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REFORMING TECHNICAL EDUCATION

Employers' views of T Levels



Report

August 2018



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Report

Reforming technical education: employers' views of T Levels

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1 Background

In 2015 the Independent Panel on Technical Education, chaired by Lord Sainsbury, was tasked with undertaking a review of current technical education provision. The Panel, which reported back in April 2016, highlighted the fragmented and confusing nature of the vocational landscape: young people had to navigate over 20,000 different courses and 160 providers, with very little information on which types of pathways would provide the best route to employment. To address this they recommended streamlining the technical education system into 15 'high quality' routes, with standards set by employers. The Government's response, set out in the Post-16 Skills Plan, accepted all of the Panel's recommendations and set out how it intended to reform the system, creating a technical option which would help young people access skilled employment and also provide the technical knowledge and practical skills needed by industry.

T-Level qualifications form the centrepiece of these reforms. They are a new technical study programme designed to sit alongside apprenticeships and A levels within the reformed skills system. T Levels will be new Level 3 technical qualifications (equivalent to A levels), and will sit in the 15 routes that group together related occupations requiring similar knowledge, skills and behaviours. These routes will be further broken down into occupational specialisms. The content of T Levels is being designed by employer panels, with the first T Levels scheduled to be introduced in September 2020 and full roll-out intended from September 2023. The study programmes will generally last over two years and will include a substantial work placement of up to three months, as well as English, maths and digital content.

If these new qualifications are to be a success, it's essential that employers are aware of and on board with the reforms. This is partly so that they will be ready and willing, from 2020 onwards, to offer a young person studying towards a T Level a substantial high-quality work placement opportunity. But it's also crucial that they recognise the value and opportunity in harnessing this new source of talent. It is this latter point which will be the real litmus test for success or failure of this new qualification.

This report is designed to shine a light on employers' views and attitudes to T Levels, investigating: employers' current level of awareness; what they would like to see from T Levels and whether they have the capacity to support the work placement element; and their likely response to T Levels in terms of future recruitment. It is based on a survey of 2,000 organisations drawn from YouGov's employer panel. The data is weighted to be representative of the UK public and private sector business population by size of employer and sector.

The report is structured as follows:

- employers' views of young people's employability
- employers' level of understanding and views about T Levels
- summary and conclusions.

1 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/536046/Report_of_the_Independent_Panel_on_Technical_Education.pdf

2 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/536043/Post-16_Skills_Plan.pdf

3 Technical routes will be developed in 15 sector areas: Agriculture, Environmental and Animal Care, Business and Administrative, Catering and Hospitality, Childcare and Education, Construction, Creative and Design, Digital, Engineering and Manufacturing, Hair and Beauty, Health and Science, Legal, Finance and Accounting, Protective Services, Sales, Marketing and Procurement, Social Care, Transport and Logistics.

2 Employers' views on how well the current education system prepares young people for work

Just under three-fifths (59%) of employers surveyed stated that in the last three years they had recruited a young person for their first job on leaving school, college or university. Almost a third of employers (30%) reported that they hadn't recruited a young person for their first job in the last three years.

Of those who have recruited a young person, larger employers (250+ employees) are more likely to report that they have taken someone on for their first job direct from education, with almost three-quarters (73%) recruiting from this pool, compared with just 40% of smaller organisations (2-249 employees).

The most commonly reported group that employers have recruited from were university or another higher education institution graduates, with 67% of employers reporting that they had taken on a graduate for their first job. Just a quarter had recruited a 16-year-old school-leaver to their first job, while just under half recruited a 17- or 18-year-old school-leaver, with similar proportions recruiting that age group from FE colleges (45% and 46% respectively).

