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

FINAL REPORT

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

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Commissioned by: Gatsby

Date: October 2026

CONTENTS AND READING ROUTES

This report is designed to be read selectively. The executive summary gives the overall conclusion; the four findings can be used independently; and the final practical priorities offer colleagues a reflective opportunity.

Section	What it offers
Executive summary	The central finding, four recurring findings and principal implications.
About this report	Purpose, scope, evidence base and limits.
Quality ambition	Five features of a strong industry placement.
Why connection matters	How curriculum and industry placement expertise connect across the T Level journey.
Finding 1: Start together	Planning, timing, readiness and industry placement design.
Finding 2: Share what matters	Usable information, consistent expectations and professional judgement.
Finding 3: Stay connected	Purposeful contact, review and access to the right expertise.
Finding 4: Learn together	Reflection, feedback and a visible improvement loop.
Quality lens and six practical priorities	Cross-cutting quality interpretation and practical priorities for connected working.
Methodology, acknowledgements and sources	How the report was developed and how its evidence is used.

WHERE SHOULD I BEGIN?

Reader	Suggested route	Question to hold
Senior leaders	Executive summary; six practical priorities; quality matrix	Do our structures, expectations and measures of success enable connected decisions?
Curriculum leaders and teachers	Quality ambition; four findings; practice in focus	How can workplace learning influence sequencing, preparation, reflection and progression?
Employer engagement and industry placement teams	Four findings; employer voice; implications	What do colleagues and employers need from one another, and when?
Quality practitioners	Evidence base; quality matrix	What shows that connected working is improving experience and impact?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

T Levels bring together substantial technical learning and an extended industry placement. For students and employers, these elements are most valuable when they operate as one connected experience, not when curriculum and industry placement activity are planned and managed in parallel.

This report brings together learning from six T Level industry placement action groups and associated employer research. It focuses on one recurring organisational question: how curriculum and employer engagement or industry placement colleagues work together to create a coherent, high-quality experience for students and employers.

Participants described committed teams and effective practice, but also conditions that weakened connection. Employer conversations sometimes began after curriculum, or timetable decisions had been fixed. Information remained within one team, responsibility appeared to pass to the employer once the industry placement began, and feedback did not always reach those able to improve teaching or preparation. Industry placement and employer engagement colleagues often bridged these perspectives, particularly when they had the time, access and influence to do so.

Central finding: Evidence from the action groups suggests that 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

Running through all four findings is the need to establish, test and refresh realistic expectations. Expectations can become misaligned at recruitment, matching, preparation, industry placement design or during delivery, so they need to be treated as a continuing shared responsibility rather than a one-off briefing.

1. **Start together.** Curriculum and industry placement planning are most coherent when colleagues and employers can influence timing, preparation, matching and activity before key decisions 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 improve a decision.
3. **Stay connected.** Scheduled monitoring is not a substitute for a relationship in which students and employers can reconnect with the college or school and access the right expertise when the experience changes.
4. **Learn together.** Student experience and employer feedback strengthen quality when they reach curriculum and programme decisions, lead to proportionate action and are tested with a later cohort or industry placement.

Implications for colleges and schools

1. Plan industry placements with curriculum and employer insight from the outset.
2. Develop workplace readiness through the curriculum from day one.
3. Share the right insight with the right people while it can still inform decisions.
4. Keep curriculum, employer engagement, industry placement and support expertise connected.
5. Use student, employer and staff insight to improve later course and industry placement delivery.
6. Lead and measure for shared outcomes, not only activity, hours or completion.

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 support shared understanding and timely action for students and employers.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Purpose

The report is intended to inform, rather than determine, Gatsby's wider work on industry placement quality. Its findings should be considered alongside broader research, direct student evidence, sector-specific evidence and other perspectives on quality.

The purpose of this report is to bring together transferable learning from the six action groups and associated employer research about how curriculum and employer engagement colleagues can create a coherent, high-quality T Level experience, and to identify practical implications for colleges, schools, leaders and quality teams.

This report provides:

- a practice-informed synthesis, rather than a formal evaluation or representative research study
- a cross-sector report focused specifically on the relationship between curriculum, employer engagement and industry placement
- a source of adaptable implications and questions, rather than a comprehensive industry placement manual
- a contribution to quality improvement, rather than an Ofsted checklist or inspection-preparation guide
- an account of shared learning, rather than a judgement on any individual college or school, team or sector

Evidence base

The report draws on three facilitated sessions with each of six sector action groups, supported by employer focus groups, employer-sponsor contributions and two cross-sector groups of colleagues from colleges and schools. It offers a qualitative, practice-informed synthesis of recurring themes from college, school and employer perspectives. Full details of the approach, use of evidence and limitations are set out in Methodology and acknowledgements.

THE QUALITY AMBITION: COMPONENTS OF A STRONG INDUSTRY PLACEMENT

Strong industry placements can take many forms, reflecting different sectors, occupations, employers, working patterns and student needs. This project does not seek to define industry placement quality on its own. Instead, it contributes practice-based evidence to a wider understanding of what quality may require.

Across the action groups and supporting employer research, five connected features repeatedly emerged as important to a positive experience. They offer a useful lens through which colleges and schools can examine practice and contribute evidence to the wider development of industry placement quality definitions. They are not an assessment standard, a definitive framework or a prescribed model.

1. Make the industry placement clear and manageable

The employer understands the purpose, the student's likely starting point and the support available. Expectations are realistic, and hosting can fit within, and support, genuine workplace activity.

This is visible when the employer feels confident and supported to host.

2. Prepare students for how work really happens

Relevant knowledge, skills and professional behaviours are modelled and reinforced through teaching, as well as through specifically designed workplace-readiness activity, from day one. Students learn to recognise progress, connect technical learning with professional practice and respond to feedback.

