in their field. I see them every week when I am out and about. They talk passionately and are very knowledgeable—to level 5, 6, 7 and beyond—and they worked their way through. We need to ensure that qualifications can do that as well.

**Andy Carter:** My hon. Friend mentioned the importance of engaging with colleges and employers. Does she agree that it is also critical that we engage with young people and hear their experiences of T-levels? Priestley College in my constituency was one of the first in the UK to undertake T-levels, and one of the best visits I have had in my almost two years of being the Member for Warrington South involved sitting with T-level students and hearing their experiences of going out into the workplace and learning in a very different way from what they expected. We have been able to gather a tremendous amount of insight, and we can build on that.

[Andy Carter]

My hon. Friend made the point earlier that Opposition Members' suggestion that vocational qualifications are moving in a direction that is perhaps not advantageous for young people is simply unfounded.

**Lia Nici:** I thank my hon. Friend for making that extremely important point. I speak to T-level students who are absolutely and utterly convinced that this is the way to go forward. I spoke earlier about my career in education and did a quick tot up of how many young people I have put through diplomas at level 3. I think about 45,000 students have been through my classrooms, studios and workshops, and they now work all over the world in a whole range of different roles within their specialism. It is really important to say that we do not want to put people in an absolute state of panic, because there are really good qualifications and jobs out there.

I will make a couple of points before I finish. The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish said that the Conservative party does not like competition, but I think there is a misunderstanding here. T-levels are not a brand; they are qualifications. All those different organisations, such as Cambridge, Pearson and the City and Guilds, will all be able to feed in and offer T-levels.

I want to pick up the point about the Wolf report, which said that BTECs are high quality. The Wolf report came out in 2011, so I would be cautious about looking at something that was published 10 years ago.

**Andrew Gwynne:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. I want to quiz her on the assertion that BTECs are a brand. I studied for a BTEC national certificate in business and finance, and I qualified in 1992. Is that a qualification or a brand?

**Lia Nici:** Actually, the hon. Gentleman has a diploma, which happens to be accredited by the examining board of BTEC. That is what I am trying to explain. Although this has been a very interesting debate, I felt that I had to stand up and say something because there was some misrepresentation and some panic being put into this, which I really do not think is a positive thing for young people and their parents and carers, or for more mature students who are looking to do level 3.

**The Chair:** Order. Could we come back to the amendment? We have dealt with whether T-levels and BTECs are brands—we have been around that circuit already. I do not think we need to repeat that part of the debate.

**Lia Nici:** Thank you, Mr Efford. People will still be able to study on day release and part time. I know that everybody is passionate about this issue, but we need to be balanced. We all want our young people and older people to be able to study for qualifications that are high quality and that will help them to go on to further education or to get good-quality jobs, and I believe that the Bill will do that.

**Mr Perkins:** It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Lady, whose contribution I did not entirely agree with. However, it has been so rare in our debates to have contributions from Conservative Back Benchers, so I do not want to discourage them when they take place.

There are a few things that I want to say. First, the hon. Member for Great Grimsby says that she is interested in providing qualifications that employers will value, but 86% of those who were consulted on the Government's review agree with the amendment that the Lords put in and disagree with the Government's intention to take it out. If her purpose is to do what employers want, she should be voting for the Lords amendment rather than against it. She says it was her belief that the BTEC was simply a brand, but it is clearly a qualification. To "other" BTECs as if they are somehow lesser than A-levels and T-levels is a considerable mistake. The amendments are very much undermined.

**Matt Western:** I want to draw attention to the points that have been raised by the Social Market Foundation and Universities UK on how important qualifications such as BTECs have been. There is a fear that T-levels will not allow for the same degree of social mobility as has been possible in the past, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, students with SEND and BME pupils.

**Mr Perkins:** I agree with my hon. Friend. The hon. Member for Great Grimsby said she speaks to employers in her constituency who say that they are not able to attract employees with the skills they need. We have all heard that refrain. That is precisely why introducing a reform that could see 130,000 students without the qualification they are currently getting is a hugely retrograde step.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby says that she is concerned that people watching this debate will be misinformed. I have to say to her that the only people watching the debate know the sector very well indeed—there is not widespread competition for the number of viewers that "Coronation Street" gets. Those watching this debate already understand the sector. They are precisely the people who have responded to that consultation in great numbers—86% of whom have said that we should support this Lords amendment rather than get rid of it. I think that her worries about people in the sector being misinformed are very much out of line. Actually, it is the sector that is coming to us and saying, "Slow down. T-levels may well have real value, but we don't yet know. Before you chuck the baby out with the bathwater, take it steady. Let's support the Lords amendment and vote against the Government one."