Table 1: Employer recruitment of education leavers in the last three years, by age and institution (%)

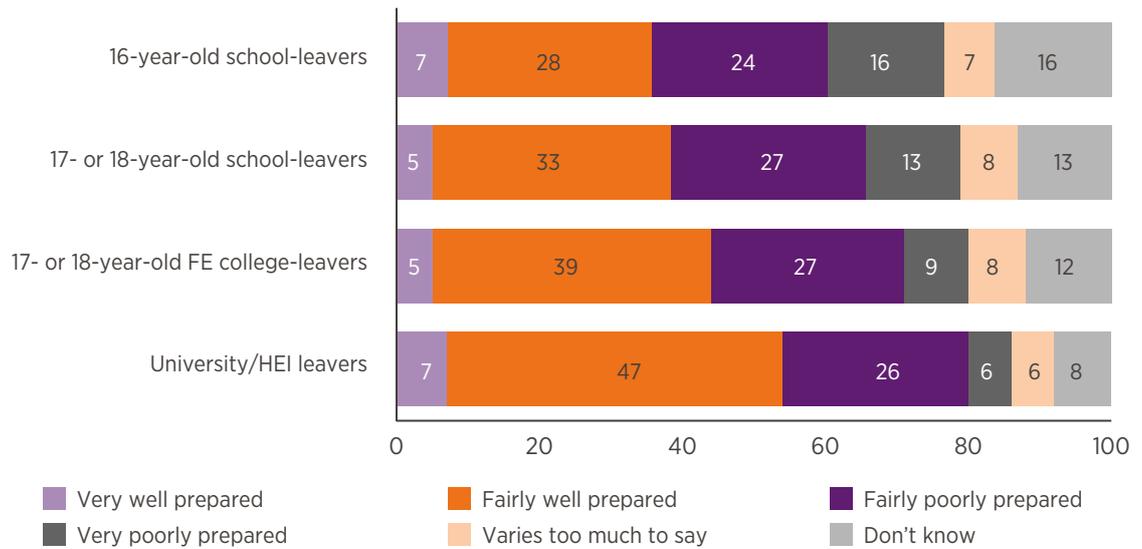
16-year-olds recruited to their first job from school	26
17- or 18-year-olds recruited to their first job from school	45
17- or 18-year-olds recruited to their first job from a further education college	46
University or another higher education institution, regardless of their age	67
Other	1
Don't know	5

Unweighted base: 1,190

Employers who have recruited a young person direct from school, college or university were asked to rate how prepared they thought they were for work. Figure 1 sets out the findings.

- Employers viewed 16-year-old and 17- or 18-year-old school-leavers as the least well prepared for work, with 40% of employers reporting that both groups were either fairly poorly or very poorly prepared for work.
- 17- or 18-year-old FE college-leavers were viewed as being better prepared for the workplace, with 44% of employers reporting that they were either very well (5%) or fairly well (39%) prepared, with just over a third (36%) reporting that they were fairly poorly (27%) or very poorly prepared (9%).
- University/higher education institution-leavers were considered the best prepared for work by employers, with over half (54%) stating that they were either very (7%) or fairly (47%) well prepared. Yet, it should be noted that almost a third (32%) of employers think university graduates are not well prepared, with over a quarter stating that they are fairly poorly prepared and 6% that they are very poorly prepared.

