



Student Voices: what are students saying about their experiences of T Levels?

Dana Dabbous
Josh Patel
Kat Emms
Andrea Laczik
Kevin Orr
Holly Papworth
Sorah Gluck
Olly Newton

December 2024



Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the colleges, staff and students who participated in this study for their valuable time and input in the focus group and individual interviews.



About Edge

The world is changing fast and education needs to keep up. Edge is an independent, politically impartial education foundation. We want education to be relevant to the twenty-first century. We gather evidence through research and real world projects and partnerships and use this to lead the debate and influence policy and practice.

Edge believes all young people need to be equipped with the skills that today's global, digital economy demands, through a broad and balanced curriculum, high quality training, engaging real world learning and rich relationships between education and employers.

Visit www.edge.co.uk to find out more.



Reference as: D. Dabbous., J. Patel., K. Emms., A. Laczik., K. Orr., S. Gluck., H. Papworth., O. Newton. (2024). Student Voices: what are students saying about their experiences of T Levels? London: The Edge Foundation.

Contents

Foreword – Alice Gardner	4
Executive Summary	5
Introduction and Policy Context	7
About the Research	8
Methodology	10
Findings	12
1. Why do students decide to take T Levels?	12
Decision making and influences	12
Appeal of work placements	13
Misinformation and lack of clarity	14
Student excerpts	15
2. Students' experiences of T Level delivery	16
Challenges of a new qualification	16
Diversity in teaching style	17
Variability in success in finding placements and engaging with employers	20
Student and tutor excerpts	22
3. Students' experience of T Level placements	23
Challenges	23
Positives	26
Student and tutor excerpts	28
4. Intended student destinations and perceived preparedness	29
Conclusion	31
Recommendations	33
References	36

Foreword – Alice Gardner



This latest research report captures the voices of those at the heart of the T Level experience: students and educators. At Edge, we are deeply committed to understanding how this ambitious programme is shaping the future of technical education in England.

As a rigorous pathway into employment, apprenticeships or higher education, T Levels represent an opportunity to bridge the gap between classroom learning and the skills demanded by the labour market and elevate the status of vocational education. However, as with any new qualification, their success depends on constant learning, adaptation, and the willingness to listen to those directly affected.

This report offers policymakers the chance to do exactly that. By engaging with over 200 T Level students and hearing from staff across Further Education colleges, it provides a comprehensive picture of both the opportunities and obstacles these qualifications present. The findings, which are particularly timely with the outcome of the Government's focused review of Level 3 qualification reform imminent, help to shed light on the key priorities of policymakers: supporting access to and retention on T Levels, ensuring high-quality teaching, aligning course delivery with student and employer needs, and making work placements a successful cornerstone of the T Level offer.

The insights captured here highlight the transformative potential of T Levels, especially in fostering career confidence and practical expertise. Yet they also illuminate challenges that cannot be overlooked, from inconsistencies in teaching approaches to the difficulties some students face in securing relevant placements. These are lessons we must take seriously to ensure that T Levels fulfill their promise.

Crucially, this report also reminds us of the value of student voice in shaping education and skills policy. By amplifying their perspectives, we can create an education system that not only meets the expectations of young people but also equips them to thrive in the fast-moving world of work.

As we work to refine and expand the T Level programme, we hope this report serves as both a guide and a call to action. It is through listening to students and responding to their experiences that we can make T Levels a truly world-class qualification.

Alice Gardner

Chief Executive, The Edge Foundation



Executive Summary

This report presents an in-depth examination of students' experiences with T Levels, a relatively new technical qualification introduced in 2020 as a vocational alternative to A Levels. The T Level programme aims to equip post-16 learners with specific occupational skills and work-based learning through classroom-based study and industry placements. Through 30 focus groups with 210 T Level students and 12 interviews with 24 college staff across 11 Further Education colleges, this report amplifies the critical voices of students, revealing both the promise and challenges of the T Level qualification. Listening to these firsthand accounts is essential, as it provides insight into how well the programme meets student expectations, aligns with career aspirations and prepares them for future employment or further education.

Key Findings

1. Why do Students take T Levels?

- **Influence and Information:** Many students chose T Levels due to school or college guidance, family influence or the appeal of industry placements. Information received about T Levels was often unclear and this limited awareness. It occasionally led students to feel misinformed about T Levels, including regarding their expectations of the balance between practical and theoretical learning.
- **Appeal of Industry Placement:** The work placement component was a major attraction promising real-world experience and a competitive edge in the job market. However, variability in placement quality sometimes left students feeling unsupported.

2. Students' Experience of T Level Delivery

- **Challenges of a New Qualification:** The novelty of T Levels has led to inconsistent delivery across courses and colleges, largely due to limited resources, high tutor turnover and a lack of established teaching practices. This variability affected students' understanding of course requirements and diminished their confidence in the programme.
- **Diversity of Teaching Styles:** The lack of a clear guide for tutors for various T Level courses has led to diverse teaching methods being utilised. While some students valued project-based and interactive learning, many expressed frustration with lecture-heavy methods and limited practical activities. Tutor familiarity with T Levels was inconsistent, and the high stakes associated with end-of-year exams further contributed to a heavy theoretical focus in year one.

3. Students' Experience of T Level Placements

- **Positive experiences due to increased employability:** Work placements were often praised for providing students with practical skills, exposure to the workplace, and real-world experiences, yet significant challenges emerged in organising and securing these placements.
- **Relevance and task matching:** Students reported that placements varied widely in relevance. While some placements were highly aligned with students' fields of study, others felt they were performing tasks unrelated to their learning which detracted from the experience.

4. Intended Student Destinations and Perceived Preparedness

- **Diverse Destinations:** T Level students have diverse goals, with many planning to attend university, pursue apprenticeships, or directly enter the workforce. Apprenticeships were an appealing option, especially for students who preferred practical experience.
- **Confidence in Job Readiness:** Students generally felt that T Levels provide a solid foundation for employment thanks to the industry placement component which builds confidence and practical skills.

Importance of Student Voice

The student voice is invaluable in understanding the real impact of T Levels. Their insights shed light on the strengths and shortcomings of T Levels, revealing how policies affect their learning, career preparation and future opportunities. Engaging students directly in discussions about their education fosters a sense of agency and inclusion ensuring that education reforms remain student-centred and relevant to real-world needs. The feedback from T Level students underscores the importance of responsive policies and improved communication across educational institutions as well as enhanced coordination with employers for a more consistent and rewarding experience.



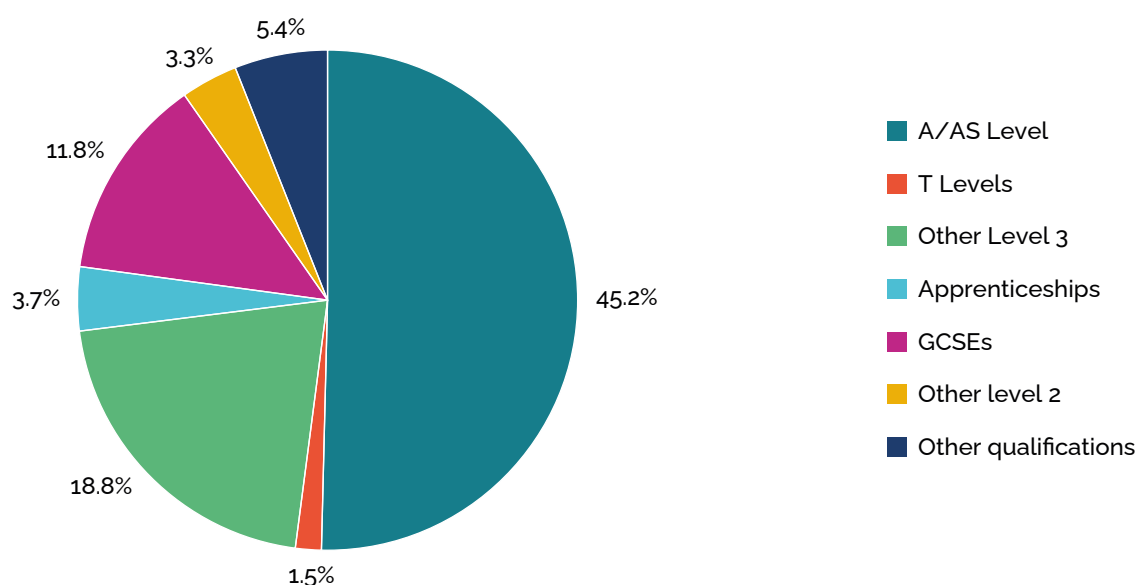
Introduction and Policy Context

T Levels are a technical route available for post-16 learners to study towards an occupational specialism and acquire the skills needed by employers and the economy. They are two-year programmes and 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. T Level qualifications may lead to university, further studies or employment.

T Levels were introduced in 2020, with the well-intentioned ambition of bringing some much-needed simplicity to the 16-19 technical and vocational qualifications landscape (alongside a policy of defunding certain other Level 3 qualifications), and to place technical education on an equal footing – not least in name – with A Levels. T Levels have their roots in the Sainsbury Review of 2016, which recommended that the Government introduce 'a coherent technical education option which develops the technical knowledge and skills required to enter skilled employment' (p.8) as part of Lord Sainsbury's vision to deliver 'a world-class system of technical education' (Sainsbury et al., 2016, p.6).

