



Department for Education: Government consultation

Implementation of T level programme

Submission of evidence by the National Foundation for Educational Research

February 2018

Introduction

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) welcomes the opportunity to submit written evidence to the Department for Education's consultation on the implementation of the T level programme. In doing this, we are pleased to contribute to thinking in this priority policy area, which seeks to enable and support young people to make successful transitions from education to employment. In addressing nine of the questions listed in the Call for Evidence, this submission draws on a range of evidence including key publications from NFER's Research Programme and education-to-employment portfolio of projects.

Question 7: Do you agree with the proposed approach integrating the work placement within the T level programme? Yes/No. Please explain your answer.

Yes. We agree that integrating the work placement within the T level programme signifies the centrality of the placement to young people gaining technical knowledge and skills. We believe that a placement directly linked to the content of T level programmes will play a key role in providing students with a high-quality experience.

The importance of an embedded work placement was confirmed by staff and students we interviewed as part of a DfE-commissioned evaluation the National Foundation for Educational research (NFER) carried out of work placement trials which were recommended by the Review of Vocational Education (Wolf, 2011). The trials aimed to test different work placement models for 16 to 19 year olds (e.g. college models based on different placement resourcing and timing approaches).

Sims *et al.*, (2013) found that vocational studies were the driver for the placements in ten case-study colleges, all of which offered students external placements at employer sites. Colleges highlighted the value of work placements being 'meaningful and relevant' to students. Examples included: Animal Care students working at a country park or vets; Health and Social Care students working with speech therapists at a care home or working at a nursery school; Engineering students putting their learning into practice at an engineering company and Creative Arts students helping to edit a local radio programme. Students valued the opportunity to gain experience of a 'real work environment', participating in 'real world' activities and being 'treated like employees' who experienced 'real pressures to deliver'. They said that the work-based contexts enabled them to take responsibility, to put vocational skills into practice and learn technical skills, to develop communication and social

skills and to gain confidence. McCrone *et al.*, (2011) gained similar feedback from students enrolled on 16-19 Diplomas, the majority of whom reported that they had carried out worthwhile tasks in their work placement. They said that they had used skills with employers that they were learning on their Diploma course and that placements had helped them to learn about the types of jobs they could apply for after finishing their Diploma.

Further examples of integrating work placements within an education programme were identified by McCrone *et al.*, (2015) in a DfE-commissioned study of the delivery of 16-19 study programmes. An example was a FE college Digital and Creative Centre which organised BTEC placements based on students undertaking a particular project/piece of work (assignment) to reflect the real world digital creative industry sector. Placement employers specified the content and deadlines of the assignment, including the activities they expected students to complete, what resources they expected them to use and which people they expected them to consult. Prior to students embarking on a placement, employers came into the college and provided master classes and other forms of employability-related support and guidance to students. In addition, to raise the profile and status of work experience, students were required to submit CVs and be interviewed for a placement, reflecting the real-world process and competitive nature of securing employment.

Question 9: Do you agree with the proposed approach to quality assurance set out above? Yes/No – please explain. If no, please explain how we can ensure work placements are quality assured?

Yes. We agree that the approach to quality assurance of work placements in T levels should clearly set out the roles of providers and employers and not be a burdensome process. Findings from NFER research endorse the importance of having a well-developed quality assurance system.

In a top tips guide for senior leaders on how to provide meaningful experience of the world of work for young people as part of 16 to 19 study programmes, McCrone *et al.*, (2015) advise that schools and colleges should have a well-regulated system to record, monitor and review work experience placements. They advocate that schools and colleges should evaluate their work experience offer to ensure that it is meeting its objectives and is reviewed regularly, and that a system is set up for students to reflect on their experiences and how they have benefitted from them.

In a DfE-commissioned evaluation of 16-19 work placement trials conducted by NFER, Sims *et al.*, (2013) presented eight steps to supporting the provision of high-quality work experience. The following steps contribute to quality-assuring work placements:

- Step 7: Monitoring and evaluation against objectives, review and reflection (capturing benefits to students including the variety of work activities undertaken and range of skills gained).
- Step 8: Feedback to employers, including placement impact on learner skills and progress into further education or employment.