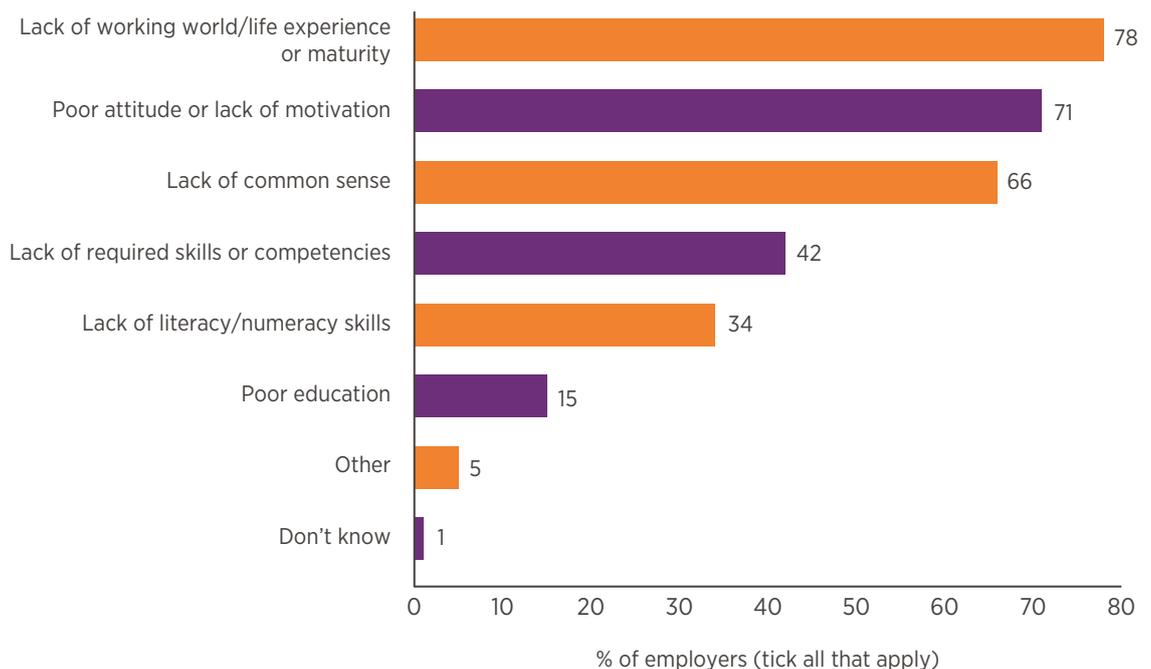
Figure 1: Employers' views of the preparedness of young people, by age and institution (%)



Unweighted base: All employers who have recruited young people to first job: 16-year-old school-leavers: 216; 17- or 18-year-old school-leavers: 394; 17- or 18-year-old FE college-leavers: 409; university or HE institution-leavers: 684.

Figure 2 sets out the ways in which employers feel that school, college and university leavers are poorly prepared for work. The most commonly identified reasons were that young people lacked experience of the world (78%), had a poor attitude or lack of motivation (71%) or a lack of common sense (66%). A lack of skills and poor education were also cited by a smaller proportion of employers: 34% stated that young people lack the necessary literacy and numeracy skills, and 42% of employers felt that young people lack the skills and competencies required for the role. However, just 15% blamed poor education for young people's unpreparedness for work.

Figure 2: Reasons why school, college or university leavers are poorly prepared for the workplace (%)



Unweighted base: employers who think that school, college or university leavers are fairly poorly or very poorly prepared for work: 436.

3 Employers' level of understanding and views about T Levels

Awareness amongst employers of the new technical education reforms currently under way is pretty low, with just 40% of employers reporting that they had heard of T Levels prior to being surveyed. Of those who had heard of them, the majority rated their level of knowledge of the new qualifications as fairly poor (46%) or very poor (18%).

Awareness levels are highest amongst public sector organisations (50% have heard of T Levels) and in the third/voluntary sector (48% are aware of T Levels) and lowest amongst private sector firms (37%). Larger private sector firms (250+ employees) also appear slightly better informed than smaller private sector firms (2-249 employees), with 40% and 34% respectively having heard of the new qualifications.

Table 2: Employers who have heard of T Levels, by size and sector (%)

	All	Private sector	Public sector	Voluntary/ third sector	Private sector SME (2-249)	Private sector large (250+)
Yes	40	37	50	48	34	40
No	60	63	50	52	66	60

Unweighted base: All: 1,801; private sector: 1,377; public sector: 190; third/voluntary sector: 234; private sector SME (2-249): 917; private sector large (250+): 460.

