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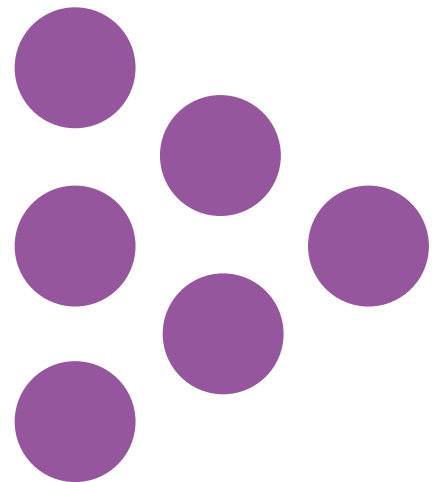
Report

T Levels Research: How Are Providers Preparing for Delivery?

National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)

T Levels Research: How Are Providers Preparing for Delivery?

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Prologue

The Government is committed to raising the profile and improving the quality of technical education in England. They are introducing new T Level qualifications as a viable alternative to the academic route for 16 to 19 year olds. The aim of these new qualifications is to provide young people with the skills needed to operate productively in the twentieth century economy.

The first three T Levels to be introduced will be construction; digital; and education and childcare. The Government has set an ambitious timetable for developing and delivering these first T Levels in September 2020. Some 50 providers have been selected to deliver one or more of these T Levels. A large amount of design and development work is currently in train, both within Government and in partnership with the post-16 education and skills sector and with employers.

NFER's interests in exploring this major reform of technical education focuses on how change is being managed in the system to provide young people with education and training opportunities which will enable them to make successful transitions to apprenticeships, employment or higher education. This report presents a snapshot of providers' preparation to implement the first three T Levels and draws out learning points for providers delivering the second wave of qualifications.

As with any large development programme of this size and ambitious delivery timetable, there are new details emerging from the Department for Education and its partners on a very regular basis. As a result, some of the issues reported to us when we interviewed providers and sector representatives in the first quarter of 2019 have been addressed or new information has been made available. There are nonetheless a number of key findings that we have identified, which will be useful to both policymakers and current and future providers.

As part of our education-to-employment research, we shall be running some stakeholder events in autumn 2019, where we will review progress once more and engage stakeholders in some of the outstanding questions and future opportunities around T Levels.

Executive Summary

Introduction and methodology

T Levels are a major part of the Government's reforms to strengthen England's skills system by improving vocational and technical education. These two-year technical programmes for young people aged 16 to 19 years will combine classroom theory, practical learning and an industry placement. Each T Level will be equivalent to three A Levels. The first three T Levels to be delivered are in Digital, Construction, and Education and Childcare. Fifty providers - further education (FE) colleges, independent training providers, sixth form colleges, a University Technical College (UTC), academies, schools and a university - will deliver one or more of these T Level programmes across England from September 2020.

This qualitative research provides an independent evidence-informed picture of how provider organisations are preparing to deliver these first three T Levels. The study objectives were to investigate:

- providers' views on how they are preparing to deliver the first T Levels and their progress to date
- the perceptions of organisations who represent and support the post-16 education and training sector on providers' preparation for the introduction of T Levels, within the wider context of level 3 technical provision
- the challenges being faced and learning points for current and future providers of T Levels.

The research involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with senior/middle leaders with organisation-wide responsibility for T Levels in half (25) of the first 50 providers of the three T Levels to be delivered in 2020. We additionally interviewed ten senior sector representatives with extensive knowledge of vocational and technical education. Sector representatives were from: associations and unions of teachers, lecturers and education leaders; expert bodies covering applied learning, technical qualifications and professional development; and representative bodies of education and training providers and employers. Interviews with providers primarily focused on their preparation for delivery. Interviews with sector representatives provided broader perspectives on the sector's preparation for the delivery of T Levels.

Key findings and learning

Providers and sector representatives are broadly supportive of the move to introduce T Levels

All providers participating in the study already deliver well-established, high-quality vocational and technical courses in the same areas as the first T Levels and see offering these new qualifications as a logical extension of their provision. Indeed, some providers acknowledged

their business interest in delivering T Levels which they thought might in future replace some of the courses they currently provide, such as Applied General Qualifications (AGQs). However, most did not agree that T Levels should replace these qualifications. The providers thought that their involvement in developing T Levels would give them an opportunity to be at the forefront of what they saw as a major, exciting change to England's vocational and technical provision and they could use their knowledge and experience to shape the programmes and make T Levels a success.

Similar views were held by sector representatives, who tended to raise more concerns about the effective implementation of T Levels and, like providers, were not supportive of the possibility of T Levels replacing AGQs.

Providers are being kept well informed about overall T Level design but noted the tight timescale to fully develop their curriculum plans, which could impact on quality.

Overall, providers reported that they were being kept well informed about T Levels and most providers gave positive feedback on the wider support they had received to date from the Department for Education (DfE), the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and the Education and Training Foundation (ETF). They valued regular updates and meetings with these organisations and having a link with the ESFA field force.

However, a number of providers highlighted concerns about the delivery timetable. The awarding organisations are scheduled to provide detailed information on content, assessment and the industry placement in February/March 2020. As these new qualifications are to be launched in September 2020, providers will therefore only have about six months to fully develop their curriculum and industry placement plans, properly assess their capacity to deliver and the resources required, and address any skills and knowledge gaps. Despite the accelerated timescale for delivering the first three T Levels being well known, some interviewees nonetheless highlighted that there was a large amount of work for them to do and the timescales were extremely tight, which could impact on the quality of their initial offer.

Whilst awaiting more detailed specifications, providers are putting in place management processes and identifying appropriate senior staff to make decisions on T Level delivery models, timetabling and staffing. They are also identifying additional resources, equipment and facilities required and preparing applications for the Capital Fund.

Providers are generally confident in their staff expertise and capacity for delivery in 2020 but cannot fully judge its sufficiency without the detailed qualification specifications

While providers were generally confident about the expertise and capacity of their staff to deliver the first T Levels, they noted that they would not be able to fully assess how much

training and support would be needed to be ready to deliver these new courses until they received the detailed specifications of the qualification content. However, in digital and construction, some providers reported that their staff did not have all of the specialist subject knowledge and/or recent industry experience required to deliver the T Level. To resolve this, most planned to update and augment the knowledge and skills of existing staff rather than recruit new staff, whilst cohort sizes were uncertain.

In the longer-term, providers expected to have to recruit, develop and update staff skills to be able to scale up delivery of the first three T Levels, as well as deliver additional T Level programmes as they are rolled out. However, they reported that recruiting and retaining staff in digital and construction programmes, and engineering in the future, was a major challenge because of education-industry salary differentials. This could lead to patchy and/or lower quality delivery of T Levels. Providers welcomed the Taking Teaching Further initiative and the professional development to be provided by the ETF[1], which they hoped would tackle this challenge by attracting staff with industrial experience into the sector and supporting existing staff to update and refresh knowledge and skills. However, they expressed concerns around insufficient funding, low staff morale and lack of investment in professional development which they thought could impact on the effectiveness of T Level implementation over the longer-term.

Learning points:

- For T Levels to be a success, it is crucial that there are sufficient staff with up-to-date industry knowledge, skills and expertise to teach the range of T Level routes across the country. It will be important, therefore, that lessons are drawn from the Taking Teaching Further initiative, alongside the current evaluation of the ETF professional development packages, in meeting this requirement.
- Consider funding for incentives to help attract staff to fill any key skills gaps which could negatively impact on T Level delivery.
- A review of effective practice in the UK/internationally in attracting suitably skilled staff to, and retaining them in, the post-16 education and training sector could also be undertaken.
- There may be useful learning from recent work in the schools sector on attracting and retaining staff that can be drawn on.
- Over the longer-term, it will be important to monitor the extent to which challenges in the sector such as funding, low staff morale and lack of focus on professional development are impacting on the delivery of T Level programmes.

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[1] The £5 million Taking Teaching Further programme aims to attract more industry professionals to work in the sector. Eight million pounds has also been allocated for the T Level Professional Development offer to help teachers and other staff prepare for the roll out of T Level programmes and qualifications. This is being led by the ETF.

Providers and sector representatives highlighted the need for continuing support and funding for new providers delivering T Levels in the future

Some providers expressed concerns about the support that future providers would need and the extent to which this would be forthcoming. They highlighted that the first wave providers are from high-performing organisations which are accessing funding to develop their capacity and infrastructure. They noted that some future providers will have less experience and capacity than those in the first wave, and they were concerned that these organisations might not receive the time, funding, support and capacity building that they will need.

Learning points:

- As T Levels are rolled out, it will be important that providers new to T Level provision can draw on comparable levels of support and funding, as well as opportunities to capitalise on early providers' experience and expertise. Many will need access to the Capacity and Delivery Fund (CDF) to enhance employer engagement structures.
- Directly linking providers from the first wave with subsequent providers or developing clusters of providers, based on for example geography or sectors, should be considered. Opportunities to network and share learning and effective practice on delivery are of paramount importance. Effective practice from school-to-school partnerships could be drawn on.

Most providers felt reasonably confident in securing the required placements for 2020 but they and sector representatives reported challenges in certain sectors and over the longer-term

Most providers felt reasonably confident that they would be able to secure the industry placements needed for their first delivery in September 2020. This was partly because many had been involved in the work experience pilot, and/or were accessing the Capacity and Delivery Fund (CDF)[2]. Providers had used the CDF to develop their employer engagement infrastructure and capacity, build or extend relationships with employers, and pilot longer placements within existing courses and reported that it had gone some way to averting a key risk in securing industry placements, at least in the early stages of T Levels. Other reasons for their confidence related to the fact that they had chosen to deliver T Levels in sectors in which they had good employer links and they had set conservative targets for student recruitment in the first year, which would keep the number of placements to be secured manageable.

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[2] £60 million has been allocated to the Capacity and Delivery Fund to support the industry placement element for the 2018/19 academic year, with a further round of funding planned for 2019/20. In addition, an £7m Employer Support Fund pilot will also be launched in the 2019/20 academic year to trial the provision of financial support to employers

However, some providers reported that they needed to recruit more employers to ensure that the T Level industry placement requirement was fulfilled in the first year and, in particular, mentioned challenges in securing digital placements. This was due to the small size of many of these businesses, as well as intellectual property and safeguarding issues. And, over the longer term, as T Levels are scaled up, both providers and sector representatives viewed the capacity of local employers to provide placements of the necessary quality and duration as a major challenge. For example, their concerns included: not having the required number and types of employers/sectors in their area from which to secure placements (a more acute issue in rural areas); low levels of awareness of T Levels amongst employers; the dominance of micro businesses and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in certain sectors; and the capacity of employers, especially micro and small businesses, to provide placements and find time to mentor students and concerns about over-burdening employers.

