Research on early delivery of the T Level Transition Programme

Research report

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As long as you take away that we've been incredibly supported and how it's been so refreshing to design something from scratch, which you very rarely get to do in FE…you design it from scratch, you get it endorsed by employers…It's been a really good experience and I think it's taught my team an awful lot about curriculum design and sequencing, which of course is high on the agenda on the new inspection framework…from every angle, it's been an absolute delight to be a part of. – *FE College*

…having the freedom in terms of the design of this programme has probably been the most insightful and innovative thing we've come across in FE for a long time. It has certainly inspired my team to think differently about curriculum design and sequencing of learning. – *FE College*

Executive summary

About the T Level Transition Programme

The T Level Transition Programme is a new type of 16 to 19 study programme, specifically designed to develop the skills, experience, knowledge and behaviours to support progression onto, and success on, a T Level. It is targeted at students aged 16 to 19 years (or young people with Education and Healthcare Plans to age 24) who are not ready to start a T Level but have the potential to progress onto one following a tailored preparation programme. The T Level Transition Programme is expected to be a full-time study programme delivered over a standard academic year, for most students.

The T Level Transition Programme is guided by a [framework for delivery](#)[1]. For the period covered by this research, the programme had five key components as detailed below.

- **Diagnostic and guidance period** – to assess students' capability and support needs in order to tailor their T Level Transition Programme to address these needs

- **English and maths** - students without at least a GCSE grade 4 in English and/or maths are required to continue studying these subjects. It is also intended that GCSE teaching will be supplemented by content contextualised to students' chosen T Level route

- **Work experience and preparation** - to develop the skills, behaviours, attitudes and confidence for students to complete the T Level industry placement

- **Introductory technical skills** – to prepare students for the T Level route they wish to progress to. This can be achieved through a) an existing level 2 technical qualification or b) non-qualification-based delivery of introductory technical content

- **Pastoral support and personal development** - to address barriers to education, support emotional and/or mental health difficulties, and support the development of study skills, and reflective and resilience skills

For the purposes of the research, providers taking a qualification approach were defined as those that planned to deliver a technical qualification (such as a level 2 qualification in IT or childcare). Providers taking a 'non-qualification approach were all other providers who were not embedding a technical qualification as their main qualification. However, they may have planned to deliver extended project qualifications, as well as additional non-technical qualifications and certificates. Some providers delivered both qualification and non-qualification approaches, believing that one approach was more suitable than the other for certain T Level Transition Programme subjects. Throughout this report, their

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[1] This framework for delivery is for the 2022-23 academic year and is an updated version of the framework that guided the providers taking part in this research who started delivering their Transition Programmes from September 2020.

views relating to the qualification and non-qualification approaches are considered with the rest of the data relating to the approach rather than as a separate group of providers delivering a mix of approaches.

The T Level Transition Programme was introduced through phased implementation from September 2020. In the first academic year, 32 providers (FE colleges, sixth form colleges and schools) started delivering the T Level Transition Programme. The aim was for these first providers to explore different approaches to delivery and develop good practice in effectively preparing students for a T Level.

The Department contracted with the Association of Colleges (AoC) to run a delivery support programme for providers, to provide support during the preparation year and first delivery year.

About the research

The research undertaken was qualitative in nature. Data collection and analysis took place in three stages. The overarching aim of the research was to explore how the T Level Transition Programme – called 'Transition Programme' from this point - was prepared for and delivered, whilst identifying learning for future delivery.

Stage one included initial interviews with 15 providers (11 by telephone and four face-to-face), which were undertaken between November 2019 and January 2020.

Stage two included telephone interviews with 21 providers and six relationship managers at the AoC (who were part of the delivery support programme), which were undertaken in November and December 2020.

Stage three included telephone interviews with 27 providers and five relationship managers, which were undertaken between June and September 2021. Six online student focus groups were also undertaken in summer 2021. They included 42 students across the three subject areas from six different providers.

Key research findings

Providers were highly engaged in preparations and delivery and generally delivered Transition Programmes which were well received by students. Students were generally reported to be more engaged and to have higher levels of attendance and retention than other level 2 students. Students themselves were generally positive about their experiences and the level of challenge, having most enjoyed the technical content, practical sessions, and individual project work, where it was well supported.

Providers took two main approaches in integrating Transition Programmes in level 2 provision. In some cases, they were distinct from other level 2 provision in the same sector, as providers felt that the Transition Programme was a higher level to their usual

level 2. In other cases, providers replaced all of their level 2 courses in that sector with the Transition Programme, as they felt that all students should benefit from the additional elements.

Transition Programme delivery benefitted when it was delivered with close links with T Levels, for example through: the same staff delivering both programmes or staff collaborating closely; combining students for enrichment activities, work experience or in tutor groups; and having T Level students buddy Transition Programme students or act as an ambassador for the T Level.

In terms of the five components, there were several factors which providers reported to work well which are highlighted below.

Diagnostics and guidance period:

- using more extensive diagnostics than usual practice – commonly conducted over six weeks to gain a holistic understanding of students' starting points and needs

- including assessment of students': technical knowledge, study skills and behaviours; English and maths competencies; digital skills; employability and work readiness

Technical component:

- embedding a smaller qualification or, in a non-qualification approach, ensuring the content and assessment was closely aligned to the T Level – it is worth noting, however, that the students consulted would have liked more hours attached to this element

- incorporating project-based delivery – including employer-set projects – in some cases set within the framework of a project qualification

- embedding additional qualifications to support employability, including health and safety and first aid

English and maths:

- contextualising English and maths, which was supported by students being taught in T Level or sector groups

- giving additional time to these subjects (between 6 and 9 hours a week for both)

- developing close links between technical departments and English and maths departments/staff

- engaging employers in creating industry-relevant tasks which required students to apply their skills in English and maths

Work experience and work preparation:

- deploying virtual employer engagement, for example, talks, masterclasses, industry days/weeks, virtual work experience weeks, mentoring, tours

- including employer-set projects, which enabled students to undertake real-work tasks related to their chosen sector and for their abilities to be assessed holistically

Pastoral support and personal development:

- drawing on strong existing pastoral provision, delivering pastoral support from one to three hours a week

- tailoring support to students' individual needs and supporting their development on both an academic and personal level, including timetabling early and ongoing support on planning for next steps

- developing close links between pastoral staff and academic tutors to ensure students' needs were identified and consistently supported.

Regarding assessment, providers thought this worked best where they used a variety of methods to assess students' progress and prepare them for the T Level. This included: individual and group assessments, such as written assignments, individual/group projects and presentations (including employer-set projects); mini tests; practical skills assessments; and internal exams, combined with exam preparation. Providers with a qualification appreciated the structure the formal assessments provided, whilst there were examples of providers taking a non-qualification approach devising a skills matrix or passport (a record that tracked students' soft skills development and employability skills, for which they could achieve a gold, silver or bronze award) to regularly assess students' broader progress and achievements.

Providers had the option to take a qualification or non-qualification approach to the technical component with both having positive elements and drawbacks:

- most providers who decided to include a qualification did so to provide credibility and structure, maintain students' engagement and allow students to progress to a range of routes, not just the T Level. Where they embedded a smaller qualification – which was most common - this allowed for flexibility to deliver the other four components. However, the approach worked less well where providers delivered larger qualifications and had to teach to a strict syllabus which left little time or flexibility to develop other technical skills aligned to the T Level

- the non-qualification approach allowed for the close alignment of content and assessment to the T Level and the flexibility to innovate and tailor the programme to students' needs. Key challenges were students' and parents' demand for a recognised qualification and concerns around portability.

The pandemic impacted providers' preparations and delivery, diverting staff energies elsewhere and requiring a move to online teaching which disadvantaged some students without access to equipment or Wi-Fi, at least initially. A move to online delivery also made building rapport with students more difficult and particularly impacted diagnostics and pastoral support, which tend to be best delivered face-to-face. Feedback from students suggested that they would have benefitted from more contact time and tutor support with assignments.

Another key component particularly affected by Covid-19 was securing placements and allowing students the opportunity to practise their practical skills in a real workplace. Few students completed a placement, with placements being more likely in Education and Childcare than in Construction and Digital. However, many providers tackled this challenge by focusing on virtual engagement with employers to support students' work readiness and, particularly in Digital, securing virtual placements. In many cases, employers became more accessible when they were able to engage virtually. Regarding Digital placements, a number of providers and relationship managers felt strongly that virtual placements should count towards work experience and industrial placement hours in the Transition Programme and T Levels going forwards, given this sector's more permanent move to remote working.

Providers faced some challenges in students' engagement with English and maths GCSEs, which many providers required students to achieve to progress to T Levels. Providers reported that some students struggled with one or both of these subjects, with some commenting that this was sometimes due to students having received higher centre assessment grades (CAGs) than providers thought reflected their ability. This could make it challenging to maintain students' engagement, particularly where students had substantial work to do to achieve the grades providers were requiring to progress onto T Levels.

The aim was for the Transition Programme to support students' progression onto T Levels but, in reality, providers reported that students were progressing onto a range of options. The proportions of students providers reported were likely to progress onto T Levels varied from very small numbers to almost all. Where students were not progressing to T Levels, they tended to be progressing to another level 3 course without exams and providers' entry requirement for grades 4s in GCSE English and maths, or onto an apprenticeship. A small proportion of students were making a sideways move to another level 2. Not having completed a placement was, for some students, a reason for them choosing another course which did not have the same requirement as the T Level for students to complete a substantial industrial placement. Several providers and relationship managers felt that there needed to be a review of what constitutes success in terms of Transition Programme students' next steps.

The elements that providers felt had most effectively prepared students for T Levels were: technical units/modules aligned to the T Level; development of English and maths

competencies within the vocational context; exam papers and practice of command verbs for exam questions; development of independent study skills; an employer set project; placements and placement preparation; and time and workload management support.

1 Introduction and background

1.1 Introduction

This report presents the findings of research into the T Level Transition Programme, which was undertaken by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) between October 2019 and September 2021. The overarching aim of the research was to explore how the T Level Transition Programme was prepared for and delivered, whilst identifying learning for future delivery.

The research focused on the first providers who prepared for their T Level Transition Programmes during the academic year 2019 to 2020 and started delivery from September 2020. They delivered T Level Transition Programmes in: Education and Childcare; Digital; and Construction.

1.2 About the T Level Transition Programme

The T Level Transition Programme is a new type of 16 to 19 study programme, specifically designed to develop the skills, experience, knowledge and behaviours to support progression onto, and success on, a T Level. It is targeted at students aged 16 to 19 years[2] who have the potential to progress on a T Level following a tailored preparation programme. Students who are recruited need to be eligible to receive 16-19 funding for their subsequent T Level. The T Level Transition Programme is expected to be a full-time study programme delivered over a standard academic year, for most students.

The T Level Transition Programme was introduced through phased implementation from September 2020. In the first academic year, 32 providers (FE colleges, sixth form colleges and schools) started delivering the Transition Programme. All of these providers were rated Good or Outstanding by Ofsted. The aim was for these first providers to explore different approaches to delivery and develop good practice in effectively preparing students for a T Level.

The first providers were responsible for their own branding and gave their Transition Programmes a range of names. As well as T Level Transition Programme, these names included: Transition to T Levels, Access to T Level, Gateway to T Levels, Pre-T, Yet-T, Route to Three or Connect. A small number of providers gave their programme the name of the level 2 qualification it contained.

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[2] And young people with Education, Health and Care Plans up to age 24.

The T Level Transition Programme - called 'Transition Programme' from this point - is guided by a [framework for delivery](#)[3]. The framework covering the period that is the focus of this research set out five key components which the Transition Programme should incorporate, whilst also allowing providers flexibility to put together the most appropriate and effective programmes to meet the needs of their students.

The five core components of the Transition Programme are:

- **Diagnostic and guidance period** – to assess students' capability and support needs in order to tailor their Transition Programme to address these needs and to help students decide which T Level route they want to prepare for. The expectation is that the Transition Programme starts with an intensive diagnostic period in which providers take a holistic approach to understanding the needs of individual students

- **English and maths** - students who do not hold at least a GCSE grade 4 in English and/or maths are required to continue studying these subjects as per the English and maths condition of funding. It is also intended that GCSE English and maths teaching will be supplemented by content contextualised to the T Level route

- **Work experience and preparation** – to develop the skills, behaviours, attitudes and confidence that will be needed for students to complete the T Level industry placement and for future employment more generally. This can include: work shadowing; work tasters; work experience and site visits; work preparation and employability skills development (e.g. talks, visits, help with interview skills and CVs); the development of digital skills; and work-related projects

- **Introductory technical skills** – to include introductory skills and concepts to prepare students for the T Level route they wish to progress to, taking into account the T Level technical content. This can be achieved through a) an existing level 2 technical qualification or b) non-qualification-based delivery of introductory technical content e.g. delivered as discrete modules, workshops and projects. Providers can also consider offering some level 3 'bridging' content towards the end of the Transition Programme to help assess students' readiness for level 3 study

- **Pastoral support and personal development** – relevant and meaningful support to address barriers to education, support emotional and/or mental health difficulties, and support the development of study skills, and reflective and resilience skills. Support should be tailored to individual needs and include regular progress reviews to ensure barriers to progress are being overcome. Delivery may

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[3] This framework for delivery is for the 2022-23 academic year and is an updated version of the framework that guided the providers taking part in this research who started delivering their Transition Programmes from September 2020.

include tutorials, seminars, group work, individual support and referral to specialist support/agencies.

Providers were expected to bring these components together and integrate them in the most effective way to engage and support individual students, as well as provide stretch and challenge to prepare them for T Level study. They were expected to be innovative and creative in their programme development, where possible and appropriate.

Providers also had the flexibility to add other elements to meet students' needs and support their progression to T Levels. This could include, for example, a science qualification/content, health and safety/first aid at work qualification, or food hygiene certificate.

The Transition Programme incorporates many of the requirements laid down for all 16-19 Study Programmes. This includes the requirement for students to continue studying English and maths if they have not already achieved a GCSE grade 4, and for the programme to be tailored to student need and include work preparation and experience and pastoral support. However, it differs in several ways. This includes flexibility to weight the components differently, with the technical component not expected to be the biggest part of the programme, and not needing to be delivered using a qualification, in order that more time can be spent on addressing students' wider barriers to progression.

1.3   About the support providers received

During the preparation and delivery year, the first providers were supported by the Association of Colleges (AoC), who were contracted by the Department for Education to run a delivery support programme for providers. A key element of the support was keep in touch (KIT) meetings with a dedicated relationship manager, of which there were four in the preparation year and three in the delivery year. They were intended to be face-to-face but some had to be undertaken virtually due to Covid-19.

The KIT meetings aimed to encourage providers to plan and deliver innovative approaches and support them to implement high-quality Transition Programmes aligned to the Framework for Delivery. Relationship manager support also included telephone contact, feedback on monitoring reports that providers submitted, and responding to ad hoc queries.

Other support offered included: national and regional learning events bringing all providers together; focus groups on the technical component, for example on the non-qualification approach, English and maths or work preparation; themed webinars; and a padlet, an online platform hosting resources to support delivery of the programme, some of which were from providers themselves.

1.4   About the research

The research undertaken was qualitative in nature and included regular semi-structured interviews with the providers and their relationship managers, as well as focus groups with students.