Up to 2024/5, [£1.75 billion is expected to be spent on the T Level programme](#). Despite this investment in their infancy, T Levels are yet to find their place as a viable option in the post-16 landscape. [The Edge Foundation's own polling with Public First conducted in early 2024](#) revealed that 51% of adults in England had not heard of T Levels. Take-up remains low, with just 11,935 students having completed a T Level to date ([DfE, Provisional T Level results 2023/24](#)), while T Levels made up just 1.5% of the qualifications taken by 16-17 year olds in 2023 (See Figure 1).

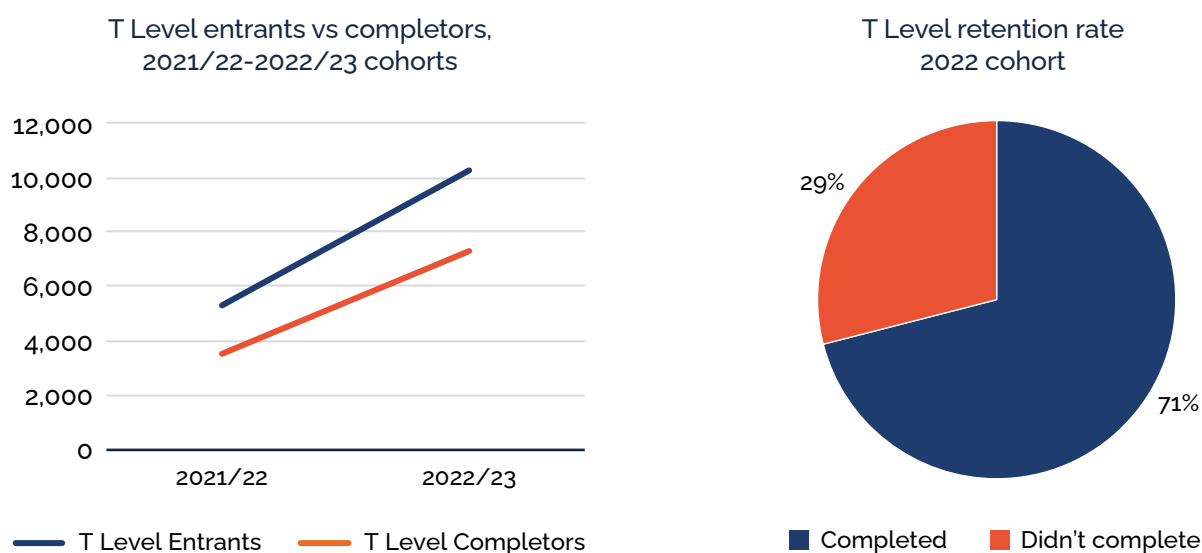
Figure 1: Highest qualification aim of 16-17 year olds, 2023



Source: [DfE, Participation in education, training and employment age 16 to 18](#)

Perhaps most significantly, only 71% of the 2022 cohort completed their T Level in 2024 (see Figure 2). While this is a notable improvement from the 66% completion rate of the 2021 cohort, it is still far below the retention rates in other Level 3 courses which stand at above 90%.

Figure 2: T Level Participation Rates



Source: [DfE, Provisional T Level results 2023/24](#)

Often described as a 'chunky' qualification (equivalent to three A Levels) by design, their size limits students' ability to 'mix and match' a T Level with other Level 3 qualifications, such as BTECs and A Levels. [The Edge Foundation's recent policy report](#) indicates the importance the public place on breadth and choice in 16-19 education, particularly for those students who may not be certain of their chosen career pathway. We welcomed [Minister Jacqui Smith's relaxation of the rules](#) around which qualifications may be deemed as 'overlapping' with T Levels, and therefore, defunded, under the accelerated Pause and Review of the policy:

Where the review identifies the balance of learner and employer needs within a sector requires level 3 qualifications other than T Levels and A Levels, we will maintain the relevant qualifications. This may well be in areas that overlap with T Levels, which is a change from the approach taken by the last government (Minister Jacqui Smith in FE Week, September 30, 2024).

About the Research

To investigate how T Levels have been implemented and delivered, this study spoke to and listened to T Level students themselves. Including student voice is essential in qualifications' reform because students are the primary stakeholders affected by these changes. The use of student voice in research is not new and supports strengthening students' choice and participation in education (see Jones & Hall, 2022; Rudd et al., 2006). Student insights can reveal how current qualifications align with their learning needs, aspirations and real-world skills. Listening to students also promotes a sense of agency and inclusion, fostering a system that is responsive to their perspectives and experiences (Laczik et al., forthcoming). Ultimately, incorporating student feedback in qualifications' reform can lead to more effective, relevant qualifications that respond to students' needs and prepare them for the future.

The findings from our in-depth focus groups and interviews with T Level students and tutors compliment the quantitative findings captured through the Technical Education Learner Survey (NatCen, NFER, 2024). Our research contributes by adding greater insight and further detail into what is working well and what might need further attention to improve T Level students' experiences and, ultimately, increase retention and improve outcomes.

The Department for Education acknowledged the need for 'further measures' to 'support access and retention' and make the programme more 'manageable' for the effective scale-up of T Levels, by announcing a 'route-by-route' review of content and assessment in the [T Level Action Plan 2024](#). With IfATE's powers in the process of being formally transferred to Skills England (at the time of writing), the timeline for this review is not yet clear.

This report also sits against a backdrop of efforts by the Department for Education and Ofsted (together with the Education and Training Foundation, Association of Colleges and the Strategic Development Network) to address challenges with the teaching and learning of T Level content, as well as securing and maintaining consistency across industry placements. More information can be found at:

- [T Levels support for schools and colleges](#)
- [T Levels and industry placement support for employers](#)
- The digital [Connect service](#), which supports local providers and employers to connect with each other
- [Student guide for preparing for industry placements](#)
- [Industry placement delivery guidance](#)

Methodology

The aim of this study was to explore in depth the experiences of T Level students by engaging directly with them and amplifying their voices. Students' perspectives can reveal the strengths and limitations of current programmes, highlighting areas that may need adjustment to better meet learners' needs. With this aim, we developed the following research questions to guide the study:

1. Why are learners choosing to undertake a T Level?
2. What do learners' experiences look like on the T Level course?
3. How do college tutors/T Level leads perceive their experiences on T Level courses?

A qualitative approach was adopted collecting data through 11 Further Education colleges. We asked colleges if we could interview students across different T Level courses and across Year 1, Year 2 and Foundation Level, along with one or two T Level tutors. Colleges provided us access to participants who were happy to take part in the study (see Table 2 for a breakdown of courses). In total, we conducted 30 focus group interviews with students and 12 semi-structured interviews with college staff. Interviews took place between October 2023 and May 2024 with students who began their courses in 2022 and 2023. This led to a total of 234 participations, of which 210 were T Level students and 24 members of college staff (see Table 1).

Table 1: Breakdown of participants interviewed

Colleges	Tutors	Students	SLT & other staff	Total
College 1	2	10	0	12
College 2	2	20	0	22
College 3	1	35	1	37
College 4	1	8	0	9
College 5	1	15	0	16
College 6	1	10	2	13
College 7	6	64	0	70
College 8	1	14	0	15
College 9	1	9	1	11
College 10	3	9	0	12
College 11	1	16	0	17
Total	20	210	4	234

Due to confidentiality, we will not reveal the colleges that took part in the study, as we provided anonymity to the students and staff who took part. The Edge Foundation follows the British Education Research Association Ethical Guidelines 2024 concerning issues such as informed consent, anonymity of interviewees, confidentiality of research data and data protection. The Edge Foundation also adheres to the EU's GDPR introduced in May 2019. Anonymised excerpts from tutor and student interviews will be used throughout this report to support the findings.

Table 2: Breakdown of T Level courses interviewed

Course Name	Year 1	Year 2	Foundation Level	Total
Accounting	4	2		6
Building Services and Engineering for Construction	11			11
Business (Management and Administration)	25	17	10	52
Design, Surveying and Planning for Construction	14	14		30
Design and Development for Engineering and Manufacturing	20			20
Digital Production, Design and Development	11			11
Education and Early Years	1	2		3
Engineering, Manufacturing, Processing and Control	15			15
Health (Social Care)	11	9		20
Health (Nursing)	9			9
Maintenance, Installation and Repair for Engineering and Manufacturing	20			20
Onsite Construction	2	5		7
Science (Laboratory Technician)	9			9
TOTAL	151	49	10	210

The data we gathered demonstrates the engagement and insight of the young people involved in the study. They were bright, articulate and often thoughtful about their experiences of these qualifications. Inevitably, however, the wider experience of these young people is limited and they cannot, for example, reference other similar qualifications or courses. There is, nonetheless, evidently value in listening to students' voices to inform the evaluation and development of T Levels.

The study adopted a thematic analysis to the data, and this has informed the structure of the report. The report will discuss the findings in three sections:

- 1. Why do students decide to take T Levels?**
- 2. Students' experiences of T Level delivery**
- 3. Students' experiences of T Level work placements**






Each of the finding's sections will be supported by quotations from the student and tutor interviews. This will be followed by a discussion of students' intended destinations after they complete their T Level and students' perceived preparedness for these destinations. The report will end with overall recommendations by The Edge Foundation to improve T Levels and consequently students' experiences of them.

Findings

1. Why do students decide to take T Levels?

In this study, T Level students were asked where they received information about the qualification and what attracted them to pursue it. Students cited a variety of sources, as outlined in Table 3, including advertisements, school information advice and guidance, college open days, college websites and word of mouth.