Employer willingness to provide work placements

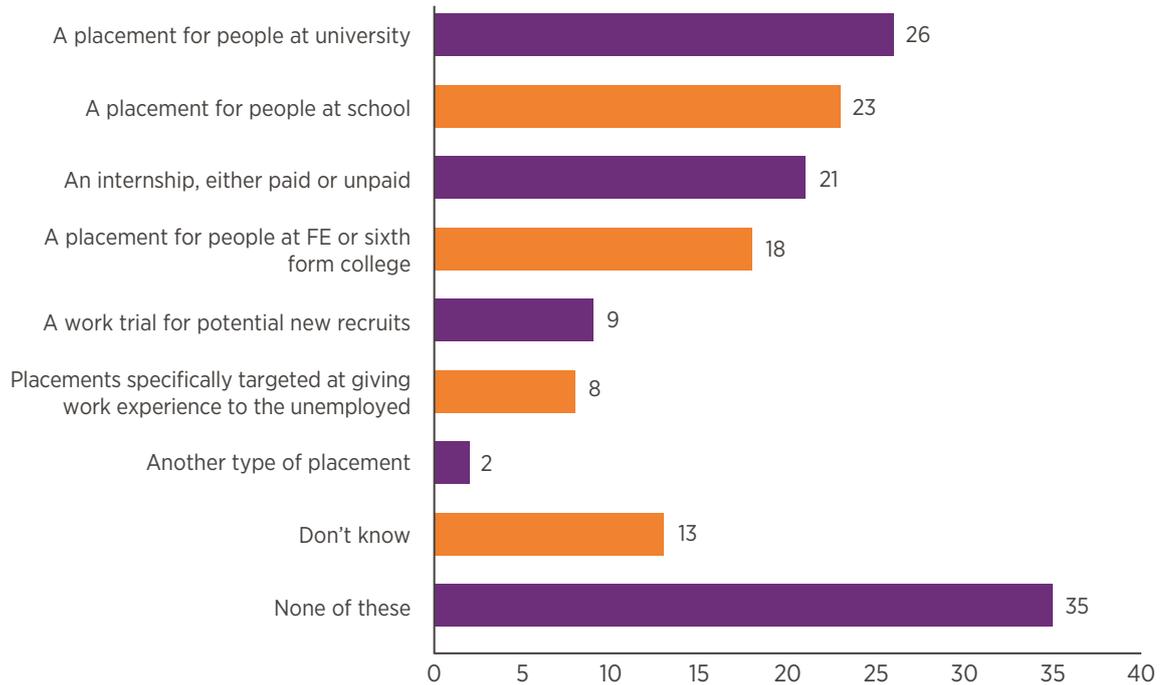
The work placement will form an important component of the new technical qualifications. Work placements are required to last on average 50 days, within a range of 45 to 60 days, and cover a minimum of 315 hours. The placements themselves need to be occupationally specific and focused on developing the practical and technical competencies required for the specific occupational pathway chosen by the student.

'We are expecting providers and employers to start developing the capacity and capability to deliver work placements now in advance of the introduction of T Levels from 2020.' (DfE)

The majority of employers already provide young people with opportunities to gain experience of work through a range of work experience placements. Figure 3 below sets out the types of placements commonly offered by employers. The most frequently reported by employers were work placements for university students (26%), followed by those for school pupils (23%), and then internships (21%), which are also likely to be graduate-level placements. Over a third (35%) have not provided any work experience placements at all in the last 12 months.

Most work experience placements provided by employers last less than 15 days (62%): almost a quarter (24%) of employers report that they have provided placements of five days, 22% offer placements of ten days, just over one in ten offer 15-day placements, and just 5% offer shorter placements of one to four days. This compares with 29% of employers who offer placements of a duration greater than 15 days.

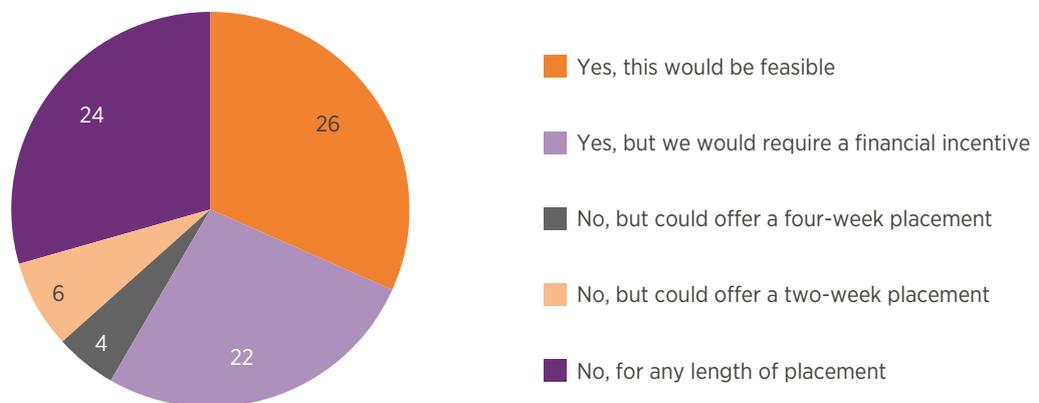
Figure 3: Types of work experience placements provided by employers in the last 12 months (%)



