



Thoughts on the development of T Levels



COLLABGROUP™
Together Today for the Skills of Tomorrow

Introduction

T Levels are the Government's centrepiece reform for improving the UK's technical and professional education system.

T Levels provide a unique opportunity to offer a high-quality alternative to traditional academic pathways and increase the supply of technical skills in the UK economy. Many further education colleges believe that T Levels will enhance the prestige of technical and professional education and create new opportunities. Colleges successfully launched T Levels during a global pandemic; this fact alone speaks to college staff's dedication, resolve, and ingenuity in making the roll out successful, but concerns remain.

In the budget on 27 October the Government announced that there will be a £1.6 billion additional investment to provide up to 100,000 16-to-19-year-olds studying for T Levels, technical-based qualifications, with additional classroom hours.

Additionally, following feedback from providers, the Government announced on 9 October, that they will be dropping the english and maths requirements for T Levels and the planned phasing out of BTECs has been postponed back to September 2024. These are welcome changes by the Government.

Over the Summer, we talked to our colleges as we wanted to understand their capacity to deliver T Levels, and to understand better the current state of preparedness for the general rollout of T Levels from 2023. In this document, we analyse the dispersion of further education providers across England and provide commentary on how the uneven distribution of T Levels programmes could impact accessibility.

Secondly, we wanted to understand from Collab Group college members how they view these qualifications and what they see as the key opportunities and challenges that lie ahead. The results paint a nuanced picture, but overall, a sense of guarded optimism shines through.



T Levels availability for FE colleges

The rollout of T Levels has been conducted in phases, with many providers unable to deliver these qualifications until 2023 at the earliest.

The logic of the phased rollout was to help the Government understand what knowledge and skills T Levels Transition Programme students are likely to benefit from their progression to a T Levels. This phased rollout produces uneven T Levels coverage across some regions. Ensuring that T Levels are available and accessible is important for enrollments to reach a critical mass.

T Levels will be delivered by a range of providers, but we argue that the most suitable providers are further education colleges. This is due to their long-established track record in delivering high quality technical and professional education across a range of sector specialisms.

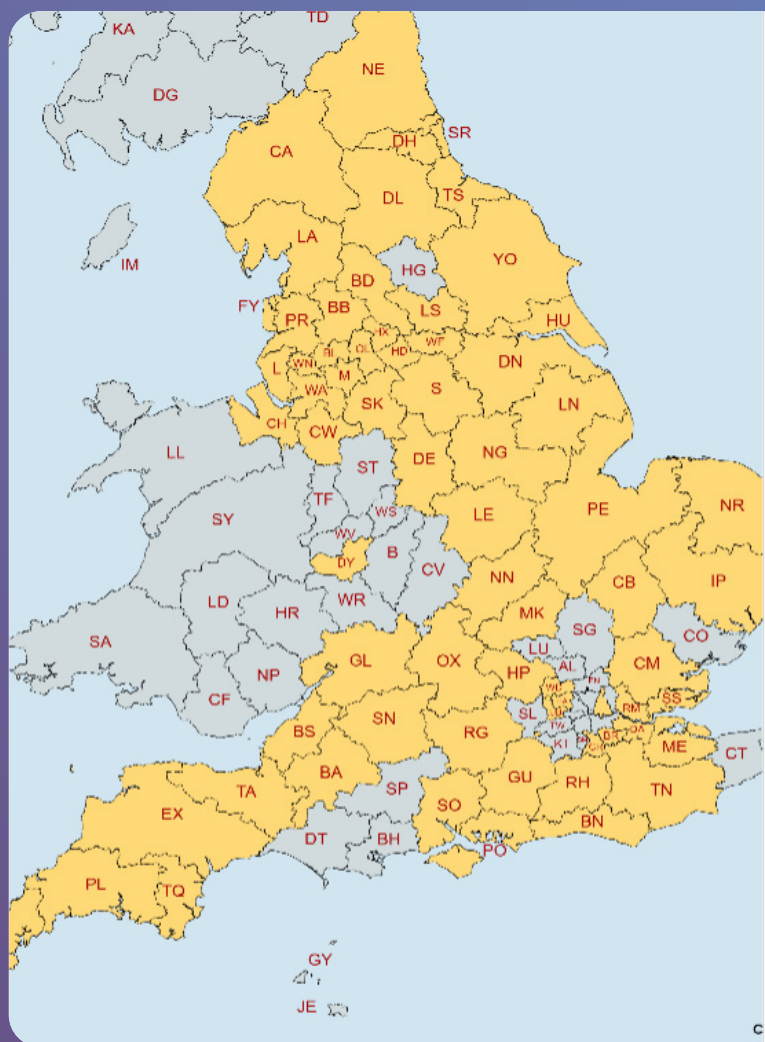
By September 2023, any provider delivering 16-19 study programmes can deliver the T Levels introduced in 2020-21. This includes ten qualifications across three routes, covering education and childcare, digital and construction. In 2022, a further six T Levels will be rolled out across legal, finance and accounting, engineering, manufacturing, and business and administration routes.