Both providers and sector representatives called for a nationally-led awareness raising campaign targeting employers.

Learning points:

- The industry placement is recognised as a particular challenge. The recent DfE update on delivery models and support, which offers more flexibility on what constitutes an industry placement, will help providers with preparations for the 2020 programmes. Additionally, however:
  - ○ it will be important to ensure that funding for the industry placement is commensurate with the level of effort required (particularly in rural locations)
  - ○ consideration should be given to offering further flexibility in certain areas/sectors in terms of what can count towards the minimum 45 days/315 hours placement
  - ○ more focus could be placed on students responding to employer briefs, simulations and virtual learning.
- Employers' awareness of T Levels, the structure and content of the industry placement and the benefits of engaging should be raised.
- It will be important to share learning and effective practice in securing and delivering placements from the first T Level providers with those in the second wave. This is particularly crucial since students need to complete the placement to achieve their T Level.

Several providers raised concerns about delivering a programme of this size

Several providers commented on the size of the T Level programme and its range of requirements, and raised concerns around:

- fitting in the number of hours required, including concerns about students who travel to college by bus struggling to complete the required hours due to buses arriving and leaving at set times (a more critical issue in rural areas)
  - ○ access barriers for students with caring responsibilities and part-time jobs

- o the logistics of integrating T Level taught classroom theory, practical learning and an extended industry placement
- o funding not being sufficient to deliver a qualification with this level of demands and complexity
- o timetabling the competing demands on teachers'/lecturers' time when they are teaching A Levels alongside the T Level.

Learning point:

- In an evaluation of the implementation of the first three T Levels (see below), it will be important to explore how providers are managing the delivery of the programme and its range of components, and how employers are managing the industry placement element.

While providers are fairly confident that they will recruit their target student numbers for 2020, they reported challenges around future student recruitment

In recognition of the challenges in setting up a new programme, most providers had set conservative recruitment targets for their first year of delivery which they were fairly confident in achieving. All but one of the 25 providers we spoke to reported that they were planning to recruit between 12 and 20 students for each T Level in the first year. However, many providers reported a number of potential challenges around student recruitment, most of which will impact more over the longer-term. These included: low awareness of parents/carers; gaining access to schools which are protectionist in keeping their prospective A Level students; high entry requirements which are comparable with A Levels; the significant demands of the programme; and uncertainties about progression routes. Providers were concerned that low student take-up could be interpreted by stakeholders as an indication that the programme is in some way deficient. To support their local efforts, providers called for a sustained, high-profile, nationally-managed marketing and communications campaign to raise the awareness of students and parents/carers of what T Levels are, who they target, their outcomes in terms of skills development and progression routes. DfE's T Levels awareness-raising campaign is now in preparation and providers have been sent a brand toolkit to help them recruit.

Providers and sector representatives agreed on the value of the proposed transition year in providing level 2 students with the knowledge, skills and confidence to successfully progress to T Levels. However, they wanted clarification from the DfE on what the transition year would entail. Sector representatives reported that there were many good practice examples already being delivered and that the DfE should look to the sector for guidance. We understand that, since the interviews, the DfE has established a Transition Panel - including T Level wave one providers and the Association of Colleges - who are designing the overall framework which can be adapted to suit local circumstances.

Learning points:

- Awareness raising: It is important that DfE's awareness raising campaign helps students and their parent/carers, teachers and career advisers to understand the demanding and specialist nature of T Levels, their equivalence to A Levels and how they differ from AGQs and apprenticeships.
- Transition year: the form and content of the transition year as a way of ensuring young people's readiness for the rigour of T Levels requires careful thought and the expertise and examples of good practice in the sector should be drawn on.
- It will be important to assess the factors facilitating or limiting student demand for the range of T Level routes and pathways.

Providers expect to use existing support mechanisms to support post T Level decision making but noted a lack of clarity on progression routes

Providers viewed T Level progression routes as level 4 and 5 technical courses, apprenticeships, employment, foundation and bachelor degrees.

Providers and sector representatives reported a range of challenges to T Level students' progression including: lack of awareness and understanding of T Levels by employers; perceptions of barriers in progression from T Levels to level 4 apprenticeships due to T Levels not developing sufficient occupational competencies; and uncertainty about what UCAS points they will attract. Linked to this, they were concerned that a lack of clarity regarding progression routes from T Levels could impact on student recruitment.

Most providers were planning to draw on existing career provision to support T Level students' decision-making about routes from T Levels to employment, training, further or higher education. Existing mechanisms included providing careers information and advice, preparing students for higher education and developing their employability skills.

Learning point:

- Progression routes from T Levels to employment, further technical courses, apprenticeships and higher education need to be clarified and communicated. Greater transparency and clarity is needed on:
  - where T Levels fit within existing provision and how they relate to AGQs
  - whether the achievement of a particular T Level will or will not allow automatic progression to a level 4 apprenticeship. Where this is problematic, thought needs to be given to supporting the development of bridging provision
  - requirements for progression to higher education technical degrees and the UCAS points T Levels will attract.

Study participants raised broader issues regarding where T Levels fit within the 16-19 landscape, alongside concerns around social mobility

During the interviews, study participants referred to the changing vision for T Levels and the evolution of their purpose from a route into specific jobs for which there were skills gaps to a broadened progression route that also includes higher education. Providers and sector representatives said they would welcome a clearer strategic picture of the purpose and aims of T Levels, and in particular where they fit within the 16-19 vocational and technical education landscape. Their key concern was a lack of clarity about the core purpose of T Levels and uncertainties around the future of AGQs. Most providers had decided not to replace AGQs with T Levels at this stage, not knowing the future of AGQs whilst the level 3 consultation is ongoing. In addition, both providers and sector representatives raised concerns about social mobility should T Levels replace AGQs. Their view is that AGQs provide a broader vocational programme and a different learning style which serves the needs of a particular group of young people for whom the academic rigour of T Levels may not be appropriate. These uncertainties were impacting on the positioning and promotion of T Levels and on preparations for progression support.

Learning points:

- A clear rationale for the introduction of T Levels should be communicated, including how they relate to AGQs (should they remain) and the distinct purpose, focus and target groups of these different qualifications.
- As part of the review of level 3 qualifications, serious consideration should be given to the needs and requirements of students who are currently well served by AGQs and for whom T Levels will be not be appropriate.

It will be crucial to evaluate the effectiveness of T Level implementation

Given the newness of T Levels and the evolution of their contribution to the 16-19 landscape, it will be crucial to evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation of the first T Levels.

Learning points:

- An external national evaluation should focus on finding out how effectively T Levels are being implemented, including what is working well, the challenges being faced and how they are being tackled. The findings from the evaluation will facilitate the sharing of emerging and effective practice as well as highlight areas for development for future T Level delivery.

1 Introduction, background and methodology

1.1 T Levels background and context

1.1.1 Policy background and context

Improving technical skills is high on the Government's education and economic agenda to create a world-class skills system in England. The rationale focuses on increasing economic growth nationally and particularly in disadvantaged regions (GB. Parliament. HoC, 2017); increasing national productivity to close the productivity gap between the UK and our OECD partners (GB. Parliament. HoC. Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, 2015); and improving the skills of the UK workforce to provide the economy with a talent pipeline which is work-ready (BIS and DfE, 2016).

A key Government policy ambition is to transform technical education, by overhauling technical qualifications to ensure that they are high-quality and meet employers' requirements. In 2016, an independent review of technical education was commissioned (the Independent Panel on Technical Education (Sainsbury, 2016)) which proposed a common framework of technical routes. The Independent Panel's report highlighted the confusing and ever-changing multitude of vocational and technical qualifications, as well as issues in the quality of delivery, and recommended 34 actions for comprehensive reform. These actions included:

- the development of 15 technical routes to skilled employment that encompass all employment-based and college-based training
- the development of new technical education level 3 programmes – T Levels - to sit within these routes
- a radical streamlining of existing technical qualifications, aiming to simplify the system for young people and employers.

The Sainsbury Review provided a strategic rationale and direction for T Levels. As noted in the Post-16 Skills Plan (July 2016), the Government accepted the recommendations of the Sainsbury Panel and subsequently committed to introducing the first T Levels from 2020.

1.1.2 Overview of T Levels

Outline of T Levels

T Levels are two-year technical programmes for young people who are 16 to 19 years of age. The description of T Levels as set out by Department for Education's (DfE) ministers is:

> *T Levels are new courses coming in September 2020, which will follow GCSEs and will be equivalent to three A Levels. T Levels will combine classroom theory, practical*

learning and a minimum 45-day placement[3] with an employer to make sure students have real experience of the workplace. The 2-year T Level courses have been developed in collaboration with employers and businesses so that the content will meet the needs of industry and prepare students for work. They provide the knowledge and experience needed to open the door to highly-skilled employment, an apprenticeship or higher-level study.

(DfE (2019a). Strategic Guidance to the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education. Annex B. p. 14.)

The first three T Levels are currently being developed and will be delivered from September 2020. These are:

- Digital route: Digital Production, Design and Development
- Construction route: Design, Surveying and Planning
- Education and Childcare route: Education.

The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education is responsible for T Levels including making arrangements for establishing employer-led T Level panels to develop the content of a T Level and appointing awarding organisations to develop and deliver technical qualifications for inclusion in T Levels. Pearson is the awarding organisation for the first T Levels in the construction and digital routes, while NCFE is the awarding organisation for the first T Level in the education and childcare route.

T Level providers

Fifty providers across England have been selected to deliver one or more of the first T Levels. The providers, all high-performing organisations, were selected by DfE following the submission of expressions of interest. The 50 providers include: 26 further education (FE) colleges, two independent training providers, eight sixth form colleges, a University Technical College (UTC), seven academies, one community school, two voluntary aided schools, one studio school, one independent school and one university.

T Level content

T Levels are based on the same standards of skill required for apprenticeship job roles which were designed by employer representatives and approved by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education. T Level panels have used these standards as the basis for developing the outline content. Each T Level comprises four components that must be completed in order for a T Level grade and certificate to be awarded:

- an approved Technical Qualification (TQ)

- a 45 days/minimum 315 hours industry placement (this requirement is significantly different from the majority of other current level 3 qualifications)

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[3] Now defined as a minimum of 315 hours.

- level 2 English and mathematics

- and any other occupation-specific requirements that are needed for entry to employment or to commence an industry placement.