This is visible when students understand how and why work in the employer setting happens and what will be expected of them.

3. Help students contribute to real work

Working within defined industry placement objectives, students progress from observation towards appropriate, supported contribution. They understand what they are doing, why it matters, what good looks like and when to seek guidance.

This is visible when students progress towards appropriate, purposeful contribution.

4. Connect industry placement to learning and progression

Students can explain how workplace activity relates to their learning and next steps. Teachers understand enough about the experience to help students interpret and build on it, for the benefit of the individual student and the wider cohort.

This is visible when students can explain what they are learning through the experience, not only what they are doing.

5. Establish sustainable arrangements and improve them over time

Students, employers and colleagues in colleges and schools review the experience and use what they learn to improve future industry placements. Sustainable arrangements retain what works while allowing workplace activity to respond to different students, employers and genuine work.

This is visible when the employer would choose to host again and can identify what would make the next industry placement stronger.

> "For us, the students aren't just people who come in and observe; we treat them as extended members of the team. We try to give them activity connected to real projects, so they can see why the work matters and where they are contributing. Technical learning is important, of course, but so are professionalism, discipline and being willing to apply yourself. Those are the things that help a young person become someone a business can genuinely work with."
>
> **Chantelle Lewis | Mango Studios LDN**
>
> Creative and design

WHY CONNECTION MATTERS

Curriculum colleagues understand learning, sequencing and student development. Employer engagement and industry placement colleagues understand employers, workplace contexts and what makes an industry placement feasible. Employers contribute current occupational practice and insight into the knowledge, skills and behaviours required at work. Each perspective is necessary.

Industry placement coordinators often connect curriculum intent with workplace reality. They build employer confidence, anticipate practical risks and make sure new information reaches the people able to act. This requires professional judgement and relationship-management skills, not simply administration.

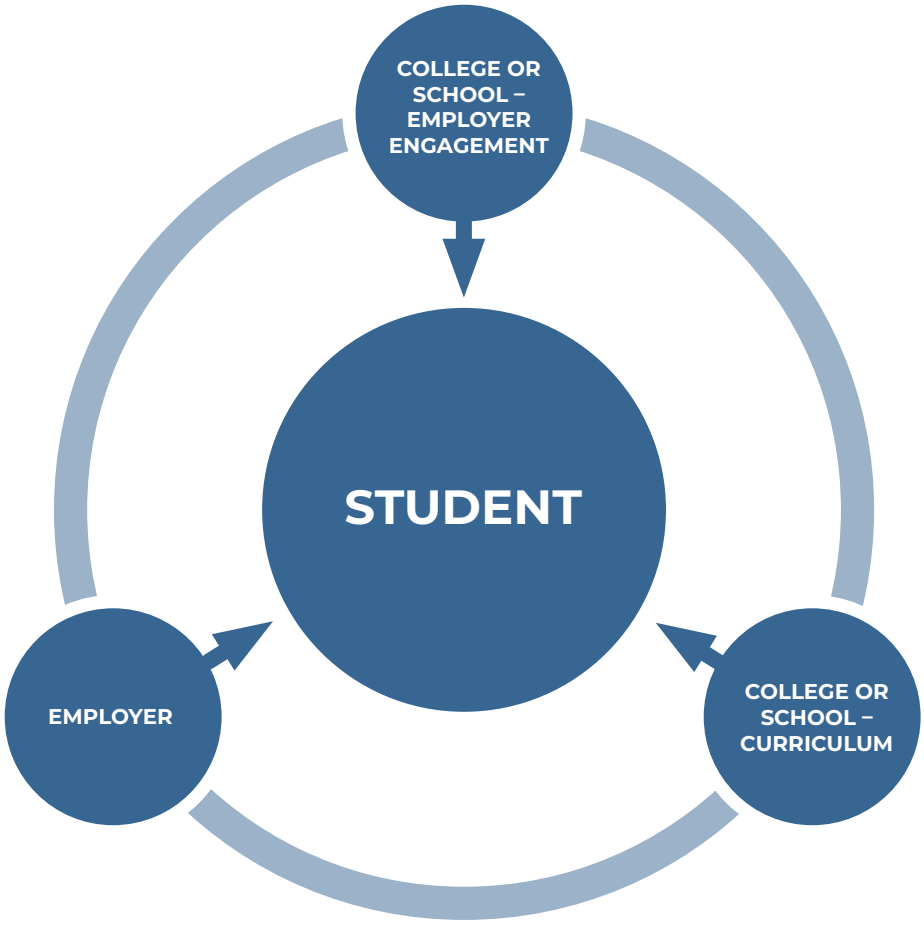
When coordinators have access to curriculum expertise, organisational influence and enough time to sustain employer relationships, the benefits can extend beyond one industry placement. The relationship may support curriculum advice, employer-led activity, staff industry updating, future industry placements, apprenticeships and recruitment.

When these areas of expertise connect, students are more likely to undertake purposeful activity at the right point and relate workplace experience to their learning; employers gain clearer expectations, less avoidable administration and greater confidence in hosting; and colleges and schools gain stronger relationships and a better basis for sustainable improvement, future industry placements and progression opportunities.

When expertise does not connect, a problem can appear to belong to one person or team. An employer may be approached too late, information may be missing, or feedback may not lead to change. The evidence suggests that these events often expose gaps between otherwise reasonable decisions.

Connected working cannot remove every structural or sector-specific constraint, including travel, workplace patterns, health and safety requirements, supervision capacity and restrictions affecting younger students. It can make these conditions visible earlier, help colleagues and employers decide what is viable and reduce the effect of disconnected decisions on students and employers.

In this project, five evidence-informed features were identified that contribute to positive outcomes for students and employers. They describe what a strong industry placement should make possible. The four findings that follow describe the conditions that supported those features: planning together, sharing useful information, staying connected and learning from experience.