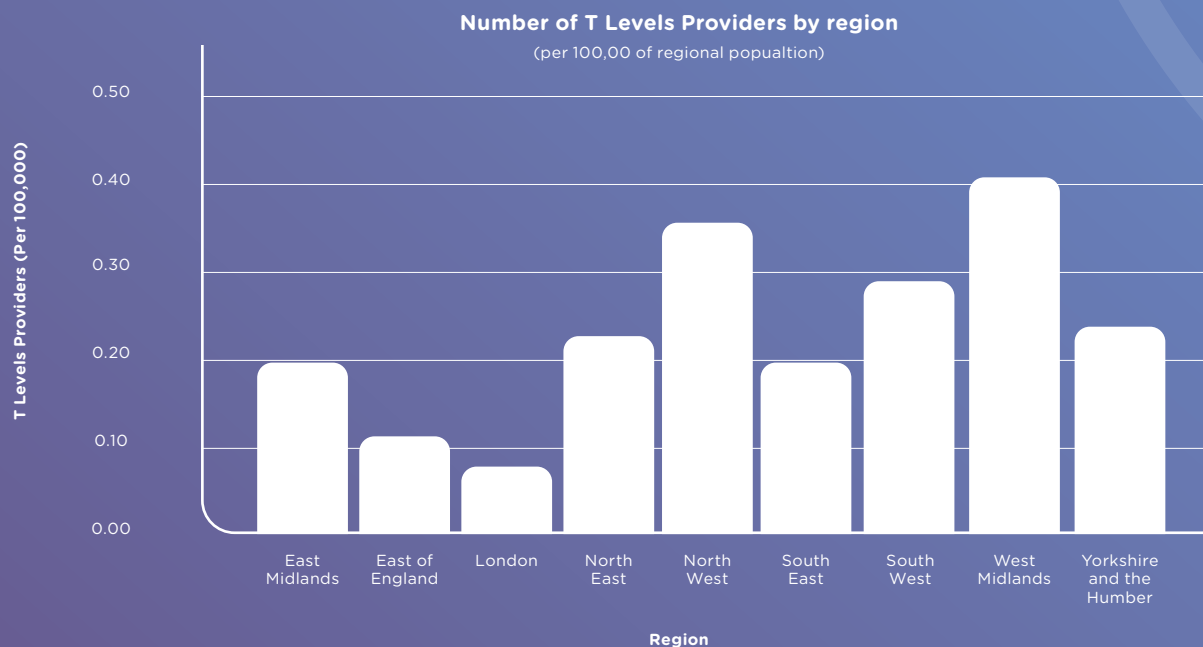
118 out of 192 further education colleges will be delivering T Levels in some form from 2023; this comprises 61% of the total number of FE colleges. Amongst Collab Group members, 26 colleges are based in England, 15 of these colleges are due to deliver T Levels by 2022/23. A further 11 colleges within the Collab Group college network are not currently planning to offer T Levels by 2023.