The TQ includes a core component which develops underpinning knowledge, understanding and core skills, and occupational specialism(s) to develop occupation-specific knowledge, skills and behaviours. The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education will have responsibility for approving the TQs that form part of T Levels, including making arrangements to secure the availability of qualifications for approval. Ofqual, as the statutory regulator for qualifications, will have responsibility for regulating the TQs collaboratively with the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education.

T Level assessment

The TQ core knowledge and understanding will be assessed through one or more examinations which will be set and marked by the awarding organisation. The assessment of the occupational specialism(s) requires students to be able to achieve each performance outcome to a minimum standard that meets employer expectations. Students must have obtained either GCSE grade 9-4 or a Functional Skills level 2 pass in both English and mathematics to successfully complete their T Level, and will receive support during the T Level programme to achieve these if they have not already done so.

Students who have completed all the required components of a T Level will receive an overall grade of Pass, Merit or Distinction, which will be noted on their T Level certificate.

Transition framework

The DfE is developing a transition framework to help develop students' skills and confidence in order to enable them to join T Level programmes. This will be targeted at young people who are not ready to start a T Level at age 16 but who can realistically achieve a T Level by age 19.

T Level funding

T Levels will consist of 900 education and training hours on average per year which is 50 per cent more than the average 16-19 study programme. The Government has announced that £500 million additional funding per year will be allocated for the delivery of T Levels 'once they are fully up and running' to take account of the larger size of the programmes and to support the organisation of industry placements. In addition, the Government is allocating:

- a £38 million Capital Fund to support the first T Level providers in providing high-quality facilities

- £60 million to the Capacity and Delivery Fund (CDF) to support the industry placement element) for the 2018/19 academic year, with a further round of funding planned for 2019/20

- £20 million to support the further education sector to prepare for T Levels including:

  - £5 million for the Taking Teaching Further programme which aims to attract more industry professionals to work in the sector

  - £8 million for the T Level Professional Development offer to help teachers and other staff prepare for the roll out of T Level programmes and qualifications. This is being developed by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) with the Gatsby Charitable Foundation and the wider FE sector.

The Government's indicative funding allocation per student for delivering a T Level programme over two years given in an example for a medium-sized T Level of 1,800 hours (900 hours per year) is £10,220 (before formula factors for programme cost weights are applied). The funding figure includes:

- £9,670 to cover delivering the T Level qualification (1250 hours), specified additional requirements (50 hours) and Employability, Enrichment and Pastoral (150 hours)

- £550 for an industry placement (expected to last an average of 350 hours and 315 hours as a minimum).

(Source: DfE and ESFA (2018). Provider funding for delivery of T Levels. Government consultation.)

In addition, the funding allocation for delivering level 2 English and mathematics, where needed, is set at £750 per subject per student over two years.

The Government expects to publish detailed funding arrangements for T Levels in summer 2019.

The DfE's T Level Action Plan 2018 states that it is investing £13 million to train 1400 Careers Leaders and establish 40 Careers Hubs to encourage schools and colleges to work together with training providers, higher education institutions (HEIs), employers and career professionals to improve careers provision for young people in their area. The DfE notes that 'Careers professionals and Careers Leaders in schools will be key in disseminating messages about T Levels and are a central part of our engagement strategy' (DfE (2018a), p.44).

1.1.3   Future developments

The Government's response to the public consultation (DfE, 2018b), which ran on the implementation of T Level programmes (November 2017-February 2018), identified several areas for development in finalising the programmes. These included:

- a need for greater clarity relating to the positioning of T Levels in the education system, including their identity and target audience in relation to A Levels and apprenticeships

- a need for T Levels to be more rigorous, value-adding for employers, as well as inclusive of students with additional needs

- assessments need to enable progression and demonstrate rigour, whilst being consistent and inclusive

- T Level industry placements are a vital component of T Levels but will be highly ambitious and challenging to deliver on a national scale, requiring considerable effort to mitigate inequality of opportunity

- a transition offer will be valuable but, where possible, should be a more open and inclusive proposition as opposed to being specifically linked to T Levels

- T Levels will require a strong supportive infrastructure network, extensive marketing and time for the benefits to be realised, measured and promoted.

The Government's response also included confirmation that it would undertake a review of post-16 qualifications that are approved for teaching in England at level 3 and below (excluding T Levels, A Levels and GCSEs). The first part of this review is a public consultation (March-June 2019) to collect views and evidence about the general principles that should apply to post-16 qualifications. The review aims to streamline the number of qualifications available and to ensure that, as T Levels develop, the Government only funds 'high-quality qualifications that serve a clear and distinct purpose' (DfE (2019b), p7).

T Levels are only one part of the Government's reforms to upgrade England's skills system. Another key aspect is the reform of apprenticeships which embraces funding, standards development and assessment. This aims to grow the number of apprenticeship starts to three million by 2020 and improve the quality of apprenticeships. The reforms also include a £170 million Government investment in 12 Institutes of Technology (IoTs) in England which will be launched in the autumn 2019. The purpose of the IoTs is to provide students with high-quality skills training and technical qualifications. Each IoT will have a technical specialism such as digital, advanced manufacturing or transport and engineering.

1.2 Aims and methodology

1.2.1 Aims

The overall aim of the research was to provide an independent evidence-informed picture of how provider organisations are preparing to deliver the first three T Levels. The study objectives were to investigate:

- providers' views on how they are preparing to deliver the first T Levels and their progress to date

- the perceptions of organisations who represent and support the post-16 education and training sector on providers' preparation for the introduction of T Levels, within the wider context of level 3 technical provision

- the challenges being faced and learning points for current and future providers of T Levels.

1.2.2 Methodology

Telephone interviews of around 45-60 minutes were undertaken with half (25) of the 50 providers who will deliver the first three T Levels from 2020. We invited all of the first providers to take part in the research and focused our reminder strategy on ensuring that we secured interviews with: providers of different types; providers running the range of T Levels; and staff with different roles and responsibilities for T Levels within their organisation (including senior leaders with an organisation-wide responsibility for T Levels, heads of faculty or department, and sector leads). However, due to the early stage of development of T Levels, most of our provider interviewees held senior leadership roles, with a broad responsibility for T levels across their organisation.

Telephone interviews of around 30-45 minutes were also undertaken with ten senior sector representatives working with the post-16 education and training sector in a range of representative, support and development roles. These sector representatives gave an informed perspective of how the vocational and technical education and skills sector has been preparing for the delivery of T Levels in terms of, for example, funding, provider support, content development and assessment design.

Further details of the characteristics of interviewees are provided in section 1.3.

The focus of the interviews was on exploring how the first providers are preparing for T Levels and questions were asked on the following areas:

- reasons for involvement in T Levels and involvement in shaping their development nationally
- information, support and funding
- staff expertise and capacity to deliver T Levels
- planning for delivery
- awareness raising and student recruitment
- progression routes
- T Levels in the context of other level 3 provision.

1.3 Characteristics of organisations and interviewees

1.3.1 Characteristics of provider organisations involved in the research

Of the providers participating in the research, two were independent training providers, 17 were further education (FE) colleges, three were sixth form colleges, two were academies and one was a community school. All of the providers had been rated 'good' or 'outstanding' in their most recent Ofsted inspection; had recognised high-quality teaching and delivery of

vocational and technical provision; and had a successful history of delivering vocational and technical courses in the first three T Level sectors.

A breakdown of the number of providers who will be offering each of the first three T Levels in September 2020 can be seen in Table 1.1 below. Around half will be delivering all three T Levels.

Table 1.1.   T Levels to be delivered by individual organisations

T Level sector	Number of providers
Digital	4
Construction	1
Education & Childcare	4
Digital and Education & Childcare	4
Digital, Construction and Education & Childcare	12

Looking at vocational/technical attainment levels within the colleges in the provider sample, overall, students have achieved a range of grades when completing Applied General Qualifications and Technical Level (Tech Level) courses, which have ranged from a Pass to Distinction*. However, the majority of students have achieved Merit and Distinction classifications. For providers offering A Levels, individual institutions' average grades range from grade E to grade B. These figures are based on providers' most recent results from the 2017 and 2018 academic years (Gov.UK, 2019). Data on average attainment within independent training providers was not available.

The size of providers, based on the number of students, was variable spanning from schools and sixth form centres with enrolments of between 950 and 1250 to enrolments within FE colleges of up to 25,000, which included students taking foundation degrees, students enrolled at university centres and students taking courses in adult and community settings.

1.3.2   Characteristics of sector organisations involved in the research

We also invited representatives from organisations with extensive knowledge and understanding of vocational and technical qualifications and the 16-19 education and training sector to take part in the research. We interviewed ten representatives from:

- associations and unions of teachers, lecturers and education leaders
- expert bodies covering applied learning, technical qualifications and professional development
- representative bodies of education and training providers and employers.

Interviewee characteristics are presented below.

1.3.3   Interviewee characteristics

The provider staff we interviewed held senior responsibilities for the planning and delivery of T Levels. Some staff had an organisation-wide role of leading on curriculum development and programme implementation, whilst some staff had a faculty-level role as head of learning within departments and were responsible for liaising with T Level curriculum leaders. Many of the interviewees were involved with the development of their organisation's T Level implementation plans, making applications for funding, and attending meetings with the DfE, Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), the Association of Colleges and the ETF.

The ten key sector representatives had a breadth of strategic policy development and operational experience of promoting, designing and delivering vocational and technical 14-19 programmes and qualifications, apprenticeships and A Levels. The sector-level view added value by providing broader insights into providers' preparations to deliver the first three T Levels.

1.4   Report structure

We start by describing providers' and sector representatives involvement with T Level design and providers' reasons for choosing to deliver the first T levels (chapter 2), then move on to present views on information, support and funding for the first T Level providers (chapter 3).

After providing commentary on staff expertise and capacity in chapter 4, chapter 5 focuses on planning for delivery. Chapter 6 discusses awareness raising and student recruitment.

The final chapters include views on progression routes (chapter 7); T Levels in the context of other level 3 provision (chapter 8); and reflections and learning (chapter 9).

2   Involvement with T Levels

Providers and sector representatives are broadly supportive of the move to introduce T Levels, and most reported that they, or their colleagues, were contributing to decision making and planning at a national level. This included, for example: sitting on T Level advisory panels; contributing to decisions on qualification structure, core content and grading; and making written submissions to T Level consultations. Some sector representatives were gathering and feeding back the views of all of their members and had been involved at an earlier stage with the Sainsbury Review.

