

# T-levels struggle on

## Martin Allen

The same day as their A-level counterparts, a second cohort of Technical Level (T-Level) students received their grades. For the record, the results data show:

- Just under 3,500 students received results in ten areas.
- 90.5 per cent achieved a Pass or above. The pass rate ranged from 96 per cent (Health) to 70 per cent (Digital Business Services).
- 22.2 per cent of students achieved the top distinction and distinction\* grades; 47.1 per cent achieved a merit, and 21.2 per cent scored a pass.
- The T-Level pathway in which the highest percentage of students achieved a Distinction (equivalent to three As at A-level) was Education and Early Years (34.5 per cent), whilst Digital Business Services had the lowest (2.5 per cent).

But with numbers still relatively low (T-levels are now being rolled out over a four year period), it is too early to draw proper conclusions or even, because of changes in the way results have been displayed, to make comparisons with the 900-plus students who received grades last year. Yet longer term issues continue to remain. A Parliamentary Committee report earlier this year raised serious concerns, while Ofsted concluded that T-levels were not yet providing 'value for money'. Both continued to highlight dangers of cutting funding to existing vocational provision, as the Government plans to do, before T-levels have properly bedded in.

### Industry placements

There have always been difficulties arranging work placements for students on vocational courses, which require more than just 'standig around and watching'. But unlike previous full-time vocational qualifications, the T-level requires a mandatory 45-days placement. Though this year's results show a completion rate of 95 per cent, the Parliamentary Committee noted that up to 250,000 placements could be needed once T-levels are fully operational.

But though T-levels were developed with the input of leading employers, Department of Education research in 2021 found that almost two thirds (63 per cent) of employers were not interested in or able to be offering a placement. Ofsted also found that the quality of placements varied considerably.

While there have been examples of youngsters being able to share placements with different employers, fears are that many of the placements may become 'virtual' or that schools and colleges will be allowed to use simulations instead. To make matters worse, in some sectors the majority of employees are working remotely for much of the week anyway. Placements are likely to be particularly difficult for students on Digital routes, for example.

### Dropout rates

In 2021 the Government had reported that over five thousand students (5210) were starting T-levels that year. This indicates a dropout rate of a third - much higher than for A-level. Further data on non-completion should be available later in the summer, though the DFE is likely to be reticent on such matters! The size of a T-level course means that dropping out (compared with, say, dropping one of your three A-levels) unless a young person does this very early, results in a lost year. Ofsted reported many examples of students leaving their course before the second year. In one institution, on one course, nobody enrolled for year two at all.

### Vocational qualifications: work or university?

In other respects, the Ts are facing similar contradictions to previous rounds of vocational qualifications. Like previous awards, T-levels were ostensibly designed as qualifications for the work place. But level 3 (officially equivalent to A-level) qualifications have also been used as entry tickets

(as 'second chance' qualifications for those excluded from academic tracks?) to higher education - and have been given UCAS accreditation points accordingly.

Over a third of the first cohort who completed their T-level in 2022 entered higher education, with a similar figure expected this year. But though the number of universities accepting T-level applicants has continued to grow, as has also been the case with previous vocational awards, only a minority of elite/Russell Group universities are currently prepared to recognise and accept students with them. And where they are, invariably applicants are required to have an additional A-level. Previously applicants have been able to combine BTEC-type qualifications with academic study. T-level timetable requirements now make this much more difficult. Ofsted reported students disappointed with the way HE has responded to T-levels, while the Parliamentary Committee also found that T-level applicants were restricted to a limited range of courses closely related to the T-level subjects.

### Skills or 'credentials'

But as a 'middle-track' qualification sitting between academic education and work-based apprenticeships, vocational qualifications have not necessarily benefitted young people seeking to enter the workforce directly either. Despite employers, or at least employer organisations, being represented on committees designing course specifications, many individual employers (surveys indicate a majority) continue to have little knowledge of vocational qualifications, preferring 'tried and trusted' academic awards.

