

ANOTHER LEVEL

Although trailblazer apprenticeships only emerged a few years ago, they have been followed by a further technical qualification. What does the transport industry think about the new T Levels, asks John Challen

Set to come on stream from September, T Levels are a new qualification that follow GCSEs and will be the equivalent to three A levels. The two-year courses – each covering a different sector of the UK industry – are designed to prepare students for work and have been created with the help of employers and businesses.

A soft launch will see three courses offered from 2020 before others – including ‘maintenance, installation and repair’, the course that is most relevant to transport operators – open over the following three years (see details via www.is.gd/isoyug).

Dean Rippon, technical training manager, learning and development at Scania, pictured below, needs some convincing. He says heavy weighting toward college-based delivery would have limited attraction for Scania.

“From what I understand, the new T Levels are designed to have a much larger college delivery plan with between 900 and 1,400 guided learning hours and a minimum of 45 days working in the industry,” he says. “This isn’t something that I would see as an attractive way to train our future technicians.”



The current Scania programme has the opposite format to T Levels, with 80% of the apprentice’s learning gained through hands-on workplace sessions and the remainder delivered at Scania’s training centre. He argues that this ratio allows all learners to learn the knowledge required while at college and then go back to their workplace and practice these skills and knowledge in a real working environment.

One other factor that Rippon is unsure of is in the delivery. “T Levels are designed to be ‘full time’ college courses for the 39 academic weeks, with full time deemed as approximately 16 hours a week,” he states. “The resource required to deliver any sizeable volume of this delivery model outside of the college environment, if allowed, would be huge in terms of tutors, classroom space, workshop space and equipment.

However, where he sees possible potential in T Levels is for those candidates who don’t make it on to an apprentice programme straight from school, but who are keen to improve their skills and knowledge (including maths and English GCSE results). “The key for me would then be allowing these candidates to enter a fully-funded apprenticeship



programme, such as the one we run,” he says.

One person heavily involved in the trailblazer apprenticeships is Lloyd Mason (pictured near right), the former Arriva engineering development manager and training consultant. He is generally supportive of T Levels and believes the principle is a good one. “The path of A Levels, to university, to work has always been pretty clear if you were academically-minded. You would think of a few A Levels you wanted to do and then have some ideas of an occupation. Then there are the relevant qualifications for those occupations via university or higher education.

A NEW PATH?

“But for those who are not academically-minded, the path has been less clear. The advice that has been available in schools has not been great for those that want to explore alternatives to A Levels. So I think T Levels will really fill that gap, and provide a 16-year-old with options for what they want to do for the following two years.”

Mason admits that when he first heard about T Levels he was unsure about how they would fit in with the existing framework. “To be honest, when I first became aware of T levels I wasn’t quite sure how they would fit in, because those are aimed at providing a



Photo credit: Tim Gander

Level 3 qualification. Most of the vehicle apprenticeships are the same. So there is the potential for conflict."

He continues: "If a student successfully completes an apprenticeship, they gain a Level 3 qualification and are accepted in the industry as someone that is competent and skilled to maintain buses and heavy vehicles. If a T Level bus and coach HGV qualification is developed, will a student be at the same level? Could someone who has come out of higher education with a Level 3 T Level in bus and coach - for example - be put directly put on to a vehicle and asked to maintain it, based on the fact that he or she has got the same level of qualification? The answer to those questions is clearly no."

Mason believes that one of the

challenges will be getting employers on side. "Workplace experience is not new," he says. "There was a time when it was quite a popular way of introducing school leavers to industry and to the opportunities that were available. It seemed to fall out of favour for a number of reasons, and not in the least because - in my experience at least - there's been a reluctance from employers."

POTENTIAL FOR SUCCESS

Sharing slight reservations about T Levels at least initially is Phil Marsh (pictured below), CEO of S&B Automotive Academy. But he can now see the potential benefits of the qualification, he adds. "I went to a few conferences to get more of an insight. After one of the presentations, I asked why someone would want to do a T Level rather than an apprenticeship, because there are lots of similarities," he recalls.

"The speaker's response was that there aren't always enough jobs available for everyone to do an apprenticeship. I thought that was quite a strange response, but didn't have the opportunity to have a second question. My fear would be, are they just a stop-gap? I think having the choice is a great thing as long as you've had an informed choice and you understand exactly what you're signing up for," adds Marsh.

"My understanding with T Levels is that you're not necessarily just going to be associated with one employer, although that may turn out to be the case. But with our side of the business, which is very technical, you can't just do the equivalent of learning to drive a car just by passing the theory test. The practical side is really critical."

The strength of an apprenticeship programme is that it provides the student with the knowledge, the practical application and you get paid, reasons Marsh. "With a T Level, they've got the knowledge, a range of experiences, but they aren't - as far as I'm aware - assessed at the end of the course. And then, where do you go? That's my concern. There's a very high rate of employment after apprenticeships; I'd be interested to see how that is mirrored with T Levels."

Marsh says he has spoken to employers who are positive about T Levels and like the idea of supporting young people into the industry. "But, historically, having worked with schools for many years, trying to get work experience can be quite difficult. Perhaps work experience for longer periods of time, rather than a short period of time, might be more amenable to employers," he says.

"I think in some sectors it would be extremely beneficial to do a T Level," states Marsh, adding that one potentially popular area would be administration. "There are currently no Level 2 admin apprenticeships anymore. It was one of the biggest apprentice areas - if not the biggest - and it's almost been forgotten."

"So for someone who wants to do something like that, a T Level would probably be an extremely good route, because the practical application would be there," he says. "And generally in an admin office you're not going to kill someone because you haven't fitted a tyre properly." **TE**

