

Challenges to Supporting T Level Placements

A review of Employer engagement and capacity to support T Level industry placements, by the Department for Education (DfE).

Summary

Industry placements are essential to delivering T Levels, the flagship policy of UK Government's Technical Education Reform. Placements will offer the opportunity for students to gain practical occupational skills and behaviours in a placement of 45 – 60 days. As this is a distinct change to post-16 education, DfE commissioned this research to ensure demand for placements can be met.

The research is based on 120 in-depth interviews with employers between February and May 2018. 12.5% of firms interviewed fitted into the Engineering & Manufacturing route, potentially the most relevant route for our sector and 10% into the Construction route.

Overall, employers welcomed the idea of T Level industry placements and responded positively to the length, structure and relevance of the placements. However, there was also a group of employers that explicitly stated they would be unwilling to offer placements because they couldn't see the benefit of T Levels over other qualifications, mostly from industries with more traditional apprenticeship routes, such as Engineering & Manufacturing.

There were many questions employers had about the T Level placements and raised several challenges, which we will now go on to address.

Placement Structure

Not all employers felt the length of the 45-60-day placement would work for them. There were concerns the placements were both too short and too long. Employers who said that the time scale wouldn't enable learners to develop the necessary skills to effectively undertake the role tended to be from the Engineering & Manufacturing, Construction and Environment routes.

In addition, this group couldn't see the value in supporting a T Level over an apprenticeship, as despite less supervision needed for a T Level, they believed the longer-term gain would be lower. Conversely several smaller employers said it would create a supervisory burden on the organisation.

Firms were positive about the flexibility of the structure of the placement, that there could be a mix of block and day release, or one or the other. Block placements were generally preferred by employers, as it was mutually beneficial for the learner and employer, but depending on the industry, the mixed approach would be the next preferred option. Employers did wonder whether the placement would need to be confined to 9am – 5pm Monday to Friday, because it was felt by some that it would limit the ‘real experience’ of the role. Similarly, employers with more seasonal work needed to know what point in the year the placements would be scheduled, as they have more capacity at certain points.

Relevant Placements

There were concerns about how to closely match learners to the specific nature of their business, especially among employers with traditional apprenticeship routes or other long-standing routes into the profession. In order to address this, employers wanted to know more about the content of the course the learner would be studying and greater clarity on how T Levels fit in with other equivalent qualifications.

Employers were keen to understand how the allocation process would work and how much responsibility would fall on the learner to find a placement. There were also concerns about learners being ‘forced’ onto placements, as if the learner was not matched appropriately and didn’t want to be there, the employer would have to dedicate resources without the likelihood of any contribution or benefit in return.

But perhaps more of a practical issue was raised by firms in rural locations, who highlighted the difficulty of students reaching placements if they did not have access to a car and had to use public transport on a regular basis to reach the site. It is also costly and if placements are unpaid, then there should be financial support for the learner.

Payment of Wages

There was a mixed response among employers about the suggestion that firms could decide whether to pay the person on placement. Most expressed they would want to pay, as it was ethically right to do so, however, there were employers who expressed they would not be able to afford it or that they shouldn’t, as they wouldn’t be contributing enough to deserve it.

Employers stressed that there should be a clear pay policy, as otherwise there would be potential to create competition within the placement industry, as higher paid roles would become more favourable and those from disadvantaged backgrounds may be unable to access insufficiently paid placements if not supported.

Health & Safety

Some employers felt that legislation and health and safety requirements might prevent them from offering opportunities in their core business functions. For example, in both the Construction and Engineering & Manufacturing routes, there were concerns raised around hosting industry placements by under-18s, as individuals of that age would not legally be allowed on sites and they would be unable to use certain equipment.

This was relevant across professions, from confidentiality agreements in legal, accounting and finance, to legal requirements in physical working environments or exposure to hazardous materials in Construction. Employers emphasised that these needs would need to be considered well in advance, as employers need to receive the proof before a student could arrive on site.

Provider Issues

Employers wanted more clarity over the role of the learning provider, as those who had previous negative experiences with providers believed there should be a system in place to effectively raise concerns or complaints.

There was also a question about the role of providers in health and safety, particularly from employers in routes that require specific pre-placement checks or preparation. It was noted that learning providers tended to manage these requirements with students doing existing vocational qualifications and firms were concerned about where the responsibility and cost would lie.

Next Steps

Many employers stated they would be willing to offer T Level industry placements, but did not feel they could state definitively until they had further clarification on the following:

- **Content of the course and the objectives of the placement** – how well would this be matched to their industry and business model?
- **Structure and timing of the placement** – will the placement happen at a set point in the year and will the learner be able to be on the placement outside of college hours?
- **The role of the learning provider** – how much of the administration and cost will fall to the learning provider? How will the recruitment and allocation process work and how involved will the employer be?
- **How T Level qualifications fit with other FE and HE qualifications** – what is the benefit of a T Level over other FE or HE qualifications?

- **Guidelines around paying learners** – definitive guidance around whether or not they have to pay the learner and how much they would have to pay?

Those who wouldn't commit an opinion or were unwilling to offer placements stated that it was down to not seeing the benefit of T Level qualifications over existing ones or lack of capacity.

To address challenges and help bridge the gap between employers' willingness to engage in T Levels and their capacity or capability to do so, the report recommends the Department for Education to:

1. Give employers clear information on what will be expected, what the financial costs of this would be and what type and level of support will be available.
2. Clarify the role of the learning provider and minimise the burden on employers.
3. Consider employer and industry specific considerations when developing and implementing T Level industry placements.

Read the report in full [here](#).

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