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University of Southampton

Faculty of Social Sciences

School of Education

The T-Level qualification: bridging, blurring or deepening the Academic-Vocational divide in post-16 education?

by

Nicola Jayne Kingsley

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

March 2026

University of Southampton

Abstract

Faculty of Social Sciences

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The T-Level qualification: bridging, blurring or deepening the Academic-Vocational divide in post-16 education?

Nicola Jayne Kingsley

Vocational education in England has been continuously reformed over the past 70 years with policymakers attempting to create a vocational qualification of equal status and reputation to academic qualifications. To address this policy churn, which has damaged the reputation of vocational education and training (VET) in England and cemented its position as the poor relation to academic education, T-Levels were introduced. Intended to bring radical change, policymakers announced a significantly different new technical qualification that would bridge the divide between vocational and academic English education.

To explore this policy reform, this research adopts a biographical approach with a case-study centred on the perspectives of two groups of students from the same education institution and socio-economic contexts studying either a new T-Level course, or A-Levels. Quantitative and qualitative data provides empirical evidence of students' first-hand, individual experience and perceptions of T-Levels; the perceived progression opportunities afforded by the new qualification in comparison to the well-established A-Level; and their perspectives on the extent to which the T-Level qualification is raising the status of technical and vocational education to equal academic. The multi-dimensional case-study contextualises students' perspectives within their familial, community and institutional contexts.

Overall, the study showed that the new T-Level qualification raised students' expectations of their progression opportunities, so facilitating development of a technically skilled workforce of graduates rather than college leavers. The technical skills developed on T-Level courses have the potential to enable vocational students to access elite technical occupations beyond the scope of other vocational education. However, issues of inclusivity, access and logistics put the qualification at risk of becoming an elitest course, only available to the few.

Students' perceptions of post-16 qualifications confirm the persistent English academic-vocational divide. The internalised notion that academic education is intrinsically higher status and superior to vocational binds T-Levels within a deficit model, as second choice for 'non-academic' students. However, T-Levels occupy an elite position within the vocational qualification landscape, gaining status through alignment with the academic and distinction from the vocational. In this way, the qualification may blur the dichotomy, if not bridge it.

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Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name: NICOLA JAYNE KINGSLEY

Title of thesis: The T-Level qualification: bridging, blurring or deepening the Academic-Vocational divide in post-16 education?

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission

Signature: ..... Date: 4th January 2026

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to the memory of my parents. They were both delighted that I had begun the project and would have been immensely proud to see me finish it.

Chapter 1 Introduction and Research Aims

This chapter presents the aims, scope and context of the thesis with an outline of research methods and introduction of the theoretical framework.

1.1 Background of study

Vocational education has been the subject of reform continuously since education became a universal right in England at the end of the 18th Century (McCulloch, 1990), always with an agenda of achieving parity of esteem with academic education. Successive UK governments have reported on the failures of technical education (Atkins and Flint, 2015), and the past 70 years has seen a "continuous agenda of reform and remodelling … pursued without a clear vision or sufficient commitment" (Sainsbury, 2016, p.23). Policymaking has proven so hasty and short-sighted that some scholars have argued governments have "played" with post-16 education, as if it were "the biggest train set in the world" (Keep, 2006). To address this policy churn, which has damaged the reputation of vocational education and training (VET) in England and cemented its position as the poor relation to academic education, T-Levels were introduced. This new Level 3 qualification, equivalent to three A-Levels in size and standard, was intended to bring radical change, creating a significantly different new technical qualification that would bridge the divide between vocational and academic English education.

Promoted as the technical gold standard equivalent to A-Levels (DfE, 2018b), T-Levels were designed to finally provide young people with reliable, high-quality vocational courses post-16. School-leavers would be able to choose between two pathways of equal value and status for their post-16 education, confident that both types of education would lead to equally successful progression opportunities (DfE, 2018c). In this way, the policy rhetoric claimed, T-Levels would introduce technical education that was not just for 'other people's children' (Hinds, 2018; Wolf, 2011) and so address the long-standing disparity of esteem between academic and vocational education.

To explore whether this policy reform has been successfully designed and implemented, this study tracks and compares the learning careers (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000) and progression opportunities of two groups of students from 2021 to 2023; approximately 100 students enrolled to this new form of technical education, and 100 enrolled at the same time and at the same college to the established academic option of A-Levels.

1.2 Rationale of the study

This case-study researches the developing status of T-Levels in comparison to A-Levels. Narrowing the divide between the relative status and reputation enjoyed by academic education

compared to vocational was the motivation of previous vocational policy reforms and was again the agenda for T-Levels. These continuous attempts to create vocational qualifications for 16–18-year-olds that education professionals, students, parents, employers and wider society consider to be equivalent in standard and value as the academic A-Level qualification, but for a more practical, industry focused curriculum, have been unsuccessful. Consequently the pace and frequency of policy reform, introducing and then withdrawing VET qualifications continues, is exacerbated. This in itself devalues new qualifications and creates distrust with all these stakeholders, thereby reinforcing the probability of failure. Each repetition of this cycle of qualification reform reinforces perceptions that VET qualifications are transitory and of lesser value, and in inverse proportion strengthens the perception that A-Levels are more reliable and of inherent higher status and reputation. The primary rationale for this study is thus to research whether T-Levels can bridge this academic-vocational divide.

Narrowing the academic-vocational divide is a long-term process requiring a societal cultural paradigmatic shift. This study therefore situates the introduction of this new technical qualification within a theoretical framework of what constitutes legitimate, or powerful knowledge, originating with Bernstein (1971)and explored extensively by Young (1972 for example), Apple (including 1992, 2004), Ball (for example 2012, 2013a) and Beck (2013), amongst many others. Similarly, this research brings the macro political context of hegemonic economic competitiveness to further understand the root cause of disparity between vocational and academic education. Positing that competition creates winners, not shared equals, it is argued that the historic superior earning capacity of professions perpetuates a superior, dominant status for academic qualifications since they provide access to these professions. Academic qualifications retain competitive edge compared to technical or vocational qualifications since they deliver syllabi and develop skills that prepare students for higher-earning professions (Avis, 2016; Avis and Atkins, 2017). At a more operational level, party politics is a factor in policy implementation that needs to be considered when evaluating the progress of T-Levels in bridging the divide (Relly, 2021). In these very early stages of the qualification it is only possible to gauge the impression of those individuals experiencing the qualification first-hand and in a localised, contextualised setting, as in this case-study. This thesis therefore provides valuable empirical evidence of how the political economic context translates to individuals' lived experience.

Further rationale for this study is to extend the body of research that locates the English judgement of vocational education within the discourse of 'non-academic' learner identities and the history of the English class system (Hyland, 2002; Pring, 2012; Brockmann and Laurie, 2016; Billett, Hodge and Aarkrog, 2022). Bourdieusian scholars including Reay, (2001, 2017 for example), Iannelli (2013), Burnell (2015) situate the perpetuation of the academic-vocational

divide within a social reproduction context; arguing that the generational inheritance of capitals reproduces the privileging of academic education and consigns VET to continued lower status. Therefore this research contextualises students' perceptions of the qualification within personal, familial and community individual contexts.

This thesis also contributes to the extensive research literature on post-16 choices (BIT, 2016), pathways and transitions (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000; Wyn and Dwyer, 2000; Maguire, 2013) by reviewing the contribution of the T-Level qualification to young people's progression opportunities and longer-term, broader career aspirations. These studies posit that policy reform is driven by the governmental skills agenda, labour market-driven policy and human capital theory approaches (Percy, Tomlinson and Huddleston, 2020). All these influences converge to reinforce existing societal strata with correlated careers. Research of the progression opportunities provided by the new technical qualification is vital and provides further rationale for this study. National quantitative data on the progression destinations of T-Level students is only beginning to emerge at the time of writing. This study's student focused, contextualised approach provides valuable insight into the processes and patterns of the formation of student perceptions, and how this manifests in students' learning careers and progression. These local, biographically informed insights provide indication of probable wider-scale future reception of this iteration of policy reform, which in turn determines the future widening or narrowing of the divide.

1.3 Research aims

The research aims of this thesis are therefore to investigate the progression opportunities furnished by T-Levels in comparison to the established academic alternative, A-Levels. The multi-dimensional case-study design which includes students' familial, community and institutional contexts, enables research of the factors that shape young people's long-term career aspirations. These two research aims lead into a third and primary aim of ascertaining the extent to which the T-Level qualification is raising the status of technical and vocational education to equal academic.

These aims are attained through empirical evidence of students' first-hand, individual experience and perceptions of the new qualification, contextualised within institutional application of policy and curricula. This biographical informed approach facilitates research of the role of social reproduction in the reception of new vocational and technical education and in perpetuating the academic-vocational divide. Similarly inclusion of students' educational contexts enables observation of the influence of the discourse around 'non-academic' learner identities and vocational education on the reception and status of this technical qualification.

1.4 Research Questions

The research aims detailed above are best expressed in these three research questions:

- What are students' perceptions of the progression opportunities provided by T-Levels compared to A- Levels?
- How are young people's career aspirations shaped?
- How do students perceive the relative status and reputation of T-Levels and A-Levels?

1.5 Research Design

This study adopts a case-study design incorporating a range of different perspectives to research these questions effectively. At the centre of the case-study are two groups of students from the same institution and socio-economic contexts studying either T-Level or A-Level courses for comparison. Quantitative and qualitative data from these students is contextualised with data gained from the institution they are studying at and employers engaged with the courses.

This case-study approach providing observation of the phenomenon in its natural environment is appropriate since the new qualification was only first introduced in September 2020, and is still at the time of writing being developed and rolled out. In contrast, the issues which this research aims to illuminate have been entrenched for decades and are fundamental in the formation and structure of the English education system. It is therefore not yet possible to evaluate the macro educational and societal impact of T-Levels. Instead this thesis provides valuable insight into the processes and patterns of how student perceptions are shaped and how these manifest in student learning careers and progression. Thus the impact of the qualification at a micro and meso level, on individuals and colleges, is described as indication of probable longer-term, macro consequences.

Similarly, evaluation of the macro-level effectiveness of the T-Level qualification on national economic productivity will only become possible in the future when the students of today have entered the workforce and applied their technical skills to industry for a sustained period. This study does however explore their perceived value to industry stakeholders through inclusion of employers' observations of the technical skills of students during industry placements. Thus the case-study design enables insight into the effectiveness of T-Level skills training at an immediate and organizational level.

1.6 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this research is founded within the school of Sociology of Education. Rooted in Bourdieusian theories of social reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 1986) this research is informed by the theoretical readings and applications of

Bourdieu scholars (Grenfell *et al.*, 2003; Grenfell, 2008, 2009; Burnell, 2015; Reay, 2015, 2004; Green, 2013; Kleanthous, 2022 etc.). Alongside concepts of social reproduction this thesis employs understanding of theories around power and knowledge, originating with Bernstein (1971; 2000) and Young (1971; 2007) and here informing the ways secondary school pupils can be prepared, however unintentionally, for different post-16 pathways.

Together these two theoretical positions provide a frame through which to understand the ways influences from home and family can inform and prescribe interaction and impact of education on individuals. The interplay of the central and fundamental influences of home and education is both reciprocating and intensifying and therefore reproductive. The theoretical concepts of inherited capitals and habitus reproduced in the field of education determining social practice generates an understanding that learner journeys are the product of both structure and agency (Colley *et al.*, 2003). Accessibility to academic knowledge is shaped by inherited perspectives, beliefs and skillsets and in this way, it is argued, socially determined cultural capitals and habitus work to raise the ranking, esteem and thus hegemony of academic/powerful knowledge (Young, 2007; Ball, 2010, 2012; Avis and Atkins, 2017). Hence the perpetuation of the academic-vocational divide. This study investigates the extent to which students' education practice and experience informed their views of the relative worth of vocational and academic education, and their choice of college course.

Once the academic or vocational, A-Level or T-Level route, had been chosen, a key question is whether the college experience functions to reproduce and cement preconceived unequal opportunities (Kleanthous, 2022), or whether both types of courses open up progression possibilities (Bourdieu, 1986). The interplay of home and education fields on the development of vocational education habitus has been explored extensively, and specifically in relation to career decision making by, for example, Hodkinson (1995). Here the question of whether post-16 qualifications and education contexts are a vehicle for social mobility, or the obverse, social reproduction (Sullivan *et al.*, 2018), whereby that initial choice of college course is a consolidation of home contexts, prescribing expectations (Burnell, 2015) is focused specifically on the T-Level qualification. This thesis then begins to scope the extent to which A-Level and T-Level college courses reproduce intergenerational capital-inscribed futures, in the well-trodden research footsteps of Reay (2004, 2015), Wheelahan, (2007) Sullivan *et al.*, (2018), amongst many others, or if the acquirement of cultural capital from college study and qualifications can reform or divert progression, perhaps towards alternative horizons for action. My thesis asks if this empirical investigation finds that qualification-type fields and associated habitus and doxa confer specific forms of cultural assets with limiting or prescribed progression opportunities attached (Apple, 2004; Beck, 2013; Grenfell, 2009).

1.7 Researcher's reflexivity and positionality

A reflexive research habitus is central to effective research in the sociology of education (Rawolle and Lingard, 2013). I therefore retain awareness of my positionality in my research. I hold senior leadership roles in the field of post-16 education, specifically sixth form and Further Education (FE) colleges. I provide more detail in the Methodology, and note here that it is useful to maintain cognizance of the possible impact of my professional positions and roles on the students participating in the study, and on my interpretation of data.

1.8 Thesis structure: Summary and Outline

The thesis is structured as follows. In Chapter 1 I have introduced the subject and scope of my study, the research aims, research design and its theoretical framework.

Chapter 2 explores the key literature in the areas of vocational education, governmental VET policy and qualification reform, the academic-vocational divide and progression pathways. Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical framework underpinning this research including Bourdieu's concepts of social reproduction as well as Bernstein and Young's theories on the classification and hierarchy of knowledge and their impact on learners' identities.

In Chapter 4 I detail the mixed methods research design and methodology. Chapter 5 provides an overview of the policy discourse of T-Levels as context for the fieldwork.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 present the findings of this project. Chapter 6 presents analysis of documentary data presented by the college hosting this case-study. This is complemented with qualitative data drawn from interviews with college leaders. Chapter 7 presents analysis of students' questionnaire responses, triangulated with data gathered from employers involved in providing industry experience or work experience to the students participating in the study. Chapter 8 presents analysis of students' qualitative responses.

Finally in Chapter 9 I discuss the findings situated with the discourses of extant theoretical and empirical literature. I conclude by identifying limitations of the study, outlining the contribution that this thesis makes to knowledge, and suggest next steps and recommendations.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

This thesis builds on significant scholarly research on vocational education and extends it with inclusion of the latest addition to the 16-19 qualification landscape, T-Levels. VET research discourse considers a broad range of aspects including policy reform, the relative status of technical and academic education and progression opportunities. The review of research literature that follows aims to draw together a pertinent selection of the many perspectives researched.

Research literature on the process of educational policymaking is reviewed in 2.1; the historic efficacy of English VET policy reform processes informs my research of the impact of T-Levels. In 2.2 research studies that investigate the relative merits of past forms of technical education and qualifications are considered, providing context for understanding the value of T-Levels. This is followed in 2.3 by a scrutiny of key empirical research literature on the academic-vocational divide, again with a view to better understand the contribution of T-Levels to this disparity. Next a selective review of the research literature into the progression opportunities afforded to college leavers is provided, and lastly in 2.5 existing research literature pertinent to the development and introduction of T-Levels is evaluated.

2.1 Research literature on the process of education policy reform

Vocational education has been the subject of continuous reform (see Richardson, 2011, for a critical historical overview). For over a century, successive UK governments reported on the deficiencies of technical education. Each failure of the current provision became a starting point for another cycle of reviewing the education and qualifications on offer to school-leavers and proposing further reform (Wolf, 2011, p.21). Evidently this process of policy-making was ineffectual as each cycle produced new qualifications and courses which failed, thus requiring another cycle and yet another new form of vocational education; “another round of permanent revolution” (Keep, 2006 p.47), “a near-permanent state of revolution” (Belfield, Farquharson and Sibieta, 2018, p.38). The ineffectual nature of this policy-making process can be attributed to various causes. A recurring concern is of governments ‘playing’ with education policy without sufficient commitment, longevity or long-term vision:

> “It is over a hundred years since the first report was produced which highlighted the failures of technical education in the UK, and since the Second World War there have been many attempts to reform the system. These have all been unsuccessful because they tinkered with technical education … An almost continuous agenda of reform and remodelling has been pursued without a clear vision or sufficient commitment” **(Sainsbury, 2016 p.1, p.23).**

The connotations of playing contained within Sainsbury's allegation of "tinkering" with reform is substantiated in research literature, including Keep's paper entitled 'State control of the English education and training system – playing with the biggest train set in the world" (2006). Here Keep finds that placing education reform in the hands of a few politicians and their advisors resulted in the "debacles" of Curriculum 2000 and the 14-19 Diplomas (ibid p.55). Developing VET policy without the insight and expertise of employers, Trade Unions or even teaching professionals meant "the government can enact whatever measures its parliamentary majority enable it to pass" (ibid p.55) and thus policy reform became subject to political expediency and game-playing.

The view that parliamentary terms of office and the need to play the game of attracting votes for re-election affects the timing and pace of policymaking is persuasive. The time constraints of the political cycle has resulted in some rushed and over-hasty policy reform according to Richardson, for example (2007). Not only does the political cycle prevent sufficient time for well-researched and informed change-management as Pring's research identified was essential (2013), but the precarious nature of political office can interrupt and impair the sequencing and implementation of reform. Moreover, the political necessity of demonstrating change, and of making "an instant impression" (ibid, p.141) whilst in office constructs an environment of continuous and "banal" reform without adequate planning or trialling. Consequently, many consider the reform processes of Curriculum 2000 and General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) to be flawed, evidentially since the qualifications produced became extinct (Hodgson and Spours, 1997, 2005; Hyland, 2002; Oates, 2008; Pring, 2013). Arguably similar political game-playing is evident in the development and implementation of T-Level policy: tied into T-Level policy development is the de-funding of the existing college-based vocational Level 3 option, Applied General Qualifications (AGQs), often referred to as 'BTECs'. Removing these qualifications from the FE landscape is part of the Department of Education's (DfE) determination to create a binary pathway of A-Levels and T-Levels – school-leavers would be forced to choose between these two types of qualifications, or an apprenticeship. Such a binary choice would enforce the successful establishment of the new qualification. However, research showing that de-funding AGQs would disadvantage at least 155,185 young people per year (SFCA, 2023) evidences governmental prioritization of 'winning' the policy game rather than providing high-quality, inclusive education.

Too much central government control is also considered a cause of ineffectual policy-making, with poor change management processes and a "hectic and pressured" pace of change subject to political manipulation at whim (Maguire and Ball, 1994; Norris and Adam, 2017). For example, research literature attributes the failure of reforms such as the 14-19 Diploma qualification and Curriculum 2000 to monopolistic state education policymaking (Keep, 2006;

Richardson, 2007). A contradictory position is presented by Huddleston and Laczik (2012) who argue conversely that the failures of the Diplomas resulted from a lack of state control. They consider the cause of failure lay with the government leaving the development of the qualification too much in the hands of employers without sufficient guidance and control. This employer-led approach resulted in a flawed product and policy because employers lacked experience and expertise in qualification development.

Other studies scrutinizing poor quality VET reform find the dominating focus on skills is the root cause. This “skills fetish” (Wheelahan, Moodie and Doughney, 2022) emanates from human capital theory (HCT). Developed in the 1970s and taking prominence in the 1980s and 90s, the neoliberal human capital approach views people as another resource alongside financial income and capital, to be deployed to optimise economic productivity and profit (Avis, 2016). This “global policy context in which economic competitiveness is hegemonic” lies behind British governmental agendas to upskill and reskill the workforce, with FE VET the engine of this agenda (Avis and Atkins, 2017, p.165).

HCT and the need for skills to further Britain’s economic competitiveness was explained and endorsed by Blair as Prime Minister in 2007: "in a sense, a whole economy has passed away … In the new knowledge economy, human capital, the skills people possess, is critical" (quoted in Keep and James, 2012, p.211). FE and VET is central to developing these technical skills (Keep, 2018), although some research finds the skills education mantra reaches down to primary schooling and threads through secondary education before becoming the raison d’être for FE (Social Mobility Commission, 2017). The adult population was also targeted for upskilling and reskilling through a series of ‘lifelong learning’ policies (Field, 2010). This culminated in 2021 in the UK with the introduction of the ‘Lifetime Skills Guarantee’ (DfE, 2021b), a policy that funded hundreds of free courses for adults who lacked useful technical skills suited to Britain’s 21st century knowledge industry. Research shows this policy also failed to have impact with limited take-up. For example, the number of enrolments on Free Courses for Job qualifications from August 2023 to January 2024 stood at just 18,020. Adult essential skills participation including digital upskilling decreased by 4.8% from the previous academic year (ONS, 2023).

Such is the dominance of the skills agenda that some researchers consider it has become “a doxa that underpins education policy” (Wheelahan, Moodie and Doughney, 2022, p.488). It is argued that the core purpose of education has become to supply employees for improved productivity of the national economy (Brown, Lauder and Cheung, 2020). Yet the connection between qualifications and productivity has not been proven nor coherently explained by policymakers (Terry and Orr, 2024), and this assumed causal relationship between skills and the nation’s gross domestic product (GDP) is arguably based on a reductive understanding of HCT (Marginson, 2019). These critical misgivings are not evident in governmental policymaking

however, and the mission of developing skills to meet employer needs has become so central to the purpose of education that it is now a quality measure, assessed by Ofsted through an additional inspection which reported on the extent to which colleges contribute "to meeting the skills-needs of employers and the local regional and national economy" (Ofsted, 2023a). This additional judgement reported alongside inspection of the quality of a provider's education raised the importance of post-16 education fulfilling employment skills needs to the extent, arguably, that skills production becomes the central purpose of FE. In September 2025 this separate graded judgement was integrated into the fabric of the new Education Inspection framework (Ofsted, 2025). Ofsted's skills judgements foreground the HCT ideology woven into the fabric of post-16 education in England. This new performance measure could affect the nature and quality of delivery of VET in England. The reputational risks associated with an Ofsted grading as well as associated funding ramifications could lead to providers focusing on narrowly competency-based qualifications at the expense of more broad-based vocational qualifications, or revising their delivery of VET to focus entirely on skills production at the expense of more holistic skills and cognitive development (see, for example, Brown and Tannock, 2009 for a theoretical, generic discussion of this issue).

This overwhelming focus on skills has led to DfE policy discourse correlating economic productivity with social equality. In this way FE VET is required to be a driver of economic growth and competitiveness as well as an engine of social justice and equality of opportunity (DfES, 2006, for example). The Lifetime Skills Guarantee illustrates this paradox well: the policy was promoted as a tool for levelling up and social equality (Johnson, 2020), however, the policy document shows these opportunities are actually purposed to the human capital mantra of closing the "skills gap" and "improving our productivity and international competitiveness" (DfE, 2021b, p.6).

These two agendas are not necessarily contradictory, but scholars consider the human capital skills approach has created a judgement framework that prevents colleges from fulfilling "FE's long-standing social justice mission" (Pennacchia and Bathmaker, 2021 p.1120; Avis, 2003; Bathmaker, 2017). The initial creation of marketized competition began in the 1990s when colleges were first judged by performance tables and made subject to market competition (Maguire and Ball, 1994). This created an environment where selection of more able and more socially and economically equipped learners boosts colleges' performance and minimises financial risk. This thesis extends this literature to consider the impact of T-Level policy reform on this tension between performing in a marketized environment and providing opportunities for social equality and justice with fresh starts for school-leavers. Two recent policy developments are scrutinised through this research lens. First, the manipulation of funding to incentivise

colleges to offer T-Levels (DfE, 2021a) and second, defunding AGQs which would force a much needed increase in enrolments to T-Levels (Education Committee, 2023).

My study of the policy reform process producing T-Levels had view of live policymaking and as such was well placed to contribute to the research discourse that describes the VET landscape as a "policy Bermuda triangle" (Keep and James, 2012 p.222). According to the National Audit Office (2022) the failure of these VET policies was caused by industry, employers and prospective students not sharing the government's faith in the skills agenda. My field work began in September 2021 with the launch of T-Levels within this government-created skills fetish and scrutinises engagement from both students and employers (AoC, 2023a). Moreover, my case-study was conducted in a period of unprecedented turmoil within the Department of Education with six Education Secretaries in office during the two years of field work. Many policy decisions affecting and surrounding T-Levels were made and changed again, and the entire replacement of the qualification was proposed (DfE, 2023c) at the same time as the T-Level students participating in this research completed their T-Level courses and endeavoured to progress onto their next steps. Therefore, my study examines this latest DfE policy process that may have created another short-lived and soon to disappear vocational qualification.

2.2 Research literature on previous VET qualifications

The review of literature in 2.1 above is focused on the metaprocess of VET policymaking. A further substantial body of research has evaluated individual new vocational courses and/or qualifications introduced over the past 50 years. Many failed to become established as credible and valued vocational education. Some, for example Higher National Certificates and Diplomas (HNC/D) (DES, 1969) survived for decades, but with little recognition beyond industry. Others were short-lived, or superseded before they became established. Below is a selective review of key studies of individual college-based VET qualifications introduced to the post-16 qualification landscape since the 1990s. These studies form the basis for my case-study into the most recent attempt to establish successful technical education in England.

In the 1990s, GNVQs, Curriculum 2000 and a range of other VET policy reforms proposed for FE, apprenticeships and Higher Education (HE) were all part of a "flurry of reforms" conceived and developed in a rushed form of "crisis management" (Hyland, 2002, p.287). Hyland considered this flawed approach tinkered with labels only and failed to address the entrenched and intransigent prejudice against vocational education. His analysis proved percipient in relation to the transience of GNVQs (Higham, 2003; Wellings, Spours and Ireson, 2010; Bird *et al.*, 2013; Spours, 2014) and to the ineffectual development of the general education element of VET (Green, 2014).

Reviewing research literature of GNVQs first, these qualifications were proposed in 1991 and withdrawn by 2007. Classroom-taught courses founded on workplace-based National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), they were officially presented as a significantly different form of broad-based VET which offered parity of esteem, prepared learners for employment through an assessment model that developed self-management skills and work-ready practices, as well as providing an accepted route to HE (DES, 1991). Wahlberg and Gleeson concur that GNVQ represented "a significant transition and transmission point"; "linking school, FE, HE and work ... GNVQ is more than just a qualification. It carries with it a set of ideological assumptions ... espousing parity of esteem" (2003, p 425).

However, their study found a disparity between the official discourse and reality. Teachers experienced GNVQ courses and students as second class (ibid p.433). The secondary policy intention of GNVQ to increase participation and achievement resulted in undiscerning entry policies, or from a more positive perspective, a socially just approach to student enrolment which was inclusive of learners who had failed at school either for ability or social context reasons, often both. Consequently, tutors in the case-study spoke of the need to take a social worker role (ibid, p.437-9). Whilst this case-study is of one specific GNVQ course, the difficulty of meeting vocational students' social inclusion needs has application to all vocational education, due to the social justice mission of FE and its platform as a second chance for school-leavers who experienced barriers to learning previously (Bathmaker, 2001). This thesis therefore attempts to scope the impact on social inclusion of the T-Level qualification as well as A-Levels, and so extend this strand of VET research.

Bathmaker's research of the GNVQ qualification found that "the extent to which employers genuinely require the broad skills that GNVQs aim to develop, is still unproven" (2001, p.85). Lack of industry engagement or interest ultimately caused the demise of the qualification (Stanley, 2012, p.101) which remained marginal and without a recognised identity (Wahlberg and Gleeson, 2003, p.440). Intermediate GNVQs were already being replaced by VGCSEs (Vocational General Certificates of Secondary Education) at the time of Wahlberg and Gleeson's (2003) fieldwork. The problem of establishing GNVQs with a sufficiently high profile to be publicly recognised and accepted is again transferable to vocational qualifications generally. Furthermore, parallels exist with my study; T-Levels were proposed to be replaced by a new qualification called the Advanced British Standard (DfE, 2023a) whilst this research was conducted because of poor recognition and low levels of enrolment. This act ironically further undermined recognition of T-Levels and increased doubt of its longevity – an unfortunate reiteration of the DfE's cycle of policy failure and reform, but one which allows the literature on GNVQ to inform this thesis.

Next a review of the critical commentary on 14-19 Diplomas, which replaced GNVQs, shows that these qualifications were again intended as radical curriculum reform, but survived only 5 years. The Diplomas implemented Tomlinson's vision for:

> "a unified framework of 14-19 curriculum and qualifications. ... GCSEs and A-Levels and good vocational qualifications would become 'components' which form the building blocks of the new system"
> **(Tomlinson, 2004, p.2)**

Tomlinson's recommendations were accepted with few modifications (DES, 2005).

The aspect of research into the design of the Diplomas with pertinence to my study of the T-Level qualification is the involvement of employers. Perhaps learning from the GNVQ experience referenced above, where the lack of industry endorsement ultimately led to their withdrawal, the Department for Education and Science announced the Diplomas as 'employer designed' (ibid). Employers were integral to Diplomas from the start: "employer involvement in Diploma development represented an extreme manifestation of employer engagement" (Huddleston and Laczik, 2012, p.403). Employers enthusiastically engaged with the design process of the 17 planned 'Lines of Learning' (LOL - subject/courses). However the amount of time required by participation in Diploma Development Partnerships (DDP) was too much for all but the largest companies and organisations (P. Huddleston and Laczik, 2018). This limited the breadth and scope of employment workplaces that could contribute. Moreover, each DDP was led by a sector skills body, which further diluted the impact of employers on Diploma design (ibid, p.415; (Prue Huddleston and Laczik, 2018, p.267). Ultimately, employers' limited expertise in the technicalities of qualification development caused the Diploma experiment to end in 2010, five years after initial proposal (Hodgson and Spours, 2007).

This thesis scrutinises the role of the Institute for Apprenticeships, which was appointed responsible for the development of T-Levels, in the light of research into Diplomas - to evaluate the extent to which it placed employers 'at the heart of the system' (Huddleston and Laczik, 2018). The Institute was renamed to incorporate Technical Education, becoming IfATE, at the point of inception of T-Levels. Evidently it was not considered successful in developing T-Level courses as it was cancelled and replaced by a new organisation called Skills England in 2024 (DfE, 2024f). Other parallels between Diplomas and T-Levels include the decision to halt three Diploma LOLs mid-process due to concerns about the technical qualification design proficiency of the DDPs, and the corresponding deferment of four T-Level Pathways because of quality concerns (DfE, Keegan, 2023).

Several reforms of post-16 technical education followed the Diploma debacle of 2005-2010. Tech Levels, Technical certificates and Applied General Qualifications (AGQs), wrapped up within an overall '16-19 Study Programmes' policy (DfE, 2015b) emanated from the Wolf Review

of 2011. Intended as a coherent technical education provision for school-leavers, it was part of a wider review of VET including apprenticeships (Brockmann, Clarke and Winch, 2010;Unwin, 2014), published as 'Getting the Job Done: The Government's Reform Plan for Vocational Qualifications' (DBIS, 2014). Several research studies examined the success of these initiatives, mostly to evaluate whether lessons had been learnt. The overall consensus is that they were not. The tone of reporting and research literature on this phase of technical education reform ranges from admonishing (Ofsted, 2014) to weary of the 'policy amnesia' (Higham and Yeomans, 2011; Raffe, 2015), to derisory (Huddleston and Laczik, 2018; Isaacs, 2013). Just six years later these initiatives were displaced by the recommendations of the Independent Panel on Technical Education chaired by Lord Sainsbury (2016).

The only vocational qualifications enduring through this churn of legislated vocational reform are AGQs. Commonly referred to as 'BTECs' and originating in HNC/Ds, this suite of AGQs has enjoyed greatest longevity and public visibility. However, their educational value and status has been continually contested (Wolf, 2011; DBIS, 2014; Kelly, 2017; Baker, 2020). In addition, the extent to which AGQs meet the skills agenda is questionable - AGQs have no mandatory requirement to provide experience of the workplace, and in implementation few AGQs provide more than a week or two of work experience, at best. This is part of the rationale for replacing them with T-Levels, which are designed to address this issue by mandating 315 hours of industry placement, approximately 20% of learning taking place with employers. This brings college-based technical education closer to apprenticeship training with its 80% workplace, 20% classroom based learning (DfE and DBIS, 2016). At the time of writing, AGQs were in the process of being replaced by AAQs – Alternative Academic Qualifications (DfE, 2024d). This new suite of qualifications delivered from September 2025 was intended to run alongside A-levels and T-levels to provide an academic route for students to enter higher education in place of AGQs. However, one month after delivery of AAQs began, the DfE announced another new replacement qualification suite – V Levels (HM Government, 2025a). Evidence that policy reform churn continues unabated.

2.3 Research literature on the academic-vocational divide

A key problem of post-16 education that my research aims to investigate is the academic-vocational divide. My study explores students' perceptions of the value of the education path they studied, which enables an evaluation of the success of T-Levels in closing the disparity of esteem between academic and vocational education in England, from a student perspective.

It is important to situate this within scholarly review of earlier endeavours to create educational equality between academic and vocational learners. The English education system has been structured with separate vocational and academic routes for over 70 years as outlined earlier.

An agenda to bring parity of esteem between them has been constant, and unsuccessful. As Wolf's review showed (2011) learners and their families believe vocational qualifications to be of lower value. For example students describing their vocational courses as being for "thick" people (Atkins and Flint, 2015 p 44), reflecting societal perceptions which closely associate vocational education with low skills, 'employability' and 're-engagement' (due to prior dis-engagement or being unsuccessful). These are all lower esteem values that are deemed to confer little educational advantage on the young people. In this way vocational students face "the soft bigotry of low expectations" and the binary structure of England's post-16 education VET cements social division rather than levelling up society (Kelly, Foreword of Richmond, 2018).