Providers are very focussed on preparing for their delivery of T Levels. Many already offered well-established, high-quality vocational and technical courses in the same areas as the first T Levels and reported that adding T Levels to their offer was a logical extension of their current provision, capitalising on existing staff expertise and resources which placed them in a good position to deliver these programmes effectively. For example, as a provider explained: 'T Levels are an incredibly exciting opportunity and the college is incredibly well placed to deliver based on the current course offer and the profile of their students and '[staff are] already in the mind-set that matches the T-Level'. Some providers also said they thought T Levels may replace some of the courses they currently provide, such as Applied General Qualifications (AGQs) in the future, so it was in their business interests to be at the forefront of their delivery. However, most added that they did not agree with that T Levels should replace these qualifications.

Alongside extending their technical provision, providers commonly reported that a key reason for their involvement in T Levels was that it gave their organisation the opportunity to be at the forefront of this major and important change in vocational and technical education. By being involved from the beginning, providers felt that they had the opportunity to shape the content and drive the course design in a way which they hoped would benefit both technical education providers and skills sectors. Many commented that it was preferable to be proactive and creative rather than delivering programmes developed by others where they could not make an input, or engage later in the roll out of T Levels when there may be less support available.

Some providers had been drawn to T Levels due to their focus on better meeting employers' needs. This included closing the gap in students' technical knowledge and work-ready skills which they perceived was a concern to employers, as well as extending their provision to meet the needs of a broader spectrum of local employers.

3   Information, support and funding for first providers

3.1   Views on information and support received

Most of the providers we interviewed said that they were well informed about overall T level design. Most gave positive feedback about the support they were receiving from the DfE, ESFA and ETF. They valued receiving regular updates from the DfE, having ongoing communication with their ESFA link person and the visits made by one or more of the three agencies to their organisation to discuss progress and related support and staff development issues. A typical comment was: 'There is a structured level of support which has been really good. The field force link which is the college's direct link with the ESFA is really responsive and supportive'. Providers also praised the opportunities that the first providers had to collaborate and to share experiences and ideas.

T Level leads reported that it was part of their job to keep up-to-date with programme developments. Many did this on a daily basis, through, for example, using the DfE's SharePoint resource though this was not always easy to access. Many had also engaged fully with T Level events, both face-to-face and webinars, which they had found useful.

However, a number of providers highlighted concerns about the delivery timetable. The awarding organisations are scheduled to provide detailed information on content, assessment and the industry placement in February/March 2020. As these new qualifications are to be launched in September 2020, providers will therefore only have about six months to fully develop their curriculum and industry placement plans, properly assess their capacity to deliver and the resources required, and address any skills and knowledge gaps. Despite the accelerated timescale for delivering the first three T Levels being well known, some interviewees nonetheless highlighted that there was a large amount of work for them to do and the timescales were extremely tight, which could impact on the quality of their initial offer.

A minority of providers reported that they had not yet seen issues and concerns they had raised fully reflected in the DfE's consultation responses, or in ensuing developments. For example, a provider reported that DfE had not appeared to address their concerns about procuring industry placements in the digital sector, in which there are many micro and small businesses which may struggle to provide placements.

Other issues reported by several providers included:

- the disproportionate amount of T Level-related administration. This included the ESFA's format for providers' T Level action plans and CDF monitoring forms which were considered unwieldy and difficult to complete (see below for description of CDF)

- the lack of a central point where all the information from providers can be uploaded, reducing the number of times they have to submit the same information to different agencies.

Some interviewees also expressed concerns about the support that future providers would need and the extent to which this would be forthcoming. All of the providers involved in the delivery of the first three T Levels are high-performing and experienced, but future providers may have a different performance profile, and/or have varying levels of expertise and require significant support to prepare for T Levels. The first providers have access to information, support and funding – for example, they are accessing the CDF to develop their employer engagement infrastructure and expertise and many are applying for funding from the Capital Fund (see below for description). A number of interviewees commented that future providers will need similar support and pump-priming and time to prepare for T Levels. This provider explained this issue as follows:

> *Most of the first providers are from outstanding institutions and the position will be worse for the others. We are getting a lot of help which later providers will also need. How will they prepare and how will they do it* [deliver T Levels] *without this additional resource? I worry about the next tranche and the roll out from there. How are they going to learn and develop?*

Providers also recommended that future providers be given opportunities to network and to share learning and effective practice, similar to those opportunities which have been available to the first providers.

There was more of a mixed set of views from sector representatives on the support given to the first T Level providers. Some said that providers were receiving 'a lot' or 'a fair amount' of support from the DfE, the ESFA field force and the ETF, which had allocated a professional development adviser to work with each of the 2020 T Level providers. However, some sector representatives expressed similar concerns to providers regarding the short timescale for developing these new qualifications. They also noted that there are existing issues in the 16-19 education and training sector which may influence the effectiveness of T Level implementation. For example, some sector representatives referred to the lack of funding, low staff morale and insufficient focus on professional development in the sector.

3.2   How information and support could be improved

As noted above, providers commented that they did not yet have much of the detail on the qualifications that were essential for planning, resourcing and promoting T Levels to students and employers. This included:

- defined content specification of the different components of the programme
- details on the assessment regime and criteria for the technical qualification and the industry placement
- flexibilities and contingencies relating to the industry placement. For example, advice on addressing issues such as placements breaking down and student travel issues in rural areas

- information on the specific equipment and resources needed

- the number of UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) points that T Levels will attract

- details on how Ofsted will inspect T Level provision.

Some of the above information, for example relating to the industry placement, has been partly or wholly provided since we carried out the data collection stage of our research.

Inconsistent and incoherent messaging about the main purpose of T Levels as the qualification evolves, and a lack of clarity about how they relate to other level 3 qualifications and progression routes is also influencing planning.

3.3   Funding accessed by providers

There are two key DfE sources of funding available for T Level providers to support their development of the qualifications and preparation for delivery:

- the CDF, which was established to ensure that the sector is ready for large-scale delivery of industry placements when T Levels are rolled out

- the T Level Capital Fund, which can be used for refurbishing existing buildings, building new spaces and purchasing specialist equipment, such as digital and audio visual kit.

The providers we interviewed appreciated the CDF funding they had received which they had used to:

- produce information for marketing T Levels to business

- increase staff resource and upskill the expertise of existing staff in employer engagement and in securing and delivering industry placements (see chapter 4 for more information)

- develop new strategies for engaging employers and establishing links with them

- develop a customer relationship management system for employer engagement

- pilot models of industry placements

- strengthen administrative systems and processes for industry placements and visits, including ensuring health and safety requirements are met

- develop links between their business unit and curriculum staff.

Some providers had submitted, or were in the process of submitting, bids to the Capital Fund for resources to refurbish rooms and facilities needed for the delivery of T Levels (see section 5.2 for more detail).

The sector representatives we interviewed were generally positive about the level of funding accessible to T Level providers for the development phase. As one sector representative remarked, it underlined 'a serious level of intent'. Another thought that the CDF had been well planned and timed and had allowed providers to experiment.

However, there was more scepticism about the funding for the implementation phase of T Levels and sector representatives, in particular, questioned whether it would be sufficient. This concern has been mirrored in recent research carried out by the Association of Colleges (2019) which looked at the cost of running study programmes and T Levels. It concluded that the Government's funding plans may undermine T Level delivery because funding levels are insufficient. The report noted that: 'Specialist technical education comes at a cost. It generally involves smaller group sizes, world class facilities and staff with up-to-date sector expertise who have the passion and skill to teach' (p.32). In addition, the report suggested that colleges might try to address the funding issue by putting a cap on student numbers and/or specialisms to viable groups and focus delivery on cost-effective provision.

4   Staff expertise and capacity

4.1   Providers' views on their expertise and capacity to deliver from 2020

In general, providers appeared confident in their level of staff expertise and capacity to deliver the first T Level qualifications from September 2020. Many highlighted that their staff had a high level of experience - both within teaching and in industry - which will be key to the effective delivery of T Level qualifications. They also mentioned the experience of their staff in developing new qualifications and their flexibility to adapt to new curricula. As one college interviewee commented: 'Colleges are used to being adaptable and flexible, turning things around quickly and staff are keen, motivated and enthusiastic to deliver'.

The providers' confidence ratings were, however, based on the draft content and their capabilities to deliver currently, and the presumption that there will be some crossover between current level 3 courses and T Levels. Providers stressed that they would only be able to fully assess their skills and capacity to deliver the first T Levels once they had seen the detailed specifications of the qualification content in February/March 2020. They noted some concerns that, if significant upskilling and professional development was required, time will be very limited to deliver this. Staff will be teaching during this period and on their summer break from the end of July which will make finding time for professional development challenging.

While most providers were confident that they would have the staff capacity in place to deliver from September 2020, several reported differences in staff knowledge and expertise by T level route. The greatest confidence and capacity to deliver T Levels was within Education and Childcare. In this route, many providers had strong, established provision, delivered by staff with experience of working in industry as early years practitioners, who maintained regular engagement with industry to keep up-to-date. They also felt that the T Level would more closely match current provision and, in addition, they had prior experience of delivering an extended work experience element. However, in digital and construction, some providers reported that their staff did not have all of the specialist subject knowledge and/or recent industry experience required to deliver the T Level. To resolve this, most planned to update and augment the knowledge and skills of existing staff, whilst a smaller proportion planned to recruit additional staff with the specialist expertise they lacked. However, a number reported difficulties in recruiting staff in the digital and construction sectors due to higher salaries being commanded in industry. Generally, providers reported that they favoured upskilling existing staff over recruitment due to uncertainties in relation to student recruitment and cohort sizes.

Many providers commented positively on the help they were receiving from the ETF, which includes support to individual providers to identify skills gaps and the subsequent development of professional development to plug these gaps in advance of 2020 delivery. They welcomed the funding for this provision, noting that industrial updating will be particularly beneficial. However, some providers were making their own plans for industry-based professional development. For example, one commented: 'We may need to work with employers and arrange some lectures on the technical aspects and industrial

upskilling/updating'. Several providers were also planning to arrange visits or secondments to industry so that staff can develop specialist subject knowledge and ensure that what is covered in the classroom matches what students will experience on placement.

4.2 Providers' views on their expertise and capacity for future T Level scale up and roll out

There was a general sense of enthusiasm amongst providers to expand their T Level offer in the coming years of delivery. For example, as one provider commented, 'If T Levels work and this is the way it's going, then the college wants to be part of this'. Some providers reported commenting that they had already selected the T Level routes they would be confident offering as part of a phased implementation plan.

