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Expanding choice and connecting pathways: England's tripartite qualification system for post-16 education

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Abstract: Since Brexit, England's labour supply gap and skills mismatch have widened. In October 2025, the government published the *Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper*, adding V Levels to A Levels and T Levels to form a tripartite post-16 qualification system. Drawing on skill formation theory, this article analyzes the institutional adjustment of England's market-led skills model and the design, operation, and limits of the system. The reform is a compensatory adjustment within a liberal market skills regime; quality, resource, and recognition problems are unlikely to disappear in the short term.

Keywords: skill formation theory; post-16 education; academic-vocational integration; degree apprenticeships

1 Introduction

Upper secondary education is moving from rigid tracking to flexible integration, and a national qualifications framework with clear levels has become a central goal of reform [1]. England was among the first to build such a framework [2]: in the 1980s, a national vocational qualification system was created to regulate what had become a chaotic field of credential awarding [3]. After Brexit, EU labour mobility was curtailed, skill shortages widened, and the inherited skills-supply model could no longer match industrial needs.

In October 2025, the Department for Education published the *Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper*, introducing V Levels as a general vocational qualification. Together with A Levels and T Levels, they now form a tripartite post-16 system covering academic, technical, and vocational routes. The reform repositions education around skills, moves the system from fragmented provision towards coordinated governance, and emphasizes lifelong learning [4].

Chinese scholarship on England's reform is extensive, but most of it focuses on single instruments such as T Levels and predates the 2025 reform.

Regarding degree apprenticeships, Xu and Li show that they embody academic-vocational parity, and explore their operating mechanisms [5]. England's qualifications system developed from the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) framework through the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), and ultimately to the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF), which came into operation in 2015 and created uniform standards. Typologically, England is a liberal market regime against Germany's collectivist model [6].

Two limitations stand out. Most of this literature predates the 2025 reform, works within the binary A Level–T Level frame, and offers no systematic account of the tripartite system; and most studies are micro-level, seldom using skill

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formation theory to expose the institutional logic behind the reform.

Skill formation theory treats skill formation as the articulation of formal schooling and industry-based training; how the two fit determines the type of regime. Its core dimensions—the state, employer incentives to train, and the authority of certification—are used here to unpack England's three routes. The article combines policy text analysis with comparative analysis, drawing on official documents, statistics and core-journal research.

2 Formation logic and evolution: from market laissez-faire to state compensation

The tripartite system is not a short-term policy adjustment but a systematic readjustment of a liberal market skills regime after years of accumulated contradictions, intensified by Brexit. In skill formation terms, its underlying logic is that the state gradually steps in to compensate as market failures become increasingly apparent.

Three pressures explain the formation of the system. First, the supply of skills falls short. Firms tend to recruit ready-made skilled labour rather than invest in long-cycle training [7]. Brexit intensified this: the inflow of skilled EU migrants fell by 42 percent, and employer skill-matching costs rose by 37 percent relative to 2019 [8-9]. A unified framework lowering matching costs thus became necessary.

Second, the qualification system is fragmented. After the 1980s, England opened the qualification market; certificates expanded rapidly while standards diverged. Each successive framework—the five-level NVQ of 1987, the nine-level NQF of 2004, and the nine-level QCF of 2008—failed to curb proliferation, diverse awarding bodies, and low trust. More than 2,000 non-standardized vocational qualifications sit at Level 3, wasting resources and weakening skill signals.

Third, young people's pathways are narrow. A long-standing social preference for A Levels treats technical and vocational qualifications as second-class choices, and many young people of middling attainment lack a route that fits both study and employment: a survey by the Department for Education found that more than 30 per cent of such young people felt they had no clear pathway after 16 [10]. This pushed the government to add an intermediate vocational route.

In terms of the intensity of state intervention, the evolution of England's post-16 qualification system can be divided into three phases, with employer-led standard setting preserved throughout. The first phase, market expansion (1980–2010), began with the Education Reform Act of 1988, which opened the qualification market completely; the state kept regulation minimal and mainly registered qualifications, so the market-dominated provision and certificate numbers grew rapidly, alongside growing divergence in quality.

The second phase, integration of a binary system (2010–2025), began with the 16–19 qualification review of 2010, which removed more than 1,500 vocational qualifications judged to have low recognition, while the state began regulating entry and quality. In 2015, the Regulated Qualifications Framework came into operation, succeeding the NQF and the QCF, and in 2020, T Levels were introduced, forming an academic–technical dual structure.

The third phase, consolidation of the tripartite system (2025–), is marked by the White Paper: England added V Levels as a general vocational qualification, established unified UCAS credit-conversion rules, and clarified the two-tier regulatory responsibilities of Skills England and Ofqual, forming a configuration of state-built frameworks, employer-led standards and parallel pathways. The state's role has shifted from regulation towards coordination.