For the purposes of the research, providers taking a qualification approach were defined as those that planned to deliver an Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) approved technical qualification (such as a level 2 in IT or Childcare). Providers taking a non-qualification approach were all other providers who were not embedding a technical qualification as their main qualification. However, they may have planned to deliver project qualifications, as well as additional non-technical qualifications and certificates. Some providers delivered both qualification and non-qualification approaches, believing that one approach was more suitable than the other for certain Transition Programme subjects. Throughout this report, their views relating to the qualification and non-qualification approaches are considered with the rest of the data relating to the approach rather than as a separate group of providers delivering a mix of approaches.

Data collection and analysis took place in three stages. See Table 2 in Appendix 1 for details on the characteristics of providers taking part at each stage.

Stage one

This included initial interviews with 15 providers (11 by telephone and four face-to-face), which were undertaken between November 2019 and January 2020. The interviews explored reasons for engagement in the Transition Programme and progress with early preparation and plans.

Stage two

This included telephone interviews with 21 providers and six relationship managers, which were undertaken in November and December 2020. The interviews were originally scheduled for the end of the 2020 summer term but they were delayed due to Covid-19. The interviews explored programme design and preparations for delivery; assessing completion and progression; and experiences of early implementation.

Stage three

This included telephone interviews with 27 providers and five relationship managers, which were undertaken between June and September 2021. The interviews explored progress with implementation and changes providers were intending to make to their programmes for the next academic year.

Six online student focus groups were also undertaken in summer 2021. They included 42 students across the three subject areas from six different providers. The focus groups explored students' experiences of studying a Transition Programme and their intended

next steps. See Table 3 in Appendix 1 for details on the programmes students were studying and the types of institution they were studying at.

Additional student consultations

Following the main study, NFER was commissioned to undertake some further consultations with students in autumn 2021. Focusing on students who had completed the Transition Programme in the 2020/21 academic year and were now pursuing a T Level, the overarching aim of the consultations was to explore students' views on a summary of the proposed high-level national delivery expectations for the Transition Programme, and how the proposed content differed to their own experiences. The proposed national delivery expectations were being developed for September 2022 implementation and included draft national technical outcomes. A summary of the findings is provided in Appendix 2.

1.5   Report structure

This report brings together data from across the three phases of research in the following chapters:

- Chapter 2: Providers' reasons for participating in the Transition Programme
- Chapter 3: Recruitment and effectiveness of student targeting
- Chapter 4: Approaches taken in designing the Transition Programme
- Chapter 5: Implementing the Transition Programme
- Chapter 6: The student perspective
- Chapter 7: Future delivery of the Transition Programme
- Chapter 8: Concluding comments.

2 Providers' reasons for participating in the Transition Programme

This chapter presents providers' reasons for participating in the Transition Programme, which were explored in the stage one interviews.

Providers were asked why they had decided to participate in the Transition Programme. This revealed a number of common reasons for engaging in the programme. Providers:

- **saw themselves as progressive and innovative institutions** which embraced policy and practice change, and they wanted to be involved in shaping the programme:

  > We are a progressive college and want to be at the forefront of change. We welcome government policy and like to be involved from the outset so we can help shape it… – *FE College*

- **saw the Transition Programme as important preparation for the rigour of T Levels and critical to their subsequent success**:

  > Our approach is to look at this as something completely new. With a Transition year, we need to think about how we set students up for T Levels – that is going to be quite different from a traditional level 2 programme. – *Sixth Form College*

- **had existing expertise in designing similar programme(s) or programme components which they could draw on**, for example courses with a tailored approach, more significant employer involvement or more focus on English and maths

- **already delivered strong level 2 provision.**

One provider particularly wanted to be involved to ensure the Transition Programme met the needs of students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and who were disadvantaged:

> We have concerns about T Levels not meeting the needs of young people with SEND and who are disadvantaged so the best way to solve this is to be involved from the start… – *FE College*

3 Recruitment and effectiveness of student targeting

3.1 Recruitment

Students targeted tended to be those who had applied for the T Level or a level 3 but did not meet the provider's entry criteria, as well as more able level 2 applicants:

> If they've just missed out on their GCSEs, plus they've got the desired career goal that would warrant them being put on the T Level, they've been put on Transition…it's very niche. – *FE College*

Many providers based their entry requirements on prior experience of level 2 provision and/or by looking at the requirements and skills required for progression to T Level. Providers considered themselves to have a good understanding of their local area, demographics and past student cohorts, so knew what kind of students would be suitable for their Transition Programmes.

Most providers recruited students with a GCSE grade 3 profile or sometimes a grade 4 profile but missing maths and/or English. Around half of providers recruited students who needed to resit both GCSEs in English and maths, whilst the other half recruited those who needed to resit one GCSE in English or maths only, so that more time was available for other components:

> It's really difficult for a learner that's come to Level 2 to re-do the entire maths and English GCSE in a year, and work on those behaviours…those intrinsic limitations they've put on themselves…those negative beliefs about them not being able to do it. – *FE College*

Providers commonly reported that it would not be possible for students to re-sit maths and English during the T Level itself due to the rigour of the programme content, and providers did not want students to be left without a qualification if they were unable to pass these subjects during the T Level[4].

In most cases, Transition Programme entry criteria was higher than that of other level 2 programmes:

> Sometimes getting students from level 2 to level 3 is difficult, let alone getting them from a level 2 to level 3.5 which is what a lot of us in the sector think it [T Level] is. – *FE College*

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[4] At the time of the research, it was a requirement for students to have achieved GCSE English and maths at grade 4 or above in order to pass their T Level programme. This requirement has since been removed.

However, a small proportion of providers recruited students with the same profile as their usual level 2 cohorts and were happy for students to pursue a range of exit routes. They did not want to limit students' progression opportunities and understood that many young people at age 16 and 17 are unsure of their future direction:

> We believe it's improving the offer for the learners, as we believe we're equipping that learner with a greater skillset to be successful in whichever progression they choose. – *FE College*

Some providers only recruited students who had a clear plan to progress to the T Level. They saw the Transition Programme as a stepping stone qualification to the T Level (seeing it as a 'three-year' T Level) rather than a stand-alone course. During the application process, students needed to demonstrate a clear goal of wanting to progress to the T Level:

> I didn't want to take students on who were unsure…I wanted to make sure I was bringing these students on because that was what they wanted to do for their academic route. – *FE College*

A lack of national marketing and branding of the Transition Programme and the resulting limited awareness of students, parents/carers and schools was a key challenge in recruitment.

A number of providers reported that the use of centre assessment grades (CAGs) in the 2019/20 academic year had led to a further challenge. Some commented that their level 2 recruitment had been lower than a *'normal'* year due to more students receiving the grades required for a level 3 course and therefore progressing straight onto a level 3 or T Level. This had meant some programmes were unviable due to insufficient numbers.

Finally, **some non-qualification providers felt that the lack of a technical qualification had negatively impacted recruitment**, due to parents and students being cautious of a programme which did not lead to an approved qualification. This had been exacerbated by not being able to see potential students and parents face-to-face.

3.2 Effectiveness of student targeting

Over half of the providers, who reported good progression to level 3 programmes (not just T Levels), felt that they had got their targeting right, even if their targets for T Level progression had not been met:

> They completely immersed themselves in everything that we did. We had a small cohort of 13 but they were the right 13 students. The diagnostic process worked, the recruitment and enrolment process

worked so we had the right students on the right course from day one. Because of that, they bought into the Transition Programme and that cemented the high levels of engagement we have experienced throughout the year. – *FE College*

These providers did not envisage making any changes to their targeting for next year.

However, although they felt they had targeted students effectively, the perception of several providers was that CAGs did not always accurately reflect students' ability. This led to some students getting onto the Transition Programme who struggled to achieve their English and maths and to cope with the level more generally.

Two providers were reserving judgement regarding their targeting until they had seen how students fared on T Levels and/or whether they achieved their English and maths GCSEs this summer.

Around a third of providers reported that they were considering raising their English and maths entry requirements to achieve further conversions in future. Some were going to stipulate that students already had either English or maths GCSE grade 4 or above so that they only needed to focus on improving their grade in one of these subjects, which would reduce the pressure. This was because of the size of the gap between grades 2 or 3 and grades 4 and 5, which providers required for students to progress onto T Level:

> We have learnt that obviously, trying to bridge the gap on two GCSEs if they haven't got the grade 4 is quite a big ask, and that's why the entry requirement is being reviewed. – *FE College*

4 Planning the Transition Programme

This chapter presents data gathered from stage one and two interviews which explored providers' and relationship managers' views on how the preparation stage had gone. It covers: how planning went overall; how the Transition Programme was incorporated into level 2 provision; planning for the five components; support for students' individual needs; innovative practice; and key challenges faced in the preparation year.

4.1 How planning went overall

Most providers and relationship managers were, on the whole, very positive about the preparation year, with relationship managers praising providers' engagement and enthusiasm and reporting that they felt providers had developed high-quality programmes.

One relationship manager commented that **providers which had senior management commitment and involvement were particularly successful in their planning stage:**

> It goes back to the planning and the whole provider approach. If you can get a member of senior management, or a couple of senior managers, and a big working group to plan everything together, it really does make a huge difference. – *Relationship Manager*

Several providers had developed beneficial links between their Transition Programme and the associated T Level. This included: the same staff developing the curriculum or staff on the different programmes working together to develop the curriculum; plans to combine the groups for enrichment activities; and plans to put Transition Programme and T Level students in the same tutor group.

Several providers commended their curriculum teams for the dedication and enthusiasm they had shown in developing their Transition Programme and T Levels and felt the thorough planning meant they were well prepared to deliver the programme:

> The teams have responded very well in preparing for the [Transition Programme and] T Levels. It was a big unknown for staff but lots of time and energy has gone into development… – *FE College*

Only one provider noted a challenge around changing the staff mind-set from designing the traditional level 2 programme to the non-qualification Transition Programme. They highlighted that tutors are comfortable delivering qualification based courses due to the set content and rigid timings they are provided with, so removing the qualification led to apprehension amongst tutors. The provider reported that they overcame this challenge

through two methods. The first was to ensure that tutors knew they were trusted to develop the programmes based on their knowledge and expertise, and to deliver flexible programmes based on the needs of students who enrolled. The second method was to, through the networks the provider created, put tutors in touch with those in other providers who were advocates of the non-qualification approach so they could confirm to tutors the benefits of the approach as well as share ideas around practice.

Relationship managers reported that **providers had kept their cohort in mind** to ensure their Transition Programmes were tailored to students' needs:

> I'm confident in saying that every single provider has planned with their own student cohort in mind. In that sense, that speaks to an element of quality as it has a clear target audience in mind. – *Relationship Manager*

4.2 How the Transition Programme was incorporated into Level 2 provision

Providers generally took two approaches to incorporating the Transition Programme into their level 2 provision. **While some providers ran Transition Programmes alongside other Level 2 courses, others converted all of their level 2 provision to a Transition Programme.**

Those providers who retained their level 2 provision often considered the Transition Programme to be a level 2.5, due to its higher demands and quicker pace, and therefore not appropriate for all Level 2 learners:

> Our regular level 2 students probably wouldn't be able to go straight onto it [the Transition Programme]. For us, it's about being clear with students about the fact that the direction of travel is towards the T Level… – *FE College*

Some of these providers viewed the Transition Programme as a specific route to T Levels, with a minority of providers – generally those taking a non-qualification approach – seeing it as a three-year programme to achieve a T Level.

Those providers who replaced their existing level 2 provision with the Transition Programme believed strongly in the concept and principles of the Transition Programme and therefore felt it should be offered to all of their level 2 learners. They particularly valued the significant employer involvement and steer, the development of students' work readiness/employability skills and the focus on tailoring programmes to meet students' needs:

> We decided that if we were going to put so much work into developing a T Level Transition, on the understanding that that's the

best that a level 2 learner could possibly have, then why would we not offer that to all our level 2 learners? – *FE College*

These providers generally had the same entry criteria as for other level 2s and were happy with students progressing onto non-T Level exit routes.

There was, however, some overlap in the two approaches within providers – some providers replaced their level 2 provision but separated their cohort into those who were potential T Level candidates and those who were more likely to take a different route. Other providers amended their level 2 provision depending on the course, for example some viewed the Digital and Education and Childcare Transition Programme as suitable for all level 2 students but felt that two separate cohorts were needed for Construction.

4.3 Planning the five components

4.3.1 Time allocated to the components

Due to the flexibility that providers had in developing their programmes, there was a lot of variety in designs. However, **providers tended to be consistent in the importance they placed on the different components.** For example:

- where providers planned to include a qualification, it was generally the largest component (between 30 and 50 per cent); non-qualification programmes tended to include a smaller technical component

- English and maths was generally the second largest component (between 20 and 40 per cent; six to nine hours a week), with most providers including contextualised teaching

- work experience and work preparation activities were generally planned to take up a maximum of 20 per cent of the time, although more time was often allocated for Education and Childcare

- diagnostics and the pastoral element took the least amount of time (around 10-20 per cent), with diagnostics being more extensive than usual practice and the pastoral element being mainly adaptation of existing practice.

4.3.2 Diagnostics and guidance period

The diagnostics that providers planned to deliver in their Transition Programmes were more extensive than their usual practice, both in terms of time and coverage. They planned to embed a range of approaches to diagnostics and testing students. Some institutions were planning to use specific diagnostic processes or packages but these were often too expensive for smaller providers, particularly schools. However, schools tended to already know their students, as many had been at the school since

Year 7, which meant the schools felt that their diagnostics process did not need to be as comprehensive.

Some providers planned a more extensive assessment of technical and softer skills at the beginning of the programme, whilst others expected to undertake more ongoing diagnostics throughout the year.

The additional time allocated to this component allowed providers to carry out more extensive diagnostics with Transition Programme students than they completed with students on other programmes. Examples of plans for diagnostics included: a six weeks diagnostics at the start (compared to two weeks on other programmes) and reviews during the year; exams and progress reviews every four weeks; using Skills Builder to assess English and maths, digital, personal learning and thinking skills; Century Tech which allowed students to see their areas for development, complete self-directed or tutor led tasks and track their progress; employer-set tasks to assess employability skills; and the development of a skills matrix endorsed by employers, in which each element of the programme had skills attached to it*:*

> We came up with the idea of a skills matrix, which is now very complex, but a very individualised document. Each element of the programme has skills attached to it so, for example, subject-specific practical skills, like safeguarding skills or participating in a meeting, then general employability skills like time management and teamwork, then we had sector-specific employability skills, and then we have academic skills, which is all around research skills, exam writing skills and so on. Then behaviours and attitudes and finally maths and English. *– FE College*

Some providers reported that, after the successful delivery of the diagnostic period on their Transition Programmes, they would be embedding these activities into their diagnostics on other programmes to make for a more comprehensive assessment of students' starting points.

4.3.3 Introductory technical component

Providers were able to take a qualification or non-qualification approach to designing their Transition Programmes[5].

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[5] 'Qualification approach' providers planned to deliver a level 2 ESFA-approved technical qualification whilst 'non-qualification approach' providers were not embedding a technical qualification. However, they may have planned to deliver project qualifications, non-technical qualifications or certificates. Some providers used both approaches, choosing the approach most appropriate to each Transition Programme. Their views relating to each approach are considered with the rest of the data relating to that specific approach rather than as a separate group of providers delivering a mix of approaches.

In terms of providers taking a qualification and non-qualification approach:

- 22 included an embedded ESFA–approved technical qualification in all of their Transition Programmes

- four took an entirely non-qualification approach – two delivered both Digital and Education and Childcare, one delivered Digital and one delivered Education and Childcare

- six used a mix of qualification and non-qualification approaches across their Transition Programmes, with four delivering Construction and two Digital with a non-qualification approach while delivering their other programme(s) with a technical qualification.