Some critics suggest policy introducing new VET qualifications as equal to academic is disingenuous; political rhetoric which the public does not accept (Relly, 2021). Several Education ministers have acknowledged that VET is characterised as 'for other's people's children', as a tactic to differentiate their own new VET reforms from earlier, unsuccessful versions. For example Hinds when Education Secretary launching T-Levels quoted Wolf (2011) saying: "For so many opinion formers, commentators and, yes, politicians: vocational courses are OPC courses: for 'other people's children'" (2018). Thus, Hinds and others before him, have promoted the new qualifications being introduced as 'worth the same' as academic qualifications, but research shows that Education ministers and civil servants were actually ignorant of vocational education and had no experience of it (Hyland, 2002).

These well intentioned governmental statements are challenged by some academics, whose studies expose the deficit model of vocational education, showing how it is the second, fallback option for those less academically successful in school (Benjamin *et al.*, 2003; Atkins, 2010; Swift and Fisher, 2012; Stalder, Choy and Le, 2022). The consequence of these "voices and sentiments of powerful others" is that the standing of vocational education "continues to be intractably low" compared to academic options (Billett, 2014). Young and Hordern (2022) provide an historical account of the genesis of this deficit model approach to technical or vocational education, and evidence its continuity in the preferences and practices of 21st century employers who continue to value college graduates of academic qualifications over VET, other than for roles requiring low level skills.

Significant research discourse locates this particularly English deficit perception of vocational education within the history of the English class system (Hyland, 2002; Fisher and Simmons, 2012). From a class perspective, VET is for other people's children, not, as referenced above, those of politicians, policymakers or middle-class parents generally (Wolf, 2002; Relly, 2021). Thus, the academic-vocational divide is further endorsed. New Labour's policy to increase the participation of 18-30-year-olds in HE to 50% further endorsed the preferential status of

academia, making the academic route post-16 even more desirable (Blair, 1999). Conversely vocational education is presented as a different form of learning for 'practical learners', who are 'non-academic', 'disaffected' and "capable of learning only by doing" (Brockmann and Laurie, 2016 p2).

Relly (2021) argues convincingly that the call for parity of esteem between academic and vocational education is "unachievable" (Relly, 2022, p 49) and is in effect virtue signalling, prompted by political motivations and tied into the social mobility agenda made high profile by Blair's New Labour (Eyles, Elliot-Major and Machin, 2022). Social mobility itself is considered disingenuous by some (Relly, 2021); part of a "neoliberal social imaginary [that] enables the misrecognition of meritocracy, where the social position of both the dominant and dominated is 'earned'" (Snee and Devine, 2018 p.1149). Snee and Devine's qualitative examination of 16 young people's post-16 choices does not illuminate the academic-vocational divide issue particularly, focusing instead on the families' wider, longer-term social imaginaries rather than the role of college course choices as a vehicle to opening those opportunities. Another empirical study that does focus on comparing academic vs. vocational choices of school-leavers, finds that:

> "expectations of young people and their parents and other familiars is quite consistently positioning VET as being an inferior postschool option to participation in higher education (HE) and one that is seen as being posterior to it in terms of status, attractiveness and educational outcomes"
> **(Billett, Hodge and Aarkrog, 2022).**

Reay (2017) draws attention to difficulties that can be incurred by social mobility. Her biographically informed study shows from a personal perspective how choosing the more publicly prestigious academic route, as championed by society and the social mobility agenda, can result in those young people not fully belonging to any area/strata of society if successfully social mobile. Thus it is considered that the crusade for upward social trajectories, essentially becoming middle-class, reiterates and confirms the English class system. There is no room here to explore the substantial literature surrounding social mobility, but highly pertinent to the academic-vocational divide debate is Reay's substantial scholarly research which presents a strong case for cherishing and valuing working-class ways of studying and being (for example, Reay, 2001; 2006; 2021; Reay and Wiliam, 2003; Reay and Ball, 1997, as a selection). Others have extended this line of enquiry to a more macro conclusion, suggesting that success in a meritocratic environment (Young, 1958), which takes the form of upward social mobility and results in a distancing from working-class localities and histories constitutes a new form of class domination. The ideological principle of meritocracy reinforces the existing class system and strengthens social reproduction. Rather than bringing equality to the different strata/areas

of society, levelling up, social mobility bolsters distinctions and increases the currency of middle-class status. Individuals who are successful in moving up do so by adopting middle-class ways, and necessarily rejecting or becoming detached from their working-class roots. From a macro political perspective, this constitutes a form of class domination rather than an accepting, blurring or levelling up of different classes (Jin and Ball, 2020). Some consider education and the opportunities it affords for the reduction of social and economic disadvantage, is used as a political instrument to mask the absence of strategies to address social inequality or more specifically to mask the underfunding of the welfare state (Keep and Mayhew, 2010; Keep and James, 2012).

Empirical studies considering this class-based root-cause of continued inequality of status between the two forms of education include the work of Iannelli (2013). Ianelli's study presents a version of the social reproduction model whereby schooling influences school-leavers' choices, technical or academic, and the type of knowledge gained in post-16 education determines a student's social mobility opportunities. Ianelli's field work essentially presents an empirical showcase of the theories of powerful knowledge and social reproduction, which will be discussed in-depth as part of this thesis' theoretical framework.

Other studies find the neo-liberal presentation of English society as meritocratic, with education the engine of social mobility, works to perpetuate social injustice. The myth that education can enable social mobility to all equally, it is argued, underplays structural disadvantages. It creates a narrative that learners/schools who do not earn an upward social trajectory are themselves responsible for that failure (Owens and de St Croix, 2020). Similarly other studies challenge "notions of meritocracy and the associated 'blaming' of working-class young people for their immobility" (Archer *et al.*, 2023, p.856). The argument is as follows: it is reasonably undisputed that English education is currently situated within neoliberal, market labour forces and a HCT paradigm (Avis, 2021; 2018; Ball, 2013b; 2016; Dickerson, McDool and Morris, 2023). Some theorists consider these philosophies and contexts prioritise economic imperatives creating a performative culture, part of the construction and measuring of a meritocracy. The effect of this performative discourse on the individual student, it can be argued, is to problematise anyone who fails to exhibit sufficient merit, rather than the system. The performance culture holds the individual personally responsible for their failure to maintain the standards of their school (and position on a league table), or boost the outcomes data, or in terms of progression to effectively participate in a neo-liberal knowledge economy. Therefore this process masks any systemic failures and conceals impacts such as class-based progression and other social inequities (Avis and Atkins, 2017). This perspective on students' personal growth and progress reflects what Brown (2013) refers to as 'performocracy' which he considers leads to or is used to justify unemployment of working-class youth as well as the overqualification and un- or

underemployment of middle-class youth. Under neo-liberalism such failures are not understood as the consequence of disadvantage or inequity but the inability to compete effectively in a competitive market place where winners take all (Avis and Atkins, 2017, p.176).

A consequence of interpreting poor performance as the fault of the individual learner leads, some scholars argue, to casting working-class youth as well as vocational education in a deficit model. Statistics show students of vocational education are from less socially advantaged backgrounds (Allen, 2025) and therefore have less access to the types of familial experience, networks and knowledge that enable them to navigate the formal education system, or capitalise on serendipitous events to construct a positive careership (Hodkinson, 2008b). Therefore blaming the individual for failing to demonstrate merit with performance criteria suited to middle-class dispositions leads to a conflation of working-class contexts and vocational education. As many social stratification researchers including Reay have identified, allocation into vocational and academic programmes is not driven by natural inclinations and intrinsic academic dispositions but instead a way of sorting children according to social class lines (Iannelli, 2013, p.909). The role of disadvantage is overlooked in this narrative, and so the academic-vocational divide is deepened since choosing the vocational option is to limit opportunities to succeed in the performocracy that privileges academic achievements.

Other studies posit that vocational education restricts upward mobility opportunities (Baker, 2020) since it is statistically more likely to lead to low-pay, low-skill, poorer quality jobs as well as increased precarity (see among others, Keep and James, 2011); Atkins 2010). Through this lens, post-16 education becomes instrumental in producing a stratified labour force with a conveniently different range of technical and cognitive skills aligned with respective levels of waged employment or professions (see Bowles and Gintis, 1977 as a classic text explicating this theory) – and so technical education remains stubbornly the poor relation.

The performative culture in which English education is operating is argued to exacerbate the inequality for vocational education between types of courses in a second way. Measures of equality are “rooted in calculability and audit as opposed to a more expansive and philosophical understanding of equality that engages with cultural, social and structural questions” (Avis, 2016, p.131). This conceptualization of youth as a resource for employers and the economy forces education towards subject knowledge driven, applied specialisms - VET (Beck, 2013, p.187). The resulting qualifications, T-Levels included, with a narrow skills focused curriculum aimed at improving economic productivity rather than enabling professional status dooms VET to remaining second choice and of lower esteem (Avis, 2003; 2016; Avis and Atkins, 2017). In contrast, other nations’ vocational education with a broader educative content succeeds. For example, German’s highly esteemed vocational education which centres on the notion of *Beruf* or vocation, incorporating development of the person in addition to industry skill formation

(Brockmann, 2012). Whilst vocational education and apprenticeships in Germany "centre on the integration of theory and practice, vocational education in England is based on the academic-vocational dichotomy" assuming that vocational learners reject all classroom learning (ibid, p.4).

Thus the historical privileging of academic education that characterises England's particularly entrenched class system subordinates vocational qualifications into an option only for 'non-academic' learner identities. Some scholars consider this prevents equality between the two types of education, arguing that it should be recognised that they serve different audiences for different purposes (Relly, 2021). To avert the phenomenon of 'university or bust' which is affecting education systems globally (Wyman *et al.*, 2017; Stalder, Choy and Le, 2022), it is argued that rather than trying to create a vocational route that competes with academic on the same criterion to bring about equality, it is preferable to create two separate parallel pathways of equal value, but in different ways - such as the dual systems of Germany (Lehmann and Taylor, 2015). Some recent UK policy developments can be seen as working towards this with the introduction of Institutes of Technology (IoT) as parallel institutions to universities, creating a complete duality of academic and vocational routes from school through to workplace (DfE, 2019). IoTs provide higher level technical qualifications (HTQs) equal to and parallel to undergraduate study. This is intended to boost the prestige and status of Level 3 vocational qualifications since they will enable progression to the new Level 4 to 7 HTQs, which in turn lead into technical professional careers of equal stature and reward as professions enabled through undergraduate study (DfE, 2020).

2.4 Research literature on progression opportunities from VET

Evaluating the destination possibilities afforded by a qualification is difficult since the learning careers and ultimate destinations of young people studying a particular course cannot be isolated from their life experiences outside formal education, nor the contexts from which they make their initial post-16 choices and then try to pursue them (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000; Billett, Hodge and Aarkrog, 2022). There is significant research to suggest that school-leavers' choice between academic and vocational routes is influenced by their home and school experiences, or in Bourdieusian theoretical terms, domestic and school fields, capitals and ensuing habitus. An exploration of these social reproduction and situated learning theories and impacts is developed within the study's theoretical framework.

Considerable literature also documents qualitatively the impact of contexts on young people's experience of post-16 education and transition to employment (Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson, 1996; Atkins and Flint, 2015; Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000; Gewirtz *et al.*, 2024). These studies illustrate well how unpredictable and badly impacted young people's transition

from school to employment can be. In some cases, the impact of significant hardship and trauma derails aspirations and ability to study at all. From these empirical studies it is possible to conclude that not only the 'horizons for actions' (Hodkinson, 1995) but the careership (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) of school-leavers is significantly impacted by school, home and life experiences (Mocca, Rojon and Hernández, 2019; Billett, 2020; Gewirtz *et al.*, 2024). This biographical lens on young people's career decisions also enables an understanding of the significance of gender within the transition paradigm. The early investigation of the impact of working-class masculinity on learner identities and progression from school (Willis, 1978) began a significant seam of research into the significance of gendered occupations, with substantial literature focusing on female students' horizons for actions and progression opportunities and journeys (for example, Brockmann, 2021; Archer, Francis, Moote, *et al.*, 2023).

An understanding of the metanarrative forcing changes to the ways in which young people transition from school to employment is provided by a number of studies, for example Du Bois-Reymond *et al.* (2001), Wyn and Dwyer (2000). This generation of school-leavers have grown up with the "human capital 'instrumental education' approach" to education, whereby the economic importance and value of educational qualifications is prioritised, as is the need to become "skilled, adaptable, and [a part of a] flexible workforce which will advance the knowledge society of the future" (ibid, p. 149). The new post-industrial workplace requiring this adaptability and readiness to reskill through lifelong learning is presented as one of change and precarity, without previous levels of job security or career continuity (Avis et al, 1996; Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000; Roberts, 2011; Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011). Some researchers argue that school-leavers embrace this new landscape with life experiences that blur the distinction between youth and adulthood, study and work. The conventional linear transition from school to work is being replaced with an extended phase of new adulthood which juggles and mixes study, personal pursuits and paid work. These studies suggest that knowledge of the difficulties young people experience entering the workplace has engendered a reverse pragmatism towards education. Post-16 education choices and subsequent career choices are seen as transient, and tend to be based on what is available rather than a considered pursuit of a prized career as part of the formation of their identity (Avis and Atkins, 2017). Collectively, these factors make it difficult to measure the progression opportunities provided by qualifications, either generically or specifically.

The political, social and economic macro factors contextualising the aforementioned ethnographic-style, longitudinal studies of young people navigating the transition from school to employment in the 1990s remains unchanged two decades later. The ambition of governments to "increase participation in post-compulsory education as a means to producing a globally competitive, high-skills economy, ... the 'learning society'" (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000,

p.9) is still current in the 2020s. This human labour theory (HCT) approach to education, when situated within a marketized environment, creates a complicated narrative for school-leavers making post-school choices. Students are viewed as a source of income by colleges, and courses are promoted by the skills they develop and future salaries they could lead to. Thus the individual needs of the school leaver can, arguably, become lost within the macro-demands of a HCT skills narrative and fierce financial competition between education providers. 15- or 16-year-olds in their last year of school face a complex array of progression choices, which may not be promoted and communicated with their personal individual needs and interests in central or priority view. It can be argued that the competition between colleges for students and the funding/income they bring, combined with free market competition can result in school-leavers becoming consumers in a shop of widely ranging options, all promising, perhaps falsely, shiny new futures. Some researchers discern a positive outcome from this, finding young people with increased agency constructing choice biographies, although the ability to progress positively, and the ability to turn serendipity to their advantage is overly dependent upon contexts, and thus social reproduction continues (Avis and Atkins, 2017 citing Hodkinson, 2008; Jones *et al.*, 2018; Archer *et al.*, 2023). Other research suggests young people are less skilled at researching and interpreting information on post-16 choices and consequently experience less effective careerships (Swift and Fisher, 2012; BIT, 2016).

Some studies suggest free market competition can lead to FE and HE organisations prioritising institutional finances over individuals' safe passage through their school-to-employment journey (Priest, 2018). For example, some of the colleges in Ball et al's (2000) study admit to taking students even though they did not have the necessary entry requirements, simply to stay financially afloat (p.13). Enrolling students to courses they are unsuited to inevitably affects retention and disrupts linear progression for the individual student. The rate of students chopping and changing between courses and taking several courses at the same level has increased (Wahlberg and Gleeson, 2003, p. 434) which interrupts the linearity of young people's progression post-school (Avis and Atkins, 2017 p. 173), and again makes evaluating the progression opportunities provided by a qualification difficult to measure.

Prioritisation of financial factors informs the performative destination data policies introduced to the UK FE sector, in line with HE graduate destination reporting. The implications of such a New Public Management (NPM) (Broadbent and Laughlin, 1997) approach to measuring and reporting on the progression opportunities enabled by 16-18 education have been explored in depth (Percy, Tomlinson and Huddleston, 2020). Here, it is pertinent to note the concerns that NPM data simplifies the route from college to work (whether or not via university), as a direct linear path and ignores the disruptions and rerouting caused by young people's social, geographic and learning disposition locations (DfE, 2015; 2018). Conversely, understanding of

the diversity of experiences complicating these career journeys, together with the rapidly changing labour market facing these young people, informs my reporting on the progression opportunities afforded to my case-study participants on both the academic and vocational route.

Increased focus on data reporting in education has yielded more information on the destinations of school and college leavers. A new performance measure introduced in 2016 by the DfE enables review of progression opportunities afforded by qualification type each year. From the start this showed that "Upper secondary students on vocational pathways, independently of their prior attainment, were less likely than those on academic pathways to progress to any sustained destination" (Vidal Rodeiro and Williamson, 2019 p. 19). This trend continues with the latest destination data available February 2024 (DfE, 2024a), however statistics on progression opportunities by qualification as opposed to generic pathway remains unobtainable.

For the many reasons identified (if briefly) above, direct comparison between T-Level completers' progression opportunities and those of A-Level or other vocational qualifications is not realisable. However, it is useful to provide some context for the reporting of T-Level progression opportunities with information on earlier Level 3 college-based vocational qualifications including GNVQs and the 14-19 Diplomas. I will focus on progression from vocational qualifications introduced after 1990 since destination data reporting was undeveloped for earlier qualifications. Also, progression routes prior to the 1990s are not as comparable to those of T-Level graduates since employment opportunities have become less clear and more precarious, thus complicating the transition from school to workplace (Roberts, 2011) and reducing the validity of comparison with T-Levels introduced from 2020. I will therefore provide as context for destination reporting of T-Levels, the progression data of GNVQs, 14-19 Diplomas and AGQs.

GNVQs were taught for just 14 years and so there are few empirical studies recording the progression opportunities these qualifications provided. The Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education research project found that GNVQ learners saw the qualification as general education providing a platform for moving towards adulthood rather than progression to a specific vocational pathway (Wahlberg and Gleeson, 2003). Hodkinson's research compliments these findings, suggesting that GNVQs were not providing clear stepped progression to employment (Hodkinson and Mattinson, 1994).

The 14-19 Diplomas replaced GNVQs and were again designed to prepare young people for both employment and higher education. Hodgson and Spours (2010) predicted that the Diplomas would be as unsuccessful as GNVQs in enabling these progression opportunities due to "low uptake, low understanding, low recognition and high complexity syndrome" (p2). The root cause

of this problem, they suggest, lies with the frequency and inefficacy of VET policy reforms which results in a lack of acceptance by stakeholders; in turn causing the new qualifications to fail and necessitating a new cycle of replacement, again. This prediction became reality for the 14-19 Diplomas (Huddleston and Laczik, 2012 p 408), was repeated again with NVQs and the learning outcome approach they epitomise (Winch, 2023), and is now being repeated in the T-Level iteration of VET reform (DfE, 2023c). The failure of these VET qualifications to provide positive progression opportunities needs to be understood within the deficit model framing vocational learners, education and horizons which positions learners as low achievers with limited destination opportunities (Atkins, 2010; Stalder, Choy and Le, 2022).

Arguably more positive progression prospects for VET learners are provided by AGQs. However, their success is usually measured in terms of progression to university. These vocational qualifications are applauded for enabling access to HE for students for whom A-Levels are not an option (Social Mobility Commission, 2017; Atherton, 2021; SFCA, 2022, 2023; Education Committee, 2023). As discussed above, upward mobility is not unproblematic, and on a macro perspective is unsustainable. Upward mobility must be balanced by downward movement. Unless professional destinations expand infinitely increasing access to university and so entry to professions will result in 'social congestion' (Brown, 2013; Brown, Reay and Vincent, 2013), necessitating a "reshuffling of the pack" (Brown, 2016). Some argue this issue is glossed over by the social mobility campaign (Payne, 2017; Lawler and Payne, 2017), and suggest its net consequence is increased competition for professional careers, which boosts the value and currency of the academic route as opposed to vocational, therefore exacerbating the divide (Esmond and Atkins, 2022a, Ch 4).

Furthermore this uninterrogated drive for upward social mobility achieved by access to university means that "25 years of education policy led us to believe we can only succeed in life with a degree" (Millward, 2023). This, together with critical research findings on the continuous, unproductive reform of VET has resulted in the conclusion that "currently and globally, there appears to be a growing and unprecedented disaffection with VET and the occupations it serves as viable post-school options." (Billett *et al.*, 2022 p. 20).

2.5 Research literature on T-Levels

At the time of writing, emerging research discourse on the T-Level qualification was pessimistic.

Firstly and fundamentally, there is a school of thought arguing that the technical skills the T-Level qualification are designed to provide are not actually needed. This undermines the core principles and motivations of the T-Level policymaking process and design which were: (a) to create a new elite technical qualification to upskill the next generation of technology worker and

(b) to boost the UK's national economy since skills correlate with economic growth (Hinds, 2018).

This primary goal of producing a technically skilled workforce to raise national economic productivity is written into the blueprint and core of the T-Level qualification (DfE and DBIS, 2016). However research suggests the fourth industrial revolution or knowledge economy has not, as predicted, accelerated demand for workers with technology skills, a 'labour scarcity'. Instead it created the opposite, a 'job scarcity' (Brown, 2024). It is argued that the relationship between education and waged work needs loosening, not tightening, in order for a broader education of young people to emerge, and to dispel the illusion that VET is the panacea of all economic ills (Esmond and Atkins, 2022a, Ch 6).

The connection between technical skills and economic activity is intrinsic to this period of vocational education reform whereby education is seen as servicing the economy (Avis, 2003). This close, causal relationship between VET and economic productivity and wealth generation is forged from and a part of the 'competitiveness settlement' of post-compulsory education (ibid p.144). The post-16 education sector has become a marketized environment formed from a framework of agreed principles and assumptions based on and structured by financial measures of success. The success of a qualification is judged in monetary terms, both by the earning potential of students completing it and increase of economic productivity generated nationally (Esmond and Atkins, 2022a, Ch 1). This then informs funding mechanisms whereby qualifications share a parallel correlation in levels of funding; the financial investment of a qualification type reflects governments' rating of esteem and status of that type of education. Relly (2021) draws attention to this when she attributes the failure of education policy reform in creating respected vocational education to a lack of political investment, and this lack of political will correlating with underfunding of VET. Historically the lack of esteem accorded to vocational education's has resulted in diminished funding; the FE sector was identified in 1989 as the 'Cinderella' service of the English education system by Kenneth Baker, then Secretary State for Education. Augar's Independent panel report to the Review of post-18 Education and Funding compared university funding of over £8 billion with further education funding of £2.3 billion. It reported on the "steep, steady decline in funding" for technical education and described a funding "story of neglect" for the FE sector and its vocational education (Augar, 2019).

These two facets of monetarised education policy come together in recent VET reform. Johnson's 2020 announcement of the £2.5 billion Covid-generated National Skills Fund designed to invest in FE students to aid social mobility, was part of the Johnson administration's 'levelling up' agenda. However, whilst Johnson claimed this technical educational reform would "make our country fairer" he justified it saying it "will tackle the fundamental problems in our

economy of productivity and growth" (2020). The implications of this policy statement is that levelling, equality and fairness has differing limits for different groups of young people: for FE students equality of opportunity means becoming economically productive i.e. employed in industry, which is not level with the progression expectations held for school-leavers following the academic route.

Higher levels of funding for T-Levels (IFS, 2023) demonstrate the Department's faith that technical skills are needed and will fuel economic growth. For the educational sector it illustrates the DfE's high esteem of this new vocational qualification, especially in contrast with continued low funding for the rest of FE courses: funding per capita in 2022 remained around two thirds of that received in schools and around half of HE funding. For T-Levels however £500 million every year in additional funding was pledged (Greening, 2017). The Department also provided considerable capital investment to T-Level providers through the Transformation Fund (for example, DfE, 2021a). Both forms of financial investment have proved effective levers to engage college providers and raise the profile of T-Levels with employers – money speaks in a marketised education sector. Interviews with college leaders and employers help explore this proposition.

Critical study and research of vocational education and the FE Sector reflects and explores this finance framework: "The prevailing tendency [of research] has been to focus either on FE's instrumental contribution to the economy and social cohesion ... driven by measures of retention and achievement that are geared toward external audit and inspection" (Colley *et al.*, 2003). This research will engage consciously with this commercial/ operational construction framing empirical research of FE/vocational education, and will maintain a broad definition of progression opportunities and aspirations, not just defined by retention, employability and financial status.

A second cause of pessimism emerging in research discourse into the future of the T-Level qualification is the questionable competency of the development and implementation processes. These concerns suggests that even if there is a labour scarcity, T-Levels will not be able to fill those skills needs. Research suggests mistakes made with previous VET reforms were repeated in the development of T-Levels. For example, the pace of development was identified as too fast as earlier as 2018 (Richmond, 2018). There was a lack of clarity on who the qualifications were for, and which type of provider was best suited for effective delivery, also how the qualification relates to apprenticeships. The issue of employers already having reached saturation point in terms of offering work experience was not addressed either, and continued to be a significant problem throughout implementation (Ofsted, 2023b). A further set of problems around quality and consistency of standards plagued the qualification, arguably

emanating from the decision to appoint a single awarding organisation per T-Level pathway (IfATE, 2024a).

A third area of concern raised by studies relates to the value of the work experience element of T-Levels given that they are taught and assessed in a classroom setting (Atkins, Esmond and Suart, 2019). Some question whether the skills required by the T-Level specifications will retain validity due to the fast pace of technology evolution. For example, Young questions the validity of the T-Level specialisms arguing that they are too narrowly defined so “unlikely to provide for occupational demands that will endure" (Young and Hordern, 2022).

Terry and Orr (2023) also question the quality of the qualification. The Department places accountability for quality with employers – a logical decision given the qualification’s primary goal of developing the high-quality technical skills that the economy needs. However their study finds employer engagement is negligible, symptomatic of a national scale problem with employer buy-in (DfE, 2023a, p.29). This quality measure therefore becomes an ineffective mechanism for raising standards of vocational education or fulfilling any labour scarcity.

A further issue identified by scholars relates to the academic-vocational divide. Studies of the initial introduction of T-Levels suggests the new qualification will worsen disparity between these two types of education as well as increase social inequality (Esmond and Atkins, 2022a; Terry and Orr, 2023). It is argued that the persistence of English classist attitudes prevents T-Levels from equalling the status of A-Levels, perhaps exacerbated by the government expressing the quality of the qualification in terms of equivalence to A-Levels and university entrance tariff points rather than holding high status value in their own right. Moreover, the determination to create a technical qualification of equal status to the academic route has informed the assessment format of T-Levels with 100% summative assessment externally marked. Whilst this may help improve the rigour, standards and prestige of the qualification, it necessitates higher entry requirements which in turn restricts student recruitment and creates problems of inclusion (Ofsted, 2023b), with some school-leavers stuck in a cycle of Level 2 retakes. Consequently the probability of T-Levels becoming a universal qualification, or indeed surviving, is threatened. Hence the outcry against the government’s intention to defund AGQs, the only other college-based Level 3 vocational option (Kelly, 2017; AoC, 2023b).

Furthermore, these new ‘technical elite’ qualifications gain prestige and seek inherent value through distinction from and contrast to vocational education generally and other vocational qualifications specifically (Terry and Orr, 2024). Even within the T-Level pathways there is a division between the elite technical subjects and less technical T-Level courses, creating a phenomenon of ‘welfare vocationalism’ (Esmond and Atkins, 2022a, Ch 6). The policy rhetoric around the different T-levels chooses to ignore the inequality of progression opportunities between different T-level pathways (ibid, Ch 5). Thus a persuasive argument is emerging that T-

Levels will magnify existing social inequalities and polarise opportunities rather than enable social justice, and English technical and vocational education system will remain the 'sick man of Europe' (ibid, p.75).

This study brings research of students' perceptions and experiences of studying T-Levels to this research literature, as well as an institutional perspective.

Chapter 3 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this research is centered upon two conceptual premises from the school of Sociology of Education (Ball, 2004b): the Bourdieusian concepts of social reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 1987) and the interdependence of power and knowledge, as explicated by Bernstein (1971; 2000; 2004) and Young (1971; 2007). These two underpinning theories come together to elucidate the long-standing academic-vocational divide, the core theoretical concern of this thesis. They also provide different but complementary theoretical perspectives on the varying school to work trajectories experienced by young people who have pursued either the academic or the vocational route through school and college, which is the second core focus of this thesis.

These philosophical concepts of social reproduction and epistemic classification and access interlink and reciprocate to weave a strong, integrated and comprehensive theoretical context for this research and thesis. There is extensive scholarly explication and debate on all aspects of these two theoretical areas and the conceptual nuances and links between them (including as a small sample, Grenfell *et al.*, 2003; Burnell, 2015; Kleanthous, 2022). Rather than essay a review of this vast research discourse, I will instead delineate each of Bourdieu, Bernstein and Young's concepts as pertinent to my thesis. Specifically, these theories will be applied to the key areas of research of: the role of social reproduction in the development of T-Level policy and in the perpetuation of the academic-vocational divide; the impact of language and knowledge classification on the status of vocational education and on learner identities; the consequent impact of learner identities in conjunction with the influence of home and school contexts on post-16 course choice; the subsequent impact on post-college progression opportunities and so school-to-work trajectories.

3.1 Social Reproduction

This case-study is constructed to explore the connections between young people's home and school contexts and the progression opportunities they perceive they can access. Fieldwork is conducted in the crucial two years of education in the English education system, 16 years to 18 years. These two years are highly formative, acting as a bridge from school and future adulthood in the world of work whether via higher education or not. It is the premise of this research that the choice of college course and qualification type is highly influential in determining future trajectories. However, this post-16 choice is not an isolated disconnected act but the product of familial and societal contexts, experiences and learning at school, and macro historical and social influences/expectations. This vast, complex and subtle set of invisible, interdependent factors is made understandable through Bourdieu's concepts of capital, field, habitus and doxa. These concepts are interlocking and relational. For instance, a specific sector of society (field)

determines the value of assets held by individuals (capital) within it, whilst an individual's position with the hierarchy of the field is determined by the nature and value of the capitals held, etc. (Grenfell, 2008). Bourdieu's concepts form a series of epistemological precepts or thinking tools which work together to explain the structure and practices of modern society in the western world through a sociological gaze.

3.1.1 Bourdieu's thinking tools

Bourdieu writes that:

> "the distribution of the different types and subtypes of capital at a given moment in time represents the structure of the social world, i.e. the set of constraints inscribed in the very reality of that world, which govern its functioning in a durable way"
> **(Bourdieu, 1986, p.242)**

This introduces Bourdieu's thinking tools (Green, 2013; Aubrey & Riley, 2020): the arena in which 'capitals' are deployed and ranked is designated as 'field'. The ways in which holders of capital operate and conduct themselves within any field is denoted as their 'habitus'. And the invisible rules of this lived societal reality have the collective label of 'doxa'. The following four sub-sections explain these four main thinking tools of Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction.

3.1.1.1 Capital

To begin with the notion of capital, Bourdieu took the familiar idea of economic 'capital' as in the financial assets and investments of a business, and expanded it to denote symbolic assets of cultural capital and social capital which together account for the inherited or acquired properties individuals bring to their interactions, locations and experiences with and in society. The symbolic capitals encapsulating the values, tastes and lifestyles of certain social groups are elevated arbitrarily above the symbolic capitals of other sections of society i.e. some symbolic capital has greater prestige, value and currency than others in a particular area of application or transaction (Moore, 2014). Symbolic capital takes different forms, most commonly separated into social and cultural capital. Social capital can be defined as the mutual recognition, relationships and networks that bind a social group together (Bourdieu, 1996) and can include but not be restricted to social affiliations and networks, family, religious and cultural heritage (Thomson, 2014). Cultural capital can be considered to encompass but not be limited to knowledge, taste, aesthetic and cultural preferences and attributes derived from education, family background and possessions (Grenfell, 2013).

Bourdieu's initial conception of the notion of cultural capital was induced from research into "the uneven scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes" (Bourdieu, 1986, p.244). Concluding that "scholastic yield from educational action depends on the cultural capital previously invested by the family" (ibid p.245), the resulting idea of social

reproduction exposed the unseen and fallacious presumptions that academic success is the product of natural aptitudes only and challenged the dominance of human capital theories on the development of education. The institutionalised form of education-produced cultural capitals, qualifications, are accorded different cultural values and capital depending on their type. Academic qualifications constitute a form of cultural capital with greater currency and value than vocational education. Thus the impact of these institutional or consecrated capitals when transferred to the field of recognition shapes the longer-term careerships of young people and reproduces social hierarchies and opportunities.

The relevance of this for my research is made evident when it is considered that vocational education, especially in England, is bound within a deficit model, i.e. the less academically successful are signposted internally and externally towards the vocational route. Those placed onto vocational courses as a fallback, second choice are then set on a long-term poorer pathway since the qualifications they will gain on completion of these courses are of lower value and status than qualifications gained from academic study. Given that there is a strong correlation between lower socio-economic status/class and the FE sector in England that delivers this vocational curriculum (Atkins, 2010), it can be seen that academic success and study versus vocational post-16 education becomes a class-based issue which is reproduced in the English education system. Thus the ensuing institutionalised state of cultural capital, qualifications, can be considered to cement the social status of students, holders of that capital (Kleanthous, 2022). This intergenerational reproduction of familial capital is the premise of Bourdieu's research applied to the field of education (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Schooling plays a central role in awarding and consecrating the higher value symbolic assets held by players in dominant positions within the field (Sullivan et al., 2018; Apple, 2004a). For example, teachers and the children of parents with professional careers who bring the highest value inherited and embodied capital to the classroom can interact successfully with school language and rules and are consequently more successful and better rewarded in terms of institutionalised capital (qualifications and grades). A cycle of intergenerational privilege and success is ensured as each intake of children is rewarded, or not, for the symbolic equipment such as capitals, ways of speaking and behaving, they bring with them from home into school (Benn and Chitty, 2013).

Focusing on English education, it is noticeable that many Education secretaries and policymakers are Oxbridge graduates, or holders of other high status institutionalized capital (Carter, 2024), as well as having enjoyed private schooling (Holt-White, 2024) – an option available only to families with high economic capital and often from the upper or middle-classes. Most academia and private sector education serve as particularly high-ranking social institutions to confer corresponding elite social capital, in addition to the high-ranking cultural

capital that recognises and rewards success in the formal curricula. In contrast, vocational education with its agenda and curriculum of developing practical skills in preparation for work in industry or service sectors as opposed to intellectual professions, produces capital of a lower value and status, commensurate with the societal status of technical practical work. The currency of vocational qualifications is strong within the intended employment sectors but not as transferable to professions, whereas the currency of academic qualifications exceeds that of vocational qualifications within the professions, and can also transfer well into the practical and technical industry sectors. The reasons for this will be explored further in discussions around 'powerful knowledge' in 3.2.