Unweighted base: all employers: 2,001.

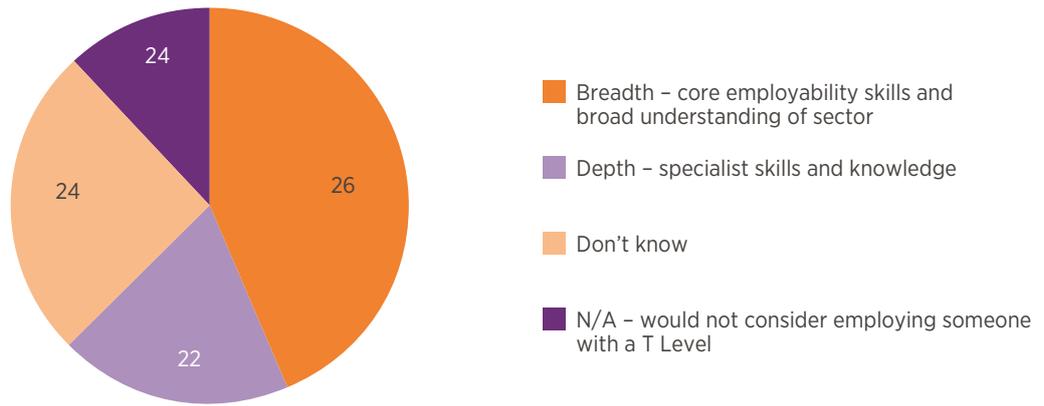
Employers were asked about how feasible it would be to offer a work placement of the length required for T Levels, and the results are presented in Figure 4. Overall, just a quarter of employers thought that they would be able to provide a placement of a minimum of 45 days in duration, with a further 22% responding that it would be feasible but that they would require some type of financial incentive to do so. Larger private sector employers (250+ employees) were more likely to say that it would be feasible to offer a 45-day placement (31%) without a financial incentive, than smaller firms (2-249 employees), where just one in five thought it would be feasible. Public sector employers (28%) were slightly more likely to state that a 45-day placement would be feasible, compared with private sector (26%) and third/voluntary sector (23%) employers.

Figure 4: Employers' views on the feasibility of T-Level work placement (%)



Unweighted base: all employers: 1,801.

Figure 5: The skills and knowledge employers say they would value when recruiting someone with a T Level (%)



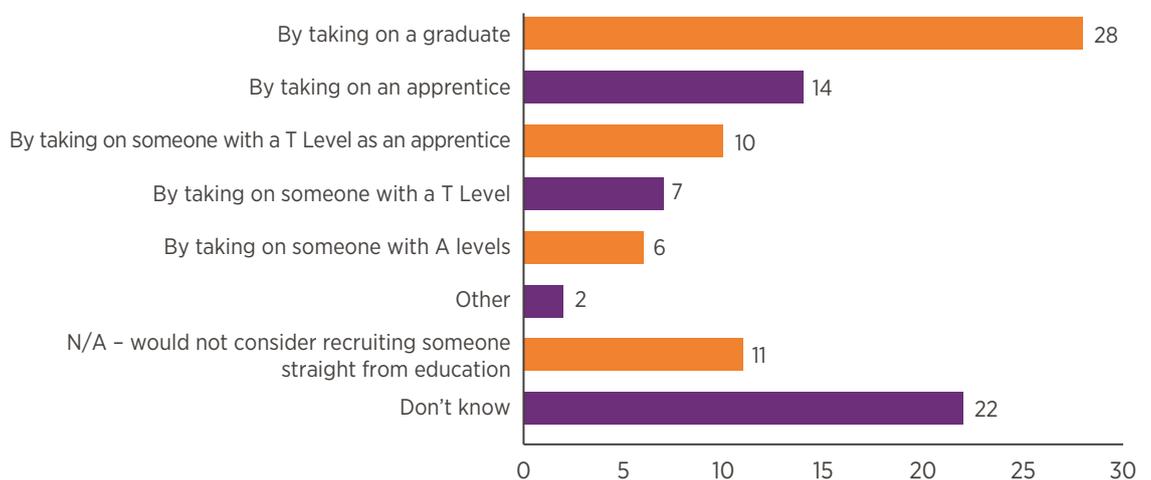
Unweighted base: all employers: 1,801.