Table 3: Sources of information when choosing a T Level

School Information Advice and Guidance	College Website	College Open Day	Advert/ Poster	Family and Friends
				

When asked specifically why they chose to undertake a T Level, their reasons varied. Most interviewees mentioned being influenced by college staff guidance during college open days, the appeal of the work placement component, and the potential pathways a T Level could offer, such as progression to university. Despite this, a recurring theme emerged: many students felt misled in some respect. Students lacked clarity on key aspects of the T Level course. This included the balance between practical and theoretical learning, future opportunities, and the quality of work placements.

Decision making and influences

In most focus groups, students indicated that they initially intended to pursue other qualifications, such as BTECs or apprenticeships, but were swayed toward T Levels by tutors, family members or college staff. One participant explained that their mother recommended T Levels after hearing about them through advertisements, showing how family input also played a role in some students' decisions. College staff were also key influences for the large majority of students. For instance, one student described being advised to take the T Level course after coming to apply for a BTEC, citing the appeal of project-based work and work placements not offered in the BTEC programme. Another student similarly mentioned being convinced by college staff who highlighted the work-related opportunities associated with T Levels, such as placements and hands-on experience. Frequently, interviewees conveyed to us they had limited knowledge of T Levels prior to contact with college staff and described their decision-making process as one of being channelled into a T Level course.

Access to university and employment

Students identified there were characteristics of T Levels they considered attractive. This included the newness of the qualification and the perception that it would offer better prospects, including admission to university or getting a job straight after the course. For example, one student expressed the desire to 'get ahead of the gap' as T Levels were anticipated to become more prominent. The alignment of T Levels with the goal of securing

employment following their education was an important consideration. A Year 2 Business student stated, 'I thought that having experience in a business industry would get me a better place and a job in the future'. Some students saw T Levels as a way to keep their options open, with opportunities to move into the labour market if in the future they were unsuccessful or did not want to attend university.

Subject specific/occupation specific

Student choices of the specific T Level course were also influenced by their interest in industry sectors, such as health, biology, physics, business, engineering, and their desire to pursue careers in related fields. For example, a Health (Social Care) student interested in becoming a family nurse practitioner was guided into their T Level because it aligned better with their career aspirations than the childcare course they initially considered. A Business student claimed that they had a strong interest in maths and business and thought the T Level route would best suit their strengths.

Some students expressed surprise at the amount of theoretical content included in their courses, reflecting a gap between their subject-specific expectations and the reality of the curriculum. This will be discussed further in the 'Students' experiences of T Level delivery' section.

Year 1, Science (Laboratory Technician) student

This student discusses how they reached the decision to transfer from a BTEC to a T Level and their experience on both courses.

'OK, I did BTEC last year, I did applied science. Basically, so when I was transferring to this year, so the head teacher, she was like, 'oh we're doing, like, a new course, you know? You'd be good for the course, like, you could try it out'. I was a bit 50/50 because I'm not really good with exams but she was like, 'it's not that bad'. So I was like, OK, I'll give it a try. So currently I'm doing it, I think it's much better than BTEC. BTEC, there is like experiments and stuff like that, but I think you get more experience and you like use different machinery. Like, the college does the placement for you. I think the BTEC, you have to provide your own placement. But I think- I don't know- I think you get more opportunity in a T Level. Like you said, you need more, like, experience after you graduate or whatever they're doing, they look at your how much experience you have, more than like, certification. So personally, I think this is a great course. I feel like maybe widen it for example, like different courses, for example - maybe like sports science or something, I think people would do that more than like BTEC. But even the BTEC, you can get, like- not information, but like you can get more- I'd say, for example, you get more experience. In BTEC, you have like kind of a lot more knowledge, but then in T Level you have more knowledge in like how to use machineries, what they do, different, like, companies and stuff like that. So you get more connections in T Level than you do in BTEC.'

Appeal of work placements

The work placement component of T Levels was a key motivator for a majority of students. Frequently, participants were excited by the idea that around 30% of the course was dedicated to work placements, which they believed would enhance their employability and give them valuable industry experience. One student mentioned that a T Level course seemed more professional because of the work placement component,

which made it more appealing than a BTEC. Another emphasized that work placements looked good on a CV, reflecting the view that T Levels could provide a competitive edge in the job market.

However, the reality of their work placement experience was polarising for students, and placements did not always live up to the expectations set during induction. One student stated that the induction presentation had promised an experience that was ultimately not delivered. This disappointment was echoed in later reflections, with some students questioning whether they would have chosen the T Level had they known how disorganized the course and placements would be. This will be discussed further in the 'Students' experience of T Level placements' section.

Misinformation and lack of clarity

A recurring theme in the focus groups was a lack of understanding or awareness about the T Level qualification prior to enrolment. Some students admitted that they did not know much about the course content or structure before applying. It was not uncommon for participants to tell us they simply followed their school's advice without fully understanding what the course entailed. Students were informed about a new qualification known as a T Level and provided with little information about the structure and content of the course. This lack of awareness often extended to other options like apprenticeships, with one student acknowledging they wouldn't have known how to apply for an apprenticeship if they had considered it. This has led to T Level students starting their course with expectations that were not fully materialised, hence leading to mixed experiences.

As previously mentioned, we heard overwhelming majority students report they had been directed to T Levels by colleges, although they may have considered taking BTECs, apprenticeships or other level 3 qualifications. In a small but not insignificant number of cases, students regretted not pursuing other qualifications than T Level after experiencing organisational issues within their course, such as late allocation into a work placement, limited experience with practical skills in their course and high tutor turnaround. For example, one student mentioned that they would have picked a BTEC if they had known how disorganised the T Level would be. Another student, reflecting on the T Level's chaotic structure, suggested they might have opted for a different path, such as A Level 3 or BTEC course, had they been more aware of these issues beforehand. The structure of the T Level will be discussed in the 'Students' experience of T Level delivery' section.

Year 1, Health (Social Care) student

This student discusses frustration with the limitation of the course that they were not informed about when enrolling on a T Level.

'To apply for university we had to like, go and see if they do allow T Levels. Most of the ones that we wanted to, at least for me, they didn't. And then there's others that don't say that if they do accept T Level, so then I had to contact them. So that's a long time to get a response from them as well. And also the course, it was advertised as like a health and science one to anyone could work but now it's more tailored to only adult nursing. Which I wasn't aware of... so we were told like in our second year, [we] was able to focus on I think there was like five different goals like midwifery, dental nursing, and like other stuff but we weren't. We were just doing adult nursing.'

Student excerpts

'I came here for the BTEC. But then I got advice to do this course. And I got told it is more like project based than exams and I thought that's quite interesting. And the whole work placement, which BTEC didn't have and sounded more professional'

(Year 2, Business (Management and Administration) student)

'I heard about it in school as well, once someone came from a college and when they were just talking about all of the opportunity you can do after T Level and what's involved in it [I] got interested'

(Foundation Level, Business Route student)

'They just wanted to get T Levels out there, when they came to see us [College Information Advice and Guidance]. Get more people involved'

(Year 2, Education and Early Years student)

'That is so annoying, because that was not what we were told. We were told everywhere [universities] will accept T Levels and then you go to a place and they don't accept it'

(Year 2, Health (Social Care) student)

'Well work placement is one of them, you do placement, so that's good, you get the experience at work. But it's also not just the theory, not just practical, it's both. So you do the exams, so you learn about it, then you also get to like do the practical side of it. So it's a good mix between the two'

(Year 1, Design, Surveying and Planning for Construction student)

'I was going to do level three. But then I got told ... that [I had] the grades to go on to T Level and that [I] could have chance to go to Uni because of UCAS points. So I just thought, er, do T Level'

(Year 1, Onsite Construction student)

'I did A Levels. I did it for a year, but I changed my mind, I really didn't enjoy it. But since being on this course, I think is way better than A Levels. And also, just because we study kind of three different things health, biology and physics because they're all so similar'

(Year 1, Health (Social Care) student)

'Yeah, so all of it was like explained to me, but obviously because there's not really any other courses like it, I didn't know what it was going to be like and I didn't get to come to any open days or any interviews or anything. I was just going into it based off of what I was told'

(Year 1, Business (Management and Administration) student)

'... it was like false advertising it. It was like ... it was just business, right, I didn't know like law would come with it'

(Foundation Level, Business Route student)

2. Students' experiences of T Level delivery

Students' experiences of different T Level qualifications featured in this study were highly variable. Unsurprisingly, delivery strategies differed between different T Level courses, and between individual Further Education colleges. But the introduction of T Levels as a new qualification has also contributed to variation, largely due to the unfamiliarity of the qualification to both educational institutions and students and due to the ongoing adjustments required as part of their adoption. The consequences of this pervade students' experiences of T Level delivery.

We identify three areas where students have faced challenges. Firstly, many students were initially uncertain about the structure of T Levels. The blend of practical and theoretical learning was both praised and criticised by students. Frustration regarding the structure of T Levels primarily arose from the perceived lack of preparation and organisation in delivering the course content. This was, secondly, intertwined with problems with resourcing T Level delivery. Students felt that the quality of the course was substantially influenced by the tutors' expertise. This was often hindered by high tutor turnover and variability in tutors' teaching styles, partially due to the limited past papers and resources to prepare students for assessments. Thirdly, given the work placements' prominence in T Levels, they had a considerable impact on students' perception of their learning experience.