**Alex Burghart:** This is another interesting debate. It is another opportunity for the Opposition to fawn over former Conservative Secretaries of State and to think back to the wonderful childhoods they had under Baroness Thatcher—[*Interruption.*] There are some great opportunities for 16-year-olds in Greater Manchester, it would appear.

I appreciate that there are cross-party points to be made. I do not need to remind the Committee that a lot of this work originates from the pen and mouth of Lord Sainsbury, who in 2016 put together the review that would ultimately lead to the design of T-levels, which he has been intimately involved in. I imagine that most members of the Committee have received communication from his lordship in the run-up to this debate, in which he has made it very clear that the reason we needed T-levels was because there was a need at level 3 for large qualifications, designed by employers,



that met the needs of employers and offer serious work placements, and that this would enhance the level 3 offer immeasurably.

Lord Sainsbury is a very strong Labour advocate for this policy. On his advice, we have designed a new suite of qualifications at level 3, designed with 250 employers, with nine weeks of work experience put in. It was wonderful to hear a speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby, because I have had the same experience. I have had the pleasure of doing this job for 11 weeks or so now, and I have travelled across the country meeting T-level providers. The level of enthusiasm among staff, pupils and employers who are providing the work placements is enormous. It is an electric moment in education.

I fully respect the serious point that the hon. Member for Luton South made about capacity for work placements, an issue that the Department is taking very seriously. My officials have absolutely busted a gut during the pandemic to make sure that young people on T-levels at this uniquely challenging time do not miss out on their work placement. I am pleased to say that the vast majority of young people who started their course in September 2020 have found a work placement, though a few have not, and we are working very hard to make sure that they do. It is a promising sign that even during a pandemic, we managed to do that, but we know that we will have to work hard on this issue, and we do not take the challenge lightly.

3.45 pm

**Rachel Hopkins:** I hope that the Minister will appreciate my concern. There are 10,000 students in the T-level pilots. He says that the Government are almost there on work placements, but nearly 250,000 people are studying for level 3 BTECs, so there would need to be a significant transition. I hope that he accepts those concerns about placements.

**Alex Burghart:** The hon. Lady makes a serious point of which we are mindful, but obviously there are lots of areas where there are no T-levels at the moment, and there are great opportunities for work experience; we are already engaging with employers and colleges.

Access has come up repeatedly. There is absolutely no good reason why a young person at 16 to 19 who is ready to study at level 3 should not do a T-level. The idea that large numbers of young people aged 16 to 19 will be shut out of studying at level 3 because of T-levels is simply wrong. There was a potentially serious obstacle in the English and maths exit requirement, which is why we removed that. I say in all seriousness to the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish that if there are colleges out there still using an English and maths entry requirement, I would like to know which ones they are—I will happily speak to their principals. I do not expect him to put that on record in *Hansard*, but I would be grateful if he supplied me with that information.

**Andrew Gwynne:** I am grateful to the Minister for that, because as I said, we really need to bottom this out. We absolutely need to make sure that we apply not just the spirit of what the Minister said on Second Reading, but the letter of it. I will certainly supply him with that information.

**Alex Burghart:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that undertaking, because this is about creating more and better opportunities. On the point about destinations, a number of MPs here have said that BTECs have led to higher education. That is excellent. There is no reason at all why T-levels should not do the same thing. Many universities have already come forward to say that they will recognise them, and we are very confident that the number will increase.

The hon. Member for Chesterfield raised a point about capacity. I am afraid that he may have got his figures slightly confused. In steady state, there is absolutely no cap on the number of people who can do T-levels. I think one estimate was that each cohort could be 100,000 people. There is plenty of space for anyone who is at the right level to do a T-level.

The Government are moving at pace, but over quite a long period. This process started in 2011, and was boosted by the work of Lord Sainsbury in 2016. We introduced our first T-levels in September 2020, and we will not begin defunding until 2024. We are taking proportionate steps to introduce a new generation of level 3 qualifications that will present great new opportunities to students, providers, employers and the economy.

