

Research Report: Understanding T-Levels In England (2023)

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Abstract

This research delves into the implementation and impact of T-Levels in the UK educational system, focusing primarily on student experiences and outcomes. Through a comprehensive literature review, I have identified challenges and successes in the rollout of T-Levels, particularly noting variations in curriculum execution across different institutions. The data analysis, grounded in statistics from official educational bodies, unveiled trends in participation and performance, shedding light on disparities linked to resource allocation, staff training, and industry collaboration. The preliminary results indicate that while T-Levels have enhanced vocational training in many areas, there remain significant challenges to ensure equitable opportunities and outcomes for all students. To gain deeper insights into individual student experiences, I designed an interview schedule encompassing areas like curriculum support, industry placements, and skill acquisition, which could be used for further research.

Introduction

Introduction to T-Levels

Definition and Overview:

T-Levels, also known as Technical Levels, represent a significant shift in the educational landscape of England, aiming to elevate the status and quality of technical education. Introduced as a part of the government's skills reform strategy, T-Levels were officially launched in September 2020, providing a robust two-year Level 3 technical programme for students aged 16-19 (Department for Education, 2019a).

The T-Level programme is meticulously structured to provide a balanced approach to technical learning. With 80% of the time devoted to classroom-based learning and 20% to industry placements, it integrates academic knowledge with real-world experience. Students undergo a demanding curriculum, culminating in examinations at the end of the two years. The industry placement, consisting of approximately 315 hours (or 45 days), offers a tangible, hands-on experience in the chosen field, forging a direct link between education and employment (Department for Education, 2019a).

The current landscape of T-Levels consists of nine distinct pathways, including sectors such as Digital, Education and Childcare, Construction, Health and Science, Business & Administration, and Engineering

and Manufacturing. The ambition is to further expand this offering, with six additional routes planned for introduction in the academic years 2023/2024 (Department for Education, 2023c). These pathways are carefully designed to align with the industrial demands of the country, positioning T-Levels as an instrumental tool to bridge the skills gap and foster a highly competent workforce.

Who are T-Levels for?

T-Levels are strategically crafted to cater to the post-GCSE demographic within the 16-19 age bracket. This novel qualification serves as an appealing alternative to conventional A-Level education or apprenticeship programmes. It targets students with an inclination toward technical occupations, and who are enthusiastic about a blended learning experience that combines theory with practise.

The essence of T-Levels lies in their alignment with national educational goals. The UK Government has consistently emphasised the need to enhance technical education, recognising a persistent skills shortage in various sectors (Sainsbury, 2016). T-Levels respond to this call by providing a structured pathway that synchronises educational objectives with industry requirements. This alignment positions T-Levels not merely as a qualification but as a strategic endeavour to strengthen the national economy by nurturing a skilled workforce.

Moreover, the focus of T-Levels extends beyond individual career prospects. They contribute to the broader societal goal of diversifying educational pathways, challenging the traditional academic hierarchy, and democratising access to high-quality technical education. By offering an alternative that holds equivalence to three A Levels, T-Levels democratise educational choice, allowing students to pursue careers that resonate with their interests and aptitudes (Department for Education, 2019a).

Research Aims:

- To explore the policy background for the development of T Levels
- To understand the implementation of T level programmes in their first few years of delivery
- To compare T level programmes with comparable educational pathways
- To explore early successes and challenges with T levels and T level transition programmes

Methodology

The primary objective of this research was to offer a comprehensive understanding of T-Levels, delving into their origins, impacts, challenges, and potential trajectories. To holistically achieve this, the study combined a meticulous literature review with an extensive data analysis methodology. This blended approach not only allowed for an exhaustive examination of the subject matter through existing literature but also ensured that the insights were aligned with real-world experiences and the latest available data. The insights from the literature review would subsequently guide the formulation of

interview questions for primary data collection, bridging the gap between existing literature and real-world experiences.

1. Literature Review Design: The literature review was based on secondary research that involved sourcing and analysing data from pre-existing sources. This approach provided a robust foundation for comprehending T-Levels, presenting a gamut of perspectives. Data sources included:

- Government Reports and Documents
- Academic Publications, and other grey literature and media articles.

2. Secondary Data Analysis:

- Data Collection: Secondary data was garnered from esteemed entities such as the Department for Education (DfE), Ofqual, Office for National Statistics (ONS), academia, and industry sectors. The data span encapsulated T-Levels' inception up to the most recent updates.
- Data Evaluation: A rigorous assessment of the data sources ensured validity and reliability. This encompassed a thorough overview of the methods used in the studies, the sample size, inherent biases, and the data collection context.
- Analysis Technique:
 - Quantitative Analysis: Encompassed statistical assessments like enrolment patterns, success metrics, and post-T-Level outcomes.
 - Qualitative Analysis: This method thematically analysed data in the literature review, breaking it down into themes and patterns about T-Levels' inception, evolution, challenges, and prospective future. Such a modus operandi allowed for an organised and systematic synthesis of copious details.

4. Ensuring Validity and Reliability: To uphold accuracy:

- Emphasis was on reputable sources like government dossiers, recognised institutions, and eminent scholars.
- Each datum, discovery, or declaration from the literature was juxtaposed with multiple sources for validation.

Findings and Discussion

Policy Background

Development and Legislation:

The genesis of T-Levels can be traced back to the UK Government's commitment to enhancing technical education and addressing the skills gap that has long plagued various industrial sectors. This led to the establishment of the Independent Panel on Technical Education, chaired by Lord Sainsbury, which submitted its report in April 2016 (Sainsbury, 2016).

Following the recommendations of the Sainsbury Report, the Post-16 Skills Plan was introduced,

emphasising the restructuring of the technical education system. It was within this framework that T-Levels were conceptualised, as part of the 15 technical education routes designed to simplify and enhance the provision of technical education for young people and adults (Department for Education, 2016). The progression towards T-Levels involved extensive consultations with various stakeholders, including educational institutions, industry leaders, and students. This collaborative approach ensured that T-Levels were anchored in real-world requirements and reflected the complexity and diversity of modern industry.

The enactment of the Technical and Further Education Act 2017 marked a legislative milestone in the journey towards T-Levels, formally acknowledging their status within the national educational landscape and defining the powers and functions of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education. This institution was tasked with ensuring quality control and alignment with industry standards, further embedding T-Levels within the broader strategic framework of skills development in England.