Challenges of a new qualification

The length of time a college had been delivering T Levels, generally measured by how many cohorts of students they had taught, was a significant factor in impacting students' experiences. For example, in Health courses, Design, Surveying and Planning for Construction, and some Engineering courses, students have reported both positive and challenging experiences. For example, a student studying Design, Surveying and Planning for Construction remarked that the course was initially disorganized, particularly because it was part of a pilot scheme, leading to some confusion among both staff and learners. Over time, however, the majority of students noticed improvements, especially as staff and colleges gained more experience with the curriculum. This gradual improvement suggests that these initial challenges might diminish as the qualification becomes more established and understood.

To effectively advance and progress delivery to mitigate variability arising from the novelty of the qualification, it is essential for educators and stakeholders to adopt an evidence-informed approach. The following two sections therefore discuss two areas which were identified by students as areas of a disorganisation, and where a lack of consistency could constructively be addressed: in teaching style and in organisation of placements.

Health (Social Care) tutor

A tutor reflects on the relative advantages and benefits of T Level delivery and their accessibility.

'So in theory, it sounded quite nice. But again, it's one of those as long as all these things - right student, right course-, then it will work. When you just try and cram students onto courses and make it fit, then it doesn't work. And T Levels so far has been kept, or is quite small and specialized. And they are generally students that are really motivated, high achieving, so it's easier to teach versus the BTEC. Who are there because they can't go on A Levels or they can't go anywhere else. And then they lower the grades to make sure they don't miss out on having that student, because it comes with funding, because there isn't really an alternative for them.'

Diversity in teaching style

As T Level qualifications are new, there is no established pedagogical approach, leading to a diverse range of teaching methods being employed. For example, some tutors in the study adopted a more project-based learning approach, encouraging students to collaborate on real-world problems. Others relied heavily on lecture formats, using PowerPoint presentation and leaving less room for interactive learning. Almost all students in this study felt there was a high level of tutors using PowerPoint to deliver the theory needed on the course in a short amount of time, usually taking place in the first year of the T Level.

Tutor expertise, turnover, and resources

In programmes such as Health and Business (Management and Administration), students frequently reported that the quality of teaching varied significantly, often depending on the tutor's familiarity or experience with the T Level format. Tutors had variable approaches to the scope of T Levels. Some tutors revelled in the autonomy provided by T Levels and the rigour of the content. Others found the lack of guidance and current limited provision of resources and direction challenging. Students noticed this. One Year 2 Business (Management and Administration) student reflected that, *'Even when we first started the course, we could see the tutors weren't as confident. Because, in a way, we didn't know if they really knew what they were doing themselves.'*

A few tutors in the study were unclear about the qualification's requirements due to limited information and resources, such as past exam papers and detailed specifications. Tutors suggested there was a greater focus on employability skills in T Levels compared to other qualifications. However, this focus does not always translate into effective teaching strategies. A few tutors interviewed have limited industry experiences themselves and often rely heavily on textbooks if available. Others have established industry connections.

The high turnover rate of tutors further compounded such problems, with new tutors frequently not afforded the opportunity yet to obtain the experience necessary to deliver learning effectively. Additionally, limited staff availability frequently compromised the quality of students' learning experiences. For instance, we observed this impact within a Business (Management and Administration) T Level course, where timetabling constraints – arising from a shortage of teaching staff – led to Year 1 and Year 2 students being combined in the same classroom. One Year 2 Business (Management and Administration) student remarked, *'we're just sat there at the back, just playing on our laptops because we haven't been given anything to do'*. This shortage of tutors not only undermined students' engagement but also adversely affected their overall experience of the course across the college.

As noted above, students themselves identified that tutors were struggling with the delivery of T Levels. One student from a T Level Health (Nursing) course pointed out that tutors struggled to explain key content of the course as they were learning about them alongside the students, reflecting the ongoing adaptation process many tutors were experiencing. A Year 1, Design, Surveying and Planning for Construction student for example, thought improving T Levels should include making:

sure the tutors are doing well as well. Because obviously as there's so few, they're taking a lot more on than what they should, so sometimes we'll miss a lesson because this tutor's got a meeting, but then again that shouldn't really happen because like I said, we haven't got no staff.

Students' enjoyment of their course frequently was identified as associated with individual tutors with whom they had adequate time and stability to establish good relationships and who had good subject and industry knowledge.

Year 1, Design, Surveying and Planning for Construction student

This student discusses the difficulty with tutors' expertise and learning from tutors who are new to teaching T Levels.

'And I think [our tutor] was some sort of surveyor. So they just came straight from like normal jobs to teaching, which I think can be quite difficult for them, and I think they should be sort of provided with some like learning... it's like, they're learning as we are. It's understanding the specification as well, because obviously they're not used to it, so it's new to them as it is to us. So I don't feel like they really understand how to explain to us and like because obviously it's so new, we don't have the full resources as what you would have with A Levels. So it's not been round long enough to have the resources.'

Balance of content

Tutors' lack of preparedness was intensified by what was perceived, by some tutors and a majority of students, as the very large volume of content they understood needed to be delivered. As one Engineering , Manufacturing Processing and Control tutor described, the 'scope of the course is huge'; sentiments repeated by tutors across subject areas. While this was not necessarily universal, it did seem to be a consequence of substantive assessment at the end of Year 1, while the balance of work placement fell in Year 2.

A small number of tutors reported to us that the volume of theoretical content and high stakes examination meant the qualification lacked some accessibility compared to other Level 3 qualifications. This and the consequences this had for classroom pedagogies affected learners' motivation and conflicted with students' expectations of the programme. Those students who had associated the qualification with practical learning, as opposed to theory-heavy, 'academic' and classroom-based learning, were often disappointed. As one Year 2 Onsite Construction student put it:

To say that you're supposed to be working outside in future just sitting in the classroom, learning theory isn't the greatest thing. Because first year especially because you're just sat in classroom pretty much all day just doing... sat working when like... we've got practical dotted in then but it's not... Yeah, it's not that's the best thing by just- a group- a group of lads, just sat down... typing. Is not... Yeah.

However, some tutors and providers had developed effective strategies to balance content and theory. In our research we encountered an example where the college provided a 'tutorial lesson' twice a week to demonstrate how topics covered in the classroom were relevant to the workplace, along with opportunities for badging employment skills. Some students reported they appreciated the coherence that the T Level offered in its demonstratable relevance to an employment sector, contrasting this favourably to the potential breadth and therefore potential shallowness of A Levels in this regard. Students' conceptions of their future destinations are explored in the 'Intended student destinations and perceived preparedness' section. That practical learning opportunities were sometimes limited by resource availability, affected the depth of students' hands-on experiences in their overall course experience. It is clear across our study that where students do experience hand-on tasks, they are valued and allow them to apply theoretical knowledge in practical scenarios.

Year 1 and 2, Business (Management and Administration) students

With an interviewer, students discuss their feelings around the delivery of classroom-based learning.

Interviewer *So for year one, you're not very happy with that type of teaching, the like sitting in a classroom and listening to Powerpoints, is that ...?*

Student A *I don't mind it.*

Interviewer *You don't mind it, OK.*

Student A *Yeah, it's sort of like a ... it is what it is attitude.*

Student B *I feel like it has to be like that though, because there is so much stuff to cover.*

Student A *Yeah, I'd agree.*

Student C *Yeah.*

Student A *It's not nice, but it's just the way it is, it has to be done ...*

Student D *And once you guys get to year two, it's so much better!*

Student C *If we make it there!*

Student D *If you make it there!*

Assessment

Tutors' decision to primarily concentrate on content delivery over the integration of practical learning seems likely to be a result of the way assessment looms large over the course across most sectors. As one Business (Management and Administration) student put it: *the 'course is more dependent on passing the test rather than learning about business at times.'*

The lack of past exam papers and resources for T Level subjects has also been a challenge. Students in Health and Science courses, for example, noted that they had to rely on GCSE or A Level materials for revision, as T Level-specific resources were limited or not available. In subjects like biology, students felt that the support for the scientific component of their course was insufficient.

The challenge of preparing students for work placements adds another layer of complexity to the teaching structure. Tutors reported difficulties in delivering the necessary coursework to equip students for their Employer Set Projects (ESP). A Year 1 Science (Laboratory Technician) tutor suggested *'the ESP is something that, I think anyway, it's been very hard to deliver and to make sure the students were kind of hacking the idea of how to do task one and task two.'* This sentiment is echoed by students who feel unprepared for assessments, expressing a desire for more sample materials to build their confidence; as one student put it, *'we definitely need more samples.'* There seems to be variability in how far employers were involved in the employer set projects. One Health (Social Care) tutor, reported to us that *'theory, the idea was it was set by an employer, but I don't think employers are involved at all. So, you get a case study essentially.'*

Overall, the diversity in teaching styles, the inconsistent structure of T Level courses and the variable experiences that reflect the newness of the T Level present significant challenges, impacting student confidence and their preparedness for work. This, combined with the limited availability of resources, led to

further confusion among students. Enhanced collaboration between colleges and industry, alongside improved resources and structured guidance for tutor are essential to address these challenges and create a more cohesive learning experience across T Level courses.

Year 1, Health (Social Care) student

In this excerpt from a focus group, students discuss the inconsistency of teaching in T Levels.

