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## Opinion

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# The UK government's skills bill is a disaster for young people

*David Blunkett and Kenneth Baker*

Wed 13 Oct 2021 15.35 BST



Last night the combined opposition - and some Conservatives - passed an amendment in the House of Lords in an attempt to stop the government's cull of most of the technical qualifications available in this country. Such qualifications were taken by more than a quarter of a million students last year.

This issue is part of a little-known policy of the government's [skills and post-16 education bill](#). While not on the [face of the bill](#), the cull was intended to be implemented in what it describes as a "hard stop" on funding of the existing range of BTEc national diplomas for specialist work-related qualifications. Unfortunately, last night's

endeavour to to protect existing high-vocational qualifications resulted in a tie, so the amendment from a former Conservative education minister, David Willetts, fell at the last hurdle.

The policy was announced by the Department for Education in a series of documents published on 14 July - the very week before schools were closing for the summer holidays (a good time to bury bad news, if ever there was one). These documents contained the policy to “defund” most BTecs and diplomas from August 2023 and August 2024, in order to ensure that they do not conflict with the government’s [new T-levels](#), for vocational qualifications.

This is a revolutionary policy, and it is an outrage that it is not on the face of the bill: as secondary legislation of a wider government bill, this means it is very difficult to debate, amend or delete. In our combined years of being in parliament (84 years), neither of us have known such an outrageous constitutional act by any government. We want to send a really strong message to the Commons to expose this policy.

The five documents issued on 14 July were the response of the government to the consultation it started in January - at least it had the decency to recognise that [86% of the respondents](#) opposed its policy. So much for a listening government. This complete failure of accountability or serious engagement with parliament is breathtaking. We wish to save the government from itself - and young people from the disastrous pathway they are being entered into.

We are not against T-levels: they may be very good qualifications for some students wanting a vocational equivalent to A-levels, but it is important to appreciate that these newer courses are only 25% practical and 75% academic. This means they are suitable for students with the highest grades of GCSEs: 6-9. They would be out of reach of those students with lower grades, who presently take up a broad and highly relevant employment-focused BTec.

Last year, fewer than [1,300 students](#) started studying for a T-level and we will not know their results until August next year. We do not know how many started a T-level last month, nor how many have managed to secure the 45 days of work experience which each student has to have, but the numbers will surely not be significant. What we do know is that last year [250,000 young people](#) took a BTec national diploma, which equipped them for the world of work, or transition into an appropriate university course.

The amendment passed yesterday in the House of Lords said there should be no defunding of technical qualifications for four years. This would allow time to judge whether T-levels have become embedded, and whether

qualifications for four years. This would allow time to judge whether 1-levels have become embedded, and whether students like to take them; whether employers want them; and whether universities regard them as appropriate qualifications for university entrance.

The July documents tried to measure the impact of these changes and revealed that those students who traditionally take Advanced General Qualifications (AGQs) and Mixed Programmes (BTecs) tend to have achieved lower GCSE grades than their peers who progress on to A-Level study (ie disadvantaged students). They are also more likely to be black, Asian and minority students, have [SEND](#), or have received free school meals.

The documents also say these proposals could lead to disabled students “being more strongly, negatively impacted by being unable to achieve Level 3 in the reformed landscape”. Well, if that is the future landscape for young people, let’s scrap it now. Neither of us has ever known any impact document of a new policy admit that black, Asian, minority, free school meal and disabled students are going to do less well.

Because this whole policy is being introduced on the sly - by not putting it on the face of the bill - most people have not heard about it or do not know its disastrous impact on students. So, we are sending a special message to the [House of Commons](#) when it gets this bill: we need it to be scrutinised and examined in great detail, and most importantly, have its unacceptable enormities deleted, before the great benefits of technical qualifications are permanently damaged.

David Blunkett is a member of the House of Lords, former Labour MP and a former education secretary. Kenneth Baker is a member of the House of Lords, former Conservative MP and a former education secretary

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### Guardian Pick

In recent times, as anyone knows who has tried get electrical, plumbing, building, joinery work, to name but a few of the vital services needed to keep ones home in good order skilled trades people are in short supply. Far too many people go to university and not all

courses equip young people to be usefully employed. And when you add the huge debts that accrue in getting a degree it's not worth it except for professions for which a degree is ...

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**Harebell49**

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### Guardian Pick

I lecture in the FE sector.

Some young people cannot succeed in examination-based study, however much support and guidance you give them. They need to be hands-on, and the country needs them to be too!

Angry, bored, frustrated youths are in nobody's interest.

If only the govt listened to we 'lefty teachers' who work silly hours in our chosen vocation, to help young people have better lives, for not a lot of money, then edu...

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