"We've worked with different colleges and schools, 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 industry 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 industry 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

A CONNECTED T LEVEL JOURNEY

Connection is needed across the whole T Level journey. The stages below show where shared activity can help curriculum, employer engagement and industry placement colleagues turn the quality ambition into a coherent student and employer experience.

Stage	Shared activity	Participants
Recruitment and expectation setting	Give students and their parents or carers a consistent account of the course, industry placement and progression journey.	Curriculum, admissions, industry placement or employer engagement, students and parents or carers where appropriate.
Programme and industry placement planning	Connect curriculum intent, student development, employer reality, timing, activity, roles and risks.	Curriculum, industry placement or employer engagement, leaders and employers.
Preparation from day one	Model and develop relevant knowledge, skills, professional behaviours and reflective capacity through the curriculum; use workplace insight to make preparation specific.	Curriculum, students, employer engagement and employers.
Employer engagement and industry placement design	Shape meaningful, realistic activity around curriculum intent, the student's starting point and genuine work.	Employer, employer engagement or industry placement, curriculum and student.
Before industry placement	Confirm expectations and relevant learning; agree objectives, learning goals, contacts, support and workplace requirements; and agree how material changes will be handled.	Student, employer, industry placement contact, curriculum and relevant support colleagues.
During industry placement	Monitor experience, progress, wellbeing, inclusion and activity; reconnect the right expertise when needed.	Student, employer supervisor, industry placement contact, curriculum and support colleagues as needed.
Reflection, progression and review	Bring workplace learning into teaching and progression; agree and test improvements; sustain the employer relationship.	Student, employer, curriculum, employer engagement or industry placement, and quality or leadership colleagues.

START TOGETHER

Industry placement planning works best when it begins as part of programme planning

What we learned

Across all six action groups, participants valued earlier coordination between curriculum, employer engagement, industry placement and relevant support colleagues. Industry placement timing, employer involvement, curriculum mapping and student development should be considered as part of programme design, not added once the course is under way.

The evidence also suggested that connection begins before programme delivery. Students and, where appropriate, their parents or carers need a consistent account during the student recruitment and induction period of the industry placement's purpose, mandatory place within the programme, likely timing and expectations. Employer engagement insight can help ensure that these messages reflect what hosting and workplace participation will actually involve.

An industry placement is shaped well before a student arrives at work. Curriculum sequence, student development, employer workflow, industry 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.

Participants did not argue for one universal delivery pattern. Employers and colleges and schools described blocks, day release, preparation phases and blended arrangements, reflecting different occupational activity and organisational capacity. The transferable principle is not the pattern itself; it is that the pattern should emerge from an informed conversation about learning, readiness and workplace reality.

Participants identified employer advisory boards, industry panels, local networks and joint events as ways to bring employer insight into programme planning. These forums add value only when the right colleagues participate, industry placement and curriculum questions are considered together, and employer insight reaches decisions. If the groups lose momentum or sit outside programme review, employers may be heard without influencing practice.

The evidence also challenged a narrow understanding of readiness. Student preparation cannot be deferred to a generic employability intervention immediately before industry placement. Relevant knowledge, skills and behaviours, and the ability to reflect on feedback and connect experience to learning, need to be modelled and developed through curriculum teaching from day one. More specific industry placement preparation can then build from that foundation.

> "Before the industry placement starts, we try to understand what students already know and can do, and how their knowledge and skills can be reinforced and developed further through workplace tasks. Having that understanding helps our line managers identify work that is appropriate for the student and gives them a genuine opportunity to contribute.
>
> "We also arrange with the college to meet the students informally and find out which parts of their subject they are most interested in pursuing. That conversation gives us a much better sense of the students as individuals, their interests, aspirations and readiness for the workplace rather than knowing only the T Level that they are studying. We can then shape the experience around their interests and introduce them to the most relevant parts of the organisation. Students can see more value in the industry placement, and we find that they are more motivated and engaged."
>
> **Nick Tucker | Staffordshire County Council**
> Digital

PRACTICE IN FOCUS

A construction employer has established an annual project-based activity as the first stage of its industry placement recruitment. Before students apply for a full physical industry placement, the employer works with both curriculum and employer engagement colleagues to give them an opportunity to engage with the company, its people and a realistic project brief.

The model depends on these relationships being joined up. Employer engagement colleagues coordinate the relationship, recruitment process and practical arrangements. Curriculum colleagues work with the employer to ensure that the project objectives align with relevant core content and skills acquisition, and that the activity takes place at an appropriate point in the curriculum. The employer brings current industry practice, shapes the brief and helps students understand the working environment and expectations.

Students work together as a team to complete the project. During the activity, they experience something of the company's work and demonstrate how they approach a brief, apply their learning, contribute ideas, collaborate with others and respond to feedback. Employer representatives also meet the students, introduce the organisation and hold informal conversations with them.

This creates a more informed matching process. Students can explore whether the employer and the construction sector are a suitable fit before committing to an industry placement. The employer and students can then make better-informed decisions about whether the industry placement is suitable and what support or development may be useful.

Full industry placement opportunities are subsequently advertised to the students who have taken part, with their contribution to the project informing the recruitment and selection process. The approach has also supported a longer-term talent pipeline: several students who progressed through the project and industry placement have since been appointed to apprenticeships within the business.

LEARNING FROM DIFFICULTY

The sequencing of an industry placement within the wider T Level programme can be as important as the quality of the opportunity itself. At one college or school, for example, experience showed that moving students directly into a complex NHS environment was not always the most effective starting point. Some students entered the setting before they had developed sufficient confidence in the professional communication, reliability and interpersonal behaviours it required. Although the opportunity itself was valuable, its timing made it more difficult for both students and employers to gain the full benefit from it.

