

T-levels: Too big to fail?

Martin Allen

The Government continues to roll out its programme of T-levels, the new technical qualifications in England, originating from a review commissioned by David Cameron and then a White Paper published by Teresa May.

The first 3 T Levels were launched in September 2020, in digital, construction and childcare. A further 7 began in September 2021 (2 more digital routes, 2 more in construction and 3 in health and science). In September of this year, another 6 will be launched, with the remaining 7 in 2023 (plans have just been announced to introduce a 24th T in marketing for 2025). Meanwhile the Department for Education has published a list of around 450 institutions that have committed to delivering them.

According to the Department, 1,300 students started a T Level in 2020 and a further 950 enrolled on a 'Transition Programme' (a one-year course for students without appropriate entry qualifications, though Maths and English requirements have now been dropped) with 5,450 more registrations last September. The slow speed of the roll-out (only 80 centres are currently involved in delivery) means these figures cannot be considered representative, but media reports have claimed many providers have undershot recruitment targets – particularly for construction, with a sixth form in Surrey said to have only one student! With well over 4000 institutions offering post-16 education, the size of the take up needs to be kept in perspective.

The list of potential providers also shows many centres, particularly schools, offering just one or two Ts. This is because the infrastructure requirements to provide the full range, for example, the hairdressing and beauty and the agricultural and animal care routes due to start in 2023, are well beyond most schools. (Originally the Ts were going to be restricted to a handful of 'specialist' FE colleges, but now any provider with at least a 'Good' Ofsted rating is eligible to sign up).

BTEC courses due to be axed

But with Rishi Sunak having announced £1.6 billion for developing T-levels for up to 100,000 students and over 150 building projects from sports therapy rooms and construction workshops to new 'digital hubs' already sanctioned, for many, T-levels are already 'too big to fail' and the government is playing for high stakes. So much so, it wants to make the Ts the only alternative to academic A-levels and has already published a list of around 150 technical and vocational qualifications with content that overlaps with that of the first ten Ts which will have funding withdrawn from 2024. While many of these awards have low student uptake and may not be financially viable, the list also includes extremely popular courses such as the level 3 BTEC health and social care diploma – several thousand students are due to complete this year – and BTEC engineering certificates. *FE Week* has estimated that 66,000 students – a tenth of those on vocational courses will be affected, but the list will almost certainly be extended to include business studies courses (the most popular vocational qualifications) when more of the Ts are rolled out.

Can the extended work placements be guaranteed?

It is the mandatory 45 work placement (which will be done in the second year) that differentiates T-levels from previous full-time vocational and technical qualifications.

To refer to the DfE 2021 T-level Action Plan:

‘The industry placement will help students to refine their technical and practical skills, knowledge and behaviours, ensuring they are ‘work ready’. T Level graduates will be an attractive proposition for many employers’

Yet despite the offer of a £1000 fee for each placement there are serious concerns about its feasibility, compounded by a more general lack of awareness, but also, lack of interest, amongst individual employers and many others about T-levels. The UK Secretary of State for Education Nadhim Zahawi recently toured media channels sporting a ‘TL’ lapel badge. According to some sources, at least one confused commentator mistakenly believed the TL stood for “Tory Leader” and that Zahawi was beginning a leadership pitch!

Because of the absence of any coordinated work placement scheme for young people in England, work placements have tended to last just a week or two and be left to individual schools and colleges to arrange. There have also been reports of supportive employers being persuaded to take more students than intended because of the reluctance of others, resulting in placements invariably being of lower quality.

If placement lengths need to be reduced, as some now argue, the potential of the qualification and in particular, its attractiveness to young people, will be seriously undermined. But once again, with so few T-level students in the system (and with students being allowed to take part of their placements ‘remotely’ because of Covid restrictions) it will be some time before there is an accurate picture of what is really happening with this aspect of the Ts.

Elite universities give Ts the thumbs down.

The Ts sit between A-levels and workplace-based apprenticeships. Wanting to emphasise that they can also serve as alternative routes to university study, the DfE has published a list of over a hundred Higher Education providers recognising them as entrance qualifications. Yet with one or two exceptions, ‘Elite’ universities have stated they will not accept them as entrance qualifications. Without an endorsement across HE, efforts to convince audiences that ‘Ts levels will be as famous as gold standard As’ will come to little. While top universities have never given vocational qualifications across the board backing, students following BTEC modules have at least been able to combine them with A-levels to improve their acceptance chances.

Will another round of vocational qualifications create better jobs?

But it is T-levels ability to facilitate the transition to skilled/technician level employment that continues to be the longer-term aspiration for the government. Alongside the proposals in

the last years FE White Paper, the Ts are part of a plan to create what some have termed a new 'technical elite'. Yet, as argued previously¹, this is a misreading of the requirements of 21st century economies and the occupational structures they are generating – where, largely, though not exclusively because of developments in automation and AI, 'middle-jobs' are declining and instead of being required to 'upskill', more young people are being 'pushed down' the occupational structure. We are also regularly reminded by government that it is unlikely future generations will be able to remain employed in one sector and that the likelihood of a 'job for life' will no longer exist. If this is the case then it seems absurd to expect anybody to lock themselves in a specific occupational pathway at 16.

In other European countries vocational pathways have provided a 'licence to practice' or have led to guaranteed employment. Without these, thousands of young people (over 40% of the cohort) will continue to opt for higher education. In this scenario, where better paid, higher skilled jobs do exist, there are more than enough graduates to fill them. In constantly emphasising 'skills deficits' government plans also downplay other important factors that improve workplace productivity, like continued investment in new technology, research and development and above all, state intervention in the economy through a proper industrial strategy.

¹ Martin Allen *Another round of vocational qualifications won't create better jobs* PSE no 103