Providers gave a range of reasons for choosing a qualification or non-qualification approach.

The main reasons for embedding a technical qualification were to give the programme credibility and recognise students' achievement to support future progression to a range of routes, not just T Levels:

> We wanted to make sure that we weren't limiting the opportunities for them so that was mainly why we went with the same qualification we run with our 16-19 year olds so that, if they decided the T Level wasn't the route for them and they enjoyed their work placement, it gave them the ability to go and get employment and possibly look at apprenticeship routes or whatever suited them best...Often, after one year, they do want to go into the world of employment and we wanted to give them something credible to do that, to give them the first step in their journey. – *FE College*

Other providers chose this route to maintain students' engagement:

> The technical qual is not a sales point, it's basically how you keep them interested to make sure they get through their English and maths, we're using those quals as the gatekeepers. – *Sixth Form College*

Providers taking a qualification approach planned to embed a range of different technical qualifications in their programmes. Decisions on the size of the qualification were based on a range of factors including: the demands of the T Level; preparation for the T Level technical element; fitting in all of the other core components; and the destinations of past level 2 student cohorts. For example, where past level 2 students tended to go into employment or apprenticeships, providers often felt they needed to include a larger qualification, with a higher number of guided learning hours and a licence

to practice. Where they tended to progress to level 3, a smaller qualification or no qualification could be justified:

> What it enabled us to do is to focus on the English and maths that we think is the bigger barrier to progression, not the qualification which they often pass – that's the easier part. It allowed us to use those hours in a more productive way focussing on some of the barriers to progression, rather than the qualification. – *FE College*

Smaller qualifications (for example certificates, which have fewer guided learning hours (GLH) compared to diplomas) were common across all three Transition Programme routes, although one provider justified their rationale for a large qualification, which was related to the academic nature of the T Level:

> The T Level is so academic that actually we want the learners to be able to do some unit work and you learn how to construct an essay and construct an assignment so that's why we put in the bigger qualifications. – *FE College*

Technical qualifications chosen included a range of level 2 qualifications from established awarding organisations. They included certificates, extended certificates, diplomas and awards. From these qualifications, providers planned to select units and modules that best aligned to the T Level content. Education and Childcare programmes often incorporated a larger qualification with a licence to practice to support students' progression to employment, should they decide to choose this route.

A small number of providers were convinced that the non-qualification approach was the right way to go, in order to do justice to the other Transition Programme components and tailor content to students' needs and the local context:

> There are many elements of the T Level which go beyond the qualification…in preparing people for this sort of course…how they operate, behaviours, skills…We did not think one qualification would cover everything…we would rather build it out of a collective of different elements…we are still convinced that is the right way to do it. – *Sixth Form College*

In some cases, providers did not currently run a level 2 programme that met the needs of the T Level, or they felt that there was not a suitable level 2 qualification on offer. This tended to be more the case for Construction, with one provider describing the T Level as *'more architecture and civil planning'* as opposed to the construction trades.

Both qualification and non-qualification providers planned to embed project-based learning into their programmes to reflect the T Level, with some planning to use the

Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) or Higher Project Qualification (HPQ) as a framework. They felt students learning skills through '*practice and doing things'* would be an engaging approach. In many cases, providers planned to engage employers in 'employer-set projects', with employers involved in the planning stage and assessing students' presentations.

Providers also commonly planned to include additional qualifications to improve students' employability. There was a wide variety with examples including: computer aided design (CAD), paediatric first aid, food hygiene, health and safety, Java, Python, ALG (Application Layer Gateway) Level 1, lifting and handing, social psychology, mental health for education and childcare, personal development and effectiveness qualifications and Core Maths.

4.3.4 English and maths

Many providers required students to achieve a GCSE grade 4 in English and maths to progress to the T Level and all providers placed a key focus on these two subjects in their plans.

Providers commonly planned to allocate around six hours a week to English and maths (three hours a week per subject) but some providers increased this provision to nine hours to ensure students were given the intense support required to achieve a GCSE grade 4:

> Maths and English is timetabled first and everything else has to wrap around…each Transition group has a tutor who's a subject specialist, but they also own maths and English for those learners…they will get a report every week showing whether those learners have attended, whether they've done their homework…to the point of holding their hand and walking them down to the maths classroom…that's at the core of what we do as an organisation. – *FE College*

Most providers planned to teach both GCSE English and maths separately (delivered by English and maths departments) as well as deliver contextualised English and maths embedded within the technical component (delivered by technical tutors).

Some providers planned GCSE delivery in discrete Transition Programme groups, whilst others planned to mix Transition Programme students with students on other courses, sometimes putting them together with students studying the same subject area to support contextualisation.

Examples were provided of GCSE tutors and technical staff working together to map where English and maths could be taught within the technical component, contextualise learning within the GCSE course where appropriate and possible, and

ensure learning would be reinforced and built upon. Providers felt this approach created strong, synchronous provision that would prepare students both for the GCSE exams and for the English and maths skills that would be required of them in the T Level.

4.3.5 Work experience and employer engagement

All providers planned to embed work experience and work preparation activities in their Transition Programmes to provide students with experience of working in the sector, with planned hours ranging from 70 to 250.

In the context of Covid-19, two Education and Childcare providers were particularly innovative with this component – one invested in a physical on-site nursery where their students would gain experience, while another invested in a virtual nursery with interactive floors, babies and simulated activities so that students could have professional conversations and be assessed on their knowledge and skills.

Most providers planned to build in a range of activities with employers to develop students' employability and work readiness:

> We had really strong relationships with four or five employers that we worked with to design the programme which stood us in good stead because we felt assured then that all of the content and the design of the programme was fully aligned to the needs of industry in our local area. – *FE College*

They were considering involving employers in: diagnostics, employer-set projects (see above), teaching work readiness, industry days, mentoring, masterclasses, and the creation of video diaries of job roles.

One provider developed a strategic employer lead for each of the Transition Programme sectors, as well as a bank of between ten to 20 volunteers per sector. A key role for each of these employers was to support with induction and curriculum design, as well as deliver the more usual timetabled master classes and guest speeches:

> They will be involved in the induction [at the start of the Transition Programme] and then they will be a real part of the curriculum going through. They are going to do their own mini Ofsted [offer review and scrutiny similar to what staff will experience during an Ofsted inspection] on the team, just to be judging the things that we are saying so they know that they are part of our curriculum design, but they are seeing that that is being executed as well. – *FE College*

There were also other examples of providers working closely with employers to understand the technical and English and maths skills required in the future workforce, so that they could take this into account in their planning.

4.3.6 Pastoral support and personal development

The majority of providers felt that they already had strong pastoral provision in place which they intended to replicate for the Transition Programme.

However, some were planning to place additional focus on study skills, mind-set (for example using the VESPA model (vision, effort, systems, practice and attitude), personal development, work readiness and employability:

> We decided to reduce qualification content down to a single award which is equal to one GCSE. With the space created on the programme, we filled it with study skills content which is what the pastoral lead led on designing last year. – *Sixth Form College*

Many providers also reported plans to embed a range of enrichment and extra-curricular activities into this component. In addition, a small number of providers intended to use software packages to support students' development. This included Ignite – in which students complete modules to develop their assertiveness and confidence – and Unifrog, which allows for the recording and tracking of students' skills progression for their university personal statements.

The planned time allocated varied from one to three hours a week, including group and one-to-one support.

4.4 Support for students' individual needs

More than half of all providers planned to use the same learning support systems for supporting students' individual development as used within all courses across their institution. They commonly reported that support would be provided by pastoral tutors, student services and learning support assistants both in lessons and tutorials, as well as in small group and one-to-one sessions:

> We have one-to-one maths and English available for those learners who are struggling and we have learning support for learners with an EHCP [Education and Health Care Plan]…We have a personal tutor to monitor behaviour as well as student services for the wellbeing, counselling and pastoral care. It's nothing really different from what we would be doing for any of our other students across the college. – *FE College*

Just less than half of the providers gave examples of additional support they would provide to individual students following the diagnostic period. Several described how they would assess students against the skills and capabilities needed for the Transition Programme and T Level during induction and then devise an individual development plan

for each student which documented the support they would require. Alongside the provision of individualised support, in some cases providers reported that students would be able to complete a smaller, more manageable qualification to their peers or would need to complete fewer assignments. One provider also noted the smaller number of learners on the Transition Programme compared to other programmes, which naturally led to tutors being able to provide more individual support.

For students with additional needs, providers also planned to reduce the length of placements or offer internal as opposed to external placements. In addition, they planned to discuss with employers what additional support students would require on placement:

> The qualification we chose has mandatory placement hours of 100, whereas our current Level 2 has 250 placement hours. We can take it up to 200 hours depending on the learners, so we can tailor it to what the learner is ready for when they have the right skills. – *FE College*

4.5   Innovative practice

Providers were expected to be innovative and creative in their planning of high-quality Transition Programmes aligned to the framework for delivery. In this regard, **providers incorporated innovative practice to differing extents, across their plans for all of the components of the Transition Programme**, with relationship managers reporting that some providers were more proactive in planning innovation whilst others needed more encouragement and support ' to embed innovative approaches.

Providers and relationship managers considered the non-qualification approach to be particularly innovative. It allowed for creative ways of delivering and assessing technical knowledge and skills in line with the T Level:

> Without a qualification, what it's done is it's picked up on the key themes of the T Level such as delivering problem solving solutions, getting the knowledge and transferring it to a skill. It's enabled staff to be creative...If we went down a qualification route, what we'd be doing is just a knowledge-based qualification and not developing the skills…It's about getting them in the right mind-set…how to sort their behaviours out in terms of employability, how do they communicate out on a work placement, how do they problem solve independently. – *FE College*

Relationship managers and providers felt that embedding a smaller qualification was also innovative, as it provided flexibility and time to deliver the other core components. For example, with this additional time, providers were able to give greater focus to the pastoral component of the programme and were able to deliver more hours of GCSE English and maths compared to other level 2 programmes:

> They could be flexible with the size of the qualification they were offering which would then give them flexibility to focus on other areas of the student development. What we've got now is a more holistic approach of bringing students up to the confidence and academic levels they need to be at to maximize the opportunities should they choose to go onto a T Level. – *Relationship Manager*

Providers and relationship managers also felt that involving employers in designing the programme was particularly innovative:

> It gave us the greatest opportunity to design and co-create this curriculum with our partner employer that we absolutely knew was fit for purpose, and that we had the ability to make changes during the year based on our intel at the time, I think that's revolutionary…You often have a curriculum, you have to get through it, it's prescribed by an AO [awarding organisation], the fact that we are essentially our own AO, we're designing it and can be as flexible as we can be…I think it will serve our students greatly for the future. – *FE College*

Innovation was facilitated by providers' enthusiasm and by the support of relationship managers, both as a critical friend and supporting provider networking:

> When we shared best practice of what other providers were doing, I think that encouraged a lot of providers to think outside the box and try something different….a number of providers had planned in qualifications, but hearing another provider who's gone down a non-qualification approach and the reasons that they're doing that made them think. – *Relationship Manager*

Relationship managers noted one main barrier to innovation. This was student and parental demand for a recognised technical qualification, which in Education and Childcare often included a licence to practice. This demand allowed providers less scope to embed smaller technical qualifications or to take a non-qualification approach. Linked to this was student and parental lack of awareness of the Transition programme and what it was trying to achieve, as this relationship manager exemplified:

> ...Parents have questions and expectations so we can understand why providers are reluctant to remove what has been the centre of every study programme. – *Relationship Manager*

Other barriers to innovation included: smaller providers' limited capacity/funds, for example to purchase diagnostics tools; and the lack of an employer base; insufficient technical expertise, a particular issue for Construction and Digital where more specialist knowledge is required. Providers also perceived the Department for Education to be reluctant to approve funding for vendor qualifications, such as those linked to particular technology systems, which was a particular issue for Digital programmes.

4.6   Drawing on evidence in decision making

Many providers drew on previous experiences and evidence of delivering Level 2 provision in making decisions regarding Transition Programme entry requirements, content and delivery.

In terms of making decisions on whether to run the programme as a standalone one year course or, effectively, like a three-year T Level course, several providers analysed the characteristics of students from similar Level 2 programmes. This included data on English and maths re-sit pass rates and progression routes. For example, if most students studying a similar course in the past had decided to progress from Level 2 to a Level 3 programme, then positioning the programme as the first year of a three-year T Level could be considered.

Providers also drew upon knowledge of what worked in curriculum adaptations from pilots or previous innovative practice pilots. Examples of this included:

- delivering an extra hour of English and maths which had achieved a higher pass rate
- reducing the curriculum content and adding study skills: 'The rationale behind reducing curriculum and qualification content and replacing it with study skills content was very much based on previous experiences, feedback from students…' – *Sixth Form College*
- taking a blended learning approach (which incorporated reading, classroom and homework tasks)
- delivering social psychology and confidence building or the VESPA mind-set model
- running vertical tutor groups, this is a pastoral system in which students are organised into mixed age tutor groups and taking this approach allowed providers to place Transition Programme and T Level students in the same tutor group which was beneficial

- drawing on evidence on what worked in engaging employers in placements and the curriculum from the Industry Placements Pilot and Capacity and Delivery Fund (CDF).

In addition, providers reported drawing on effective practice from other providers, which was facilitated by the national delivery support programme in which providers were not perceived to be in direct competition with each other:

> The opportunity for people to be in a breakout room with people from different parts of the country who are not competitors allows them to share much more readily their ideas and what they are thinking and bounce ideas off each other… – *Relationship Manager*

4.7   Key challenges in the preparation year

Providers reported that they needed to address a range of challenges when preparing their Transition Programmes.

A key challenge was the late timing of the T Level technical specifications, which delayed progress in developing the introductory technical component.

Some providers also experienced **challenges in finding the right technical qualification to prepare students for the T Level**. This was reported to be a particular issue with Construction, as level 2 qualifications tended to be for trades with content not easily mapping to the T Level.

For those opting for a non-qualification approach, making decisions on how to measure student progress was also reported to be challenging.

In terms of **English and maths,** some providers were concerned about their current low retake pass rates and Transition Programme students potentially not achieving a GCSE grade 4 in these subjects, which providers required to move onto the T Level:

> What do we do with the 50% not passing English and maths? – *FE College*.

They also mentioned challenges in considering how they could make the GCSE focus engaging and in contextualising content for the specific sectors:

> That's probably the biggest challenge…bridging the gap between us being able to deliver on the maths and English and understanding that context, while still maintaining the technical element that's relevant to the workplace. – *Sixth Form College*

Several providers felt constrained by not being able to deliver Functional Skills as part of this component to students who achieved a GCSE grade 3[6] (as they were able to do on the T Level at the time of this research) and felt that students' chances of achieving on Functional Skills would be higher than GCSE, as they would find the content more engaging. Some providers reported that, although some students achieved a GCSE grade 3 in English and/or maths based on CAGs, they were in fact working at a grade 1 or 2 and therefore Functional Skills would have been more appropriate for them.

The Covid-19 pandemic hit in the latter half of the preparation year, meaning that **staff time and energies were diverted elsewhere.** Providers had to juggle developing the Transition Programme whilst moving all of their teaching online and introducing Covid-19 policies and strategies to keep their staff and students safe. Providers felt that not being able to meet with colleagues face to face had impacted upon the speed of development.

