

Written evidence submitted by Nacro

Falling level 2 attainment:

Declining Level 2 attainment, and the subsequent lack of policy focus on this area, is a significant weakness in the post-16 qualifications landscape.

Almost one-in-five 19-year-olds across England do not reach Level 2 attainment (the equivalent of five good GCSEs), with the proportion of young people reaching this standard now in decline for five consecutive years between 2015 and 2020.

This decline is most stark among the most disadvantaged young people, with a 10-percentage point drop in Level 2 attainment between 2014/15 and 2019/20 for those eligible for free school meals (FSM).¹

Declining Level 2 apprenticeships:

In addition, recent evidence highlights a particular concern on the availability of, and participation in, Level 2 apprenticeships – which the Government continue to – rightly – promote as an alternative to the more common GCSE route.

Between 2016/17 and 2020/21, participation in Level 2 apprenticeships for those under the age of 19 declined by 53.4%, while Level 3 apprenticeship participation increased by 73.9%.² Since the start of pandemic, under 19 Level 2 starts have fallen by 41.9%.³

In 2017/18, there were 111,160 Level 2 apprentices under the age of 19, falling to 61,340 by 2020/21 – a fall of 44.8%. Within these numbers was a 49.4% drop in apprenticeships for under 19s in the bottom 20% of the Index of Multiple Deprivation, compared to a 39.6% fall for the least deprived 20%.⁴

Whether pursuing an academic or vocational route, these numbers clearly reflect a disproportionate impact on the prospects of the most disadvantaged young people.

The “disadvantage gap” among 16-19-year-olds:

On average, young people from poorer backgrounds are less likely to achieve the same level

¹ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/level-2-and-3-attainment-by-young-people-aged-19/2019-20> (See “Level 2 and 3 attainment at 19 by pupil characteristics”)

² <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/85ba124e-1489-4648-bfde-3eff6fdf76a2>;

³ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/9795440a-015e-47eb-86e2-5a5c1ceab21f>

⁴ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/47223cca-6ffb-42da-be50-d0c5352a83de>

of qualifications as their better off peers, with a significant “disadvantage attainment gap” existing among 16-19-year-olds.

The Education Policy Institute, [writing](#) as part of Nacro’s Learn Without Limits campaign, explains that *“the disadvantage attainment gap that emerges through primary and secondary education continues to widen as these young people fall further behind in this critical phase”*.

The detailed figures on attainment are as follows:

Free school meals: for those eligible for free school meals, Level 2 attainment has decreased by nearly 10 percentage points, from 72% in 2014/15 to 62.2% in 2019/20. That equates to a 17.1% increase in those without Level 2 attainment by the age of 19, who have also been eligible for free school meals.⁵

Special education needs: for learners identified with a special educational need (SEN), over the same timeframe, Level 2 attainment has fallen from 65.8% to 52.4%. Almost one in two young people identified as having a special educational need (SEN) do not achieve Level 2 attainment by the age of 19. This is an attainment gap of 33.7 points when compared with the attainment of those with no identified SEN.⁶

Children in need: children classified as “in need” (CIN), defined as needing local authority services to achieve or maintain a reasonable standard of health or development or who need local authority services to prevent significant or further harm, are also disproportionately likely to have worse educational outcomes than their non-CIN peers. In 2019/20, of 860,130 pupils known to have been CIN over the last six years, just 23.6% achieved a grade 4 and above in English and Maths GCSEs. This figure stands at 71.2% for the general population – a very significant gap.⁷

This creates a situation whereby educational attainment, and subsequently future employment prospects, are too often dictated by a young person’s background – a significant drag on social mobility.

We are therefore urging the Government to address this disparity through targeted measures listed in the recommendations section, set out at the end of this submission.

The importance of Level 2 qualifications:

Level 2 qualifications (and below) act as vital stepping-stone qualifications through further education, training or even directly into employment in strategically important industries

⁵ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/level-2-and-3-attainment-by-young-people-aged-19/2019-20> (See Table 4: Level 2 attainment at 19 by pupil characteristics, 2010/11 to 2019/20 (based on pupils recorded in mainstream state-funded schools in England in year 11))

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england/2020> (See “Children who have been in the need in the last 6 years”)

such as health and social care and construction.

Level 2 qualifications, in particular, help to level the playing field for those who have left full-time education without their basic GCSE qualifications and keep many who have had interrupted educations engaged in learning. Ignoring the merits of these qualifications puts in place an additional barrier for progression for some young people.