However, only a few providers felt that their organisation would be able to deliver *all* of the T Level routes. They commented that they would assess future T Levels alongside their current provision, skills and capacity and employer links. The aim of many will be for T Levels to complement rather than duplicate current level 3 courses. For example, one provider emphasised that there would not be sufficient students to run T Levels alongside AGQs (should AGQs remain) so they would need to consider what each course offered and which best met the needs of their students. In addition, providers would assess the professional standing and recognition of qualifications in making decisions. As one provider commented: 'The current legal, financial and management level 3 qualifications are professionally accredited and it will be an issue if the T Levels developed don't attract this accreditation'.

The capacity of employers to offer industry placements will be another important factor for providers to consider when determining which T Levels courses they can offer. Within the digital sector, multiple providers identified a regional or rural constraint, for example, identified by this provider:

> *Before agreeing to offer the T Level, we will have to be certain we can find work placements for the students, particularly those course areas where a work placement isn't currently mandatory. In the north there aren't lots of IT companies compared to the south so this may be a limitation for some of the courses on this route.*

This may lead to patchy provision of the digital route across the country due to some areas being unable to secure sufficient industry placements. As a result, many providers reported that they would consider delivering most qualification routes, but not every pathway within each route.

Providers also reported that, as T Level delivery is scaled up and student numbers grow, they may need to recruit additional staff in order to expand their teaching capacity, as well as update the skills of existing staff. As one provider commented: 'We have the skillset needed as staff are new but these skills will need to be upgraded over time. We have sufficient staff for the first couple of years but the concern is keeping [their skills] up-to date'. However, they reported that recruitment and retention issues may become more acute in sectors such as digital and construction, and engineering in the future, where there are large education-industry salary differentials. This could lead to patchy and/or lower quality delivery of T Levels. Providers welcomed the contribution that Taking Teaching Further may make in

tackling this challenge by attracting staff with industrial experience into the sector and it will be important to see what lessons can be learned from this initiative

Providers also reported that they would base decisions on delivery of future T Levels on their experience of delivering the first wave of T Levels, as well as the level of funding and resources available.

4.3 Views of key sector representatives on the capacity of the sector to deliver T Levels

Some sector representatives were concerned about the staff expertise and capacity of providers to deliver T Levels from September 2020. Again, the current lack of a detailed specification against which skills gaps can be assessed and addressed was raised as an issue. Some interviewees commented that FE colleges may find it easier to manage staff deployment than schools, as they are used to part-time and visiting lecturers with particular specialisms and expertise delivering individual units and modules. However, conversely, one sector representative highlighted evidence-based findings from a DfE survey, which identified issues with staffing in FE colleges. They suggested that 'a long-term fix is required to solve issues including shortage of teachers and skills gaps, particularly in STEM subjects, yet these difficulties are complex and are going to require time to remedy'. As mentioned in chapter 3, several sector representatives also expressed concerns around insufficient funding, low staff morale and lack of investment in professional development in the sector potentially impacting on the capacity to deliver T Levels.

Capacity to deliver the new T levels within particular departments was also raised. Some sector representatives suggested that providers are likely to be selective of the routes they choose to implement, depending on their staffing expertise to teach the technical elements of the qualification, the availability of local employers in the sector, and their existing links with these employers. This is reflected in these sector representatives' quotes:

> *Some T Levels are easier to implement and fit in with the curriculum well whereas others are a duplication or are too specific and will lack employer interest. If the CPD* [continuing professional development] *and the progression routes aren't in place, it will be very difficult to offer these.*

> *Colleges appear to be confident in delivering the pathways in which they have good industry links and they are able to bring experts in to deliver workshops and masterclasses.*

Sector representatives also highlighted that, particularly within the digital and construction routes, there are already challenges delivering current provision as staff can earn higher wages in industry than in teaching, making recruitment a challenge.

Another common theme raised by sector representatives was the need for more time and money for staff training. In this context, some sector representatives mentioned the Taking Teaching Further and the ETF professional development programmes as potentially helping to fill skills gaps.

In addition, several key sector representatives reported that they were concerned about the potential for uneven development and delivery of T Levels across providers, local areas and regions. They were worried that providers would deliver routes and pathways in which they

had existing expertise and close employer links, which would then limit the options available to students. As two key sector representatives commented:

> *A serious risk is the uneven development of T Level delivery in colleges and regions…What we need is a comprehensive and clear technical offer…As it stands, I don't think colleges can deliver this many routes.*

> *Providers may lean towards certain pathways and sectors where they already have placements rather than learners being able to choose their occupational specialism.*

5   Planning for delivery

5.1   Curriculum development

We asked providers how they were planning the curriculum and assessment for the T Level programme(s) they were going to offer. They reported that their curriculum planning work was at an exploratory stage whilst they awaited detailed specifications for content and assessment in February/March 2020.

Providers have put in place, or are in the process of putting in place, management processes and staff capacity to make decisions on T Level delivery models, timetabling (in the context of the longer guided learning hours) and staffing. They have broad plans for delivery, having produced T Level implementation plans for the ESFA, which includes timelines and deadlines for curriculum planning and securing industry placements.

Many providers raised concerns about the tight timescale for developing the qualifications, noting the potential risk to quality. Sector representatives also reported concerns around the tight timescale – for example:

> *The timescales are exceptionally tight – the turnaround of qualification development is very quick and doesn't give providers much planning time…Recruitment will begin before providers have seen the full qualification…It will be difficult to talk to parents and students about what it entails which will pose a challenge to recruitment…*

> *They are being rushed in and the risk is that they are not implemented properly. I would have preferred it if they had piloted the early routes to see if they worked rather than having them all on board within three years.*

However, providers are seeing the evolving specifications and are making progress in readiness for more detailed planning work once the specifications arrive.

Providers reported that, once they receive the T Level content specification next year, curriculum leads will create schemes of work and produce lesson content and resources in the same way as they would for any other course, within the normal planning cycle for all qualifications. For example, one provider commented: '[We have] identified the relevant staff in each department who will lead on curriculum development so need to allocate time to these staff so they can prepare and create the right delivery models. This will all become much clearer when the specifications are released'. Many providers pointed out that their experience of delivering BTECs and apprenticeships will stand them in good stead for planning and delivering T Levels.

A typical approach to curriculum planning exemplified by one particular provider was setting up a working group to include the heads of department for each T Level area and key subject staff to help shape how the programme is delivered. This group will decide what content is going to be delivered in year one and year two, agree how industry placements are going to fit into the programme, and discuss how English and mathematics will be delivered. Local employers will also be consulted on curriculum content and sequencing.

Some providers were starting to establish staff teams to look at assessment methods that would both meet the T Level criteria as well as the needs of students. Some were also looking to provide professional development on T Level assessment.

5.2   Resources and equipment

Most of the providers said that they would require additional resources or updated equipment to deliver T Level programmes, but would only have a clearer idea about what they needed when more detailed specifications of T Level content became available. Several indicated that they had submitted, or were going to submit, an application to the T Level Capital Fund.

Providers emphasised the importance of high-specification facilities, equipment and resources (such as software and text books) if T levels are to provide 'state-of-the-art education'. They reported that investment was particularly needed for the digital and construction routes. For example, one provider planning for delivering the Digital T Level maintained that, if students going out on placement were not able to recognise and use the latest software and tools, this could have a negative and reputational impact on T Level programmes. This point was endorsed by another provider who asserted that if their college was going to market T Levels as something special then equipment and facilities had to be impressive. He was going to refurbish the college's digital suite with new computers which were 'fit for purpose' and create a virtual reality space which would be used to prepare students for the industry placement. Some providers also reported that they would be setting up Skype and Webex facilities to allow them to support apprenticeship-standard end-point assessment (EPA) professional discussions.

5.3   Industry placement and employer engagement

5.3.1   The industry placement requirement

Most of the providers and sector representatives we interviewed considered the requirement for a 45 days/315 hours minimum industry placement - a larger time period than for most current courses - to be an ambitious aim which would be a unique selling point for T Levels. Typical comments included: 'Overall the concept is good and it's a great idea to have employers involved so much' and 'It's a great concept and ambitious'.

They saw the placement as an opportunity for students to apply learning, learn about specialist equipment, gain experience of the world of work and develop transferable skills. This sector representative explained the value of this component:

> *The industry placement is a good idea, that's where learners will be able to apply the knowledge they have gained. It is more than just knowledge, it is the experience of being in a work environment, learning the transferable skills such as resilience, communication, motivation, reliability.*

However, some providers questioned the decision for a 45 days/315 hours minimum placement as opposed to 36 days, which would fit more neatly into three 12-week terms and be easier to manage. As one provider commented:

> *…We are very positive about the work placement and think it is the way forward but how can we fit it in? Why 45 days? One day a week for the 36-week college term would be fine and much easier to manage. What is the evidence behind setting it at 45 days? The extra nine days will be a killer for us and what does the research say in terms of the additional nine days being better?*

Sector representatives recognised the potentially difficult balance for providers to strike between delivering T Level content and preparing students for examinations and phasing in placements. For example, one sector representative commented that it would not be feasible for providers to have students out on placements at different times which 'would cause chaos for the delivery of the curriculum'.

5.3.2   Confidence in securing industry placements for delivery in 2020

Most providers felt reasonably confident that they would be able to secure the industry placements needed for the first delivery of T Levels in September 2020. This was partly because many had been involved in the work experience pilot, and/or were accessing the CDF. Providers had used the CDF to:

- develop their employer engagement infrastructure and capacity by, for example, expanding employer engagement teams and developing improved systems and processes

- build or extend their working relationships with employers in order to source placements

- pilot longer placements within existing courses.

A number of providers were complimentary about the CDF and reported that it had gone some way to averting a key risk in securing industry placements, at least in the early stages of T Levels. Other reasons for their confidence related to the fact that they had chosen to deliver T Levels in sectors in which they had good employer links and they had set conservative targets for student recruitment in the first year, which would keep the number of placements to be secured manageable.

However, some providers reported that they needed to recruit more employers to ensure that the T Level industry placement requirement was fulfilled and, in particular, mentioned challenges in securing digital placements. This was due to the small size of many of these businesses, as well as intellectual property and safeguarding issues.

5.3.3   Engaging employers

The extended placement required for T Levels is recognised as an investment for employers as well as for students. As one provider noted, employers will want to make sure that the time invested by the student and the employer provides a worthwhile experience. The providers raised the importance of ensuring that employers are fully briefed on why they are being asked to provide a longer placement, what it will entail and how it will be structured, monitored and assessed. To address this need, providers planned to run a range of engagement activities in the summer or autumn 2019 to inform employers about T Levels. These included:

- employer events where employers are informed about industry placements and have the option to feed into curriculum planning and design

- employer conferences, breakfast meetings, training and briefing sessions

- meetings with employer representative/umbrella bodies such as Chambers of Commerce and Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) to discuss how they might support local employer engagement

- inviting employers to attend careers days where they would conduct mock interviews with students and provide information on their sector.