Student A *I would say it's quite good for people that aren't necessarily academic. Like the course overall is 80% classwork, 20% placement. So, you still got that as 40% to 10% a year. So, you've still got that 10% of your year, that you're hands on learning. And the way they teach they break it down so much and simplify it, or make it more difficult if you can do it. It is like it's catered and organized in a way that people individually will understand it. Because I could be struggling during the lesson, I could go back after that, but I will send you an email, and I'll break it down. And then it is just- they make sure that everyone understands in their own way. And it makes it a lot easier to deal with, because I got no support like that in secondary school. And I really struggled at secondary school. I hated school, hated it. I get here and I love it because they actually care about us. Not just what they are trying to teach us.*

Student B *They will talk to you individually as well about how you're doing. Yeah, and like, catch ups.*

Student C *I don't think it is necessarily for people that aren't academic either. I think it is one of those ones. If you are not great in exams, or you learn more practically. It's like that stigma of college being for people that aren't very clever. It's one of those ones in between, that you're not just doing A Levels where it's just like taking GCSEs again, but harder, but it's [doing T levels is] actually you're doing the A Levels, but you also get practical on the other side of that.*

Variability in success in finding placements and engaging with employers

As has been identified in other studies of T Level students' perspectives (Natcen and NFER, 2024; Ofsted 2023), work placements are of critical importance to students' enjoyment of their course; our study certainly supports this. The work placement elevated the experience of the entire course. As one Health Studies (Nursing) student put it: *'Even though I've got so much complaints about it, I'm still happy! Only because of the work placement.'* Students' experiences on placement will be discussed in the 'Students' experience of T Level placements' section. In this section, we explore how placements were organised and integrated with classroom-based learning.

Students across different T Level courses noted variability in the quality of their work placements and how that impacted their experience and skills development on the course. For instance, many students enrolled in Health T level subjects found that their practical placements in healthcare settings vary significantly depending on the partnerships their institution has established with employers. One focus group with Business (Management and Administration) T Level students stated that the college were still establishing connections with employers, which made the process of securing work placement slower than expected. Similarly, learners in the Digital Production, Design and Development course reported to us that they might encounter differing levels of access to cutting-edge technology or industry-standard software, impacting their skill development and preparedness for the workforce.

Further, there were inconsistencies across sectors and between colleges. Some sectors, and some courses at some colleges, had experience or established connections with employers (particularly, health or education related T Levels, for example) with more established traditions of offering work placement. By contrast, T Levels such as Business (Management and Administration) did not always have straightforward work placement. All these challenges can lead to mixed outcomes for students, highlighting the need for ongoing improvement to ensure the sharing of good practice across the organisation of placements. As a Year 1 Business (Management and Administration) student stated:

It's quite long if I'm honest, like, it wasn't really organised. Even if we did want to catch up or communicate with the person in charge of the placement, it took quite long. Like the communication was not really there, we did not feel as motivated.

These inconsistencies, particularly in placement opportunities, created a sense of instability for students, who felt they were testing the course as part of the initial cohorts. Students regularly relayed to us that they were many months late in starting or even securing placements due to these difficulties. Many second-year students reported trouble fitting in the number of required hours of work placement within their remaining hours on the course and were consequently anxious. A lack of consistency even within individual cohorts as to whether work placement opportunities were paid or unpaid, or whether travel to placements was covered by employers or colleges, also caused friction between students.

Industry awareness of T Levels also appeared limited, as indicated by a Year 1 Engineering, Manufacturing, Processing and Control student who said, 'there's quite a few different types of companies, some of them haven't heard of T Levels before'. This lack of recognition can create challenges for students seeking placements or employment opportunities related to their qualifications. Several students strongly emphasised the novelty of the T Level throughout our focus group interviews, expressing that it was a new concept for students, tutors and colleges alike. A year one Business (Administration and Management) student stated, 'it's new for the people who made it, they're just trying to understand what other people think of it'. The students' narratives reveal a need for an enhanced understanding regarding T Levels one that can be communicated effectively among all stakeholders involved, including employers providing placements.

However, there is optimism among students that future cohorts will benefit from more established systems, with one student predicting that in a few years, placements will be more readily available as colleges form better partnerships with employers.

Year 2, Business (Management and Administration) student

This student struggles with learning on the course attributing it to the lack of resources, tutor knowledge and teaching style, newness of the course and disorganised structure of the T Level

'I think it's [T Levels] a good idea. But I don't know how long it's been, like... Like, it's not very well organised. I feel like the actual teaching class, I don't know if it's like me, and it's not like, how I am good with being taught. But like most of last year, and this year, it's just, I know, it's going to be like this, but it's just slides to reading a website. I am not good at that and really get bored. I think the main bad thing of this is that there's no experience with teachers. Or like, it's hard to explain, but our teacher: they'll tell us how to do something. But they don't actually know what's right or wrong. Because there's no like, other people. We are the first class that's doing it, and they're the first teacher that's done it, and there's no like, past papers or stuff like that. You don't know if you're doing anything right. There's not many textbooks; one just came out after our first exams.'

Student and tutor excerpts

'Because at the moment we're learning about four different things and then we've got two tests at the end of the year for four things.'

And then when we're learning everything, it's hard to take it all in, and we've got a test and everything gets muddled up, because in construction, some of it's quite similar'

(Year 1, Building Services and Engineering for Construction student)

'I think yeah, it's just been like, because it's so new that yeah, maybe they didn't, maybe they underestimated what they would need to actually provide the course'

(Year 2, Business (Management and Administration) student)

'Yeah, so we weren't really given anything. So like first year was a bit of a struggle, so like this year we're kind of catching up with anything because it weren't really prepared that well, because they just ... I think they just jumped into it and ... Well sometimes when we do exam papers, like we've just done one recently, we've been going through it from the exam board, and like most the questions are wrong as well, like the answers'

(Year 1, Accounting student)

'We had like cover, and then we had a ... finally like a permanent. But I feel like our permanent teacher, [name], I don't think he was like prepared for the ... to teach the course, but he's getting the hang of it, but it's just like ... physics has been a bit confusing for us'

(Year 1, Science (Laboratory Technician) student)

'When I started, and was given the T Levels, and I had a look at it, I went, 'oh, my gosh, I really don't understand this. Why it's quite tight learning, you know, it's not sort of quite general..., of course, its Management Administration, it's quite focused. I've tried to explain it now as it's like, you're in an organisation, it's how everything would work around you. And so I was dubious. I'll give them no, really, you know, I'm not quite sure, this is odd'

(Year 1, Business (Management and Administration) tutor)

'To say that you're supposed to be working outside in future just sitting in the classroom, learning theory isn't the greatest thing. Because first year especially you're just sat in classroom pretty much all day'

(Year 2, Onsite Construction student)

'I think there's like, they change it up quite a lot. So, some weeks we might be in pairs, individually or groups doing like presentations, doing our own research for it and then finding and presenting all that to the class like in the following weeks. Some of it like, the teacher will give us the information first. Sometimes we do it like, a bit of both, like it's all very mixed.'

(Year 1, Digital Production, Design and Development student)

3. Students' experience of T Level placements

T Level work placements offer students valuable opportunities to gain practical experience and prepare for their future careers. However, these placements come with significant challenges that affect students' overall satisfaction with the qualification. Organisational difficulties, such as delays in securing placements and inconsistent communication between colleges and employers create a sense of frustration and stress for many students. The lack of clear tracking and feedback mechanisms further impacts students' experiences of work placements. Around half of students we spoke to claimed that there is often a mismatch between students' course expectations and the tasks they are assigned during placements. Despite these issues the work placements offer many positive aspects including job preparation, increased confidence in students' sense of their employability, and exposure to different career roles. The majority of students we spoke to appreciate the hands-on learning experience which allows them to apply classroom knowledge to real-world situations and build confidence for the job market.

Challenges

Organisational challenges and delays

Delays in securing placements are a common issue for nearly all T Level students, with some not receiving placements until the second year of their programme. This process appears disorganised, with students frequently citing long waiting periods and a lack of clarity over who is responsible within the college for arranging placements. This caused the majority of students to feel stress over completing the prescribed 315 work placement hours to pass the course. One T Level Business (Management and Administration) student noted, *'We obviously have 315 hours. That's quite a lot. They wanted to make sure we could get them done and most people didn't have a placement or anything at all until the end of the first year.'* This delay leads to frustration, particularly when students are blamed for not securing placements themselves, despite being told initially that this was the college's responsibility, with another T Level Business (Management and Administration) student claiming, *'they like kind of blame us that we don't have a placement...when I chose this course, I was told they would do that for us.'* Securing a placement on occasion depended on existing links with employers that students might have already through, for example, family businesses or family connections. This produced inequalities in access to opportunities.

Inconsistent communication between the college, placement coordinators, and employers exacerbates these delays, leaving students feeling unsupported. In a high proportion of focus groups, it was common for most students in both their first and second years to report to us that they did not yet have placements secured and were either waiting for the college to find them one, or were searching themselves. Colleges were also unable to provide them with guarantees as to when they might be able to be placed. The local labour market context also played a role. As one Business (Management and Administration) student identified, it was hard for students and colleges in *'this type of small-town area, [to] get in contact with businesses that might want to take students.'* Overall, a high proportion of students faced significant delays in securing placements, which impacted their ability to complete the required hours. This was due to staffing shortages, as well as confusion over responsibilities. One Design, Surveying and Planning for Construction student expressed this disorganised process leaving students progressing differently across their placements, stating *'Because at the beginning of the year, some people got placements, some didn't, so now some people are like behind on placement, so they might not have a chance to continue.'*

Monitoring issues:

There are concerns about a lack of proper systems to track student progress and skills gained during placements. Both students and tutors stress the need for better tracking and feedback mechanisms, as there is little formal monitoring of student progress during placements. A small number of tutors have had to create their own forms to track this information, and a lack of coherent feedback between colleges and employers is a main reason attributed to this. A Science (Laboratory Technician) tutor commented, *'there's not enough recording of what they're doing. I don't see any kind of reporting that we can all look at.'*

Students frequently report that placement coordinators and supervisors often do not provide clear guidance or relevant tasks. There were also often restrictions in what sort of workplace tasks students, particularly those under the age of 18 in sectors such as Health courses, were permitted to participate. This lack of direction led to experiences where students feel underutilised or undervalued. A Health (Nursing) student stated that their employer did not have much for her to do most days, *'she was like, I have nothing for you to do and so, I ended up just kind of getting moved around to different places all day.'*

Mismatch between placements and course expectations:

Around half of students we spoke to express disappointment with the relevance of their work placements to their course of study. These students stated they were given tasks unrelated to their field, leading to frustration and a feeling that their time was being wasted. Some of these tasks discussed during the student focus groups involve tasks unrelated to their field, such as administrative duties or tasks not specific to their learning on the course. A common issue is the mismatch between what students expect and what they experience during placements. For example, a Business (Management and Administration) student stated:

Yeah, work placement is not relevant at all. They're just getting me to do like little grunt work in the [name of employer] like sweeping and stuff. Like it's not difficult, but I don't see how it benefits me at all in a business context.