This tells us something about the role that qualifications play in the transition from school to work. Rather than providing 'oven ready' recruits for employers (who invariably have little knowledge about what goes on in classrooms), qualifications are often no more than 'proxies'. We should remember also that, while qualifications may help a young person to successfully get a job, it is not necessarily true that they help them to do it, and that, in most workplaces, especially in the service sector, skills are largely learnt 'on the job'.

Thus, as noted above, employer recruitment practices are just as likely to reflect socially generated views about what constitutes a 'good' education. Young people (at least those who have a choice) will also likely enrol for particular qualifications on the basis of their 'exchange value' - in other words qualifications are 'credentials', sought for what they will buy in terms of employment or higher education places, as much as providing

intrinsic benefits, and in this respect vocational qualifications have always bought their holders less than academic ones. It could also be argued that Tory governments are expanding vocational provision as a way of diverting traffic from an over-congested academic track.

### Vocational qualifications and 'academic drift'

Recent vocational qualifications, like the General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) which became popular in FE colleges in the 1990s but also as school sixth forms continued to grow, were originally constructed around 'competencies'. But when GNVQ was repackaged as a Vocational A-level (part of New Labour's *Curriculum 2000* reforms) it took on many of the characteristics of academic learning, including formal written-based assessment. The vocational qualifications that followed have continued with this format. T-level students still spend 80 per cent of their time in classroom learning - the Ts have an extensive 'core', graded A\* to E like A-levels.

This 'academic drift' has been welcomed by some on the grounds that it can only improve the status of vocational qualifications vis-a-vis academic ones. But there is a risk that students who have rejected or, more likely, struggled with academic learning, (often considered to be the vocational education 'client group'), become disillusioned. Ofsted also noted concerns from teachers over the high level of content and the appropriateness of assessment on some courses.

Unlike most Advanced level BTEC qualifications, where young people with low GCSE scores can access a First level, T-levels require relatively high GCSE scores. Those without these enter a Transition Program (TLTP) lasting a year. However, the Commons Committee flagged up only around 14 per cent of students successfully making the transition, and only half of these had gone on to achieve the full T-level. Ofsted also noted low progression rates.

### 'Doing it like the Germans'?

Elsewhere, young people following vocational/technical pathways have more certain futures. In Germany, seen as a model to emulate, full-time vocational study is linked to apprenticeships, which in turn form part of a 'licence to practice' particular occupations. But moving to this type of model would involve much more than a 'cultural shift' - as some in the UK argue. In Germany, labour demand and

recruitment are subject to much greater regulation and planning, with the local state, employer representatives and trade unions involved.

Implementing these sorts of transition programmes would require wholesale reorganisation of the labour market and economy, well beyond anything considered across the political spectrum in the UK. Rather than the UK's 'free market' approach, it would require the state taking responsibility for young people's transition from education to work, a type of 'social partnership'. Major economic and social changes have weakened the German model and more young people there now choose university. It continues to survive, however.

### **Qualification reform: the way forward**

If the weaknesses of UK vocational qualifications have been highlighted, there are even more serious concerns in relation to their specialist nature - within each T-level area there are specific occupational clusters. Arguably this is not appropriate where continued changes to the occupation structure are inevitable, as technology, particularly AI, continues to revolutionise many aspects of the production process.

Rather than increasing skills requirements, development in AI are expected to affect and/or reduce further the number of 'middle jobs' with which vocational qualifications have traditionally been associated; but as technology advances, employment skills will likely become more 'generic'. While some of the claims that people will enjoy a number of 'multi-careers' during their working life are far-fetched, persuading young people to lock in to a specialist course of study at 16 will not do them any favours.

Rather than just continuing to lament the lack of parity between academic and vocational qualifications, we should campaign for a 'good general education for everybody' - but this should not be mistaken for an academic education for everybody. (Neither are 'alternatives' like the International Baccalaureate the answer.) Looking forward, curriculum reform must draw on some of the more positive aspects of vocational qualifications. Their original emphasis on continued assessment, their emphasis on soft skills, and the less hierarchical relations between teachers and taught are just a few of these aspects.

---