3 Institutional design and operation: multiple choice and vertical articulation

All three qualifications sit at Level 3 of the Regulated Qualifications Framework and cover the post-16 phase. The design preserves the employer-led tradition of standard setting while using state coordination to standardize and articulate the system; the RQF provides a platform for accrediting outcomes, guarantees parity between academic and vocational routes through top-level design, and serves educational equity through mutual recognition of achievements.

A Levels remain England's mainstream academic qualification: a two-year programme of three or four academic

subjects assessed mainly by terminal written examinations, and the main route to research-intensive universities. T Levels, introduced in 2020, are high-level technical qualifications: 1,800 total learning hours, about 80 percent school-based teaching, and 20 percent (at least 315 hours) industry placement. The highest T Level grade is worth 168 UCAS points, the equivalent of three A Levels, mainly feeding applied degrees and technical jobs.

V Levels, announced in the 2025 White Paper and due to be phased in from 2027, are general vocational qualifications. A single V Level is comparable in size and difficulty to one A Level and focuses on practical competence in business, care, and general service occupations. It can be taken alone as a route to employment or combined with A Levels or T Levels, and consolidates existing general vocational qualifications such as BTECs.

In governance, England operates a two-tier regulatory structure. Skills England coordinates national surveys of industry skill needs and leads employers in developing qualification curricula; Ofqual is responsible for quality assurance, entry and withdrawal, and examination regulation, setting unified rules on levels and credit conversion. The White Paper states that industry representatives lead curriculum development for all qualifications.

A key institutional innovation is that national rules soften the academic–vocational dichotomy and create pathways that are horizontally optional, vertically progressive, and connected along the whole chain, lowering the risk of a single one-off choice at 16. Horizontally, a flexible tracking mechanism allows students to combine qualifications—A Levels alone; a full T Level; A Levels plus a V Level; or a T Level plus a V Level—partly replacing the one-choice-for-life pattern.

Vertically, the system is built for equivalence and articulation. Downwards, it connects to Level 2 foundation qualifications through a transition year, so weaker students can first complete a Level 2 qualification and then enter the Level 3 system. Upwards, all three qualifications sit at the same RQF level with unified UCAS credit-conversion rules, giving universities a fair reference when admitting students from either track. The conversion is an official reference without legal force; Russell Group universities remain cautious.

Along the whole chain, the system links to degree apprenticeships. The apprenticeship framework corresponds to Levels 2–7 of the RQF: higher apprenticeships sit at Levels 4–5 and degree apprenticeships at Levels 6–7, embodying academic–vocational parity. T Level graduates are a major source for high-level technical degree apprenticeships, their placements counting towards parts of the training. The result is a tiered pathway from Level 2 qualifications, through the Level 3 trio, to higher and degree apprenticeships.

4 Boundaries and limitations: contradictions and concerns in implementation

The tension between expansion and quality control is a problem of the reform. As T Levels expand and V Levels approach, coverage grows quickly while supporting resources lag: about 18 percent of the qualified dual-competence teaching posts required for T Levels are currently unfilled, and some institutions have cut hours of practical teaching. The regulatory system, designed around A Level terminal examinations, does not yet cover process-oriented assessment.

Resource allocation is also structurally imbalanced. Firms participate on cost–benefit grounds and favour large cities and large firms: among firms involved in standard setting and placements, large enterprises account for more than 70 percent, while small and medium-sized enterprises contribute less than 20 percent. In the north and rural areas, full vocational course provision is below 60 per cent of that in large cities.

The authority of a qualification also depends on social and cultural attitudes. A 2024 survey commissioned by the Department for Education found that more than 65 per cent of parents regard A Levels as the optimal route to university, and only 12 per cent would prioritize T Levels; vocational qualifications have faced low social recognition since the NVQ system. Even after several years of provision, T Levels account for only 2.3 per cent of post-16 enrollments.

The not-yet-implemented V Levels also carry a risk of unclear positioning. In consultation, over 40 per cent of

colleges and industry representatives feared that, sitting between academic and high-level technical qualifications, a V Level could end up with less academic depth than an A Level and less technical precision than a T Level. There is also an equity risk: students from low-income backgrounds are more likely to drift into vocational routes with low recognition, whereas advantaged children tend to choose A Levels, hardening class divides.

5 Conclusion

The tripartite post-16 qualification system consolidated in 2025 is a significant institutional adjustment within England's liberal market skill formation regime. Faced with the problems revealed after Brexit, the government moved from laissez-faire habits, introducing a new general vocational qualification, unified credit rules and a two-tier regulatory structure to form a configuration where the state sets the stage, employers lead standards and pathways converge. It has partly repaired qualification fragmentation and the academic–vocational divide, forming a ladder from secondary education to degree apprenticeships.

It should equally be recognized that the reform does not break with the underlying logic of the market model, and state compensation has its limits. Structural imbalance in employer participation, regional divergence, lagging social attitudes and quality pressures will persist, and the new V Levels face a risk of unclear positioning. Fine-tuning can ease market failure; it cannot fully overcome the limits of the market regime itself.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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