They were also capitalising on existing links and meetings with employers to raise awareness of T Levels.

Providers reported that DfE also need to target awareness raising and marketing at employers, with the aim of explaining the importance of providing industry placements and how employers will benefit, as these comments illustrate:

> *Marketing and promotion is the main risk…there needs to be a* [nationally run] *campaign…There needs to be messaging that employers should support the T Levels as they are providing what employers want – students with relevant skills for employment…*

> *…In terms of industry placements; there will need to be wider level of support and marketing from DfE to start raising awareness and the requirements of the industry placement. Employers need to know this.*

5.3.4   Confidence in securing placements in the longer-term

Over the longer-term, a large number of providers reported that they were apprehensive about securing placements of the required number and quality for the first three technical routes, as well as for the next wave of technical routes as they are introduced. This concern was echoed by many of the sector representatives who were concerned about delivery of the extended placement, with one describing it as 'an enormous amount in crude day terms'. However, they acknowledged that some types of provider have the experience and established infrastructure to manage the procurement and delivery of industry placements, especially FE colleges, UTCs and independent training providers. They thought, though, that schools, or those with less experience and limited existing infrastructure, would find delivering the placement offer very difficult.

However, both providers and sector representatives recognised that, if providers chose to offer T Levels in routes in which they had established employer links, this could have a negative impact on student choice. Many felt strongly that provision should not closely match the local labour market and employer base as this would restrict opportunities and not prepare young people for jobs of the future.

Providers also identified several additional challenges in securing industry placements:

- not having the required number and types of employers/sectors in their area to run particular T Levels

- capacity of employers, especially micro and small businesses, to provide placements and mentor students and concerns about over-burdening employers and the costs incurred

- lack of large employers in rural areas to provide placements, especially in the digital sector

- student travel issues in rural areas

- additional health and safety checks required for taking young people under 18 on to a construction site

- safeguarding challenges related to placing a student with sole traders, micro and small businesses, which is a particular issue in the digital sector

- intellectual property issues, particularly in the digital sector

- competition for placements with other T Level providers as well as with apprenticeships and other work-based learning

- sector restrictions regarding when placements can take place e.g. in the construction sector industry placements should ideally take place from March to September to take into consideration weather conditions and the length of the working day.

Providers tended to be less concerned about securing placements for Education and Childcare because existing level 3 courses already incorporate a significant work experience element. In contrast, they were more worried about securing placements in the digital sector, where there are many sole traders and micro businesses. These types of business may be reluctant to commit to hosting a T Level industry placement because they are unlikely to have suitable work consistently available and might find it challenging to comply with the requirements of safeguarding legislation. This issue was perceived to be even more acute in rural areas, where transport to placements may be an additional issue. As one provider and sector representative commented:

> We have huge concerns about placements for the digital T Level. We don't have the number of businesses required and the majority will just be a single person and they can be in the middle of nowhere.

> This is a big unknown and I don't see a solution. Some parts of the country have all SMEs. We may need to move forwards with simulated work placements and employer-led projects over time.

The cost of securing and delivering T Level industry placements at scale was also raised by a number of providers who noted the importance of access to funding like the CDF. As two providers commented:

> We need support from the Government. We need significant changes in funding for the work placement element or we won't be able to sustain the pilot phase work.

> In the longer-term, we are worried about how we will deliver 700/800 longer placements without the additional funding [CDF] that we have now.

Providers also commented on the cost that would be incurred by employers: 'It takes time and resources for employers to look after students, there are health and safety elements to consider which can be a drain on employers…'. An Employer Support Fund was recently announced (see section 5.3.6 below) and it will be important to explore the effectiveness of this.

Other research and reviews have identified providing industry placements as a major challenge for T Levels. For example, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2018) reported that most of the employers it surveyed indicated that they would not be able

to offer an industry placement at the required number of days/hours. In addition, Foster *et al*., (2018) found that, although many employers were willing to offer placements, they could not be definitive about doing so until there was clarification about the structure and timing of placements and how T Levels fitted with other further education and higher education qualifications.

5.3.5 Student access issues

During the interviews, providers raised a number of issues about student access to the T Level programmes and their steps to prepare for these. In particular, providers were concerned about the extent to which the requirements of the extended placement could impact on those students who are already disadvantaged and the implications for social mobility.

Providers reported that a minimum 45 days/315 hours placement would be challenging for some students to accommodate and could interfere with any paid work and caring responsibilities they might have. In addition, providers reported that some students would need additional support from student services to cope with the placement. Providers also raised issues about the time and costs that students would incur in rural areas in travelling to placements which, in some cases, may be excessive.

5.3.6 The need for flexibility and advice on contingencies

Providers called for more industry placement flexibility asserting that this was needed to accommodate the situation of different sectors, local labour markets and students. This flexibility might include, for example, students completing their placement with more than one employer, working to employer-led and judged briefs/projects and counting some of their paid part-time work towards the 45 days/315 hours since it was developing transferable skills, such as communication, teamwork and resilience. They also called for advice on contingencies when placements break down and cannot be completed.

More recent DfE guidance on T Level industrial placements (DfE 2019c) goes some way to responding to this need for more flexibility. It states that a single placement can be split across two employers if needed and a student's part-time job hours can now be counted towards the required placement hours providing the job is occupationally relevant to their specialism, takes place off the provider's campus and learning objectives are being worked towards. Students can also undertake short work taster activities, of up to 35 hours, which are relevant to their T Level pathway and will help them decide on an area of specialism. These can also be counted towards the student's total number of placement hours. In addition, construction students can now complete a Commercial, Charitable or Community Project for a maximum of 105 hours of their placement, working closely within an external employer. A £7m Employer Support Fund pilot will also be launched in the 2019/20 academic year to trial the provision of financial support to employers. In addition, an Employer Support Package will be developed to support employers during the 2019/20 academic year. This is designed to provide employers with the information and understanding needed to plan and implement high-quality placements. Although the new guidance tackles some of the challenges raised by providers, more flexibility and advice on contingencies would be welcomed.

5.4 The size of the qualification

A number of providers expressed concerns about delivering a qualification of this size. These concerns related to: fitting in the number of hours required; funding not being sufficient to deliver a qualification with this level of demands and complexity; and staffing/timetabling. In terms of staffing and timetabling, providers reported that teachers often taught both A Levels and vocational courses which would be more difficult to manage due to the size of T Levels. The comments below illustrate these points:

> *There are huge issues in terms of the number of hours required. We won't be able to fit them in.*

> *T Levels are a bigger qualification and there is already a strain on funding within the FE sector.*

> *It will be tricky to manage the teaching of them* [T Levels and A Levels] *both together.*

Providers also questioned how students without grade 4 or above GCSE (or the equivalent) in English and mathematics will cope with re-sitting GCSEs/undertaking Functional Skills alongside the TQ and placement.

In addition, some providers reported issues in terms of their students getting to and from college to complete all of the hours for T Level programmes when they came by bus which arrived at and left college at set times. This was a more critical issue in rural areas where large numbers of students travel into college by bus, as this provider pointed out: 'An 8.30am to 5pm day which T Level students will need to cover the hours needed is not possible with the bus times we have'.

As mentioned above in relation to the industrial placement, providers also raised concerns about students with caring responsibilities and part-time jobs accessing T Levels due to the range of demands and they noted the associated impact on social mobility.

6 Awareness raising and student recruitment

6.1 Confidence in student recruitment

We asked providers how confident they were that they would be able to recruit the required number of students for the first year of the T Levels they will be offering. Providers were fairly confident that they would recruit enough T Level students and indicated that they were aiming to recruit students for T Level programmes from schools that they usually recruited from and from students already enrolled on level 2 courses in their organisation.

All but one of the 25 providers we spoke to reported that they were aiming to recruit between 12 and 20 students for each T Level in the first year of delivery. However, one provider was aiming to recruit 80 students for the Education and Childcare T Level which was replacing the AGQ. Many providers reported that their recruitment target numbers were conservative because they wanted to ensure that the first cohort was a success.

A sector representative observed that it will take several years for the T Level recruitment pipeline to build up after future students see what previous cohorts have progressed to after completing a T Level.

6.2 Selection/recruitment criteria for T Levels

The providers we interviewed said that, in deciding criteria for selecting and recruiting young people for T Level programmes, they were taking account of the rigour of T Levels which were considered to be on a par with A Level courses. Consequently, most had decided that the criteria should be similar to those for A Levels: four or five GCSEs at grade 4 or above including English and/or mathematics (or the equivalent). There is funding for students to retake English and/or mathematics as part of the course but a number of providers noted that students would have to pass these in year one as there would be insufficient time to retake them in year two. As a result, many said that, 'to be safe', they were going to ask for either one or both of these subjects at grade 4 or above (or the equivalent) until they had more information from DfE.

A minority of the providers we interviewed stated that they were still discussing their T Level programme selection and recruitment criteria which they said would partly depend on the detailed content of the T Level qualification specifications when they are issued.

6.3 The form and content of the transition year

We asked providers and sector representatives what they thought the transition year should include. They reported that it should give level 2 students the knowledge, skills and confidence to enable them to transition successfully to T Level programmes. To achieve that, the elements they suggested the transition year included were:

- tuition in English and mathematics to help those students without the required standard to reach it

- work-related learning, including the development of vocational and technical knowledge and employability skills and work behaviours

- preparation for, and undertaking of, an industry placement

- training in work-based projects

- confidence-building and the development of resilience and independence.

These elements were endorsed by some of the sector representatives who emphasised the importance of the transition year in focusing on personal development and including mentoring and coaching support.

A number of providers and sector representatives suggested that the transition year should provide a balance between developing broader skills and sector-specific knowledge, allowing students to explore different options and to progress to a T Level or an apprenticeship. Others suggested that the transition year should be flexible in terms of time, as some young people may need more than a year to prepare for T Levels.

During the interviews, providers said that they needed further information on the transition year from DfE about what it will include; whether it will lead to a qualification; and how the funding for students will work (for example, will students who do a transition year receive full funding for this and the two years needed to complete their T Level?) Several sector representatives commented that there was a wealth of experience in the sector in running this type of provision and a range of good practice models already out there which DfE could draw on.

The DfE has established a transition panel including T Level wave one providers and the Association of Colleges who are involved in designing the transition year. Providers are developing an overall framework which can be adapted to local circumstances.

