

What do students really think about T Levels?

A qualitative research study by the Edge Foundation in collaboration with Professor Kevin Orr

July 2024

About the research

In **January 2023**, the Edge Foundation commenced a qualitative research project, taking a deep dive into the experiences and viewpoints of learners across various T Level courses. We explored their day-to-day college experiences with their course, work placements, aspirations, and their perspectives on achieving career goals post-T Level completion.

Between **October 2023 and May 2024**, we visited 11 colleges across England, speaking to a total of 210 students and 24 teachers and wider staff (e.g. SLT, industry liaison officers or curriculum managers). We conducted:

- **28 focus groups** with Foundation Level, Year 1 and Year 2 students who began their courses in 2022 and 2023; and
- **13 semi-structured interviews** with teachers and staff, supporting T Level students.

This interim report aims to shed light on some of the emerging themes from these interactions. The final report, coming out in **Autumn 2024**, will examine these themes in greater detail.

What is a T Level?

T Levels are a 2-year course which are taken after GCSEs and are broadly equivalent in size to 3 A Levels. Launched in September 2020, these courses have been developed in collaboration with employers and education providers so that the content meets the needs of industry and prepares students for entry into skilled employment, an apprenticeship or related technical study through further or higher education. T Levels offer students practical and knowledge-based learning at a school or college and on-the-job experience through an industry placement of at least 315 hours – approximately 45 days.

A word on the policy context

Since their introduction in September 2020, T Levels (and the roll-out) have been subjected to close scrutiny, but face renewed attention due to recent policy changes.

In December 2023, then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced plans to overhaul 16-19 education and introduce the Advanced British Standard (ABS) over the next decade - a baccalaureate-style programme that would supersede but maintain "the best elements" of A Levels and T Levels. Under the consultation plans, the ABS (occupational) pathway proposed some specialisation in a particular sector and an industry placement, resembling a T Level. Technical subjects available under the ABS would be based on the same employer standards as T Levels.

The numbers of students taking T Levels are concerningly low, even for a new qualification. In the 2023-24 academic year, just over 16,000 students enrolled across 18 T Level courses, with plans to expand to 21 subjects from September 2024.¹ Recent figures from the Department for Education (DfE) point to high non-completion rates of T Levels: only two-thirds of entrants in 2021-22 completed their course and assessments within the standard two-year timeframe.² The DfE has since announced a route-by-route review of T Level content and assessment to support access and retention.³

As part of wider plans to simplify the post-16 qualifications landscape, the previous Government also commenced the defunding of certain Applied General Qualifications (AGQs), such as BTECs, deemed by the Department for Education to "overlap" with T levels. Critics have highlighted the potential impact of this on student choice. Of those students who switched from a T Level to another technical course in 2021, 90% chose a course that is due to be defunded by 2026.⁴

In Opposition, the Labour Party pledged to pause and review the defunding of certain Level 3 qualifications. To date, no commitment has been made to scrap T Levels or replace them through the ABS.

Emerging Findings

1. Students were being steered into T Levels, rather than making their own, informed choice.

Throughout the research many students described having been given information about their T Level which turned out to have been misleading, which raises the issue of adequate advice and guidance. We will examine this more fully in the final report. Considering that T Levels are still new, colleges and schools relied on information they have received from DfE. Consequently, many students found that the actual experience of their T Level course diverged significantly from the expectations set by these sources. They were 'sold' something different. This resulted in a mixture of student feelings and attitudes, ranging from satisfaction with their course to dissatisfaction stemming from the perceived limitations of their actual T level course on their career prospects due to their sometimes narrow focus.

2. T Levels are not well established - and this is affecting young people's opportunities after completion.

Some students expressed concerns about their options following completion of their T Levels. Students cited the "newness" of the T Level qualification as justification for any perceived shortcomings in their T Level courses. They referred to instances such as style of teaching (PowerPoints, rote learning), limited subject specific teacher knowledge, high teacher turnover, absence of textbooks for certain courses and the lack of past papers for exam preparation. These challenges affected their experience of T Levels. While some students were more apprehensive about their prospects after completing their T Levels, others adopted a wait-and-see approach, remaining open to potential opportunities rather than having a fixed career trajectory in mind.

¹ *Financial Times*. (2024). *low T-levels uptake in England prompts calls for urgent reform of qualification*. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/eb36f4ab-28ce-4083-9b1c-626b19cf3444>

² DfE. (2024). *T Level Action Plan 2023 to 2024*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6627c087d29479e036a7e68e/T_Level_Action_Plan_2023_to_2024.pdf

³ *FE Week*. (2024). *DfE launch T Level review after 'worrying' drop-out rates*. Available at: <https://feweek.co.uk/dfe-launch-t-level-reviews-amid-worrying-drop-out-rates/>

⁴ *FE Week* (2024). *Revealed: Most T Levels drop outs Switch to axed courses*. Available at: <https://feweek.co.uk/revealed-most-t-level-drop-outs-switch-to-axed-courses/>

3. Industry placements are students' favourite part of the T Level yet, in practice they have revealed many issues.

Industry placements were a key selling point for students embarking on a T level. However, many issues surfaced during the course of their T Level studies. Delays in commencing placements were common, sometimes extending into the second year, attributable to the limited pool of employers available to allocate to students and difficulty making contacts and making employers aware of what a T Level entails. This delay caused stress among students as they struggled to complete the mandatory 45 industry placement days required for the qualification. Furthermore, the quality of the industry placements came into question across many T Level courses. Students often found themselves assigned tasks that did not align with their T Level curriculum because employers frequently lacked sufficient information about T Levels. Tracking and facilitating communication regarding students' activities at their workplace proved challenging for both students and teachers, with the perception that this issue lay beyond the college's sphere of influence. However, experiences varied across sectors and for some students workplace experience developed their confidence and skills in their chosen route.

4. There is ambiguity in the teaching style and structure of T Levels.

A certain degree of uncertainty characterises the teaching approach within T Level courses. Teachers expressed challenges in determining the content to be covered, particularly in instances where textbooks were unavailable. Consequently, teachers relied on

their existing knowledge and expertise to devise suitable curricula and instructional methods for their T level classes, and they often used textbooks developed for apprenticeships for additional support. This is not necessarily problematic, however. Arguably T Levels allow flair and ingenuity for teachers with the confidence and knowledge to plan for their own students. Assessment looms large over the course, influencing both the instructional style adopted and the considerations made by teachers. Many students voiced dissatisfaction with the teaching and learning style employed, highlighting its heavy emphasis on theory with limited opportunities for practical, hands-on work. Which was not what they had anticipated or what they had been told.

What Next?

The final report will be published in Autumn 2024 where some of the direct experiences of current T Level students and the lessons we can learn from these experiences will be shared. The report will share further findings of this research along with Edge's recommendations. Get in touch with Edge to discuss this research further by emailing research@edge.co.uk.

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