*Question put, That the amendment be made.*

*The Committee divided: Ayes 9, Noes 6.*

#### Division No. 10]

##### AYES

Burghart, Alex	Johnston, David
Carter, Andy	Nici, Lia
Clarke-Smith, Brendan	Richardson, Angela
Hunt, Jane	Tomlinson, Michael
Hunt, Tom	

##### NOES

Ali, Tahir	Johnson, Kim
Gwynne, Andrew	Perkins, Mr Toby
Hopkins, Rachel	Western, Matt

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Amendment 18 agreed to.*

*Amendment proposed: 19, in clause 7, page 10, leave out lines 41 and 42.—(Alex Burghart.)*

*This amendment leaves out subsection (4) of section A2D6 (approved technical education qualifications: approval and withdrawal) to be inserted into the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009. The subsection was inserted at Lords Report.*

*Question put, That the amendment be made.*

*The Committee divided: Ayes 9, Noes 6.*

#### Division No. 11]

##### AYES

Burghart, Alex	Johnston, David
Carter, Andy	Nici, Lia
Clarke-Smith, Brendan	Richardson, Angela
Hunt, Jane	Tomlinson, Michael
Hunt, Tom	

##### NOES

Ali, Tahir	Johnson, Kim
Gwynne, Andrew	Perkins, Mr Toby
Hopkins, Rachel	Western, Matt

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Amendment 19 agreed to.*

*Amendment proposed:* 48, in clause 7, page 11, line 19, at end insert—

“(10) The Secretary of State must publish criteria to define what is meant by “high quality qualifications”, which can be used as a framework for future deliberations about any defunding of qualifications.

(11) Any future defunding of qualifications must be reviewed by an appointed independent panel of experts, against the criteria set out in subsection (10).

(12) The Secretary of State must publish the proposed list of Level 3 vocational and technical qualifications which are proposed to be defunded, based on the criteria as set out in subsection (10), within 3 months of this Act receiving royal assent.”—(*Mr Perkins.*)

*This amendment would require the Secretary of State to publish the criteria for what they consider to be high quality qualifications worth funding and to set up an independent panel to determine this.*

*Question put, That the amendment be made.*

*The Committee divided: Ayes 6, Noes 9.*

### Division No. 12]

#### AYES

Ali, Tahir	Johnson, Kim
Gwynne, Andrew	Perkins, Mr Toby
Hopkins, Rachel	Western, Matt

#### NOES

Burghart, Alex	Johnston, David
Carter, Andy	Nici, Lia
Clarke-Smith, Brendan	Richardson, Angela
Hunt, Jane	Tomlinson, Michael
Hunt, Tom	

*Question accordingly negated.*

*Question proposed, That the clause, as amended, stand part of the Bill.*

**The Chair:** With this it will be convenient to discuss new clause 6—*T-levels: Duty to review*—

“(1) Two years after the date on which the first T-levels are completed, the Secretary of State must perform a review of the education and employment outcomes of students enrolled on T-level courses.

(2) No qualifications may be defunded until the Secretary of State’s duty under subsection (1) has been undertaken.”

**Alex Burghart:** I rise to speak in support of clause 7. Much of the debate so far has centred on the level 3 qualifications that will be funded for young people in the reformed landscape. This is an important matter, and one that we have consulted on extensively as part of the post-16 qualifications review. We are making changes based on feedback. We are allowing that extra year before implementing our reform timetable, and we are removing the English and maths exit requirement from T-levels, bringing them more in line with other level 3 study programmes, such as A-levels.

However, I would like to bring us back to the specific purpose of this legislation, which is focused on the approval and regulation of technical qualifications. For the majority of technical and vocational qualifications, little scrutiny is applied to the content before they enter the publicly funded market under existing arrangements. That is in contrast to the more rigorous arrangements in place for general qualifications such as A-levels, and

we do not think that it is right. We want students and employers to be confident that every technical qualification is high quality and holds genuine labour market currency.

Clause 7 introduces powers to enable the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education to approve a broader range of technical qualifications than it is currently able to, with a particular focus on alignment with employer standards. Standards are developed by groups of employers and are managed and published by the institute. They set out the knowledge, skills and behaviours that are essential for a person to be competent in an occupation. Apprenticeships, T-levels and higher technical qualifications are based on those standards. T-levels have been co-designed with more than 250 leading employers and raise the quality bar of the technical offer at level 3. We want to ensure that all technical qualifications are high quality and meet the skills needs of business and industry. Extending the institute’s role will make it certain that the majority of technical qualifications available in England are based on standards and deliver the skills outcomes that employers have told us they need.