However, this was not universal. Students on courses such as Health subjects; Maintenance, Installation and Repair for Engineering and Manufacturing; Design, Surveying and Planning for Construction; and Engineering, Manufacturing, Processing and Control, told us that the work placement gives them a practical understanding of their field, helping them see the relevance of their learning and reinforcing knowledge for exams.

The mismatch between work placements and learning on the course was also attributed to a lack of employer awareness of T Levels. Students who were disappointed with their placements frequently mentioned that their employers and colleagues did not know what T Levels involved. Many students stated that this was a communication issue the college should have sorted out before placements commenced. Students were frustrated that there was limited to no information on the curriculum T Level students are learning in college that would allow for a greater match in workplace tasks. A Building Services and Engineering for Construction student stated that:

The placements, they need to be given the criteria of what they need to be doing with the students. There could be more communication between the college and the placement. It feels like there's always a middleman.

This led some students to feeling that their work placement was a waste of time, especially if they did not find their placement useful. As one Business (Management and Administration) student explained:

But why am I doing so much and what am I going to get out of this.. anything- like for me, just placements have never actually been useful.

Inconsistent quality across work placements

It has been repeatedly mentioned that students felt that the tasks on their work placement made the biggest difference to their enjoyment of the work placement and the T Level overall. Yet, through the interviews with students there was great variability of experience depending on the setting of the work placement and the quality of activities and tasks provided. There were several excellent cases of work placements. For example, students enrolled on Health subject T Levels, where their placements were often pre-allocated to a local hospital, had more positive experiences of their work placements than other courses. In some cases, students mention that companies do not have enough work to keep them occupied. Additionally, some placements offered little in terms of hands-on experience, with students feeling they were treated as 'free labour'.

We explored previously how the effectiveness of the organisation and experience of placements depended often on whether sectors had historical traditions of work-based learning provision. Some colleges had effectively implemented placement coordinator roles, and seemed to find success in placing students and ensuring their experience of placements was constructive. These coordinators were responsible for helping to organise placements (together with students) and liaising with employers. Some placement coordinators' role communicating with employers expanded to include explaining and suggesting what students could contribute for employers. Occasionally, their role also includes providing a line of communication to enable the alignment of classroom learning with placement activities.

Struggles with workload and balance:

Students who had part-time jobs alongside their T Levels often found it challenging to balance their studies with placements, which can lead to time management issues. A Science (Laboratory Technician) student stated *'I study, I do placement, and I work... I don't have enough time to study. I don't have great time management'*. Even students who do not have part-time jobs complain of the intensity of the schedule between attending college and attending their work placement. As one Health (Social Care) student explained:

Mondays we have biology and then the next day we have placement, by the time I'm finished placement- unless I revise that, which I barely have time to do as soon as I get home on a Monday, I'll eat or something, and I'll go knockout to sleep because I need to wake up at like 5am

These demands on time were often compounded by barriers such as long travel time and prohibitive cost of travel to get to placements. Even where public transport was readily available, placement travel times could exceed an hour.

Year 1, Maintenance, Installation and Repair for Engineering and Manufacturing student

This student discusses the difficulty with securing placements and would recommend a change to how securing work placement is organised on the course

'I think like something that would probably change about this course, because like it's really difficult to get in the hours, and most of us ... like we're like nearly at the end of this year now, and I would say more than a third of us just we've had nothing. Like we've emailed three placements a week, and even that we're not like... that's minimum, and we're not getting anything back. Because reasonably, like as a business, you're not really going to want students that have no experience.'

Positives

Practical experience and job preparation

For the majority of students, placements provided valuable real-world experience, helping them build confidence and communication skills. It also allowed them to apply classroom learning to practical situations. A high proportion of students enjoyed the opportunity for hands on learning in their work placement. As one Building Services and Engineering for Construction student put it: *'But it's different when you're in learning stuff inside of a hands-on area...because you'll remember it more, if you've done it. Whereas you won't remember if you've read about it.'*

Year 1, Health (Nursing) students

A group of students discussed how they had come to appreciate the content of their classroom-based learning in their practice.

Student A *And learning about diseases as well.*

Student B *Especially learning about diseases. Because I'll be like looking at my handover or something and I'll see that somebody-*

Student A *And you'll go, ah!*

Student B *-has that disease, I'll be like, oh my gosh, I learnt about that yesterday!*

Student A *[...] Like I think I learnt about Parkinson's at some point, and then I look at my handout, I'm like that guy has Parkinson's, I know how to deal with this! Like it just felt ... I don't know, it felt good.*

Student C *It's reassuring to know you know about it.*

Student A *Yeah.*

Interviewer *And did that help you dealing with that patient?*

Student A *Yeah, I was- Yeah, I remember like he had a lot of trouble moving, like he couldn't eat, so we had to feed him and stuff. So I knew how to like ... I was trying to help him be a bit more independent, I was like, do you think you can hold this cup? And everything. So I just remember dealing with him very carefully, because I knew what the symptoms and everything were. So I knew what he was suffering with, so I knew what things I could do and what things I can push him to do.*

Students appreciated the value of practical experience, which helps them connect theoretical knowledge with real-world applications. Some students noted that the activities that they conducted in their placement even helped them prepare for their T Level assessments, but this was limited to a few T Level courses. Additionally, it allows them to understand if they do want to pursue the career they have chosen. This was discussed by a Business (Management and Administration) student who stated *'I think because we have the placement, we have that experience to just see how the business works. If that was what were going to go do after we finish it.'* A majority of students interviewed valued the manner in which work placements offer a sense of preparation for the job market.

Increased employability

Students frequently reported to us that they felt that their placements could lead to future job opportunities, particularly as employers got to know them personally. A Science (Laboratory Technician) student stated one of her T Levels tutors said *'she said that if you do T Levels, the company will trust you because like if you've been working with them and you go apply for them later on after your degree or just after you finish your course.'* A few further students pointed out that companies are more likely to trust and hire someone they have already worked with during the placement period.

Additionally, the familiarity and relationships students build during placements may lead to better opportunities for employment after completing their T Level. A majority of students agreed that placements help them build the skills such as confidence, public speaking and interview skills needed to succeed in the job market. One Business (Management and Administration) student elaborated on this, stating that *'it also helps with like, because you have to do an interview to get your placement and the same interview to get a job.'* These were the main skills students repeatedly explained that they had developed the most due to their placements.

Exposure to different career roles

Work placements influence students' career decisions. Some students decided that certain career paths, like office work, may not be for them after experiencing it firsthand, while others gain clearer visions of their career aspirations through these practical experiences. Students valued the chance to explore various roles within their industry and develop a clearer understanding of what they wanted to pursue as a career.

A Health (Nursing) student found it important to be shown the different roles available to them once they completed their course, stating *'I feel like it gives you different options, like being in the placement, you're in a lot of different wards. So it gives you a chance to open up what you want to see.'* This exposure to different roles provides students with a more in-depth view of their field, allowing them to better understand the diversity of tasks and specialisations available. Another Business (Management and Administration) student mentioned that they were exposed to different areas of business during their placement *'they tried to give me different things, for example, like marketing, finance, and some things.'*

Year 2, Design, Surveying and Planning for Construction student

This student shares the different roles they are exposed to during their work placement

'What I've been doing is I've just been in like meetings with different type of architectures because they all ... like architects actually have different roles. Let's say someone will do the pipework, someone will do doors, someone [has] done design, like the structure of the house, and then they combine into one design and have a meeting of what is wrong, what needs changing. And like also with the project managers and the site managers. It's just different types of roles that you can get in architecture and stuff.'

Student and tutor excerpts

'So it's made me think about do I want to work in a fast paced environment or somewhere more quieter, so like do I work for an NHS lab or a privately owned clinic, or a privately owned company and so on. It's made me think about the opportunities that are available'

(Year 1, Science (Laboratory Technician) student)

'I like it better [T Level] because it's, well, because it's not like you come here and you learn one thing it does not catch you confined to one thing they've shown you, you can still go into this job or that job, we're still offering you that, you know, you're not confined to that one thing that you've picked'

(Year 1, Building Services and Engineering for Construction student)

'During my placement, I was made to like, do phone calls to customers or do some customer service. And that did actually help. So if I do apply to jobs, yeah, I'd be better off''

(Year 2, Business (Management and Administration) student)

'I think it is mainly [enjoyed] the placement, because you get a lot of experience. You're at the hospital- most of us went to a hospital, and you saw- the more you appreciated how everything works, the different career paths you can take and where to go to get that career.