At this stage, it is evident that cold spots are emerging across the T Levels delivery network within England. While coverage indicated by the map, shows that overall T Levels coverage across England is good, there are some significant gaps if current delivery patterns are maintained. This may be why the government is now pushing back the timetable to defund Level 3 qualifications to 2024.

The existing data for college T Levels delivery shows significant gaps across major population centres, including London, the East of England and the East Midlands.

London is a particularly stark case where some T Levels routes are significantly under-resourced by further education providers. By the 2022/23 academic year, only six providers will deliver the onsite construction T Levels, with three being further education colleges. Five colleges will deliver engineering and manufacturing, and one will deliver finance and accounting.





T Levels availability for FE colleges

A reason that could explain why Collab Group Colleges in the Northwest and Southeast are delivering T Levels at a higher rate is due to colleges in those areas having higher Ofsted Grades.

Colleges with Ofsted Grades 1 or 2 are eligible to deliver T Levels and the Collab Group colleges that have achieved these grades have chosen to deliver T Levels over other courses.

It makes sense that in the initial phase of the T Levels roll out the DfE wanted to safeguard the quality of these qualifications. However, this blanket restriction predicated on Ofsted grades does create gaps in the T Levels delivery network. Of course, the restrictions will be lifted eventually, and the provider base will expand. But is there a risk that areas starting from a lower starting base will not catch up, and the legacy of cold spots will be maintained. This is important as we are already witnessing significant skills gaps in the UK economy as the effects of COVID-19 and Brexit have combined to create significant labour supply issues. T Levels could form part of the answer to increasing the supply of skills in the economy, but their potential needs to be maximised.

The existing delivery gaps would be one thing if providers who were currently not eligible to deliver T Levels felt adequately supported to deliver them in the future. However, the feedback we have received from colleges suggests this is not the case.

One significant barrier is around capital funding. Colleges currently rated as requiring improvement or below cannot access capital funding to prepare to deliver T Levels from the 2023 academic year. These funds are essential to make investments in equipment and facilities to deliver T Levels. While the government recently announced that colleges will receive £83 million pounds of additional capital funding, it is unclear if this funding has been earmarked for T Levels and who is able to access it. It makes little sense to broaden the base of T Levels providers in 2023 but withhold the means to adequately prepare to deliver these new qualifications, given they will require significant capital investment.

We would recommend that some of the restrictions impacting the accessibility of capital funds should be reviewed or Government give assurances that capital funding will be made available in the run up to 2023 to ensure all colleges can successfully deliver T Levels.



How are providers viewing T Levels

We sent out a survey to Collab Group colleges to build on our analysis to understand how they view T Levels.

The survey sample included colleges delivering T Levels and those that hoped to offer T Levels in the future.

Overall, the survey results demonstrate nuanced views on T Levels, ranging from great optimism to considerable pessimism. There is a discernible shift in outlook between those currently delivering T Levels and those who will not be eligible to deliver T Levels until 2023. Those currently delivering T Levels tended to be optimistic about the capacity of colleges to offer these qualifications and the prospects for future expansion. Those who are currently not offering T Levels—in most cases because eligibility criteria restrict them from doing so—are much more sceptical about the prospects of these qualifications.

Most colleges saw T Levels as a key mechanism to improve the current technical and professional education system. All colleges expressed an interest in expanding their delivery over the coming years. Respondents overwhelmingly saw the health and science route, engineering route, and business and administration routes as the most likely candidates for expansion. Conversely, the routes that have been identified as least likely for expansion include agriculture and the environment, creative and design, and catering and hospitality.

As T Levels have taken place within the wider contexts of the pandemic, we also wanted to understand how the pandemic had impacted recruitment.