This clause places a duty on the institute to regularly review the qualifications that it approves, upholding quality over time and ensuring continued labour market currency. It will give the institute the power to manage the number of qualifications in targeted areas—by issuing a moratorium on the approval of new qualifications—if the institute judges that there is a risk of inappropriate proliferation. Furthermore, it will enable the institute to charge fees for the approval of qualifications, subject to regulations published by the Secretary of State.

As the Sainsbury review found, the current approach is not working, with over 12,000 qualifications at level 3 or below. It has led to a complex and bloated landscape of qualifications, which is confusing for learners and does not serve them or employers well. Our reforms to technical qualifications will set a new quality bar, where the content of qualifications lines up with the skills needs of the workplace.

New clause 6 would place a duty on the Secretary of State to undertake a review of the education and employment outcomes of T-level students two years after the first cohort has completed the programme. It would also prevent the removal of funding from qualifications until the review has been carried out. T-levels are a much-needed step change in the quality of the technical offer for 16 to 19-year-olds, based on the same employer-led standards as apprenticeships. Their design draws on the best international examples of technical education.

A number of mechanisms are already in place to keep T-levels under review, including the institute’s arrangements for reviewing T-level technical qualifications in live delivery. We are working closely with students, providers, employers and universities to ensure that stakeholders are clear on the range of progression opportunities that T-levels present. From 2024, we will publish statistics on the attainment of the T-level technical qualification and the employment outcomes of T-level graduates. That is set out in the technical guidance of the 16 to 18 accountability measures.

In addition, the Bill already provides for the review of approved technical qualifications. New section A2D8 under clause 7 places a duty on the institute to regularly review the qualifications it has approved. That includes

T-levels, higher technical qualifications and the other qualifications it will approve as part of our reforms. I therefore do not support the inclusion of new clause 6 in the Bill.

**Mr Perkins:** Labour welcomes T-levels in principle but has concerns about their implementation. The current cohort of pupils in the first year is pretty small, and there is insufficient evidence to assess the success, or otherwise, of the qualifications at this stage. We have real concerns about the work experience element of T-levels. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton South spoke about whether there are enough employers able to offer work experience, whether that work experience will be relevant and meaningful, and how it will be assessed. What safeguards will be in place to ensure that the work placements are relevant? Will there be a way of pupils failing their work experience other than by not attending?

We are also concerned that the amount of work experience required will restrict the number of institutions that are able to offer a broad suite of these qualifications. We think the failure to achieve the amount of work experience placements might mean that not enough of the qualifications are available at different institutions. A lot of students are finding that if they want to do the T-level that would take them towards the career they want, they might have to travel a very long way, because there will not be the same availability nearby.

The Government are attempting to trash the reputation of alternative and established level 3 qualifications in the minds of employers, students and their parents, while the T-levels are still standing on shifting sands. They were announced initially as a vocational route to take 18 to 19-year-olds towards the world of work. When a study in September 2020 showed that Russell Group universities were not willing to take T-levels as entry qualifications on to science and engineering degrees, the Government were entirely sanguine, describing them as ladders to work, not to university. Yet the Secretary of State's current favourite anecdote is of a student he met at Barnsley College called Greg, we are told, who now believes that he has the pick of universities because he is studying T-levels, so the outcome destination for T-level students in the Government's mind seems to have shifted overnight from the workplace to university, without any evidence as to why that is.

Just like the Minister, I recently visited a college to meet students and lecturers on T-level qualifications—I went to Derby College last week. I also met students who were doing other level 3 qualifications. I asked the 14 students doing the science qualification at Derby, “How many of you are pleased that you did this qualification?” Fourteen hands went up. They were very pleased with the qualification. They had been doing it for only a couple of months, but they were really encouraged. I went on later to meet students doing a BTEC level 3 qualification in digital technology, working towards gaming. I asked them the same question, and once again every hand went up.

4 pm

My impression is that the Government simply go and speak to T-level students and see the real enthusiasm, and think that that is all the evidence they need; but actually there are students who are doing different courses,

have made different decisions and are very happy with their course. So we should not say that just because there are some students who really like T-levels, that is all the evidence we need as to whether they are a success.