Sims *et al.*, (2013) found that colleges placed importance on developing and applying effective methods of monitoring as a way of quality-assuring work placement programmes. College work placement coordinators said that they were embedding this monitoring function in their management processes. They considered that monitoring should capture the

benefits to students, including the variety of work activities undertaken and range of skills gained. Colleges were using a variety of approaches to monitor the impact of work experience. These included collating feedback from students and employers and placement visits by curriculum staff, support staff and work placement coordinators to gather evidence for student portfolios. In their research on work experience, NatCen and SQW (2017) reported that the main tools for work placement monitoring were phone calls and face-to-face visits by school and college staff (e.g. work experience coordinators, heads of year, heads of department/faculty and pastoral staff).

In addition, Sims *et al.*, (2013) found that some colleges were using an electronic Individual Learning Plan (ILP) to record students' qualifications and achievements. Where the ILP included a section for work placement, it allowed students to log details of placements undertaken and the skills developed. The ILP included a template for employers to provide students with a reference which is then attached to the ILP, and provided students with documented evidence of their experience to show potential employers. Other quality assurance monitoring methods included the completion of review sheets by employers on a weekly or fortnightly basis, and post-placement feedback sessions with employers and students. Employers noted that monitoring generally took place informally, through contact between their organisation and college staff (such as the placement coordinator or course leader). In other cases, more formal processes were in place for collating information, such as students logging their skills and achievements or working through work books which were signed off by the employer.

Question 10: What additional support or further modifications should be available to those with greater needs or special circumstances (such as caring responsibilities) during a work placement?

Research by NFER identified a range of additional support that can be provided to young people with greater needs during their work placement, which we consider to be applicable to work placements undertaken as part of T levels. In a DfE-commissioned evaluation of 16-19 work placement trials, Sims *et al.*, (2013) evaluated different models of work placement, including a model focusing on supporting those with learning difficulties and disabilities (LLDD) or vulnerable/disadvantaged students. Nine of the ten case-study colleges used trial funding to support this model. They invested the funding in one or more of the following activities:

- procuring work placements
- providing one-to-one support, which was critical to enabling students to benefit from work experience, that involved supporting them to attend the placement, providing details about what the placements would involve and breaking down what was required so that they felt confident to attend
- resourcing mentors, coaches and support assistants to work with young people and employers to ensure that vulnerable students are protected
- paying for transportation to work placements and accompanying students if necessary
- visiting students on placement.

College staff explained that they attempted to give learners with LDD appropriate and realistic work experience. For example, work experience coordinators spent time working

with students and employers to match-up interests with organisation-type. The importance of identifying an appropriate and accessible sector and occupation was also noted by research on work experience carried out by NatCen and SQW (2017). Sims *et al.*, (2013) found that where students had specific needs, such as LDD, or if they were lower achievers (such as Foundation students), work placement coordinators spent time communicating with employers about their needs in order for an appropriate match to be made. Employers invested time in giving students worthwhile experiences, at the same time as gaining benefits themselves. For example, one employer offering placements to learners with LDD at a country park had a structured programme in place. Each placement took the same format which involved work shadowing, followed by more hands-on work covering different areas.

Question 13: What are the common barriers/challenges for employers to host work placements and how can we support employers to offer work placements?

Research by NFER identified several common barriers and challenges experienced by employers who decide to host work placements. In a DfE-commissioned evaluation of 16-19 work placement trials, Sims *et al.*, (2013) found that bureaucracy was considered to be discouraging some employers interested in providing placements. Employers said that they appreciated tasks such as risk assessments and Disclosure and Barring System (DBS) checks being carried out by college staff. This removed a burden from them and made it easier to encourage their employees to become involved in the delivery of placements. Large companies generally found such formalities less of a burden than smaller employers, but the more that college staff could do to assist in these areas, the more positive employer responses were likely to be.

Related to this was the view that many potentially interested employers were discouraged from offering placements by 'myths', such as needing to have specific insurance for placement students, or having to have all their workforce DBS-checked. If colleges can provide information which clarifies the legal and insurance positions involved in taking 16-19 year-old placement students, it might help to reduce these fears.

Sims *et al.*, (2013) also found that some colleges had targeted particular vocational areas because they wanted to expand their placements to cover certain curriculum areas, such as construction or engineering. However, in two colleges, finding enough placements in these areas was challenging due to employers' perceptions about insurance liabilities. Another college reported difficulties in finding placements for ICT students, which were attributed to data confidentiality issues.

In their research on work experience, NatCen and SQW (2017) reported that schools and colleges found difficulties in securing work placements in the engineering, construction, media and health sectors. The reasons were sector-specific, for example, students' health and safety issues in construction, and confidentiality and safeguarding in the health sector.

