

## SUMMARY OF AELP POSITIONING ON T LEVELS

June 2021

Plans for an overhaul of technical education have been around for some time; the prospect of 15 new occupational routeways had been put forward in Nick Boles' "Post-16 Skills Plan" in 2016. These were described as two-year college-based programmes suitable from the age of 16, as well as those 19+, with close alignment to the new apprenticeship standards.

The Post-16 Skills plan timetable that was originally set out was as follows:

- a) April 2017 – IfA begins operating
- b) April 2018 – IfA becomes IfATE
- c) October 2018 – Procurement begins for technical qualifications
- d) February 2019 – Technical qualifications approved for 'pathfinder' routes.
- e) September 2019 – First teaching of 'pathfinder' routes
- f) Sept 20/Sept 22 – Phased teaching of other routes

Plans for T Levels were formally announced in the Budget announcement of March 2017, with a phased budget rising to £500m by 2023, indicating serious backing for the policy concept. However in July 2017 it was announced by Skills Minister Anne Milton that delivery of the first qualifications would be delayed until September 2020, following criticism that that the original timescale was "impossible" by several major AOs including City & Guilds.

A government consultation in December 2017 gave more details on T level design, stating that they would be set at Level 3, and broadly equivalent in scope to 3 A levels. Mandatory work placements would also be included. Our consultation response ([Submission 45](#)) dated February 2018 included the following key points, on which we have remained consistent ever since:

- a) We agreed with the drive to provide a clear route through technical education that is easy to navigate and optimises choice for learners in progressing in a career or occupation.
- b) We questioned the decision to add T-levels to the qualification landscape without a clear strategy of whether or not they were intended to replace other qualifications.

*"Because it is yet unclear what T levels will replace, their addition to the technical qualification landscape, far from simplifying things, makes it considerably more complicated."*

- c) The core competencies of apprenticeship and traineeship providers should be fully utilised in building any new strand of technical learning provision.

*"Providers with experience in engaging employers to offer apprenticeship and traineeship are in a strong position to also facilitate engagements with work placements T level purposes. Every effort should be made to use this experience and expertise..."*

- d) We were concerned at the lack of equivalence of outcome between completing a T-level at level 3 and an apprenticeship at level 3.

*"...the consultation admits that some T levels will not deliver learners to full occupational competence without an apprenticeship being completed....under these proposals T levels look like the qualification a learner would take in the event they cannot get an*

*apprenticeship – very much a second-tier option...than one designed to build a solid career base.”*

*“It is questionable how a T level can come close to providing the equivalent of an apprenticeship 80% of on the job experience and learning using only classroom-based activity and 3 months work experience....this raises fundamental questions surrounding the relativity and equivalence that is possible between apprenticeships and T levels.”*

- e) We called for testing of the T-level delivery concepts in non-College environments to ensure utilise the full potential benefits of roll-on roll-off provision, noting that there was no inherent reason why this could not happen. (NB This did not happen. All T levels are now delivered on a formal academic-year basis with fixed exam windows.)
- f) We called for a balance between the firm work placement requirement for 45-60 days/ 7 hours a day, and exceptional cases where this may be varied, such as for those with special needs or defined circumstances. We also called for some national standardisation of work placement content.
- g) Some form of direct financial recompense, and/or perhaps an employer staff support programme, should be considered to encourage employer engagement in work placements. (NB This has recently been offered as a Covid response strategy.)
- h) We welcomed the fact that both Functional Skills and GCSE would be recognised by T-levels as equivalent English and maths qualifications. We used [our press release on the government’s consultation response](#) to press home a call for equitable funding.
- i) For the proposals not to have included Level 2 was a mistake that would impede social mobility. We recommended using the existing Study Programme strand as the “entry ramp” to T-level study, with a “transition offer” for learners with SEND/LLDD and protected characteristics. We noted that the ostensibly new “transition offer” proposed

*“is...describing Study Programmes that already exist.... With so little overall thought being given in the consultation to a strategy for level 2s, it is difficult to see how the social mobility agenda is being addressed within the technical qualification reform agenda as a whole.”*

We issued [a press release in November 2017](#) on this issue.

- j) Capital funding to build placement delivery capacity should be offered on a provider-neutral basis. (NB This call was ignored – whilst Capacity and Delivery Funding was made available to all potential T Level providers, Building Facilities and Improvement Grants were reserved for Colleges only, even though 3 ITPs had been confirmed as participating in the first wave of T Level roll-outs.)
- k) The policy of single licensing for T-level technical qualifications should be abandoned. We cited previous Select Committee reports, Secretaries of State and government’s own research.

We additionally expressed a range of concerns about work placements (latterly termed “industry placements”) and noted that the consultation

*“over-estimates how much the supply of and demand for provision is governed by policy and underestimates how much it responds to market forces.....having an offer available does not ensure it will be taken up.”*

In May 2018 we published [research](#) sponsored by City and Guilds with an accompanying [literature review](#) that came to the following broad conclusions:

- a) There was little evidence that the inclusion of work placements would substantively improve the skills of learners, as they were more usually viewed by employers as “*long-format job interviews*”.
- b) Capacity and Delivery Funding (intended to build capacity for work placements) was more likely to fund “bolting-on” of work experience to existing models of delivery than develop new ones
- c) Work placements may adversely affect the market for paid employment for 16-19 year olds
- d) That there was a clear ask from employers and providers alike that the relationship between apprenticeships and T Levels should be more clearly articulated.
- e) That potential financial support for both employers and learners must be seriously considered for to be made available in the numbers required - 90% of employers surveyed wanted this.

In the same month, the [then-DfE Permanent Secretary Jonathan Slater wrote to then-SoS Damian Hinds](#) saying that “it will clearly be very challenging to ensure that the first three T-levels are ready to be taught from 2020 and beyond to a consistently high standard.... I would advise deferring the start date to 2021 in order to mitigate the feasibility and consequential value for money risks.” In a ministerial direction, the [SoS replied](#) that “None of the advice (I have received) has indicated that teaching from 2020 cannot be achieved.....the delivery of T levels in 2020 is focused in a measured way on a small number of T Levels in a small number of providers.” The first teaching in T Levels did indeed commence in line with revised roll-out schedule in September 2020.

No official figures have been given for how many students have enrolled, although we have logged an FOI requesting these figures. Department officials have limited comment on this to saying that numbers were less than originally expected, although this was not surprising in light of the intervening pandemic and that overall they were pleased with uptake.

Other notes:

- Details on the overall structure of T Levels and planned subject rollouts can be found in our [“What’s Next?”](#) Guide.
- Our [Submission 58](#) (Feb 2019) was a response to the government consultation of provider funding for T levels.
- PW has run T level webinars for members and others, including November 18, January and March 2020; at conferences; and presentations to the AELP Technical Education/T Level SIG that ran up until about 2019.

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