When I was speaking to the managers in the T-level operation at Derby, we talked about childcare and education. They said that there are roughly five times more students at Derby doing the Cache level 3 qualification, which has many similarities with the T-level, than the T-level. I asked them why they thought more students did the Cache than the T-level, and they gave a number of reasons. The first reason was that the industry recognises the Cache qualifications, they are very well established and many people within the industry have already done it, so that is what they look towards—there is a real history there. Secondly, the T-levels are much more exam based, and many students like an approach that is not all about the last exam, but is more intermittent. Thirdly, T-levels are a very full-time qualification; as a result, there are many people who do the qualification and find they do not have the time to do additional work.

Particularly in working-class communities, a lot of 17 and 18-year-olds are told, “Look, you can go to college, but we need you putting some rent in. We need you doing some work.” A T-level really restricts those opportunities. The Government have maybe not realised how important that is for a lot of students. These are often people for whom that bit of work that they get alongside their college studies makes the difference between the household being sustainable or not. Since the abolition of the education maintenance allowance that is all the more important. These are really crucial matters that the Government need to consider, and they need to be considered before we get rid of alternative routes.

I was talking about the extent to which the T-levels stand on shifting sands. We are now told, certainly in the last year, that work experience can be virtual: someone might not have to go to an employer; they can do their work experience online. That, again, is totally different from what was initially said. I suspect that if we look at these qualifications in 2023 and 2024, we will find that the amount of work experience has been diminished. I am confident that, across the breadth of qualifications that there are, there will be a real struggle to get the amount of work experience that is needed. The HR and heritage T-levels have already been scrapped before they even started. We have just heard from the Minister that there are 400 providers doing T-levels, but most of those will only do small numbers of them—there will not be the breadth that there currently is among colleges.

We heard about the importance of day release on BTEC qualifications. T-levels are a full-time qualification that people do for two years—the model where people do a BTEC over five or six years will not be available. There are all kinds of reasons why T-levels might not be suitable for many students. In the first cohort of T-level students, maths and English GCSE, or equivalent, at grade C was required prior to entry. We heard the Secretary of State announce on Second Reading that he is going to get rid of that as an entry-level requirement. However, the pilot is going to be done on a cohort who already had maths and English grade C at GCSE level; we shall be assessing, in a year's time, the outcomes of a group of students who started from a place different from where future T-level students will start.

There are all sorts of ways in which the whole situation is still changing. I do not blame the Government for that—when new qualifications are introduced there is a lot to learn. However, that is a reason to be cautious and careful before making dramatic decisions.

**Matt Western:** I want to clarify a point—really just for my own clarification. What number of GCSEs are people supposed to have, and at what grade, before they are eligible to take a T-level, and how does that differ from a BTEC, an AGQ or other forms of diploma?

**Mr Perkins:** As I understand it, from what the Secretary of State has said, going forward there will not be the need to have a maths or English GCSE before a student does a T-level. In the future, it will be similar to how it is currently, but last year's cohort—the first cohort—did have to have GCSEs in maths and English before they were allowed to do the qualification.

**Alex Burghart:** To clarify the point that the hon. Gentlemen are discussing with each other, there was never an entry requirement for T-levels—there was an exit requirement. Someone could start their T-level without any GCSEs at all, but up until Second Reading it was not possible for them to get their T-level certificate unless they had by that stage passed their English and maths. They could have spent their education at 16 to 19 getting their English and maths; they would have it at the end. That is no longer the case. In the same way as a person does not need to have GCSEs in order to do A-levels, they no longer need to have GCSEs to do T-levels. We obviously encourage all students to improve their English and maths at 16 to 19 years old.

**Mr Perkins:** We all encourage them, absolutely. I am interested in what the Minister says. I had the impression that a GCSE in maths and English was being used as an entry-level requirement, but I hear the Minister's point, and if institutions were to take a different approach, I dare say I would find out about them. I appreciate the Minister's comments.

**Matt Western:** So the point would be, as the Minister just described, that someone could have been very good at the T-level subject that they had chosen to do, but unless they got through—okay, the Government have changed their position just recently; whether they hold to that decision long term, we do not know—they would not get that qualification, even if they retook English and maths countless times. They may have spent years trying to get it, and they would still be a failure.