This thesis recognises the contrast of capitals held by students of vocational and academic education (Lehmann and Taylor, 2015), and turns attention to the VET policy reform that perpetuates reproduction of this disparity. Bourdieu's concepts enable theoretical understanding that this replicating cycle of restriction and ceiling for FE VET students is allowed and enabled by VET policymakers who, holding contrasting, higher cultural capital aligned with and the product of the academic route, are still given the responsibility of improving vocational education, even though they have not experienced it nor will direct their own children towards it. Thus policymakers continue to develop vocational qualifications for 'other people's children', as noted by Wolf (2011) and referenced by Hinds (2018) in relation to T-Levels. Scholars such as Edwards (2008) explore the disconnect and perhaps hypocrisy evident when policy makers introduce reforms of an education intended for others (see also Gale and Lingard, 2015).

3.1.1.2 Field

'Field' is a second Bourdieusian thinking tool which denotes a defined social space with an associated system of social relations with different status, values and rules. Field is therefore an arena in which capitals take currency, determining the location and ranking of agents operating within that particular field hierarchy. However, it is useful to retain cognizance of the different views within the sociology of education on the influence of structure; the debate presents a dichotomy of social structures versus human agency perspectives. The social reproduction model represents a middle ground, arguing for equal and interdependent relations between field, capital and habitus, none dominant nor causal but "tangled together in a gordian knot" of fused structure and agency (Thomson, 2014, p.67). Moreover, fields are not singular or unchanging but formed reflexively in interaction with the agents' dispositions, capitals and practice operating within. This mutual dependence between field and capital means that in turn, capital is very field dependent.

Field theory allows a nuanced, manifold understanding of the different arenas forming society: multiple fields overlap and interact across the various areas and aspects of life; economic and social for example. Fields exist adjacently – domestic, work and recreation fields link together to

describe the different parts of lived experience on a horizontal, concurrent and equal plane. A vertical arrangement of fields is also formed through specialization. For example, an overarching field of professions encompasses subfields of law, medicine, finance etc. and each subfield comprises further subfields, for instance the legal profession field consists of subfields of barristers, solicitors and legal executives and/or subfields of employment, property, criminal law, etc. Some of these subfields are more powerful than others; the economic field exerts dominance and affects the housing field, domestic field, education field, etc. as illustration, and some fields hold higher prestige with greater transference to adjacent fields. As illustration, the elite cultural capital gained from high status education fields (academic qualifications) hold a higher currency and value in the corresponding professions field of employment whilst vocational qualifications have a stronger transfer value in lower skills employment fields, but less currency in profession fields or other prestige social or cultural fields (Thomson, 2014).

The multiplicity of fields and sub-fields overlapping and making up the different areas of society is made more complex with hierarchies of capitals within each field (Bourdieu, 1984) – there is no such thing as a level playing field. At the heart of the social reproduction theory is the belief that players who bring higher status capitals to the field are advantaged at the outset because the field's status is dependent upon and produces more of that particular capital. This is particularly evident in the school field since formal curricula and pedagogies valorise academic forms of capital. These agents can use their capital advantage to accumulate more and advance further, be more successful, than others in the field. Field theory when applied to education shows that formal education is not a level playing field but unmeritocratic in the way it speaks to and suits the capitals of middle-class children, enabling those children to succeed and so reproduce their inherited cultural capital. Thomson (2014) suggests Bourdieu and Passeron found schooling operated purposefully to sift and sort young people into different educational trajectories, academic or vocational, and that the education field reproduced itself more than others (1990).

It is this finding that my case-study explores in relation to the school-to-post-college trajectories of groups of students choosing either A-Levels or T-Levels: will the choice of the new vocational qualification be a continuation and affirmation of inherited capital, or will a T-Level confer a higher level of institutionalised capital than previous vocational qualifications and so T-Levels will hold a higher currency in the field of education, and subsequent fields of work. It is acknowledged that the role of education in shaping young people and their capitals is not separate from the rest of the lives of these young people, but lies in a network of reciprocal interactions and impacts between various fields, including for example familial, economic, faith community fields, etc.

3.1.1.3 Habitus

Bourdieu conceived of habitus as "history turned into nature" (Bourdieu, 1977, p95). Sometimes referred to as 'embodied capital', habitus is the manifestation of inherited knowledge, ways of seeing and being as well as expectations from the environments of childhood, both home and school. Bourdieu considered primary socialization in the family to be deeply formative, and whilst habitus is never fixed but constantly evolving through lived experience and interactions, this early formation of habitus is instrumental in the choices made and directions developed through education. The pertinence of this theory to my research is clear when considering Bourdieu believed education to be the most important agency following the formation of domestic habitus (Moore, 2014, p.103). The pathways chosen as individuals mature, for example in post-16 education, can reinforce the burgeoning habitus begun at home in childhood if field-habitus match of the chosen college course is comfortable, engendering a feeling of "fish in water" (Bourdieu, 1977, p.214). Consequently, the habitus of individuals maturing in similar settings will share characteristics of that social group or class:

> "the ways in which a person's beliefs, ideas and preferences are individually subjective but also influenced by the objective social networks and cultural traditions in which that person lives"
>
> **(Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997, p.33)**

Arguably this phenomenon is particularly prevalent in England, seen as having an entrenched and rigid class system (Esmond and Atkins, 2022a; Ball, 2013, p.197) which is strongly reproductive. Academic learning reproduces middle-class privilege by conferring legitimacy, prestige and value to symbolic or cultural capital (Crossley, 2014, p.94). Similarly, some studies found working-class habitus could reject academic learning, as an attribute of working-class masculinity for example (Willis, 1978). From this perspective, such a rejection of academic learning in school and the subsequent choice or diversion to vocational learning is a consolidating and cementing factor of social reproduction, which VET policy reform will struggle to change. Indeed, Colley *et al.* (2003) developed the idea of 'vocational habitus' to describe the norms and values of specific work roles (such as mechanic, nurse, etc.) and argue that VET teaches the necessary associated habitus, along with the required knowledge and skills. This helps students become 'right for the job' (Colley et al., 2003 p.488).

Some scholars find this model of social reproduction too simplistic however, suggesting that parental influence is more complex than the unseen effect of 'what people like us do', and many students living in areas of socio-economic deprivation exhibit habitus inculcated from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds (Kleanthous, 2022). Other studies find peer influence can have significant effect on the generation of habitus, in addition to that of parents and family

(Brooks, 2003). However peer influence may reinforce those deeply formed perceptions and attitudes if a similar social-cultural background is shared.

Moreover, there is a school of thought that criticizes the conception of habitus as it is encapsulated in the notion of 'vocational habitus' as overly structurally deterministic (Lehmann and Taylor, 2015). It is argued that Bourdieu did not see habitus as unchanging and fixed, but as endlessly transforming (Hardy, 2012, p.127; Maton, 2014, p.52). Taking this into account, the potency of college choice increases and school-leavers' choice of pathway in their post-16 education years becomes even more important. As illustration, the choice of A-Levels by a student of lower socio-economic context with family education and employment rooted in non-professional occupations could alter their habitus, enabling access to the academic field of higher education and professions. In contrast the choice of vocational education post-school would further inscribe their domestic field-generated symbolic capital and habitus (Lave and Wenger, 1991). My study aims to scope the influence of habitus on participants' initial choice of college course – A-Level or T-Level and through interview to explore the development of corresponding academic or vocational habitus through their two years of study.

3.1.1.4 Doxa

When an individual's capitals are valued and highly ranked in a field, it follows that habitus fits well and is in step with that of other well-respected agents within the field. Each field can be understood as a competitive game or "field of struggle", requiring players to develop strategies to maintain their place in the game, or to prosper (Bourdieu, 1977). A sports analogy is often adopted to illustrate this phenomenon: when a player brings the right attributes and approach to the field (inherited capitals and habitus), they understand the rules of the game and know how to score, how to help themselves and their team win. The team being those who share equal symbolic capital and habitus. These 'rules of the game' are known as doxa within the paradigm of social reproduction. They are assumptions so accepted as to be the natural order and invisible, "the reality that goes unanimously unquestioned because it lies beyond any notion of enquiry" (Deer, 2014, p.115).

Doxa are key to the maintenance of hierarchy of social relations in modern society. Dominant players with naturalized understanding of doxa continue to operate successfully, so further accumulating high value capitals. Institutions within the field legitimate these capitals so strengthening the doxa and their own status. Thus, doxa are self-reinforcing, simultaneously increasingly potent and unseen:

> "The adherence expressed in the doxic relation to the social world is the absolute form of recognition of legitimacy through misrecognition of arbitrariness, since it is unaware of the very question of legitimacy"
> **(Bourdieu, 1977).**

The doxa of the field of education creates the unseen, unquestionable, seemingly natural and true higher status of academic study compared to practical vocational education and training. Doxa establishes and reinforces as innate the arbitrariness of this hierarchy of status of education and qualification types. The higher cultural capital of academic study represented in objectified form as qualifications is a social construction and a misrecognition of arbitrary categorisation and hierarchical status. This misrecognition lies behind the persistence of the academic-vocational divide. It serves to reinforce doxa and strengthen the symbolic assets of dominant agents in the field of education, and through progression, to the societal field of power. Qualitative data gained through interview scopes students' awareness of how to play this particular field of education in order to build successful careerships from school through college and onto next steps.

3.2 Knowledge and power

A second theoretical perspective, parallel to and complementary with social reproduction theory, is pertinent to this thesis. Scholars have argued that the classification of knowledge itself is arbitrary, and these false categories of knowledge and learning are integral to the formation of curricula and schooling in western education. Different types of knowledge are esteemed differently, with the highest status type of learning being academic, rational, unapplied knowledge and learning. This arbitrary and subjective ranking of knowledge, learning and qualifications favours the dominant social classes and perpetuates their societal privilege. This type of knowledge and schooling is therefore more powerful than applied, practical skills-based curriculum i.e. vocational education. Theories of powerful knowledge such as those espoused by Bernstein (e.g. 1971), Young (1972 for example) and Apple (including 2004) are key to understanding the academic-vocational divide and the consequent formation of deficit model learner identities for vocational students, which in turn influence, perhaps limit, students' horizons for actions. In this thesis these notions of hegemonic knowledge are employed to understand the ways secondary school pupils can be prepared, however unintentionally, for different post-16 pathways and ultimately futures.

3.2.1 Language codes

As a precursor to theories of hegemonic knowledge, it is useful to begin with Bernstein's theories on language. Bernstein explored the impact of different ways of speaking and communicating in the classroom on pupils' progress and achievement in school (2004). His theories suggest that schools as a rule tend to devalue students who use restricted language codes but reward students who use the elaborated codes of the middle-class (Aubrey & Riley, 2020). Bernstein observed that teachers are necessarily accomplished and familiar at communicating in elaborate language codes with extensive vocabulary, standard English

grammar and fluent, elaborate syntax. This form of language is prized and written into the syllabus and assessment criteria from primary schooling onwards. Thus teachers and the English school system in the broadest sense expect, assess and reward the children who bring similar vocabulary, grammar and syntax to the classroom, albeit appropriate to the age group of the class.

Those pupils who have developed at home a different, by these criteria less articulate and less extensive language cannot access learning or success at school as easily. Their restricted language code is not recognised or rewarded, and so school/academic success is less attainable resulting in more fragile, less confident learner identities. As a result, pupils with restricted language code are less able to develop academic cognitive or communication skills and will pass on their restricted language codes, with concomitant knowledge and skills, to their own children. This corresponds with Bourdieu's theory of the intergenerational reproduction of habitus and cultural capitals. Its salience to the formation of learner identities and post-16 course choices is evaluated in this research.

3.2.2 Knowledge structures

Bernstein developed the notion of language codes further to describe the way they define school success and so prescribe what is valued and taught in the classroom. He developed theories around the construction of structures of knowledge – the way the education system privileges certain forms of knowledge and defines what is worth knowing. This determines what is included in the curriculum and so governs what can be accredited. Best summed up in his own words, Bernstein wrote:

> "Curriculum defines what counts as valid knowledge, pedagogy defines what counts as a valid transmission of knowledge, and evaluation defines what counts as a valid realisation of this knowledge on the part of the taught"
>
> **(Bernstein, 1971)**

It is this work on knowledge structures (Bernstein, 2000) that resonated with his peer and fellow British sociologist Young. Young's work popularized the idea that what 'counts as knowledge' is socially constructed as is the authority that education is endowed with, which in turn lends it the ability to be the arbiter of what is correct and what isn't, which learning is valued and which is not (1971). Young argued that education theory of pedagogy, curriculum development etc. operates with a set of invisible assumptions. These assumptions, criteria which are so embedded and fundamental that they go unrecognised, originate from traditional schooling, i.e. the practice of academic learning. The selected criteria are therefore based on western academic standards such as higher orders of rationality. These standards became institutionalised so that they became the 'truth' which legitimates practice. So accepted are

these criteria for educational practice and knowledge that they act as natural, underpinning invisible requirements of educational ability, so masking the fact that they are constructed and situated. Thus the education system because of this epistemological understanding creates an environment where some students with the context and aptitude for scholastic study thrive and others whose experience and approach favours intuitive, creative or practical, applied learning can become excluded from the educational progress others enjoyed. Again, parallels with habitus and doxa are evident.

This theory of knowledge structures provides insight to the foundations of formal education; curriculum, examinations, subjects, definitions of intelligence and teachers' authority. All these aspects of school knowledge are not natural and indisputable, but constructed. As Young argued in his aptly titled text 'Knowledge and Control' (1971), constructed to maintain societal hierarchy and status quo. Young contended formal education could be seen as a ruling-class construction designed to ensure working-class children failed educationally and so became resigned to working in more manual, less well-paid jobs. This is a caricature of Young's scholarly argument, but this phrasing is indicative of the type of interpretation prevalent in the wide-spread dissemination of his ideas throughout the English teaching profession (White, 2018).

The following two decades saw English secondary school curricula revised to include "integrated" courses which moved away from the classical specialisms of esoteric academic subjects studied separately and unapplied to lived experience. Instead, integrated courses cut across subject boundaries in line with Young's ideas. Effectively this new curricular was shaped in the model of vocational education with subjects integrated in application as beneficial for the development of useful skills and understanding for a particular purpose. As illustration, Health and Social Care courses integrate science, ethics and medical practices applied to healthcare settings such as nursing rather than discrete theoretical courses of biology, philosophy, sociology for example.

Perhaps inevitably, traditionalists became concerned this move towards a blurring of academic and applied knowledge for all resulted in a 'dumbing down'. They feared standards were being lowered rather than recognising the new curriculum represented a philosophical revision of the fundamental nature of knowledge, pedagogy and curriculum (Gibb, 2015). One can hear this fear of dumbing down in the persistent labelling of A-Level study as the 'gold standard', a standard that must be valorised, protected and defined in contrast to vocational qualifications. The defence and veneration of the gold standard A-Level qualification is explored through students' eyes in this case-study, especially as the rival T-Level qualification was introduced as an equivalent gold standard of technical education.

3.2.3 Powerful knowledge

Young also changed his position somewhat, publishing in 2007 a second text again with the telling title of 'Bringing Knowledge Back in' which arguably presents a reversal of position on the way powerful knowledge should be managed in schooling, one which chimes to an extent with traditionalist views. Young retained his ideas regarding the dominance and hegemony of academic knowledge from previously, and still believed the academic curriculum and pedagogy worked to exclude students without aligned home and familial contexts. But he no longer advocated for wholesale integration and applied curricula as a means for a more inclusive education. Instead a new theoretical approach to inclusivity was advocated, one which increased access to this powerful knowledge.

Young considered that academic knowledge enables the ability to generalise, form concepts and understand how the world works (and perhaps change it) in ways that "everyday knowledge", tied to the contexts in which people live, cannot. Academic subjects and curriculum were therefore the gateway to "powerful knowledge" not, as previously argued, "the knowledge of the powerful", selected and organised to exclude young people from low-income backgrounds and protect elite privilege (ibid). Academic knowledge is powerful because it provides a "basis for generalisations and thinking beyond particular contexts or cases" (Young, 2015). Social justice, Young argued, demands that all students should have as much access to this powerful knowledge as their advantaged peers (2007). It is useful to consider this theory as applied to the development of T-Level policy; whilst T-Levels courses are vocational courses designed to develop knowledge and skills applied to specific industry job roles, the design of T-Level curricular and assessment models echoes that of powerful knowledge/academic curriculum in many ways. For example the syllabus of the core units of each T-Level contain high levels of theoretical academic content similar to that taught in the A-Level syllabi. This academic knowledge is assessed as theory unapplied to contexts or example, through external examination. This discussion is developed through analysis of T-Level policy documentary data in Chapter 5, and through fieldwork exploring whether T-Level curricular design enables any wider epistemic access to powerful knowledge for the young people participating in this case-study.

It is necessary to engage with the element of critical opinion that takes issue with an apparent inconsistency of approach in Young's legacy, as noted by both Bernstein and Pring (Marrero, 2021), and also with the "sound-bite quality" of his work (Beck, 2013). For example, it is argued that Young's 'sound bites' led to an undiscerning adoption and application of his ideas by the English educational establishment, rather than his theorising itself. It is alleged for instance that the 'expert panel' advising Education Secretary Gove on the reform of the English National GCSEs Curriculum adopted his later call for subject-based curriculum for 'common schooling'

in an uncritical way, leading to a very rigid, traditionalist form of revised GCSEs (ibid). Young himself has consistently insisted he does not endorse the curriculum traditionalism prompted by Gove (Young and Muller, 2015). However in an interview (Wilby, 2018) Young stated in relation to vocational, applied, practical skills education that teachers "don't know anything about work" and "If you have children who've taken vocational courses, employers don't really want them". From this perspective the powerful knowledge argument can be seen as reinforcing the valorisation of academic, theory-driven knowledge at the expense of more applied, pragmatic knowledge. Or in Bourdieusian terms, symbolically valuable knowledge is authorised by those who regulate access to professional fields and the divide is perpetuated whilst social equity is prevented.

As noted above, elements of the T-Level qualification borrow from the traditionalist approach of Gove and the wider Conservative administration. This thesis will explore whether T-Levels bring powerful knowledge to English vocational qualifications, and whether the integration of theory and practice of this new vocational qualification enables a higher esteem. VET enjoys a higher status in some other education systems; Germany for example where vocational qualifications operate on a knowledge-based model incorporating substantial 'general' education akin to powerful knowledge (Brockmann, Clarke and Winch, 2008). It is therefore pertinent to consider if T-Level syllabi will garner similar improved status, refuting Young's later disparaging opinion of vocational education.

3.2.4 Official knowledge of performance culture

The theoretical work of Apple is pertinent here; writing as a self-professed political activist (2004, p.xx) his theories are deliberately situated within the political and economic domains, overtly addressing the politics of education both party and generic. His work applies Young's theorising on the relationship of knowledge and control to issues of ideology and curriculum (ibid). Using the denomination 'the selective tradition', Apple theorises on the construction of legitimate knowledge and the hegemonic foundations of educational knowledge and curriculum hierarchy. He characterises official knowledge as representative of ideological configurations of the dominant interests of society. He argues that controversies over official knowledge signify more profound political, economic and cultural relations and histories, and are proxy for wider questions of power relations (Apple, 2004, p.182). This leads to a hidden curriculum that tacitly teaches expected norms, values and dispositions to young people.

Pulling on the theories of Habermas, Bernstein and Bourdieu as well as Raymond Williams, Apple sought to understand education (and all 'social activity') as a "powerful agent in the economic and cultural reproduction of class relations in a stratified society" (Apple, 2004, p.7). This led him to expose the way pedagogy, classroom practice, labelling, and assessment in schools was not neutral, nor apolitical, as he argued previous social and education scholarship

had claimed and maintained. Apple emphasised the influence of the economic environment of modern education, specifically mercantile capitalism. For example, he argues that education operates within a performance culture and is shaped by the performativities of “global and macro-economic considerations of rate of return on investment or the reproduction of the division of labor” (ibid p,25). Thus the official knowledge of education corresponds with economic growth agendas and human capital theory (HCT).

Ball posits that 'accountability' and 'competition' are becoming a new 'discourse of power'; an emerging form of legitimation for both the production of knowledge and its transmission through education (Ball, 2004a, p.145). Thus curriculum, pedagogy and education policy are the products of a performance culture, the value system and hierarchy ascribed to the performativity environment that education now works within. In relation to this thesis, the performativities prescribing the development of vocational qualifications and measuring their success are different to those governing academic education. Metrics for assessing academic curricular success relate to university progression, particularly Russell Group universities followed by access to professions. In contrast VET is measured by transition into the workplace. This is particularly evident with the “skills fetish” (Wheelahan, Moodie and Doughney, 2022) directing T-Level policy. These two different criteria for success prevent equivalence and so prevent any resolution of the academic and vocational divide (Relly, 2022), as discussed next.

3.3 Theoretical causes of the academic-vocational divide

A key concern of this thesis is the persistent and thus far irreversible low status of vocational education compared to academic. Understanding the causes of this disparity of esteem is essential in order to interrogate the contribution of a new qualification to the landscape. The theories of social reproduction and the classification and restricted distribution of knowledge summarised above provide theoretical understanding of this academic-vocational divide. Both sets of theories expose the arbitrary and self-interested origins of this differing status between these two types of education as well as the ways it is perpetuated and naturalized, as if an innate truth/reality. This thesis employs these theoretical foundations to explore how the new qualification is experienced and perceived by students and the institution that delivers these courses.

3.3.1 Cause 1: the arbitrary classification of knowledge

Firstly and fundamentally, it can be considered that the arbitrary categorisation of education into academic and vocational is the source of the divide between the two. From an historical philosophic perspective, the academic-vocational divide stems from the idealistic versus pragmatic origins of the two types of education, in modern terms liberal-progressive and modernist-vocational education ideologies (Carr, 1998). In post-16 education it enhances the

esteem of A-Level qualifications as the embodiment of the idealistic pursuit of knowledge; 'learning for learning's sake' whilst vocational education continues the pragmatic tradition (Ball, 2013, p.49). Consequently academic education is imbued with higher intrinsic worth, and the academic-vocational divide is natural; unspoken and unseen. It therefore cannot be questioned.

Moreover, the problem of epistemic access to academic learning reinforces its prestige (through scarcity) and so increases its status and creates a divide with practical, or skills-based education which is more accessible (Bernstein, 2000). This is highly pertinent to my study given the pragmatic, skills-based remit of T-Levels published at launch (DfE, 2018c). My research investigates students' perceptions of the relative status of pragmatic knowledge, as delivered by both the T-level qualification and the AGQs it is replacing.

3.3.2 Cause 2: social reproduction maintaining disparity

This epistemological insight that roots the disparity of status between these two types of education and knowledge in an arbitrary classification of knowledge, is supported by the Bourdieusian perspective that the education field works to ensure the generational inheritance of capital and perpetuate the academic-vocational divide. Social reproduction theory suggests that since academic education is historically situated in social privilege contexts, A-Level success confirms and perpetuates that privilege through progression to university and professional careers. By the same process and cycle vocational education remains of lower status and esteem as discussed by Relly (2021), Edwards (2005) and others. This thesis provides opportunity for a localized application of this theory by reviewing the influence of students' parents' education experience and employment on their course choices and career aspirations.

3.4 Progression opportunities and horizons for action

The relative status of college courses affects the school-to-work trajectories experienced by young people. In the first instance, school experience shapes the self-perception and confidence of learners depending upon how well-equipped they are to access the language, knowledge and skills of formal learning. School to post-16 transition consolidates these resulting learner identities in many cases, by diverting those who have not succeeded with or academic learning to a different form of education – vocational – which employs different language and a more practical, applied knowledge content. The different language codes and assessment methods of vocational qualifications are therefore treated as a contingency option for the less able, rather than appreciated as different but equal (Reay, 2001). This misrecognition of different forms of language and assessment criteria must be acknowledged and problematized, not accepted as a given (Apple, 2004, p.43). Moreover, the process of assigning those who are unsuccessful at academic study to vocational courses classifies this

type of learning as lesser (Reay, 2015) as well as reinforcing learners' sense of underachievement. This study scopes students' lived experience of being consigned to the deficit, vocational option (Atkins, 2010), seeking to identify whether there is an impact on their horizons for action as well as immediate post-college progression opportunities.

Curriculum is also a key determiner in the formation of students' learner identities and consequent progression options. It is argued that the pedagogy of vocational education takes a cognitively restricting form that creates a condition of 'trainability' – a passive willingness to accept successive 'doses' of training and retraining, as prescribed by government agencies, employers and managers (Bernstein, 2000, Ch 3). In contrast, the abstract, conceptual knowledge of academic pedagogy provides learners with platform to think 'the unthinkable' and 'the not-yet-thought'. Applied to T-Levels, the central 'employability skills' of the curriculum restricts students to the specific context of workplaces and denies them access to powerful knowledge: "students need access to the disciplinary style of reasoning to move beyond a focus on isolated examples of content" (Wheelahan, 2007, p.645). Omitting these styles of reasoning from the vocational curriculum in favour of skills for employment thus inhibits scope for personal development and frames learner identities. The impact of T-Level curricula's 'employment logic' on students' developing learner identities and careership is reviewed by tracking any changes to their longer-term sense of what is available to them in their careers as a consequence of studying their college course, in line with studies such as that conducted by Iannelli and Raffe (2006).

Tracking the impact of curriculum upon students' progression can be seen as foregrounding structure exclusively, neglecting the role of individual agency in young people's careerships. However, career-making decisions are inextricably intertwined with personal circumstances and priorities (Bimrose, Brown and Barnes, 2008) and individuals' agency is itself described by their embodied capitals and habitus, which, as the product of a particular economic condition, define their ability "to perceive and seize the potential opportunities formally offered to all" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.124). By way of illustration, academic undergraduate study is ostensibly available to all, but seizing that opportunity is easier for those with aligned middle-class capitals and habitus (Kleanthous, 2022, p.155; Avis and Atkins, 2017). Conversely, those who chose the vocational route and exhibit a strong vocational habitus can less easily seize this opportunity. Their inherited habitus steers them through VET towards a different horizon for action (Hodkinson, 1995). Furthermore, the original familial predispositions that orientate young people to the vocational habitus can be further developed through college vocational courses to help them become 'right for the job' (Colley et al., 2003 p.488).

This research asks whether the development of vocational-specific habitus through domestic, school and college fields determines specific, perhaps limiting horizons for action leading to

prescribed or restricted future opportunities for accumulation of forms of capitals in adulthood (Apple, 2004; Beck, 2013; Grenfell, 2009). Theoretically then, this thesis reviews whether post-16 qualifications and education contexts are a vehicle for social mobility, or the obverse, social reproduction (Sullivan *et al.*, 2018), whereby that initial choice of college course consolidates previously developed domestic and school generated habitus, and whereby the currency of the qualifications gained prescribe post-college expectations (Burnell, 2015) and reproduce intergenerational capital-inscribed futures (Wheelahan, 2007).

Even if education does enable significant upward mobility, there can still be difficulties. Careerships that successfully gain higher status will inevitably involve a break away from domestic capitals. The trials of such habitus dislocation caused by a working-class child exercising agency and selecting the academic education field, however successfully, was experienced by Bourdieu himself (Robbins, 2010) and is well documented by other scholars including Reay (2017; 2001 for example). Such a mismatch between habitus and field produced by upward (or downward) mobility can result in hysteresis and a future where the individual is no longer a 'fish in water' in either their original domestic context or their socially-mobile-achieved place within society (Hardy, 2012; Jin and Ball, 2020). This theoretical conundrum is illustrated by Reay, here writing from personal lived experience:

> "social mobility is a form of cruel optimism. …. Those of us from working-class backgrounds invest heavily in the fantasy … in doing so, we are forming optimistic attachments to the very power structures that have oppressed us, and our families before us. … It has become the preferred cure for social problems and educational inequalities, promoted by politicians … but in deeply unequal societies like England it has come to feel much more like a social ill"
>
> **(Reay, 2017, p.102).**

Upward mobility benefits the individual but with a cost if they must leave family and inherited social capital behind. Structurally the social mobility agenda valorises middle rather than working-class cultural capital (Ball, 2003). It reinforces the doxa, the "normality of the middle-classes … and its corollary, the equally unacknowledged pathologisation and diminishing of the working-classes" (Reay, 2006). Therefore the individual's benefit is achieved at the cost of their wider class. Through a Bourdieusian conceptual lens, a more effective macro strategy would involve a reimagining of the alleged paucity of working-class culture. This would expose the symbolic violence of misrecognition of the false hierarchy of the value of social capital, which, as it stands, reinforces cultural hegemony (Gewirtz and Cribb, 2009). Whilst the assessment of such broad concepts cannot be achieved in a case-study comprising 200 students, the traces of such habitus dislocation can be discerned in the learner journeys and burgeoning learner identities of the individuals interviewed.

Chapter 4 Methodology

The chapter that follows discusses the methodological choices made in the construction of this research.

4.1 Introduction

This research took the form of a case study that included qualitative and quantitative methods. This mixed methods research design brings empirical research to the theoretical discussion of VET policy reform and the scholarly debate of the value and standing of academic and vocational education in the English post-16 FE sector. With specific focus on the most recently introduced vocational qualification, the research processes discussed in this chapter were chosen to support investigation of the following research questions:

- What are students' perceptions of the progression opportunities provided by T-Levels compared to A- Levels?
- How are young people's career aspirations shaped?
- How do students perceive the relative status and reputation of T-Levels and A-Levels?

4.2 Research Philosophy

This thesis works within an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm whereby meaning is constructed through the lens of the participants' subjected experience and the interpretation of the researcher and their own subjectivities (Denzin and Lincoln, 2012). This research recognises the individual and specific nature of participants' experiences as well as the impossibility of separating those perceptions of reality from the social and cultural contexts in which they are generated.

A qualitative research methodology is therefore dominant and integral to this thesis, as being "crucial for identifying and theorizing different constructed versions of reality" (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.8). The research method adopted to analyse the qualitative data in this study, thematic analysis, values the subjectivities of context-produced realities and knowledge: "subjectivity is the primary tool for reflexive Thematic Analysis as knowledge generation is inherently subjective and situated" (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.8).

Recognising the contextual nature of subjected realities, this research employs quantitative demographic data to complement the subjectivities of the qualitative data generated through open text questionnaire responses and interviews with participants. In this way, a quantitative,

post-positivist frame of reference is mixed with and supports interpretation of qualitative data and the constructed realities revealed through thematic analysis.

4.3 Researcher's reflexivity and positionality

The relational nature of social science empirical research was considered of key importance by Bourdieu, the foundational author of this study's theoretical framework (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). As illustrated in Bourdieu's reflection of his own position in relation to sociological research expressed in his Sketch for Self-Analysis (Bourdieu, 2008), the relationship between researcher and subject of research can be influential and needs to be acknowledged. Such a reflexive research habitus is key (Rawolle and Lingard, 2013).

My position in relation to this case-study was as a senior leader in the field of post-16 education, specifically Sixth Form and Further Education colleges. At the time of data collection I was responsible for the curriculum design and delivery of an A-Level and mixed AGQ programme of the college where the case-study was located. Previously I had been responsible for introducing T-Levels to a college campus. As an experienced teacher of both academic and vocational courses, and as manager/leader of a range of post-16 provisions I had extensive experience with communicating with 16–18-year-old students. In terms of conducting semi-structured interviews with a sample of the case-study participants, I was experienced in asking neutral, open questions, at listening without steering responses and being able to encourage conversation without affecting the content of it. This said, I recognise there is no position of pure neutrality in either qualitative data collection or interpretivist analysis of qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Some of the students participating in the case-study and interviewed were aware of my role as a senior leader at their college, but only one had prior interactions with me.

The role of the case researcher is to "dig into meanings, working to relate them to contexts and experience" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2012, p.128). As Grenfell summarized (2008) Bourdieu believed the principle of reflexivity was needed to challenge "potential bias derive(d) from the positioning of the researcher in the social space" (ibid p.226). It is therefore important to be aware of the possible impact of both my college position in relation to the students participating in the study, and the more general influence of an older adult conducting the research. It is reasonable to assume that most students will wish to make a positive impression on professionals from their own college. This assumption is especially credible since all participants had chosen to complete the initial entry questionnaire, and later to accept an invitation to a conversation about their course and progression aspirations (semi-structured

interviews). This research therefore needs to retain cognizance of the inherent bias of the self-selected participants and the likelihood that their relationship with the questionnaire and interviewer was one of respect and helpfulness. Also that their responses regarding their career aspirations could be influenced by a (potentially unacknowledged) desire to impress or please. Further information is included within 4.7.4 on the measures put in place to limit this effect, and how the analytical methods employed to review the resulting data were designed to recognise the bias produced.

4.4 Research Design

My research is constructed as a case study (see Yin, 2008 for exemplar sociological studies in this format). Recognising the complexity and subjectivity of knowledge, a case-study combines multiple strands of research. Set within a sociological theoretical framework, this parallel comparative case-study enables exploration of the introduction of T-Levels from the micro perspective of young people studying in the post-16, FE sector. Institutional, meso views are incorporated through inclusion of college-produced information promoting and defining the new qualification, and interviews with college leaders. Data from employers providing work experience to these students provides an external stakeholder perspective of this macro policy reform.

The case-study is constructed with two questionnaires completed by a group of T-Level students and a comparable group of A-Level students. The first, completed at the start of their 2-year college courses, provides both quantitative and qualitative insight to their family education and school contexts, and their perceptions of their destination possibilities after college. Through this, their views on the relative status and value of the two qualification types are also collated. A second short questionnaire captures their destination and progression intentions as they come to the end of their college course. Quantitative demographic data provides some contextual comparative evaluation of the domestic, family, education and school contexts of these young people choosing A-Levels and T-Levels. Qualification grades achieved and university placements provides quantitative data on the outcomes of both cohorts of students participating in the case-study.