Further light was shed on barriers and challenges by McCrone *et al.*, (2015) in a DfE-commissioned study of the delivery of 16-19 study programmes. For example, one of the FE colleges in the study lacked an established tradition and culture of work experience placements (as opposed to internships), and the college's Digital and Creative Centre struggled to procure placements because many businesses in the creative and digital industries are small and medium-sized enterprises, which are commonly less receptive to

engagement. To overcome this, the college successfully created various opportunities to build relationships with the local business community, especially through the college's Employers Advisory Board. This entailed significant amounts of dialogue focusing on the mutually beneficial elements of employers providing work experience placements. Ensuring an employer focus, and promoting a flexible approach, are key to this.

The obstacles to employer engagement, such as the need for DBS checks, health and safety issues and insurance cover are interesting to explore, as some colleges had found these difficult to overcome, whereas others had been successful in dealing with them. The view of the successful colleges was that these concerns were largely the result of a lack of information amongst employers, and that once they were aware, for example, that students were covered by college insurance policies, barriers were reduced. However, there was recognition of the need for colleges to reduce the burden on employers where possible. Colleges that had successfully overcome barriers to engagement were actively carrying out risk assessments, dealing with the processing of DBS checks and ensuring students had the correct insurance cover. College staff felt that employers generally responded very well to having these concerns addressed, additionally, it meant that employers could no longer use them as an excuse not to engage with colleges in relation work placements (which was sometimes thought to be the case).

In several colleges, interviewees commented on the need to overcome initial reluctance from employers to provide placements due to previous negative experiences. In these cases, there was the perception that young people had not been adequately prepared, matched or supported; these factors were considered important for the successful engagement of employers. Overall, the role of the college work experience coordinator was crucial in overcoming any reluctance amongst employers, as well as engaging a sufficient number of them.

In the NFER Top Tips guide for senior leaders on how to provide meaningful experience of the world of work for young people as part of 16 to 19 study programmes, NFER (2015) identified several ways of supporting employers to provide work placements. These included proactively engaging with the needs of local employers and working in partnership with them to prepare young people prior to beginning their work experience placement. It is worth noting that colleges maintaining ongoing partnerships with employers can offer a range of benefits including placement offers, as this Edge Foundation and National Foundation for Education Research (2017) [guide](#) reveals.

Question 14: How do these challenges vary across industries and location types?

Research undertaken by NFER sheds light on how the challenges for employers hosting work placements vary across industrial sectors. McCrone *et al.*, (2015), in a DfE-commissioned study of the delivery of 16-19 study programmes, found examples of colleges encountering challenges in procuring work placements in some employment sectors. An FE college department head found it struggled to obtain placement opportunities in Hair and Beauty, with the Production Arts element, in particular, being most difficult. This was because there were fewer large employers available. The difficulty of finding opportunities for Production Arts students was tackled by thinking creatively – looking out for any events locally that the college could link into. For example, students provided theatrical make-up for

a 'murder mystery week-end', 'medical' make-up for the local hospital, and beauty therapy at local care homes.

Another example identified by McCrone *et al.*, (2015) was a technical college which found it difficult to secure work placements in retail and travel and tourism. The college made considerable inroads into securing the involvement of a wide range of employers through networking activities and a strategy of persistent, targeted contact – especially face-to-face visits. One large employer suggested that this recruitment strategy had been successful because of the time invested in building and maintaining relationships with employers prior to, during and following work experience placements.

Geographical location was raised as an issue amongst college staff interviewed by Sims *et al.*, (2013) as part of their DfE-commissioned evaluation of 16-19 work placement trials. The challenge related to the resistance of students to attending placements outside their immediate neighbourhood. Staff addressed this by inviting employers to attend the college and talk to the students before their placements began. This stimulated students' interest and improved their confidence to take up a work placement in another neighbourhood.

Question 15: How can the range of employers, including SMEs, be better supported to offer work placements for students with additional needs?

Research by NFER identified a range of additional support that can be provided for young people with greater needs during their work placement. In a DfE-commissioned evaluation of 16-19 work placement trials, Sims *et al.*, (2013) evaluated different models of work placement, including a model focusing on supporting those with learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD) or vulnerable/disadvantaged students. The evaluation found that intensive support for both employers and students was considered particularly effective amongst those colleges placing learners with LDD. College staff visited students on placement once (or sometimes twice) a day, or were present for the duration of the placement. In addition, establishing effective communication channels between the college and employer was important to ensure that any issues could be dealt with promptly. It was important for employers to be well briefed on the students joining them for a placement. Some college work experience coordinators asked employers what they would expect of students prior to the placement, in order to help them with necessary preparations such as discussions about time management and appropriate behaviour.