However, some providers were less adversely affected as they had undertaken a lot of planning before the lockdown, and others more easily adapted to these additional challenges:

> We'd done a lot of planning before the lockdown happened so we weren't really adversely affected by it. We did our big launch event in February and we had all our teachers trained on T Levels before then. We were lucky that everything was done before lockdown. – *School*

Engaging with employers and securing placements was also strongly impacted by Covid-19, with employers needing to focus on their businesses surviving the pandemic. Employer engagement tended to be more of a challenge for providers located in rural and coastal areas and for schools and sixth form colleges as opposed to large FE colleges, who were perceived to have an advantage in terms of stronger, existing employer pipelines.

In terms of institution size, relationship managers perceived larger institutions to experience fewer challenges than smaller institutions due to more staff capacity and a financial advantage. This meant that they were more likely to have a larger number of staff working on the Transition Programme, which provided greater capacity to develop the programme and to attend events and KITs.

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[6] Providers are able to offer Functional Skills to students who achieved a GCSE grade 2 or below as part of the English and maths condition of funding.

5 Implementing the Transition Programme

This chapter presents data gathered from stage two and three interviews which explored providers' and relationship managers' views on how the implementation stage had gone. It covers: how implementation went overall; implementation of the five components; assessing student progress and readiness to progress to T Levels; implementation challenges resulting from Covid-19; and student engagement and progress.

5.1 How implementation went overall

In the third stage of interviews, providers were asked to rate on a scale of 1 (not at all well) to 5 (very well) how they thought overall delivery of the Transition Programme had gone during the first year. The number of providers giving each rating can be seen in Table 1 below. Despite the challenges and disruption resulting from Covid-19, providers were generally happy with first year of implementation, with 18 out of 27 rating overall delivery as a 4 or 5.

The reasons providers gave for scoring their delivery lower on the scale (2 or 3) were related to Covid-19 and included being unable to deliver all the planned content, the need for last minute adjustments to the programme, and the lack of in person teaching. More broadly, providers commented on the challenging nature of delivering a new programme in the circumstances of the multiple lockdowns, teaching in bubbles when in school/college and the absence of staff and students due to illness and isolation.

There were no clear trends in the types of providers giving particular scores.

Table 1 Provider ratings for delivery of the Transition Programme in its first year

On a scale of 1 (not at all well) to 5 (very well) how do you feel the delivery of your Transition Programme has gone over the last year?

Rating	Number of providers
1	0
2	1
3	6
3 or 4	2
4	14
5	4
Total	**27**

Provider ratings for delivery of the Transition Programme in its first year

The relationship managers interviewed were also positive about providers' progress in the first year of delivery. They were asked to rate the effectiveness of providers' delivery on the same scale. Two relationship managers gave a 4, one a 3.5-4 and two a 3.5. They reported that the quality of programmes was good overall despite providers needing to adapt their plans due to Covid-19:

> In the context, they have done a remarkable job, given the circumstances that they were actually operating in…They changed their plans, they were adaptable and they genuinely did the best job that they possibly could for their students. – *Relationship Manager*

Many providers complimented their teaching teams, with **programmes reported to have been particularly successful where they were delivered by experienced and technically skilled staff, who invested time in getting to know their students.** For example, one provider reported course tutors spending 60-70 per cent of their time with Transition students which proved to be an effective strategy in supporting students' individual needs.

The same staff teaching on the Transition Programme and T Level, or close links between the teams had also worked well:

> The teachers on the Transition are the teachers on the T Level so there has been that oscillation and being able to take what is happening on the T Level and bring it down for the Transition. That communication has really enabled us to show the links and talk about the T Level with some confidence. This is something we need to retain. – *FE College*

The following sections provide more detail on what has worked well and less well in implementation of the core components and assessment.

5.2 Implementing the five components

5.2.1 Diagnostics and guidance period

Most providers felt the delivery of their diagnostic period had gone reasonably well despite the fact that they were less confident at the planning stage.

The diagnostic process tended to take place over a period of around six weeks, which gave time for providers to get to know their students and, in some providers, a trial period to ensure students were on the right course:

> We have a 42-day window – that's an opportunity for us to check that the learners are on the right programme…to check if anyone has got

any learning needs. At the beginning of the year we had the learners in person so when we went into lockdown, we had built up the profile of the learners so we were able to support them in the best way we could. – *FE College*

A minority of providers reported that they had completed diagnostic work with students before they started the course, for example by setting them an assignment during the summer holidays.

Diagnostics tended to include assessment of students': level of technical knowledge; study skills and learning behaviours; English and maths skills; digital abilities; and employability skills and work readiness:

We got some really clear metrics on all of our students, we got to know them incredibly well and it definitely set us up to re-sequence some elements of the curriculum based on the intel we got from the diagnostic process. – *FE College*

Where providers completed thorough assessments and conversations with students, they were able to gain a holistic understanding of their skills and capabilities and put in place appropriate interventions and support:

When students got their [GCSE] results, they were spoken to by a specialist member of staff about their career aims and what pathway would be best for them. We feel that, because of this, we got the right students onto the right courses and this is reflected in retention figures. We also offered a screening test at the start of the year to find out if students would need additional study support or time in exams. – *Sixth Form College*

Providers spoke of several useful software packages they had used to support delivery of the diagnostic period such as Navigate, which allows students to track their development of employability skills, as well as iDEA for developing digital, enterprise and employability skills and Century (which has been mentioned previously).

One of the key challenges faced by providers was their perception that the CAGs were not always an accurate reflection of students' English and maths abilities, which led to challenges in identifying students' English and maths starting points and support requirements and the need for a more in-depth diagnostics process:

I thought the predicted grades was a bit difficult because we had to really up our English and maths diagnostics to take into account how they may not be as reliable as we'd hoped. – *FE College*

Online delivery of diagnostics during the pandemic was also challenging due to the digital poverty experienced by some students. Providers also reported that building relationships with students and getting to know their skills, strengths and areas of development was more challenging when done virtually, compared to in-person.

5.2.2 Introductory technical content

Most providers were happy with the approach they had chosen – whether ESFA-approved technical qualification or non-qualification[7] - and felt this component had gone well.

Providers who delivered a qualification highlighted how helpful this was for providing structure to the technical component. Relationship managers also reported providers' success in delivering the technical component, due to their existing expertise in delivering qualifications.

Providers felt that the qualifications they embedded gave tutors the flexibility to select units best aligned to the T Level, which provided a strong foundation of knowledge for the T Level.

Some providers also reported that they were glad that they had included a qualification as a number of their students were choosing to progress into work:

> Not all of the students are going to progress onto the T Level, so having an actual qualification is useful. Some of our Childcare students went into work immediately afterwards, so I'm glad there was a qualification they could take away with them. – *FE College*

However, the qualification approach worked less well where providers had to teach to a strict syllabus and did not have the time or flexibility to develop other technical skills aligned to the T Level. Some providers also commented on the assessment scenarios of some qualifications being outdated and not a suitable preparation for T Level.

Providers who took a non-qualification approach were generally pleased with their decision:

> There is no doubt that we made the right decision. Students benefited from the decision we made, there is a clear line of sight to

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[7]'Qualification approach' providers planned to deliver a level 2 ESFA-approved technical qualification whilst 'non-qualification approach' providers were not embedding a technical qualification. However, they may have planned to deliver extended project qualifications, non-technical qualifications or certificates. Some providers used both approaches, choosing the approach most appropriate to each Transition Programme. Their views relating to each approach are considered with the rest of the data relating to that specific approach rather than as a separate group of providers delivering a mix of approaches.

the T Level. We were able to adjust things throughout the year based on the profile of the students, the diagnostic period. Covid had an impact on some of the stuff we did but we were able to refine and re-sequence…That flexibility was purely down to the fact that we could make our own adjustments. – *FE College*

The providers who had taken this approach, as well as some relationship managers, praised the freedom the non-qualification approach gave. Providers were able to deliver a programme based on the T Level content and had the flexibility to innovate and tailor the programme to students' needs:

The providers delivering the non-qual programmes love them. The lecturers think it's great as it has given them freedom and has unfettered them from the curriculum. They don't have to follow the scheme of work…it's a step towards individualised learning. – *Relationship Manager*

However, it is worth noting that embedding a small, technical qualification gave providers similar scope for flexibility.

Some providers took advantage of flexibility in their programmes by making adjustments during the year. For example, some Digital providers increased their focus on programming whilst some Education and Childcare providers increased their focus on observations to better prepare students for placement. Others increased their focus on a range of areas dependent on student need, for example English and maths, work readiness and pastoral, or added additional qualifications such as infection control in response to Covid-19.

Some providers who had delivered a qualification could see the flexibility a non-qualification approach gave tutors and students, which was constrained by a qualification.

However, despite the majority of non-qualification providers being very pleased with their decision, some of these providers, as well as qualification providers and relationship managers, raised concerns around portability. They were concerned about students studying for a year and not gaining a recognised technical qualification and the issues they might face in progressing onto an apprenticeship or employment, or moving to a different school/college, as this quote from a qualification provider exemplifies:

It doesn't sit well with me them being on programme for a year and them not having anything qualification wise. – *FE College*

For these reasons, **several providers (both delivering qualification and/or non-qualification programmes) and relationship managers called for more**

standardisation, prescription and regulation around the non-qualification approach to ensure the programme does not disadvantage students.

A minority of providers reported issues with staff technical expertise, and with staff struggling to adapt to teaching a programme without a technical qualification:

> Messages about how different Transitions should be hadn't filtered down to the teams, and it is so easy just to do things the way that you have always done them as a teacher, but we wanted to make this completely different…We keep using the term [intensive skills training], we have got the technical component, we have got the employability component, so it is very different from a normal level 2. *– FE College*

Providers embedding project-based delivery - with projects commonly co-designed with employers - reported that this strategy was very successful. Employer-set projects allowed students to work on an industry relevant scenario and develop the required technical and transferable skills, such as independence, critical thinking, problem solving and teamwork, as well as gain useful feedback from employers. Given the challenges in securing work experience during Covid-19, this component and such projects became even more valuable. The additional qualifications that were used by some providers as a framework for project-based delivery (such as EPOs and HPQs) also increased students' employability.

However, Covid-19 brought two key challenges to the delivery of the technical component. **Remote delivery of practical skills proved problematic and the absence of placements meant that students were unable to put the technical knowledge and skills they had learnt into practice in a real-life context.** To overcome the challenge of practical work, providers reported re-sequencing programmes so that the topics requiring school/college resources and facilities were completed when providers were open and topics conducive to home learning were taught over the lockdown period.

5.2.3 English and maths

Overall, providers were pleased with the grades that their students had achieved in English and maths:

> English in particular proved to be really successful. On average, we got 40% high grades [i.e. GCSE grade 4+ from Transition Programme students] compared to 30% across the rest of the curriculum area [non-Transition Programme students] so there is definitely a marked improvement in terms of high grades for this cohort. *– FE College*

Those providers which reported success with this component attributed allocating more hours to English and maths than was usual for level 2 courses. Some providers also reported that, where students already had a GCSE grade 4+ in one of these two subjects, they were more likely to pass their retake in the other as they had less pressure and were able to focus on the one subject.

In addition, effective diagnostics, which ascertained students' level, and contextualising content had contributed to students' progress and engagement.

Close collaboration between the Transition Programme curriculum teams and English and maths departments also proved to be an effective delivery strategy:

> The GCSE and curriculum team have communicated about what students are struggling with so this is built upon, given more focus to improve students' confidence in their skills. – *FE College*

Conversely, lack of collaboration had led to stand-alone and disjointed provision, with opportunities for contextualisation and reinforcing content not being capitalised upon.

Engaging employers in the creation of industry-relevant tasks and assessments, which developed students' skills in English and maths in a real-life context, had also helped to maintain students' engagement. A minority of providers also reported the benefit of using Century software, which allows students to identify their areas for improvement and provides self- or tutor-directed tasks based on their areas for improvement (e.g. fractions or decimals).

Larger institutions tended to have the advantage of being able to deliver these subjects to Transition Programme students as an exclusive group or in groups comprised of students studying the same subject. This supported vocational contextualisation and helped to improve engagement. In smaller institutions – primarily schools - these students were more likely to join the current GCSE cohort, which was a barrier to contextualisation.

However, a number of providers reported that their English and maths pass rates were lower than expected. They attributed this to dedicating too few hours to these subjects, and setting their English and maths entry requirements for the Transition Programme too low, which meant that students had too large a gap to bridge to meet providers' T Level entry requirements:

> When we look at the national pass rate, even though we have a slightly better than national average pass rate, still the majority of learners may not make it to a T Level, to a level 3 because of the barrier that is maths and English. – *FE College*

Many providers linked lower pass rates to students' loss of learning and confidence during the partial school closures and students' centre assessment grades (CAGs) being higher than their perceived ability:

> I think there are potentially some students that wouldn't have got those grades and who in a normal year would have ended up on a level 1. We've got a few students who are struggling a little bit with a level 2 offer because they've been over predicted. – *FE College*

Where providers had undertaken in-depth diagnostics, delivered intense provision at the start of the programme or run their provision over the full year, this gave students a better chance of passing their resits. Some providers had cancelled November re-sits to allow students more time to improve their skills, although there were examples of students successfully passing November resits after a period of intense provision.

5.2.4 Work experience and work preparation

The Covid-19 pandemic heavily impacted on students' ability to have a work placement. Not being able to undertake a placement was a particular issue for Education and Childcare students, as a set number of placement hours was often required to pass the qualification that providers chose to include. However, some providers changed to a qualification that did not require a placement. In addition, some non-qualification providers who had planned significant employer involvement, for example through work tasters, were also heavily impacted by the pandemic.

However, **there were some success stories** – primarily in Education and Childcare – where providers were able to get all of their students out on placement and complete the required hours, either those set internally for this component or required by the awarding organisation, as well as cases where students completed short placements later in the year. However, although placements later in the year were preferable to no placement, providers and relationship managers raised issues relating to this being too late for students to test out whether they had chosen the right sector.

There were also examples of providers placing students in areas which were not their specialism in order to develop their work behaviours:

> What is really important in Transition is that not everyone is ready to walk into what might be their career. We are getting them ready to be going into a placement for the T Level, so some of these students need to build on their other behaviours first... – *FE College*

However, **most Transition Programme students were unable to attend a work placement. This was due to a combination of providers' prioritisation of level 3**

students, including T Level students – whose completion of a placement was often essential to achieving their qualification –, and the Covid-19 restrictions:

> …we are getting kickback from places that we've used for years, saying that they're just not taking students on because of the current situation…they're not liking the idea of students going from college to work to placements, it's too many bubbles. – *FE College*

To counter this, a small number of providers reported using college childcare facilities as placements for Education and Childcare students. In addition, one provider had used their college extension to teach Construction students, who interviewed the range of professionals on site.

Several providers secured virtual work placements, which was commonly reported for Digital:

> Virtual work experience, that has been a necessity this year and for some people that has gone really well…Companies were more likely to actually be involved if they could do remote delivery rather than have someone in the office. – *Relationship Manager*

In response to the challenges faced in securing face-to-face placements, most providers placed an increased focus on developing students' employability skills in preparation for a placement during their T Level. This included developing work behaviours and understanding of the workplace and undertaking simulated activities, observations and assessments similar to those they would normally undertake on placement:

> We do a lot of preparation for placement, even if they're not going out and we cover professionalism, legislation…the practical elements that are linked to the theory. We cover behaviour management…just giving them a general understanding and expectation of roles and responsibilities. – *FE College*

Providers also engaged with employers virtually to support work readiness activities and provide students with a well-rounded understanding of their chosen industry. With the move to virtual working, many employers became more accessible with providers being able to engage with employers located further afield, including abroad:

> Work in industry and work experience may have stopped but it didn't stop, we needed to use it in a different way. So it allowed us to get more accessible to some employers because it was a case of them logging onto a Teams meeting or being able to meet with the staff,

rather than having to bring them all in and get all the students together. – *FE College*

In several cases, employers had delivered more activities than was originally planned. Examples included employer-set projects, virtual work experience weeks, industry days/weeks, master classes, talks, mentoring and virtual tours.