Historical Development:

1. **Inception and Legislation (2016):** T-Levels were proposed as a key initiative in the Post-16 Skills Plan in 2016. The government committed £500 million annually towards technical education (Department for Education, 2016; HR Magazine, 2017).
2. **Pilot Phase and Rollout (2020):** T-Levels were launched in September 2020, with three courses initially. By September 2021, the number of courses expanded to 10, reflecting a significant expansion in offerings (Department for Education, 2023c).
3. **Student Enrolments:** The inaugural year saw enrolment of 1,235 full-time students. The numbers are projected to grow as more courses and providers are added (House of Commons Library, 2022).

Alignment with Educational Strategies:

T-Levels are not an isolated phenomenon but part of a broader realignment of educational priorities in England. They fit within the context of Build Back Better (HM Treasury, 2021), a blueprint for economic growth that identifies the critical role of skills and education in enhancing productivity and innovation, however this strategy was withdrawn. The integration of T-Levels with existing educational strategies reinforces the importance of a flexible, responsive education system. T-Levels are designed to be agile, adapting to evolving industry needs, and responsive to technological advancements. This dynamic nature ensures that the technical education system remains relevant and continues to contribute to economic development and social progress.

Furthermore, the focus on practical, industry-aligned learning offers a robust pathway to employment, underpinning the government's agenda for social mobility and equality of opportunity. By providing quality technical education that leads directly to skilled occupations, T-Levels contribute to the

overarching goal of a fairer, more prosperous society (Department for Education, 2019a). T-Levels also reflect a growing international trend towards valuing technical education. By elevating technical qualifications to a status equivalent to traditional academic routes, England joins a cohort of countries recognising the vital role that vocational and technical education plays in a balanced, inclusive economy (Cedefop, 2015).

What has happened so far?

Initial Implementation:

The initial implementation of T-Levels were marked by both anticipation and anxiety. Launched in September 2020, the programme started with three courses, representing a significant departure from previous educational pathways (Department for Education, 2019a). The ambitious timeline set by the government was one of the most significant challenges, giving educational institutions limited time to prepare for such a fundamental shift.

The enthusiasm for T-Levels was evident in the programme's aim to align with industry needs, thus addressing the long-standing skills gap issue (HM Treasury, 2021). But alongside this enthusiasm were concerns about readiness, resource allocation, teacher training, and infrastructure adaptation. The short time frame led to discrepancies in the quality of delivery across different regions and institutions.

Moreover, the need for substantial collaboration with industry partners further complicated the rollout process. Ensuring that curricula met industry standards while remaining accessible to students required careful planning and coordination. The uncertainties and rapid changes also led to a lack of awareness among potential students and their parents, further challenging the recruitment process (Wolf, 2021).

Despite these challenges, the rollout of T-Levels marked a turning point in technical education in England, reflecting a willingness to innovate and adapt to the evolving needs of the workforce.

T-Levels Rollout:

16/24 T-Levels have been launched so far, with a rollout that has been laid out by the T-Level Action Plan (Department for Education, 2023c).

T-Level Rollout

Year	T-Levels Offered
2020	Digital Production, Design and Development (D), Education and Early Years (E), Design, Surveying and Planning (C)
2021	Digital Support Services (D), Digital Business Services (D), Onsite Construction (C), Building Services Engineering (C), Health (HS), Healthcare Science (HS), Science (HS)
2022	Management and Administration (B), Finance (L), Accounting (L), Engineering and Manufacturing Design and Development (EM), Maintenance, Installation and Repair (EM), Engineering, Manufacturing, Processing and Control (EM)
2023	Agriculture, Land Management and Production (A), Legal Services (L)
2024	Hairdressing, Barbering and Beauty Therapy (HB), Craft and Design (CD), Media, Broadcast and Production (CD), Animal Care and Management (A)
2025	Marketing (S)
TBD	Catering (CH)

(Department for Education, 2023c), (Department for Education, 2019a)

Key (Routes):

- A = Agriculture, Environmental and Animal Care (2)
- B = Business and Administration (1)
- C = Construction and the Built Environment (3)
- CH = Catering and Hospitality (1)
- CD = Creative and Design (2)
- D = Digital (3)
- EM = Engineering and Manufacturing (3)
- E = Education and Early Years (1)

- HB = Hair and Beauty (1)
- HS = Health and Science (3)
- L = Legal, Finance and Accounting (3)
- S = Sales, Marketing and Procurement (1)

Availability and Distribution of T-Levels:

Colleges and Schools Offering T-Levels:

Since the inception of T-Levels in 2020, the availability and distribution across educational institutions have expanded significantly. As of the 2022/2023 academic year, over 200 colleges and schools across England are offering T-Levels (Department for Education, 2019b). A regional breakdown reveals that the availability of T-Levels is not evenly distributed. Some regions, particularly urban areas like London, have a higher concentration of institutions offering T-Levels (Department for Education, 2019b). On the other hand, rural regions might have limited or no access to T-Levels.

In terms of specific T-Level paths, the offerings vary widely. Courses in fields such as Digital Production, Design and Development are more commonly available as insinuated by the total number of enrolled students, reflecting the government's focus on sectors with high economic importance and growth potential (Department for Education, 2023d). Some challenges still exist in the availability and distribution, such as the capacity of institutions to deliver high-quality T-Levels and the level of awareness among potential students and their families.

Upcoming Academic Year (2023/2024) Analysis:

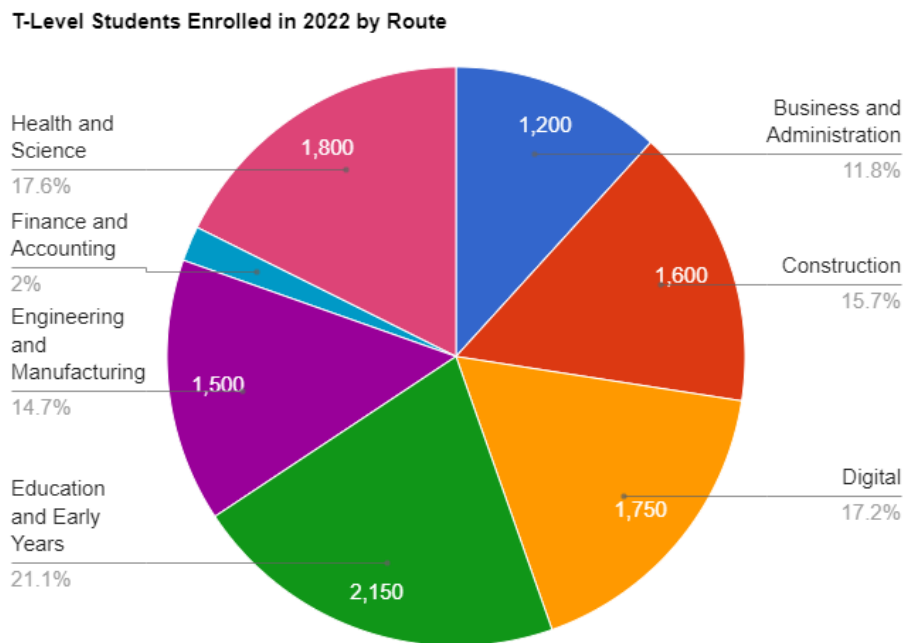
The upcoming academic year is expected to see further growth and changes in the T-Levels landscape. The government has already announced plans to introduce new T-Level paths, expand the existing ones, and increase the number of providers (Department for Education, 2023c). One anticipated trend is the expansion of T-Levels into more rural areas, partly through increased funding and support for institutions in these regions. This aims to ensure a more equitable distribution of T-Levels and to respond to local labour market needs.

Moreover, collaboration between colleges, schools, and employers is expected to deepen, particularly in sectors with acute skills shortages and government funding such as the 10% funding uplift for the 2023/2024 cycle is indicative of this as there's more incentive for providers to take on T-Level students (Education & Skills Funding Agency, 2023). These partnerships may lead to more customised and responsive T-Level courses, enhancing their relevance and attractiveness. There is also a growing emphasis on quality assurance and continuous improvement in T-Level delivery. New guidelines, training, and support for T-Level providers are anticipated, focusing on teaching excellence, employer engagement, and student support, but their implementation is still a matter for the future (Ofsted, 2023).

Participation and Enrolment in T-Levels

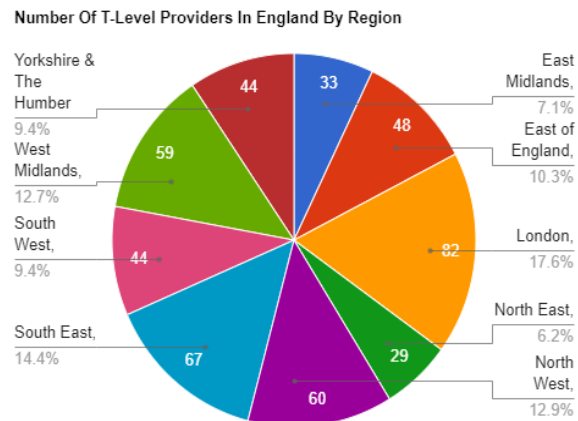
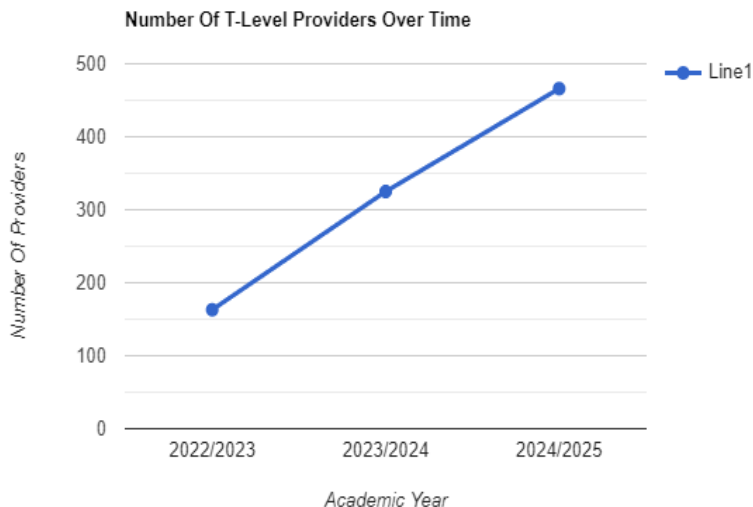
Enrolment Trends:

1. **Initial Participation (2020):** 1,235 students enrolled in T-Levels in their first year across three courses (House of Commons Library, 2022).



2. **Growth (2021–2022):** The number of students grew to 10,200 in 2022 and to an estimated 25,000 by 2023, as more courses will be rolled out (FEWEEK, 2023e).
3. **Projected Growth (2023+):** Although there's no current data available yet, T-Levels can be expected to grow quite rapidly if the government carries out defunding alternative courses (House of Commons Library, 2022) and investing more into T-Levels. There could be up to or more than 100,000 students by 2025 considering that the growth from 2020 - 2022 was a 725.911% increase.

4. Regional Distribution:



Providers By Academic Year:

- 2024/2025 = 466
- 2023/2024 = 325
- 2022/2023 = 163
- T Level Transition Programme:
- 2023/2024 = 185
- 2022/2023 = 73

2024 Cycle:

- 33 = East Midlands
- 48 = East of England
- 82 = London
- 29 = North East
- 60 = North West
- 67 = South East
- 44 = South West
- 59 = West Midlands
- 44 = Yorkshire & The Humber

Reference: Department for Education (2019b)

Factors Influencing Participation:

1. **Gender Distribution:** T-Levels have already seen an uneven gender split, with 97% of education and early years students being female whereas 89% and 90% of digital and construction T-Level learners were male. This highlights a concerning issue of gender stereotypes impacting participation in T-Levels (FEWEEK, 2022a).

2. Industry Partnerships: 250 employers have been involved in designing the T-Level curriculum, possibly influencing student interest in these career-focused courses (Education Committee, 2023).

Impact of COVID-19 on T-Levels

Immediate Responses and Changes:

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges to educational systems worldwide, including the newly introduced T-Levels in England. As a large portion of T-Levels consists of hands-on, classroom-based learning and industry placements, the restrictions and lockdowns imposed during the pandemic had immediate consequences. In the early stages of the pandemic, educational institutions were forced to shift to remote and blended learning. However, adapting to online formats was particularly challenging for T-Levels, given the practical nature of these courses (FEWEEK, 2023c). Institutions had to innovate, using technology to simulate practical experiences where possible and restructuring assessments and deadlines.