6.4 Awareness raising

Some providers had devised a T Level communications action plan and marketing campaign strategy and all had started providing, or were planning to provide, activities to raise the awareness of a range of key stakeholders. This included students (in Years 10 and 11), parents/carers, school and multi-academy trust (MAT) senior managers and teachers, careers advisers, and local authorities. The activities included:

- developing T Level brochures; posting information on their website and including it in their prospectus; issuing press releases and promoting T Levels in the local newspaper; messaging via Twitter; and social media promotions

- meetings with head teachers, teachers and careers staff, providing documentation and making presentations at school assemblies

- hosting college open days and parent evenings, attending school information evenings, and offering T Level taster days

- promoting T Levels at careers fairs

- providing information to careers advisers via information sessions and local network events organised by the Local Enterprise Partnership

- briefings and meetings with local authority education teams.

Providers were also briefing their staff about T Levels with the aim of generating an internal pipeline of applicants. For example, one provider had organised a T Level launch for all staff and had given staff teaching level 2 and level 3 vocational and technical courses access to documentation on its SharePoint site on T Levels. Others were informing level 2 students on courses which would naturally feed into T levels.

A number of providers and sector representatives called for the Government to ensure that T Levels were firmly on the public agenda through targeted communications, media and promotions activity. Providers stressed that it will be important to build parental confidence as parents/carers have an important influence on their children's decision making and will be worried about their children being a 'guinea pig'. Typical comments included:

> *We need national support in marketing. Parents/carers won't want their children to take them if they haven't heard about them…*

> *This information needs to be out there because if pupils and parents/carers don't know about T Levels, they won't take off and until the public see them as a good idea they won't take them.*

> *Parents/carers need to be made more aware because if they don't know much about them then they will encourage their children to take an A Level or BTEC.*

Providers emphasised the importance of providing stakeholders with information on T Levels' structure, content, assessment and progression opportunities, including clear messaging on the value and distinctive nature and benefits of T Levels and how they compare to other level 3 vocational and technical provision and A Levels. They noted that, if T Levels are to become a credible technical alternative to A Levels with comparable recognition and prestige, there is a need to convince students and parents/carers that this is the right programme to take. The market that T Levels is targeting is the pool of students with good GCSE credentials whose normal progression would be to take A Levels and from there go on to higher education. Several providers pointed out that communicating information about T Levels in a succinct and parent-friendly way could be challenging given that the programme design is complex.

DfE's T Levels awareness-raising campaign is now in preparation and providers have been sent a brand toolkit to help them recruit.

6.5   Potential challenges in recruitment

Alongside the challenges in raising awareness of T Levels, providers and sector representatives mentioned several other potential challenges to recruitment. These included:

- gaining access to schools which want to retain their prospective A Level students

- high entry requirements that are comparable to A Level, which might deter young people from applying and providers accepting students onto the course who may struggle

- the significant demands of the programme

- T Level choice being dependent on young people being aware of the job market and developing a preference for the type of work they would like to do, a stage which many 16-year-olds have not reached.

7 Progression routes

7.1 Progression from T Levels

Providers expected that progression routes from T Levels would include employment; Higher National Certificate (HNC) and Higher National Diploma (HND) courses (levels 4 and 5); apprenticeships, including higher apprenticeships; and foundation and technical degrees. Many had close links with local HEIs offering 'solid progression routes'.

Some providers reported that they were planning to undertake some preparatory work to explore the range of potential progression routes for their T Level students. For example, one provider was aiming to research likely progression to inform the information, advice and guidance given to students. Another said his organisation would devise and disseminate a clear map of the level 4 and level 5 courses to which T Level students could progress in their college.

Providers reported that there are, however, a number of challenges to realising these progression routes, including:

- a lack of awareness and understanding of T Levels amongst employers and HEIs

- barriers in progression from T Levels to level 4 apprenticeships

- uncertainty about what higher education courses they will lead to and the UCAS points they will attract.

A number of providers and key sector representatives raised concerns about the impact the lack of clarity about progression routes from T Levels may have on recruitment, with students opting instead for qualifications with established routes. As two providers commented:

> *It will be important for progression routes to be clear or people will be wary of taking them.*

> *Without fully understanding the progression routes parents/carers are unlikely to allow their child to embark on the course…The biggest risk is sorting out progression routes.*

Providers were particularly concerned about T Level students not developing sufficient practical skills and occupational competence to allow them to progress onto level 4 apprenticeships. This could be a particular issue in sectors such as construction and engineering. Sector representatives made similar observations, maintaining that a T Level in construction would give threshold competence to get onto a level 4 apprenticeship but not occupational competence. Another example provided was engineering where the level 3 apprenticeship takes three to four years to complete. It may, therefore, be problematic for a T Level student to progress to a level 4 apprenticeship in engineering as their knowledge and skills will not match those of a level 3 apprentice.

Sector representatives commented that T level students could experience duplication of content if they needed to progress to a level 3 apprenticeship rather than a level 4 due to not being suitably prepared for the higher level. They suggested, therefore, that students who were clear on the occupation they wanted to enter may be better off taking the apprenticeship route from the outset. However, for students who were unclear of their

direction who had chosen a T Level first, bridging courses could be developed to allow students to progress directly from a level 3 T Level to a level 4 apprenticeship..

Similar issues were raised about progression to higher education, particularly in terms of how T Levels will be viewed as entry qualifications for technical and other courses and what UCAS points they will attract. Providers and sector representatives recommended that DfE needs to do more to promote T Levels to HEIs.

7.2   Supporting progression

We asked providers what they were planning to do to support students' progression from T Level programmes. Most said that they had existing structures in place through which they use to provide support to other level 3 students. The range of support they expect to provide includes:

- written information on progression options

- a careers package comprising a careers advice and guidance support team who support students in making career decisions, help students with building CVs and writing personal statements, and offer mock interviews

- information provided by speakers from HEIs who explain progression routes to higher education

- help with UCAS applications

- tutorials focusing on higher education topics (e.g. finance)

- developing employability skills and taking students on visits to employers to see the range of opportunities available.

A number of sector representatives noted that more clarity about the purpose and role of T Levels in the post-16 landscape would help to address progression challenges. For example, several made the point that the original idea behind T Levels was to offer a different route for students not wishing to progress onto higher education or apprenticeships, and instead prepare students to go straight into work and fill skills gaps. As one sector representative explained: '[T Levels] are designed for a level 3 job, technician positions to fill skills shortages, which is right'. Sector representatives commented that the aim for T Levels was now less clear because the Government 'appear to be promoting the HE element'. However, there was a lack of agreement about whether T Levels should be a route into higher education.

It will take some years before the actual progression routes from T Levels are known.

8 T Levels in the context of other level 3 provision

8.1 Views on the concept and aims of T Levels

Providers and sector representatives were broadly positive about the concept and aims of T Levels. They welcomed the Government's focus on strengthening vocational and technical education and developing high-quality technical qualifications with a clear link to occupations for which there is a demand. This comment illustrates the outlook:

> *It is the correct direction for post-16 education. For quite a while, there has been a mix of technical qualifications which haven't been well understood by the learners, parents or employers so to have technical qualifications developed which have a clear link to occupations and industry and with the potential to progress to higher education is going to be valuable.*

They also understood the drive to rationalise and simplify qualifications in the vocational and technical landscape, noting that the current plethora of qualifications is confusing for young people, parents/carers and employers. Indeed, some considered that the policy thinking underpinning T Levels could be more ambitious than a qualification-led change and thought it fell short of an overhaul of vocational and technical education.

Some providers and sector representatives commented that T Levels will strengthen technical education because, being employer-led and having a substantial placement, recruits will leave with an appetite to learn and apply their knowledge, have developed skills in problem-solving and will understand their business/industrial sector. For example, as a provider and sector representative commented:

> *Students come out of college or university with very good qualifications but without employability skills. The T Levels are trying to bridge that gap so students leave with a technical qualification and experience with employers.*

> *Giving students meaningful experience of the sector will be a big selling point.*

However, this view was not shared by all. Some sector representatives questioned whether T Levels would be better than what is already available and were not convinced that new technical education provision was required. Their view was that existing provision met need and could be enhanced if necessary.

8.2 Potential impact of T Levels on existing level 3 provision

The future of current level 3 qualifications is, as yet, unknown. The first stage of the consultation[4] closed on 10th June, with the second stage of the review due to follow later in 2019. Within this context, the majority of providers and sector representatives voiced concern about the potential impact of T Levels on other level 3 qualifications.

Whilst there is still uncertainty about the future of other level 3 vocational and technical qualifications and T Levels are not yet established, the majority of providers reported that

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[4] The government's review of post-16 qualifications in England at level 3 and below included a public consultation which ran from March-June 2019.

they would be unlikely to make an immediate switch to offering T levels as their replacement. Where a small number of providers had decided to transfer courses over 'wholesale' to T Levels, this tended to be because they did not want to run courses alongside each other with similar content thus risking confusion and small class sizes.

Provider and sector representatives were worried that the introduction of T Levels might lead to the discontinuation of AGQs (such as BTECs and Cambridge Technical Certificates) which they said had currency with, and were valued by, both employers and HEIs. They reported a number of positive aspects of AGQs:

- they are successful and broad vocational courses with established progression routes onto apprenticeships, employment and higher education

- the qualification received at the end of the course is understood and recognised by HEIs and employers alike and, in some cases, has professional recognition

- they provide options for students with a wide range of abilities, interests and learning styles and a second chance to those who have not flourished at school

- they allow two years for students to achieve GCSE grade 4 or above (or the equivalent) in English and mathematics

- they can be mixed and matched with A Levels, allowing students to explore different learning styles.

Within this context, providers and sector representatives expressed concern about the potential discontinuation of AGQs on student choice and progression. They also questioned the expectation that T Levels, as yet an untried product which could potentially narrow provision, were to become the 'mainstay of 16-19 vocational and technical education'. They noted that many current AGQ students would not be able to cope with the rigour of T Levels and that there would remain a need for AGQs 'to run alongside T Levels for those students who aren't up to the rigour of the gold standard T Level'. Linked to this, they expressed concerns regarding the potential impact on social mobility should T Levels replace AGQs and that this would result in a 'bottleneck' of students for whom there was no suitable vocational/technical course. These comments express the views of a number of providers and sector representatives:

> *Our concerns are all related to the Applied Generals and to what extent they will be replaced by an unknown product like T Levels … There is space for a third route but not at the expense of Applied Generals. I am concerned about the potential loss of Applied Generals for two key reasons: social mobility vehicle: they are good, broad and have currency with universities and employers; mix and match – you can mix and match them with A Levels and you can study for two years and see what type of learning suits you best.*

> *If you remove all of the Applied General and BTEC provision, what do the young people do who fail at school?...We need to keep Applied Generals/BTEC. If not, just having the three routes* [A Levels, T Levels and apprenticeships] *will be a catastrophe…This is about social mobility and progression and offering options that young people will enjoy and engage with…They* [policy makers] *are completely missing the point.*

The key message was that, although the need to simplify and reduce the large number of vocational and technical qualifications is recognised, it will be important to ensure that key post-16 routes which currently serve the requirements of students and employers are not withdrawn.

