

## **VET in FE - T Levels and BTEC programmes**

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### **Abstract**

In this fourth article in the series, 'VET in FE', two work-related programmes – T Levels (the new offers) and BTECs (the tried and tested ones) are discussed. We conclude the new T Levels still have issues to iron out, and the current BTECs provide a better route to work.

### **Introduction**

This article is the fourth in the series - VET in FE. The first article, 'A question of 'divide and rule'?' argued that the proliferation of VET qualifications and the divide and rule concept set up needless segregation in the FE landscape and that the VET in the FE sector needed a rethink. The second article, 'A Way Forward,' offered another framework by forming connections with other education sectors whilst retaining the FE characteristics: porosity, inclusivity and widening participation underpinned by social justice. This framework refers to occupational education. The following article, 'Curriculum Development Framework', considers a curriculum that seeks to rationalise, de-mystify and clarify the vocational offers for stakeholders. We called this an Occupational Education (OE) curriculum framework development.

This fourth article explores the salient characteristics of two occupational/VET programmes - T Levels and BTECs - regarding curriculum development. The rationale for choosing these two vocational/occupational offers is that 1. These are current programmes, 2. They have similar and different characteristics, 3. T Levels are touted as the next generation VET offers, whereas BTEC offers are to be phased out, and 4. Evaluation of the two offers. To investigate the two offers, we will explain and discuss them in the next section. In the conclusion section, we will provide a way forward regarding occupational education/VET in the FE sector fit for the 21st Century.

The FE sector highlights porosity, inclusivity and diversity (Loo, 2020). The FE sector in England occupies a porous landscape between the (secondary) compulsory education sector and the higher education sector. Porous in the sense that the sector's pedagogic activities overlap those of the two surrounding sectors. The sector is inclusive, as illustrated by the Department for Business and Skills (BIS, 2016) in its statement, "It also plays an important role in reaching out to disadvantaged groups to encourage their participation in learning when they otherwise might not". It is diverse that includes FE colleges, voluntary and community organisations, commercial organisations, independent training providers, adult and community learning providers, industry, specialist colleges, armed and uniformed services, prisons and offender learning institutions, and other public-sector organisations (Education and Training Foundation, 2014). However, the main characteristic of FE is that 71.3% of its teaching staff teach occupational/vocational programmes (Loo, 2020), commonly known as vocational education and training (VET). This preponderance of work-related programme offers considered second to the academic ones. The 'English context' needs to be considered when investigating the FE sector (Loo & Jameson, 2017). Thus, a significant challenge to the ambitions of further education sits with education policies and reforms that reproduce a segmented socio-economic labour market in the UK, one that often undermines the value of vocational routes.

### **T levels and BTECs**

The Richard Review (2012) found wanting apprenticeships (work-related programmes) to upskill existing staff as the wrong approach to training. In the EDSK Report (2020), 'No Train, No Gain', apprentices were let down due to the lack of information regarding the offers and in low-skill low-

level positions with below the minimum wage. These shortfalls might have led to introducing of a new form of VET offer: T Level.

The Department for Education (DfE) announced new reforms to vocational education in 2021, intending to streamline vocational education for 16-19-year-olds. Transitioning from secondary schooling into further education includes ‘A’ levels, BTECs and T Levels. In short, students have two choices of education route into further study or employment: an academic route (‘A’ levels) or a vocational route (BTECs and T Levels). By 2024, the DfE plans to make ‘A’ levels and T Levels the main options for school leavers in England. Currently, T Level qualifications do not cover the breadth of choice that BTEC qualifications and funding for many BTECs will soon be removed by the DfE (Lewis, 2021). Thus, the reform to vocational education appears to rationalise choice for 16-19-year-olds by changing the curriculum and the nature of qualifications available. Further education has already become increasingly fragmented. Gamble (2022) terms this phenomenon as ‘segmentalism’ and is likely to be impacted further as T Levels ensure a direct link between education and employment.