**Mr Perkins:** Well, I am not sure that I would use that phrase—

**Matt Western:** In terms of the qualification.

**Mr Perkins:** As I understand it—from what the Minister said, and from my understanding—it was previously an exit-level requirement. We were arguing against that for some time and we are glad that we have managed to persuade the Government of that argument. The important point here is that the Government are learning, visibly and in plain sight, but they have already made the decision on what the conclusions are going to be, while they are still working out what they are doing with the qualification that is working.

It is essential that Ministers get this right, to ensure that T-levels enjoy the confidence of employers, FE professionals and young people and their families. The amendment would offer oversight and ensure that the quality and standards of T-levels are assessed thoroughly, and that conclusions are drawn about any improvements or observations made in that review. It is absolutely fundamental that the Government should review after they have established what the T-level students have done, as things settle down. Qualifications originally planned to be T-levels are still being cancelled. We may well find in a year's time that further qualifications have not had enough take-up and they also start being cancelled. Let us see what is happening before any decisions are taken to defund alternative qualifications.

**Alex Burghart:** I do not wish us to keep treading over the same ground. I am very pleased to hear of the many happy students at Derby College, and that they are enjoying their courses. The key question before us is whether we want a system at level 3 that prioritises qualifications designed by employers and that offer a substantial element of work experience. I think we do. It is good for students, good for employers and good for the economy at large. We are designing a system of technical education, whereby a lot of students will go into level 3 technical and do T-levels. They will progress to apprenticeships and to work; some will progress to university. We will also have students at 16 to 19 who do level 2 and go into apprenticeships or traineeships, or work. There will be routes for everyone at 16 to 19 in our reformed system, but everyone will ultimately be doing a qualification that was designed with employers in the room, and many people will be doing a qualification with a serious workplace element.

We are advised to be cautious and careful, and I understand that; these are big reforms. Ten years have passed since we started this process, and it is five years since the Sainsbury review. By the time the first qualifications are defunded, four years will have passed.

**Matt Western:** Will the Minister give way?

**Alex Burghart:** Sorry, I have finished.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 7, as amended, accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

### Clause 8

FUNCTIONS OF THE INSTITUTE: AVAILABILITY OF  
QUALIFICATIONS OUTSIDE ENGLAND

*Question proposed,* That the clause stand part of the Bill.

**Alex Burghart:** The clause is an important first step in allowing qualifications such as T-levels to be made available outside England by the relevant bodies. To date, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education has not collaborated with bodies outside England for that purpose. The clause makes the power explicit.

We know that many qualifications taken in England are also taken by students elsewhere, both in the other nations of the UK and beyond. Those arrangements will remain unchanged for many qualifications. However,

there are some qualifications for which the institute owns the intellectual property, such as those forming part of T-levels. If other nations decide that they want to offer T-levels, the clause would allow the institute to engage with relevant bodies, such as regulators or education authorities, as appropriate. That engagement would enable all parties to work together to consider the arrangements that might be needed for programmes of education such as T-levels to be taken by students outside England.

**Mr Perkins:** I have nothing to add to that.

**Hon. Members:** Hear, hear.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 8 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

### Clause 9

TECHNICAL EDUCATION QUALIFICATIONS: CO-OPERATION  
BETWEEN THE INSTITUTE AND OFQUAL

*Question proposed,* That the clause stand part of the Bill.

**Alex Burghart:** The clause recognises and supports effective joint working between Ofqual and the institute. Under existing legislation, the two bodies share statutory responsibility for oversight of technical education qualifications. Their respective functions and professional expertise are vital in safeguarding the credibility and integrity of technical qualifications. In particular, the institute ensures that qualifications are relevant to employers and deliver the skills they need, while Ofqual's regulatory role is vital to maintain educational standards and the consistency of technical qualifications.

Despite the close relationship between the two roles, the two strands of existing legislation governing them are currently separate. The clause fills the gap by reinforcing the co-operation that is necessary between the two bodies to ensure that they can each perform their respective functions effectively. The two bodies already work together. They have developed an administrative framework for co-operation. The clause, together with clause 10, will align the legislation with key elements of the framework that they have agreed. Clause 9 writes mutual co-operation clearly into their respective statutory remits, as well as their working relationship. The clause also empowers each of the two bodies to provide advice and assistance to the other and ensures that each will have regard to such advice. These provisions will reinforce the long-term stability of their relationship. In particular, they will reduce the potential for the two organisations' priorities, systems and processes to drift apart over time.