It would have been easy to interpret this as a problem with individual students or a mismatch with the employer. Instead, curriculum, industry placement and employer colleagues used the experience as evidence about programme design. It showed that curriculum preparation, industry placement sequencing and workplace expectations had not been considered together early enough.

Colleagues reconsidered the sequence. Earlier experiences in care and community settings gave students opportunities to practise professional behaviours and build confidence in real workplaces. These capabilities continued to be modelled, developed and reflected on through teaching. More complex environments were introduced later, when students were better placed to engage with the opportunity and employers could offer activity at an appropriate level of challenge.

Employer insight helped curriculum and industry placement colleagues develop a shared understanding of readiness, while experience from industry placements highlighted what needed further attention in teaching. Industry placement timing, student development and curriculum sequencing became one planning conversation rather than three separate decisions.

When difficulty is treated as design evidence rather than individual failure, it can lead to stronger preparation, more purposeful progression and a better experience for subsequent students and employers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

For	Implication
Leaders	Establish clear points at which curriculum, employer engagement, industry placement and relevant support colleagues plan together and revisit decisions about timing, readiness, matching and workplace activity. Provide the time and authority for employers to contribute before delivery arrangements become fixed.
Curriculum staff	Make curriculum sequence, intended learning and student-development milestones visible to employer engagement colleagues and employers. Develop industry-relevant knowledge, skills, behaviours and reflective capacity from day one, and use experience from industry placements to identify what needs further attention in teaching.
Employer engagement and industry placement teams	Bring employer workflow, expectations, prerequisites and opportunities into programme planning early. Help curriculum colleagues and employers translate curriculum intent into appropriately timed workplace activity, preparation and matching decisions.
Quality teams	Examine whether industry placement timing, preparation and activity create an appropriate progression of challenge. Where difficulties or mismatches occur, test whether the underlying learning leads to a change in curriculum, industry placement design or sequencing and whether the effect is reviewed in later delivery.

SHARE WHAT MATTERS

Confidence grows when the right insight reaches the person able to use it at the right time

What we learned

All six action groups identified information-sharing as an influence on industry placement quality. Employers needed timely information about curriculum themes and dates, students' current learning, industry placement objectives, workplace expectations, availability and relevant support needs. Students also needed a clear account of what the industry placement involved, how it related to learning and what was expected of them.

Useful information did not always reach the person able to act. Employer engagement colleagues sometimes relied on informal conversations to obtain curriculum information; employers received a course title without a clear account of students' current knowledge and skills; and changes were not always communicated across teams. A shared student-record platform and a concise employer-facing curriculum timeline were two ways colleges and schools addressed this gap.

Employer evidence reinforced this distinction between having information and receiving the right insight. Employers did not ask for every curriculum document or all available information about a student. They wanted a proportionate account of what would help them plan meaningful activity, supervise the student appropriately and respond when circumstances changed. Action-group discussions similarly highlighted the importance of information about attendance, attitude, availability, interests, readiness and relevant adjustments, while also recognising the need for consent, appropriate boundaries and professional judgement.

The challenge was not simply a lack of communication. Information could be accurate but too detailed, inaccessible, late or sent to someone unable to use it. Quality depended on selecting the relevant information, explaining it clearly and making sure it reached the person making the decision.

As outlined in *Start together*, workplace readiness develops through the curriculum from day one. Here, the additional issue is information: employer insight should shape that preparation over time, with specific expectations added once the industry placement and workplace are known.

> "We work with colleges and schools that organise their employer engagement in different ways, and I don't think there has to be one model. What matters is knowing from the beginning who we should speak to and having confidence that they can connect us with the right person when we need more specialist information.
>
> "We don't need every document or every detail about a student. We need the right information at the point when it can help us make a decision, for example, what the student has already learned, what they are ready to do, any relevant support or adjustments, and any dates or changes that could affect the industry placement.
>
> "That depends on strong relationships within the college or school as well as a trusted relationship with the employer. When our contact understands us, keeps us informed and can draw in curriculum or industry placement colleagues when needed, the communication feels clear and consistent. It gives us confidence that we are working with one joined-up college or school team."
>
> **Anna Woodberry | Stoke-on-Trent City Council**
> Health

PRACTICE IN FOCUS

At one college, the industry placement coordinator identified a gap in the information available to support employer conversations. Without a detailed understanding of the second-year curriculum, it was difficult to explain what students would be learning at college and when. Employers knew the course students were studying but did not have enough information to judge which workplace tasks would be appropriate at different points in the programme.

To address this, the coordinator began working more closely with curriculum colleagues to map the learning sequence and translate it into a concise employer-facing timeline. The timeline identifies when key content and skills are taught, alongside important programme commitments such as assessments, required college attendance and periods when students may not be available.

This has turned curriculum information into something the employer engagement and industry placement team can use. Conversations with employers can now begin with a clearer picture of students' likely knowledge and skills at different stages of the year, rather than the course title alone. Employers can identify relevant workplace activity, ask more specific questions and flag where their operational timetable may not align with the curriculum or students' readiness.

The practice also creates a route for information to travel in both directions. Curriculum colleagues provide and update the learning sequence; the industry placement coordinator translates it into the information employers need; and employer feedback can be taken back to curriculum colleagues where timing, preparation or expectations need to be reconsidered.

The response did not require employers to receive more information. It required the right information to be selected, translated and shared at the point when it could improve industry placement planning. Addressing the original gap has therefore strengthened the relationship between curriculum and industry placement planning and created a more dependable basis for conversations with employers.

Construction

LEARNING FROM DIFFICULTY

During a building services engineering action-group discussion, an employer engagement colleague described walking past a workshop and noticing a student in class who, according to the industry placement schedule, should have been with their employer. The student had been asked to attend curriculum activity at college, but the industry placement team and employer had not been made aware of the change. The employer was expecting the student, while the student was following the instruction they had been given by their tutor.