5.2.5 Pastoral support and personal development

Providers delivered between one and three hours a week of pastoral provision. This included group sessions, one-to-one provision, and tutor supported and self-directed tasks.

This component supported students' holistic development through focussing on a range of topics including social and employability skills, academic and study skills and behaviours, resilience and career planning.

Allocating students a dedicated pastoral tutor or mentor who got to know them well was reported to be particularly beneficial, particularly in terms of setting students individual targets, reviewing progress and discussing next steps.

Clear lines of communication between pastoral and academic tutors was key in terms of ensuring students were given consistent support with their areas for development.

One provider gave an example of close alignment between tutorials and the curriculum, which had worked well. They required curriculum teachers to reinforce and augment pastoral activities in their schemes of work and map where links were made. The personal tutor also taught the students in their tutor group:

> The opportunities are in the curriculum team being able to reinforce and reflect and then get the students to explore in more depth what has been covered in tutorial and apply it to the particular sector area. – *FE College*

The move to online learning during the pandemic made this component more challenging as pastoral activities tend to be more effective when delivered face-to-face. Providers also reported that the number of learners requiring more extensive pastoral support had increased during the pandemic. To overcome this, **some providers reported increasing pastoral time to build stronger relationships with students**. This included one-to-one calls with students to regularly check in on them, both personally and academically. Some providers also put in place additional hours to focus on developing students' communication skills, teamwork and resilience to mitigate the impacts of lockdown. Mention was also made of mental health support, the delivery of mindfulness sessions, and referrals to CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services).

The pandemic also led to some planned face-to-face activities – such as National Citizen Service volunteering, residential trips, visits or speakers coming into schools/colleges – being cancelled.

5.3 Assessing students' progress and readiness to progress to T Levels

5.3.1 Assessing students' progress during the Transition Programme

Providers used a range of methods to assess students' progress on the Transition Programme and most reported that their assessment process had worked well. Assessments were devised to allow for students' different learning styles and to gain a holistic understanding of students' academic skills, personal and employability skills, attitudes and behaviours. Providers reported assessing students' progress in relation to:

- the technical qualification, where one was included

- GCSE English and maths resits

- smaller embedded qualifications, where included

- a work placement (if included), including receiving an employer endorsement/reference

- individual and group assessments – for example written assignments, group projects and presentations

- mini tests that provided instant feedback

- practical skills assessments – however, these were a challenge to undertake remotely during the pandemic as many students did not have access to the resources they needed and they had to be adapted, removed or re-scheduled for when students were back in school/college

- exam style internal assessments.

Where exam practice and preparation was included, providers felt they had prepared students for T Level exams and compensated for the fact that they had not sat their GCSE exams. Exams set did not always have a pass/fail element:

> For us it's become really important because of what their experience prior to coming to the college has been…we're acutely aware that for our next year's cohort they've had two years of disrupted learning. Some of these students haven't sat an exam…at T Level they've got to do an exam, so it's important during our Transition we expose them to that. – *FE College*

However, some providers had to cancel the exams they had planned due to Covid-19:

> If they had sat the formal exams, that would have prepared them well. The formal exams we put in which mimicked the exams on the T Level haven't happened. – *FE College*

Providers reported that project-based work - particularly when steered by employers – was very successful. It had both enabled students to undertake real world tasks related to their chosen sector as well as allowed for a more holistic assessment of students' abilities. This was due to students being required to apply technical knowledge and skills from across multiple units/modules or topics, as well as demonstrate transferable skills, such as communication, team work and problem solving:

> I did combine three of the technical units as I believe that combination made for a really nice project. Instead of having them disjointed and not related, I reworked them into one big assignment and…it became this more realistic representation of real life. – *FE College*

Providers delivering qualification-based approaches commented on how beneficial it was to have formal assessments and assessment pillars.

Conversely, relationship managers noted the success of the innovative assessment approaches used by some providers taking a non-qualification approach, which were aligned to T Level skills requirements and provided an ongoing understanding of students' progress. Examples included: a skills matrix or skills passport; a four-week cycle of teaching, assessment and pastoral; use of project qualifications.

5.3.2 Assessing students' readiness to progress to T Levels

Providers are able to set their own entry requirements for T Levels as there are no national entry criteria. They commonly reported that, to progress to T Levels, they would require students to have:

- a Merit or Distinction in their technical qualification, if one was included:

> I do think it's only going to be those that are more able and are showing a particular flair for technical education that would stand a chance of moving directly onto a T Level. – *Sixth Form College*

- a pass in GCSE English and maths at grade 4 or above – a key requirement for providers

- evidence of soft skills, including confidence, good behaviour/attitudes/effort, strong attendance, punctuality and organisational and employability skills.

Many providers reported that they took a holistic approach when determining whether individual students were ready to progress to T Levels:

> It's looking at them as a whole, taking that holistic view of the student and making sure that they've made progress from where they've come in to where they're going to go. – *Sixth Form College*

They would often invite students for an in-depth interview or several interviews over the course of the year to discuss their next steps.

5.4   Implementation challenges resulting from Covid-19

This section presents a round-up of the challenges providers faced in delivering the Transition Programme virtually during the pandemic and how providers tackled them. Some of these challenges have been touched upon in the previous sections. The specific impact of Covid-19 on students' ability to have a work placement is also reported above in section 4.2.4.

Providers highlighted the impact of **digital deprivation on some students' ability to engage with online learning.** This included their lack of access to Wi-Fi, a laptop and necessary software and having poor digital skills:

> The ICT skills. When we were thrown into using Teams, we were dealing with a lot of learners who weren't capable at the start and trying to deliver that with technology poverty, some students doing it off their phones, some students handwriting, just the differences among the learners. – *FE College*

In addition, providers reported that some students did not have a suitable, quiet space to study.

Providers also reported lower levels of student engagement when lessons were delivered online:

> A lot of them will keep their cameras off, they won't engage as much as in a physical classroom… – *FE College*

As mentioned previously, online learning also constrained what could be taught, with the teaching of practical, hands-on skills often having to wait until students were back in the classroom.

In addition, **providers reported that tutors found building rapport with students difficult when they were not physically in a classroom, and students' social skills and personal development suffered from lack of face-to-face engagement** with both tutors and their peers during the pandemic:

> Our cohort in Digital, their biggest area for development wasn't necessarily their technical skills, it was more their personal skills. Because we had a lock-down for three months what we would normally want to do to try and develop these personal skills has not been as effective as we wanted it to be. – *FE College*

Providers put in place a range of measures to overcome these pandemic-related challenges, some of which drew on learning from the 2019/20 academic year:

> This year we were more prepared. We built in the use of Teams in induction from September. Preparation to go online was built in better than in 19/20…in some ways it was more positive…you had better behaviour, they weren't impacted by their peers in the room. – *FE College*

Some providers reported that they had included an assessment of students' digital skills and access to equipment (both Wi-Fi and laptops/desk tops) in the diagnostic period, put on additional digital training, provided students who needed them with laptops and equipment, and recorded sessions.

5.5   Student engagement and progress

Drawing on data gathered from the stage three interviews, this section presents providers' views on student engagement and progression and their perceptions of how effectively the Transition Programme had prepared students for T Levels. Chapter 5 presents the student perspective, drawing on data from the student focus groups.

5.5.1 Student engagement and satisfaction

In answering questions on student engagement and satisfaction, providers drew on: attendance and retention data; student surveys/student voice (more than half of the providers had collected this type of data); verbal feedback from tutors (the majority of providers interviewed had student contact or had spoken to tutors); and feedback from learner representatives at course review or curriculum meetings (mentioned by a minority of providers).

The majority of providers reported that their Transition Programme students were highly engaged in the programme:

> Ultimately we've got students that are enjoying it…they feel like they're on the right course, that this is taking them to their desired next step, and that's what this is all about. – *FE College*

In addition, two-thirds of providers reported high levels of student satisfaction.

The elements and strategies that providers generally perceived students to find particularly engaging were:

- the core/technical component, particularly hands-on practical skills development and project-based work

- engagement with employers and work experience (when it took place)

- contextualisation of English and maths:

- pastoral element to support students' academic and personal growth and their planning for their next steps

- providers identifying and resolving any issues early on:

> It's a 'you said, we did' mentality…they put things forward that they might want changing and then we show them what we've changed for them because they've asked for that…the feedback I've seen has been fantastic. – *FE College*

- working with T Level students, for example on project work and work experience, and T Level student 'ambassadors' sharing their experiences:

> For us, that was a real positive…the students that are on T Level…they have had a very good time, they love their course and they've been to talk to Transition students and other level 2 students. They presented to the students about their T Level experience …they've been brilliant ambassadors… – *FE College*

Several providers also stressed the motivational impact of including a qualification.

Where students were highly engaged, they were reported to have worked hard and pushed their boundaries, for example in terms of understanding emerging technologies in Digital. They were perceived to have grown and progressed on both a personal and academic level.

Where students were less engaged and satisfied with the programme, this tended to be because of challenges with the technical element, particularly in Digital and Construction, and/or with English and/or maths.

In terms of the technical element, **providers commonly reported students struggling with programming and web development in the Digital Transition Programme**. However, one provider saw the challenges that Digital students had experienced in a positive light, explaining that students needed to learn how to solve problems in preparation for employment:

> The students have been challenged in positive ways and have been encouraged to solve problems. They do a unit on web development using html and if you don't get the semicolons in the right place it won't work. It's about helping each other to solve problems. They will struggle in employment if they can't solve problems. – *FE College*

Although contextualisation of English and maths did improve students' engagement, some students still struggled with these subjects. This was particularly the case where they needed to retake both subjects as this made it a large programme. In addition, some students leant towards one subject finding it difficult to engage with and pass the other. For example, one provider reported the challenges that numerate Digital students had in retaking English:

> Historically, these students have very strong maths backgrounds, they are very capable in terms of logical thinking. But, when it comes to English, some of our learners have barriers to learning – the idea that they have to respond emotionally to a piece of text is quite challenging. – *FE College*

Several providers reported that it was difficult to keep students motivated when they were struggling with the technical element and English and maths as, if they were struggling on the Transition Programme, it would be unlikely that they would be able to progress onto the T Level. One non-qualification provider was concerned that students who were unlikely to be able move to the T Level could question what they had gained from the year, particularly if they would not go away with a recognised qualification. Another provider commented that they were going to discuss students' next steps earlier in the course in an attempt to maintain these students' engagement.

Providers also commonly reported that **Covid-19 challenges, particularly a move to online learning and limited placement opportunities - had impacted on students' engagement and satisfaction.** In particular, they had suffered by not being able to do as much practical work as planned and apply their learning in a work setting.

When asked to compare the engagement of Transition Programme to other level 2 students, **around half of the providers perceived that Transition Programme students were more engaged than students on other level 2 courses.** Many related this to Transition Programme students: being 'stronger' with fewer personal difficulties and barriers to learning; having better results in English and maths when starting the

course; and better progression opportunities. One provider gave an example of several students passing their maths and English in November, with others expected to pass in the summer. Another provider put the higher level of engagement down to the more hands-on and practical nature of the course compared to the level 2 BTEC.

Over a quarter of providers reported that the level of engagement of Transition Programme students was similar to that of other level 2 students. In some cases, level 2 students were receiving the same experience as Transition Programme students, as new strategies introduced for the Transition Programme had been embedded across the department. Around a quarter of providers felt unable to compare levels of engagement, often because they did not offer similar level 2 provision.

5.5.2 Attendance, retention and progress

Linked to the high level of engagement, more than half of the providers reported high attendance of Transition Programme students, which in some cases was higher than attendance on other level 2 courses. Some reported 90-100 per cent attendance, which one provider commented was *'unbelievable'*. Where attendance was higher than other level 2 courses, this tended to relate more to Construction than Education and Childcare and Digital, which already tended to have good attendance:

> The Construction Transition has had the best attendance out of the whole department at that level…there's lots of areas of our curriculum that are learning from our Transition model because the level of development they can see…the progress in terms of their assessment, the recognition of their employer engagement…the increased level of understanding and focus… – *FE College*

Similarly, many providers reported high rates of retention.

Providers commonly reported that most students were doing well and producing the required quality of work whilst a small proportion of students were struggling and/or finding the programme more challenging. In some cases, this was related to a gap in students' skills resulting from the Covid-19 lockdowns and the cancellation of GCSE exams. This included research and writing skills and issues with attention span, behaviour and mental health.

5.5.3 Students' next steps

The majority of providers interviewed had some students progressing onto T Levels but the proportions varied – from very small numbers to almost all – **and students were also progressing onto a range of other destinations**, including other level 3 courses and apprenticeships and other level 2 programmes. Two providers reported that none of their Transition Programme students (in Digital and Education and Childcare) were progressing to T Levels.

Just less than half of the providers reported that their Transition Programme students were progressing either to T Levels or onto other level 3 courses and apprenticeships.

Students' English and maths grades were often a key determiner as to whether they were progressing to a T Level or another level 3. Many providers required students to have a GCSE grade 4 or above in English and maths to be accepted onto their T Level programmes.

Also important to students' decision making was the different styles of learning of T Levels and other level 3s, with some students opting for courses with less focus on exams. In this regard, providers reported the difficulties in administering exams during the pandemic and that more work on raising students' confidence with, and preparing them for, exams needed to be undertaken next year.

Providers and relationship managers also reported that not being able to undertake a work placement in preparation for the large T Level placement had led to some Transition Programme students opting for another level 3 course instead.

Providers tended to be happy that students had positive upwards progression to level 3, even though not all were progressing to T Levels. Some felt that supporting students to progress from level 2 to level 3 was difficult in itself, with progression to a T Level – considered by some to be a level 3.5 – to be even more challenging.

Around a third of providers reported that their Transition Programme students were progressing to a range of level 2 and 3 course and apprenticeship destinations which, for many providers, was expected:

> What's really important to us is that we get students onto qualifications that are right for them…Students have done very well on level 2 but they haven't necessarily got the grades they would need to do that sort of rigorous [T Level] exam. – *Sixth Form College*

Several relationship managers felt that there should be a review of what constitutes 'success' in terms of Transition Programme progression routes:

> It's a T Level Transition Programme so the idea is that the students progress to the T Level but equally if a student gets a positive destination, another level 3 programme or employment, or an apprenticeship that shouldn't be undervalued. – *Relationship Manager*

A number of providers reported that some of their students had changed their mind about the career they wanted to go into and/or had dropped out of the Transition Programme.

Several providers also reported students experiencing mental health issues, which had impacted on their continuation of their studies and progression.

Looking at subject differences did not reveal any particular patterns. Some providers reported 'strong' progression to T Levels in Digital (of half to three-quarters) whilst others reported very small proportions progressing to T Level, with most students preferring to move onto other level 3s and apprenticeships. Where high proportions of Digital students were progressing to other level 3s, this was because they were more attracted to courses such as games design and e-sports, with students commonly changing their minds about their area of specialism between 16 and 17:

> It's not that the course didn't go well, it did outstanding. It's just that learners have their own identity and want to do what they find most interesting…It just goes to show what somebody thinks they want to do at 16 can be quite different when they get to 17. – *FE College*

Others reported that students had found the programming difficult and did not have the grades the provider required for the T Level, which was considered similar to an A-level in Computer Science. One provider was happy with a third of their Digital students progressing to the T Level as historically most of their level 2 computing/IT students did not tend to progress to further study.