The government and educational bodies responded by introducing flexibility in the delivery of the qualifications. This included adjustments to the timing and format of assessments, guidance on remote teaching, and temporary changes to the requirement for industry placements (Department for Education, 2023b). The aim was to maintain the integrity and value of the qualification while accommodating the extraordinary circumstances. Efforts were also made to support providers and students through additional funding, resources, and communication channels. Collaboration with industry partners was crucial to navigate the complexities of remote learning and to ensure continuity of industry placements where possible.

Long-term Implications:

The adaptations made during the height of the pandemic may have lasting implications for T-Levels. The accelerated embrace of digital learning tools has opened new avenues for educational delivery and can continue to play a role in enhancing accessibility and flexibility. However, the disruption also brought to light potential vulnerabilities in the T-Levels system, especially concerning the dependence on industry placements and practical, in-person learning and the dangers of the temporary blended placements (Department for Education, 2023b). The challenges faced could stimulate further thought and development in creating more resilient models for technical education that can withstand future shocks.

The pandemic also laid bare disparities in access to resources, technology, and support, potentially exacerbating inequalities in educational outcomes. Ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to succeed in T-Levels, regardless of their socio-economic background, remains an ongoing concern that will likely require continued attention and investment. Finally, the experiences of the pandemic

have provided a rich source of learning and reflection for policymakers, educators, and industry partners. Lessons learned from this period of adaptation and innovation may guide future enhancements to T-Levels, contributing to their ongoing evolution and effectiveness.

T-Level Transition Programme

Programme Overview:

The transition programme was introduced as an essential support structure for T-Levels, acknowledging that not all students might be ready to jump directly into the rigor of this new educational pathway. It serves as a foundational year designed to help students develop the academic, technical, and employability skills necessary to succeed in T-Levels (Department for Education, 2021b).

Implementation and Effectiveness:

The transition programme's rollout has varied across institutions and regions. Some colleges have integrated it smoothly, offering well-designed curricula that align closely with the main T-Levels courses. Others have faced challenges, particularly around resourcing and understanding the precise needs of potential T-Level students (FEWEEK, 2023d).

There's also an ongoing debate about how the transition programme's effectiveness should be measured. While some argue that success should be defined in terms of progression to a T-Level, others believe that a broader view of progression, including apprenticeships or other vocational pathways, should be considered, with an overarching consensus being that the transition programme will have developed a broad range of transferable knowledge and skills, henceforth they can go onto any pathway they deem appropriate for themselves (Department for Education, 2021c).

Challenges and Opportunities:

Key challenges have emerged in implementing the transition programme. These include engaging employers in the process, ensuring that students see the transition year as a valuable step rather than a 'holding pattern,' and coordinating with other pre-existing transition support (Wolf, 2020). There's also the question of how to differentiate the T-Level transition programme from other Level 2 provisions effectively.

Despite these challenges, the T-Level transition programme also presents numerous opportunities. It allows for a more personalised approach to learning, helping students identify their strengths and interests. Moreover, it provides a space for innovation in pedagogy, with the possibility of exploring new teaching methods and technologies to engage and prepare students effectively.

Comparative Analysis of T-Levels with Other Pathways

T-Levels represent a significant development in the English education system, offering a new pathway for students interested in technical education. Understanding how T-Levels compare with other educational options, such as A-Levels, apprenticeships, and vocational courses like B-Tecs and C-Tecs, provides essential context for evaluating their potential impact and success.

Statistical Comparison with Other Qualifications:

1. T-Levels vs. A-Levels: A-Levels saw 731,855 entries in 2020. Comparatively, T-Levels, in their initial year, represent a niche but growing segment of 1,235 entries (Ofqual, 2020).
2. T-Levels vs. Apprenticeships: Apprenticeship starts in England were approximately 321,400 in 2020. T-Levels, with their blend of classroom learning and work placement, offer a different pathway (ONS, 2022).

Comparison with A-Levels:

A-Levels, traditionally viewed as a pathway to university education, emphasise academic subjects and theoretical knowledge. In contrast, T-Levels are designed to provide a blend of classroom learning and practical experience, preparing students for the workplace or further technical education. The structure of T-Levels, with an 80:20 split between classroom learning and industry placement, creates a distinct emphasis on applied skills and hands-on experience that differentiates them from A-Levels. However, it's important to note that A-Levels allow the flexibility of choosing 2-4 different subjects, potentially providing more branches for a student's future in contrast to a T-Level which is equivalent to 3 A-Levels.

While A-Levels are usually assessed through end-of-course examinations, T-Levels involve continuous assessment, including employer-set projects to evaluate industry-relevant skills (Department for Education, 2019a). This diverse assessment method aims to offer a more rounded picture of a student's ability, reflecting both theoretical knowledge and practical competence. It also brings T-Levels closer to the demands and expectations of employers, aligning education with industry needs.

Comparison with Apprenticeships:

Apprenticeships, another pathway for vocational education, share similarities with T-Levels but also have key differences. While both provide opportunities for learning on the job, apprenticeships are primarily workplace-based, with the general apprentice spending around 80% of their time in a work environment (Department for Education, 2022a). T-Levels, on the other hand, maintain a more substantial classroom component, providing a more structured curriculum that covers a broader range of topics and skills.

Furthermore, apprenticeships often target specific job roles, tailoring the learning to the employer's immediate needs. T-Levels, in contrast, aim to provide a broader foundation in a sector, offering more flexibility in career choices and progression. This distinction reflects a strategic positioning of T-Levels as a bridge between academic education and the specialised focus of apprenticeships, catering to students who seek a blend of both theoretical education and practical training.

Comparison with Vocational Courses (B-Tecs and C-Tecs):

B-Tecs and C-Tecs are other well-established vocational qualifications in England. They have a more modular structure and are often offered in a wide variety of subjects, from business to performing arts. While these qualifications provide practical skills and vocational training, T-Levels have a more pronounced industry focus, with a mandatory industry placement component that is designed to be more immersive and reflective of real-world work conditions (Department for Education, 2019a).

T-Levels' alignment with specific industry sectors and their integration with the government's Skills Plan set them apart as a strategic initiative to address skills gaps in key sectors of the economy (Department for Education, 2020). The intention is to create a more seamless transition from education to employment by ensuring that the skills taught are directly relevant to industry needs.