It would be easy to treat this as an isolated attendance or communication error. Although the immediate issue may appear minor or administrative, its reputational effect can be disproportionate. An unexplained absence or late change can leave an employer questioning the college or school's reliability and make future participation less likely. The more useful learning is that curriculum activity, the industry placement commitment and communication with the employer had been managed as separate matters. There may have been a legitimate reason for the student to be in college, but the change had not reached everyone who needed to know or been considered against the student's existing workplace commitment.

The fact that the problem was discovered by chance is particularly revealing. Had the colleague not seen the student in the workshop, the mismatch might only have become apparent when the employer contacted the college or school to ask why the student had not arrived. This risks inconveniencing the employer, undermining confidence in the college or school and placing the student in the uncomfortable position of appearing unreliable when they had simply followed conflicting expectations.

The incident demonstrates that recording information is not the same as sharing it effectively. When a change affects an industry placement, there needs to be a clear and dependable route for informing the student, employer, curriculum team and employer engagement or industry placement colleagues. Responsibility for communicating the change should be explicit, and there should be confirmation that the people affected have received and understood it.

The learning is not that programme arrangements must never change. Changes will sometimes be necessary. What matters is that they are considered across the whole programme and communicated through trusted relationships before the student or employer experiences the consequences.

Students should not be expected to reconcile conflicting instructions, and employers should not have to discover changes after an expected student fails to arrive. Clear communication is important to every party: it protects the student's confidence and reputation, respects the employer's time and operational planning, and gives curriculum and leadership colleagues confidence that programme decisions are being implemented coherently.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

For	Implication
Leaders	Establish a clear information pathway and ownership for decisions or changes that affect an industry placement. Ensure curriculum, employer engagement, industry placement and support colleagues work from a shared and current picture, rather than relying on students to reconcile conflicting instructions.
Curriculum staff	Translate curriculum sequence, student readiness and key programme commitments into information employers can use. Before changing attendance or curriculum activity on an expected industry placement day, consider the effect on the student and employer and initiate the agreed communication route.
Employer engagement and industry placement teams	Build a trusted route between the employer and the wider college or school team. Identify what the employer needs, when they need it and who holds that insight; translate and broker the relevant information in both directions and confirm that material changes have been received and understood.
Quality teams	Test whether important information reaches the right person in time and leads to appropriate action. Treat conflicting instructions, unexplained absences, repeated requests and problems discovered by chance as evidence about the information pathway, not simply as individual communication errors.

STAY CONNECTED

An industry placement is a continuing relationship, not a handover

What we learned

Participants described an industry placement as a continuing relationship rather than a handover. Students and employers received more coherent support when curriculum, employer engagement and support colleagues stayed connected. Continuing employer relationships also supported curriculum input, careers activity, staff development, future recruitment and apprenticeships. Industry placements are therefore part of the college or school's wider employer-engagement strategy, not a separate transaction.

A recurring insight was that connection was most valuable when it remained focused on learning. Participants described the different perspectives brought to the review of industry placement goals and objectives: employers could see how students were contributing and developing in the workplace; curriculum colleagues could relate that experience to the knowledge, skills and behaviours being taught; and employer engagement colleagues could connect those perspectives and help agreed actions to be followed through. These accounts presented riview as a shared educational activity that keeps expectations aligned rather than solely a monitoring form or a process owned by one team.

Participants reported a range of ways of maintaining this connection, including regular cross-team meetings, joint employer visits, progress reviews, curriculum involvement in employer conversations and industry placement activity being discussed within lessons. The variation indicated that no single meeting frequency or contact model defined strong practice. More important were the purpose of the contact, clarity about responsibility and whether emerging information led to action while there was still time to improve the experience.

Learning and customer relationship management platforms can give relevant colleagues access to current information about progress, objectives, contact and actions. Their value depends on appropriate access, consistent use and a clear connection to conversations and decisions. Employers also stressed the need to avoid multiple systems, repeated requests and unnecessary administration.

Scheduled reviews featured frequently in the evidence, but participants also described changes and support needs arising between formal review points. These accounts highlighted the value of a trusted contact who could recognise what had changed and reconnect the appropriate curriculum, support or leadership expertise. The strongest contact models did not rely on one person knowing every answer; they provided a dependable route back into the wider college or school team.

Continuing connection keeps the industry placement visible as part of the student's learning. It helps students reflect on their development, allows workplace experience to inform teaching and support, and enables colleagues to address difficulties together. The industry placement is then more likely to feel like an embedded part of the T Level rather than time away from the curriculum.

> "We have a regular half-hour meeting with each college or school every week, even when there aren't students currently on industry placement with us. That continuity matters because we're not starting the relationship again each time a round of industry placements begins. It gives us space to look ahead, raise anything early and understand what is changing at the college or school. When a cohort of students do join us, the contact route and working relationships are already there, so support feels part of an ongoing partnership rather than something set up around an industry placement cohort."
>
> **Iain Hook | University Hospitals of Morecambe Bay NHS Foundation Trust**
> Health

PRACTICE IN FOCUS

At one college, employer engagement and curriculum colleagues working on digital T Levels introduced a short weekly meeting. The regular connection supports students before, during and after their industry placements and keeps the experience visible to both teams.

The meeting is used to maintain a shared view of student preparation and progress, consider employer and student feedback, review learning goals and agree actions. Curriculum colleagues relate workplace experience to current learning; employer engagement colleagues connect this with the employer perspective and involve other expertise when needed.

As a result, emerging needs can be addressed while action is still possible, workplace activity remains connected to teaching, and students and employers experience a joined-up college relationship. The value lies not in the meeting frequency itself, but in having a dependable point at which the right colleagues interpret what is happening and agree what should happen next.

