

Down to a T

What is the future of early years work placements under T-Levels? **Bill Esmond**, associate professor of learning and employment at the University of Derby and who is part of a team evaluating the T-Level placement pilots, reports

Regular readers of *Nursery World* will already know that childcare and early years education are going to be in the front rank of the Government's new T-Levels – vocational equivalents to A-Levels – starting alongside construction and computing in 2020. Those subjects, and for that matter 'technical education', do not sound much like what nurseries do, so managers and early years practitioners may be wondering how they got into this, and what to expect when it starts.

The single most important reason that the education sector is going to lead the way with T-Levels is its placements. Work placements are central to the *Sainsbury Review* and accompanying *Post-16 Skills Plan*, published together in mid-2016. When ministers stand up to talk about T-Levels, the chance for young people to gain work experience through 'high-quality, substantial industry placements' is nearly always at the heart of their sales pitch.

But one of the biggest challenges facing technical education is that placements will be difficult to organise in many industries: a world short of high-quality job opportunities for young people is already going to be a world short of work placement opportunities. In many industries, there are also limits to what 16-year-olds can safely and legally do in the workplace.

Early Years Educator (EYE) qualifications, on the other hand, include substantial placements already. Many settings have experience of offering good placements, with capable staff who know how to act as supportive teachers. The sector also benefits from plentiful guidance from Government sources about what



good placements should look like. What could possibly go wrong?

How many hours?

Nursery World has already raised important questions about whether T-Levels will provide the necessary foundation for a licence to practise. In particular, this relates to T-Level placements, expected to last less than half the current 700 hours. These are not so much questions about whether the early years sector can provide suitable placements but whether T-Level placements will be adequate for the early years sector.

Behind the public announcements, the Government and other interested parties have also been asking questions and investing in research studies to find out how placements could best work across all the planned T-Levels. For most industries, the

placements are a huge step up from the few days of work experience that Level 3 students undertook after the 2011 *Wolf Report*.

In 2017-18, 21 provider institutions, including South Thames College and Manchester College, trialled early years placements on models designed by The Challenge (best known for the National Citizenship Scheme).

These pilots have been evaluated by the Institute for Employment Studies, with support from researchers at the University of Derby.

The study has yet to report back but the Department for Education has added to its principles for work placements in readiness for another round of pilots, when providers (colleges and training firms) will be supported through the Capacity and Delivery Fund. This advice ➤

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is written for providers and much relates to the monitoring of placements, and what they should provide for and expect from students on placement.

Good placement practice

But these are also issues for nursery managers and school leaders who are to host their placements. Even before T-Levels, an earlier *Nursery World* article (and a book) by Jackie Musgrave and Nicola Stobbs also asked challenging questions about placements and the students who turn up at early years settings, ranging from the inspirational to those who seem to need as much support as the children. This can certainly be a cause of frustration among experienced staff.

This brings us to a difficult issue for all work placements: the employer wants the best possible student they can get – they want the placement process to be selective; but the provider (the college or training organisation providing the course) wants to place all of its students – their interest is for work placements to be inclusive. Sometimes this leads to conflicts over the calibre of the students undertaking placements.

This seems to be less of a problem with early years and education settings, where it is usually understood that placements are part of a learning experience. So, while nursery managers or heads will always be interested in whether a placement student could potentially become a future employee, they usually understand that such judgements should emerge on the basis of students' learning during the placement rather than when they first arrive.

And this learning depends very much on what the placement setting offers the student as a learning experience. The 2012 *Nutbrown Review* talked about the need for high-quality placements as an essential part of a student's training, complementing classroom-based study in areas such as child development with practice in an early years setting.

Cathy Nutbrown spelled out the dangers of poor placements in her review: 'It is possible, even likely, for a student undertaking a placement in a poor setting to pick up bad habits, witness inappropriate practice, or for them to feel lost and confused when there

is a lack of support. This could be a tremendous waste of that student's potential, and ultimately detrimental to the young children they will work with.'

The *Nutbrown Review* recommended that only settings graded Good or Outstanding by Ofsted should be allowed to host placements; and that colleges and training providers should monitor settings to ensure that they were capable of providing high-quality placements. But ultimately it is nursery managers and professionals in leadership roles – who can make decisions, allocate resources and appoint staff – who will make placements successful.

This is not guaranteed. Learning is not the automatic consequence of placing a student in the workplace. When I undertook a small-scale study of work experience on Level 3 study programmes in 2016 straight after the *Sainsbury Review* (see Further Information), the best placements were built around planned activities, supported by workplace experts. These represented the best of what the Government asks of placements, 'the practical and technical skills required for the profession or trade that the student is studying for'.

But early childhood students were sometimes let down by unstructured systems, spending months in the workplace but much of their time on routine activities, cleaning or sticking children's work into books. They mainly learnt about behavioural expectations and, while this is important, some complained about limited opportunities to interact with children.

This brings us back to the placement as a learning opportunity. The Government often links its technical education policies to recent apprenticeship reforms: both strengthen the contribution



FURTHER INFORMATION

- Article on the *Sainsbury Review* and *Post-16 Skills Plan*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/GTMP2kHlvtMQI8gmsrJn/full>
- DfE's T-Level announcement, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/education-secretary-announces-first-new-t-levels>
- <https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/news/1165045/t-level-placements-too-short>
- <https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/feature/1165071/training-today-t-levels-bed-of-roses>
- <https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/feature/1152563/business-development-proper-placement>

While course providers want to place all students, settings are keen to only take on those who are capable

made to learning by the workplace. Sometimes they refer to a European-style system of integrating learning with work, although there are differences between well-established national systems with high employer involvement (such as in Germany and some neighbouring countries) and voluntary arrangements like in England, where providers, or learners, seek out their own arrangements.

These countries also have strong links between workplace and school or college learning; the relationship between the two contributes strongly to their success. Placements are seen as an opportunity to apply what is learnt on the taught course, the course provides concepts that explain what students see in practice, and wider studies contribute to students taking their learning seriously.

A sound base

Early years education appears to be among the most successful areas going into the T-Levels, mainly because of its relatively strong qualifications and healthy placement arrangements. These owe something to the stronger regulation that followed the *Nutbrown Review*. Those looking to sustain quality in the sector will not want to see either weakened by new qualifications or placement arrangements.

So, what should managers be thinking about in preparation for T-Levels in 2020? Those with an interest in providing good placement experiences will be thinking about what kind of learning opportunities can be offered within their setting and how this can be organised alongside the requirements of running busy nurseries.

How will they liaise with providers to recruit students? Will they interview? What expectations will they have and how will they be established at induction? Who is best to support students and liaise with providers about any issues?

Most will also want to see the health of the early years sector maintained and will be watching carefully to make sure that qualifications and placements continue to provide a sound professional grounding for a new generation of early years practitioners. ■