9 Reflections and learning

9.1 Reflections

T Levels is an ambitious new programme which is welcomed by most of the first wave of providers. They are working hard to put in place processes and plans to ensure successful delivery of the first three T Levels. This first group, comprising high-performing post-16 education providers, has many years' experience in developing vocational and technical courses. These providers have chosen to deliver T Levels in areas in which they have existing expertise, established employer links and ongoing interest from students. Additionally, most have set conservative targets for student recruitment in the first year which they expect to achieve. Given their experience, they are well placed to address many of the challenges this study identified as adversely affecting progress and the future roll out of T Levels.

Whilst acknowledging their potential to improve post-16 technical education and strengthen young people's employability skills, sector representatives were less positive about T Levels than the providers. Their concerns were on two levels: operational – uncertain levels of demand for T Levels and tight timescales for implementation; and strategic – a fear that the advent of T Levels might result in the withdrawal of AGQs, which are respected and valued qualifications.

The key findings and learning points relevant identified by the study participants are summarised in section 9.2. They provide useful learning for current and future waves of T Levels.

9.2 Key findings and learning points

Key findings	Learning points
Information, support and funding	
• Providers and sector representatives support the move to introduce T Levels. • Providers are kept well informed about overall T Level design. • Providers highlighted the tight timescale (six months) to fully design the new qualifications in time for their launch noting it may impact on quality. This timescale was, however, planned by DfE, and providers are seeing and commenting on early draft specifications as they are produced. It is understood that providers will have a full 12 months to design future T Level qualifications. • Providers and sector representatives highlighted the need for continuing support and funding for new providers delivering T Levels in the future.	• As T Levels are rolled out, it will be important that providers new to T Level provision can draw on comparable levels of support and funding, and opportunities to capitalise on early providers' experience and expertise. Many will need access to the CDF to enhance employer-engagement structures. • Consider directly linking providers from the first wave with subsequent providers or developing clusters of providers, based on for example geography or sectors. Opportunities to network and share learning and effective practice on delivery are of paramount importance. Effective practice from school-to-school partnerships could be drawn on.
Staff expertise and capacity	
• Providers are generally confident in their staff expertise and capacity for delivery in 2020 but cannot fully judge its sufficiency without detailed qualification specifications.	• For T Levels to be a success, it is crucial there are sufficient staff with up-to-date industry knowledge, skills and expertise to teach the range of T Level routes across the country. • Lessons should be drawn from The Taking Teaching Further initiative, and the evaluation of the ETF professional development packages, in meeting this requirement. • Consider funding for incentives to help attract staff to fill any key skills gaps which could negatively impact on T Level delivery. • A review of effective practice in the UK/internationally in attracting suitably skilled staff to, and retaining them in, the post-16 education and training sector could also be undertaken. • There may be useful learning from recent work in the schools sector on attracting and retaining staff that can be drawn on.

	• Monitor the extent to which challenges in the sector such as funding, low staff morale and lack of focus on professional development impact on T Level delivery.
Programme delivery	
Securing and delivering industry placements	
• Most providers and sector representatives expected challenges in securing sufficient industry placements, particularly in certain sectors and over the longer-term.	• The industry placement is recognised as a particular challenge. The recent update on delivery models and support (DfE, 2019c), offers more flexibility on what constitutes an industry placement and will help providers with preparations for the 2020 programmes. Additionally: 　o ensure that industry placement funding is commensurate with the level of effort required (particularly in rural areas) 　o consider offering further flexibility in certain areas/sectors in terms of what can count towards the minimum 45 days/315 hours placement 　o consider placing more focus on students responding to employer briefs, simulations and virtual learning. • Raise awareness amongst employers of T Levels, the structure and content of the industry placement and the benefits of engaging with the programme. • Share learning and effective practice in securing and delivering placements from wave one providers with those in the second wave. This is crucial since students need to complete the placement to achieve their T Level.
Delivering a programme of this size	
• Several providers raised concerns about delivering a programme of the size proposed for T Levels.	• In an evaluation of the implementation of the first three T Levels, it will be important to explore how providers are managing the delivery of the programme and its range of components, and how employers are managing the industry placement element.

Student recruitment	
• While providers are fairly confident that they will recruit their target student numbers, they reported challenges around future student recruitment.	• Awareness raising: it is important that DfE's awareness raising campaign helps students and their parents/carers, teachers and careers advisers to understand the demanding and specialist nature of T Levels, their equivalence to A Levels and how they differ from AGQs and apprenticeships. • Transition year: the form and content of the transition year as a way of ensuring young people's readiness for the rigour of T Levels requires careful thought and the expertise and examples of good practice in the sector should be drawn on. • It will be important to assess the factors facilitating or limiting student demand for the range of T Level routes and pathways.
Progression routes	

• Providers expect to use existing support mechanisms to support post-T Level decision making but noted a lack of clarity on progression routes.	• Clarify and communicate progression routes from T Levels to employment, further technical courses, apprenticeships and higher education. Greater transparency and clarity is needed on:
	  o where T Levels fit within existing provision and how they relate to AGQs
	  o whether the achievement of a particular T Level allows automatic progression to a level 4 apprenticeship. Where this is problematic, thought needs to be given to supporting the development of bridging provision
	  o requirements for progression to higher education technical degrees and the UCAS points T Levels will attract.

T Levels within the broader context of level 3 provision	
• Study participants raised broader issues regarding where T Levels fit within the 16-19 landscape, alongside concerns around social mobility.	• Communicate a clear rationale for the introduction of T Levels, including how they relate to AGQs (should they remain) and the distinct nature, focus and target groups of these qualifications.

	• As part of the review of level 3 qualifications, serious consideration should be given to the needs and requirements of students who are currently well served by AGQs and for whom T Levels will be not be appropriate.
The need for evaluation of T Level implementation	
• It will be crucial to evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation of the first T Levels.	• Undertake an external national evaluation, focussing on finding out how effectively T Levels are implemented, what is working well, challenges faced and how they are tackled. Evaluation findings will facilitate the sharing of emerging and effective practice and highlight areas for development for future T Level delivery.

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Appendix: Table 1

Type of institution	T Levels delivering	Location	Ofsted rating	Average attainment scores post-16			Size – number of students
				Applied General	**Tech Level**	**A Level**	
Independent Learning Provider	Digital	Nationwide	Good	Data not available	Data not available	Data not available	3000
Independent Learning Provider	Digital	East of England	Good	Data not available	Data not available	Data not available	???
FE College	Education	Yorkshire and the Humber	Good	Data not available	Data not available	Data not available	2100
FE College	Digital, Construction, Education	North West	Outstanding	Merit	Distinction-	Data not available	20000
FE College	Digital, Construction, Education	South West	Outstanding	Pass+	Pass	C- 26.12	15000
FE College	Digital, Construction, Education	South East	Outstanding	Merit+	Merit	C 29.28	25000
Sixth Form College	Digital, Construction, Education	South West	Good	Merit+	Merit	C 31.08	2200

Type of institution	T Levels delivering	Location	Ofsted rating	Average attainment scores post-16			Size – number of students
				Applied General	**Tech Level**	**A Level**	
FE College	Digital, Construction, Education	East of England	Good	Merit+	Merit-	C 30.53	11000
Community School	Digital	North East	Outstanding	Distinction	Distinction-	C+ 33.80	1237
FE College	Digital, Construction, Education	South West	Outstanding	Merit+	Merit+	C+ 32.58	10000 - 12000
FE College	Digital, Education	South East	Outstanding	Data not available	Merit+	Data not available	5200
FE College	Digital, Education	South East	Outstanding	Data not available	Merit	D+ 23.85	7820
FE College	Education	Yorkshire and the Humber	Outstanding	Merit-	Pass-	E 11.35	21850
FE College	Digital, Construction, Education	South East	Report not yet available due to recent merger	Merit+	Data not available	C 31.43	5000
Academy	Education	West Midlands	Outstanding	Merit	Merit+	C- 28.18	955
FE College	Digital, Education	North West	Outstanding	Distinction	Merit-	C+ 32.01	6300

Type of institution	T Levels delivering	Location	Ofsted rating	Average attainment scores post-16			Size – number of students
				Applied General	**Tech Level**	**A Level**	
FE College	Digital, Construction, Education	North East	Outstanding	Distinction-	Distinction+	C- 25.49	11000
Academy	Digital	West Midlands	Outstanding	Merit+	Data not available	C+ 34.11	1269
Sixth Form College	Education	South East	Outstanding	Distinction* (2017)	Distinction+	B- 36.21	4000
Sixth Form College	Digital, Construction, Education	Yorkshire and the Humber	Good	Data not available	Merit-	C 31.48	1000
FE College	Digital, Education	Yorkshire and the Humber	Good	Distinction-	Data not available	D 18.44	3360
FE College	Construction	East of England	Good	Pass+	Merit+	E 9.71 (2017)	4000
FE College	Digital, Construction, Education	South West	Outstanding	Distinction+ (2017)	Merit+	B- 35.82	6500
FE College	Digital, Construction, Education	West Midlands	Outstanding	Distinction-	Merit+ (2017)	D 19.44	16000

Type of institution	T Levels delivering	Location	Ofsted rating	Average attainment scores post-16			Size – number of students
				Applied General	**Tech Level**	**A Level**	
FE College	Digital, Construction, Education	Yorkshire and The Humber	Outstanding	Data not available	Distinction-	C+ 32.19	8000

Table 1 – *Data on OFSTED ratings has been taken from the most recent inspection. Post-16 attainment data is based on average grades and points received by students in the exam season of 2018 (unless stated as 2017 where 2018 data was not available). Unavailable data for grades may be due to suppressed data, in which less than 10 students took the qualifications therefore data was not published for confidentiality, or because the qualification was not offered by the provider. Points for A Levels are based upon the following benchmarks: A* = 60; A = 50; B = 40; C = 30; D = 20; E = 10; Fail = 0. Points for Applied General Qualifications and Tech Levels are not reported here due to the differing points benchmarks based upon the size and challenge of the qualifications.*

Evidence for excellence in education

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