A practical starting point: Where no regular connection currently exists, establish a short recurring meeting between curriculum and employer engagement or industry placement colleagues for each T Level route. Use it to review preparation, employer expectations, current industry placements, emerging changes and actions requiring follow-through. The frequency can be adjusted locally, but the connection should be dependable.

LEARNING FROM DIFFICULTY

During the employer roundtable, one employer described a student becoming distressed during an industry placement because of a personal matter unrelated to the workplace. The situation affected the student's ability to manage the working day, and the student contacted the college or school for support.

The college or school and employer needed to provide a sensitive and consistent response. The student needed support, while the employer needed clear communication about how the situation would be managed. An uncoordinated response could have created mixed messages or left either party managing the situation alone.

The employer valued a response that supported the student without undermining the workplace approach. The example shows why the college or school remains involved throughout an industry placement and why a trusted contact must be able to involve relevant support colleagues when circumstances change.

The learning is that connected support can protect wellbeing while maintaining clear and appropriate workplace expectations.

For	Implication
Leaders	Establish a small number of purposeful connection points across the industry placement journey, supported by clear ownership, appropriate access to shared information and cover arrangements that prevent continuity depending on one individual. Agree how emerging concerns, including welfare or safeguarding matters, will be assessed, escalated and coordinated with the employer.
Curriculum staff	Remain involved at the points where curriculum insight adds value. Contribute to the setting and review of industry placement learning goals, help students connect workplace experience to the knowledge, skills and behaviours being taught, and use feedback from the industry placement to inform teaching, reflection and support.

For	Implication
Employer engagement and industry placement teams	Agree a proportionate contact rhythm and a clear main route with each employer. Maintain a shared view of progress and agreed actions, reconnect curriculum or specialist expertise when circumstances change, and close the communication loop so that students and employers receive a coherent response without unnecessary administration.
Quality teams	Look beyond whether meetings or reviews took place. Examine whether learning goals remained purposeful, relevant colleagues contributed, agreed actions were completed and contact led to timely improvements in learning, workplace activity, confidence or support. Use student and employer experience to test whether systems and relationships work between formal review points as well as at them.

LEARN TOGETHER

Experience creates value when it produces a visible improvement loop

What we learned

Across the six action groups, participants saw industry placements as a source of insight into student contribution, employer experience, course design, preparation, matching and support. The discussions distinguished between conducting a review and learning from it: evidence was stronger for gathering feedback than for bringing student, employer and staff perspectives together, changing a decision and testing whether the response helped a later student or cohort.

As described in Start together, relevant knowledge, skills, behaviours and reflective capacity develop over time. In this section, the emphasis is on how students use reflection during and after industry placement to connect experience with taught learning, feedback and their next development priorities.

Experiences of difficulty provided some of the clearest examples of learning. Action-group and employer accounts showed how mismatched expectations, inappropriate timing, communication failures or an unsuccessful industry placement could expose weaknesses in preparation, sequencing, matching or support. Where contributors described a constructive response, the difficulty became evidence for redesign rather than a reason to attribute fault to an individual student, employer or team.

Positive experiences also raised questions about how learning travels. Participants described strong relationships, effective activities and responsive support that sometimes depended on particular individuals or informal ways of working. This suggested that understanding why an experience succeeded was as important as identifying what went wrong. Without that examination, effective practice could remain isolated to a curriculum area or team and vulnerable to changes in staffing or relationships.

Evidence of complete improvement cycles was limited, which may reflect the stage of T Level delivery and the small number of later cohorts available to test changes.

Participants also connected this learning with progression and organisational capability. Workplace evidence can strengthen careers and next-step conversations, help employers identify potential future recruits and reveal where curriculum, employer engagement or industry placement colleagues would benefit from industry updating or staff development.

> “The students told us themselves that their Microsoft Excel skills weren’t where they needed them to be in the workplace. We fed that back to the school, and what was encouraging was that they acted on it: they built more Excel into the curriculum for the next cohort. For an employer, that is what makes feedback worthwhile. You can see that the industry placement experience has informed what happens in the classroom, giving the next group more opportunity to develop those skills before they arrive.”
>
> **Erika Stainton | Lincolnshire Co-op**
> Business and administration

PRACTICE IN FOCUS

At one college, feedback from different industry placements began to reveal a recurring pattern. Employers were positive about students’ technical interests and potential, but some found that students were not consistently prepared for the professional behaviours required in the workplace. The feedback included punctuality, communicating with colleagues, responding to instructions, asking for help and managing concerns appropriately. Employers also said that they sometimes received too little information about the individual student, their strengths, interests, existing knowledge and the support that would help them contribute.

Employer engagement colleagues had responded to these issues as they arose, while curriculum and support colleagues had worked with individual students. The annual course review created an opportunity to look across those separate experiences. Employer feedback, student reflection and staff insight were considered together, allowing colleagues to recognise that this was not simply a series of individual industry placement problems. It raised broader questions about how professional behaviours were developed through the curriculum and how student readiness was understood and communicated.

The subsequent course design process introduced two connected changes. First, relevant professional behaviours and reflective capacity were made more explicit throughout teaching from day one. Workplace scenarios, employer-led activity and routine classroom expectations gave students repeated opportunities to practise communicating professionally, explaining their reasoning, seeking clarification, responding to feedback and reflecting on their development. Preparation became part of the continuing curriculum rather than an employability session immediately before industry placement.

Second, curriculum, employer engagement and support colleagues developed a concise, student-owned readiness and talent profile. Completed with the student, it brought together a high-level picture of their relevant learning, strengths, interests, industry placement objectives and the professional behaviours they had been developing. Where appropriate and agreed with the student, it also identified adjustments or practical strategies that would help them participate successfully. It was not intended to reproduce the student's full college record or label them as ready or not ready.