This student view is extended through semi-structured interviews with a sub-sample of participants. Employing more in-depth, reflexive methods, this qualitative data enables further understanding of students' valuations and experience of A-Level and T-Level courses and the progression visions and opportunities they considered available to them by participating in these forms of post-16 education.

Interviews with senior leaders responsible for introducing T-Levels to their college provides a qualitative institutional perspective. Analysis of the materials produced to promote and define the new qualification completes this meso view.

The case-study is broadened with questionnaires collating employers' views of both A-Level and T-Level students. Triangulating student-generated data with employers' perceptions of the two qualifications' success in preparing students for progression beyond college, enables some understanding of T-Level policy implementation from an external stakeholder perspective.

4.5 Case-study

A case-study design was chosen to enable contextualised understanding of perceptions of students. Other forms of data such as employers' questionnaire responses and interviews with college leaders, serve to triangulate the data collected from the participating students (Creswell and Clark, 2011) enabling exploration of a diversity of perception and the multiple realities experienced (Stake, 2012), ultimately increasing confidence in the evidence collected (Stake, 2010, p.126).

4.5.1 Case-study methodology

For the central research of students' perceptions, quantitative data, collected at the start and end of the two-year case-study, framed qualitative data gained from questionnaires and from embedded interviews with a sub-sample of students. This more in-depth qualitative research played a supportive role to extend exploration of the entry questionnaire data. The design of this case-study is therefore Exploratory, using Cresswell and Clark's classifications (2011, p.187).

This student-focused research had one phase concurrent collection of quantitative and qualitative data – one phase since the interviews which took place 12 months after initial engagement through participation of the entry questionnaire, were not dependent upon the questionnaire data nor selected to explain questionnaire findings. Moreover, the quantitative data collection of the case-study took place over two years, so the qualitative data collection was in this sense concurrent rather than subsequent (Punch and Oancea, 2009, p345).

Quantitative data collected included demographic characteristics, college course/qualification achievements, university progressions and attitudinal information gained from multiple-choice and Likert-scale questionnaire responses. Qualitative data was collected from open-text responses in questionnaires and from interviews. The weighting of both types of data is equal, and the two types of data analysis were merged at the interpretation-of-results stage.

The choice of research methods for each research question is summarised here:

Research Question	Type of data	Source of data
1. What are students' perceptions of the progression opportunities provided by T-Levels compared to A- Levels? 2. How are young people's career aspirations shaped?	Quantitative and qualitative data collected from questionnaires on students' career aspirations and progression plans Quantitative data on student achievement results and university applications Employers' descriptive evaluation of students' progression to workplace readiness	On-line student questionnaire responses, Questions 10, 11, 12 and 13 Interviews with 10% of case-study respondents Qualification results and UCAS application reports On-line employer questionnaires responses
3. How do students perceive the relative status and reputation of T-Levels and A-Levels?	Quantitative demographic contextual data of students choosing to study T-Levels or A-Levels Quantitative and qualitative data collected from questionnaires regarding students' choice of college course Qualitative data gained from students' descriptive opinions on the relative status and reputation of the two qualifications in interview	On-line student questionnaire including Likert-scale responses and open-text responses; Questions 3 – 9 and 17-26 Semi-structured interviews with 10% sample of case-study respondents

Table 4.1 Research Methods

4.5.2 Case-study design: structure and sequence

Empirical data collection was centered on two parallel groups of students for comparison of students' perceptions of this iteration of education policy reform and its success in producing a vocational option to rival A-Levels in terms of progression opportunities and value. Longitudinal in that it tracked students over two years of study, the case-study approach is multidimensional. An entry questionnaire captured quantitative context data and investigated students' social and educational contexts through open-text responses which qualitatively surveyed their self-reflections on their learner identities, their own education history and that of their family, family occupations and their own future career aspirations. Quantitative outcomes and destination data of case-study participants gathered at the end of the two years provided a

measure by which to evaluate students' entry questionnaire responses. It also enabled an evaluation of the impact of college course choices on perceived progression opportunities. The case-study was enriched with the embedding of qualitative data from a sample of the case-study participants. These semi-structured interviews triangulate and extend questionnaire responses, providing more in-depth rich data (Punch and Oancea, 2009).

The case-study design is naturalistic; observing and describing the students' intent and actions without intervention. However the construction of the case-study does enabled isolation of the variable of the chosen course, since the two samples shared equitable socio-economic contexts as defined by household postcode (King, Keohane and Verba, 1994). These shared contexts enabled some measurement of the impact of the course studied – A-Level or T-Level - but the naturalistic nature of the sample selection, course selection and subjectivity of the largely qualitative data collation prohibits any exact experimental research design or associated precise data analysis/reporting. Furthermore, evaluating the destination possibilities afforded by a qualification was difficult since the learning careers and ultimate destinations of young people studying a particular course could not be isolated from their life experiences outside formal education, nor the contexts from which they made their initial post-16 choices and then tried to pursue them (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000; Billett, Hodge and Aarkrog, 2022). These external factors were particularly prominent to the case-study data presented in this thesis, and challenging in nature since the area where the students were located is one of significant socio-economic deprivation for the most part.

Further dimensions were included in the case-study in order to understand important contextual conditions pertinent to my phenomenon of study (Yin, 2008, p18). An overview of the policy discourse defining the agenda of the qualification was provided as context. Employers who had provided work experience to case-study participants, both A-Level and T-Level students, were questioned on the work-readiness of the students placed in their workplace. The questionnaire designed for those employers who had provided a T-Level student with an Industry Placement also surveyed employers' knowledge and opinion of the new qualification. This provided another perspective on students' expectations of career opportunities, and on policymakers' qualification design which was intended to meet employer needs and standards. Semi-structured interviews with senior leaders of the educational provider of the case-study on the curriculum intent of T-Levels provided a qualitative insight into the institutional view of the T-Level policy. It provides a glimpse of the operationalization of policy reform.

The timeline below illustrates this case-study design structure and sequence:

Case-study empirical data collection and analysis flow

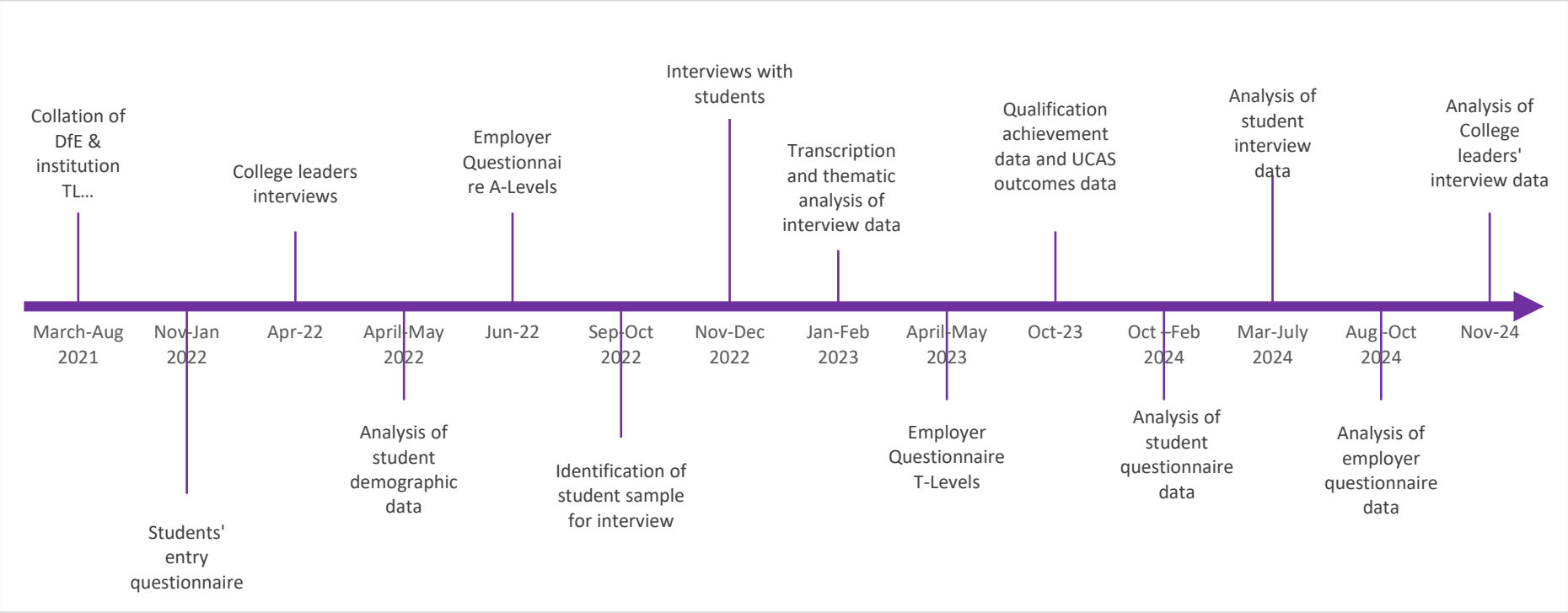

Figure 4.1 Research methods sequence

4.5.3 Case-study: student perspective

The purposes of this research were to ascertain the progression opportunities made available to two groups of students of similar home contexts, and so to explore the influence of college course type, academic or vocational, on future career aspirations. This information once gathered then enables some understanding of the extent to which the new T-Level qualification can bridge the divide with academic qualifications, in the eyes of the students themselves. To facilitate this research approximately 200 students, half studying A-Levels and half taking the new technical qualification T-Levels participated through completion of questionnaires and some with interviews.

4.5.3.1 Sample selection methods

The case-study was intended to survey all students enrolled to T-Level courses at an FE College in September 2021 and a comparable group of A-Level students enrolled at the same time to a different campus of the same college. A total 117 students were enrolled to T-Level courses at the time the case-study samples were identified in October 2021 and terry. A sample of A-Level students with comparable home postcodes as a measure of socio-economic context was sought from the total 792 enrolled. 104 A-Level students completed the entry questionnaire and joined the research. The average GCSE score of these A-Level respondents is 6.0, very close to the average GCSE profile of the whole first year group of students, 6.1. Postcodes of the two case-study groups indicating socio-economic contexts were very similar.

4.5.3.1.1 Gender

The gender profile of the case-study participants was reflective of the student population for each qualification type at this college. 62.7% of the T-Level participants were female, 37.3% male which corresponds closely to the gender profile of the whole T-Level cohort enrolled to this college in this academic year. Similarly, the gender profile of the A-Level sample, 61.5% female and 38.5% male, echoed the whole cohort of A-Level students enrolled in this academic year (1,639 students) - 65% female and 34% male with 1% not applicable.

4.5.3.1.2 Ethnicity

The ethnic profile of the case-study participants was representative of the wider cohorts from which the samples were derived. 14% of all case-study respondents identified as Minority Ethnic and 86% as White. There were 5.5% more Minority Ethnic students within the A-Level sample of students (16.3%) compared to the T-Level sample of students (10.8%). This 5.5% higher proportion within the A-Level sample reflected the ethnicity of the whole A-Level student body at this college campus where 15.8% of students identified as Minority Ethnic. The proportion of Minority Ethnic students of the T-Level sample, 10.8%, is similar to that of all 3,841

students at the college campus where T-Levels are delivered; 11.7% identified as Minority Ethnic.

4.5.3.1.3 Neurodiversity

A significantly higher proportion of the T-Level sample had declared learning difficulties or disabilities (LDD), 21.7%, compared to 8.7% of the A-level sample. This was again in line with the whole cohort of T-Level and A-Level students at this college. Only one respondent had an Education Health Care plan and was studying A-Levels. The effect of these differences on students' confidence, aspirations, career ambitions and destinations was explored.

4.5.3.1.4 Socio-economic disadvantage

The overall socio-economic profile of case-study participants was characterised with considerable levels of disadvantage, by two of the three recognized measures. Since financial disadvantage affects achievement and retention (DfE, 2024b), this impacted both outcomes and progression opportunities of case-study participants.

61 of the total 187 participants lived in areas within Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) Deciles 1, 2 or 3 – the 30% most deprived areas in England (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2019). This constituted 32.6% of all case-study respondents living in areas of deprivation, more (35.6%) from the A-level sample than from the T-Level sample (28.9%). Exactly the same proportion of students were eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) in both groups - 9.6%.

Eligibility for FSM is a recognized measure of financial disadvantage. By this measure case-study participants were less disadvantaged than national England populations (DfE, 2024b). As Table 4.2 below shows the proportion of FSM-eligible students participating in the case-study was lower than national averages: 4.6% fewer A-Level case-study students compared to the national A-Level population and 17.0% fewer T-Level case-study students compared to Level 3 vocational students nationally:

FSM eligibility	AL English population	%	AL case study	%	AGQ & Tech level	%	TL case study	%
FSM eligible	33634	14.2%	10	9.6%	36804	26.6%	8	9.6%
Not FSM eligible	200569	84.7%	94	90.4%	99669	72.2%	75	90.4%

Table 4.2 FSM eligibility by qualification type

It is noted however that direct comparisons with the national population of T-Level students were not available. Moreover, the enrolment profile to T-Levels was not necessarily equitable to that of other Level 3 vocational qualifications, which is explored with the analysis of outcomes and progression opportunities resulting from this study.

Another measure of socio-economic advantage/disadvantage is HE Participation Of Local Areas (POLAR) statistical analysis which is based on how many 18-year-olds from an area started a higher education course between the academic years 2009/10 and 2013/4. POLAR assigns a quintile to an area based on levels of participation in HE. Quintile one shows the lowest rates of participation in HE, historically ranging between 5.6% to 23.8%. Participation rates in quintile 2 are also low, between 23.8% and 31.6%. A very high proportion of students from both the A-Level and T-Level samples lived in POLAR quintile 1 areas: 44.2% of A-Level respondents and 47.0% of T-level respondents. An equally balanced number from each sample lived in areas of POLAR quintiles 1 and 2 combined: 63.4% of A-Level respondents and 60.3% of T-Level participants. Analysis of students' outcomes, aspirations and progression retained sight of this level of disadvantage and its impact.

4.5.3.1.5 Prior-attainment

Students' qualifications on entry to college, their prior-attainment and measure of academic ability, is another variable to be considered in the selection of samples, since the higher the average prior-attainment, the higher the average outcomes at the end of 16-to-18 study regardless of the programme of study (DfE, 2024b). Prior-attainment was measured by the average grade achieved at GCSE[1] in Year 11/Key Stage 4 at the end of secondary education. Within the case-study samples, the overall profile of T-Level students' GCSE attainment prior to enrolment to college was lower than that of A-Level students. The GCSE entry requirement to study both A-Levels or T-Levels at this college was five GCSEs at Grade 4 and above, usually including both English and Mathematics. The campus delivering A-Levels at this college "recommended" a Grade 5 in subjects being taken at A-Level, and in some cases a Grade 6. This was typical of the national requirement for an FE College. Some sixth form colleges require a marginally higher GCSE average and school sixth forms typically require higher prior-attainment.

The average GCSE score of the 83 T-Level students in the study was 5.3, 0.62 higher than the average GCSE score of the whole cohort of T-Level students enrolled in September 2021. It can be argued that the higher ability profile of participants reflects the eagerness of students to sign up or not – arguably it is more probable that those who were more confident of their academic ability and progress opportunities would engage in a case-study reporting on these subjects.

[1] GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education) are graded from 9 to 1. Grade 4 is considered the equivalent of a low C grade of the previous grading system of GCSEs. The average GCSE grade profile is calculated as the total grade number divided by the number of GCSEs taken. For example, a student with ten GCSES at Grade 9 will have an average GCSE grade profile of 9. A student with three GCSEs at Grade 5 and three GCSEs at Grade 4 will have an average GCSE grade profile of 4.5.

Similarly, there is a strong correlation between achievement and attendance (Long and Roberts, 2024) meaning students with lower prior achievement were statistically less likely to be present when the survey entry questionnaire was introduced.

The GCSE grade profile of T-Level and A-Level participants differed. There were significantly more T-Level students in the study with an average GCSE score of below 4.5, 30.1%, compared to A-Level students, 10.6%. This was reversed for the highest range of prior-attainment, with 28.8% of A-Level students' average GCSE scores of 6.8 and above compared to 13.3% of T-Level students:

Qualifications on entry	A-Level students	T-Level students	A-Level students %	T-Level students %
GCSE average of 4.5 and below	11	25	10.6%	30.1%
GCSE average of up to 6.8	74	72	71.2%	86.7%
GCSE average of 6.8 and above (More Able & Talented)	30	11	28.8%	13.3%

Table 4.3 Prior attainment profiles of student participants

This impacted grade outcomes, and therefore progression opportunities of case-study participants: historically and in 2023 when the case-study completed their qualifications, nationally there was a 2.5 grade attainment gap between A-Level students with the highest (7+) and lowest (0 – 4.5) prior-attainment. The attainment gap for students of AGQ and Tech Levels with the highest and lowest prior-attainment was less pronounced at 2 grades difference (DfE, 2024b). There was no reporting on T-Level outcomes for this year, 2023.

4.5.3.1.6 Summary of sample selection

In summary, the composition of the case-study samples was representative of their respective populations for all characteristics; gender, ethnicity, neurodiversity, socio-economic status and prior-attainment. The demographic characteristics of gender, ethnicity and socio-economic contexts of the two halves of the case-study participants, A-Level and T-Level, were considered to be sufficiently comparable to enable a workable isolation of the variable of qualification when measuring the impact of their programme/course on the development of learner identity and progression opportunities.

4.5.3.1.7 Generalisability and transferability

The profile of case-study participants, and their corresponding college populations, was atypical to national populations in terms of ability range. This impacted the validity of extrapolation of findings gained from this case-study in this respect. For example, the ability ranges of the A-Level case-study sample (and the corresponding A-Level population of this college) did not conform to the ability profile of the national population of A-Level students. As

Table 4.4 shows, the prior-attainment of the A-Level students participating in this case-study was lower than the national average. The ability profile of participating T-Level students on the other hand, were more aligned/slightly above that of AGQ and Tech Level students nationally. However, enrolments to the new T-Level qualification were not necessarily directly comparable with AGQs and Tech Levels since T-Levels are positioned within the vocational qualification landscape as elite technical qualifications with higher entry requirements (DfE, 2024b).

Student populations	GCSE average grade 0-4		GCSE average grade 4-7		GCSE average grade 7-9	
Case study AL sample	2	1.9%	78	75.0%	24	23.1%
England AL population	4124	1.4%	162961	57.1%	118156	41.4%
Case study TL sample	7	8.4%	68	81.9%	8	9.6%
England AGQ % Tech level population	22285	15.0%	116178	78.1%	10287	6.9%

Table 4.4 Student populations and prior attainment by qualification type

4.5.3.2 Research instrument: entry questionnaire

An introductory questionnaire was designed to identify student participants, and to collect demographic information. The questionnaire was issued to students in their first term of college, at the start of their course. Invitation to participate in the case-study by responding to the questionnaire was distributed via email to the total population of A-Level and T-Level students at the college hosting the case-study in November 2021.

The platform employed was Microsoft Forms; an on-line, cloud-based format which provided high accessibility as it could be completed on a PC or a phone. This platform had the advantage of familiarity, clear presentation and the inclusion of photographs for a more engaging user-interface with images that reflected the target audience in terms of age, gender and ethnicity. To improve user-experience the format and view adapted automatically to the gadget used for access; phone or computer screen. Online questionnaires are generally considered to offer advantages of speed and convenience for delivery and completion (Fan and Yan, 2010), particularly useful for the target audience of teenagers moving around a campus between lessons and 'free' recreational or study periods. The questionnaire could be accessed at any time on or off-campus.

This format of on-line questionnaire provided a high level of accessibility and interactivity with flexibility for question format and sequential flow. The questionnaire was responsive to increase speed and relevance for the respondent. Formatted with branching, the options chosen as answers to questions took respondents to different sections. This design with skip patterns built in was intended to address the problem of falling response rates for on-line questionnaires (Hill, Dean and Murphy, 2013) by keeping completion times to a minimum by ensuring respondents

did not have to answer redundant questions. Depending upon their answers, respondents answered between 13 and 21 questions in total. The estimated time to complete the survey was 10 minutes. The initial questionnaire design was piloted with students studying the same qualifications, but at a different college. Questions were revised and/or removed and a refined questionnaire design produced. Responses were collected and stored with password protection securely within Microsoft OneDrive.

The data collected included demographic quantitative data and further quantitative data collected from multiple choice questions. Attitudinal responses were collated through Likert-scale responses, and qualitative data elicited through open question free-text responses. The format of responses for each question included binary, multiple-choice, Likert-scale or open-text formats, as appropriate[2].

The questionnaire incorporated questions designed to survey participants' attitudes to:

- their school and college education
- self-perception of academic ability
- home contexts
- parental/guardian education profile

Together these questions were designed to garner information to investigate participants' self-perceived learner identities and their parents' educational and employment experience. This enabled some estimation of familial social and cultural capital together with its impact on students' post-16 course choice; what led them to choose either the A-Level or the T-Level route.

To gauge self-perceptions of learner identities, respondents were asked to rate their perceived academic ability in relation to the rest of pupils in their year group using a Likert-scale of 1 to 5:

Think about the classes you were in at secondary school and the marks you gained through Years 10 and 11 - how did your learning and achievements compare with the rest of your year group?	
1	I struggled in most lessons
2	My work was usually in the lower half of the ability range in my year group
3	My work was usually in the middle of the ability range in my year group
4	My work was usually towards the top of the ability range in my year group
5	I was usually at the top of the ability range in my year group

Table 4.5 Question 7 of Entry Questionnaire

[2] Appendix A shows the final questionnaire format and sequence incorporating skip patterns and branching.

A further question required students to gauge their attitude and experience of secondary school through a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from "didn't enjoy many lessons and found it hard to engage" through to "really enjoyed most lessons and learnt a lot from them". Together these questions helped discern the impact of school fields on learner identities.

The research question on the progression opportunities students perceive are provided by T-Levels compared to A-Levels was addressed through questions regarding participants'

- career aspirations
- perceived 'horizons for action'
- progression/destination intentions
- and expectations of course and college

Surveying students' long-term goals and aspirations in this entry questionnaire at the start of their time at college enabled an evaluation of the selection criteria that informed the initial choice of course type at college: was the choice of qualification type in itself a manifestation of aspirations and career goals. It provided a starting point to measure the impact of qualification type on the development of students' 'horizons for action' and aspirations.

4.5.3.3 Research instrument: exit questionnaire

An exit questionnaire designed to capture case-study students' perceptions of the impact of their college courses was issued towards the end of their two-year courses, in May and June 2023.

Questions focused on the same topics as the entry questionnaire, and sought to measure any changes. For example, the first question 'What will you do in September when you've finished college?' followed up the question from the entry questionnaire 'What do you intend to do when you leave college?' In the entry questionnaire the question was phrased with modality; 'what do you intend to do'. By the exit questionnaire the question was phrased more definitely; 'what will you do'. In the entry questionnaire three broad multiple-choice options were available – get an apprenticeship, get a job or go to university. In the exit questionnaire nine multiple-choice options were more specific and asked for more detail as fitted the development of their future choices through the college course, and the shorter timeframe before making that next step[3].

4.5.3.4 Research instrument: qualification and destinations data

Case-study participants' course outcomes and graded results were collated following publication of results in August 2023. Information on participants' next steps was also collated where possible, including progression to university where appropriate. Tracking the

[3] Appendix B provides detail of the questions and sequence/flow.

development of participants' intended goals as captured in the entry questionnaire into reality of destinations provided opportunity to scope the impact of T-Levels compared to A-Levels. The parallel comparative design of the case-study therefore enabled an investigation into whether pursuing a T-Level designed to develop technical work skills defines and limits the 'horizons for action' (Colley *et al.*, 2003) for a student. Secondly, exploring the destination and progression opportunities enabled by the two types of qualifications was a mechanism for operationalising the theoretical issue of the 'hidden curriculum' (Apple, 2004a).

4.5.4 Case-study: employer perspective

The T-Level qualification requires students to complete a minimum of 315 hours of workplace learning. Work experience is not an assessed element of A-Level qualifications, however statutory guidance on careers and work experience was introduced for schools and colleges in 2014 (Holman, 2014). In line with these Gatsby Benchmarks, the host college aimed to provide a week of work experience to its A-level students.

4.5.4.1 Research instrument: questionnaire for A-Level employers

A questionnaire surveying employers who provided A-Level students with a week of work experience was issued in June 2022 immediately after 'A-Level WEX week' at this college, at the end of the students' first year of study. This questionnaire focused on workplace readiness and was informed by the Gatsby benchmarks (ibid). Questions sought employers' feedback on the students' soft or transferable skills such as confidence, ability to work independently, resilience, teamwork skills and leadership potential, these skills being identified as 'what employers are looking for' by the University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS, 2017)[4].

4.5.4.2 Research instrument: questionnaire for T-Level employers

A questionnaire surveying employers who provided T-Level students with some part of the required industry placement was issued in the second term of students' second year, since by that point in the course most T-Level students had completed some part of an industry placement. This questionnaire evaluated students' technical skills (Gatsby Foundation, 2022) as well as 'soft' workplace skills, including professional standards of behaviour and attitudes, as described by Education & Skills Funding Agency T-Level industry placements guidance (DfE, 2023d). These questions sought to evaluate how successfully the T-Level course developed students' subject specialist skills as defined in the T-Levels Employer Guide (HM Government, 2022)[5]. For both employers' questionnaires the Microsoft Forms platform was used again, since

[4] Details shown in Appendix C.

[5] Full details are provided in Appendix D.

it is a familiar part of the Microsoft software suite used by most organisations for management of information and communication in the workplace, and for reasons of accessibility and secure management of data as stated above. To reduce workload and improve response rates, the questionnaire was designed responsively with branching and skip patterns included to increase speed and relevance for the respondent.

4.5.4.3 Response rates

All employers that provided industry placements to T-Level students and a week of work experience to A-Level students at this college were contacted. Response rates were low; 19 responses were received regarding T-Level students from the full cohort of 117 enrolled to this qualification in this year group. Likewise, 112 responses were received from employers providing work experience to A-Level students from an overall year group of 792 student enrolled to the A-Level programme. These responses remained indicative of employers' perceptions of the skills, knowledge and behaviours of the two cohorts of student case-study participants. The small number of 19 responses regarding T-Level students however necessitated caution when analysing the data produced.

4.5.5 Case-study: institutional perspective

Documentary data from the research site website provided insight to the college's presentation of the T-Level qualification. This was supported with qualitative data gained from interviewing leaders of the college to gain an institutional view of the new qualification including their perspective on how T-Levels fit into the post-16 qualification landscape, their motivation for introducing the new courses to their college, and how they mediated policy agendas in implementation.

4.5.5.1 Research instrument: documentary data

Documentary data collated from the college's website consisted of information on each of the T-Level courses it offered from the four T-Level Routes available for delivery in September 2021.

4.5.5.2 Research instrument: interviews with college leaders

A semi-structured approach was adopted in line with Brinkmann and Kvale's conception of the research interview as a professional conversation in which "knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the interviewer and interviewee" (2024). Pre-determined questions focused on the strategic planning of curriculum design introducing T-Levels and interviewees' anticipations regarding the progression opportunities that would be provided to students by both qualification types. These open format stem questions provided a planned sequence of questioning to avoid going off topic too much, but with flexibility for adaptation. Additional questions could be added, or some removed as appropriate to facilitate free flow of responses

and to enable the interviewees to direct the conversation enough to fully develop and communicate their views on these pre-prepared topics (Yin, 2008, p.85). The flexibility of this format enabled a reflexive approach which resulted in one interview exploring a corporate view and the other an operational perspective on implementation of the qualification[6].

4.5.6 Case-study: in-depth student perspective

The research gained from students participating in the case-study was extended by qualitative research of a representative sub-sample of nine A-Level and nine T-Level participants. Interviews aimed to scope the influence of family and home contexts on the formation of students' expectations; their 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson, 1996) or idea of what the future holds for them; the impact of school field on their burgeoning learner identities and choice of college course; and as the final step their intended progression opportunities after college aged 18.

4.5.6.1 Sample selection

A sub-sample of 10% of the 188 case-study participants were interviewed; nine A-Level students and nine T-Level students. This sub-sample reflected the overall case-study student profile in terms of gender, ethnicity, socio-economic contexts, additional learning support needs and prior academic attainment. All were invited to talk about their "career or university aspirations and how they developed from school years, etc." on a voluntary, non-incentivised basis.

4.5.6.2 Research instrument: interviews with students

A naturalistic approach of data collection was conducted through a conversational interview approach designed to enable capture of the perceptions of 'local actors from the inside' of the changing post-16 education qualification landscape (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.6). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each student individually, working within an Interpretivist paradigm and respecting the subjectivity of students' personal experiences and expectations.

Individual interviews were conducted to capture rich qualitative data relating to personal subjects such as students' childhood dreams, learner identities and career hopes (Kruger *et al.*, 2019). Interview questions were developed following review of the entry questionnaire responses to create a rich dialogue with the evidence. A first draft of questions was piloted with a case-study respondent for feedback and refinement (Yin, 2008).

[6] Full details of the planned questions are shown in Appendix E.

No preparation was required of the students engaging in discussions, and their entry questionnaire responses were not consulted prior to interview to avoid unconscious bias and leading questions from the interviewer. All students were asked the same opening questions and a reflexive approach was taken to choosing which follow-up questions to ask in response to students' answers. Thus the direction, quantity and flow of conversation followed the interviewees' lead until all the identified topics had been discussed (ibid, p.70). This approach was adopted to allow respondents to speak freely and direct the conversation with inclusion of all the information they felt was relevant. In this way interviewees described the parameters of detail and inclusion and the interviewer's perspective, as a senior leader of the college they studied at, and of an older generation, did not prescribe legitimacy or priority of perspective (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

4.5.6.3 Interview data collection: timing

Interviews were conducted in November and early December 2022 when students were in their second year of study and had completed college advice and guidance on 'next steps' after college through the tutorial programme. This college's advisory internal deadline for submission of applications to UCAS (University & Colleges Admissions Service) was current or had just passed at the time of interview and this had been the catalyst for the college's careers information and guidance timeline. Thus, the students interviewed had all engaged with planning their next steps after college informed by guidance and advice on how to apply for a job, an apprenticeship or undergraduate study.

4.5.6.4 Interview content

Conversations were based on eleven stem questions, supplemented with probing questions. Interview questions were designed through consideration of the case-study parameters and questionnaire and research questions. First, questions around early childhood dreams of what they would be when they 'grew up' attempted to ascertain the types of future aspirations created by the domestic field alone, pre-school. Second, these interviews aimed to discern the impact of school fields on students' learner identities in conjunction with family and home contexts. Third, this afforded some understanding of the combined influence of domestic and education fields on students' choice of post-16 course; A-Levels or T-Level, academic or vocational. Next, questioning within the interviews explored students' expectations and aspirations for when they finished their chosen college course. The fourth aim was therefore to scope the impact of college choice (either academic or vocational) on the imagined futures of

the young people opting for that route, and the fifth aim was to ascertain the opportunities the course legitimised and provided to course completers[7].

The term "interview" was avoided in both the invitations sent to students and in the opening of the meeting, due to its connotations of formality and judgement. The first few minutes were therefore spent with introductions and explanation of the purpose and context of the "conversation". Students were encouraged to speak freely with the assurance that "the more you talk the better" and that nothing was irrelevant – "anything that pops into your head about the topic being discussed is relevant to you". Generic prompts were used such as "Just to confirm my understanding ...." and "that's interesting, is there anything else you could add?" to encourage interviewees to further develop their responses. In this way the interviewee was, to an extent, empowered to shape the direction and depth of their narrative, and the format became less structured (Newby, 2014, p.344). An opening question of 'How would you describe yourself as a student?' with prompt questions if needed of 'conscientious or laid back? Middle of the class, or top, or?' worked as an icebreaker and to get students to begin talking about themselves. It also built on entry questionnaire inquiry around learner identities. The casual nature of this question in interview garnered rich and naturalistic responses with interviewees speaking frankly about their levels of effort and success in their four terms of college.

The question 'Can you remember what you wanted to do or be when you were little?' took a measure of early childhood aspirations produced by domestic fields unaffected by the field of school. Asking students to recall their pre-school ideas of what they would 'be' when they grew up attempted to gauge early, innocent notions of what was possible for them as the product of the home context. The aim of the question was to explore the impact of family social and cultural capital on the young pre-school child. This provided a useful starting point for comparison with later adolescent and post-school career ambitions gathered through follow-up questions of 'and at secondary school?' and 'And in Year 11 when you applied to college?'. In this way it is possible to develop some understanding of the impact of the field of education.

This line of inquiry began in the entry questionnaire a year earlier, on entry to college. Participants were asked to respond in open-text to the question 'If you realised your highest, best ambition in the future, what would you be or be doing at the top of your career?' The study therefore captured students' horizons at four points: pre-school; at the start of college when their school years had just finished; in their second year of college and lastly their actual destinations after college:

[7] An interview guide showing the format and sequence of questions with prompts and follow-up questions is detailed in Appendix F.

Capture point	Stage	Typical age	Formative fields	Method
Point 1	Early childhood	<7	domestic	interview
Point 2	Start of college	16/17	domestic, school	questionnaire
Point 3	Second year of college	17/18	domestic, school, college	interview
Point 4	Post-college	18/19	domestic, school, college	UCAS and college reporting

Table 4.6 Tracking points of development of 'horizons for action'

4.6 Case-study analysis

As detailed above, research instruments of the case-study produced both quantitative and qualitative data. These several data sets "talk to and inform each other to create a typology of approaches" (Newby, 2014, p.131). This fieldwork is non-experimental – a non-interventionist, descriptive survey which has no hypothesis to test nor scope for inference. The analytical methods employed to investigate the data produced are explained below.