Comparison with Similar Programmes Abroad:

T-Levels in England can be compared to several international vocational and technical education programmes. Here are some key comparisons:

1. **Germany's Dual Vocational Education and Training (VET):** T-Levels share similarities with Germany's Dual VET system, which combines school-based education with work placements. However, in 2018, the German system enrolls approximately 500,000 students every year, compared to T-Levels' more modest enrolment at 10,200 in 2022 (Journalism for the energy transition, 2018; FEWEEK, 2023e).
2. **Australia's Vocational Education and Training (VET):** Australia's VET emphasises strong industry collaboration, a model that T-Levels aims to replicate. In 2021, 24% of Australians aged 15-64 which includes 4.3 million students were engaged in nationally recognised VET, demonstrating significant engagement compared to current T-Level participation (NCVER, 2022).
3. **Switzerland's Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET):** Switzerland's VPET has a strong focus on meeting labour market needs. With 66% of young people choosing VPET, it illustrates a successful model that T-Levels could emulate, especially regarding employer collaboration (Keller, 2019).
4. **United States' Career Technical Education (CTE):** The U.S. CTE programme focuses on integrating academic knowledge with technical skills. With federal funding of \$1.3 billion

during 2019/2020, the U.S. model might inform considerations for funding mechanisms in T-Levels (GAO, 2022).

Implications for Educational Choices:

The introduction of T-Levels has added complexity and diversity to the landscape of post-16 education in England. Students, parents, educators, and employers must navigate these options to make informed decisions about the most suitable pathways. The nuanced differences between T-Levels, A-Levels, apprenticeships, and other vocational courses reflect the multifaceted nature of education and career preparation. T-Levels have carved a unique space within this landscape, offering a new route that combines knowledge-based learning with practical industry exposure. Their success will hinge on clear communication, effective collaboration between educational institutions and industry, and ongoing monitoring and refinement to ensure that they meet the evolving needs of students and the economy.

Performance and Outcomes

Success Rates and Achievements:

1. **Completion and Pass Rate:** 3,448 students were in receipt of T Level results in 2023 with a 90.5% pass rate, however there was a 66.2% completion rate as the cohort started off with 5,210 students (Department for Education, 2023c).
2. **Educator Preparedness:** Although quantitative data is not available, most teachers have undertaken specific external training to equip them with the necessary skills to deliver the curriculum effectively (Ofsted, 2023).
3. **Student Satisfaction:** Early surveys indicate that 79% of students are either very satisfied (34%) or quite satisfied (45%) with their T-Level course. (Department for Education, 2022b).

Employment Outcomes:

1. **Industry Placement Success:** Around 90% of the students in the first wave have successfully secured industry placements as part of their T-Levels, reflecting positive employer engagement (FEWEEK, 2022b).
2. **Further Education Paths:** T-Levels are designed to provide a pathway to higher education, with universities recognising these qualifications for relevant courses and a T-Level course being equivalent to 3 A-Levels (Department for Education, 2023e).

Reflection on 2023 Results Day

Analysis of Results:

The 2023 Results Day marked a significant milestone for T-Levels, reflecting both the growth and challenges associated with this new educational pathway. The results showcased a mix of successes and learning opportunities, contributing to the ongoing discourse on the effectiveness and potential of T-Levels.

The overall pass rate for T-Levels in 2023 showed little improvement compared to previous years, though disparities exist across different regions and sectors. Some courses have reported higher pass rates, while others face challenges, perhaps indicative of varying levels of teaching quality, student preparedness, or curriculum alignment but the overall pass rate remains at 90.5 percent (Department for Education, 2023a). Arguably, T-Levels still lack against competitors, with top grades of distinction and distinction* only being achieved by 22.2 percent of learners in contrast to 27.2 percent for A-Levels (FEWEEK, 2023b).

There's still a long way to go with the implementation and integration of T-Levels, a fact reinforced by the statistic that 1 in 3 students have dropped out as results were only released to 3,448 students, significantly lower than the 5,210 T-Level students that were reported in 2021 (FEWEEK, 2023b).

Progress & Challenges

Positives:

- 1. Focus on Employability and Technical Skills:** One of the most hailed aspects of T-Levels is their clear alignment with the demands of modern industry. By working closely with employers, the programmes were designed to equip students with practical skills directly applicable to their chosen field. This focus on employability is seen as a crucial step in reducing the gap between education and the job market, enhancing the prospects of graduates and meeting the evolving needs of employers (HM Treasury, 2021).
- 2. Inclusivity and Accessibility:** T-Levels offer an alternative educational pathway that caters to students who may not be inclined towards traditional academic routes. This inclusivity broadens access to quality education, enabling more diverse groups of students to pursue meaningful careers. It acknowledges that academic performance is not the only indicator of potential and that different learners require different approaches (Wolf, 2021).
- 3. Strong Industry Collaboration:** The collaboration between education providers and industry partners is a cornerstone of T-Levels. This partnership ensures that the curriculum remains responsive to the current trends and demands of the industry. It offers students exposure to real-world scenarios and

provides employers with a workforce trained in relevant skills. Such collaboration fosters mutual understanding and alignment between education and industry, potentially reducing the time and resources needed for on-the-job training (Gatsby Foundation, 2021).

4. Flexibility in Curriculum: T-Levels were designed to be adaptable to the ever-changing landscape of the modern job market. This flexibility enables educators and industry partners to modify the curriculum as needed, keeping the programmes up-to-date with technological advancements and industry needs. Such a dynamic structure fosters a more engaging and relevant educational experience, preparing students for the uncertainties and opportunities of the future workforce (Department for Education, 2019a).

5. Emphasis on Real-World Experience: A distinctive feature of T-Levels is the inclusion of substantial industry placements. These placements offer students the opportunity to apply their learning in real-world contexts, enhancing their understanding and building confidence. This hands-on approach not only solidifies theoretical knowledge but also fosters soft skills like communication, problem-solving, and teamwork. These placements are seen as vital in preparing students for the complexities and demands of the workplace, promoting a more holistic approach to education.

Challenges:

1. Challenges in Implementation and Awareness: The implementation of T-Levels was met with mixed reactions, with significant challenges arising from the compressed timeline and the lack of public awareness. Many educational institutions expressed concern over the readiness of faculty, infrastructure, and collaboration with industry partners. Moreover, EngineeringUK's 2021 Brand Monitor survey found that a lack of understanding and awareness among students and parents hindered enrolment, particularly the fact that 63% of young people did not know what T-Levels are suggesting a shortfall in marketing and information dissemination.

2. Inconsistencies in Quality and Delivery: The ambitious nature of T-Levels, coupled with the rapid rollout, led to inconsistencies in the quality of delivery across different institutions and regions. Some schools and colleges struggled with the new curriculum, leading to uneven student experiences. The variations in quality were often linked to disparities in resources, staff training, and industry collaboration, raising concerns about equality of opportunity and outcomes which are often found in rural areas in particular (FEWEEK, 2023d).