The profile gave employer engagement colleagues a stronger basis for matching and enabled employers to plan from a more individual understanding of the student. It also gave students a structured opportunity to articulate what they could already contribute, where they wanted to develop and what support helped them perform at their best. The profile could then be revisited through industry placement reviews as the student's confidence, experience and goals developed.

The next annual review considers whether employers report greater confidence in students' preparation, whether students can describe their strengths and development more clearly, and whether fewer concerns arise around the professional behaviours previously identified. This enables colleagues to retain, refine or reconsider the approach rather than assuming that introducing a profile or additional curriculum activity has resolved the issue.

The significance of the practice is not the creation of another document. It is the learning cycle behind it: recurring feedback was considered collectively, translated into curriculum and industry placement practice, and carried forward for review with a subsequent cohort.

LEARNING FROM DIFFICULTY

When feedback arrives after course design decisions have been made

A college or school had fixed a day-release industry placement model before employer engagement began. Employers later explained that project cycles, site access and supervisor availability made this pattern difficult, but the timetable was already hard to change. The feedback therefore arrived too late to influence the decision.

The experience was brought into the next annual course review. Colleagues examined why employers had declined, when meaningful activity was available and how different patterns aligned with curriculum sequence and student readiness. They retained day release where it worked and introduced blocks, flexible windows or project-linked activity where these offered a stronger fit.

The next cohort provides the test: whether more suitable employers participate, industry placements start as intended, workplace activity connects better to learning and employers are more confident about hosting again. The example shows a complete improvement cycle, from employer evidence to a changed design decision and a defined test of its effect.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

For	Implication
Leaders	Align industry placement evaluation, annual course review, curriculum planning and timetabling so that employer engagement knowledge and employer evidence are considered before fundamental delivery decisions are fixed. Give agreed improvements an owner, timescale and intended outcome, and protect a culture in which both difficulty and success can be examined without attributing blame.
Curriculum staff	Use annual course review to consider patterns across employer feedback, student reflection and industry placement experience - not only qualification and classroom evidence. Translate relevant learning into course design, sequencing, preparation and teaching, then identify what a subsequent cohort should demonstrate if the change has helped.
Employer engagement and industry placement teams	Move beyond forwarding individual comments. Bring together recurring employer insight, distinguish an isolated experience from a wider pattern and present the implications early enough to influence course and industry placement design. Close the loop by telling employers what was decided, what changed and what remains under review.
Quality teams	Trace the complete improvement cycle: the evidence gathered, how different perspectives were interpreted, the decision made, who acted and what was seen in a later industry placement or cohort. Examine whether employer consultation occurred while decisions were still open, and whether changes improved student preparation, industry placement relevance or employer confidence rather than simply adding another process or document.

A CROSS-CUTTING LENS FOR INDUSTRY PLACEMENT EXPERIENCE

The positive outcomes from an industry placement are not secured by the industry placement process alone. Nor can they be judged only by whether the required hours have been completed or the necessary procedures are in place. A valuable and meaningful learning experience depends on how effectively the industry placement connects with the student's wider programme of learning and whether curriculum, employer engagement and industry placement colleagues work together to create a coherent experience for the student and employer.

Across the action groups, connected working influenced the timing and sequencing of industry placements, the preparation of students, the relevance of workplace activity, the information available to employers, the support provided as circumstances changed and the extent to which experience informed subsequent course design. Where these connections were strong, the industry placement was more likely to operate as an embedded component of the T Level. Where they were weak, apparently sound processes could still result in a fragmented experience.

To identify positive industry placement experiences, look beyond whether arrangements exist and minimum hours are met, and consider what those arrangements enable. Relevant evidence can be found in student and employer experience, planning decisions, review conversations, adjustments and changes introduced through later delivery.

The matrix below sets out the quality connection within each of the four findings, the evidence that may make that connection visible and signals that could indicate an aspect of practice worth exploring further.

A GUIDING QUALITY PRINCIPLE

The strongest evidence is not simply that a meeting, review or system exists. It is that relevant insight reached a decision while it was still possible to influence it, led to an observable improvement for students or employers, and was examined again to understand whether the change helped.

Finding	Outcomes	Evidence worth examining	Signals worth exploring
Start together	Positive outcomes are strengthened when curriculum, employer engagement and employer insight shape programme and industry placement decisions before delivery patterns, timetables and expectations become fixed.	Annual course and programme planning; curriculum sequencing; the rationale for day-release, block or flexible delivery; employer advisory boards, panels and other routes for employer voice; employer availability and workflow; declined opportunities and the reasons for them; readiness and prerequisite decisions; planned workplace activity and expected student contribution.	Employers being approached only after the timetable has been fixed; viable opportunities not fitting the delivery model; employer engagement colleagues being expected to promote an offer they did not help to shape; recovery industry placements; primarily observational or low-level activity; workplace activity that does not align with students' prior learning.
Share what matters	Positive outcomes depend on relevant insight reaching the person able to use it, at the point when it can still inform a decision or response.	Employer and student briefings; accessible curriculum timelines; matching decisions and their rationale; shared records; agreed contact routes; material-change triggers; consent and adjustment arrangements; evidence that important changes have been received and acted upon.	Students or employers repeatedly providing the same information; inconsistent instructions; the student becoming the main messenger between teams; reliance on one person's memory; important information being discovered by chance or too late to influence the experience.