4.6.1 Quantitative data analytical methods

4.6.1.1 Analysis methods for student participant data

Analysis of the student-generated quantitative data measured the relationships between multiple variables, derived from the standard categorisation of demographic data employed within the education sector and site of research. Frequency distributions and cross tabulation were used as a descriptive tool for the first stage of analysis. This provided understanding of distribution patterns and the relationships and/or contingency between variables (Rosenberg, 1968). Further analysis used some regression analysis processes, for example to describe the relationships between independent variables of demographics, contexts and attitudes to learning, and the dependent variable of choice of post-16 course (academic or vocational):

Independent variables	Dependent variable
Attitude to school/learning	→ Choice of A-Levels or a T-Level course at college
Prior-attainment/academic ability	
Family education/qualifications	
Parents' employment	
Socio-economic context	
Gender	

Ethnicity	
Neurodiversity	

Table 4.7 Factors informing choice of post-school routes

A two-phase process then described the correlational relationship between these independent variables, and a second/ultimate dependent variable of career aspirations and perception of progression opportunities (Punch and Oancea, 2009). For this second regression analysis, case-study participants were grouped by choice of college course to comparatively measure the correlation of contextual factors (independent variables) and career aspirations/expectant progression opportunities (dependent variable) by type of course undertaken:

Treatment Group	Independent variables	Dependent variable
T-Level students	Attitude to school/learning	Career aspirations and perception of progression opportunities
	Prior-attainment/academic ability	
	Family education/qualifications	
	Parents' employment	
	Socio-economic context	
	Gender	
	Ethnicity	
	Neurodiversity	
A-Level students	Attitude to school/learning	Career aspirations and perception of progression opportunities
	Prior-attainment/academic ability	
	Family education/qualifications	
	Parents' employment	
	Socio-economic context	
	Gender	
	Ethnicity	
	Neurodiversity	

Table 4.8 Factors informing perceptions of progression opportunities by qualification

4.6.1.2 Analysis methods for employers' data

Both employer questionnaires produced predominantly quantitative data, which was analysed descriptively, following the same methods employed with student questionnaire data.

4.6.2 Qualitative data analytical methods

4.6.2.1 Student interview analysis methods

The audio recordings of the in-person interviews were reviewed, and transcriptions produced using Braun & Clarke's notation system (2013, p.165-6)[8].

The transcribed participant responses were analysed inductively, in line with an interpretivist ontological position. Using thematic analysis, students' subjective and socially located experiences were explored to provide a rich, complex account of data which allows recognition of epistemological plurality, as each student's perceptions are recorded and explored (Bryman *et al.*, 2001).

Braun and Clarke's six-phase process of reflexive thematic analysis (2021, p.35) was adopted and is summarised as six steps here:

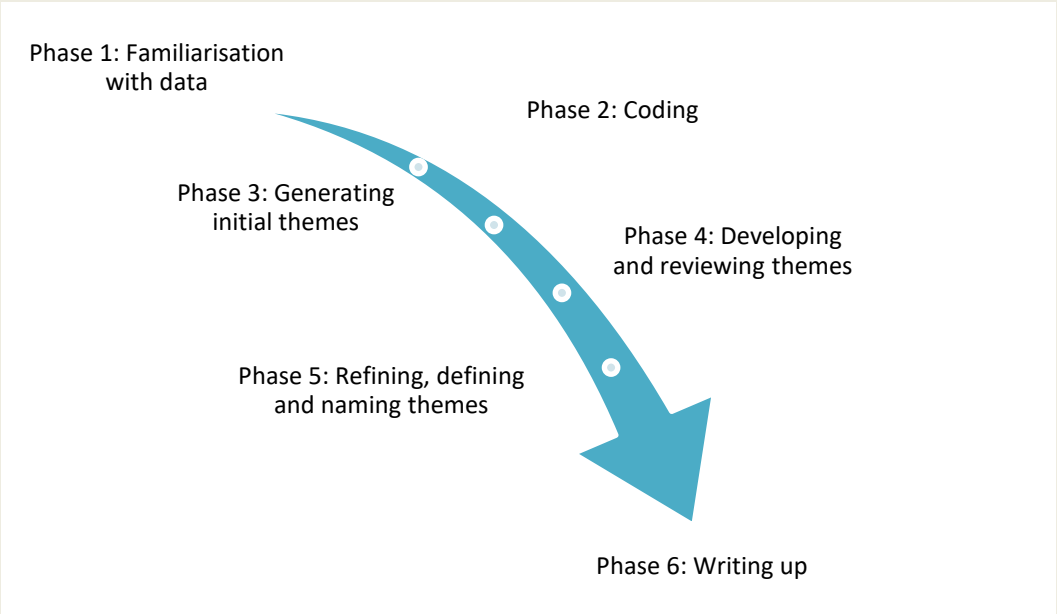

Figure 4.2 Six phases of reflexive thematic analysis process

This data analysis process is iterative and recursive rather than linear, so phases can become merged and earlier steps in the six-step process revisited and repeated. The starting point for this study's analysis process were the central research themes of the interviews: the status and reputation of college courses/qualifications, the progression opportunities made available by

[8] An example is shown in Appendix G.

these qualifications and students' career aspirations. From these interview topics 15 sub-themes were induced through analysis of transcribed data:

Theme	1. Progression opportunities and aspirations	2. Status and reputation of TLs and ALs
Sub-themes	a) employment	a) UCAS tariff and points
	b) degree apprenticeships	b) university recognition
	c) university	c) university entry requirements
	d) home expectations	d) College course entry requirements
	e) family education and careers	e) GCSE prior attainment
	f) influence of school and home on college choices	f) longevity
	g) learner identities	
	h) career aspirations	
	i) impact of college courses	

Table 4.9 Themes and sub-themes induced through thematic analysis[9]

4.6.2.2 Student interview presentation of analysis

Analysis is presented in a vignette style, in the tradition of research studies taking a more ethnographic approach (for example Willis, 1978; Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000; Brockmann, 2012). This presentation format facilitated the learner identities of the respondents remaining intact, allowing the integrity of their subjected realities to be retained.

Findings are structured thematically with individual interviewees' data discussed in relation to the theme they had spoken about the most, or had articulated perspectives regarding most clearly. A sketch was developed of selected interviewees with contextual information included to enable appreciation of their subjectivities, and to support insight to the influence of context upon their perspectives, whether distinct or representative of the perceptions of the interviewed sample. This optimizes the value of the vignette approach which helps illuminate a specific aspect of responses to a research question, not necessarily generalizable, sometimes poignant (Stake, 2010, p.172).

4.6.2.3 Questionnaire open-text responses

All open-text responses from questionnaires were again analysed in accordance with Braun and Clarke's six-phase process of reflexive thematic analysis (2021, p.35).

[9] These were formed from 35 coded items after lengthy recoding, reviewing and refining. Appendix H provides more detail.

4.6.2.4 College leader interviews

Student perception data was contextualised by interviews with the strategic policy leads of the research site, a senior leader and the T-Level lead of the FE college of the case-study. This furthered understanding of the policy from a college level point of view. Interviews were analysed with the methods of Thematic Analysis, as above.

4.6.3 Documentary data analytical methods

Documentary data from the research institution's website providing information on T-Levels illuminates the college's values and views of the T-Level qualification in relation to the overall post-16 qualification landscape. This promotional material contributed to the formation of students' perceptions of the relative status and reputation of the T-Level qualification and as such provided a contextualised framework for interpretation of students' perceptions.

Relevant texts from the college's website were subjected to textual analysis methods designed for social research (Fairclough, 2003). The resulting analysis, influenced by a poststructuralist perspective, an approach that enables a rich decoding of denoted and connoted meanings interpreted within a social perspective (Hawkins, 2025), provides in-depth understanding of the institutional context from which students' perspectives were formed.

4.7 Ethical Issues and considerations

Social science research involves collecting data through working with people and reporting findings related to them. Consequently, one of the most important concerns is to conduct research underpinned and informed by ethical principles throughout. It was important therefore for me as a researcher to design and conduct research in line with the University of Southampton's ethics regulation, and meeting the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) six principles of ethical research (2022).

Since this research study's data collection methods were non-intrusive and observational, and do not include experiment or intervention, the key ethical considerations for conducting this field work ethically were codes of practices for working with young people (16 to 19 years old) some of whom may have vulnerabilities. This was particularly important due to potential impact of my dual role as a professional practitioner as well as researcher.

The process of attaining approval from the university's Ethics Committee and Research and Integrity Governance Team ensured my research complied with appropriate ethical codes and regulations. Fieldwork was therefore conducted with confidence and safety, in terms of protecting the well-being of participants, security of data and ensuring the integrity of data collection and analysis methods.

4.7.1 Ethical approval process

Ethical approval from University of Southampton's Electronic Research Governance Online system (ERGO) was gained in preparation for conducting fieldwork[10].

The Ethics Committee's Social Sciences Ethics Application Form process identified any risks of potential harm to participants or deception and ensured mitigations were in place. Necessary measures and precautions were taken to protect the participants from any form of psychological, academic or reputational harm, as appropriate to the nature of each type of participant and the roles they inhabit within the research site and wider further education sector. For example, potential risk arising from disclosures of safeguarding concerns from any young person participating in the case-study would be managed within the research site's safeguarding team, observing established confidentiality and welfare protocol. Other risks of harm relate to potential institutional reputation issues. These were mitigated against through anonymization of the research site.

Gaining informed consent from participants was relatively unproblematic for this research study since all research methods were transparent, publicised and did not include any covert observation. All participants were invited to engage in the research and supplied detailed information on all aspects of the study through a detailed Participation Information Sheet. It was made clear that engagement with the research was voluntary and the decision to participate could be withdrawn at any point during the study. If students chose to participate in the study, they could not begin until they had completed the Student Questionnaire Consent Form, again approved by the Ethics Committee. Similarly, the sub-sample invited to participate in interviews were required to complete a Student Interview Consent Form prior to interview.

Risk of invasion of privacy or contravention of principles of respect and dignity in data collection were evaluated through scrutiny of the Entry Questionnaire, scripted questions and list of topics for semi-structured interviews and communication emails to students, employers and college leaders.

4.7.2 Anonymity and confidentiality

To ensure the information provided by participants was treated with confidentiality, the identities of participants were concealed during data collection and pseudonymised in reporting of findings. The identity of the college hosting the research study was also anonymized by the removal of all identifiers of the college such as geographical location.

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[10] ERGO submission reference 67045 and 67045.A1. See Appendix I for confirmation and approval

4.7.3 Security of data

In line with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the legal requirements that are applicable to personal data collected for research purposes (Punch and Oancea, 2009, p.67), all information collected is stored securely on a personal, password protected Microsoft OneDrive. Coded and anonymised data collected is deposited in the University of Southampton's data repository and held for 10 years.

4.7.4 Subjectivities and situatedness

As stated above, this research recognises the subjective nature of participants' experiences as well as the impossibility of separating those perceptions of reality from the social and cultural contexts in which they are generated. It is therefore acknowledged and accepted that the values of the researcher will influence the reading of data (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.12).

Consequently, my position in relation to the research conducted is highly pertinent, particularly as I held dual roles as professional practitioner and researcher. My relationship with research participants could therefore have influenced their responses, and affected my interpretation of the ensuing data. In political (in the broadest sense) terms, my position in relation to the students participating in the case-study was one of authority and relative power (Bryman *et al.*, 2001, p.130). Moreover, it is usual for research participants in education to be accessed by the researcher via a gatekeeper, often known to the students from within the institution, for example the headteacher. In this way it is usual for the gatekeeper to assume the role of authority to the participants, introducing and allowing access from the researcher who sits outside any hierarchical structure (Punch and Oancea, 2009, p.65). In this research, I was both gatekeeper and researcher, though operating with the consent and approval of the college Principal. Measures were taken to limit the impact of this status differential. For example, invitations to students asking them to participate used a relatively informal register. I assured students in these invitations that their responses would not be shared with anyone at the college and the research was entirely separate from their academic performance record so they could relay their thoughts, perceptions and aspirations without inhibition. Similarly, I prepared for 'interviewing across difference' (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.88) which in this case heightened the hierarchical relationship between researcher and participant. When conducting interviews with students I employed my experience liaising with young people, making sure I created informal environments and relaxed spaces, both socially and physically (ibid, p.91), for them to speak freely. Nonetheless, these measures cannot remove the power dynamics of interactions between a 16–18-year-old and an older senior leader operating in a professional setting especially as it is unlikely that students would differentiate between my working in a professional capacity and working as a researcher. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the respect young people studying at college hold for professional figures whether teacher, leader

or researcher could affect their responses, making them eager to please and influencing their presentation.

The research methods adopted to analyse the qualitative data in this study – thematic analysis – embraces this dynamic however. Researcher subjectivity, "the researcher's set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied" is integral (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p.22). This analytical approach values the situatedness of the researcher and views their identities, values, experiences and skills as a resource enriching qualitative analysis; the researcher becomes the instrument for analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.13). Thus the subjected and interpreted meanings produced through this researcher-participant relationship enhance the richness of the data produced.

Chapter 5 Context of policy discourse

This chapter reviews the policy discourse proposing, developing and launching the new T-Level qualification, to provide context for fieldwork. This chapter is structured in two parts; an overview of the structure and design of the qualification, second a review of implementation strategies.

5.1 Design and structure of the qualification

The principles of the design of the qualification are clearly set out in the Post-16 technical education reforms T-Level action plan:

> "T-Levels will be designed primarily to support entry to skilled employment. Successful completion of a T-Level will provide students with the knowledge, skills and behaviours necessary to start skilled employment in an occupation related to their field of study" **(DfE, 2017b)**

A key distinction between this vocational qualification and its predecessors then is the singular focus on preparation for specialist occupation employment. Hence the structure of this two-year college course with three mandatory elements, all focused on work skills:

- A 'core' set of underpinning knowledge, concepts and skills, tailored for their chosen industry and occupation: 'core content'
- Specialist training covering occupation or industry specific skills: 'occupational specialist content'
- An industry placement with an employer, which will last for a minimum of 45 working days.

To facilitate such a uniquely work-oriented qualification, employers were central to the design and structure processes of each T-Level, and part of the validation of content for each (IfATE, 2024; e.g. City & Guilds, 2025).

Arguably placing employers at the heart of the qualification reform rather than educators led to the quality issues identified by Ofsted in its 'T-level thematic review' (2023). The review found "there remains considerable work to do to improve the quality and effectiveness of … T-Levels … to make sure that they fulfil their potential and can be offered at scale" (ibid, Executive Summary). Ofsted found that even experienced teachers struggle to teach the "complex" courses. Complaints from education providers over "volume of content" and "unduly burdensome" assessment triggered a review of every T-Level with the Department confirming both content and assessment methodologies could be changed as a result (Chowen, 2024). My fieldwork enables consideration of these quality issues at a local level.

To fulfil its skills for employment remit, the T-Level qualification is based on the same standards and content as apprenticeships. The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education

(IfATE) was therefore made responsible for the design and structure of the qualification. IfATE replicated the assessment model of apprenticeships for T-Levels, so students are assessed through 'Performance Outcomes' to demonstrate competency in skills necessary to enter employment to a specific role/occupation. An example is provided in Appendix I 'Construction: Design, Surveying and Planning T-Level outline content'(DfE and IfATE, 2018).

Eleven T-Level Routes were planned to cover the key industry sectors requiring skilled workers (HM Government, 2025b):

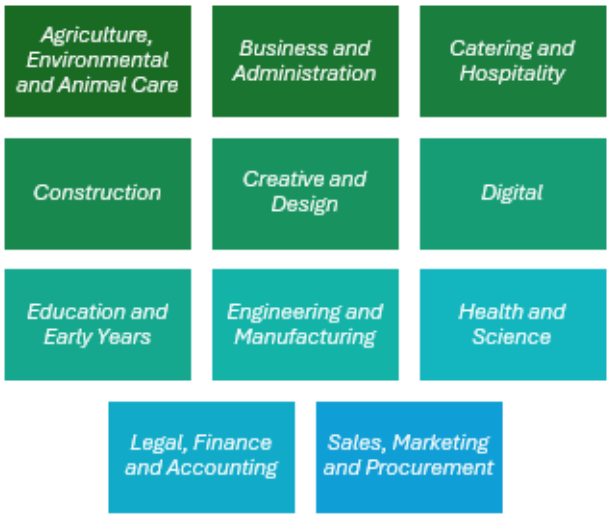

Figure 5.1 T-Level Routes

Each T-Level Route has specialist Pathways which students enrol to, with multiple Occupational Specialisms (DfE, 2017a) studied in the second year of the course:

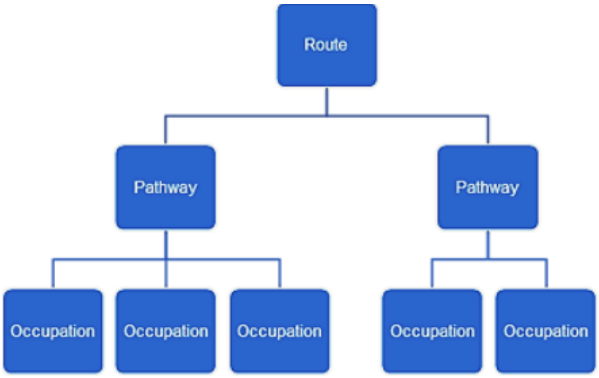

Figure 5.2 T-Level Routes, Pathways and Occupations

The number of Pathways within a Route varies to reflect the structure of a particular industry sector. Similarly, the number of Occupational Specialisms differs according to the roles available in that area of work (tlevels.gov.uk, HM Government, 2025). To illustrate, the Business & Administration T-Level Route has only one Pathway and three specialisms:

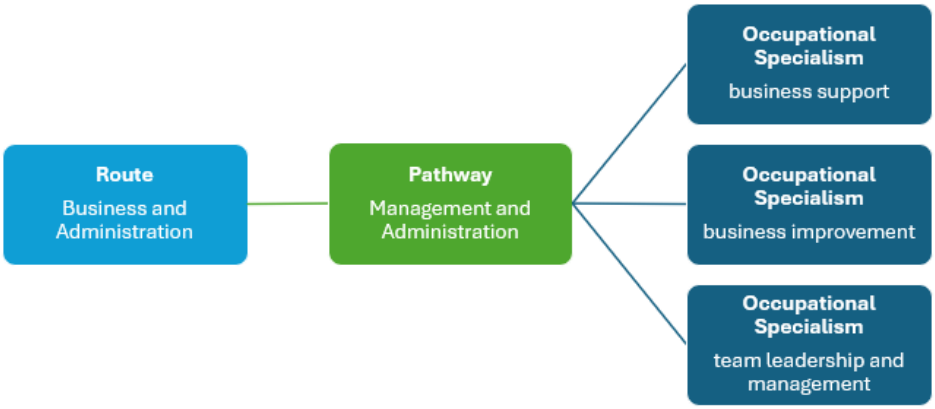

Figure 5.3 The T-Level in Business and Administration

In contrast, the Health & Science T-Level Route provides three Pathways with varying specialisms in each:

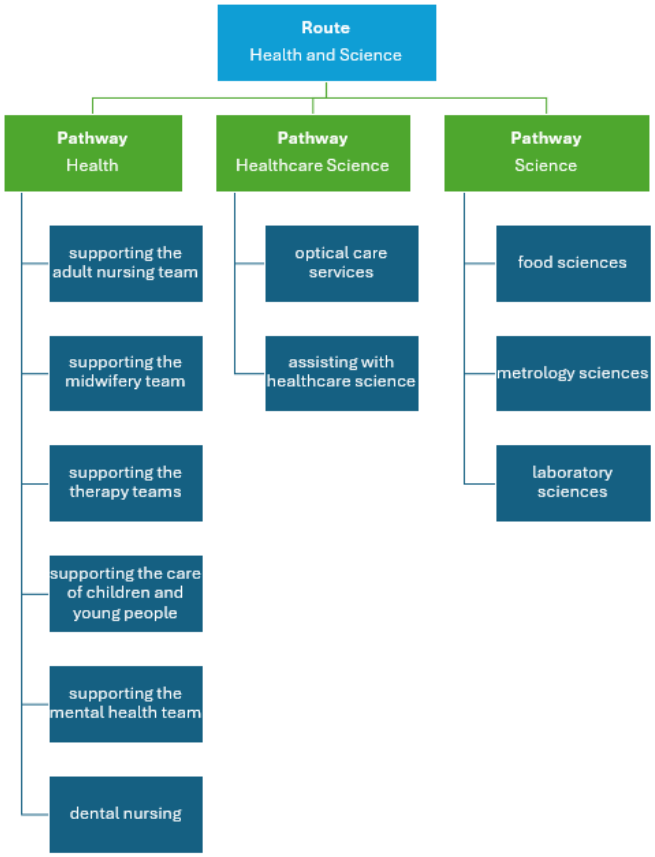

Figure 5.4 The T-Level in Health & ScienceThis structure of T-Levels Routes with Pathways to Occupational Specialisms has caused problems contributing to poor student recruitment. To explain, the key planning and intent document, the T-Level Action plan (DfE, 2017b with annual updates) shows the very dominant weighting of the Technical Qualification element of each T-Level:

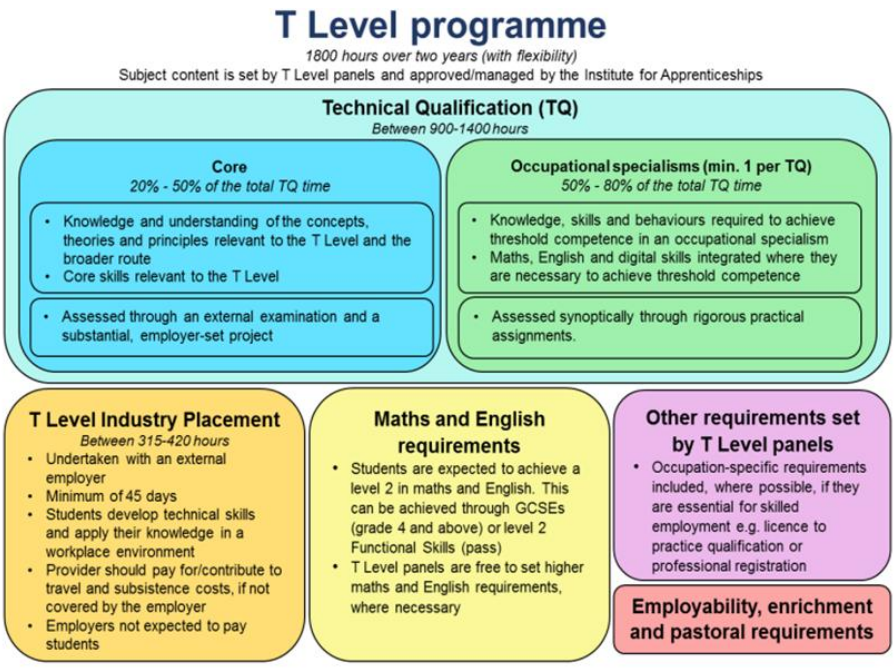

Figure 5.5 The T-Level programme designed by IfATE with employers The only element of the qualification not dedicated to technical work skills is the last on the infographic (DfE and IfATE, 2018), named 'Employability, enrichment and pastoral requirements'. So minor is this element of the programme that there are no hours specifically dedicated to it. This lack of breadth in the syllabi causes considerable concern from an education perspective, and for schools giving guidance to their pupils on what college course to choose. It is questioned whether 15 or 16 year olds know the exact career they wish to pursue, and if it is desirable to channel young people in such a specific and narrow direction (Coulthard, 2023). The problem is compounded in practice by colleges not being able to afford to provide more than one occupational specialism. The intention of the policy design is that student do not have to choose their specific occupation until the end of their first year at college, when most are 17 years old. In practice this postponement by a year of the choice of specific career does not happen due to financial funding realities of the FE sector. As illustration, school-leavers may be sure they wish to study science and choose the T-Level Route Health & Science, enrolling to the Pathway Science. However the Occupational Specialisms provided within the Science Pathway are narrow: food sciences, metrology science and laboratory sciences. To be financially viable, colleges realistically can only offer one specialism, so if the local college only offers metrology sciences, school children in the area have just that one science option available. In reality, the same few Occupational Specialisms are offered by T-Level providers nationally, so effectively the qualification is not providing the range of career progression intended (Boniface and Whalley, 2025). The experience and

impact of this qualification design and early career choice is reviewed through students participating in this case-study.

The industry placement of the T-Level provides nine weeks of work experience, a radical departure from previous college-based vocational courses. For example, Extended Diplomas usually provide 10 days of work experience at best, and this is not mandated; it is possible to gain the qualification successfully without any work experience. The implications on student experience are researched by this study and detailed in Chapters 7 and 8, together with employers' views of the industry placement. The research site institution's experience of implementing this policy is reviewed in Chapter 6.

T-Level policy discourse characterises the assessment methodology of the T-Level as rigorous and to an indisputably high standard, like A-Levels. This was designed to help create a vocational qualification of equal stature to academic as promised at launch (Hinds, 2018). To this end all elements of the T-Level are externally assessed, like A-Levels and in stark contrast to AGQs which are predominantly assessed through teacher-assessed coursework. For T-Levels the Core theory is assessed at the end of the first year through external examination as are Occupational specialisms at the end of the year 2. The industry element is assessed through written assessment too, externally marked. Whilst the intention of assessing this qualification using academic methods is transparently to bring the esteem enjoyed by A-Levels to this 'gold standard' technical education, some argue it is inappropriate:

> "Written exams are still seen as the gold standard. Ironic that we don't think this for the driving test, yet this glaringly obvious fact has become increasingly obfuscated … Written examinations are absolutely right for some disciplines or situations, but they are deeply inadequate for others"
> **(Gallagher, 2025).**

Policy makers built further rigour into the assessment methodology of T-Levels by requiring students to pass all components of the programme in order to be awarded the qualification. Moreover, each element is graded differently as well as separately:

- an overall grade for the T-Level, shown as pass, merit, distinction or distinction*
- a separate grade for the core component, using A* to E
- a separate grade for each occupational specialism, shown as pass, merit or distinction
- confirmation of successful completion of the industry placement
- confirmation the candidate has met any additional mandatory requirements

A student's overall T-Level grade is worked out from the grades they achieved on the core component and occupational specialism(s). Proving particularly problematic is the way the grade achieved for the Core element at the end of the first-year acts as a limiting grade. It

creates a ceiling for the maximum grade that can be achieved for the overall qualification. This means a student's overall grade for this competency, skills-based qualification is proscribed by the grade achieved in a written exam of theoretical content halfway through the two-year course. The impact of this grade limitation on the reputation of the qualification is reviewed in this study.

5.2 Implementation of the qualification

Problems with implementation of policy reform has been a significant factor in previous VET failures. The first few years of implementation of this qualification indicate similar problems, as Skills Minister Baroness Jacqui Smith stated, T-levels "probably haven't been developed as effectively as we would have hoped" (Busby, 2024). An overview of these implementation strategies and arising issues is presented here.

The first three T-Levels were launched in September 2020 in construction, digital, and education & childcare as planned. Seven more T-Levels were launched in September 2021, six in September 2022, two in September 2023, and three in September 2024 (DfE, 2024g). Awarding organisations were unable to keep up with this fast schedule and did not provide teaching materials, text books or sample exam papers in time which prevented effective teaching of the courses and students' exam preparation (Ofsted, 2022).

The government found it necessary to delay introduction of T-Levels in Hairdressing, Barbering and Beauty Therapy; Craft and Design; and Media, Broadcast and Production from 2023 to 2024, and to defer the Catering T-Level beyond 2024 to allow more time for them to become of sufficient quality (Keegan, 2023). Eventually T-Levels in hairdressing, barbering, beauty and catering were scrapped (Gov.UK T-Levels support for schools and colleges, 2025). At the same time the government decided to cease enrolments onto the T-Level in Healthcare Science due to low recruitment (ibid).

Even more damaging to the successful establishment of this 'revolutionary' policy reform was the government's intention to replace it with another new qualification, the Advanced British Standard (ABS) (Prime Minister's Office, 2023). A clear sense of education policy being a tool in party politics is evident in the announcement of the ABS and subsequent notice of its cancellation by the new Labour administration who cited financial incompetency of the previous government as the reason for cancellation rather than educational reasons:

> "the ABS was supposed to be the former Prime Minister's legacy, but it turns out that he did not put aside a single penny to pay for it. So we will not go ahead with that policy, because if we cannot afford it, we cannot do it"
> **(Hansard - UK Parliament, 2024)**

Another aspect of T-Level policy implementation that seems underdeveloped and problematic is a lack of planning to scale-up industry placements to a national level. The industry placement is the cornerstone of the qualification. Experience of the workplace to develop technical skills with and for employers is the primary differentiator of this policy reform, and also a key attraction for students (Edge Foundation and Orr, 2024). The future of the qualification is therefore placed in doubt by the difficulty in sourcing employers to provide these industry placements, despite significant financial incentives and policy alterations (Lewis and Bolton, 2024). The difficulty of obtaining work experience is explored from both an institutional and student perspective in the following chapters.

T-Level Action plans document short timespans for IfATE, acting without input from education professionals, to develop the assessment and grading methodology for T-Levels. This resulted in the overly complex grading system detailed above that limits pass rates and has lowered quality of delivery. The extent of the detrimental impact on student outcomes is arguably masked by the Department which has withheld full data on qualification achievement rates for T-Levels (SFCA, 2023). The National Audit Office therefore investigated T-Level pass rates and reported that they have "fallen each year" as new subjects are introduced (2025, p.7). Moreover, pass rates are only for those students who completed the course, it does not reflect retention rates, which are "worrying" (Chowen, 2024). Nationally, a third of 2021 enrolees dropped the course. Of the next cohort, enrolling in September 2022, only 70.8% were retained (ibid). "Many" students have dropped out of T-Levels after being "misled" onto the flagship qualifications Ofsted's review of T-levels reported (2023).

These quality issues reported in Ofsted's thematic review have affected both student satisfaction and recruitment. Ofsted found that "At their worst, T-Level courses are not what students expected", they felt "ill-informed about content and structure". It also noted issues around teaching, staff recruitment and retention, and the quality of industry placements.

Collectively the problems of design and implementation identified above have damaged the reputation and attraction of the new qualification, repeating the issues that caused the failure of GNVQs and Diplomas; "low uptake, low understanding, low recognition and high complexity syndrome" (Hodgson and Spours, 2010). Just 1,235 full-time students aged 16- to 18-years-old enrolled to the first three T-Levels launched in September 2020 in construction, digital, and education and childcare. The fieldwork of this thesis began in September 2021 when a further seven T-Levels were launched and the number of T-Level students increased but only to 6,062 (Lewis and Bolton, 2024). Recruitment to the new qualification has continued to be lower than expected as shown below in Figure 5.6 (Borrett and Foster, 2024):

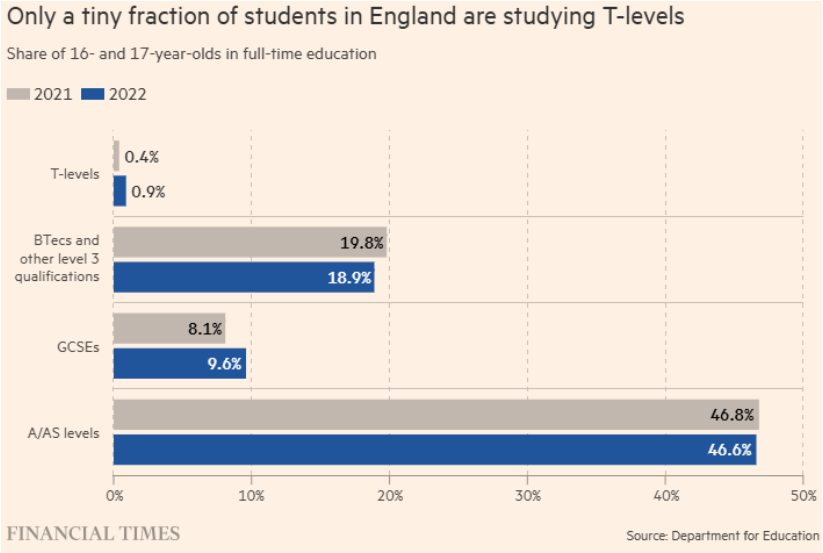

Figure 5.6 T-Level enrolments, 2021 reported by the Financial Times

Colleges nationally struggled to recruit to T-Level courses, largely due to lack of engagement or recognition from employers (AoC, 2023a). Fewer than 550 students started a T-Level in the legal and finance route launched in 2022. A total 270 students only enrolled to the T-Level in agriculture, land management and production, introduced in September 2023 (Chowen, 2024) and in the summer of 2024 three occupational specialisms had five or fewer students completing the T-Level. For example three students completed the painting and decorating specialism within the Onsite Construction T-Level (National Audit Office, 2025 p.25). Awareness of T-Levels as a post-16 option remains low among young people, parents and employers; research by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) indicates the majority (63%) of young people didn't know what T-Levels were, and while 72% of employers surveyed said they had heard of them, just 28% understood what they involved (Coulthard, 2023). Student participant awareness is reported in Chapters 7 and 8.

Rushed implementation affected reception of the qualification by universities too. Some refused to accept the qualifications as valid entry courses, leaving students and teachers feeling "let down" (FE Week, 2023) and like "guinea pigs" (Standley, 2024). This sentiment is also found within student participant data. Few T-Level completers have progressed to apprenticeships due to an inadequacy in this policy reform: there is no alignment between T-Levels and Level 4 apprenticeships meaning students cannot develop the necessary level of on-the-job training, knowledge and occupational competency required for progression to level 4 apprenticeships (House of Commons Education Committee, 2023, para 37). However, progression to higher-level apprenticeships (degrees) of the first cohort of T-Level completers (completing their qualification in summer 2022) were higher than the rate for all level 3 students, "suggesting that T-Level programmes have enabled high rates of progression to higher-level apprenticeships" (DfE, 2024d, p12). Again, research into the progression opportunities enabled by T-Levels is reported on at a local level next.

Chapter 6 Case study: Institution findings

This case-study includes analysis of institutional documentary evidence to contextualise students' perceptions of T-Levels within the specific education provider-setting of the research site. The immediate context of the college, including views and values shown on the website and the strategic and operational approaches of leaders in their implementation of the qualification, were crucial to the formation of student choices, perceptions, experience and sense of what progression opportunities were available to them.