By working together effectively, the two bodies will minimise the scope for confusing, duplicated and overlapping processes. That will support the setting of clear, demanding quality standards for the qualifications. It will minimise the potential for confusion and unnecessary bureaucracy that could burden awarding bodies if Ofqual and the institute do not co-ordinate their requirements, systems and processes.

**Mr Perkins:** Throughout the Bill we have been calling for greater clarity and understanding of the roles of various operators within the sector, so we are pleased to see that that is the case with clause 9.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 9 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

### Clause 10

APPLICATION OF ACCREDITATION REQUIREMENT IN  
RELATION TO TECHNICAL EDUCATION QUALIFICATIONS

**Mr Perkins:** I beg to move amendment 49, in clause 10, page 14, line 17, leave out paragraph (a).

*This amendment would ensure Ofqual remains able to make a determination under subsection (1) in relation to accreditation requirements relating to approved technical education qualifications.*

Amendment 49 is brief and would ensure that Ofqual remains able to make a determination under section 138(1) of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009 in relation to accreditation requirements relating to approved technical education qualifications. The Bill hugely centralises power in the Secretary of State's hands, and it is important that an independent organisation can ensure that our technical education framework remains based on evidence and academic excellence, rather than on political priorities. For that reason, we would look to leave out paragraph (a) and ensure that Ofqual remains able to make such determinations.

4.15 pm

**Alex Burghart:** The amendment aims to retain Ofqual's power to accredit technical education qualifications that are also subject to the institute's approval processes. These two functions are very similar, so the amendment would undermine the intention to clarify the statutory approval process for technical qualifications.

By creating a single approval gateway managed by the institute, the Bill removes duplication in the processes for these qualifications and so ensures that the system is as efficient as possible. If we were to accept the amendment, awarding organisations might be subjected to two overlapping and very similar approval processes. The mutual co-operation requirements of clause 9 ensure that although Ofqual cannot decide to accredit technical qualifications, it will continue to play a key role in their approval. Ofqual will continue to exercise its regulatory functions in live delivery.

I should draw the Committee's attention to the comment by Jo Saxton, the Chief Inspector of Ofqual:

"The Skills Bill heralds the acceleration of a unified system of technical qualifications based on employer-led standards, in which Ofqual has a pivotal role, providing students and apprentices with high quality qualifications...The Bill cements our close working relationship with the Institute, drawing on the strengths and expertise of both organisations, with our statutory regulation of technical qualifications continuing to underpin this system".

I think we can take it from that comment that Ofqual is very happy with the Bill as it is drafted.

It is more appropriate that the institute leads on the approval process, because its work is essential in ensuring that both the content and the outcomes of technical qualifications are aligned to the skills that employers have told us they need.

**Mr Perkins:** I heard what the Minister said. This was a probing amendment to try to understand a little more about how Ofqual's role would operate in the future. However, having heard what the Minister has had to say, I beg to task leave to withdraw the amendment.

*Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.*

*Question proposed,* That the clause stand part of the Bill.

**Alex Burghart:** Clause 10 is needed in addition to clause 9 in order to clarify the roles of the institute and Ofqual in the approval of technical education qualifications. Under the existing legislation and the provisions of the Bill, the institute has specific responsibility to ensure that technical qualifications meet the skills needs of employers and different employment sectors. In parallel, Ofqual has the discretion to decide that individual types and classes of qualification should be subject to an accreditation requirement before they can be taught in schools and colleges. The purpose of the two processes is similar—to ensure that qualifications meet a high-quality bar before they enter the market. Therefore, the current legislation means that individual technical qualifications could be subject to two similar and unhelpfully overlapping approval processes. That would be unnecessary double regulation.

Clause 10 will remove the potential for overlap and duplication by creating a single approval gateway for all technical qualifications. Taken together with the mutual co-operation provisions in clause 9, it enables the two bodies to work together to provide a clear single approval pathway for technical education qualifications. It will remove the potential for duplication and additional bureaucracy both for the two bodies themselves and for the awarding organisations whose qualifications are subject to approval.

**Mr Perkins:** Given the concerns that we have raised with regard to the creation of the division between Ofqual and the institute, and the fear that that may lead to a two-tier approach and a sense that the investigations into academic qualifications that are seen with A-levels and other qualifications under Ofqual are different from those under the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education and the technical qualifications, this is an issue that the Government need to be very careful about in future. They should ensure that there is real confidence that the technical qualifications are robust and subject to the same processes, and the same checks and balances, as other qualifications.

