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.

T he 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 contributions of employers in designing and delivering meaningful placements that will contribute to the success of the new qualifications. We focus on research by NFER (2013, 2015a) on existing work placements, and how employers and schools and colleges work together to improve them.

First, a brief overview of 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 the current A-level and BTEC qualifications, known at T levels, will be introduced across six sectors. They will be delivered at a college, school or an employer’s work placement.

The two-year T level study programme will include an element of a high-quality placement (NFER, 2015a). This placement will contribute to the success of the new qualifications. Placement employers specified the content and deadliness 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 this article we consider what we can learn from that evidence about the contributions of employers in designing and delivering meaningful work placements. We focus on research by NFER (2013, 2015a) on existing work placements, and how employers and schools and colleges work together to improve them.

Evidence on the way existing and previous work placements operate suggests that employer buy-in and engagement with the needs of local employers and working with schools and colleges is crucial for the success of T level work placements. Universities and other post-16 providers (NFER, 2013) 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).

Further information

• Post-16 Skills Plan, Department for Education & Department for Business Skills and Industry, July 2016: http://bit.ly/2Ir4k4x
• Evaluation of the work experience placement trials, NFER, October 2013: www.tdfe.ac.uk/publications/WEX201
• Sharing innovative approaches and overcoming barriers in delivering 16-19 study programmes’ principles and case study report, NFER, April 2015a: www.tdfe.ac.uk/publications/DFA015
• 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.tdfe.ac.uk/publications/DFA012
• What makes work experience effective? NFER/SecEd Research Insights article, April 2015: www.sec-ed.co.uk/best-practice/what-makes-work-experience-effective/

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 (2016b) 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 T levels in their school or college. The guidance also encourages leaders to engage with the needs of local employers and working 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 resistance 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 processes 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, for example:

• to gather student portfolios through collating feedback from students and employers with information collected by school or college staff through work placement or work calls.
• to use schools and colleges’ internal monitoring data.
• to use 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 use to promote employers, much like a real reference.
• to ensure they meet the latest secondary education, best practice guidance and leading commentary

To register, visit
www.sec-ed.co.uk/e-bulletin

RESEARCH INSIGHTS   in association with
National Foundation for Educational Research

Offering the latest secondary education news, best practice guidance and leading commentary

Access all of SecEd’s news, best practice, expert blogs and analysis online.

SecEd TV brings together a range of best practice education videos from across the web. Topics include inspection, good teaching, CPD, leadership & lesson ideas.

Receive regular SecEd e-bulletin updates free of charge.

To register, visit
www.sec-ed.co.uk/e-bulletin

Join the thousands following us on twitter @SecEd_Education