3. Complexity of Industry Collaboration: While collaboration with industry is one of the defining features of T-Levels, it also proved to be one of its most complex aspects. The logistics of arranging substantial industry placements for every student presented practical difficulties, especially in regions with limited industry presence (Wolf, 2021). Some employers were hesitant to participate, citing concerns about the time and resources required to mentor students.

4. **Potential Overlap with Existing Qualifications:** T-Levels were introduced to provide a clear and distinct pathway for technical education. However, some critics argue that they may overlap with existing qualifications such as BTECs, creating confusion rather than clarity (Education Policy Institute, 2022). This potential overlap raises questions about the differentiation of T-Levels and the justification for introducing a new qualification rather than reforming existing ones (FEWEEK, 2023a).

5. **Financial and Resource Constraints:** The implementation of T-Levels required significant financial investment in infrastructure, staff training, and student support. The government's funding allocation was perceived by some as inadequate, putting pressure on schools and colleges to deliver quality education with limited resources. Additionally, smaller institutions faced particular challenges in adapting to T-Levels, leading to concerns about their sustainability and the potential widening of regional disparities (Federation of Small Businesses, 2022).

Future Perspectives: What's Next?

Government's Future Plans and Strategies:

The UK Government has been actively engaged in the continued development and expansion of T-Levels as part of broader educational reform. Official documents, such as the Skills for Jobs White Paper (Department for Education, 2021a), outline the government's commitment to enhancing technical education, with T-Levels serving as a cornerstone. This plan seeks to bridge the gap between education and the skills required by the industry by providing high-quality, technical alternatives to A-Levels. There is an emphasis on expanding T-Level offerings, increasing funding for the delivery of these courses, and enhancing industry collaboration to ensure that the qualifications remain relevant to the needs of employers.

Recent government announcements have also highlighted the importance of extending T-Levels to more colleges and schools, creating more flexibility in the system to cater to different needs (Department for Education, 2023c). There is also evidence of a push towards creating a unified framework that better connects T-Levels with apprenticeships and higher education pathways. The plan aligns with the UK's Industrial Strategy, which emphasises creating a highly skilled workforce to boost productivity and innovation.

Industry Perspectives:

From an industry perspective, T-Levels are seen as an essential step towards addressing skills shortages in key sectors such as construction, health and science, and digital technology. Various industry bodies and large employers have endorsed T-Levels, recognising their potential in delivering industry-relevant skills and are keen to support T-Levels (CBI, 2021). The active engagement of employers in developing the curriculum ensures that T-Levels are tailored to meet real-world demands.

However, some challenges and concerns remain. The industry's input is critical for the success of T-Levels, and there is a need for a more structured partnership between education providers and employers. Businesses are calling for clear communication and support to engage in T-Levels, particularly among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which might find participation more challenging due to resource constraints (Federation of Small Businesses, 2022).

Educational Trends:

The introduction and planned expansion of T-Levels is reflective of global trends in education that emphasise the importance of vocational and technical training. This trend is not only confined to the UK but is part of an international movement towards more practical, skills-based education that aligns with labour market needs (Cedefop, 2015). The integration of T-Levels within the broader educational landscape also points to a shift towards more diversified and flexible learning pathways. They are seen as a valuable addition to the range of post-16 options, providing learners with various opportunities to pursue careers or further education in line with their interests and aptitudes.

Integration of the Universal Framework (Skills Builder) into T-Levels

Understanding the Universal Framework:

The Universal Framework, often referred to as the Skills Builder Framework, is an evidence-based approach that defines the competencies essential for success in the workplace and life. It identifies eight essential skills, including teamwork, problem-solving, listening, and creativity (Skills Builder, 2021). These skills are broken down into a series of progressively challenging steps, from the foundational levels to the more advanced, providing a clear pathway for skill development.

The framework is designed to be universally applicable across different contexts and age groups. It is used by educators, employers, and individuals to understand, teach, and assess these critical skills. The systematic structure helps guide the progression and mastery of these competencies, promoting a shared language and understanding.

Application within T-Levels:

The integration of the Universal Framework into T-Levels represents an effort to align technical education with the broader skills needed in the workplace. It ensures that learners are not only acquiring specific technical competencies but also the essential skills that underpin successful employment.

The potential benefits of this integration are manifold. First, it provides a coherent structure that supports learners' holistic development. Second, it fosters better alignment with employers' needs, ensuring that T-Level graduates are well-equipped to succeed in the workplace (Department for

Education, 2023c). Third, it offers a common language for skills development, facilitating collaboration between educators, employers, and learners.

However, the integration is not without challenges. Implementing the Universal Framework requires careful planning, coordination, and training of educators. There may also be some resistance or difficulty in integrating these universal skills into the specific technical curricula of T-Levels (Ravenscroft, 2019).

Future Prospects:

The ongoing efforts to integrate the Universal Framework into T-Levels are indicative of a broader trend towards more comprehensive and coherent skills education. The positive experiences from pilot programmes during 2017/2018 with twenty organisations including London Youth and the National Literacy Trust (Ravenscroft, 2019), along with governmental support, suggest that this integration is likely to continue and expand.

Future prospects include the development of shared resources, best practises, and potential standardisation across different T-Level paths. Ongoing collaboration with industry will be crucial to ensure that the integration remains relevant and responsive to the evolving needs of the labour market. While the existing synchrony between the Universal Framework and T-Levels is perfectly aligned, a cohesive integration of these elements is essential to ensure that employability and attainment continue to rise (Ravenscroft, 2019).

Conclusion and Recommendations:

Summary of Key Findings:

T-Levels, England's innovative addition to its educational offerings, present a diverse and intricate landscape that converges with the country's overarching educational and industrial requirements. These qualifications mirror a calculated transition towards hands-on, industry-centric learning avenues, positing themselves as alternatives to conventional A-Levels and vocational courses. On the whole, the inception and progression of T-Levels carry marks of both potential and challenge. While these new pathways champion successes in curriculum alignment, student milestones, and industrial interactivity, they also grapple with impediments, such as the palpable hitches in implementation, noticeable regional variances, and disruptions induced by COVID-19. The analytical dissection has brought to light gradual increases in T-Levels enrolment, though they remain behind analogous vocational initiatives seen internationally, such as those in Germany and Switzerland.