In terms of Education and Childcare, the picture was also mixed with some providers reporting half, three-quarters or more of their students progressing to T Levels (including the Health and Science route). Where students had decided against T Levels, they had often opted for an alternative level 3 qualification which did not have exams, as they felt that the T Level criteria *'might be too much for them'*. One provider reported that none of their Education and Childcare students were progressing to T Levels and all were going onto an alternative qualification:

> Really it comes down to the worth of the Education and Childcare T Level. They see that [an alternative] Diploma is the equivalent qualification, it's mirrored almost, but it's non-exam based and they don't want to do exams. – *FE College*

Providers did not generally perceive this to be negative as they felt it was good that students were able to make an informed decision that T Levels were not right for them and were still progressing onto a level 3. Several providers reported English and maths capabilities being an issue for students' progression in Education and Childcare and they wanted to try to ensure that students progressing to T Levels would be successful:

> I was pretty realistic and knew it wasn't going to be a lot. It was even lower than I thought it would be. I was expecting more than we had, but not significantly more… So, even if we doubled our pass rate, we still wouldn't have the best progression anyway. – *FE College*

Other providers reported their students' interest in going into an apprenticeship, which was not unexpected as their Transition Programme included a licence to practice qualification:

> All along when we have had discussions about the Transition offer…the course that we offer at level 2 needs to be for multiple destinations. Some students are always going to want to do an apprenticeship, particularly in a practical subject like early years…because the early years qualification comes with a licence to practice, that then means that some students can go straight out to work so they don't have to do the T Level to get employment in that sector. – *FE College*

In terms of Construction, there tended to be stronger progression onto T Levels (often over three-quarters), sometimes because this was the only level 3 course in this occupational area that the provider offered. Other students were progressing to a National Diploma or apprenticeships.

> All Construction students will progress to a T Level. We've always run a level 3 qualification but we have fully changed that to being just the T Level offer. The teachers have always embedded employer skills and all teach of higher education courses as well so students were very prepared. – *FE College*

5.5.4 How effectively has the Transition Programme prepared students for T Levels?

Providers generally felt that the Transition Programme had effectively prepared students for T Levels, even where progression to T Levels was less than expected. This included preparation in terms of the technical skills, knowledge and behaviours needed for the T Level content, and assessment regime:

> They will go with a foundation knowledge that often learners who come with GCSEs won't have, because they have had a year of exploring that particular industry. – *FE College*

Some providers also commented that their programmes prepared students well for level 3 studies in general and that Transition students would be better prepared than GCSE students.

However, **a key issue mentioned by a number of providers was whether students had achieved the necessary grade 4 in English and maths** which providers were requiring for entry to T Levels – with a higher grade in maths sometimes being required for Digital and Construction:

> There's nobody left on the course who couldn't move to T Level because of their technical skills. For us, it's just about whether they pass the English…We wouldn't let a normal [GCSE] student onto the T Level without English and maths, therefore that is the key aspect of what they need to get from the T Level Transition. Everything else is an added bonus. – *Sixth Form College*

Where many students had chosen to progress to a different level 3 or an apprenticeship, a number of providers reported that this was not because they did not have the technical ability. For example, **one provider reported that their Transition Programme had prepared students well for T Levels but it had prepared them better for work, with many choosing to progress onto an apprenticeship**:

> The T Level is very work destination focused and the industry placement is a critical part of it. We have spent a lot of time thinking about work skills and being work ready and I suppose we were a victim of our own success. It was so successful that they want an apprenticeship where they can get into work quicker…The Transition Programme was hard work so students have decided not to do another two years but to take the apprenticeship route. This experience has made me realise it is not a complete disaster if students don't go onto the T Level. – *FE College*

The elements which providers felt had particularly prepared students for T Levels were:

- technical units/modules mirrored to T Level units/modules as technical skills form a large part of the T Level: 'One of the key things we focused on was that technical knowledge and specifically programming as it forms such a big part of the T Level' – *FE College*. However, some providers added a cautionary note regarding the need to include a 'breadth of knowledge and experience' in case students do not want to do a T Level

- development of students' English and maths competencies within the vocational context – including extracting them from the T Level and adjusting them for the Transition Programme

- exam papers and practice of command verbs for exam questions

- development of independent academic study skills, including problem solving, analysis, justifying an argument and referencing

- project-based learning/employer-set projects and work readiness activities

- placement preparation and placement

- time management and workload management – in preparation for the heavy workload of the T Level.

A number of providers mentioned that, although they had done everything they could to prepare students, some elements had been affected by Covid-19, particularly the placement and the opportunity for students to develop their employability skills:

> I think they are prepared for the T Level, the only thing is the employability – I'd have liked to have seen those skills heightened before they go into the T Level. – *FE College*

6 The student perspective

This chapter presents the findings from the six student focus groups. It covers students': reasons for enrolling on the Transition Programme; reports of what their Transition Programme covered; enjoyment of the Transition Programme; perceptions of the non-qualification approach, hours and level of challenge; understanding of the requirements to progress to T Level; intended next steps and preparedness; suggestions for improvements; and recommendation of the Transition Programme.

6.1   Students' prior study and how they found out about the Transition Programme

The vast majority of students in the focus groups had completed GCSEs in school prior to undertaking the Transition Programme. A small number of students had completed another level 2 course at their college ahead of enrolling onto the Transition Programme.

Students had found out about the Transition Programme in a variety of ways. **Around two-thirds of students had applied for the T Level** but, as they did not achieve their providers' required grades in English and maths (which tended to be a grade 4 or 5), they were advised to complete the Transition Programme first. Some students had found out about the Transition Programme whilst at school, either through teachers or careers advisers, or during assemblies in which their post-16 options were explained. Students at two providers noted seeing local T Level marketing whilst, at another provider, the majority of students initially enrolled on another level 2 course but were recommended the Transition Programme as it was felt more appropriate for their career aspirations.

Some students were unaware that the programme they were studying was more widely known as the T Level Transition Programme. Two groups of students knew the programme just as the level 2 course offered by the provider in their subject area, while others knew the programme by the provider's individual name, for example Pre-T course.

6.2 Findings from the focus groups

6.2.1 Students' reasons for enrolling on the Transition Programme

Most students hoped the Transition Programme would enable them to achieve the required English and maths grades to progress onto a T Level. However, some were open to other options, reporting that they wanted to develop skills and knowledge to progress onto a T Level or another level 3 route. They felt that the additional year would give them time to understand the most appropriate career pathway for them:

> I wanted to build up my computer skills and knowledge so I could go onto a higher course. – *FE College, Digital*

6.2.2 Students' reports of what their Transition Programme encompassed

Students studying Transition Programmes reported that the programme was taught via modules, independent projects (such as an Extended Project Qualification) and practical skills sessions. Students felt that the topics they had covered would provide a foundation for them to progress onto a T Level next academic year. For example, students on Education and Childcare had learnt about theories of child development whilst students on Digital and Construction had become proficient in using specialist software.

Very few students had completed a work placement due to Covid-19 restrictions. However, they had undertaken activities aimed at developing their employability skills, with some having attended talks in which employers had described careers in their sector and what working in the industry entailed. Some students felt they had not developed their practical skills as much as they hoped due to the lack of work experience.

Some students also had the opportunity to gain additional qualifications, such as an ASDAN digital course, British Sign Language and Health and Safety - which they felt would support their employability.

Students had completed a range of assessments which had mainly included written assignments related to course topic areas, but had also included exams, presentations and assessments of practical skills.

6.2.3 Students' enjoyment of the Transition Programme

Students had enjoyed the Transition Programme, but to varying degrees across providers. Students were asked to rate on a scale of 1 (not at all enjoyed) to 5 (really enjoyed) how much they had enjoyed the Transition Programme and which elements they had enjoyed the most and the least. Students in three providers rated their enjoyment at around 4 – 5; students in two providers rated their enjoyment around 3 – 4

while students in one provider rated their enjoyment around 2 – 3. There were no notable differences in enjoyment across subjects and qualification approach.

Students had generally enjoyed the topics and content they had covered during their programmes. They valued the fact that, in comparison to GCSEs or A-levels, the Transition Programme allowed them to focus on one specific subject area that they were particularly interested in. Students had enjoyed some content less, for example learning about case studies of child abuse on their Education and Childcare Transition Programme and the more basic, less technical content covered on their Digital Transition Programme. Some students reported that, if there had been more technical content, their enjoyment of the programme would have been greater.

Students were mostly positive about the methods of programme delivery. Although limited due to Covid-19 restrictions, **practical sessions where students put knowledge and skills into practice was the element they had most enjoyed**. They also reported positive student-teacher and peer relationships which had contributed to their enjoyment of the programme.

Students reported that they had enjoyed individual project work, in which they were able to focus on an area they were particularly interested in. However, some students would have liked more support from staff. For example, students in one provider reported that they were given an essay brief and were then left to *'get on with it'*. However, they recognised the unique circumstances of the last year, which had contributed to this lower contact time.

Undertaking assessments was an area of programme delivery that students found less enjoyable. Some students had found the workload associated with assessments overwhelming, as sometimes assessments for multiple modules were due in at the same time and students felt pressure to achieve the high grades required for progression to a T Level or level 3 course. However, some students were more positive about the assessments, enjoying the chance to gain feedback on their achievements and see how they were progressing over the year. Students also recognised that the assessments were preparing them for the expectations at T Level/level 3.

Students reported challenges related to online learning, which was more significant for some students, for example due to them not initially having a device to work on or a quiet space to work.

6.2.4 Students' perceptions of the non-qualification approach

Students in four providers were studying a non-qualification based Transition Programme, with some of the technical element being delivered through individual projects (such as through a project qualification) or qualifications to support employability. Students were unsure of the implications of studying a Transition Programme which did not include a technical qualification but most did not feel they would be negatively

impacted as they were planning to progress onto a T Level or other level 3 course within the college.

6.2.5 Students' perceptions of the hours

Students reported being in college for between three and five days a week (including a mix of full and half days) and receiving between 10 and 13 hours a week of taught contact time with tutors. Students had received little homework but self-study was required for the completion of assignments and preparation for exams. **Students were generally happy with the Transition Programme hours and the balance of the different components:**

> It's been good because it gives us enough hours to come in and get everything we need, then anything we miss we've actually got time after college to complete it…so we have plenty of free time to get what we need to done. – *FE College, Digital*

However, some students would have appreciated increased contact time and more time on employer engagement. All students had expected to spend one or two days a week on a work placement but they understood the reasons (Covid-19 restrictions) for this not coming to fruition.

6.2.6 Students' perceptions of the level of challenge

Students felt that, overall, the Transition Programme had offered them the right level of challenge, but some elements were more challenging than others, for example managing multiple individual assignments, learning technical content such as coding, and learning about child abuse which was emotionally challenging. There were no notable differences in perceptions of level of challenge across subjects and qualification approach.

6.2.7 Students' understanding of the requirements to progress to T Level

Some students commented they were less clear at the start of the year about what they needed to achieve to progress onto a T Level but had more understanding by the end of the academic year:

> We weren't told at the start what criteria we had to meet, we knew we needed a Merit or Distinction to pass, but now we've got all of our assignments and projects in, it's a bit clearer as our lecturer can tell us what grades we need to get to achieve an overall Distinction for T Level. – *Sixth Form College, Education and Childcare*

Students said they required either a grade 4 or 5 in English and maths (depending upon the T Level route) and, for those students completing a qualification, most required either a Pass or Merit to progress onto the T Level.

Upon completion of the Transition Programme, most students understood that they would receive a college certificate detailing their achieved grades in the components of the Transition Programme. They felt this recognition of their achievements was important.

Students were asked to rate on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very) how satisfied they were with the achievements and progress they had made over the last year. These scores ranged between 3 and 5. **Most students felt that they had achieved what they hoped to, such as through achieving the GCSE grades required to progress and through gaining good technical knowledge which would prepare them for the T Level or another level 3 course:**

> It's given me skills [for T Level] and it's also taught me where my interests in Construction are. – *FE College, Construction*

However, some students were less satisfied. For example, students in one group had lost a technical tutor at the start of the year and, due to issues in finding a replacement, they had to learn a topic by themselves, which was challenging. Although they expected to successfully progress onto level 3, they felt their level of knowledge and achievements could have been greater in different circumstances. Another student did not gain the experience they hoped from their Digital programme:

> There is nothing much about IT, nothing about coding or web design. It's really, really basic like in school, it's not good for people who are interested in IT or for preparing them for next year, it's been a waste of a year. I didn't know at the beginning, I thought I'd be learning about things like web development and coding. – *Sixth Form College, Digital*

6.2.8 Students' next steps and preparedness

Most students (around four-fifths) involved in the focus groups were planning to either enrol onto a T Level (over half) in the next academic year or complete another level 3 course (around a quarter). The level 3 courses students were progressing onto were mostly related to their Transition Programme subject although some students had realised the sector was not for them. Five students were going onto apprenticeships (related to their Transition Programme subject) as they felt they wanted a more practical route:

> I'm more of a practical person and, this year, being sat at a computer has taught me that it's not for me, so I'm doing an apprenticeship. – *FE College, Construction*

Only one student was making a side-ways move into another level 2 course.

Students were asked to rate on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very) how prepared the Transition Programme had made them for these next steps. **Students gave a mix of scores although most felt prepared, with around three-quarters of students giving a score of four or five**.

Students commented that the Transition Programme had prepared them in terms of the study skills they would need, such as referencing, researching, preparing for assignments and knowing the expectations around these, as well as how they would be graded:

> I do feel prepared for T Level or a different level 3. I know how they will grade our work, what we need to research, how to reference. I know how to prepare for assignments now. – *FE College, Education and Childcare*

Most students felt the specific subject content had prepared them for the T Level by giving them strong foundation knowledge, while other students felt the Transition Programme had confirmed where their sector interests lay. Only a small number of students did not feel prepared – students in just one group felt the content was too basic while students in another group were unsure of what to expect at level 3 so felt they could not yet say if they were fully prepared.

6.2.9 Students' suggestions for improvements to the Transition Programme

Students' suggested improvements related to three broad areas of the Transition Programme: content, delivery and assessment.

Regarding content, **students would have liked to cover broader content related to their chosen technical route, as well as have more hours attached to this element**. For example, one group of Digital students had expected to learn about topics such as social media, coding and web design, which they saw as the basics of IT, but they were not covered. Another student would have liked more focus on hardware:

> I would have liked more content on hardware and we've only had three practicals on this…A lot of our lessons have been software and networking based. – *FE College, Digital*

As mentioned previously, **students also felt the programmes could have included more practical content and the opportunity for work experience**, but acknowledged the impact of the pandemic on these elements.

Students also suggested improvements to the delivery of the Transition Programme, including increased contact time and tutor interaction and tutors who could teach multiple topics to cover staff absences. Students also suggested improvements to timetabling, with one student group suggesting that their taught hours could have been condensed into two days, rather than be spread across the week. However, again, students understood the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on the number of students allowed in college at any one time.

