

# T levels: The Future of Technical Education?

November 2021

## Why do we need T levels?

T levels are new technical qualifications in England, designed to create a high-status vocational route for 16-18 year-olds, that can compete with A levels in providing access to university, higher apprenticeships or employment.

The government has committed significant funding to the introduction of T levels, yet T levels currently have small numbers of students. T levels have the potential to transform technical education. However, their future will depend on how their position develops in relation to established qualifications.

This policy briefing considers the background to T levels, how they are different to other educational routes and details early findings from a research project exploring teachers' perceptions of the new qualifications.



T levels have significant government support and are likely to be here to stay. However, they present key challenges for both policymakers and T level providers.

## Recommendations from the research

### For policymakers:



#### Recommendations

- Recognise the tension between raising the status of technical education and maintaining inclusive routes for all 16–18-year-olds.
- Consider how appropriate highly specialized routes are for students unsure of their desired career path at the age of 16.
- Evaluate the impact of end of course, exam-based assessment on the recruitment and retention of students.
- Address the practical implications of requiring large numbers of students to complete extended work placements.

### For T level providers:



#### Considerations

- Recruiting and retaining teachers able to teach the specialist elements of T levels.
- Ability and resources to develop strong relationships with employers so they understand the benefits of accepting students on placement.
- Dealing with increased competition for high-quality placements as the number of students taking T levels increase.
- Adapting to a shifting qualifications landscape in which new transitional routes for students may be necessary.

## Background to T levels

T levels derive directly from the **2016 Sainsbury Report's** recommendations for an employer-focused, high-status qualification to rival academic A levels. Many other vocational/technical qualifications have been developed but few have lasted, BTEC being a notable exception. The government recently announced its **intention to remove a large number of BTEC qualifications** by 2025.

The government has a vision of mainstream education for 16-18-year-olds that is restricted to three pathways: T levels, A levels, and apprenticeships. To achieve this vision, the government has invested very significantly in professional development and resources for the first wave of T level providers. More strikingly, the government is allowing only one awarding body for each T level to prevent proliferation of courses. These decisions distinguish the implementation of T levels from what has gone before.

## What do T levels offer?



T levels are designed as post-GCSE qualifications that will normally take two years (full-time) to achieve. Each T level is equivalent to three A levels, and they have related UCAS points, allowing application to university.

The government plans involve a gradual introduction of different subject areas and only three subject areas/pathways were launched in 2020:

- Design, surveying and planning for construction
- Digital production, design and development
- Education and childcare.

By September 2023 there should be 15 industry-related pathways available. It was estimated the first wave would recruit around 2500 students, but, partly because of the pandemic, around half that number were on course in 2020-21.

GCSEs

A levels

T levels

Apprenticeships

T levels involve

80%

College - or school-based provision (around 1800 hours)

20%

Placements in industry (at least 315 hours; 750 hours for the education and childcare pathway).

“ I love the concept of them, I love the idea of students being able to combine industry placement with classroom learning. But, and I'm speaking just in my personal capacity here, at the moment they seem to be a bit of a niche product. ”  
(Teacher of Digital)

HudCRES researchers Kevin Orr and Rachel Terry are carrying out a study (from March to November 2021), funded by the Education and Training Foundation, to find out what teachers of T levels from colleges across England think of the qualifications in comparison to other qualifications.

## The research findings

These findings are based on interviews with 14 teachers in 11 Further Education colleges, not all of whom had started to teach the qualifications. As these teachers are among the early adopters of T levels, they may not be representative of all T level teachers.

## Teachers' perceptions of T levels



- Teachers see the qualifications as offering a distinctive, specialist option for students who know which career path they intend to take. This is particularly evident in Construction and Health, where teachers value the specialist routes available.
- In other subjects, such as Digital and Business, teachers are less enthusiastic, questioning how T levels will boost the students' prospects for employment or further study.
- T levels are seen to be more closely tied to industry than other qualifications at this level, enabling students to tackle practical problems and to demonstrate their ability to perform 'on the job'.
- The placement requirement is viewed as a strength, even where it presents challenges for colleges.
- Teachers view T levels as more challenging than existing level 3 qualifications, partly because of their content but also because they include exams. This affects which students are recruited to the qualifications as they need GCSE grades equivalent to those required for A level study.

“ I was very surprised and impressed, I think, by the amount that the students were expected to cover in the T level. You know, it was quite an extensive specification and covered a wide range of knowledge. ”

(Teacher of  
Construction)

“ Placement providers will unanimously say that their best practitioners are generally not the most academic. They are the young people who have got empathy, who have got patience, who have got an absolute desire to work with young children. ”

(Teacher of  
Childcare)

“ I don't think it's got currency yet. I think if I went to an employer and said, 'so what do you think about the T levels then?' there would be many who don't know. I think I would find a lot who know about A-levels. I think I would find a considerable number who know about BTECs. ”

(Teacher of  
Digital)

# Find out more about the research



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## About the researchers :



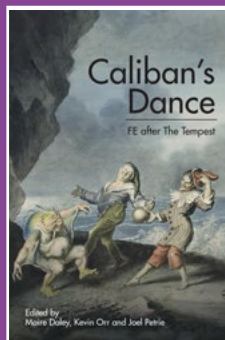
Kevin Orr is Professor of Work and Learning. His research focuses on technical and vocational education and training. He is an editor of the Journal of Vocational Education and Training.

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Dr Rachel Terry is Senior Lecturer in TESOL. Her research focuses on the professional learning of teachers in further education.

<https://pure.hud.ac.uk/en/persons/rachel-terry>



[Daley, M., Orr, K. and Petri, J.e \(Eds\) \(2020\) Caliban's Dance: FE after The Tempest](#)

[Orr, K. \(2020\) A future for the further education sector in England, Journal of Education and Work 33 \(7-8\), 507-514](#)

[Bathmaker, A.-M., Orr, K. \(2020\) Epilogue: the elusive pursuit of distinctiveness and equity through higher vocational education, International Journal of Training Research 18 \(2\), 179-183](#)

[Hanley, P and Orr, K \(2019\) The recruitment of VET teachers and the failure of policy in England's further education sector, Journal of Education and Work 32 \(2\), 103-114](#)

Learning in institutional contexts: A case study of recently qualified in-service teachers in English further education (March 2021). Author: Rachel Terry (Unpublished Doctorate).

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