6.1 Context: the T-Levels on offer at the research site

This case-study was based in a FE college of approximately 4,000 16–19-year-olds studying courses ranging from Entry Level 1 through to Level 3. This fieldwork was conducted from September 2021 to August 2023 when three T-Level routes had been launched (DfE, 2023b), and were all offered at this college. Students participating in this research were enrolled to courses within all three routes[11]:

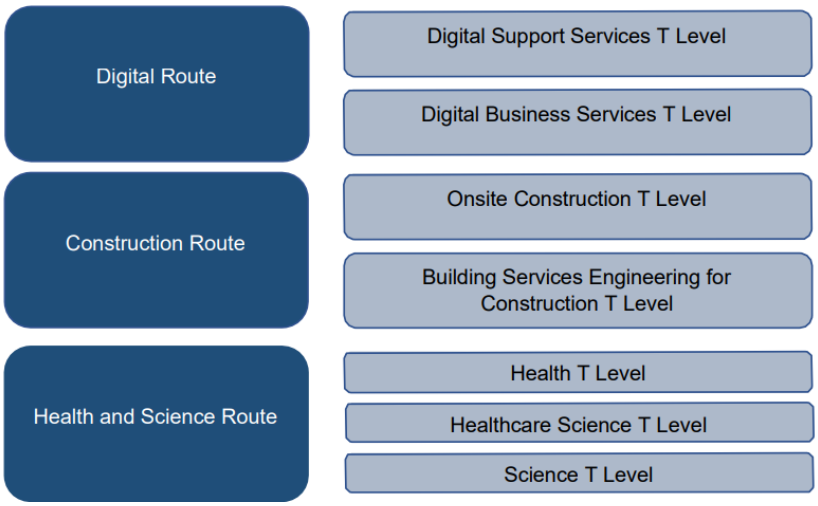

Figure 6.1 T-Level Routes available September 2021

The region in which the college is located has substantial industry and business but also areas of significant socio-economic deprivation, as is typical of most urban and semi-urban areas. Sourcing industry placements for T-Levels was recognised as a national challenge, however the location of this research site did provide reasonable opportunity, and so this college did not face the same difficulties with fulfilling the work placement requirement that rural colleges experience. Being located near to economically disadvantaged areas meant that a third of case-study participants lived in postcodes identified as in the 30% most deprived areas in England (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2019). However, the proportion of

[11] Details shown in Appendix K

students eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) in the case-study was lower than the national average.

The average prior-attainment of the students studying A-Levels at this college was in line with other FE colleges, and lower than school sixth forms and sixth form colleges in the area. Moreover, this particular college operated with some leniency regarding the prior-attainment of English and Maths GCSE, which is atypical. Most colleges and schools insist on achievement of both in order to begin A-Level study. In contrast however, this college did allow A-Level study of some subjects without both GCSE English and Maths above grade 4 but did insist on both GCSEs for enrolment to T-Levels.

6.2 T-level information provided by the research provider

The promotional information presented by the college to prospective students, including those that subsequently enrolled and participated in this case-study, employed the branding and infographics of the government's official T-Level website (HM Government, 2021). This image shows the primary logo, typical of the T-Level branding:

Figure 6.2 T-Level promotional infographics

Textual analysis of this documentary data (Hawkins, 2025) found a dominance of upward-pointing arrows, four in this image/logo, and a fifth incorporated into the letter 'T' of the name 'T-LEVELS'. Together with the strapline of 'WELCOME TO THE NEXT-LEVEL'. These signify upward mobility and aspiration indicators. The descriptor of T-Levels as 'THE NEXT-LEVEL QUALIFICATION' suggests they are better, higher and newer than existing qualifications. The employment of capital letters throughout connotes importance and clarity; a powerful and clear visual communication of the new qualification.

Adjacent to this image on the webpage (see Appendix M), was a text box in which the college claimed that it

> "was chosen as the only college in [the region] in 2020, the launch year of this exciting qualification, to bring you the first three T-Levels in Construction, Digital and Education & Childcare".

Describing itself as '**chosen'** to offer T-Levels signals to the reader that the college is preferred over its competitors. Moreover, stating that it is the '**only**' college emphasizes its unique status in this respect. Addressing the prospective student reader directly 'to bring **you**' confers that special status and preferential treatment to the prospective student. The adjective '**exciting**' used to describe the new qualification connotes dynamism, enthusiasm and stimulation. By using this word, the college promotes T-Levels positively, and implies that in comparison existing qualifications lack excitement; are less inspiring.

Immediately below this statement the college brings a sense of currency and immediacy to its T-Level offer with the time descriptor '**now**': "Now, with experience and innovation driving our curriculum, we have introduced further T-Level options including ….". The college creates a sense of timeliness and a newsworthiness with this announcement of new curriculum, but it steadies this **innovation** drive with a reminder of its **experience**, of its status as an established and knowledgeable education provider that can be trusted to deliver reliable qualifications. This documentary data provides valuable contextual understanding of the way the T-Level qualification was presented to the student participants, informing their choice of pathway through college, and influencing their learner identities as students of this type of education.

6.3 T-Level course information

Similarly, the positioning of T-Levels within the broad range of courses offered by the research site is of influence in forming students' perception of the qualification. The College's website landing page (Appendix M) offers viewers a course finder option at the top, showcases 2 or 3 aspects of the college and TYPES OF STUDY. T-LEVELS are listed first in the types of study offered, signifying importance and prominence. Second the college lists ACCESS COURSES, third VOCATIONAL COURSES, next GCSE COURSES, then A-LEVELS followed by ADULT LEARNING COURSES, ONLINE COURSES, APPRENTICESHIPS, HIGHER EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL DIPLOMAS and PART TIME COURSES. The hierarchy of courses communicated in this order of listing with T-Levels first and A-Levels fifth boosts the status of this new technical qualification.

Each type of study is illustrated with a photograph and clicks through to information on that type of study. The box for T-Level courses is shown here, with a photograph of students in an easily identifiable workplace setting and wearing uniforms typical of this healthcare sector:

Figure 6.3 Image from the landing page of the research site's website

The research site's website course information shows the same format is used for each T-Level. The Design, Planning & Surveying for Construction T-Level course information is typical (see Appendix L for full course information for illustration). Beneath the name of the course is an image. For this course the college has selected an image that presents a workplace setting with a young, smiling female person wearing a hard hat foregrounded:

Figure 6.4 Image illustrating the T-Level in construction

Behind her a stream of people wearing hard hats signify that the setting is a construction site. The female figure is in focus, looking directly at the camera and so the viewer. The setting behind her is blurred, as are other figures. In this way the image enables the view to identify and relate with this protagonist who presents as professional and confident. The implication is that

studying this T-Level will enable prospective students to follow in her footsteps. The opportunity to enjoy similarly successful career paths is emphasized in the overview of the course stating the course will “prepare you for the world of work” naming two prominent employers from the construction industry.

The college’s webpage reinforces the career progression prospects of students of these T-Level courses with associated salaries. The monetary reward of each career is highlighted, together with labour market information on the number of jobs existing in the region, clearly communicating to students that multiple, good job prospects will be available to them to progress to, with substantial salaries:

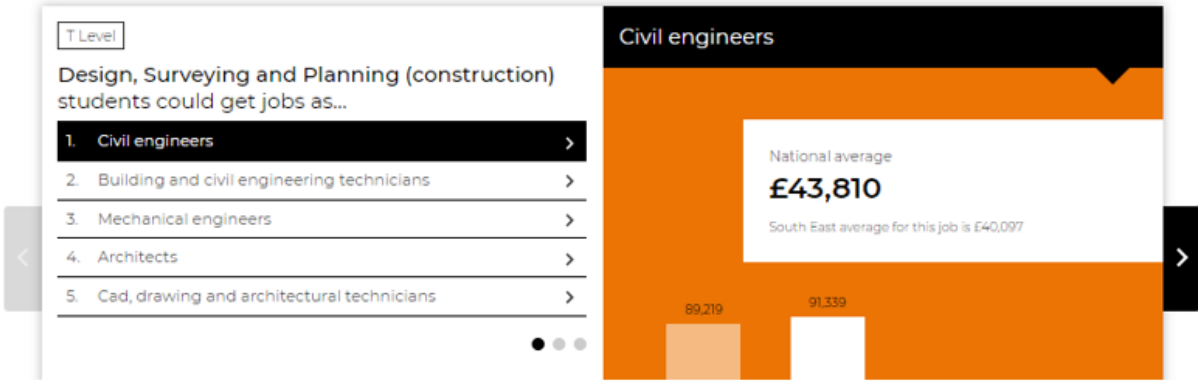

Figure 6.5 The research site’s T-Level in Construction course information

This interactive webpage uses infographics, information and data provided by a third-party company that supplies colleges and higher education institutions with career progression and labour market information. This information is embedded within the College’s T-Level course information and is live – providing up-to-date data on salaries, job vacancies and the size of job markets, sectors and industries. Prospective students viewing the college website can click on a job role to see further salary information and video recordings of career professionals describing their jobs and providing ‘career advice’. In relatively small print at the bottom of the career pop-out is information on ‘Qualifications held’. In this example it is stated that “The majority of those employed in this role will hold a Master’s degree, postgraduate diploma, Level 7 NVQ”. This information, which does not help promote the T-Level is seemingly concealed or not communicated effectively with the greyed-out colour of the type preventing it from standing out to the viewer unlike the white and orange text above it, as shown here:

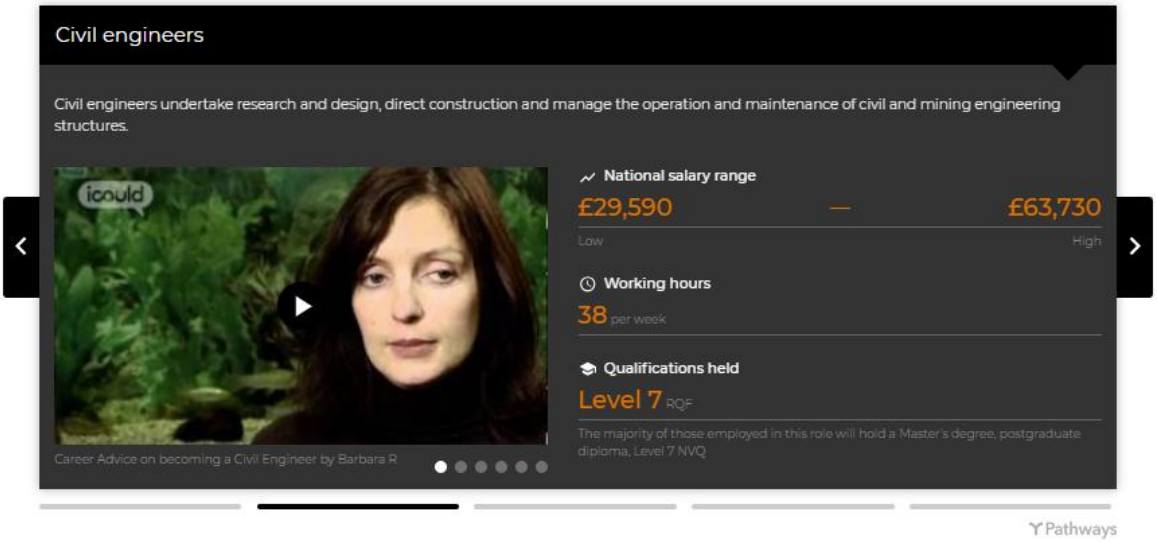

Figure 6.6 T-Level in Construction; information on selected career pathway

Higher qualifications are required for all of the job roles included by the college on its website T-Level course information. Arguably presenting these job roles and salaries as the outcome of T-Levels misleads school-leavers using this information to inform their choice of college course, illustrative of Ofsted's finding that "many students reported being misled and ill informed" about T-Levels (Ofsted, 2023b).

Other aspects of this institutional documentary data could cause students to be misinformed. For example the college provides very brief information on the actual two-year course, with a single sentence on entry requirements and assessment. Information on the structure of the course is also brief and formatted in a condensed style with bullet points placed adjacent horizontally rather than in list, so taking up minimal space:

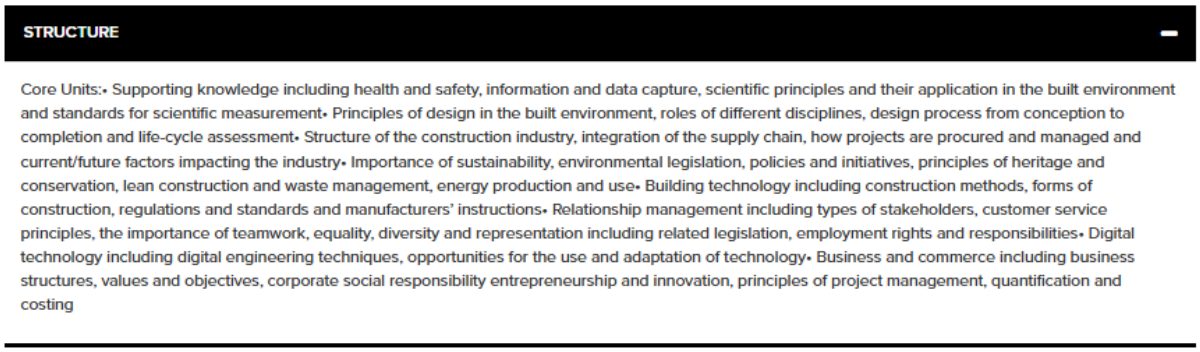

Figure 6.7 T-Level in Construction course information

In this way the College foregrounds workplace salaries and career prospects that the T-Level can lead to (after several years of further study), and minimises course content. The information presented is focused on promoting the long-term benefits and rewards of studying a T-Level, rather than detailing the content and structure of the two years of study necessary to achieve those rewards. This textual analysis finds that the dominant purpose of this website information

is promotion of the qualification and recruitment of prospective students and omits detail of the experience of studying for the qualification.

6.4 College leaders' perspectives on T-Levels

Interviews with two senior leaders of the education provider that hosted this case-study provide useful meso-level perspectives to contextualise student's perceptions of the qualification.

Both interviews were semi-structured, core questions can be seen in Appendix E. The same core questions framed the discussion for each interview, but in both cases the interviewer allowed the interviewee to shape the content and direction of the discussion through their responses. The resulting qualitative data was analysed in line with Thematic Analysis methods (Braun and Clarke, 2022) as detailed in Chapter 4, Methodology. The themes that emerged from the two interviewees included the quality of technical education, the academic-vocational divide, work experience and the governmental policy. Each of these themes were approached differently; Dave, the college's Principal and CEO took a more strategic and theoretical approach whilst Dan was more operational.

6.4.1 Raising the quality of technical education

Dave believed the T-Level qualification would not only raise the standard of technical education in England, but would also introduce a more holistic form of education to the vocational qualification offer. He talked about the importance of FE vocational education helping "young people developing as individuals … Giving them a security and resilience and wellbeing to face what actually is outside there in the world", in addition to skills and qualifications for the security of employability. "It's about self-worth, I think at the end of the day" he concluded. This institutional perspective provides valuable contextual information to understand the development of learner identities of T-Level students at this college.

Dave did not see a tension between these personal development education aims of this form of technical education and the commercial, economic goals integral to the conception of the T-Level qualification at its governmental launch, where it was promoted as a means, ultimately, to improve the national gross domestic product (GDP) of Britain (Hinds, 2018). Dave explained that employers' needs for commercial growth, national economic productivity and the skills an individual student needed for their self-belief, resilience and workplace productivity were one and the same. Dan echoed this view. Dan saw the purpose of 16-19 education "as supporting student aspirations whether that was to develop employability skills or the skills to progress academically to HE". He believed these goals were compatible with T-Levels improving Britain's economic productivity: "the Skills Plan and the Sainsbury report were very much around

addressing this gap in productivity … at a national level and trying to raise the standards nationally compared to other countries."

At a national level concerns have been raised that T-Levels "may be inaccessible to a wide range of students, particularly those with lower academic attainment" (House of Commons Education Committee, 2023b). Both college leaders contradicted this. Dan believed that the structure and teaching methods of T-Levels with industry contexts and practical workplace applications made the Level 3 academic content of the qualification more accessible to learners who saw themselves as practical learners and had not enjoyed school classroom learning as much as their A-Level peers. Similarly Dave believed the T-Level qualification was more inclusive of a broader range of learners:

> "the diversity of approach and range people coming in can support a student who gets easily distracted or bored by the same group, same individual [teacher] … it's different to school because there's a different technique, a different dynamic, different room, different access to different sort of equipment, I think, gets a different approach."

This institutional perspective is reviewed in this study's research of students' perspectives and evolving learner identities.

6.4.2 The academic-vocational divide

Talking about T-Levels potentially raising the standard of technical education in both cases prompted these college leaders to speak of the disparity of esteem between academic and vocational or technical education. They were both hopeful T-Levels would bridge this academic-vocational divide. Summarising the college's initial decision to commit to the new qualification Dan recalled:

> "it was very much the thinking that vocational and technical education was the sort of poorer relation and … there's still a certain amount of academic snobbery around A-Levels and [introducing T-Levels] was trying to firstly, address that … so we were raising the standards of technical education."

Both research site leaders considered the assessment methodology of T-Levels resembling that of A-Levels would help bring parity of esteem. For example Dan considered stakeholders external to the college would see T-Levels as more equal to A-Levels "because there is that higher level of academic expectation, … because of the fact that they're largely exam-based and synoptic assessment based rather than assignment." Dave also believed the increased rigour gained from external assessment would improve the status of T-Levels as it would "give a consistency of practice". This research evaluates whether this narrative has fed into the views of student participants.

However, Dave was clear that "A-Levels still have a currency that is very much attached to the middle-classes". He described the process of social reproduction and concluded that T-Levels, still in its early days at the time of interview, April 2022, had not yet "impacted on the narrative of … A-Levels are what you do, to … move into professions and go to university." Again this institutional perspective is tracked through student data.

Dave was in favour of creating a binary option of A-Level or T-Level for post-16 education by withdrawing AGQs. He considered that Extended Certificates (AGQs equivalent in size to a single A-Level) lacked rigour and were poor quality, especially when combined with an A-Level or two. He believed they were used to give students who were not academically suitable for an A-Level programme an option to still access this academic route when they would actually be better served by technical education. Dave's position as the accounting officer of an FE college gave him an alternative view regarding this policy debate on the defunding of AGQs. Whereas the industry association representing sixth form colleges campaigned strongly against the removal of AGQs (SFCA, 2022) in order to protect student choice and guard widened participation to university, Dave's analysis of this campaign concluded a less altruistic, socially motivated incentive lay behind the SFCA's campaign. He believed the current foregrounding of the academic-vocational divide which portrayed technical education as inferior was politically expedient for the sixth form sector as opposed to the FE sector. Dave considered the campaign to retain AGQs was the result of "funding pressures, and [sixth form college leaders] holding on to students within A-level programmes, … maintaining numbers." Without the option of a third 'easier' certificate, some sixth form students would be unable to remain at the sixth form of their school or college and instead would "have gone to an FE college or followed an apprenticeship or gone into another route". Thus the motivation for retaining AGQs lay with holding on to the funding students bring and financial viability rather than education standards. This further supported and endorsed the new qualification T-Levels in his eyes. This insight to the position and value of qualifications within the post-16 landscape helps understand students' perceptions.

6.4.3 T-Level work placements

Both senior leaders from the research site valued the work experience aspect of the T-Level qualification. They considered T-Levels were the best college-based qualification for preparing students for the world of work by developing appropriate technical skills, attitudes, skills and behaviours. Dave believed spending more time in industry could reaffirm the decision to move into this area of work or the skills arena by providing "a much more grounded notion a bit like an apprenticeship in some ways". He considered that the qualification was broad enough to allow students who did not enjoy the occupational specialism workplace to apply to a range of

degrees instead. Both leaders believed the soft skills developed to help students become workplace-ready were transferable to other employment sectors or to further study.

The value of industry placements was evidenced by this institution's experience; Dave explained that students of the Construction T-Level with the occupational specialism Surveying and Design for Construction and the Built Environment had so successfully completed their industry placement that the employers facilitating the work experience had "actually poached the best individuals on that course" and employed them. This contextualises at a local level the implementation of T-Level design, showing the industry placement to be successful and this is triangulated with students' perceptions.

6.4.4 Progression from T-Levels

Dan had been involved with the introduction of T-Levels since its launch. He explained that the Department's early T-Level briefings had presented the purpose of the qualification as preparing students for going straight into employment. He and all the early adopters for the T-Level "were very clear that it needed to also have HE progression as a pathway after the T-Levels, otherwise they wouldn't work." He went on to describe how the majority of the first T-Level cohort of students at this college had in fact progressed to university; progression opportunities of the second cohort are of key focus of this study.

Dave interpreted the Department's revised presentation of T-Levels as providing multiple progression pathways as a way of 'selling' the qualification to parents of prospective students. To give them "a greater comfort" that both jobs and university progression were possible. He described the debate current in 2022 around the quality and quantity of graduate employment opportunities and whether the fees of c.£9,000 per year were worth incurring. He argued that the government was being strategic in its presentation of this new technical education in order to appeal to the middle-class audience wedded to the academic route.

Dave was also aware of the mutability of policymaking, and of the failure of previous VET policy reform: he "realised there's a risk that [T-Levels] could have ended up and may still end up as diplomas. I, many of us had been through that experience." Similarly, Dave indicated the Department had not operationalized its strategy to ensure nationwide roll-out of the new qualification. In relation to how industry placements could be provided to T-Level students if the qualification was delivered on a national scale he queried "But how are you going to get the volume of employers to be involved in and doing it. … How it was gonna be achieved, no idea."

6.4.5 National strategic policy intention - to contribute to GDP

Lastly, this qualitative data produced through interviews with college leaders provides insight to the motivations for adopting the qualification from an organisation level. When explaining his

motivation for his college to become an early adopter of T-Levels, Dave used terms such as ‘product’, ‘selling’, ‘stakeholders’ and ‘market’. This points to his role being responsible for ensuring the financial stability of his college within a marketized, highly competitive environment. For example, his initial decision to offer T-Levels, besides improved quality of technical education, was that he and his Board of Governors could see “a market for it.” Other colleges in the region had responded negatively to the new qualification and “did not want to get involved” so he “saw an opportunity”. Being the only provider in the region offering the new qualification gave the college a unique selling point and allowed it to monopolise the market, even if it was at that point a “niche market”.

A second financial motivation was to safeguard the organisation against the financial repercussions of potential policy changes: “And if the plan was to in the future defund applied generals, then there would be no loss, we'd be ahead of the game.”

Thirdly, Dave confirmed that the capital investment that offering T-Levels attracted influenced the decision to become an early adopter: “because of the amount of capital was also being put in, I felt that it would be remiss of us not to take that opportunity.” Dave provided a very different interpretation of the government’s promotion of T-Levels as a tool to improve the nation’s GDP. He interpreted this as a way of making the spending of public funds more palatable to taxpayers:

> “I think that has as much to do with future funding … people being content that .. [the government is] pushing more money into further education. And there's been pressure to cut rather push more money in. … So others within industry, or parents or anyone else understand what they're doing that for”

Essentially he contended that the economic growth argument was deployed in order to justify the allocation of public funds on this scale into a new form of technical education, so revealing the strength of the government’s desire to enforce adoption of the T-Level and create a new form of technical education. The cynicism of this leaders’ interpretation of policy discourse can be traced through to students’ localised fear of being part of a qualification experiment, of gaining a qualification that might cease to exist, as illustrated in Chapter 8.

Chapter 7 Questionnaires

This chapter reports on the findings of two groups of students studying either A-Levels or a T-Level participating in the case-study through completion of a questionnaire at the start of their course at college. More data was produced by a second questionnaire issued towards the end of their second and final year at college, course completion rates and grades achievement, and some destination data in the form of university application and placements of the participants. Students' perceptions of their courses and the skills they provide are contextualised by employers' observational data.

This data enables research into the following areas of enquiry:

- What are students' perceptions of the progression opportunities provided by T-Levels compared to A- Levels?
- How are young people's career aspirations shaped?
- How do students perceive the relative status and reputation of T-Levels and A-Levels?

7.1 Data collection and context

The two groups of students participating in this study were enrolled to T-Level and A-Level courses at a FE/ sixth form college for the academic years 2021- 2023. They shared similar socio-economic contexts as indicated by household postcode. Description of career goals and aspirations and reflections on their learner identities were collected at the start of their college journey to explore the choice these young people made as school-leavers to either take an academic or a technical/vocational route through college. These initial career aspirations and intended progression goals were tracked through the two years of study and into actual destinations[12] following completion of the Level 3 courses. This enabled an evaluation of the impact of qualification type on horizons for action, future ambitions and progression.

All employers that provided industry placements to T-Level students and a week of work experience to A-Level students at this college were contacted for feedback on the employability skills demonstrated by the students placed with them[13].

7.2 Students' perceptions of progression opportunities

This study finds that T -Levels were perceived as a gateway to skilled employment and specific careers more than A-Levels. At the start of their college courses case-study participants were

[12] Destination data was collected for those students that completed UCAS applications

[13] Full details of the questionnaires are shown in Appendices Appendix C and Appendix D

asked what they intended to do when they left college; get a job, get an apprenticeship, or go to university. This question included within the entry questionnaire[14] enables exploration of the policy intentions of T-Levels, described in the DfE's policy paper 'Introduction of T-Levels' (2018c) as consisting of content that "meets the needs of industry and prepares students for entry into skilled employment, an apprenticeship or related technical study through further or higher education".

As Table 7.1 shows, more T-Level students intended to go straight into employment after college than A-Level students (26.5% vs 15.4%). Only 22 of the total 187 case-study participants intended to get an apprenticeship, approximately 5% more T-Level students than A-Level students. The majority of participants (127 students, 67.9%) opted for progression to university as their intention once they had completed their college course. 75% of A-Level students intend to progress to university compared to 59% of T-Level students.

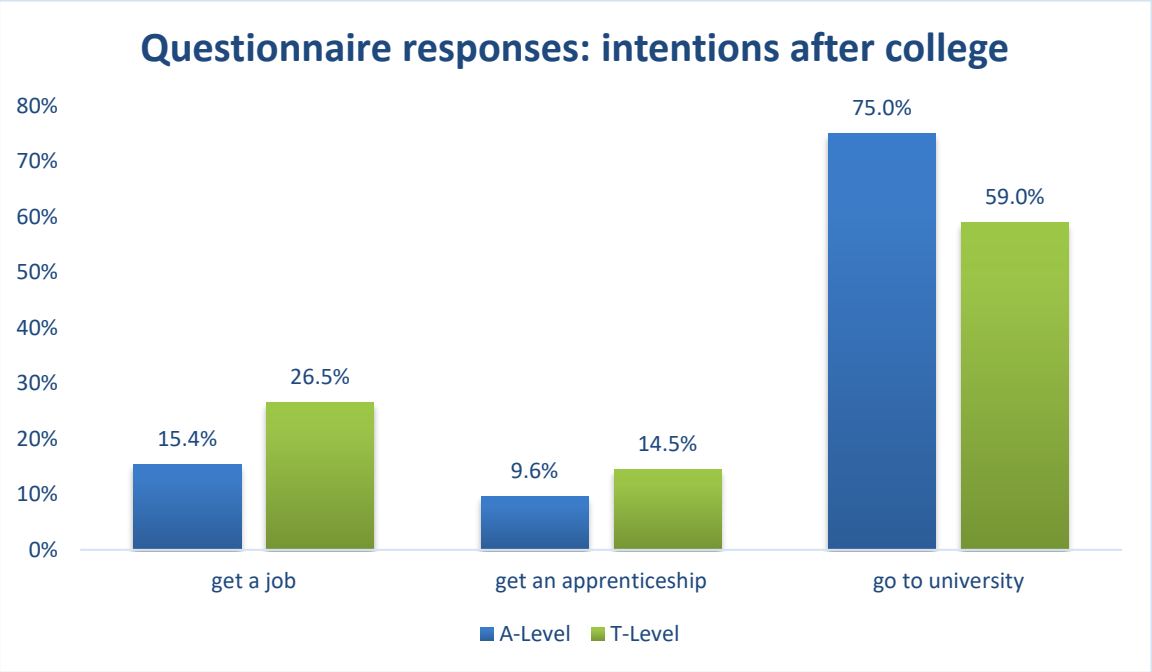

Figure 7.1 Student participants' progression intentions at the start of college

7.2.1 T-Levels seen as a gateway to skilled employment

More of the students who wanted to progress straight into employment after college chose the T-Level route through college rather than A-Levels. This indicates that students perceive the T-Level qualification as better preparation for employment than A-Levels. Conversely, this statistic indicates that students perceive A-Levels as more pertinent for undergraduate study and consider the academic qualification a more secure route into university study than T-Levels. This will be discussed next in 7.2.2. Subject content is also a major factor for school-

[14] See Appendix A

leavers when choosing a college course, as is assessment methodology. Both factors are referenced by participants in their questionnaire responses regarding why they chose their college course and are discussed further below.

7.2.1.1 Technical skills and work experience to 'get a job'

Of the 38 case-study participants who intended to 'get a job' after college, 22 chose a T-Level as the best route towards this destination. This perception that T-Levels are a more effective route directly into employment realises the original policy agenda of the qualification: "T levels will be designed primarily to support entry to skilled employment" (DfE, 2017b, p.8). 26 of the 83 T-Level students participating in the case-study directly referenced the opportunity to develop workplace skills through work experience as the reason why they chose to study a T-Level instead of A-Levels. Typical responses included "There was a higher focus on work experience than other options", "Work experience that you don't get with A-Level", "I was eager to be able to learn but also be a part of a work placement so I can put theory into practice" and "I chose this course as I get to attend work experience alongside academic learning". Some respondents stated that industry placement or opportunity to work with companies meant, for example, "it would be better off for my career"[15].

The employers who responded to requests to appraise the students placed at their organisation for part or all of the 45-day industry placement confirmed that the T-Level qualification did equip students with appropriate technical skills and knowledge[16]. Three of the employers described students' technical skills as 'excellent', 16 as 'good'. They rated students' technical knowledge similarly: three described the students' technical knowledge as 'excellent', 15 as 'good' and just one as 'inconsistent'. This very positive appraisal of the students' technical knowledge and skills was supported with open-text responses such as "The students have gained set of skills that make them well prepared for employment". With the assumption that students will not yet have the full set of knowledge and skills of experienced employers, a follow-up question asked employers if any skills not yet developed were missing from the syllabus/course content, or if, as far as they could tell, the student had not learnt effectively. It is a concern that approximately 40% considered the course design did not include all the necessary content for working in their sector. However, only one of the employer participants identified any notable gaps in a student's technical know-how, citing the need for training at college so they could demonstrate the ability to deliver "Effective use of industry standard software and CAD packages, especially 3D & BIM" during the placement.

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[15] See Appendix N for all 83 respondents' answers to the question 'Why did you choose to take a T Level course rather than A Levels or another Level 3 course such as BTEC?'

[16] Responses were received evaluating 19 T-Level Industry Placements

7.2.1.2 T-Levels are good preparation for specific career paths

Case-study participants also perceived that, unlike A-Levels, T-Levels facilitated entry to specific career roles. For example, some students said they had chosen the T-Level route because "it offered something more interesting and closer to the career I wanted to persue [sic] in life", "I chose a T-Level because it was the next step towards my chosen career" and "Because the course that I take is more specific to the job role I want to achieve in the future." In comparison only three of the 104 participants taking A-Levels referenced their career in their rationale for choosing the academic route, and in each case it was because they believe A-Levels would keep their career options open in comparison to a T-Level preparing them for a specific occupation, which they did not want[17]. This again endorses policy intentions which were to enable "post-16 learners to study towards an occupational specialism and acquire the skills needed by employers" (House of Commons Education Committee, 2023a).

Employers who provided industry placements in these occupational specialisms reported that the T-Level students placed with them were mostly well informed about their specialist industry sector; three employers reported that students had 'excellent' understanding of their specialist sector, eleven had 'good' understanding and 5 'inconsistent'. Thus this research finds that T-Levels are a useful addition to post-16 options for school-leavers who are sure of their career path.

7.2.1.3 Which students choose to progress straight to employment?

It is useful to examine in more detail which school-leavers are choosing the T-Level option at college so they can move straight into employment at the end of the course. As stated above, 22 participants chose a T-Level with the expressed intention to progress into the workplace once they had completed the course. First to note is that the socio-economic profile of these 22 students is more affluent than for the case-study as a whole, measured by their family home IMD categorisation. This is in-line with the overall IMD profile of the T-Level cohort compared to the A-Level cohort of this case-study, and of the campus populations these case-study participants were drawn from. This indicates that low income and a need to earn as soon as possible is not the motivation for seeking employment at 18 years of age. This conclusion is reinforced when looking at the choices of students living in IMD deciles 1-3. More of these students living in areas of high deprivation (60.7%) chose to study A-Levels and a route to university instead of T-Levels and their facilitation of employment, as Figure 7.2 shows:

[17] See Appendix P for all 104 respondents' answers to the question 'Why did you choose to take A-Levels rather than a T-Level or another Level 3 course such as BTEC?'