Some students suggested it would be more manageable and less stressful for assessment periods to be spaced out over the year, rather than having one main assessment period at the end of the academic year. Students also commented that clarity around expectations could be improved, and stressed the value of having a range of assessment methods, such as presentations and practical assessments, alongside the written assignments:

> With one of our lecturers, we just had to do reports, repetitively, that can get boring and you lose motivation…For the assignments, if you switch it up a bit like doing a PowerPoint, it's going to be more exciting than doing report after report. – *Sixth Form College Education and Childcare*

6.2.10 Students' recommendation of the Transition Programme

Around four-fifths of students said that they would recommend the Transition Programme to other students as they felt the course provided good foundation knowledge and preparation for level 3 pathways. However, some would encourage prospective students to consider their level 3 ambitions, as well as their GCSE grades, and their commitment and attitudes to ensure the Transition Programme is the best route for them:

> You've got to be committed and have the right attitude. – *Sixth Form College, Education and Childcare*

Some students studying Digital felt their Transition Programme would not be suitable for all computing routes so students would need be clear on their next steps to ensure the Transition Programme would prepare them effectively. Another group of students commented that they would only encourage students who had not met the grades for the T Level to complete a Transition Programme and, for those who had met the grades, going straight to a T Level and spending two rather than three years at college would be a better option.

7 Future delivery of the Transition Programme

This chapter presents data from the stage three interviews regarding changes that providers were planning to make to the Transition Programme and other level 2 provision for the next academic year (2021/22). Around a third of providers reported changes that they were planning to make, which drew on their and other providers' experiences of what had gone well and less well in the first year of implementing the Transition Programme.

7.1 Overall changes in delivery

Around a fifth of providers planned to make some changes to overall delivery of the Transition Programmes.

Some providers planned to map out more clearly what students needed to achieve at different stages of the course, and to make the content more prescriptive for delivery teams. They felt that this would provide more support for staff joining the programme.

A number of providers planned to embed (more) opportunities for collaboration between T Level and Transition Programme students, for example through students working together on projects and work experience. This would develop the leadership skills of T Level students whilst enabling Transition Programme students to gain an understanding of the T Level expectations. Some providers also planned to implement a mentoring or buddy system to further strengthen the link between T Level and Transition Programme students and enable Transition Programme students to feel supported by a peer. One provider reported that they were considering allowing Transition Programme students to attend T Level lessons in the third term.

Although it had not been their initial intention when planning their Transition Programmes, a fifth of providers planned to retain a blended learning approach for the 2021/22 academic year. They acknowledged that this had led to a positive experience for some students, for example those who travel long distances to school/college. Some providers felt that the use of Teams had worked well for delivery of tutorials as students who perhaps would not have engaged in person contributed to the positive discussions and conversations taking place. Providers also found the submission of work on these platforms to be positive. Some providers also reported that they would continue to record demonstrations, for example of the use of software in Digital, which students could then go back to in their own time:

> Some of the demonstrations in practical subjects [which have been recorded] with software for instance, we're going to keep all of that. – *FE College*

7.2 Changes to the introductory technical component

Two-fifths of providers reported that they were planning to make a range of changes to their technical component.

A number of providers who had an embedded qualification were planning to deliver a different type of qualification or different units, or a different size of qualification.

Those choosing different qualifications or units were doing this to better align the content to the T Level and different pathways, with students being able to choose units most suited to their career aspirations. In one case, a provider was planning to provide stretch and challenge by including some level 3 units, for example in Construction. Others were intending to improve the teaching of Python, make their curriculum more theoretical or practical, or include more simulated observations in Education and Childcare. A minority of providers reported that they were changing their awarding organisation as they felt the assessment scenarios of the awarding organisation they had originally chosen were outdated and not a suitable preparation for T Level.

Where providers were planning to embed a different size of qualification, most had opted for a smaller qualification. This was considered more manageable for students and would allow more time to be spent on developing students' personal and academic skills (for example developing digital, employability, communication and study skills). Some providers had felt that the strict syllabus of the larger qualification they had chosen did not allow the time or flexibility to develop other technical skills aligned to the T Level. However, one provider reported that they would be embedding a larger qualification to better prepare students for the academic rigour of T Levels and the level of the technical content:

> It met the requirements for what we needed this year but we've realised that if we are going to prepare our learners for the T Level next year, it needs to be a more substantial qualification. The new qualification is a bit harder. – *FE College*

A small number of providers planned to change from a non-qualification to qualification approach. This tended to be because they felt level 2 students needed the structure that a qualification provides or due to recruitment having been negatively impacted by the lack of qualification.

On the other hand, there were providers planning to remove their qualification in favour of a non-qualification approach. This tended to be so that they had more flexibility in aligning content to T Levels and time to develop the skills that students would require for T Levels:

We are looking at moving away from a qualification and looking at a non-qualification route. We felt that, for some of the students, we could then focus on skills development and getting them T Level ready if we didn't have the qualification to assess. – *FE College*

Providers delivering a project-based approach were also planning to adapt their content by providing students with a wider range of projects to choose from linked to the pathway they were interested in pursuing. Other providers who had not embedded a project qualification (e.g. EPQ or HPQ) were intending to do so.

A number of providers were also planning to include additional qualifications to improve students' employability.

7.3 Changes to English and maths

More than a third of providers were planning to make a range of changes to their English and maths delivery.

Providers noted that, where students were not likely to pass English and maths, allocating too few hours to these subjects was a contributing factor, so hours were being increased. In some cases, an increased focus was going to be placed on these subjects in the first term, with the aim of students passing their retakes in November. Some providers who had not already done this reported that they planned to map out the T Level English and maths skills, and how these could be taught and developed in the Transition Programme, to ensure students were prepared for the level of English and maths expected of them.

Other providers planned to increase or improve contextualisation to further increase student engagement, appoint a dedicated tutor or improve the understanding of dedicated tutors of what was required:

Look at the planning of our maths and English delivery and the contextualisation around that so that we can make sure that more learners can bridge the gap in the year. – *FE College*

7.4 Changes to work experience and preparation

Providers planned for face-to-face placements to go ahead next year, in line with what was initially intended in the first year.

However, **several providers reported the need to continue to offer some virtual placements.** This was particularly needed in Digital, where a large proportion of the industry was perceived to have made a permanent move to remote working. Providers and relationship managers called for the hours students completed on virtual work

placements to count towards students' work placement hours, which was of paramount importance for T Levels:

> IT companies are changing the ways they are structuring their businesses, looking at more remote working, which will reduce the opportunity for work experience because the government has already said they won't count any work experience that isn't placed within the workplace so that's going to become an issue, particularly in the next few years as we move to more online, digital work places. – *FE College*

Several providers intended to **increase employer engagement as well as the number of employer-set projects**, which might include students undertaking a project on placement set by their employer.

Based on learning from what had worked well and less well, some providers also intended to make adjustments to their work preparation activities, for example through increasing the number of employer-set projects which helped students draw together their learning and skills in a real-world context.

7.5   Changes to diagnostic and guidance period

Few changes were being considered for the diagnostic component, as most providers felt their delivery of this component was already strong. One provider planned to extend the diagnostic period and stream students into either the Transition Programme or other level 2 provision to ensure that students were on the correct course:

> Next year, we are enrolling all of our learners onto a generic level 2 and then we're having an extended diagnostics, and then filtering into two routes – a general level 2 and the Transition. A lot of the learners on our Transition this year are not destined for T Level. – *FE College*

Another provider planned to involve employers in induction in order to support with assessing students employability skills.

Two relationship managers reported that a small number of providers felt that their diagnostic assessment needed to be more thorough and holistic and, as a result, these providers were making changes for next year.

7.6 Changes to pastoral support and personal development

Similarly, few changes were being considered for the pastoral component. Providers planned to deliver the pastoral component face-to-face, as initially intended, highlighting the difficulties of providing this sort of support online. They also planned to provide more or earlier support for digital skills and mental fitness and resilience**.**

Some providers recognised the need to provide better support for students' career decision making. This included providing both Transition Programme and T Level applicants with information before and during the programme about the routes they could consider – including apprenticeships – so they could make an informed decision.

7.7 Changes to assessment

Some providers were planning to more closely align Transition Programme assessments to those set on the T Level so that students would be better prepared. This included adding in more internally devised exams and exam preparation and study skills support to raise students' confidence:

> Going forward next year, we will do a lot more of bridging the gap between level 2 and level 3 so incorporating a lot more exam-style questions and assignments… – *FE College*

One provider was also going to more systematically grade students against a skills matrix, with four weekly assessments and a red, amber, green (RAG) rating.

7.8 Changes to other level 2 provision

Experiences of implementing the Transition Programme had a mixed influence on providers' plans for other level 2 provision.

Some providers replaced all/most of their level 2 provision with Transition Programmes from the outset, whilst others were considering this strategy at the end of the first year of delivery as they wanted all students to benefit from its structure. In these providers, students tended to stay on after level 2 rather than seek employment. This approach also meant providers would be prepared for new T Levels coming on stream in the future and would be able to offer these without needing to plan, recruit and implement new Transition Programmes:

> We are seeing the Transition to T Level as a core component of our level 2 offer for the college moving forwards. Part of that has been driven by the flexibility of the framework that has been provided, I think that has been welcomed and has been good. – *FE College*

Other providers had decided to keep the distinct Transition Programme/level 2 model currently in place, but had added elements on the Transition Programme into level 2 courses to add value. For example, providers had added extended diagnostic periods to assess students' academic skills, digital skills and work readiness and had mirrored the assessment structure of Transition Programme onto level 2 courses. One provider reported that they would be decreasing the guided learning hours for the technical component on their level 2 courses, as the flexibility in the Transition Programme to focus on the development of other skills and include additional qualifications to prepare students for level 3 had been beneficial:

> We have reduced the guided learning hours so instead of them being a diploma, we have reduced a lot of them to certificates and have added in additional certificates to focus more on mental health awareness, digital skills, to better prepare them for moving onto a level 3. – *FE College*

Some providers commented that they would continue reviewing their level 2 provision as T Levels were rolled out. Providers felt that, for some sectors, the Transition Programme and level 2 models would need to remain separate, as the Transition Programme would not be suitable for all students. However, for other sectors, a Transition Programme could replace current level 2 provision.

Providers who had no plans to change level 2 provision in response to the Transition Programme gave students' abilities and progression routes as their rationale for these decisions. For example, providers who considered the Transition Programme to be a level 2.5 felt this course would only be appropriate for the higher achieving students with clear plans to progress onto a T Level. Other providers highlighted the requirements of other level 2 courses which are not conducive to the Transition Programme framework. For example, some referred to level 2 courses in Education and Childcare which tend to include a large qualification which gives students a license to practice should they wish to go into employment at the end of level 2. However, this qualification size does not leave scope to accommodate additional elements. One provider also highlighted that, in some construction trades courses, students are required to have met level 2 competencies before progressing onto level 3, and this would be mean that the level 2 requirements for progression to T Level or other level 3 courses would differ too much.

8 Concluding comments

Providers were highly engaged in preparations and delivery and generally felt that they had delivered high-quality Transition Programmes which were well received by students. Students were generally positive about their experiences and the level of challenge, having most enjoyed the technical content, practical sessions, and project work. Students were generally reported to be more engaged and to have higher levels of attendance and retention than other level 2 students.

The Transition Programme is different to other study programmes in that it gives providers more flexibility to choose an appropriate technical qualification size, or to deliver without a qualification. In most cases, providers embedding a qualification tended to choose a smaller qualification. Both approaches appeared to work well enabling providers to align content to the T Level and embed employer-set projects, as well as deliver the other key components of the Transition Programme. However, both approaches also had drawbacks. The qualification approach worked less well where providers had to teach to a strict syllabus which left little time for other elements and the non-qualification approach brought concerns around portability and student demand.

The pandemic impacted providers' preparations and delivery. A move to online delivery made building rapport with students more difficult and particularly impacted diagnostics and pastoral support, which tend to be best delivered face-to-face. Another key component particularly affected by Covid-19 was securing placements to provide students with the opportunity to practise their practical skills in a real workplace. Very few students completed a placement. However, many providers tackled this challenge by focusing on virtual engagement with employers to support students' work readiness and, particularly in Digital, secured virtual placements. Providers also faced some challenges in students' engagement with English and maths GCSEs, with providers reporting issues with centre assessment grades being higher than some students' ability.

The aim was for the Transition Programme to support students' progression onto T Levels but, in reality, providers reported that students were progressing onto a range of options. Where students were not progressing to T Levels, they tended to be progressing to another level 3 course without both exams and the requirement for grades 4s in GCSE English and maths, or onto an apprenticeship. Not having completed a placement was, for some students, a reason for them choosing another course which did not have the same requirement as the T Level for students to complete a substantial industrial placement.

Appendix 1: Characteristics of providers and students participating in the research

Table 2 below provides details on the characteristics of the 29* providers which took part in the research. Fifteen providers participated in stage one, of which four participated in a visit and 11 in a telephone interview. Twenty-one providers participated in a telephone interview in stage two and 27 providers participated in telephone interview in stage three. Eleven providers participated in all three stages of the research.

Table 2 Characteristics of providers taking part in the three stages of research

Provider characteristics	Number
Type	
FE College	22
Sixth Form/16 – 19 Academy	5
School/11-18 Academy	2
Location	
North West	5
North East	2
Yorkshire and the Humber	3
East of England	2
West Midlands	3
East Midlands	1
London	2
South West	6
South East	5
Size	
Large	13
Medium	9
Small	2
No data	5
Transition programme subject	
Digital	24
Construction	5
Education and Childcare	23

Provider characteristics	Number
Qualification approach	
Qualification	19
Non-qualification	4
Qualification and non-qualification	6
Participation in research	
Phase 1 (2019)	15
Phase 2 (2020)	21
Phase 3 (2021)	27

*Two providers who participated in phase 1 of the research subsequently withdrew from 2020 delivery of the T Level Transition Programme. They are not included within these figures.

Table 3 below provides details on the 42 students who took part in the focus groups, including the programmes they were studying and the types of institution they were studying at.

Table 3 Data on students who participated in a focus group

Provider and course type	Number of students	Number of providers
FE college	28	4
Sixth form college	14	2
Digital Transition Programme	14	2
Construction Transition Programme	8	1
Education and Childcare Transition Programme	20	3
Qualification based Transition Programme	14	2
Non-qualification Transition Programme	28	4

Appendix 2: Findings from additional student consultations

Introduction

This executive summary presents the findings of the small-scale student consultations, which the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) conducted in autumn 2021. Focusing on students who had completed the Transition Programme in the 2020/21 academic year and were now pursuing a T Level, the overarching aim of the consultations was to explore students' views on a summary of the proposed high-level national delivery expectations for the Transition Programme, and how the proposed content differed to their own experiences. The proposed national delivery expectations were being developed for September 2022 implementation and included draft national technical outcomes.

Aims

The aim of the research was to understand students' opinions on the proposed high-level content for future T Level Transition Programme. Students were asked questions relating to:

- how the proposed content compared to what they had studied
- their views on the proposed content and suggestions for improvement
- their own Transition Programme experiences and preparation for the T Level in the context of the proposed changes
- their thoughts on what should be included in a T Level Transition Programme student guide.

Methodology

The research team contacted six providers whose students had participated in a previous focus group in summer 2021, with the request for students who had completed the Transition Programme and were now on the T Level to take part in a one-to-one interview or focus group to share their opinions on the proposed changes to the Transition Programme content.

Four of the six providers responded, resulting in focus groups (ranging from two to six students) in three colleges and two one-to-one interviews with students in one college. Ten further providers were contacted due to the low take up. This resulted in one more one-to-one interview. Table 4 below details the characteristics of the 15 students involved in this research. It should be noted that only one student had completed a Transition Programme that included a technical qualification, while the other 14 had completed non-

qualification Transition Programmes, therefore their views are over-represented in this research.