As the Government completes its consultation into the future of qualifications at Level 2 and below, we therefore urge that it focuses on providing a high quality, vocational and technical Level 2 offer that can lead directly to good jobs in the workplace and access to higher level skills, as well as providing stepping stone qualifications into further learning for those who have disengaged.

The alternative proposed reduction in the breadth of Level 2 vocational qualifications risks further entrenching and increasing the disadvantage gap.

Given the Government is looking to the education and skills system as a key component to both its levelling up agenda and its post-COVID recovery plan, it must act to ensure that the chances of young people are not hampered by where they come from. To truly level up, we must focus on levelling up the opportunities of our most disadvantaged young people.

Government focus on Level 3 and above:

The Government's ambition to upskill the workforce through, for example, offering fully funded Level 3 courses is the right one. It is the route map to getting there that is wrong.

Much of the Government's focus, and subsequent funding, has been directed towards those studying for Level 3 qualifications and above. This includes its flagship skills policy – the £2.5bn National Skills Fund. Within the funding pot is the "Lifetime Skills Guarantee", which offers a free level 3 qualification for those (aged 19 and over) who do not already have one.

The unintended consequence of this direction in policy will be to further entrench educational inequality across the country. Those who have already achieved Level 2 attainment will benefit from Government funding to boost their training and employment prospects, with those yet to achieve Level 2 attainment at risk of falling even further behind.

This fails to acknowledge the pathways required to attain a Level 3 qualification for those yet to reach Level 2 attainment – an issue that was covered in the recent Commons debate on the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill. To ensure that those without Level 2 attainment are not left further behind, we echo [Christian Wakeford MP's call](#) for an extension of the Lifetime Skills Guarantee to those without a level 2 qualification

This will fail to create a viable pathway towards higher level skills for the almost one in five who, by the age of 19, are yet to reach Level 2 attainment.

T Levels:

Falling Level 2 attainment also has a knock-on effect on the suitability of T-Levels – a Level 3 qualification – for those who have yet to achieve that standard of qualification. The Government’s response has been to propose a “year-long” transition programme for those not at Level 2, so that they can start studying at Level 3.

This period of a year fails to consider the barriers faced by the most disadvantaged young people who may have faced multiple barriers to participation in mainstream education. Many are likely to need more than that year to transition up towards a Level 3 qualification and not being able to reach this is likely to further entrench disadvantage. This is borne out by the fact that 38.3% of students re-sitting English and maths GCSEs achieve a lower grade than their first effort.

We do recognise that the Government has removed the “exit requirements” for a T-Level, which previously dictated that students need a grade 4 or Level 2 Functional Skills in English and maths in order to be awarded a T-Level. But this still does not acknowledge the jump up to Level 3 or provide the policy solutions to bridge this gap.

The proposed defunding of Level 3 qualifications:

We welcome the Government’s decision to pause plans to start removing funding for most BTECs and other applied general qualifications from 2023 but remain concerned about the potential impact of these proposed changes when they do come into force.

This is due to the importance of having choices and appropriate routes for learners at all levels, which act as vital stepping stones to further training and good jobs, and this is especially true for the most disadvantaged young people. We applaud the Government’s commitment and ambition to upskill our workforce but urge a re-think of the roadmap to getting there. We must ensure that we are providing the right pathways for all young people, regardless of their background, so that they achieve their ambitions.

What is needed is a range of courses, routes and options that work for both learners and employers. Limiting choice will hit the most disadvantaged learners hardest. For any reforms to succeed, the Government has to take into account the needs of all learners at all levels – especially those already most disadvantaged – and work alongside those who support them.

Recommendations:

- 1. A clear route map to employment** – with a reformed post-16 qualifications system offering a broad range of vocational qualifications at Level 2, enabling access directly into employment or onto higher level skills
- 2. Funding a Pupil Premium Plus** – extending the pupil premium to post-15 settings, broadening the eligibility criteria beyond FSM to incorporate both 16-19-year-olds identified as having a special educational need (SEN) or those who falling within the ‘Children in Need’ (CIN) classification
- 3. Extended Lifetime Skills Guarantee** – to ensure that those without a Level 2 qualification can access the funding

- 4. A review of Universal Credit conditionality** – to remove the barriers and disincentives to education for those on universal credit

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