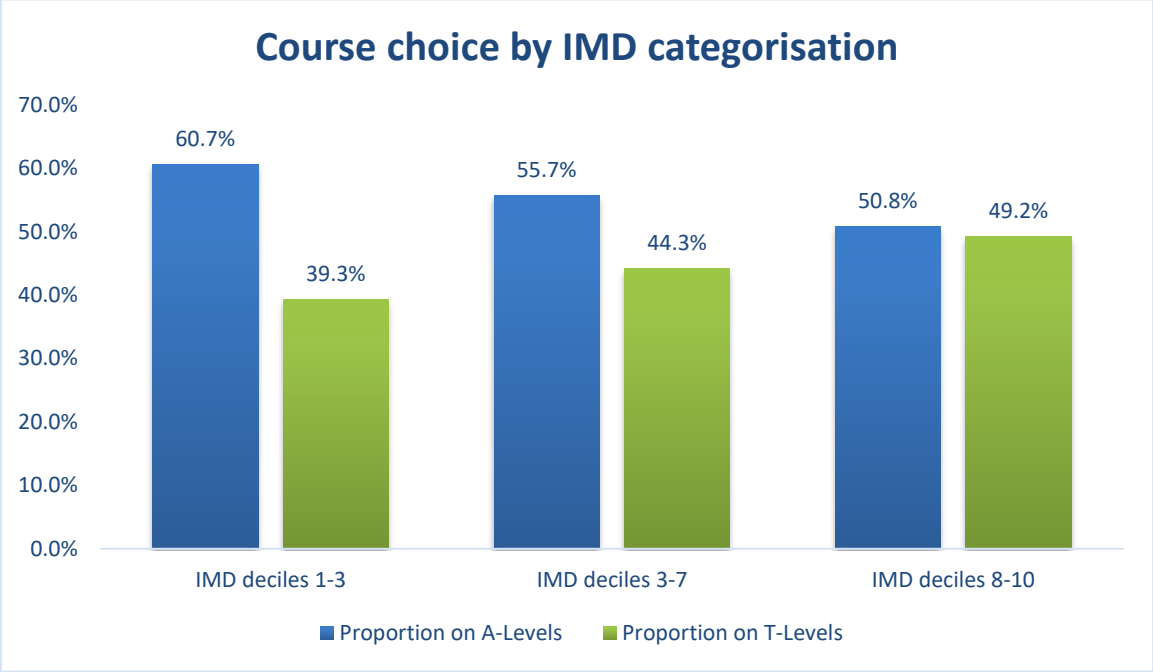

Figure 7.2 IMD status of student case-study participants

Case-study data then suggest disadvantage does not influence young people's decisions to start earning as soon as possible after the compulsory education leaving age of 18. National data corresponds: national statistics show that 26.8% of disadvantaged 18-year-olds progressed to employment in 2023 compared to 28.3% non-disadvantaged college-leavers (DfE, 2024b). And within this case-study, fewer A-Level students chose the 'get a job' progression option, despite the lower IMD profile of the A-Level cohort as shown in Table 7.1 above.

These students opting for employment are not reproducing their parents' experience either. Of the 22 T-Level participants intending to progress to employment instead of university, ten of them (45%) have parents with degrees from university. Whereas the level of parental education is lower for T-Level students intending to go to university; 36.7% of these students' parents attended university. It therefore appears that generational reproduction is not at play here.

It is noticeable that the majority of these 22 T-Level participants opting for the workplace are male (18 of the 22 participants). This gender profile aligns with the subject of the T-Level courses chosen however. The majority (19 of the 22) were students on the Digital and Construction T-Level pathways, and the gender profile of students enrolled to these T-Level courses at this college is equally imbalanced – only five of the 43 enrolees are female. Conversely there were only four male students enrolled to the Nursing and Healthcare T-Levels at this college and 71 females[18]. None of these Health and Healthcare students intended to enter employment upon completion of their course, which is to be expected since a degree is necessary to nurse or

[18] This reflected a national picture of gender imbalance in enrolments to these T-Levels in 2022 (Camden, 2022)

become a healthcare practitioner such as a midwife or paramedic. It is therefore subject-matter and a genderised construal of subject and career trajectories that leads to the gender imbalance of students perceiving T-Levels as a route to employment at 18.

It is reasonable to deduce therefore that the subject matter and nature of career paths the subject leads to, constitutes the dominant factor determining students' perceptions of T-Levels as gateways to direct employment. Indeed, the majority wanting to get a job at 18 expressed clear sector workplace-related expectations of their T-Level course such as "Good knowledge on cyber security, business and general knowledge of computers and infrastructure", "everything i need to know about construction", "knowledge for my future job", "The standard first aid and nursing skills that will transfer over to being a paramedic" and "On the job experience in the field of IT and the theory knowledge to back that." Employers participating in the case study by completing a survey regarding the student(s) placed with them, confirmed that T-Level courses are in fact delivering these sector specific skills and knowledge:

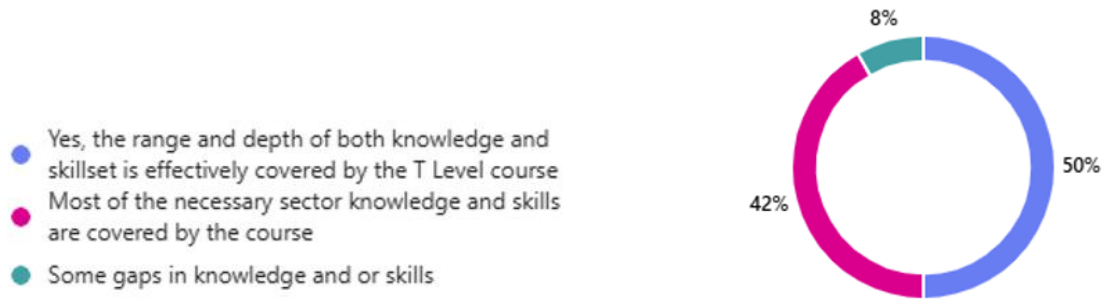

Figure 7.3 T-Level employers' questionnaire responses

Indeed, some students were so well prepared for their chosen specialist occupation that the organisation hosting their industry placement employed them. For example, a project management consultancy working in the built environment offered their industry placement student a job for when he completed his T-Level: "Louie has been offered the role as an assistant project manager". The principal of the college also noted that several of the first cohort of T-Level students had been "poached" by their work experience organisation who were effectively treating the college as a recruitment agency.

7.2.2 University is the aspiration for most

The majority of case-study participants (127 students, 67.9%) intended to progress to university, from both A-Level and T-Level courses.

7.2.2.1 Academic versus vocational routes to university

Participants perceive that A-Levels provide the best opportunities to access university: 75% of A-Level students intend to progress to university compared to 59% of T-Level students. This mirrors perceptions of student populations nationally. For example, 75.4% of sixth form college students progressed to university in 2021 (the most recent year national statistics were

available at the time of writing) (DfE, 2024e). Given that the majority (77.5%) of students in sixth form colleges study A-Level[19] (Allen, 2024, p.22), the parallels with the A-Level half of the case-study are evident.

This research has therefore endorsed A-Levels as the traditional, academic route to undergraduate study. Nearly a quarter of A-Level case-study participants directly cited access to university as the reason they chose to study A-Levels rather than vocational/technical options. Comments included "A-Levels seemed like a better route to take because I want to go to university", "A-Levels are also more suitable for getting into more prestigious universities which is more suited to my goals", "I need the A-Levels I chose for university" and "Unis look for A-Levels". In addition to these responses confirming the perception that A-Levels are generally preferred by universities, a number of A-Level participants believed that A-Levels were necessary to access specific courses at university saying for example, "The course that I want to take in University requires A-Levels" and "It is the most suitable qualification for the universities I want to get into and for the career paths I want to pursue."

This data also indicated that T-Levels are seen as providing access to HE, more than other vocational or technical qualifications. To explain and evidence: 59% of T-Level participants chose to study this qualification as a means to progress to university. This is a higher rate than the 51.1% of FE college students in England who progressed to university in 2021 having studied vocational qualifications (not T-Levels) and a minority (of these FE students) studying A-Levels (DfE, 2024e). These two data sets are not entirely comparable however and it is useful to look at contextual factors such as socio-economic status and prior attainment as well as achievement rates in order to better understand students' perceptions of the progression-to-university opportunities provided by the new technical qualification, T-Level. This follows.

7.2.2.2 Progression to university and POLAR norms

The best place to start when ascertaining whether students perceive that the new qualification increases access to university compared to existing vocational qualifications and in comparison with A-Level, is to situate students' responses within the participation rates for their local area (POLAR) contexts. A very high proportion of students from both the A-Level sample of respondents (44.2%) and T-Level sample of respondents (47.0%) samples live in POLAR quintile 1 areas which have the lowest HE participation rates, historically ranging between 5.6% to 23.8% of 18-19-year-olds progressing to HE from that locality. An equally balanced number from each sample live in areas of POLAR quintiles 1 and 2 combined: 63.4% of A-Level respondents and 60.3% of T-Level participants. A slightly larger proportion of T-Level participants compared

[19] In both the case-study research site and the sixth form college provision referenced here, some students' programme of study includes an AGQ qualification alongside A-Levels

to A-Level lived in Quintiles 4 and 5 where more young people have historically studied at university:

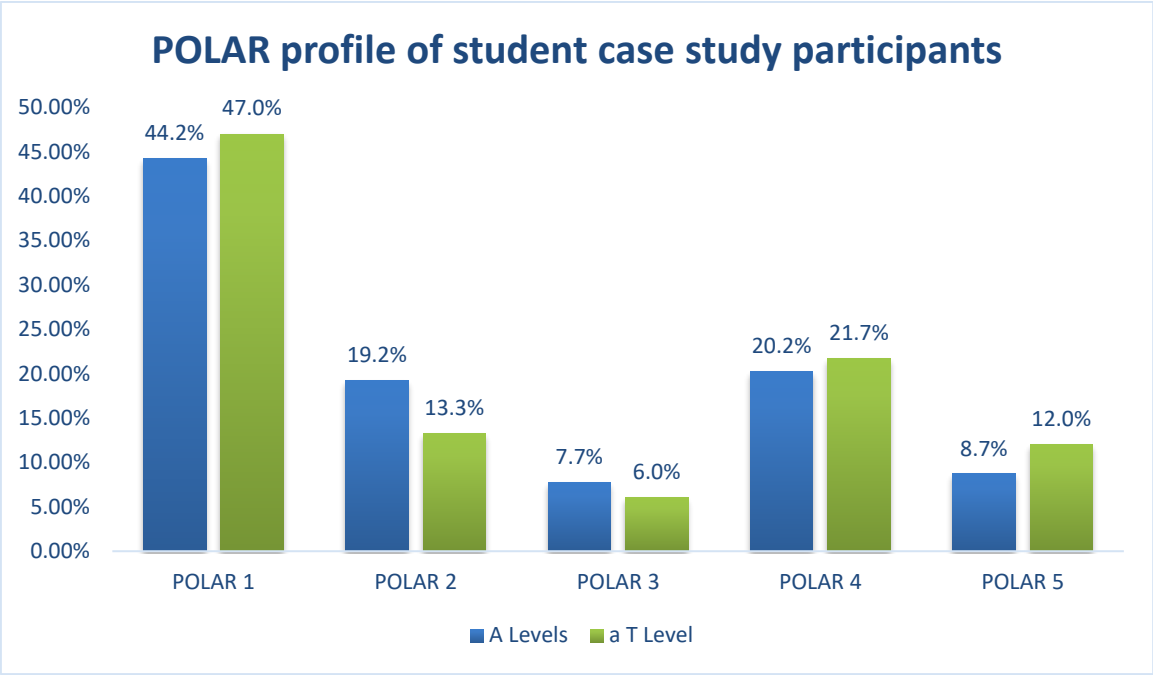

Figure 7.4 POLAR contexts of student case-study participants

Mapping the levels of aspiration to progress to university found in this case-study against POLAR rates of participation shows these participants' intentions far exceed actual progression according to POLAR statistics, especially for those living in communities where progression to university is traditionally low. For illustration, Figure 7.5 shows that 80.4% of the 46 A-Level students living in a POLAR 1 quintile aspired to progress to university, significantly higher than historical progression rates for the community in which they lived. A-Level students living in communities with a more established tradition of undergraduate study (POLAR quintile 4) were less aspirational, with 52.4% intended to progress to university, whilst the level of aspiration for university study recorded by A-Level participants located in quintile 5 communities aligns with the middle of the range of norms for those geographical locations rather than exceeding historical trends.

Aspiration to study at university was also higher than historical norms for the 39 T-Level students living in a POLAR 1 quintile at 59.0%. The reverse is found regarding T-Level participants living in quintile 5 where their intentions to progress to HE only just approaches the lowest historical rates of progression for those areas:

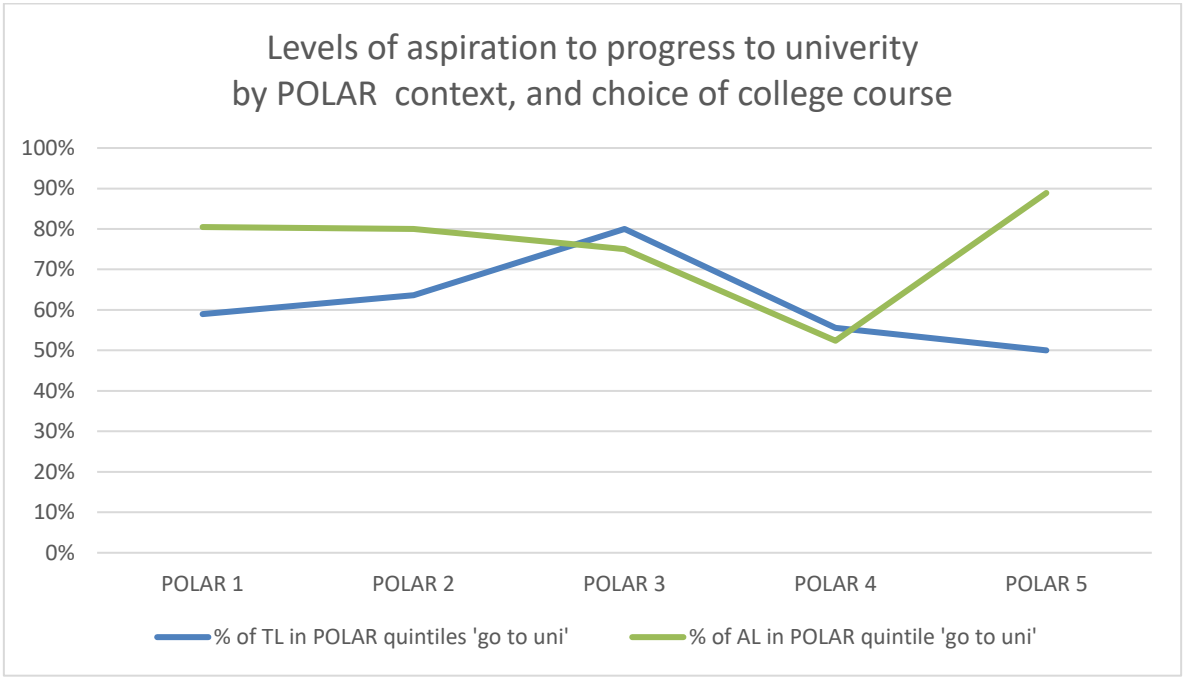

Figure 7.5 POLAR status of case-study participants intending to go to university

It is evident that students participating in this case-study perceive that both academic and T-Level routes provide strong progression opportunities in HE but more have chosen the academic route to achieve this HE goal, as is traditional. However, this data reveals a high propensity for participants to see T-Levels as a means to reach university, compared to AGQs and other level 3 vocational qualifications. Figure 7.6 is useful to examine whether T-Levels are seen as providing progression opportunity to HE more than previous vocational qualifications:

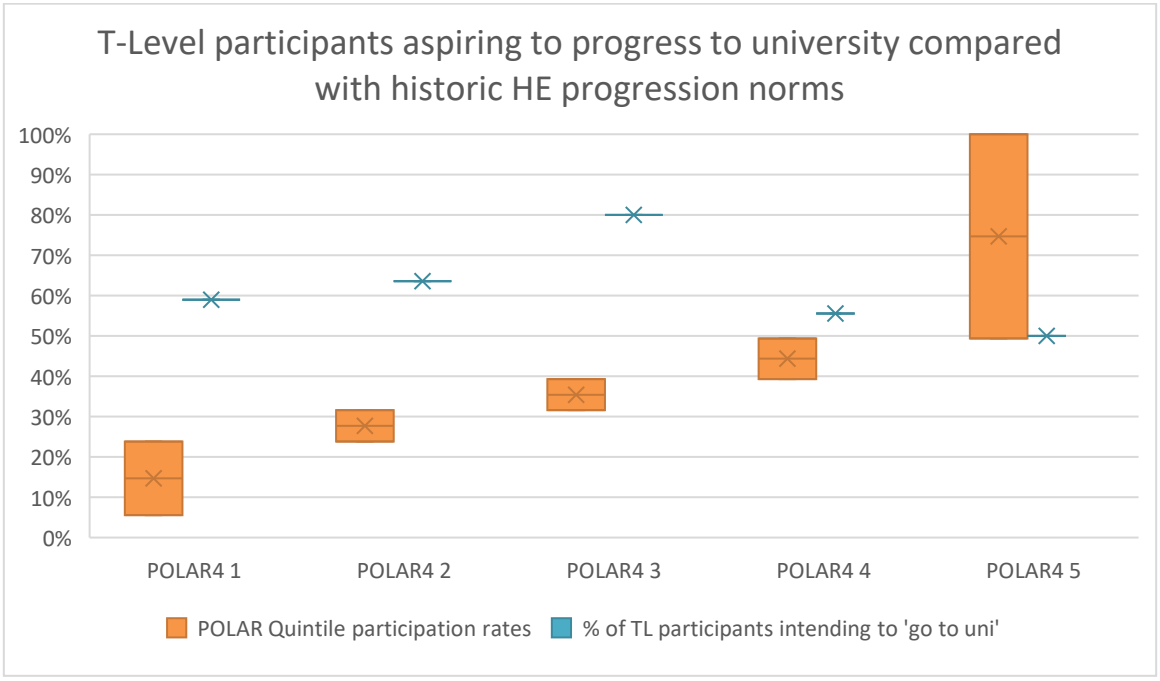

Figure 7.6 T-Level participants' aspirations to progress to university contextualised

This shows the extent to which the intentions of T-Level participants to progress to university exceed historical progression to HE for the geographical areas they live in. Greater variations

exist for students living in the lower quintiles of POLAR postcodes which indicates T-Levels are potentially widening participation to disadvantaged students, with the understanding that aspiration is the first necessary facilitating step for actual achieved reality. The data shows that more students from underprivileged contexts see university as a possibility for them because of the T-Level qualification.

7.2.2.3 Progression to university for disadvantaged students

Further evidence that T-Levels are widening HE participation for disadvantaged students is seen in the strong positive correspondence between POLAR quintiles and socio-economic status as measured by IMD classification:

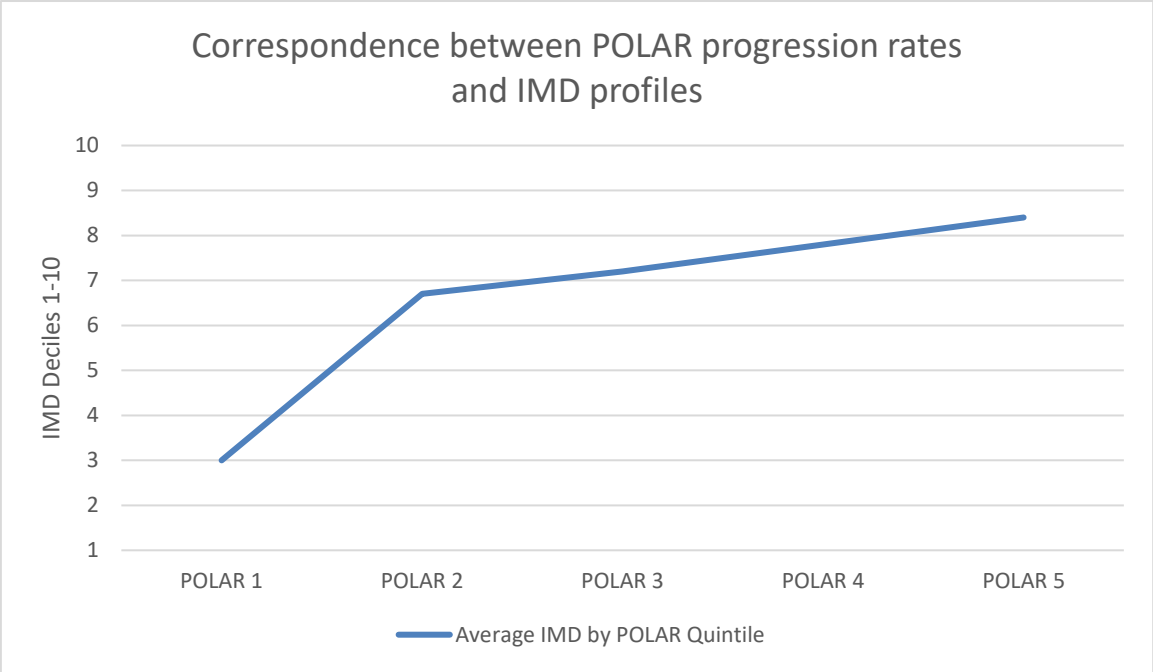

Figure 7.7 Progression to university rates by IMD profile

Furthermore, the other measure of economic disadvantage – eligibility for FSM – confirms the relationship between POLAR progression rates and socio-economic status. There are eight T-Level participants eligible for FSM and seven live in POLAR quintile 1, IMD deciles 1-3. It can thus be seen that disadvantaged students (as measured by POLAR categorisation and IMD classifications as well as FSM eligibility) are aspiring to progress to university at a higher rate than has been the norm historically, and they perceive the T-Level qualification as opening up opportunity to do so.

The data therefore reveals that T-Levels are fulfilling the role previously occupied by Level 3 AGQs as passport to university for disadvantaged college-leavers. Further evidence is found in the correspondence between lower prior attainment and disadvantage, and between lower prior attainment and study of AGQs. A study of the national sixth form college populations of the year of 2023 (the year of this study) shows that socio-economically disadvantaged students are

significantly more likely to enter Level 3 college study with lower prior attainment from school (Allen, 2024):

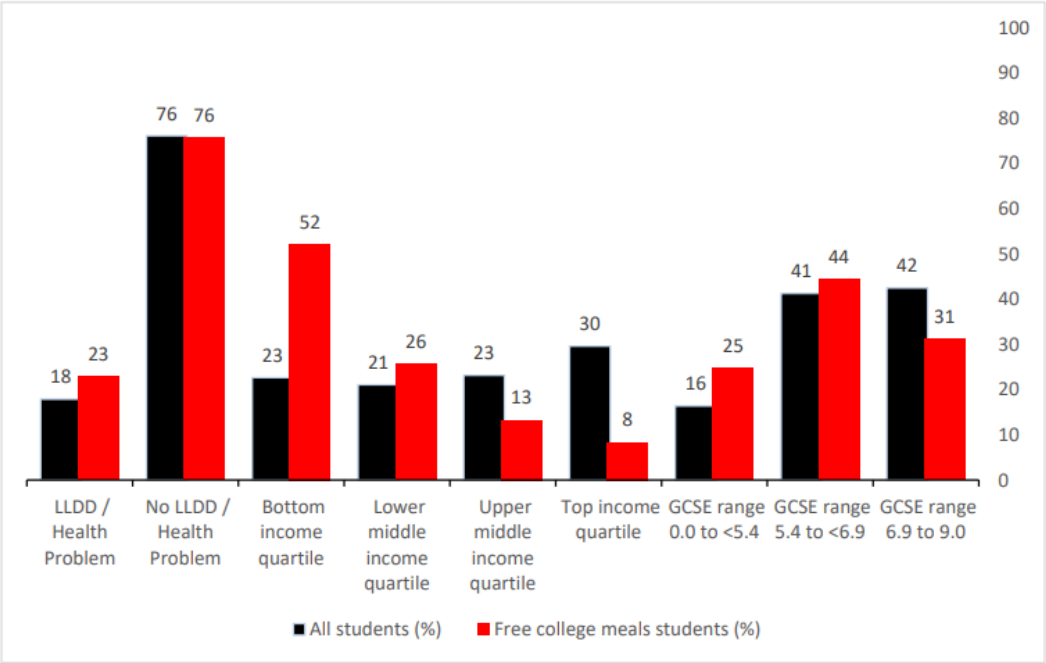

Figure 7.8 Free college meals students' prior attainmentFurthermore, there is a strong association between prior attainment and choice of college course. Again, from research of the national sixth form college populations of 2023, it can be seen that the majority of school-leavers with a GCSE profile of <5.4 (predominantly grade 5s) chose to study full-time vocational courses, or a mixed programme of AGQ and A-Level (ibid p.25):

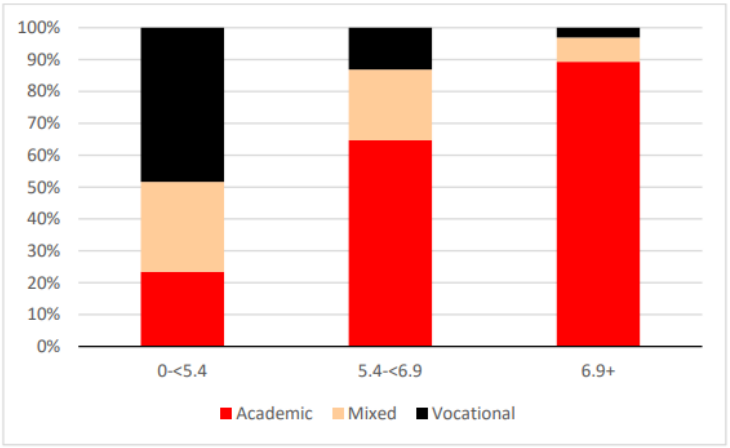

Figure 7.9 curriculum pathway by prior attainment

It is evident that to maintain the same level of access to Level 3 study as existing AGQs, T-Levels would need to be attainable with similar entry requirements. However, parliamentary review advised there is not yet "the right balance of rigour and accessibility" (House of Commons Education Committee, 2023). The relatively high entry requirements of T-Levels would restrict

audience to “a small pool of academically gifted students, who have a specific employment goal in mind by age 16” (ibid para 53).

7.2.2.4 Prior attainment, T-Levels and progression to university

In light of this warning, it is useful to consider what this case-study shows regarding the balance of rigorous entry requirements and accessibility. Figure 7.10 below shows that more participants entering college with low and mid-range GCSE attainment are choosing to study T-Levels rather than A-Levels:

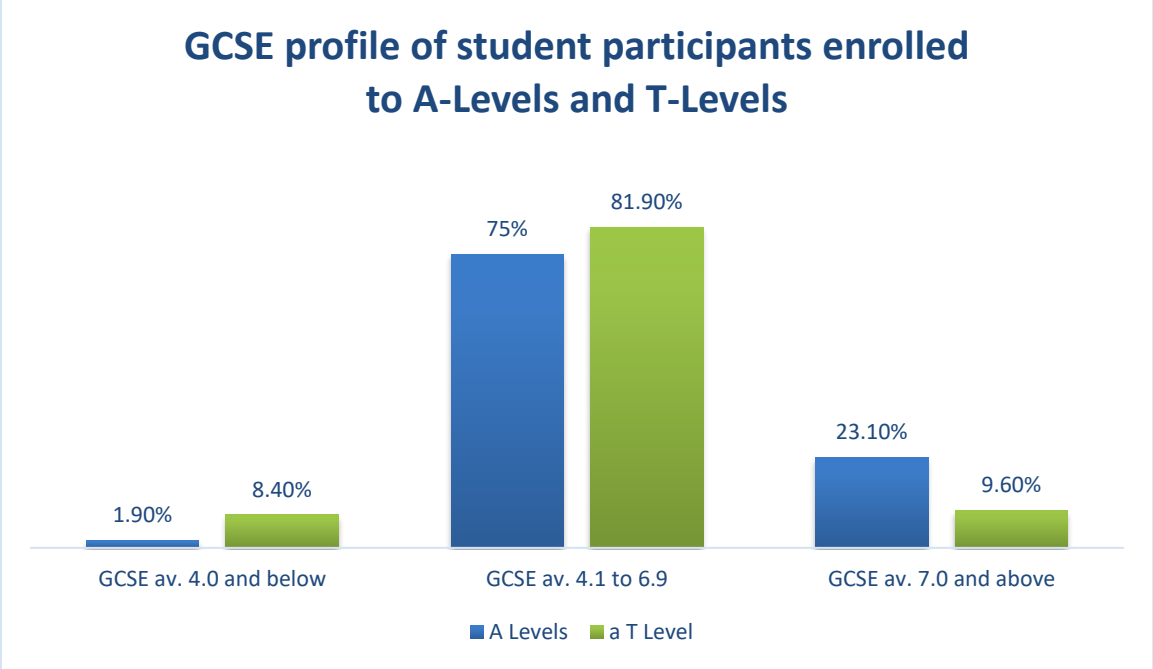

Figure 7.10 Student participants' choice of course by average GCSE profile

Placing this enrolment pattern into national context, the larger proportion of college starters with low GCSE attainment (up to average of 4.0, Grade 4) choosing T-Levels rather than A-Levels reflects national trends of enrolment to AGQs and Tech level qualifications (see DfE, 2024b for national statistics). In this case-study sample then, T-Levels are fulfilling the role of AGQs in meeting the needs of school-leavers with low prior attainment, but not to the same extent as AGQs nationally (8.4% vs 15.0%). It is evident that the more demanding entry requirements of T-Levels compared to AGQs is a factor in the smaller proportion of low prior attaining school-leavers in the sample choosing the vocational, T-Level route (8.4%), compared to nationally 15% of low prior attainers enrolling to the AGQ/Tech level route.

Continuing this analysis of prior attainment to better understand students’ perceptions of T-Levels and A-Levels as routes to university, it is noted that case-study participants with high prior attainment followed historical norms in choosing to study A-Levels at college – 75% of the 32 students with a GCSE profile of above 7.0 enrolled to the A-Level programme. In contrast, and again following historic and national trends, the majority of case-study participants with low

prior attainment chose T-Levels for their college course – 77.8% of the 9 students with a GCSE profile of 4.0 or less:

Students	Av GCSE grade 0-4		Av GCSE grade 4-7		Av GCSE grade 7-9	
Total	9	4.8%	146	78.1%	32	17.1%
Choosing AL	2	22.2%	78	53.4%	24	75.0%
Choosing TL	7	77.8%	68	46.6%	8	25.0%

Table 7.1 Prior attainment profile of A-Level and T-Level participants

Now to consider further the influence of prior attainment on students' choice of routes to university. Table 7.2 below shows firstly how many of these case-study participants with low GCSE attainment intended to progress to university. It is noted that achieving less well at school has not dampened students' aspirations to progress to university to any great degree: 66.7% of low GCSE achievers intend to progress to HE, slightly more than mid-GCSE achievers, and only 20.8% less than those who were highly successful at school:

Students	Av GCSE grade 0-4		Av GCSE grade 4-7		Av GCSE grade 7-9	
Wanting to go to uni	6	66.7%	94	64.4%	28	87.5%
Choosing AL as route to uni	2	22.2%	55	37.7%	21	65.6%
Choosing TL as route to uni	4	44.4%	39	26.7%	7	21.9%

Table 7.2 Intention to progress to university – academic or vocational route

Next to review the influence of prior attainment on participants' choice of college course as a route to university: double the number of participants with low GCSE grades chose T-Levels as their pathway to undergraduate study. Conversely, only a quarter of participants with high GCSE grades chose T-Levels as their gateway to university. These statistics need to be treated with caution since they are based on small numbers, however an overall conclusion can be drawn that students with low GCSE grades tend to perceive T-Levels as a better course for providing access to university than A-Levels. The fact that some of these participants may not have been accepted on to the A-Level programme means that enrolment to the T-Level was not a choice but a necessity. Nonetheless, the vocational qualification provided a level 3 option when the academic option did not. Moreover, the entry requirements at this college for T-Levels mandated Grade 4 for both Maths and English GCSE whereas this entry requirement was not always necessary for acceptance to its A-Level programme. Conversely, enrolment to science and Maths A-Levels at this college required at least Grade 5s in relevant GCSE subjects, preferably Grade 6. So it is a complex picture, but it remains the case that in this study T-Levels provide wider access to Level 3 and higher study than A-Levels.

7.2.2.5 T-Levels and progression to university for neurodiverse students

Another measure of accessibility is the extent of inclusivity of neurodiversity. In this respect the T-Level qualification proved more inclusive than A-Levels in this study. Significantly more students with declared learning difficulties or disabilities (LDD) chose the T-Level route than A-Levels: 21.7% of T-Level participants had LDD compared to 8.7% of the A-Level cohort. This is in line with the whole cohort of T-Level and A-Level students at this college. An equal proportion (two thirds) of neurodiverse students were retained on both the A-Level programme and on T-Levels. This is 16% lower than the retention rate of neurotypical students. Neurodivergent students did not achieve as well as neurotypical students either. However the achievement gap for students with LDD on the A-Level programme was significantly larger than for those studying a T-Level. Five of the nine neurodivergent A-Level completers (55.5%) passed two or more courses compared to 78.9% without LDD – a 23.4% difference. In contrast, 11 of the 12 T-Level completers with LDD passed. The T-Level also enabled positive progression opportunities for these T-Level case-study participants with LDD. 44.4% progressed to university compared to 24.6% of neurotypical T-Level students. These statistics need to be treated cautiously due to the low numbers, but it is clear that the T-Level qualification has enabled more positive progression opportunities for neurodiverse students than the academic route.

7.2.2.6 Vocational qualifications lead to different undergraduate courses

The data therefore show that both routes, academic and new vocational, are perceived as a conduit to undergraduate study. The type of undergraduate study enabled differs however, according to students[20]. To elucidate: of the total 83 T-Level participants, 49 recorded their intention to progress to university at the start of their course. 44 of these 49 recorded a preferred undergraduate subject that was a direct continuation of their T-Level subject. For example, the preferred undergraduate degree of those participants enrolled to the Health T-Level Pathway with the occupational specialism of 'Supporting the Adult Nursing Team' was nursing or midwifery. One of these respondents specified Mental Health nursing and three others specified paediatric nursing. Similarly, participants embarking on the Education T-Level with an occupational specialism of 'Early Years education and childcare' wanted to study degrees in either 'Primary Education', 'Childhood Studies' or 'Child Psychology' – again a direct continuation of subject into undergraduate study. The preferred degree subjects of participants from the Digital T-Levels were also a continuation of their college subject if they chose the 'progress-to-university option' in the questionnaire, which few did. Only six students enrolled to the Science Pathway T-Level with the occupational specialism of 'Laboratory Science' in

[20] The responses of participants intending to 'go to university' are shown in AppendicesAppendix Q andAppendix R

September 2021 at this college. Two of these students participated in the case-study and noted Biology and Biochemistry as their desired degree subject, again a direct continuation of the T-Level syllabus.