Finding	Outcomes	Evidence worth examining	Signals worth exploring
Stay connected	Positive outcomes can be sustained when students and employers can reconnect with the college or school and access the appropriate expertise as learning, workplace activity or circumstances develop.	Agreed learning goals and objectives; purposeful reviews; student reflection; employer feedback; curriculum participation; shared records; actions and adjustments made; escalation routes and arrangements for continuity when a usual contact is unavailable.	Reviews concentrating only on attendance or hours; learning goals not being revisited; action waiting until the next formal review; curriculum colleagues losing sight of the industry placement experience; continuity depending on one individual; information being recorded without prompting a response.
Learn together	Outcomes are better when insight from industry placement informs annual course review and course design, leads to a visible change and is examined through later delivery.	Themes emerging from student, employer and staff evidence; annual course review; subsequent course design and timetable decisions; progression and destination insight; an identified action, owner, timescale and intended effect; evidence from later industry placements or cohorts; feedback to those who contributed the original insight.	Feedback arriving after design decisions have been fixed; the same issue recurring; curriculum and industry placement evidence being reviewed separately; successful practice remaining local to one person or team; changes being introduced but not evaluated; employers contributing feedback without hearing what happened as a result.

RELEVANCE TO OFSTED'S RENEWED INSPECTION FRAMEWORK

These connections are relevant to Ofsted's current **Education inspection framework 2025** and the **Further education and skills inspection toolkit, operating guides and information** used for inspections from September 2026.

The findings have particular relevance to the evaluation areas relating to leadership and governance; curriculum, teaching and training; achievement; participation and development; inclusion; safeguarding; and, where applicable, contribution to meeting skills needs. Within these areas, they also touch on employer and stakeholder engagement, curriculum planning and sequencing, work-related learning and preparation for students' next steps.

This report does not reproduce or reinterpret inspection criteria and should not be used as a proxy for them. Its purpose is to help colleges and schools examine the quality and effect of their own connected working.

SIX PRACTICAL PRIORITIES FOR CONNECTED WORKING

Taken together, the four findings point to six practical priorities for colleges and schools seeking to connect curriculum, employer engagement and industry placement more effectively. They are not intended as a prescribed model or an additional checklist. Colleges and schools can use them selectively, concentrating on the priorities most relevant to their students, employers and organisational context.

1. BRING INDUSTRY PLACEMENT INTO 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. Industry placement should be planned as an embedded component of the T Level rather than accommodated after curriculum and timetable decisions have been made.

2. DEVELOP WORKPLACE READINESS THROUGH THE CURRICULUM FROM DAY ONE

Model and develop relevant knowledge, skills, behaviours and reflective capacity throughout teaching. Build on this foundation with preparation tailored to the workplace, occupational context and individual student rather than relying on a generic intervention immediately before industry placement.

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. Ensure that important changes are communicated, understood and reflected in the support or activity provided, using professional judgement, consent and appropriate boundaries.

4. KEEP THE RIGHT EXPERTISE CONNECTED THROUGHOUT

Give students and employers a dependable contact route while ensuring curriculum, employer engagement, industry placement and support expertise can reconnect as learning, workplace activity or individual circumstances develop. Formal reviews should be purposeful, but they should not be the only opportunity to recognise and respond to change.

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 be sustained or changed, who will take responsibility and what difference is expected. Examine the effect through later industry placements or cohorts and tell contributors what happened as a result of their feedback.

6. LEAD AND MEASURE FOR SHARED OUTCOMES

Set expectations, allocate time and use measures that value the quality and coherence of the student and employer experience, not only industry placement activity, hours or completion. Leaders should enable curriculum and employer engagement colleagues to share insight, influence decisions and take responsibility for shared outcomes.

METHODOLOGY AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

How the report was developed

This report brings together learning from six T Level action groups involving colleagues from colleges and schools across different routes and organisational contexts: Digital; Engineering and manufacturing; Management and administration; Building services engineering; Health (non-acute); and Creative and design. The groups explored the relationship between curriculum delivery, employer engagement and industry placement, sharing practical experience of what helps these elements connect and what can be learned when they do not.

Each of the six action groups met three times over a three-month period. Discussions explored what a strong industry placement looks like in different sectors and organisational contexts; what was working well; where difficulties were being experienced; and the challenges involved in finding, facilitating and supporting high-quality industry placements. Participants also worked together to develop practical resources intended to help colleges and schools support employers and students to achieve stronger industry placement experiences.

The action-group discussions were complemented by employer focus groups held in January 2026, two cross-sector groups of colleagues from colleges and schools convened in June and July 2026, and a final employer-sponsor roundtable held in July 2026. These activities enabled learning to be examined across sectors and from the perspectives of employers, colleges and schools. The resources and other outputs produced through the action groups are intended for publication on the Technical Education Networks website.

The report distinguishes between cross-sector synthesis, participant-described practice, development aspirations and anonymised employer research. This matters because a practice mentioned in discussion is not automatically evidence that it operates consistently or has produced a particular outcome.

This is qualitative, practice-informed work. It is not a representative evaluation and does not claim that every finding applies identically in every college or school, route or employer. Readers should consider the learning alongside their own student and employer evidence, organisational context and professional judgement.

The report draws on participant accounts of student experience and reflection but did not include a separate programme of direct student research. Student experience should therefore be examined locally alongside the findings.

How examples and voices are used

Employer voices and practice vignettes are embedded where they illuminate or test a finding. Named quotations and identifiable examples are presented with contributor agreement on accuracy, attribution and publication use. January focus-group evidence informs anonymised themes and composite learning scenarios. Where an account depends on both college or school and employer perspectives, the report has sought to represent both with care.

Learning-from-difficulty examples are included to expose system conditions rather than assign blame. All have been anonymised, and some draw together recurring features from more than one contribution. They should be read as illustrations of the learning, not as accounts of a particular college or school, employer or individual.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the curriculum, employer engagement, industry placement, quality and leadership colleagues who contributed openly to the six action groups. Their willingness to share successful practice, unresolved challenges and learning from experiences that did not work as expected made this report possible.

We also thank the employers who contributed to the January 2026 employer research and the July 2026 employer-sponsor roundtable, and the colleges, schools and employers whose practice and voices feature in this report.

This work was commissioned by Gatsby, with commissioning support from Dominic Martinez and Natasha Watkinson.

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