That is the key point that we make to the Government. We do not intend to oppose clause 10 stand part, but we seek reassurances that there will not be too much of a sense that the different pathways are of different merit.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 10 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

### Clause 11

#### INFORMATION SHARING IN RELATION TO TECHNICAL EDUCATION QUALIFICATIONS

*Question proposed,* That the clause stand part of the Bill.

**Alex Burghart:** The clause supports a critical aspect of the joint working needed to ensure that the whole technical education system works together to deliver the skills that employers need. It does so by ensuring that Ofqual can exchange information with the other bodies that have important roles in this framework. Under existing legislation, the institute can exchange information with other bodies to support its own functions and those of the other body involved. At present, similar powers do not apply to Ofqual. Ofqual's explicit

information-sharing power allows it to share information only with other qualifications regulators in the UK to enable or facilitate the performance of the qualifications functions of that regulator. There is no explicit function allowing it to share information to support the functions of other types of bodies.

**Mr Perkins:** Could the Minister clarify a little more the kinds of information that he anticipates will be relevant under this clause?

**Alex Burghart:** It is—

**Mr Perkins:** No, he obviously cannot.

**Alex Burghart:** It is part of that long day you were talking about, Mr Efford. The purpose of the clause is to ensure that whatever information the institute and Ofqual want to share with each other, they can. It is open-ended, and is there to serve their purposes.

**Mr Perkins:** Will the Minister give way?

**Alex Burghart:** I will make some progress. The clause tackles that limitation by providing Ofqual with information-sharing powers in relation to technical education qualifications that correspond with those that already apply to the institute. Specifically, the clause enables each organisation to share information either to support its own functions, or to help other bodies in their own roles. For example, it would allow Ofqual to share information that it already gathers from awarding body organisations with other bodies, such as the institute, to avoid other bodies needing to duplicate data-gathering exercises. That approach of “collect once, use multiple times” would help reduce administrative load. Hopefully, that answers the question that the hon. Member for Chesterfield asked.

The clause plays an important role in supporting coherent, efficient joint working between Ofqual and other relevant bodies, and will help to secure high quality across the technical education system as a whole.

**Mr Perkins:** There are always concerns when it comes to this Government and information sharing. There have been many examples in which there has been real concern about the approach that the Government have taken to this sort of thing, which is why I was asking about the scope of these powers. We entirely understand sharing information about specific qualifications, but if it gets more granular than that—if it gets more into the area of personal data—there will be real concern. At future stages of the Bill's passage it would be good to get a more detailed understanding of precisely what information the Government are seeking powers to share. Notwithstanding that, on the basis that these information-sharing powers mirror the current arrangements with regard to the institute, we do not intend to oppose clause stand part.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 11 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

### Clause 12

#### TECHNICAL EDUCATION QUALIFICATIONS: MINOR AND CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS

*Question proposed,* That the clause stand part of the Bill.

**Alex Burghart:** The clause sets out minor and consequential amendments to the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009 and other legislation as a consequence of the other provisions contained in chapter 2 of the Bill. That includes amendments that result from extending the powers of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education such that it will be able to approve a wider range of technical qualifications. These amendments are necessary to ensure that the statute operates effectively.

**Mr Perkins:** They certainly are.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 12 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

### Clause 13

#### RENUMBERING OF PROVISIONS RELATING TO TECHNICAL EDUCATION QUALIFICATIONS

*Question proposed,* That the clause stand part of the Bill.

**Alex Burghart:** The clause sets out changes to the numbering of existing sections to the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009, allowing for new and existing provisions to be sequenced and numbered in a logical manner. This is a technical but necessary consequential change to the legislation, resulting from other provisions in this chapter of the Bill.

**Mr Perkins:** It certainly is.

**The Chair:** We are all grateful for that clarification.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 13 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Ordered,* That further consideration be now adjourned.

—(Michael Tomlinson.)

4.24 pm

*Adjourned till Tuesday 7 December at twenty-five minutes past Nine o'clock.*

**Written evidence reported to the House**

SPEB13 Course Hero

SPEB11 Universities UK

SPEB12 Pearson UK (re: Clause 7)