

IChemE Submission on Post-16 Level 3 and Below Pathways Consultation

The Institution of Chemical Engineers (IChemE) appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback on the proposed changes to level 2 and 3 education. IChemE are a qualifying body and learned society for chemical, biochemical, and process engineers in the United Kingdom (UK) and worldwide, with over 31,000 members. Our mission is to champion the vital role that chemical engineering plays in engineering a sustainable world.

Our organisation has a keen interest in the UK's education sector as the chemical engineering discipline is reliant on a diverse supply of educated and skilled professional and specialists. We have substantial involvement with the sector through our 7 to 18 outreach programmes, support for undergraduate students and apprenticeships, engagement with universities and technical colleges, and ongoing learning and development support for professionals at all career stages. The aim of this work is to provide lifelong educational support as well as to help meet the need for 900,000 skilled workers by 2030.¹

General comments

We share the Department for Education's (DfE) desire to reduce the complexity of the current level 2 and 3 education systems. However, we are unsure whether the specific proposals will meet the stated policy objectives.

The language used in the document can be ambiguous at times and it is not immediately clear what the proposed pathways are intended to cover or achieve. It is critical that educational pathways are easy to understand given that every member of society interacts with it at some point in their life, whether it be as a student, caregiver, or an employer. Policy makers need to have greater consideration for how teachers, parents and care givers will be informed enough to make decisions on which education pathway is appropriate in a given industry.

Level 3 vocational pathway

Changes to the education system need to be easy to communicate and understand

The most important factor impacting young people's engagement with level 3 courses is the ability of their influencers (parents and carers), as well as the young people themselves, to comprehend the pathways that are available to them. This necessitates that all qualifications are easy to understand, with a clear structure and outcomes. We understand the proposed V levels are to be introduced to simplify the wide array of similar courses offered at this level. However, we are concerned that the introduction of a new qualification may not achieve this outcome and may instead generate more uncertainty, especially if the implementation of the V levels is poorly handled and the required infrastructure is not in place from the start.

The language used to describe these new levels is in itself confusing and potentially misleading: 'We will make V levels the only pathway of vocational qualifications at level 3 for young people'. On the current proposals, a young person with the ambition of being a dentist, an engineer, a pharmacist

¹ *Assessment of priority skills to 2030*. (2025, November 5). GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/assessment-of-priority-skills-to-2030/assessment-of-priority-skills-to-2030>

etc will deem these to be vocational career pathways and will be immediately confused as to whether to opt for V levels or A levels. This could undermine the value of A levels and there needs to be an immediate clarification of what the Government perceives to be the value of A levels compared to V levels. As an example, for young people with an interest in finance and economics, as a career pathway, would they opt for a V level in accounting or an A level in economics?

A system wide curriculum review is needed to ensure all courses complement each other

We strongly encourage DfE to consider a wider review of the curriculum at level 3, including A levels, and develop a single qualification system that covers all education pathways. This will also go some way to address the confusion faced by universities in understanding whether their admission criteria are met by the new V and T levels but more importantly it will remove the uncertainty, faced by parents and carers who simply want their children to select the 'best' qualification and career pathway for them and their future success. By not reviewing A- levels these will remain the 'gold standard' for academically gifted young people who may lose out in the offer of skills development.

Technical and vocational pathways have been subject to more policy changes compared to the academic route through A levels and university. This unstable policy environment creates confusion about qualifications which further discourages young people from pursuing these career paths. Industry awareness of qualifications is also reduced through repeated changes, impacting their engagement with the education sector and further misaligning education supply and workforce needs. We ask that government commit to a clear and consistent long-term approach to these pathways, easily accessible for all young people.

New courses need to be implemented more effectively

Anecdotally, we have heard that T Levels have suffered from limited public acceptance and knowledge due to poor implementation. While we agree with the policy intent of this qualification, we believe that greater focus on the supporting information and infrastructure could have prevented many issues. We have observed students discouraged from taking these courses due to lack of guidance and the difficulty of finding the required placements. If the proposed V levels do go ahead, we encourage DfE to have much greater consideration of implementation to prevent a repetition of such issues.

We are also concerned how the proposed V Levels will interface with higher education. We are aware that many universities do not currently accept people with T Levels and it seems inevitable that V Levels will face the same issue based on the information provided. For these courses to be effectively implemented there needs to be thorough engagement with, and acceptance from, the higher education sector to ensure that these qualifications are understood and valued. Given the increasing complexity of Level 3 qualifications, we strongly encourage government to consider how university entrance expectations can be more effectively communicated to the public.

Level 2 occupational and further study pathways

We do not understand how the proposed pathways are notably different from those currently available. The occupational pathway appears to be aimed at those with lower academic scores and who may not be achieving the level 4 English and Maths results needed to enter the workforce. If this is the case, we appreciate the efforts that are being made to address the negative stigma that these students face. However, we are not certain that what is being proposed will improve the education outcomes for these students. At the moment, there is not enough information to assess whether the proposals will meet their policy objective and risk making things worse by adding additional uncertainty into a system already characterised by considerable change.

ICChemE, January 2026