Recommendations:

For the diverse stakeholders involved, an assortment of implications and actionable recommendations emerges:

1. For Policymakers:

- **Continuous Support and Evaluation:** Reinforce T-Levels through persistent backing and habitual evaluations, while being mindful of regional prerequisites and disparities.
- **Policy Alignment:** Endeavour to sync T-Levels with the broader educational and economic doctrines, ushering in a seamless and consolidated strategy.
- **Improve Accessibility:** Devise methodologies to render T-Levels more approachable for students spanning different socio-economic strata and geographies.
- **Enhance Funding:** Mull over alternate financial models to guarantee the enduring development and roll-out of T-Levels, perhaps drawing inspiration from global benchmarks.

2. For Educational Institutions:

- **Quality Assurance:** Fortify quality control measures with an emphasis on educator training, syllabus creation, and collaborations with industries.
- **Student Guidance:** Augment career counselling and backing, aiding students in navigating through T-Levels and alternative educational routes.
- **Informed Choices:** Render understandable information regarding T-Levels, facilitating families to make astute educational decisions congruent with vocational visions and individualistic requirements.

3. For Industry Partners:

- **Active Engagement:** Advocate for employers to be intimately involved in the conceptualisation, realisation, and evaluation of T-Levels, closing the existing chasm between scholastic offerings and industrial requisites.
- **Support for Placements:** Simplify and make attractive industry placements, enriching students' practical exposure.

4. For Researchers:

- **Ongoing Research:** Champion sustained studies that monitor the long-haul repercussions of T-Levels on outcomes such as student performance, market integration, and socio-economic upliftment.
- **Focus on Challenges:** Zone in on hurdles encountered in particular zones or sectors, spotlighting bespoke solutions and benchmark practises.
- **Learn from International Best Practises:** Glean insights from global comparisons, possibly integrating successful components from renowned vocational models overseas.

Conclusion:

Summing up, T-Levels in England carve out a promising yet intricate educational panorama. The qualifications symbolise a pivotal move in narrowing the skills chasm and fine-tuning education with the dynamism of industrial demands. Yet, it's undeniable that there's a road ahead with challenges to surmount and potentials to tap into. To truly capitalise on what T-Levels offer, a synergy of

policymakers, educators, industries, and the broader community is paramount. The insights and lessons drawn both domestically and internationally proffer a fertile ground for dialogue, initiative, and enquiry, ultimately steering England towards an ever-evolving and inclusive educational paradigm that has truly made the most of vocational education. Arguably, there's a lot of future research to be done, especially considering that T-Levels are in the early stages of implementation meaning that there's a lack of primary data regarding delivery and success. This is why it is recommended that more research is done which is why based on the findings of this research report, a set of interview questions were developed (refer to appendix) as a starting point for qualitative primary research could be done to find out the experiences of current and previous T-Level students.

Appendix

Based on the findings of this report, these interview questions have been formulated:

1. Question: How did you first learn about T-Level courses?
 - Aim: Understanding awareness and accessibility
 - Finding Out: Sources of information that guided their choice
 - Why Chosen: To evaluate the effectiveness of communication and marketing strategies.
 - Prompts: Friends, school counsellor, internet search
 - Follow-Up Questions: What sources did you explore? Did someone recommend them to you?

2. Question: Why did you choose a T-Level course over other educational paths?
 - Aim: Insight into decision-making
 - Finding Out: Factors influencing their choice of T-Levels
 - Why Chosen: To identify the unique appeals or benefits of T-Levels.
 - Prompts: Career goals, course content, industry placement
 - Follow-Up Questions: Did you consider other options? What made T-Levels stand out?

3. Question: How have your family and friends reacted to your choice of pursuing a T-Level?
 - Aim: Understanding social perceptions
 - Finding Out: How T-Levels are perceived within the student's social circle
 - Why Chosen: To gauge societal attitudes toward T-Levels.
 - Prompts: Supportive, sceptical, neutral, unaware
 - Follow-Up Questions: Were they supportive of sceptical? Did their opinions influence your decision?

4. Question: What are your career goals, and how do T-Levels align with them?
 - Aim: Alignment with career aspirations
 - Finding Out: How T-Levels support students' future plans
 - Why Chosen: To gauge the relevance of T-Levels in meeting occupational goals.

- Prompts: Specific job roles, skills development, industry alignment
- Follow-Up Questions: How do T-Levels specifically contribute to your goals? Did career prospects play a role in your decision?

5. Question: What challenges have you faced during your T-Level course?

- Aim: Identifying areas of improvement
- Finding Out: Potential issues or difficulties in the T-Level experience
- Why Chosen: To pinpoint areas that might require changes or additional support.
- Prompts: Academic difficulties, time management, personal circumstances
- Follow-Up Questions: Can you provide specific examples? How did you overcome these challenges?

6. Question: Can you share an example of a project or task that you found particularly engaging or beneficial?

- Aim: Identifying impactful learning experiences
- Finding Out: What types of activities resonate with students
- Why Chosen: To guide future curriculum development.
- Prompts: Team projects, research assignments, hands-on tasks
- Follow-Up Questions: What made this project stand out? How did it contribute to your learning?

7. Question: How would you rate the support from teachers and staff?

- Aim: Quality of teaching and support
- Finding Out: Level of satisfaction with educational support
- Why Chosen: To ensure that students are receiving adequate support and guidance.
- Prompts: Assessment, one-on-one support, career guidance, pastoral support
- Follow-Up Questions: Did you feel confident that the support given was adequate?

8. Question: What resources or tools were most valuable to you during your studies?

- Aim: Identifying key educational resources
- Finding Out: Resources that contributed to learning success
- Why Chosen: To understand what tools and resources are most effective in supporting learning.'
- Prompts: Textbooks, online materials, industry-specific equipment
- Follow-Up Questions: Were any resources lacking? What would you recommend for future students?

9. Question: What additional support or resources do you wish were available during your course?

- Aim: Identifying gaps in support
- Finding Out: Unmet needs or areas for improvement
- Why Chosen: To enhance the support structure and student experience.
- Prompts: Tutoring, specialised software, mentorship
- Follow-Up Questions: What specific areas needed more support? How could your learning experience have been enhanced?