For too long, there has been a narrow view that vocational education can solve labour market problems (Shalem & Allais, 2018). Loo (2019) argues for a widening work-related approach: occupational education. The advent of T Levels in the recent reform to further education and the vocational curriculum is hastily aimed at fixing economic deficits. The new qualifications have been based on identifying labour and skills shortages across key occupations. Three T Levels within the construction, media and childcare routes were introduced at a small number of providers in September 2020. In 2021, other offers were made available (accounting, design and development for engineering and manufacturing, finance, maintenance, installation and repair for engineering and manufacturing, management and administration), and it is expected that by 2023 more will be introduced (Foster & Powell, 2019). Policy publications highlight that the T Levels have been developed from labour market demands to address a ‘chronic shortage of people with technician skills in the UK’ (DfE, 2016, p. 7). This sticking-plaster approach is merely a short-term solution if it is one. Also, labour market demands change over time. We have yet to witness the scope and potential of these recent reforms, but the imminent cuts to BTEC provision are concerning.

T Level provision is based on a skills deficit model to benefit the economy. It undermines the purpose of education and its broader relationship to work, society and social identity (Winch, 2016). Vocational courses are known for combining theory and practice to develop students’ capacity for disciplinary and applied knowledge across a range of occupations. Those undertaking a T Level qualification are expected to complete a 45-day work placement instead of the short work experiences associated with the BTEC curriculum. Work placements serve many purposes, and for BTEC students, the work experience model is aimed at supporting knowledge within and across occupations. Presently, students can study more than one BTEC, which affords them choice across vocational areas. T Levels, however, have been developed to focus on skills development for one specific industry area narrowly. Loo (2018) laments the narrowness of skills and argues for a more comprehensive notion of compromising knowledge, experiences, abilities and skillsets. The T Level longer work placement has been negotiated with employers and aligned to industry standards by identifying agreed tasks and roles. Unlike BTECs, students undertaking a T Level qualification will have their placement performance assessed. This approach will contribute to around 20% of their overall grade.

NatCen Social Research (2017) identified that coordinating the shorter work experience has been problematic for those providers offering BTEC qualifications. The demands of a 45-day work placement will likely add significant pressure on further education resources. Many colleges rely on staff networks and contacts in industry to source and secure suitable work placements. However, T Levels are not without issues either.

The most challenging sectors are those already identified for early T Level qualifications (engineering, construction and health). Engineering and construction placement providers have raised issues related to health and safety procedures. At the same time, confidentiality and safeguarding are concerns for those in health, social care and early years settings (NatCen Social Research, 2017). Politics have influenced the concerns identified by NatCen Social Research, legislation and a rise in bureaucratic systems and are likely to impact the T Level educative experience. One question, who would provide the infrastructure – private providers? If so, there will be implications for deeper financial resourcing, without necessarily the efficiency gains.

To raise the profile of T Level qualifications, initial entry requirements were set to be higher than those needed for the extended BTEC diplomas. This recommendation has recently changed due to the implication that some T Level applicants may only successfully gain a level 2 in Mathematics and English after undertaking the course. Unlike BTECs, the new qualifications are only offered at level 3, a ‘transition year’ is on the horizon for 16-year-olds who could progress and complete a T Level by 19 (Foster & Powell, 2019). Those who complete T Level courses with Distinction passes (including the highest grade for work placement performance) will be awarded the equivalent of 3 ‘A’ levels, with similar UCAS points to the extended BTEC diploma. Finally, there is no adult education provision for T Level qualifications. For now, adults returning to education can still study BTEC courses. If BTEC courses are further reduced, this pathway will be closed to these adult learners – signifying a depletion of talent for the workplace.

It is difficult to see the advantages of the T Level provisions over BTECs at this early stage which prompts the question of whose benefit are T Levels? The current vocational routes (BTECs) are popular with students and are already recognised by universities and employers (Adams, 2023). Simplifying vocational education to suit the economy limits student choice. By doing so, the reform attempts undermine the broader purpose of further education as a site of porosity, inclusivity, diversity and reinforce the academic and vocational division.

## Conclusion

This article illustrated the weaknesses of the reformed VET offers in the form of the T Levels (DfE, 2021) following the criticisms of apprenticeships in the Richards Review (2012). Suppose the well-recognised, established and progressive BTECs are to be further reduced. In that case, this will also close the career pathways of adult learners, which will be a loss of talent in an economy starved of suitably qualified workers since the UK has come out of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the next and final article in this VET in FE series, we will discuss what a future and rationalised occupational education system looks like for FE in the 21st century.

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