T-LEVELS
THE NEXT LEVEL QUALIFICATION

GATSBY ACTION GROUPS

CONNECTING CURRICULUM, EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT AND INDUSTRY PLACEMENTS

LEARNING FROM SIX T LEVEL INDUSTRY PLACEMENT ACTION GROUPS AND SUPPORTING EMPLOYER RESEARCH

SHORT SUMMARY

Of interest to: Senior leaders in colleges and schools; curriculum leaders and teachers; employer engagement and industry placement teams; quality practitioners

WHAT EMERGED ACROSS SIX DIFFERENT SECTORS?

The strongest T Level industry placements occurred when curriculum, employer engagement and industry placement activity were experienced as one connected whole, not as three related processes running in parallel.

Across the action groups, participants described strong commitment, careful relationship-building and examples of effective practice. They also returned to a more practical organisational challenge: how to make sure the people who understand the curriculum, the employer context and the student experience are shaping the same decisions at the right time.

That challenge appeared in different ways across Digital; Engineering and Manufacturing; Management and Administration; Building Services Engineering; Health (non-acute); and Creative and Design. Evidence from three meetings with each group, supported by employer focus groups, cross-sector college and school groups and an employer sponsor roundtable, pointed less to a single solution than to a set of recurring moments when connection either strengthened the placement experience or left students and employers to bridge the gaps themselves.

A glimpse of what the full report explores

Participants described committed teams and effective individual practice. They also described structural conditions that could weaken the connection between curriculum, employer engagement and industry placement activity, such as:

- Employer conversations beginning after curriculum, timetable or placement-pattern decisions were fixed.
- Useful information remaining within one team, reaching the wrong person or arriving too late to influence a decision.
- Responsibility feeling handed over once the student began their industry placement, with curriculum input and expertise becoming less visible.
- Feedback being collected but not consistently reaching the people able to change teaching, preparation, industry placement design or course planning.

The central finding

Strong industry placements are more likely when curriculum, employer engagement and industry placement planning are treated as connected programme activity, with shared purpose, usable information, continued involvement and a visible improvement loop.

FOUR RECURRING FINDINGS

A thread running through all four findings is the need to establish, test and refresh realistic expectations. Misalignment can arise during recruitment, matching, preparation, placement design or delivery, so maintaining shared expectations must be a continuing responsibility rather than a one-off briefing.

1. Start together

Industry placement planning works best when it begins as part of programme planning. Curriculum sequence, student development, employer workflow, placement timing and practical prerequisites combine to determine what the student is ready to do and what the employer can meaningfully offer. Early joint planning makes these interdependencies visible while there is still scope to act.

Question to consider: ***Are employer engagement knowledge and employer insight present before timetables, delivery patterns and expectations become fixed?***

2. Share what matters

Quality depends less on the volume of information exchanged than on whether the right insight reaches someone able to use it in time to influence or improve a decision. Employers generally do not ask for every curriculum document or every detail about a student. They want a proportionate account of what will help them plan meaningful activity, supervise appropriately and respond when circumstances change.

Information can be accurate but too detailed, recorded but inaccessible, shared too late or passed to a colleague who cannot use it. Curriculum colleagues understand learning and sequence; employer engagement colleagues understand employer context and operational requirements; support colleagues can advise on relevant and proportionate disclosure; and students know their own interests, confidence and support needs. The task is to identify the relevant information, explain it clearly and make sure it reaches the people making the decision.

Question to consider: ***Could important information be accurate, yet still inaccessible, too detailed or shared too late?***

3. Stay connected

An industry placement is a continuing relationship, not a handover. Students and employers are more likely to experience coherent support when curriculum, employer engagement and support colleagues remain connected as the industry placement develops. The strongest contact models do not rely on one person knowing every answer. They provide a dependable route back into the wider college or school team.

Question to consider: ***Do reviews and contact keep learning visible, or mainly confirm attendance, hours and process?***

4. Learn together

Experience creates value when insight from students, employers and staff reaches course and industry placement decision-makers, leads to proportionate action and is tested through later delivery. Across the action groups, evidence was stronger for gathering feedback than for demonstrating how it had informed a decision, changed practice and been tested with a later student or cohort.

Difficulty can become evidence for redesign rather than a reason to attribute fault to an individual student, employer or team. Positive experiences also need examination so that effective practice does not remain dependent on particular individuals or informal relationships.

Question to consider: ***Can we trace feedback through to a change, an owner, an intended effect and evidence from a later cohort or placement?***

WHAT CONNECTED WORKING CAN MAKE POSSIBLE

The full report combines cross-sector findings with employer voices, practical examples and learning from difficulty. Together, they show how connected working can improve industry placement design, student preparation, matching, support, curriculum content, employer confidence and longer-term relationships.

