Training Qualifications UK

Alternative Academic Qualifications (AAQs)

Quick Reference Guide

Overview

In light of the review conducted on qualifications for students aged 16 and above, the Department for Education (DfE) has confirmed its objective to establish a streamlined qualifications system.

This guide has been created to provide you with a summary of the current information available and its implications for your post-16 level 3 vocational curriculum. Additional comprehensive details can be found on our website. Rest assured, we will keep you updated as we learn more about these changes and continue to provide the necessary resources to support you.

Alternative Academic Qualifications

In summary, the following Post 16 progression routes will be available to students to progress to:

- A Levels
- T Levels
- Apprenticeships
- Technical Qualifications
- Mixed study programmes, typically consisting of two A Levels alongside a small AAQ

Apprenticeships, A Levels and T Levels remain the government's preferred progression options of choice in the post 16 reformed education landscape. At level 3 alongside A levels and T Levels students who want to progress to higher education who do not want to study purely A levels, or a T Level programme, will be able to choose a mixed study programme.

This could consist of 2 A Levels alongside a small alternative academic qualification (AAQ), that complements and enhances the A Levels. This could also consist of a large AAQ as an alternative to an A Level. Large AAQs will only be available in a limited range of subjects where there are no T Levels and there is a need for a large qualification enabling entry to more specialist areas of higher education.

AAQ Funding

The Department for Education (DfE) have set out their broad expectations around the types of study programmes they expect and will be publishing more detail as we move towards 2025, although they have reiterated from the guide to the future landscape that their clear expectation, as outlined in study programme guidance will be that most students taking small approved AAQs will also be studying two A levels. Reflecting the central role of A levels and their recognised rigour and quality.

The following table illustrates the post 16 options available to learners as a funded study programme in the future reformed landscapes, where an AAQ may be considered as part of a mixed study programme or on its own:

Funded mixed study programme combinations			
Option 1	**1 x A Level**	**1 x A Level**	**1 x Small AAQ**
Option 2*	**1 x A Level**	**1 x Small AAQ**	**1 x Small AAQ**
Option 3	**1 x A Level**	**1 x Large AAQ – 720 GLH** *(restricted to Performing Arts, Sport, Art & Design subjects only)*	
Option 4	**1 x Large AAQ – 1080 GLH** *(restricted to Performing Arts, Sport, Art & Design subjects only)*		

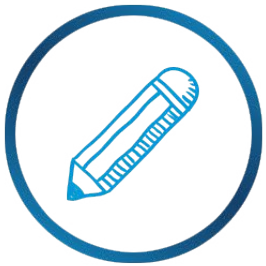
**For students on a part-time study programme, for students with special educational needs and disabilities, or those with exceptional circumstances.*

The 'guide to the post 16 qualifications landscape at Level 3 and below for 2025 and beyond' published in April 2023 outlines specific funding rules that will prevent study programmes that consist entirely of small AAQs. This is on the basis that evidence shows that students taking study programmes consisting entirely of non-A level qualifications in order to progress to higher education generally experience worse outcomes at university. The view is to ensure that all students taking these qualifications benefit from the improved outcomes that a mixed study programme which includes A levels can bring.

Timescales for development

Cycle 1 – First Teach 2025 to 2026

For 2025 to 2026, the DfE will consider for funding approval small AAQs only in the subject areas they have specified in the Qualifications funding approval manual: 2025 to 2026. This includes the following subject areas, typically where they are less well served by A Levels and T Levels:



- Applied Science, Medical Science
- Engineering and engineering principles / technology
- Health and social care
- Information technology, Computing
- Subjects which support progression to degrees in healthcare professions allied to medicine, dentistry, and nursing

Cycle 2 – First Teach 2026 to 2027

For 2026 to 2027, the DfE will confirm funding approval criteria for other qualifications in the 'funding approval manual for 2026 to 2027' expected to be published later in 2023. This includes the following subject areas, typically where they are less well served by A Levels and T Levels:

Small AAQs:

- Uniformed Protective Services, Policing
- British sign language studies
- Art, craft and design, Sound engineering, Animation and visual arts
- Creative digital media production, Digital games, film and video production
- Sport, exercise science, and physical activity, Sporting excellence and performance
- Performing, production, and creative arts, Music performance, production and technology, Qualifications for music practitioners/the creative music industry

Large AAQs

- Sport, Sport and exercise science, Sport and Physical or outdoor activity
- Art and design, Art, design and media or communication, Fine and applied art
- Performing arts, production arts, Music technology, Music performance and production

Next steps for TQUK

At TQUK, we recognise that every student is unique, and our aim is to ensure that all students receive the education they deserve and can achieve their aspirations. We will be submitting AAQs for approval in the academic route in June 2024. The outcomes for these qualifications, scheduled to be first taught in September 2026 (cycle 2), will be known by July 2025.

Once approved, in September 2026, TQUK will be offering Alternative Academic Qualifications (AAQs) in:

Cycle 2		
Subject	**Size**	**First Teach**
Performing Arts	Small & Large	September 2026
Sport		
Art, Craft & Design		
Engineering	Small	
Health & Social Care		
IT		
Digital Games		
Uniformed Protective Services		
Policing		
Creative Digital Media		
Film and Video Production		
Sound Engineering		
Applied Science		