In the work placement trials evaluated by Sims *et al.*, (2013), three case-study colleges were using trial funding to investigate the specific challenges faced by SMEs when offering work placements. Staff in one of the colleges said that they had worked with the local chamber of commerce to contact employers, including SMEs, observing that companies were willing to offer placements and appreciated having their involvement acknowledged. 'Employers want their input to be highlighted, i.e. that they have a social conscience and are a good employer', said one work experience coordinator. Trial funding was used by a college to expand the range of SMEs in the engineering sector which could offer placements. It offered incentives but employers did not want these, preferring alternatives such as the college providing access to college training courses, use of college premises or students with personal protective equipment. Some SMEs are community-based organisations that rely on volunteers, and placement students help to support their workforce. In one of the case studies, the students' placements contributed to the running of a community farm.

Question 25: What support should we consider as part of a transition offer to ensure that students can progress to level 3 study and particularly T levels?

It is important that young people have some knowledge of the workplace in order to help them choose a progression route; if they have not previously had an opportunity to do so, they need to experience the world of work during their transition year. The NFER Teacher Voice Omnibus (2017) revealed uneven access to such experience, reporting that approximately two-fifths (42 per cent) of secondary school senior leaders said that: ‘no pupils [had] experienced a work placement lasting two weeks or more’ (p. 13). Further support should be offered to young people as part of the transition year to ensure that they experience ‘a taster’ of the workplace environment, and have a comprehensive understanding of the range of progression routes open to them.

Additionally, the Omnibus survey of pupils and their parents/carers asked parents/carers who had offered advice or help with consideration of career options, what information sources they had used (Panayiotou *et al.*, 2017): ‘There was a strong tendency for parents/carers to use their own knowledge and experience (84%) or the knowledge and experience of family members and friends (66%)’. This is potentially problematic since young people consult their parents, as well as subject teachers, when making decisions about which routes they might take to progress in to work. In terms of support as part of a transition offer, it is important that parents and subject teachers are able to guide learners to contemporary sources for information about routes to the world of work, and not necessarily leave them to rely on their own knowledge and experience, or that of their parents.

Research by NFER identified the need to improve self-confidence and resilience amongst young people. McCrone *et al.*, (2013) carried out a study for the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) to establish how well providers were able to prepare young people, aged 19 to 24, who were not in education, employment or training (NEET) for apprenticeships and other work. The providers, which included further education colleges, adult education centres, and voluntary and community sector organisations such as Barnardo’s, Rathbone and YMCA, provided learning and support programmes to prepare young people for training and employment. The programmes comprised a combination of developing participants’ employability, basic and foundation skills, counselling and mentoring, career planning, preparation for job interviews and vocational courses offering tasters in technical skills training. The evidence from this research showed that on completion of the programme, the young people were ‘more resilient and better able to plan a productive future’. The findings are directly relevant to the proposed transition year, as one of its purposes is to prevent young people from becoming NEET.

If the activities provided during the transition year include support to improve self-confidence and resilience, as was the programme for NEETs in 2013 (albeit for an older cohort), then the evidence suggests young people will be better able to continue with their education or training in a positive way.

Evidence indicates that the transition year should provide one-to-one support from consistent staff, mentoring, relating basic skills to the world of work and close partnership work. McCrone and Bamford (2016) examined the impact of school-based programmes in place to support students aged 14-16 at risk of temporary disconnection from learning. The study tracked the progress of students on five different support programmes to the end of

Year 11 and concluded that there is considerable evidence that these particular support programmes are successful in re-engaging young people. Although the support programmes differed in their approach to supporting young people, there were key elements common to all approaches which contributed to their success. These included: mentoring; a consistent, dedicated project lead who established a relationship with the young people; group or peer support; enabling young people to see the relevance of their learning to the world of work; and flexibility. These findings suggest that such support mechanisms should be central to the proposed transition year.

Question 28: What information do you think will need to be provided to be able to market T levels effectively to students and parents, and how far in advance of first teaching will it be needed?

NFER's evaluation of the Implementation and Impact of Diplomas highlighted the central role of information, advice and guidance (IAG) to the take-up of Diplomas, levels of learner understanding of, and satisfaction with, the qualification. We consider there is much to be learnt from this experience that can be effectively applied to the marketing of T levels.

Diplomas, introduced in 2008, represented a different, more applied, learning style which incorporated both the theory of a subject and its application. They included learning in the workplace (a minimum of ten days' work experience), and learning through realistic work environments, to enable the development of practical skills and the work-related application of learning.