Like, it's not just uni or college'

(Year 2, Health (Social Care) student)

'Well it [T Level] was new, so I knew there was going to be problems as always there are with new things, and they didn't fully flesh out, so it feels kind of rushed that they did this, because they haven't got all the companies and everything.

So there's obviously problems with schedules and teachers'

(Year 1, Engineering, Manufacturing, Processing and Control student)

'Some of them felt like it was just that 'I have to do this to pass my course'. I'm not sure that the employers were entirely on board with it, they didn't necessarily see the entire value. And it actually requires somebody in employment to have a very good understanding of education and education systems, in order for them to set up a programme of learning that our students can undertake in the workplace'

(Building Services and Engineering for Construction tutor)

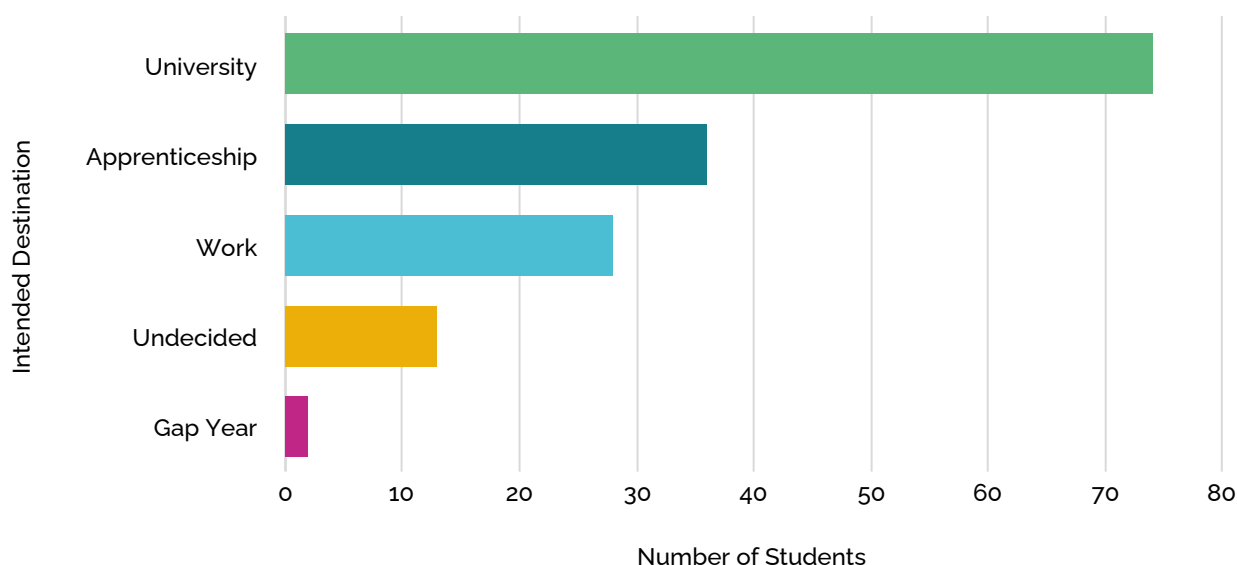
'The main benefit, I would say is the industry placement is a massive benefit. In terms of employee engagement, industry engagement. Students are walking out of a two-year course potentially into an apprenticeship or a degree straightaway, they've got that industry knowledge'

(Design, Surveying and Planning for Construction tutor)

4. Intended student destinations and perceived preparedness

The T Level students we spoke to were considering a range of post-qualification options, with aspirations split between university, apprenticeships, and direct employment. Figure 3 shows the intended destination of students after they complete their T Levels. Over half of students were aiming for university. This was frequently in order to pursue specialised careers like nursing, teaching, or business. Of the remaining students, the most common responses were to enter apprenticeships for the practical experience and income they offer, with a slightly smaller number preferring to enter the workforce immediately. A small but notable number are undecided, influenced by practical placements and shifting interests. Uncertainty is common, as students weigh their options and sometimes change plans based on their experiences. Overall, T Level students exhibit diverse career trajectories balancing between higher education, apprenticeships, and immediate employment. In each case students felt their course could prepare them for any option they choose.

Figure 3: Intended Destinations after T Levels



*Note: 62 students did not share their intended destination. These have been omitted from the table. Some students had more than one intended destination.

University Aspirations:

Over half of students we spoke to expressed a desire to go to university, with a few identifying that degrees are needed in their fields. As one Digital Production, Design and Development student explained, *'when I was looking at different jobs in IT, I came onto digital forensics, which I'm interested in, but I have to go to university for it.'* Although concerns about whether universities will accept T Levels do emerge, these were limited to a few fields such as Building Services and Engineering for Construction, and Engineering, Manufacturing Processing and Control. A Building Services and Engineering for Construction tutor notes, *'We are getting told that they can go straight to university with it, it's equivalent to three A Levels... we'll see, I've done two UCAS applications this year for my students.'*

Most students who were set on university as their intended route were very firm and clear that was their choice. A Health (Social Care) student responded, *'I want to go to university study paramedics science'* and another Education and Early Years student stated clearly *'I want to go to university to study teaching'*. Most students stated that they applied to university even if they were not planning on going; they saw it as a back-up plan in case other options failed. An Onsite Construction student echoed this stating *'I've got no clue what I'm gonna do next. Just all I know is that it can lead to uni. So, if I want, if I decide yes, I want to go to uni, I can do that.'*

Apprenticeships as an attractive option:

Apprenticeships are appealing, especially for students unsure about university or concerned about student debt. One Business (Management and Administration) student who intended to go into a Degree Apprenticeship remarks, *'I'd rather do an apprenticeship because you get paid, getting a degree.'* A Building Services and Engineering for Construction tutor echoes this, *'Apprenticeship... the more realistic route... the university route, well we will see how many [students] go.'* This illustrates that apprenticeships offer practical alternatives, particularly for students interested in entering the workforce more quickly. A Design, Surveying and Planning for Construction student stated, *'I'm preferring the apprenticeship route...you get paid while you're doing it, and...it's like a guaranteed job.'* Most apprenticeship routes mentioned included Level 4 apprenticeships and a few Degree Apprenticeship, the majority referred to apprenticeships more generally without specifying the level.

Preparation for Work:

A few students aim to enter full-time work directly. One Business (Management and Administration) student stated, *'I'm wanting to go over onto full-time work, instead of moving on to further education.'* Others consider starting their own businesses, such as a Building Services and Engineering for Construction student who aims to become a certified plumber: *'Just become a certified plumber...start my business, not work for somebody else.'* Several students highlight that T Levels provide them with the vocational qualifications and industry placements they need to enter the job market directly, further stating that this allows them to have financial independence immediately after completing a T Level. An Onsite Construction student stated, *'Hopefully by the end of this I'll be a qualified joiner... then I'll probably work with someone for a bit but I'll probably want to like go into like sole trader.'*

Career Uncertainty and Flexibility:

There were several students who express uncertainty or indecision about their post-T Level destinations. One Health (Social Care) student stated *'I'm undecided. I don't know whether I want to do an apprenticeship or go to university.'* T Level experience also had the capacity to open up career options rather than narrow them. As another Health (Social Care) student explained, they were confused as to which career path to follow, *'I came into college knowing that I wanted to work with children... but I did a placement last year in a care home... and I really liked it. And that's made me confused if I want to work with dementia patients or children.'* This further demonstrates how work placements have provided exposure to different career roles that students were not initially aware their course would offer.

Conclusion

Since their introduction in 2020, T Levels have come under close scrutiny from across the political spectrum, not least because of the corresponding threat they posed to existing, well-established vocational courses. Nevertheless, T Levels have been praised as a new opportunity to simplify the post-16 education and training landscape and raise the status of technical education. Yet despite lofty ambitions numbers of students engaging with T Levels are low when compared to other courses such as A Levels and BTEC routes. Numbers are steadily increasing, so hopes remain that T Levels will continue to attract higher numbers. This current research attempted to cut through the political rhetoric and discover how T Levels are being experienced by those closest to them, the students enrolled.

As T Levels are new courses it was probably inevitable that they would encounter some teething issues. This research highlighted that this was certainly the case, with one of the key issues being around accurate information and guidance for those considering the course. Although students mentioned a range of sources where they found out about T Levels, the college itself tended to be the main information source and largest influence on decision-making. The issue came when students compared the information they gained before starting the T Level, the expectations they developed, and their reality of the course itself. Consequently, many feeling they had been 'mis-sold' the programme. Students had based their decision-making on what they were told by college staff on open days, who themselves in some cases were not always well informed about what the T Level would entail, particularly for the first cohort of students.

Students were drawn to the appealing professional development opportunities provided by T Levels, with work placement components particularly emphasised. This was especially notable when compared to the relative lack of such opportunities in BTECs. The work placement was believed to enhance employability, give students valuable industry experience and help them stand out in their CVs. Although the findings of the report discuss some of the challenges encountered across work placements, such as organisational delays, monitoring issues and consistent quality across placements, a majority of students stated they thoroughly enjoyed the exposure and experiences within their work placements.

As with any learning, the teaching experience and level of expertise of those who teach T Levels are crucial. Students' experiences of the teaching on T Levels varied widely. High tutor turnover contributed to poor organisation and, at times, unsatisfactory experiences of the course. Staff issues meant that there were sometimes periods without appropriately qualified teaching staff at all, as well as higher workload for existing staff who took on the additional burden of absent staff. High staff turnover is a major issue facing colleges (Sibieta and Tahir, 2023) and with the additional burden of tutor preparation and development for a new qualification, this issue becomes even more challenging for T Levels. More positively, students' experience did seem to improve as courses became more established at a college, suggesting that as T Levels are further embedded into the system their delivery and management will improve.