> *"We've worked with different providers, and you really notice the difference when everything is joined up from the beginning. If we understand what the student needs, what they should gain from the placement and who we can speak to if something changes, we're not left trying to work it out as we go along. That structure gives us confidence that the placement will work for everyone. It makes it much easier to say yes again and, where we can, to offer more places."*
>
> **Gary Howard | Redpack Packaging Machinery | Engineering and Manufacturing**

Practice in focus: four examples from the report

A project before industry placement recruitment. A construction employer works with curriculum and employer engagement colleagues on a realistic project brief before students apply for industry placements. Students experience the company and show how they approach a brief, apply learning, collaborate and respond to feedback. This supports more informed matching and a longer-term apprenticeship talent pipeline.

A curriculum timeline employers can use. An industry placement coordinator works with curriculum colleagues to translate the second-year learning sequence and key programme commitments into a concise employer-facing timeline. Employers can plan suitable activity and identify potential misalignment earlier.

A dependable weekly connection. Digital curriculum and employer engagement colleagues meet weekly to review preparation, current industry placements, changing circumstances and actions. This maintains a shared view of student learning and helps colleagues agree which person or team in the college or school is best placed to respond.

Feedback that changes the next cohort's experience. Employer feedback about professional behaviours is considered alongside student reflection and staff insight. The college or school strengthens workplace readiness through teaching from day one and develops a student-owned readiness and talent profile. The next review tests whether employer confidence and student preparation have improved.

Learning from difficulty

The report uses anonymised examples to expose system conditions without assigning blame. In one example, students entered a complex NHS setting before some had developed sufficient confidence in professional communication and workplace behaviours. Colleagues used the experience as evidence about sequencing, preparation and industry placement design, introducing earlier experiences in care and community settings to build confidence.

Another example examines a fixed day-release model that employers could not consistently support because workplace activity depended on projects, production cycles, site access and supervisor availability. Employer evidence entered the process only after the curriculum, timetable and industry placement pattern had been fixed. The central lesson is that feedback cannot influence a decision that has already been closed.

Why connection matters

Curriculum colleagues bring expertise in learning, sequencing and student development. Employer engagement and industry placement colleagues understand employers, workplace contexts and what makes a placement feasible. Employers contribute current occupational practice and insight into the knowledge, skills and behaviours that matter at work. None of these perspectives is sufficient on its own.

Industry placement coordinators frequently make this connection possible. They translate between curriculum intent and workplace reality, build employer confidence, anticipate practical risks and ensure that emerging information reaches the people able to act on it. Building these connections requires professional judgement and relationship management skills, not simply placement administration.

FROM FINDINGS TO PRACTICAL ACTION

The report does not prescribe one organisational structure. Colleges and schools delivering T Levels vary in size, roles, routes and employer context. What matters is whether local arrangements help colleagues build shared understanding and act at the right time for students and employers.

Six practical priorities for connected working

1. **Bring industry placement into T Level programme planning from the outset.** Involve curriculum, employer engagement and, where possible, employers while delivery patterns, sequencing, preparation and industry placement expectations can still be influenced.

2. **Develop workplace readiness through the curriculum from day one.** Model and develop relevant knowledge, skills, behaviours and reflective capacity throughout teaching, then add preparation tailored to the workplace, occupational context and individual student.

3. **Design information-sharing around decisions**. Agree what students, employers and colleagues need to know, why they need it, when it will be useful and how it will reach the person able to act.

4. **Keep the right expertise connected throughout.** Give students and employers a dependable contact route while ensuring curriculum, industry placement and support expertise can reconnect as circumstances develop.

5. **Turn experience into course improvement.** Bring student, employer and staff insight into industry placement review, annual course review and subsequent course design. Identify what will change, who will act and what difference is expected.

6. **Lead and measure for shared outcomes**. Use expectations, time and measures that value the quality and coherence of the student and employer experience, not only industry placement activity, hours or completion.

The ambition

The full report identifies five connected features that offer a useful quality lens, rather than an assessment standard: an industry placement that is clear and manageable; preparation for how work really happens; supported contribution to real work; connection to learning and progression; and sustainable arrangements that improve over time.

Where should I begin in the full report?

Senior leaders: Executive summary, practical priorities and quality matrix.

Curriculum leaders and teachers: Five-feature quality lens, four findings and practice in focus.

Employer engagement and industry placement teams: Four findings, employer voice and implications.

Quality practitioners: Evidence base and quality matrix.

One question to take back to your organisation

Do our current arrangements enable curriculum, employer engagement and industry placement expertise to influence the right decisions at the right time for students and employers?

Read the full report here: Connecting curriculum, employer engagement and industry placements

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