How are providers viewing T Levels

Overall, respondents felt the pandemic had not impacted recruitment too greatly. However, respondents highlighted that it was difficult to separate the pandemic as a cause of recruitment challenges from issues that could have arisen in more normal times.

Nethertheless, respondents identified that the pandemic had impacted routine recruitment activity, such as engagement with schools. Recruitment has also been challenging as there has been insufficient promotion of T Levels nationally. However, we accept that the government needs to have a balanced approach that does not create so much demand that there is insufficient capacity to meet that demand in these early phases of the rollout.

A limited number of respondents were able to provide detailed information about their recruitment patterns for T Levels. Four colleges were able to supply detailed projections of their actual vs projected recruitment, and they show that colleges delivered 88% of their projected recruitment targets for T Levels programmes.

This high level of recruitment is primarily accounted for by the over-delivery of one college. When this college is removed, the recruitment against projections falls to 66%. The reason for these low recruitment numbers could potentially be explained by key influencers not knowing exactly what T Levels are and their benefits. Due to the phasing out of BTECs and influencers not being aware that T Levels could be considered a replacement yet, there could be adverse effects for learners in the future.

How are providers viewing T Levels

The sample cannot be assumed to reflect wider trends; but combined with some of the written responses, it does seem to indicate a real variability in how successfully colleges have been able to recruit learners onto T Levels programmes.

Some colleges have indicated that their assessment for demand for T Levels within their local area is either low or very low. The success of T Levels relies on many contingent factors, so the success of these programmes overall cannot be generalised.

Colleges have also experienced additional challenges in securing employers for industry placements. Most respondents reported some difficulty in securing commitments from employers. Placements for some routes, such as health and digital, are challenging to secure placements. There is no doubt that the pandemic has disrupted employer engagement activity. Even so, many colleges have utilised the funding provided through the capacity development fund to increase their connections. However, this engagement still proved difficult with businesses focussing on other priorities. The government has now announced a new incentive payment of £1,000 to employers to offer an industry placement; this measure should hopefully act as an incentive to fill placements, particularly in harder to place sectors and locations.

We also asked respondents to reflect on how optimistic they feel about T Levels overall. These responses ranged from pessimistic to very optimistic. However, it is difficult to generalise the success of T Levels when there is so much variability depending on the route and the local labour market. Some respondents reported that they were not very optimistic based on the challenges of engaging with employers and schools. Awareness of T Levels amongst key groups remains relatively low as there has been no significant awareness campaign undertaken, and key influencers, such as schoolteachers, career advisors and parents, are barely aware of T Levels.

Another significant area of concern identified by the survey was around the proposed attempts to rationalise the current system of Level 3 qualifications. There was concern that getting rid of qualifications at Levels 3 would adversely impact learners from areas of social disadvantage. The intention of the rationalisation process at Levels 3 is to ensure that there are no overlapping qualifications with T Levels. However, not every learner will be confident or able to advance to T Levels. Although colleges have introduced a T Levels transition programme, this alone may not be sufficient to allow everyone that will be impacted by these changes to have clear routes to educational progression currently provided by BTECs.



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Conclusion

There is a great deal of optimism that T Levels can significantly improve the current system of technical and professional education. The quality of these qualifications is evident and overall colleges remain optimistic about their prospects for longterm success. T Levels will be integral to improving the supply of skills in the labour market, especially at this time of considerable disruption.

It will be important that T Levels reach a critical mass over time so that they gain greater acceptance amongst learners, parents, and employers. Currently, there are significant gaps in the map in key regions. The current rules also impact which providers can access capital funding and will create undue restrictions to their eventual nationwide rollout.

Yet overall, the fact that T Levels were successfully rolled out during a pandemic with so little disruption is a great success in itself. Collab Group colleges are keen to continue working with the government to ensure that T Levels succeed, and we can take our technical education system to the next level.



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