Drawing on evidence from six of the evaluation reports (which included surveys of learners in 2008, 2009 and 2010 and case-study visits to 15 consortia) Wade *et al.*, (2011) explored the part Diploma-related IAG played in supporting young people to make informed decisions about whether to study for the new qualification. The evidence from learners showed that, in the case of Diplomas, they needed information about: the content of each component of the Diploma; the applied learning style for a Diploma; the equivalence and progression routes and the location(s) of learning. These findings are equally applicable to T levels i.e. the content of each component of the T levels; the applied learning style for a T level; the equivalence and progression routes and the location(s) of learning should be explained to all learners.

In terms of who is best placed to provide such information, Wade *et al.*, (2011) established the value of young people's discussions with staff at school, a Connexions personal adviser and their parents. Those young people who reported that they had undertaken such discussions were significantly more likely than those who had not, to have a better knowledge of Diplomas. Well-informed teachers, career advisers and parents were valuable sources of information for learners. In addition, learners felt that a combination of written information, taster day, first-hand experience of what it would be like to study a Diploma and guided direction from careers advisers were the most effective sources of information.

An example of the effectiveness of adopting a matrix of the strategies outlined above is illustrated by the evidence from three consortia that commenced delivery in 2008. In these consortia, learners were positive about the IAG received, and the recruitment levels to Diplomas had matched or exceeded anticipated take-up. Learners in these consortia were more likely to report that: they had received information via a broad range of methods; the IAG they had received fully covered the content and structure of the Diploma; they had

impartial advice around choosing and decision-making and they had the opportunity formally and informally to seek further information from well-informed teaching staff.

In terms of the timing of the provision of Diploma-related IAG, Wade *et al.*, (2011) suggested that there needs to be a balance between timely provision of information and hands-on experience. For example, providing sufficiently detailed information on Diplomas, so that young people could decide in principle whether they wished to consider the qualification, followed up by more detailed information and taster sessions, enabled learners to refine their choices and ensure they had chosen the correct course for them.

The Diploma evaluation also pointed to the importance of fully informing subject teachers (as well as young people and their parents) about the new qualification *before* its introduction so they could direct young people to appropriate sources of impartial information.

In the longer term, it will be important to track young people into the labour market, and produce information about the relative benefits of taking T levels compared to other qualifications, in terms of further education, employment and wage outcomes. This will enable individuals and employers to make informed decisions about the value of these new routes of study and qualifications.

Question 29: How much engagement do providers currently have with industry professionals in shaping the curriculum, teaching, and training other members of staff?

McCrone *et al.*, (2017) outlined in NFER's evaluation of employer engagement and project-based learning (PBL) in University Technical Colleges that, at its most profound level, some UTCs have developed relationships with employers where they are co-developing and delivering projects in the curriculum. This is associated with PBL whereby specialist theoretical, practical and applied learning is informed by an employer providing an "authentic, engaging and complex question, problem, or challenge". The findings from phase one of this study indicate that there is profound employer involvement present in three UTCs from a sample of ten case studies. The remaining UTCs had considerable employer engagement but not at such a profound level. One interviewee described employer involvement in PBL as "employers take ownership of them [projects]. They [employers] are delivering their challenge [project] and they want it to be great with the kids. That's a completely different dynamic to getting employers to come in and do stuff for schools. It is very important to the employers to make them successful. This is profound employer engagement".

Profound involvement is characterised by employers as: taking 'ownership' of a project, for example by using their company branding to identify the qualification module or unit; inputting into formative assessment and feedback to students; influencing the delivery of curriculum modules/units, for example employers suggest ideas for live briefs or projects and UTC staff ensure they meet the qualification requirements and informing teaching and learning with specialist, current, technical skills and knowledge.

A culture of employer engagement in schools/colleges is essential to prepare young people for today's complex world of work. The Edge Foundation and National Foundation for Educational Research (2017) [guide](#) provides guidance on how to develop employer engagement. For profound engagement to work it requires firstly, mutual understanding of

how employers and educators operate, for example, the pattern of working days and weeks and daily commitments that determine the frequency with which emails are read. Secondly, it needs mutual respect for, and value of, what each bring to the table, such as educators' detailed understanding of qualifications' assessment criteria and employers' awareness of current skills' needs in the workplace. Lastly, it requires senior leaders to be open to working in new and innovative ways, for example, being prepared to give employers ownership of projects.

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