

Making new T levels a success

With the introduction of T levels, the government has signalled one of the biggest shake-ups in the English qualifications system for years. **Dr Claudia Sumner** looks at the evidence of how schools and colleges can work with employers to provide students with effective practical experience – a key part of the new qualifications



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The first tranche of new technical qualifications, known as T levels, will be available to students from 2020. Though T levels are new, there is existing evidence on the operation of work experience placements that can be used to inform the development of one of their key features: meaningful work placements.

In this article we consider what we can learn from that evidence about the contribution of employers in designing and delivering meaningful placements that will contribute to the success of the new qualifications.

In 2016, Lord Sainsbury published a review of technical education in the UK (*Post-16 Skills Plan*, July 2016). He identified “serious problems” with a system that it is “over complex”, and unfit for the 21st century. He said that vocational qualifications had “become divorced from the occupations they should be preparing individuals for”.

The government responded by introducing radical reforms to technical qualifications. It aims to simplify the system for post-16 by offering young people just three routes: academic A levels and the technical options of work-based Apprenticeships or college-based T levels.

What are T levels?

The Department for Education’s (DfE) T level action plan (October 2017) states that T levels are new technical study programmes that will sit alongside Apprenticeships within a reformed skills training system.

The two-year T level study programme will generally be taught full-time in a “classroom, workshop or simulated environment”. The qualification will also include a work placement of up to three months that is intended to build vocational competencies, as well as maths, English and digital skills. Assessment will take place at the end of the programme, leading to a Level 3 T level certificate.

In order to structure and deliver the new, simplified technical routes, the government has drawn up 15 technical occupation routes: four to be delivered through Apprenticeships and 11 through the T level programme. The first three T levels, in digital, childcare and education, and construction will begin in 2020 (for more details, see the DfE’s T level action plan).

Timetable for the introduction of T levels

The first T levels will be available from 2020, with more being rolled out from 2021/22.

- From 2020: Digital; Construction; Education and Childcare.
- From 2021: Legal, Finance and Accounting; Engineering and Manufacturing; Health and Science.
- From 2022: Hair and Beauty; Agriculture, Environment and Animal Care; Business and Administrative; Catering and Hospitality; Creative and Design.

Work placements

Evidence on the way existing and previous work placements operate suggests that employer buy-in through the provision of high-quality work placements could be crucial to the success of the new qualification.

Research by NFER (2013) has identified a number of factors associated with successful work placements.

First, work placements must be meaningful and relevant to students. For example, 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; or creative arts students helping to edit a local radio programme.

Furthermore, students value the opportunity to assume responsibility for tasks. For example, an further education college digital and creative centre 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.

Our research on previous examples of work experience embedded in study programmes for 16 to 19-year-olds also suggests that creating longer work placements directly linked to the content of each T level programme could play a key role in providing students with a high-quality placement (NFER, 2015a).

Organising work placements

It is vital that schools, colleges, employer-organisations and the DfE work together to provide support to employers to identify and overcome any perceived barriers to hosting work placements, such as the need for DBS checks, health and safety issues and insurance cover.

NFER’s *How to provide meaningful experience of the world of work for young people as part of 16 to 19 study programmes* guidance for senior leaders in schools and colleges (2015b) may help those starting to think about designing T level work placements in their own school or college because it identifies several ways of supporting employers to provide work experience, that can also help to inform the setting up of work placements. One excellent example is proactively engaging with the needs of local employers and working in partnership with them to prepare young people before they begin their work placements.

In our exploration of 16 to 19 study programmes, we found that the role of the college work experience coordinator was crucial in overcoming any reluctance among employers to offer work placements, as well as engaging a sufficient number of them.

Monitoring the quality of placements

Ensuring that work placements are high-quality, using college monitoring and support systems, is crucial to ensure that students enjoy and get the most from a successful experience. Schools and colleges can draw on existing evidence to inform their decisions.

Work placement coordinators are increasingly embedding monitoring functions in their management processes (NFER, 2013). Particularly valuable are ways to capture the benefits of the placement for students, such as the variety of work taken and the range of skills gained, which can be done in a number of ways:

- Colleges may help to gather evidence for student portfolios through collating feedback from students and employers with information collected by school/college staff through placement visits or phone calls.
- Some schools and colleges are introducing electronic Individual Learning Plans (ILP) with a section for work placements, where students can log details of placements they have undertaken and the skills they developed. Some ILPs included templates for employers to provide students with a reference – which they can then show potential employers, much like a real reference.
- Colleges can create review sheets to be completed by students and employers on a weekly/fortnightly basis in order to provide evidence of tasks and skills.

experience. This investment was found to maximise young people’s chances of succeeding in their chosen path.

- Providing mentoring for students through a dedicated project lead who establishes a relationship with the young person.

Conclusion

T levels have the potential to offer young people an alternative route to achieving a quality technical qualification. The work placements available through T levels could play an important part in helping young people to develop the skills they will need to succeed in the workplace. Meaningful employer engagement in the design and management of work placements, and careful monitoring of their quality and focus will be important to the success of the new qualification. [SecEd](#)

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Further information

- *Post-16 Skills Plan*, Department for Education & Department for Business Skills and Industry, July 2016: <http://bit.ly/211k4xK>
- *Post-16 technical education reforms: T level action plan*, Department for Education, October 2017: <http://bit.ly/2JqN4hZ>
- *Evaluation of the work experience placement trials*, NFER, October 2013: www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/WEXX01
- *Sharing innovative approaches and overcoming barriers in delivering 16-19 study programmes’ principles: Case study report*, NFER, April 2015a: www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/DFIA01/
- *How to provide meaningful experience of the world of work for young people as part of 16 to 19 study programmes: Top tips for senior leaders in schools and colleges*, NFER, April 2015b: www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/DFIA02/
- *What makes work experience effective?* NFER/SecEd Research Insights article, April 2015: www.sec-ed.co.uk/best-practice/what-makes-work-experience-effective/

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