Employers were asked about what they would value most, in terms of skills and knowledge, if they were to recruit someone with a T Level to an entry role within their company, and the results are presented in Figure 5 above. Interestingly, over double the proportion of employers would value breadth (core employability skills and a broad knowledge of the sector) over depth (the specialist skills and knowledge required for the vacancy) in knowledge and skills.

Despite low levels of awareness, employers appear broadly supportive of the principle of T Levels. When asked whether they think the new vocational qualification would make a difference to young people's employability overall, 44% stated that they thought it would make a positive difference, 35% thought it would make no difference, 17% said they didn't know, and just 4% thought it would have a negative impact.

That they are broadly supportive in principle is also evident from their views on which type of candidate they would prefer when recruiting straight from education to fill an entry-level vacancy in their organisation. Figure 6 sets out the findings and shows that although recruiting a graduate is still the most preferred option (28%), recruiting someone with a T Level is the second most popular, with 17% reporting that they would recruit someone with a T Level as an apprentice (10%) or direct into an entry-level role (7%). The least popular choice for filling an entry-level role was taking on someone with A levels (6%), which probably reflects the view that A levels are a pathway to further or higher education rather than a direct pathway into employment.

Figure 6: Recruiting someone straight from education: the preferred way to fill an entry-level role (%)



Unweighted base: all employers: 1,801.

4 Summary and conclusions

Employers are highly critical of young people's preparedness for work and identify a lack of work experience as one of the main reasons for this.

T Levels could play a key role in addressing employer concerns on the work-readiness of young people, by providing both the knowledge and technical skills needed but also the broader employability skills that are gained through real experience of the workplace. The work placement element of the new study programmes is therefore critical to the overall success of the technical education reforms.

The survey highlights a concerning lack of awareness amongst employers of the new qualifications. With only a year and a half left to the roll-out of the first new routes, it's critical that more is done to increase their understanding and ensure that they are able and willing to engage and provide high-quality work placement opportunities.

Although many employers already offer work experience places to young people, many of these opportunities are aimed at graduates rather than school or college students, and currently most opportunities are quite short in terms of duration, with the majority lasting less than two weeks. This is considerably shorter than the work placements required for the new T-Level routes, and it is clear from this data that most employers would not be able to offer a placement of the length needed to fulfil T-Level requirements, either at all, or without some type of financial incentive.

Further consultation is required with employers on this to ensure that the requirement to provide work experience does not discourage organisations from supporting young people studying T Levels.

Yet, despite the challenges this raises, it is very encouraging to see that many employers are, in principle, highly supportive of the reforms. On balance, employer responses indicate that they feel they will have a beneficial effect on young people's employability, and there are early indications of a willingness to recruit young people who have been through this route. Interestingly, the survey data also suggests that employers would value breadth over depth in terms of the skills young people gain from T Levels, preferring employability skills and a broad understanding of their sector rather than specialist skills and knowledge required for specific vacancies.

In light of these findings the Government should seek to:

- put in place an awareness-raising campaign to increase employer awareness and engagement
- ensure employability skills are embedded in a consistent manner across all T-Level routes
- ensure adequate co-ordination, support and guidance are available for employers, to help them get ready to offer T-Level work placements
- consider whether financial incentives may be appropriate to increase employer engagement with work placements, particularly for SMEs.



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