10. Question: How do you view the inclusivity and diversity within your T-Level course or institution?
- Aim: Evaluating diversity and inclusion
 - Finding Out: Perceptions of inclusivity in the classroom environment
 - Why Chosen: To ensure a diverse and inclusive learning environment.
 - Prompts: Cultural diversity, gender balance, support for special needs
 - Follow-Up Questions: Were there specific areas where diversity was either encouraged or lacking?
11. Question: How have T-Levels helped you in personal development, such as communication, leadership, or problem-solving skills?
- Aim: Evaluating personal growth
 - Finding Out: How T-Levels contribute to the development of soft skills
 - Why Chosen: To measure the holistic development provided by T-Levels.
 - Prompts: Group projects, leadership roles, real-world problem-solving
 - Follow-Up Questions: Can you provide examples of personal growth? Were there opportunities for leadership?
12. Question: What skills and knowledge do you feel you have developed during the course?
- Aim: Measuring self-efficacy
 - Finding Out: Student confidence in their abilities post-completion
 - Why Chosen: To assess the effectiveness of T-Levels in preparing students for the workforce.#
 - Prompts: Technical skills, soft skills, industry-specific knowledge
 - Follow-Up Questions: How confident/not confident do you feel with these?
13. Question: How well did your T-Level course prepare you for your next steps, regardless if that's university, apprenticeship or any other path? Please explain how?
- Aim: Assessing preparation for further education
 - Finding Out: Readiness for university-level studies
 - Why Chosen: To ensure T-Levels provide a solid foundation for continued education.#
 - Prompts: Academic readiness, employment confidence, industry knowledge
 - Follow-Up Questions: What aspects of T-Levels helped in your next steps?
14. Question: How did you find the industry placement experience?
- Aim: Assessing real-world application
 - Finding Out: Perceptions of industry placement and its value
 - Why Chosen: To understand how industry placements contribute to the learning experience.
 - Prompts: Setting up the placement, relationship to classroom learning, specific tasks
 - Follow-Up Questions: Did you have adequate support in securing the placement? How did it relate to your classroom learning? What did it involve and what did you have to do?
15. Question: Have you participated in any extracurricular activities or clubs related to your T-Level course? Can you provide any examples?

- Aim: Exploring extracurricular engagement
- Finding Out: The impact of extracurricular activities on the learning experience
- Why Chosen: To understand the role of extracurricular activities in enhancing education.
- Prompts: Clubs, community projects, competitions, supercurriculars
- Follow-Up Questions: How did they enhance your experience? How did these activities complement your studies?

16. Question: Did you feel the content of your T-Level course was aligned with your experiences of the industry work placements?

- Aim: Assessing relevance to industry
- Finding Out: Alignment with current industry practises and standards
- Why Chosen: To ensure that the curriculum is aligned with the demands of the industry.
- Prompts: Curriculum, applicable knowledge
- Follow-Up Questions: Were there some areas that seemed irrelevant? How did the curriculum align with the industry practises?

17. Question: How do you think employers view T-Level qualifications?

- Aim: Perception of employer acceptance
- Finding Out: How students perceive the value of T-Levels in the job market
- Why Chosen: To gauge the perceived employability of T-Level graduates.
- Prompts: Positive reactions, questions, misconceptions
- Follow-Up Questions: Have you discussed T-Levels with potential employers at work experiences? What feedback have you received?

18. Question: What advice would you give to someone considering a T-Level course?

- Aim: Gathering insights for prospective students
- Finding Out: Key considerations or advice for new students
- Why Chosen: To understand the student perspective and inform future recruitment.
- Prompts: Research, considering career paths, speaking to alumni
- Follow-Up Questions: What do you wish you had known before starting? What are the key factors to consider?

19. Question: How do you view the balance between theoretical study and practical experience in your course?

- Aim: Evaluating course structure
- Finding Out: Satisfaction with the balance between theory and practise
- Why Chosen: To ascertain the effectiveness of the course design in providing a well-rounded education.
- Prompts: Classroom lectures, industry work, field trips
- Follow-Up Questions: Did you feel there was enough hands-on practise? How were theory and practise integrated in your course?

20. Question: What technology or tools did you utilise most during your online or remote learning (if applicable)?

- **Aim:** Assessing remote learning experience
- **Finding Out:** Effectiveness of online learning tools
- **Why Chosen:** To optimise remote learning experiences, especially relevant in a post-pandemic context.
- **Prompts:** Video conferences, collaboration platforms, online resources
- **Follow-Up Questions:** Were there challenges with online learning? How did technology enhance or hinder your experience? If there were challenges, how could these be resolved?

21. Question: How did the pandemic affect your T-Level experience, and what adjustments were made?

- **Aim:** Understanding the impact of unforeseen circumstances
- **Finding Out:** Adaptations and challenges faced during the pandemic
- **Why Chosen:** To learn from the adaptations made during an unprecedented crisis and apply them to future scenarios.
- **Prompts:** Remote learning, changes in assessments, social interactions, mental health
- **Follow-Up Questions:** How did your institution support students? Were there specific changes that were more or less effective?

22. Question: How would you describe the community and social environment among T-Level students?

- **Aim:** Assessing social dynamics
- **Finding Out:** The quality of the social and collaborative experience
- **Why Chosen:** To ensure a positive and collaborative learning environment.
- **Prompts:** Friendships, study groups, online communities
- **Follow-Up Questions:** How did peers collaborate? Was there a sense of community and teamwork within the course?

23. Question: How do you see the future of T-Level qualifications in the education landscape?

- **Aim:** Understanding future perspectives
- **Finding Out:** Student's perspective on the long-term place of T-Levels
- **Why Chosen:** To gain insights into how T-Levels fit into the broader education system.
- **Prompts:** Growth potential, industry recognition, curriculum
- **Follow-Up Questions:** How do you see T-Levels evolving? Can you imagine them staying 10 years from now?

24. Question: How do you feel about the financial aspects of taking a T-Level, such as costs or financial support?

- **Aim:** Exploring financial considerations

- Finding Out: Perceptions of affordability and financial support
- Why Chosen: To understand financial barriers or incentives related to T-Levels.
- Prompts: Tuition fees, scholarships, living expenses
- Follow-Up Questions: Was financial support available? Did costs influence your decision? Did the industry placement cover transport costs if any?

25. Question: What are your plans after completing your T-Level?

- Aim: Post-graduation planning
- Finding Out: Next steps in education or career
- Why Chosen: To trace the pathways T-Level students take after graduation.
- Prompts: Further education, employment, gap year
- Follow-Up Questions: How have T-Levels prepared you for these plans? Have your plans changed during the course?

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