
T-levels: a UCU view

The text below, by Gila Tabrizi, UCU policy officer, formed part of a longer document authored by her and titled 'The future of post-16 qualifications' which was submitted by UCU (for a deadline of 21 January 2022) to a parliamentary education select committee inquiry into 'how the current system prepares young people for work and education'.

2.1 UCU has significant concerns about the introduction of T Levels designed as a qualification available only to a minority of young people. The danger is that between the traditional academic education of A Levels and those more narrowly focused on vocational education, there will arise an 'overlooked middle' of learners who are unable to access either. The government's proposal to simultaneously defund a substantial portion of applied general qualifications will compound this problem, [and we discuss this further in section 4.0].

2.2 The T Level, as an alternative to A Levels, cannot meet the needs of all students. Not everyone who wishes to study vocational subjects wants to go into an occupational role. Many students want to pursue a mix of general and vocational qualifications. Even with the introduction of a T Level transition year, a more linear and externally assessed vocational route is likely to increase failure rates, and push some students who would follow the current applied general route into lower levels of learning or out of learning completely. On top of this the substantial employer commitment to providing the necessary work experience required to pass a T Level, particularly amidst the fallout from the covid-19 crisis, and the geographical variation in the available levels of provision are going to restrict access to the offer. The government should be open that the T Levels are intended to be a more selective and smaller offer than current provision, which means there will be a large cohort of young people who are unserved and will find their progression prospects hampered.

2.3 Exclusion, rather than inclusion is therefore built into the design of T Levels. To help overcome this UCU recommends the continuation of the current applied general route, and the maintenance of the principle of mixed programmes. We should celebrate the achievement and progression of all students and not just a minority of high achievers. The language used around other routes is also important, and we would

caution against the trend to denigrate existing options as not rigorous. This continues to feed the narrative that vocational options are soft or not as valid as academic options, an attitude that the government has stated it is opposed to.

2.4 There is also a question mark over the progression prospects for students undertaking T Levels, as the qualifications are not yet widely accepted for entry by higher education institutions (1). Although institutions are responsible for their own admissions criteria, there is a key role for government, having decided to launch a new flagship technical qualification, in integrating the needs and views of higher education institutions (and employers, students and parents and carers) to ensure they are widely understood and valued. The absence of a properly funded, independent information advice and guidance service also contributes to this communication gap. When we consider that underrepresented groups in higher education are more likely to have pursued vocational options to get there in the first place, it is crucial to the success of T Levels that they are not responsible for exacerbating structural inequalities.

2.5 For students who want to pursue T Levels there are measures that can be taken to support their achievement, such as providing adequate funding for the sector to deliver these demanding qualifications, giving teachers the opportunity to participate in meaningful CPD and addressing staff workload, stress and poor employment practices while also improving recruitment and retention of new technical teachers to support the delivery of the qualifications. The government should commit to tackling these issues through an overarching strategy that brings coherence to the reforms.

1. <https://feweeek.co.uk/confused-and-frustrated-most-universities-reject-first-cohort-of-t-level-students/>