Interviews and focus groups took place virtually, over Zoom, in October and November 2021. The proposed content was shared with students via screen share. It is important to note that, due the timing of the research, students had only completed one half term of their T Level so could not fully comment on the applicability of all of the proposed content to the T Level, as they were not aware of all of the content they would cover over the two year course.

Table 4 Characteristics of participating students

Transition Programme subject	Qualification approach	Number of students	One-to-one interview/focus group
Digital	Qualification	1	Interview
	Non-qualification	2	Interviews
Education	Non-qualification	6	Focus groups
Construction	Non-qualification	6	Focus group

Knowledge, skills and behaviours

Students were shown examples of the proposed core knowledge, skills and behaviours that all students will be expected to learn or develop on the T Level Transition Programme, as a minimum (to ensure some consistency for students). The proposed knowledge, skills and behaviours can be found in Figure 1 at the end of this appendix.

Students felt that, through developing the proposed knowledge, skills and behaviours, future Transition Programme students would be well prepared for the T Level and for their future careers, recognising that these were all important life skills:

> All of the skills that are mentioned in the T Level and that need to be applied are here [within the proposed knowledge, skills and behaviours slide]. They are all important. There are lots of jobs [in the education and childcare sector] and you may change job in the future and these are life skills too that everyone needs, for example setting a good example of yourself, going for interviews. You shouldn't just gain these skills in this course [E&CC TP], they should be taught on every course. – *Education and Childcare student*

Students in one of the six colleges reported that they were aware of the knowledge, skills and behaviours they would develop during the Transition Programme when they started. Students in some colleges reported developing some of the proposed skills, such as managing stress and coping with setbacks and effective verbal and non-verbal communication.

The knowledge, skills and behaviours that students perceived to be the most important were:

- communication and social skills
- teamwork

> You need to learn how to communicate well with other people because team working is very important. – *Digital student*

- setting a good impression to employers
- time management and organisation
- problem solving
- confidence

> You really need this [confidence] in the future for building relationships with children, parents, guardians. A lot of people are introverted and shy… and this could set a bad impression of them [in the workplace, to employers, to parents]. – *Education and Childcare student*

- presenting skills
- maths and English (this is a key reason students enrol on the Transition Programme).

Students only reported one suggested addition to the proposed knowledge, skills and behaviours. Students commented on the value of 'learning through doing' and felt that within 'Industry-relevant technical knowledge and skills', there should also be a focus on developing the relevant practical skills for their industry.

Technical content

Students were shown examples of the high-level technical content proposed for Transition Programmes in Construction, Digital and Education and Childcare, as these were the routes that the participants studied on their Transition Programmes. This was to give them a flavour for some of things that future Transition Programme students would study for these three routes. The proposed technical content for the three Transition Programmes can be found in Figure 2 at the end of this appendix.

All students felt that, through learning the proposed technical content, future Transition Programme students would be better prepared for the T Level than they had been.

During their Transition Programmes, students had studied some, but not all, of the topics set out in the proposed content. However, students felts that the proposed technical content was relevant and interesting, as well as comprehensive, covering a range of topics that would give students a strong foundation for the T Levels.

Digital

Digital students highlighted two areas of the proposed content where there should be more emphasis – cyber security and using algorithms to create flow charts. Students reported that these topics were being covered in depth on the T Level but did not feel they had gained sufficient foundation knowledge on these topics from their Transition Programmes.

Education and Childcare

Education and Childcare students welcomed laws and legislations being included in the proposed content but highlighted the importance of this topic being covered in depth on the Transition Programme. This had been a major focus on the T Level, yet some students had not gained any prior knowledge from their Transition Programme.

Students suggested two additions to the proposed content – a topic on the basics of teaching primary English and maths and learning through case studies. Students reported that many of their peers wished to go into primary teaching so felt that this topic would be a valuable addition. Students reported that learning through case studies had provided a useful context to put their skills and knowledge into practice and applying these to a specific situation, so felt future Transition Programme students would also benefit from this method of learning.

Construction

Construction students did not suggest any additions to the proposed technical content. These students had studied a project based Transition Programme related to a specific construction career, so did not feel they gained a breadth of knowledge. They felt that studying the proposed content, which covers a variety of knowledge and skills, would be preferable and would prepare future students well for the T Level.

Qualification approach

Students were asked, hypothetically, how they would feel if they had learnt all of the knowledge and skills, set out in the proposed technical content and proposed knowledge, skills and behaviours but did not receive a qualification at the end. Their answers and the quotes presented relate to this hypothetical scenario, rather than their own experiences. The students involved in this research who studied non-qualification programmes gained

other qualifications, such as EPQ or industry relevant qualifications in place of a technical qualification.

Most students felt that Transition Programmes should have a formally recognised technical qualification attached which provides evidence of the knowledge and skills learnt over the year and allows students to take multiple progression routes:

> I personally feel like if there wasn't a qualification I would be quite disappointed. Kind of like a year wasted if you know what I mean, because you are not getting any qualifications out of it. – *Construction student*

The small number of students who were not opposed to the non-qualification approach saw the Transition Programme as a year to gain English and maths and decide upon their Level 3 route, rather than the purpose being to gain a Level 2 technical qualification.

Route based project

All students suggested that a small route-based project, completed alongside the proposed technical content, would be a valuable opportunity for the future Transition Programme students to apply a range of knowledge and skills and provide experience of a workplace activity and employer expectations. Ideally, this should be developed in conjunction with an employer:

> Yes, it would be good because it would give you the skills and the underpinning knowledge to put it into practice when you are in a setting. – *Education and Childcare student*

Digital and Construction students had completed projects on their Transition Programme and, based on their reflections of this, highlighted the importance of tutors carefully planning the projects to ensure they are related to the Transition Programme topics and allow students to develop industry relevant skills. The Construction students whose entire year had been delivered through one project based on a particular career did not think this should be the norm as it did not develop a breadth of knowledge.

Progress monitoring

Students had found regular tests and feedback during the Transition Programme helpful and thought that future Transition Programme students would benefit from this to help monitor their progress and highlight areas where they required more support.

Some students reported that they had been involved in deciding their targets/areas for development on the Transition Programme. They reported that future Transition Programme students should be allowed to have this input because tutors should be

aware of the topic areas and skills that students themselves felt they needed to focus upon and develop further:

> Tutors should know what students feel they need to focus on and it would also mean tutors can better support students with these targets. – *Digital student*

Support related to T Level progression

Students felt that Transition Programme students should be supported throughout the year to decide their T Level route as students may change their minds over the year. They reported that students should be given strong support at the start of the Transition Programme so that they are aware of what they need to develop and achieve over the year in order to progress on to the T Level. This should then be followed by ongoing support to help them make decisions on their next steps, for example through meetings with tutors, careers advisers and T Level taster days. Students reported that the most useful form of support was advice that helped students to understand the content of the different T Level routes and the relevance of this content to their career aspirations. This was supported by Transition Programme tutors who had a good understanding of the related T Level.

Work placement

Students felt that all Transition Programme students should have the opportunity to complete a work placement. Only the Digital students involved in the research had the opportunity to complete a placement, however Construction and Education and Childcare students also felt they would have benefitted from this opportunity.

Students felt that workplace preparation, for example through completing employability modules, interview preparation and mock interviews, would be an important precursor to students' work placements. Students further highlighted the importance of students being given input into the placement decision rather that it being allocated by tutors, to ensure its relevance to students' career aspirations and so they gain as much as possible from the experience.

In the absence of being able to complete work placements, students felt that having the opportunity to visit a workplace, complete an employer-set project, and having employers speak to students about the industry, careers in the sector and what they look for in their employees would be valuable replacements.

Student guide

Students would welcome a Transition Programme student guide, which includes details on all aspects of a Transition Programme and includes previous students' experiences:

> A student guide would be helpful and informative. It would need to give students general information about the Transition Programme and information about everything on the course. – *Construction student*

Students thought that the guide should include:

- details on the topics that students will cover during the Transition Programme

- information on the amount and methods of assessment for each topic, as well as snippets of assignments that previous students completed:

  > It would be good for students to know what they will be doing and what the expectations are. It would mean they would be prepared and wouldn't be too stressed out when they were given the assessments. – *Education and Childcare student*

- a summary of the different T Levels in the pathway that students may progress onto

- an overview of the knowledge and skills that students will develop, for example time management, teamwork, confidence, pitching ideas and presenting work to tutors and employers, GCSE English and maths

- information on career prospects from studying the Transition Programme and T Level:

  > The different careers you can do with a T Level. Students can then do their own research into the different careers and will know how what they will be learning about links [to careers]. – *Construction student*

- contact details for the T Level.

Students suggested that the guide should be interactive, for example including videos and quizzes. They felt that videos or transcripts of interviews with previous Transition Programme students would be particularly useful. Previous students could answer questions on what they had learnt over the year and how they had benefitted from the course, which would help future students decide if the Transition Programme was the right course for them:

> Try to give them an insight of what we have done in the classroom so they can have an idea if this is the right thing for them. Let them see it first hand, not just on a piece of paper or on Facebook. – *Education and Childcare student*

Reflecting on their own experiences, students had most enjoyed the following aspects of their Transition Programmes:

- teamwork:

    I really enjoyed all the team working we did. It helped me to get used to that and I made some good friends on it. – *Digital student*

- practical sessions:

    One of the units was computer hardware where we were actually able to take apart the PC and actually see the parts. I like doing the hands on stuff. – *Digital student*

- employer engagement, including mock interviews:

    Presenting in front of employers kind of gave us a little bit of an insight into jobs and how to pitch with clients. – *Construction student*

- learning through case studies:

    I also liked the different case studies…we did so many different case studies that I found interesting and it helps you with the underpinning knowledge. – *Education and Childcare student*

- undertaking individual research

    I enjoyed the theory part. I liked doing my own research. – *Education and Childcare student.*

Appendix 3: Proposed knowledge, skills and behaviours, and technical content

Figure 1: Draft of proposed knowledge, skills and behaviours

Industry-relevant technical knowledge and skills

Core technical knowledge and skills relevant to students' chosen T level route (as per the national performance outcomes for the programme)

Skills for successful study

Skills and behaviours to support independent learning, including time management and how to plan, monitor and review the effectiveness of learning activities

Study and assessment techniques to prepare students for their chosen T Level route. For example, formal writing, researching and referencing, critical thinking and problem-solving techniques, and exam strategies, such as responding to command verbs

English, maths and digital skills

GCSEs or Functional Skills in English and/or maths (depending on prior attainment) where students do not already have a grade 4 GCSE in these subjects

Application of contextualised English and maths skills relating to a student's chosen T Level route

Basic digital skills where a student needs to develop them

Knowledge and skills for the workplace

Professional workplace behaviour. Introduction to the standards expected for T Level Industry Placements e.g. professionalism, taking responsibility, communicating properly, producing results

Organisational policy and procedures. For example, importance of dress code, adhering to health and safety policies, confidentiality, drugs and alcohol policies

Travel training. Time keeping and punctuality, how to plan travel to work journeys

Effective verbal and non-verbal communication e.g. use of formal language, positive body language, presentation skills

Teamwork and relationship building. This could be developed through, for example, group projects, workplace scenarios or enrichment activities

Positive attitude and behaviours

Strategies to build resilience, confidence and self-esteem, such as positive mindset techniques and reflecting on progress made throughout the programme

Managing stress and coping with setbacks, e.g. through mindfulness and meditation techniques, understanding link between a healthy lifestyle and good mental health, and knowing how to access additional mental health support if needed

Reflection and responding to feedback: learning how to seek, respond to and use feedback and self-reflection to increase self-awareness and achieve development goals

Figure 2: Drafts of proposed technical content

Proposed examples of the knowledge and skills content for Digital Transition Programmes, shown to students who participated in this research.

Explore data analysis solutions	Design a cyber security resilience plan	Produce digital solutions
Knowledge (examples) • Types of data and the differences between them • Difference between qualitative and quantitative collection methods and how they are used • Data manipulation (e.g. cleaning, merging, data operations • Statistics including the construction of tables, charts and diagrams and how to interpret and use them • Data Protection and Security • Innovation in digital technologies e.g. Internet of Things, Artificial Intelligence, Augmented Reality	Knowledge (examples) • Need for cyber security (motivation for cyber attacks and their impacts) • Data protection (legal framework) • Threats, vulnerabilities and risk and differences between them • Protection measures for hardware, software, users, physical security	Knowledge (examples) • Programming principles (e.g. algorithms, how to develop program code and constructs, high-level and low-level programming languages) • Hardware (e.g. components of a computer system, storage of data) • Software (e.g. function of an operating system, purpose and functions of utility software) • Problem solving frameworks

Explore data analysis solutions	Design a cyber security resilience plan	Produce digital solutions
Skills (examples) • Identify different sources of data • Apply qualitative and quantitative methods for collecting data • Perform a data investigation • Manipulate data into a required format	Skills (examples) • Planning • Following data protection guidelines • Identify protection measures that will counter given threats • Assess cyber security risk	Skills (examples) • Critical thinking (e.g. using logic) • Analysing • Recording • Evaluating (e.g. appraising evidence, making recommendations)

Proposed examples of the knowledge and skills content for Education and Childcare Transition Programmes

Plan play, learning or educational activities for children and young people within a specific age range	Prepare environments for children and young people's play, learning and educational activities	Observe children and young people's learning and development within a specific age range
Knowledge (examples) • Primary areas of child development (physical, communication, personal social and emotional, cognitive) • Key milestones in development and factors impacting on learning and development • Different types of learning and learning environments • Resources, staffing, and equipment required for different types of activities	Knowledge (examples) • Key regulations and legislation • How they affect health and safety policies, safeguarding and confidentiality procedures • Risk assessments • Types of play, learning and educational activities • Types of equipment and resources used in play, learning and educational activities and how they are used effectively • Considerations when preparing specific environments	Knowledge (examples) • Use of different observations methods • Requirements for observation and the information produced • Communication (including verbal and non-verbal) • Importance of spoken language, body language and tone in communication and how each is used to convey different messages • Importance of confidentiality in any communication regarding observations
Skills (examples) • Planning (e.g. identifying steps in a plan, estimating time and resources) • Critical thinking (e.g. evaluating pros and cons of approaches) • Creativity	Skills (examples) • Assess health and safety risks • Set up equipment and/or resources and carry out safety checks • Adhere to PPE requirements as specified in procedures	Skills (examples) • Observing • Recording (e.g. transcribing) • Communicating (e.g. active listening, engaging an audience) • Self-reflection (reflecting on observations made)

Proposed examples of the knowledge and skills content for Construction Transition Programmes

Plan for the approval of sustainable construction projects	Design sustainable construction projects	Apply technical skills to a sustainable construction project
Knowledge (examples) • Characteristics of different built environments • Local planning and building control requirements • Construction development cycle • Information and data • Principles of measurement and application to the built environment • Different types of measuring equipment	Knowledge (examples) • Different types of drawings • Computer Aided Design (CAD) • Performance requirements of buildings • Different types of sub-structure and super-structure components • Different types of materials • Sustainable techniques and materials • Mechanical and electrical principles	Knowledge (examples) • Typical health and safety hazards • Purpose, security, maintenance and operation of different types of equipment and tools • Sustainability implications for use of different materials in construction projects • Stages in a construction project and the different occupations and process involved at each stage
Skills (examples) • Using measuring equipment • Measuring topographical features • Designing and carrying out tests • Identifying likely impact • Using evidence and advice	Skills (examples) • Sketch designs • Interpret information and data • Presenting information and ideas	Skills (examples) • Planning and estimating time and resources • Practical skills related to one occupation (e.g. bricklayer, joiner, plumber, electrical installer, plasterer, painter and decorator