The limited flexibility in delivery did lead to a diversity of teaching approaches being used and students noted approaches such as project-based learning and interactive exercises with peers. By far the most predominant method of delivery of theory was via lectures aided by PowerPoint, which students expected to listen and take notes. This corresponds with high level of content that was covered in the course, particularly for some subject areas, which was burdensome for both staff and students to cover. In turn, some students were unhappy with the balance of theory and practice, which led to fewer opportunities for practical learning. The level of content was not supported by sufficient course guidance and textbooks, with both staff and student interviewees noting that course resources from awarding organisations were insufficient to support the teaching of the course, including a lack of practice exam papers to support success in assessments.

Where students were satisfied with the delivery of their T Level, delivery tended to involve the effective and complementary integration of theory and practice elements. This included, for example, theoretical lessons reinforced with practical projects which drew on the earlier lessons. The work placement was a standout element of T Level courses, acting as a selling point for initially choosing the course as well as felt to be largely the most valuable feature of the course for students.

Despite varying teething problems with the setting up and inconsistent quality of work placements, students praised the opportunities they were receiving for practical, hands-on experiences which helped make concrete the knowledge they had gained in college. The work placements can help students remember the theory better, which also aided them in their assessments. Beyond assessment, the placements can also support students to clarify their career goals through exposing them to the varied roles available in their industry or chosen sector. As much previous research has demonstrated (Nat Cen Social Research, 2017), the work placements here strengthened students' development of skills which will support them into employment including confidence and interview skills.

Amongst our research interviewees, the majority of T Level students wished to pursue the route to university after completing their T Level course, although many also saw apprenticeships as an attractive route. The intention of the students contrasts strongly with the initial policy intention of T Levels which saw the courses as a stepping stone straight into apprenticeships or into the workplace. Yet, although some students believed the T Level had prepared them with good skills to enter employment, relatively few in our research were choosing to do this without further education or training first. Indeed, the reality of the first T Level cohort of students aligns with our findings; in Gatsby's (2024) sample of 531 students the most popular destination was progression into higher education.

Whilst T Levels offer a promising alternative to traditional technical and vocational qualifications, the newness of the qualification has led to a great variability of experiences; variability dependent on the tutor in the college or the college itself; variability in what is available regionally; and variability between courses and sectors. Much of the variation, and associated challenges, may be a product of their newness rather than an inherent issue with the qualification itself. The question is how can we reduce that variability to ensure more students have consistently better experience and more opportunities to thrive in their T Level courses and beyond? Through this research we aim to shine a light on the experiences of those directly involved in T Levels, the students and tutors to tackle some of the pressing problems, as well as celebrating the successes of T Levels so far.

Recommendations

These reflections on T Levels make important revelations about the overall approach to and functioning of the vocational education system. The challenges T Levels face exemplify challenges that we have seen repeatedly as different governments reform piecemeal aspects of post-16 education. This is done with the most positive of intentions, regardless of the party in power. Nevertheless, certain pitfalls have repeatedly entrapped past efforts and must be addressed if ongoing and future reforms in this space are to succeed.

First, **work placements and employer connection are crucial to successful vocational programmes and to high quality information, advice and guidance** and it is clear from this report that when they go well they are at the centre of a student's success and positive experience from a course. But the volume of employer placements is an absolute limiting factor to the success not just of T-Levels but of other programmes such as apprenticeships too. What is more, as we highlighted in our Flex Without Compromise policy report, the level of challenge will get even higher as we add a return to universal work experience through the government's Youth Guarantee and programmes like Foundation Apprenticeships into the mix. It is clear that launching these and asking individual education providers to just 'do more' to contact the same employers to secure more placements will not work to deliver the volume of employer contacts required. A new approach is needed. The Government needs to take stock, and consider a more systematic approach here that serves to rationalise the way in which employer placements are brokered. Precisely how this should unfold is beyond the scope of this piece of research, but a policy matter which Edge will continue to explore.

Second, real **attention needs to be given to the way in which the work-based and classroom-based elements of vocational education fit together**. Too often, as T Level students have reported to us in this research, vocational options are comprised of a classroom part and separately a work-based module with very little connection between the two. This misses the most dynamic and effective part of high-quality vocational education. We will not achieve successful delivery of T Levels or similar programmes until we have respected, fairly remunerated staff in the sector who have been given the opportunity to develop such pedagogies:

- It is clear from this report and many others that the high turnover of staff in the sector is a huge issue for the quality of delivery. Government must look in the round at the deal for the FE workforce – pay, conditions, CPD – and ask the question of whether, without a significant change to this, we have a hope of attracting a stable workforce who can deliver and make a success of T Levels and other vocational programmes. If not, there is no point introducing more programmes and initiatives until that issue is addressed; we risk undoing the progress that has been made in driving up the quality and status of teaching and learning in FE.
- Attention then needs to be given to the structure of vocational courses and the training and CPD of vocational staff to focus on the creation and development of the virtual circle of learning, experience and reflection that can take place between the classroom and the workplace.

Third, despite the dedicated work of organisations like The Gatsby Foundation in creating the good careers benchmarks, and the Careers and Enterprise Company in promoting and implementing them, **there has been so much change to the post-16 offering that has added to its complexity and the careers guidance system is too patchy** to ensure that all young people know about or have considered what is available to them. Again, this is likely to be exacerbated rather than improved as each government adds new initiatives and programmes to mend perceived holes in the system. Instead, a more fundamental re-examination of the system within which T Levels sit is required:

- Employers, policymakers, educational institutions, parents, and young people alike face significant challenges due to the excessive complexity of the system and its range of options. Successive governments aspiring to make improvements in this regard should recognise that a complex system cannot be simplified by merely introducing yet another option. The time has come for a fundamental review, of the scale of the Tomlinson Review, into the structure of secondary and post-16 education. Whilst we welcome the Curriculum and Assessment Review, it is clear from its scope and focus that this is likely to recommend small changes and not look at the fundamentals of the shape and structure of this phase of education.
- Individual schools and the Careers and Enterprise Company have endeavoured to adapt to the 2012 policy change, which shifted responsibility for careers education to schools without allocating corresponding funding. However, twelve years on, it is evident that this shift has resulted in a postcode lottery regarding the quality of advice and options available to young people. Especially given the complexity of the system, the only way to address this is to provide young people with properly funded access to careers advisers.

Finally, as this report has highlighted and as has also repeatedly emerged from Edge's wider work around the principles of vocational education: **vocational education should be allowed to develop and exhibit its own approaches, pedagogies and success measures** rather than simply trying to emulate academic education. It offers something unique to students, to employers and to the economy and that should be celebrated:

- T Levels and other vocational options do not need to follow the pattern from recent academic education of hugely detailed and extensive syllabuses of course content working towards high stakes end point assessments. Vocational education must forge its own path, building on its rich history, with greater tutor and trainer autonomy and flexibility.
- The real test of the success of a vocational qualification or pathway should be its destination (and progression, thereafter). In T Levels as with other vocational routes, more attention must be given to securing destination routes right at the start of the design phase.

References

- Boniface, R. and Whalley, G. (2024). Analysis of T Level students' destinations: First cohort. Gatsby Foundation. <https://www.gatsby.org.uk/education/latest/where-are-they-now-data-from-first-t-level-cohort-shows-that-new-qualification-prepares-students-for-their-chosen-destination>
- FE Week. (2024) 'How we'll go about reforming the level 3 landscape,' *FE Week*, 30 September, 2024. <https://feweek.co.uk/how-well-go-about-reforming-the-level-3-landscape/>
- Jones, M.-A., & Hall, V. (2022). Redefining student voice: Applying the lens of critical pragmatism. *Oxford Review of Education*, 48(5), 570–586. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2021.2003190>
- Laczik, A., Eriksen Grevle, T. and Hawthorn, S. (forthcoming) 'Developing Competencies for Democratic Culture through Learners' Participation'. In Council of Europe (Forthcoming). Strassburg: Council of Europe. Available <https://rm.coe.int/prems-056824-gbr-2511-contextualising-competences-for-democratic-cultu/1680b19f84>
- NatCen Social Research and SQW. (2017). Work placement and related activities in schools and colleges. Nat Cen Social Research for the Department for Education. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a82c3f240f0b6230269c95d/Work_experience_and_related_activities_in_schools_and_colleges.pdf
- Natcen Social Research and NFER. (2024). Technical Education Learner Survey 2023: end of-course surveys. Nat Cen Social Research and NFER for the Department for Education. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66f5413fc71e42688b65ecb6/Technical_Education_Learner_Survey_2023_end-of-course_surveys.pdf
- Ofsted. (2024). T Level thematic review: final report. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/t-level-thematic-review-final-report/t-level-thematic-review-final-report>
- Rudd, T., Colligan, F. & Naik, R. (2006) *Learner voice: A handbook from Futurelab*, English Secondary Teachers Association and Futurelab. Futurelab, Bristol.
- Sainsbury, D., Blagden, S., Robinson, B., West, S. and Wolf, A., 2016. Report of the independent panel on technical education. Department for Education.
- Sibieta, L. and Tahir, I. (2023). What has happened to college teacher pay in England? The Institute for Fiscal Studies. <https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-03/What-has-happened-to-college-teacher-pay-in-England.pdf>