7.2.3 Apprenticeships remain a minority pursuit

Progression to an apprenticeship was the least popular option for respondents in this case-study. Only 11.8%, 22 of the 187 participants intended to get an apprenticeship at the end of their college course. Slightly more T-Level respondents intended to take up an apprenticeship after college than A-Level respondents (14.4% vs 9.6%).

The socio-economic status of the T-Level responders choosing to progress to apprenticeships is lower than the overall T-Level cohort as measured by IMD. The average IMD profiles of the 12 T-Level participants intending to progress to an apprenticeship is 4.54, more than a decile lower than the IMD profile of the whole T-Level cohort, 83 students, at 5.69. It is also the case that A-Level participants intending to progress to apprenticeships share a slightly lower IMD profile than that of the whole A-Level cohort, although the difference is only 0.78 of a decile. From this, it would seem that case-study respondents perceive apprenticeships as a means of earning while learning.

From the perspective of prior attainment this data shows that progression to apprenticeships is a positive choice. The average GCSE profile of those students opting for apprenticeships is in-line with or marginally above that of the overall average prior attainment, and therefore these participants are choosing apprenticeships over university. However, in most cases, they were still choosing undergraduate study, but on a day-release model as part of a degree apprenticeship.

The 12 (of 83) T-Level students who intended to progress to higher degree apprenticeships are concentrated in IT (4), construction (2) and healthcare (5) sectors, as evidenced in their entry questionnaire responses. In comparison, A-Level respondents expressed a wish for a broader range of industry sectors to be an apprentice in, as you would expect with the broader range of A-Level subjects. Participants listed engineering, meteorology, astronomy, business, hospitality, catering, police, accounting, creative accountancy and journalism[21].

7.2.4 T-Levels and access to elite professions

This research sought to scope participants' horizons for action through an open question in the entry questionnaire: 'If you realised your highest, best ambition in the future, what would you be

[21] All responses from student participants intending to 'get an apprenticeship' are shown in Appendix S

or be doing at the top of your career?' The qualitative data produced[22] shows approximately 43% of A-Level students held high aspirations of professional success compared to 34% of T-Levels. This confirms the normative expectation that students opting for the academic route through college hold higher aspirations of professional careers, more than those choosing the vocational or in this case technical route. A higher rate of occurrence of aspirations such as barrister, surgeon and veterinary surgeon, accountant and stockbroker is seen in the responses made by A-Level students compared to T-Level students. T-Level students' "highest ambitions" included 'Head of Midwifery', 'head of an IT department at a large company', 'radiology, sonography or something similar'. Responses from T-Level participants also included becoming 'CEO of a large tech company' and five respondents wanted to be architects, which is unexpected and discussed below.

7.2.4.1 Architecture

Responses from participants of the Construction T-Level route with the occupational specialism of 'Surveying and Design for Construction and the Built Environment' are revealing. Thirteen students from this course participated in the study and seven aspired to architecture at the start of their time at college. By comparison, none of the 104 A-Level participants noted an interest in becoming an architect. As a very high-status profession, architects have traditionally qualified via the academic A-Level route to undergraduate study. These students choosing the vocational route to architecture is a new development which is attributable to the new technical qualification. Indeed, one participant stated in his questionnaire that he chose to study the T-Level in Construction because "it's a straighter course to my goal" of "Architect".

Of the seven T-Level students interested in architecture, four intended to study architecture at university and two intended to access the profession via a degree apprenticeship. This new qualification is potentially increasing access to an elite profession, providing a second pathway with a more practical, industry-oriented form of curriculum and assessment. As illustration, IfATE's Occupational Map for Construction and the Built Environment identifies 'Architect' as a design and surveying profession attainable via apprenticeship (marked with A in blue), with T-Levels providing initial training at technician level (marked with TL in red):

[22] See Appendix T for participants responses regarding their future career ambitions

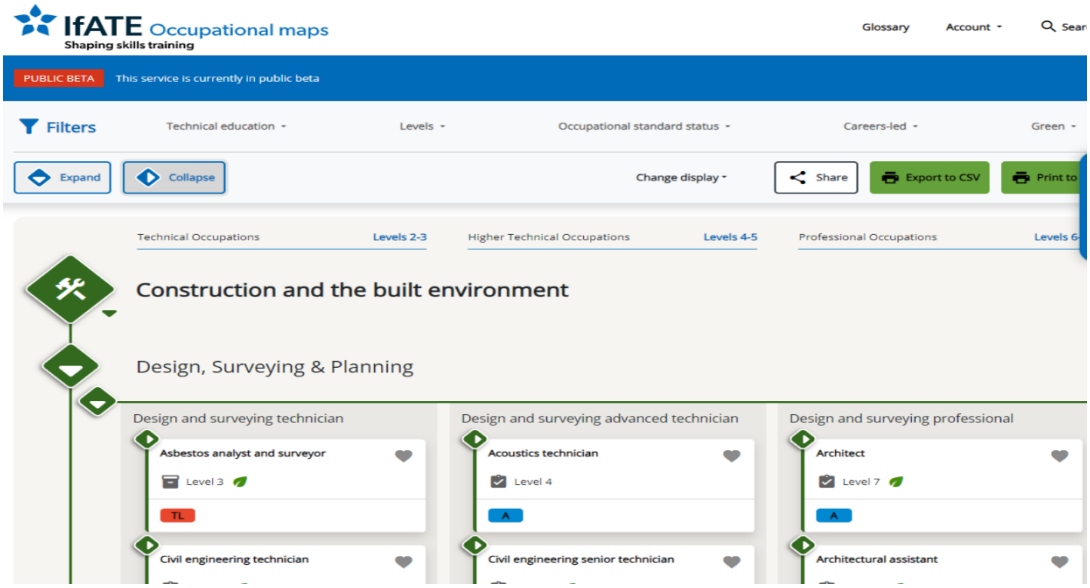

Figure 7.11 Occupational maps by IfATE (**https://occupational-aps.instituteforapprenticeships.org/maps/route/construction**)

The case-study participants' responses show a high level of aspiration to become an architect, and chose the T-Level qualification as an alternative route to realise their ambition, in part due to their lower GCSE grades. The average GCSE attainment of these seven students is 5.59, indicating it is improbable they would achieve the high A-Level grades required for architecture degrees. For example, UCAS records the average requirements of undergraduate architecture degrees as A-Level grades AAA (UCAS, 2019).

A closer examination of the seven T-Level participants aspiring to become architects predicts upward social mobile trajectories rather than generational reproduction (if their aspirations were realised). For example; only one of these students' parents hold university degrees; the parents of the other six students did not attend university. The jobs of these parents are reported as 'chef', 'taxi driver', 'accounting', 'owns a building company' and a 'Facilities, Maintenance and Manufacturing Engineering manager'. Furthermore, four of these seven would-be-architects live in POLAR quintile 1 – with the lowest historical progression to university rates.

Five of these seven aspiring architects made applications to study architecture at university. The two who did not make a UCAS application had intended to 'get a job' or 'an apprenticeship' when they completed their entry questionnaire in the first term of their T-Level course. Of the five that made applications, three were successfully placed on an architecture degree. These three progressing to study architecture present upward mobile trajectories, in different ways. Siham's career trajectory appears steep – she left school with an average GCSE profile of 4.46, predominantly grade 4s. Her parents did not attend university, she lived in a POLAR quintile 1 area where less than a quarter of 18-year-olds progress to university. The postcode in which she lives is also categorised as IMD decile 4, a lower income area. She identifies as Asian British –

Indian, her father is a chef in a restaurant/take-away and her mother looks after the family full time. Zuri's potential upward mobility was also considerable. She had a mid-range GCSE profile of 6.08; mainly grades 5/6. Her parents both attended university in the Congo where she was born, and her father "redid" his engineering degree in England after they moved here. Her mother worked as a carer and her father was a manager of a care home business. She lived in an area of considerable socio-economic disadvantage (IMD decile 2) which is also the lowest POLAR quintile. The third successful applicant to study architecture, Josh, shows what can be considered a normal generational mobility however. His parents do not hold degrees but his father is successful in the construction industry, owning a building company. Josh lives in an affluent area (IMD decile 9) where between 31% and 39% of young people progress to university and has a mid-range GCSE profile of 6.09. Josh's trajectory if attained, towards the high-status profession of architecture would therefore be an upward step, but one that can be seen as typical generational mobility, achieved through a vocational college course.

Thus the new T-Level qualification has furnished aspiration and potentially provided access to the profession of architect to a wider range of students than previous vocational qualifications, or in this case-study, compared to the academic A-Level route.

7.2.4.2 Law

The same cannot be said for other high-status professions such as law and medicine. This was unavoidable in the case of students aspiring to become lawyers since at the time of the case-study (2021-2023) the T-Level in Legal Services was not yet developed. However, following its launch in September 2023, just 255 students were enrolled across England (DfE, 2025).

7.2.4.3 Medicine

The Health and Science T-Level Route was in delivery however, and this college offered the Health Pathway with the Occupational Specialism of Supporting the Adult Nursing Team which according to the occupational maps produced by IfATE was a stepping stone to qualification as a medical doctor, via a level 7 Apprenticeship (IfATE, 2024b).

It is evident that most of the would-be-medics participating in this research did not perceive the T-Level course as a route to this high-profile profession, however. 13 of the 187 participants stated they wanted to become a medical doctor. All saw university as a necessary step towards qualification. Ten of these case-study would-be-medics took A-Levels, three enrolled to a T-Level. The three that took a T-Level as route to a medical profession gave these reasons:

> "because the course I wanted to do as A-Levels wanted high grades", "tried a-levels for a year, hated it, too much work too fast, not enough support, even when I asked for it

(at a different college, not here)" and "this course offered the qualifications that I wanted better than any other course"[23].

Two of the three participants choosing a T-Level as a route to becoming a medical doctor stated that this choice was born out of necessity, because they were not able or allowed to enrol to the A-Level programme because their GCSE achievement did not meet minimum entry requirements. Enrolling to the T-Level was therefore a deficit choice. The third respondent phrased her reason for choosing the T-Level as a positive selection, as the best pathway for her to become qualified as a "specialised doctor/ surgeon". However, "best" can be interpreted as 'only' when her GCSE profile is factored in: her GCSE attainment averaged 4.93 with GCSE grade 5 for Combined Science (5,5) and for Maths which prohibits acceptance to an A-Level programme at this college or the vast majority of colleges nationally. Thus the vocational route was also a necessary choice for this student. In all three cases then, the T-Level qualification facilitated participation in an aspiration to study medicine to a wider range of learners. Two respondents (Gulsah and Jasmine) were able to pursue their medic aspirations through college despite their lower school achievement of 4.93 and 4.73 respectively. The third (Hazel) had achieved successfully at school with a GCSE profile of 7.87, but could not manage the fast pace and independence of A-Level study.

The other ten case-study participants aspiring to study medicine chose the traditional A-Level route as the best option, saying for example, "A-Levels are a much stronger course to take/higher acceptance rate when going into career routes such as medicine/pharmacy" and "I would like to go into Medicine". It is interesting to note that the respondent stating she chose A-Levels as they would "give me the chance to explore different job prospects" was very specific about the type of future job she thought she would have: "Medical field preferably a dermatologist"[24] The reasons given for their positive choice of A-Levels as the best pathway to medicine indicate perceived high academic status, preference by medical school/university and also recommendation by schoolteachers. This academic route through college was made possible by their successful academic learning at school – the prior attainment of these ten respondents is high relative to this case-study. An average GCSE profile of 6.99 is above the average GCSE achievement of the whole case-study cohort (187 students averaging a GCSE score of 5.7), and also above the average GCSE attainment of the A-Level cohort (104 students averaging a GCSE score of 6.02). Thus the A-Level qualification confirms the role of hegemonic powerful knowledge in the continued achievement of academic success from school through to elite profession.

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[23] See Appendix N for all 83 T-Level responses about why they choice to study a T-Level

[24] See Appendix P for all 104 A-Level responses about their choice to study A-Levels

Being a medical doctor is considered one of the most prestigious professions. Aspiring to become a medic therefore has the potential for considerable upward social mobility, depending upon individuals' starting points. Comparing the social mobility potentially facilitated by T-Levels in this particular case, it has been seen that the T-Level facilitated aspiration to medicine for those with insecure or less successful academic experience, so potentially disrupting the hegemony of powerful knowledge in education. The social and economic context of these three would-be-medics enrolled to the T-Level in Health shows positions of relative privilege however. All three lived in quite affluent areas (IMD deciles 7, 6 and 7) and two had parents with university degrees, one of whom worked in a GP surgery. Thus in terms of generational reproduction, these three respondents aspire to moderate upward social mobility. In contrast, the medical career aspirations of the ten A-Level students indicate a significant jump in upward mobility rather than generational reproduction. Only three of these ten respondents' parents held university degrees, and none had studied medicine. All the parents of these respondents were in paid employment and three worked in healthcare professions including Health Visitor, Optician and Social Care. This indicates little reproduction of parental social status/privilege. Supporting this conclusion, these 10 respondents lived in postcode areas in POLAR Quintile 2 (an average of 2.3), areas with relatively low historic progression to university. Furthermore, these ten respondents shared more socio-economic disadvantage as measured by IMD (at an average of 4.3 IMD decile) than the whole A-Level cohort (104 students averaging an IMD decile rating of 5.27), or of the whole group of case-study respondents (187 students averaging 5.46).

7.2.4.4 T-Levels seen as enabling architects, but not doctors

This research finds that students do not consider T-Levels provide access to the elite profession of medicine. They do see A-Levels as a pathway to study medicine, even if there is no familial or community tradition or experience of practicing medicine. As such A-Levels represent a springboard for significant upward social mobility in the field of medicine. Student do perceive T-Levels as a similar launch pad for a rising social trajectory to the profession of architecture.

7.3 Students' perception of qualification status and reputations

This study finds that students' perceptions of post-16 qualifications confirm the persistent English academic-vocational divide, supporting the notion that academic study and qualifications are inherently and intrinsically 'better' than practical or technical learning. The newly introduced T-Level is viewed by these student case-study participants as of higher status than previous vocational qualifications, but not of equal value and esteem as A-Levels. Arguably this reiterates social reproduction theory as well as the consolidation and continuation of restrictive epistemic knowledge classifications and educational expectations.

7.3.1 "A-Levels are better"

Students participating in this research were asked why they chose to study either A-Levels or a T-Level, as stated above. The questionnaire provided respondents with an open-text box to record their response[25]. Nine of the 104 A-Level respondents overtly expressed their belief that A-Levels are of superior status or hold an inherently higher value compared to vocational education including T-Levels saying for example, "A-Levels are better", "I thought A-Levels were better qualifications" and "to be able to complete the highest level of education I can". A view that A-Levels were superior qualifications was implicitly evident in other responses such as "Because I wanted to do the actual thing", "My choices for education all lied behind doing A-Levels" and "they're perceived as more respectable".

Similarly, a number of responses of the 87 T-Level students indicated they shared the belief that A-Levels were better, saying that they would have preferred to take A-Levels. For some this was based on entry requirements, for example "grades weren't high enough to do A-level", "because the course I wanted to as A-Levels wanted high grades" and "I knew a-levels would be too hard for me as I was a below-average learner in school and only achieved average GCSE grades". Others said they chose a T-Level course rather than A-Levels or another Level 3 course such as BTEC because "A-Levels are ment [sic] to be quite difficult" and "it was the only good option available to me."

Three responses from A-Level students indicate the belief that academic learning is inherently superior saying A-Levels "seemed like the most academic option for me", "the path I wanted to take in life could only happen if I took the three courses I have as they're more academic based."

A lot of A-Level respondents believed their qualification would enable better career prospects, indicating they held A-Level study as superior and more valuable than vocational, and recognised as such in the wider employment and social arena. As illustration, reasons given for choosing A-Level study included: "because it would give me better options for my career", "I believe it will give me better opportunities later in life" and "thought it would be better for my career path". One response was particularly illuminating "I feel like they [A-Levels] stand me in good stead for careers in the future, as they are the standard and that's what most places would be looking for".

Students' responses also constitute evidence that A-Levels are held in higher esteem by the wider education sector and/or parents. For example, the reasons given by some A-Level respondents for choosing A-Level study included "I was mainly recommended by teachers to

[25] See Appendix N and Appendix P for all responses to this question

take A-Levels", "I was encouraged to by my teachers" or simply "Told to". Two responses suggest schools recommend progression to academic study through omission of information and guidance regarding T-Levels/vocational qualifications; "because I didn't really know what T-Levels were and I just understood the A-Levels I wanted to take more" and "I didn't understand enough about T-Levels and didn't know what I would do with a btec".

Continuing with students' perceptions reflecting a wider, establishment confidence and endorsement of A-Levels, it is evident from some questionnaire responses that A-Levels benefit from being the well-established, traditional option. In contrast T-Levels were perceived by some as risky because of their newness. As illustration, some participants said they chose the A-Level route because it "felt more reliable", "because t-levels were a new thing and I didn't want to risk it" and "the traditional route seemed better for me". This is not surprising given the T-Level qualification was only in the second year of delivery, it does endorse the negative effect of continued policy churn, however.

In contrast, six respondents chose to study a T-Level specifically because it was new saying "T-Level are brand new and it thought it would be great to be a part of something we haven't see before", and "to try something new". This could indicate the new qualification heralds a new start for vocational qualifications, with, in time, potential to bridge the reputation gap between vocational and academic college education. Further indication that the T-Level qualification is designed to occupy a different, higher-value position within the post-16 qualification landscape is evident in five T-Level participants' comments that they chose the T-Level as it better prepared them for specific technical careers including "because I wanted to be a quantity surveyor", "I have picked this course as I like to be a project manager and I am interested in designing buildings" and "Nursing was only available as a T-Level".

This takes us back to the reproduction of capital hierarchies, discussed theoretically in Chapter 3 and alluded to above in 7.2.2.6. The T-Level qualification appears to be perceived by students as different from AGQs by providing opportunity to develop technical skills not previously provided by Level 3 vocational qualifications. This would lead to the T-Level qualification attaining a higher status in the academic-vocational continuum of esteem. There is a ceiling however determined by the classification of professions. Nursing, the career destination of the T-Level Health Pathway with the Occupational Specialism 'Supporting Healthcare, Option A: Supporting the Adult Nursing Team' is less prestigious than medicine, with entry requirements of Chemistry, Biology and preferably Maths A-Levels. Similarly, quantity surveying, the career destination of the T-Level Construction Pathway with the Occupational Specialism 'Surveying and design for construction and the built environment' is less prestigious than architecture. Similarly, many respondents who had chosen to study a T-Level (16 of 83) cited the subject content of their course as the reason for choosing it, and because it led them directly to the

career they were interested in, often in Construction or Nursing. These responses evidence the new qualification is generating positive perceptions from these students, however the type of career destinations perceived as being provided by the T-Level reinforces rather than disrupts the academic-vocational divide (with the exception of architecture).

Indeed many of the reasons cited by students for choosing the T-Level seem to confirm the deficit model perspective of vocational education. Some students stated that they enrolled to the T-Level because they could not manage the academic alternative: “because I am not an academic person”, “it’s less stress” and “it allowed me to only focus on one classroom/ course instead of dotting around to many different subjects”. Several cited their difficulty with exams as a reason for choosing T-Levels instead of A-Levels.

At the same time, these students choosing T-Levels instead of A-Levels for these avoidance reasons, signals they perceive the qualification as more inclusive. It is well evidenced that AGQs better meet the needs of neurodivergent students as well as those with learning difficulties incompatible with the academic route (Allen, 2025). So whilst the students are placing their choice of the T-Level within a deficit situation – because they can’t access A-Levels, they are making a positive choice in selecting a course that better meets their learning style and needs. For example because they learn more effectively through application. It was clear from the case-study participants’ responses that practical, ‘hands-on’ experience of applying theory was seen as a benefit of the T-Level. As illustration some participants chose the T-Level because it was “more practical rather than just theory and the course seemed more right for me”, “I learn better with hands on lessons” and “as well as [the T-Level course] mixing academic and hands on work, I find it easy but boring writing in a book all day and want real world practice in my future career path!” For these students the T-Level was a positive choice.

7.3.2 T-Level Industry experience is prized

Many students (22 of the 83 T-Level respondents) cited industry experience and development of employment skills as a positive motivator for choosing the T-Level. One respondent explained that he chose “T-Levels over BTEC because of the work experience. I thought that it would put me at an advantage over everyone else applying to the same jobs/apprenticeship as me.” As seen in 6.4.3, industry placements are effective in providing valuable work experience, in some cases generating offers of employment.

Policymakers also prize the work experience element of the T-Level qualification, in many ways predicating the status and success of the qualification on employer engagement. Both student and employer data elicited in this case-study applauds and corroborates this employer contribution. It is unfortunate then that recruiting employers to engage with T-Level design or to provide work experience has faltered, even with the low number of students so far enrolled (AoC,

2023c). At a local level, this college hosting the case-study reported challenges in sourcing industry placements even though it was the only provider in the region offering T-Levels and therefore without competition. Of those employers who took the time to respond to this study's questionnaire, seven considered the placement a useful addition to their workplace. Three selected the option 'Resource of supporting and supervising outweighed benefit, but worth doing to 'grow' the next generation of workforce', and nine considered the placement had benefitted their organisation or team 'to some extent'. None were unsure if they would be able to offer a placement again.

This study finds that the government's core strategy for improving the status of technical education, the T-Level Industry Placement, is insecure. Without measures to improve and increase employer engagement to a national scale, an improved status for T-Levels is at risk.

7.3.3 Students perceive status through a lens of university recognition

This research identifies that the majority of students perceive status through the lens of university acceptance; students attribute value and status to college qualifications according to that conferred by universities. T-Levels are awarded the equivalent UCAS tariff points as other Level 3 full-time 2-year courses, including three A-Levels. Students recognised this equivalence. For example one student stated they had chosen a T-Level course "Because I thought it'd be convenient to only study one subject and still get the equivalent to 3 A-levels". Another said the T-Level course "was equivalent to 3 A-Levels and gave me a good amount of work experience". However, as reported above, the UCAS points tariff is only one measure of value. Students perceive that universities continue to prefer the A-Level qualification either because the subject content is more relevant to certain undergraduate study or more generally that "A-Levels are more suitable for getting into more prestigious universities". This perception held by participants that A-Levels enable access to a wider range of universities, and to the higher status universities compared to T-Levels, stemmed from their experience of reviewing the entry requirements for undergraduate courses which often listed only A-Level and AGQ grade requirements without reference to T-Levels. In 2022, when these students were preparing their UCAS applications, 127 universities in England confirmed that they would consider T-Levels for entry onto at least one course at their institution. This list has grown, but still does not include the two most prestigious institutions, the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge (DfE, 2024c).

The perception that the T-Level qualification would not allow entry to the more prestigious universities translated into these T-Level participants making applications to universities outside the Russell Group. The only exceptions were applications to technical, occupational degrees such as nursing and software engineering where participants applied to Surrey and Southampton Universities. One student did make an application to study a traditional academic degree at a Russell Group university. In her Exit questionnaire she wrote that she had applied to

study Biomedical science "at Southampton University but got rejected due to my t-level qualification, I was not even considered."

For these case-study participants, limited acceptance of the T-Level by universities negatively affected their perceptions of the status and reputation of the qualification compared to A-Levels.

7.3.4 T-Levels perceived as part of the vocational deficit model

As discussed in 7.3.1, eight of the 87 T-Level students participating in this study stated directly that they enrolled to a T-Level course because A-Levels were not an option for them due to their lower GCSE grades or they believed A-Levels would be too difficult for them. A further eleven T-Level respondents explained that they chose a T-Level because they could not achieve well with exams, the assessment methodology of academic courses, or they believed that studying one course would be easier than managing three separate courses. In all 19 cases, enrolling to the T-Level course instead of A-Levels was a negative rather than positive choice.

This evidences that 22.9% of T-Level participants view A-Levels as higher status; the better option, if it was available to them. Vocational education has long-been positioned in this deficit model[26]. This study finds that the new technical qualification continues to be seen as second choice, as lower in status and reputation. To further substantiate this finding, the lower prior attainment profile of the T-Level case-study cohort indicates that those who can choose the academic route, do (see Figure 7.10).

As discussed in relation to access to HE (7.2.2.3 above), it is reasonable to conclude that T-Levels were seen as more accessible by students with learning difficulties too; a total of 34 students participating in the research had recognised learning disabilities or difficulties (LDD). Of these, 25 enrolled to a T-Level as opposed to 9 enrolling to A-Levels.

Continuing with students' self-perceptions of their educational ability and skillsets, it is useful to consider participants' learner identities when considering if T-Levels are seen as second choice, of lower status and value than A-Levels. Participants were asked to self-evaluate their attitude and experience of secondary school through a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from "didn't enjoy many lessons and found it hard to engage" through to "really enjoyed most lessons and learnt a lot from them".

The distribution of responses by A-Level students and T-Level students was similar, suggesting that experience and attitude to education at a secondary level is not necessarily instrumental in the choice of qualification and course type at post-16 education:

[26] See 2.3 for rResearch literature on the academic-vocational

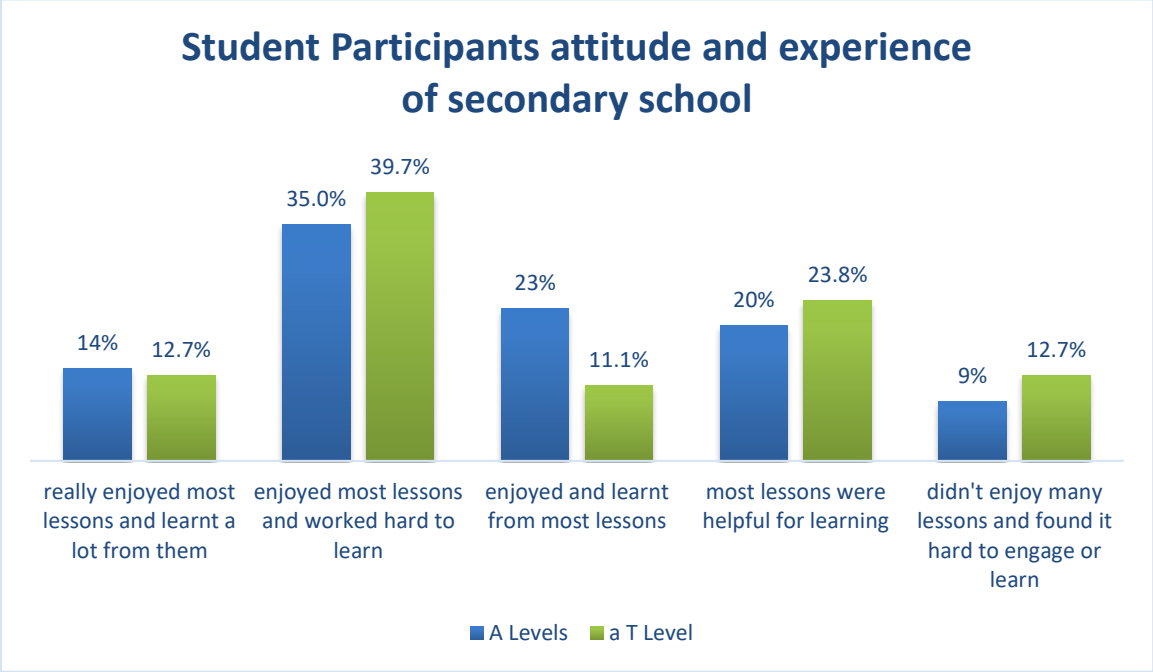

Figure 7.12 Participants' self-reflections on their experience of secondary school

Perhaps more indicative of learner identities is students' perception of their ability, of their success in learning. If T-Levels do occupy a deficit, 'second best position' in students' perceptions of status and value, it would be logical to assume that participants with confident learner identities will opt for the better, 'first choice' type of course at college – A-Levels. Participants of this study were asked in an Entry Questionnaire to 'Think about the classes you were in at secondary school and the marks you gained through Years 10 and 11 - how did your learning and achievements compare with the rest of your year group?' Responses of a 5-point Likert-scale ranged from "I was usually at the top of the ability range in my year group" through to "I struggled in most lessons". The vast majority of this cohort of learners showed confidence in their abilities; 94.7% of respondents rated their work in the top half of their year group's ability range. This is to be expected – less successful school-leavers will move on to Level 1 or 2 courses at college rather than progressing to Level 3 study. Of these, 26 of the total 187 respondents, 13.9%, considered themselves the most able in their year group.

As Figure 7.14 below shows, 21 of them chose A-Levels rather than a T-Level option (11.2% vs 2.7%), endorsing the higher status of A-Levels. It is notable that of the ten students who rated themselves as having lower ability at school, five still opted for A-Levels suggesting the draw of the prestigious route overcame insecurities regarding their academic ability.

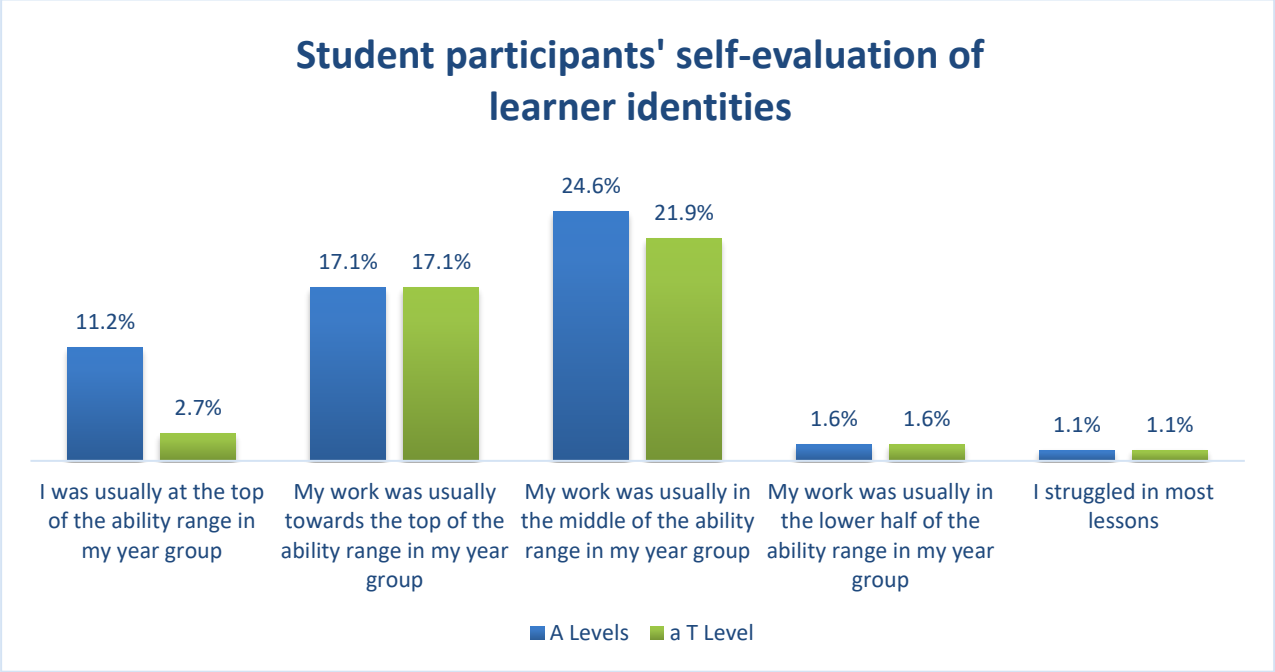

Figure 7.13 Participants' self-reflections of ability compared to school year group

Continuing to relate participants' learner identities with their choice of college course, students were asked 'What approach are you taking/ going to take to your studies at College?' again with 5-point Likert-scale response options. Responses are shown here:

Q14 What approach are you taking/ going to take to your studies at College?	A-Level	T-Level
aim for the very top grades, complete all extension work and more	26	23
work hard and do as much of the extension work as I need to	31	33
complete all work set on time and attend every lesson	29	18
do enough work to get a decent grade	12	8
do enough to pass	6	1

Table 7.3 Participants' intended approach to college study

To summarise, the T-Level students surveyed expressed the intention to work harder than A-Level students in the study. Seven of the 187 participants reported their approach to college study as making little effort, only doing enough study to pass, and six of these seven students chose to study A-Levels. In addition more A-Level students than T-Level students described their attitude and approach to college study as only doing enough work to get a decent grade. Combining these two categories of self-evaluation that denote less diligent, unconscientious approaches to study we see that 14.4% of case-study participants described themselves in this way, 9.6% of them A-Level students compared to 4.8% T-Level students. In inverse proportion more T-Level students than A-Level students surveyed expressed their intention to work hard at college. The proportion of T-Level respondents who selected the two descriptors indicating a

diligent and hard-working approach to studying at college is 67.5%, compared to 54.8% of A-Level respondents.

This indicates T-Levels were an active choice for students who had gained their GCSE grades through hard-work and diligence. Closer examination supports this conclusion. The largest difference in response between the two groups of students when rating their approach to studying at college is in response to the descriptor that uses the phrase 'work hard'. 39.8% of T-Level students selected this descriptor compared to 29.8% of A-Level students; a 10% difference. The T-Level qualification is indeed promoted as being hard work – it is designed with a larger quantity of taught hours delivered in the classroom; 600 GLH (Guided Learning Hours) per annum compared to 540 GLH per annum funded for students on all other full time Level 3 courses including A-Levels (in the academic years of this research). Moreover, in addition to the increased quantity of hours delivered at college, T-Levels also require a minimum of 315 hours per year to be completed in the workplace as an industry placement. This makes the T-Level experience more akin to full-time employment. Arguably this T-Level delivery model of substantial directed hours in the classroom and workplace appeals to students who have achieved well through hard work through their secondary education. In comparison, the traditional A-Level delivery model provides fewer directed, taught hours and success depends on the ability to perform effectively in just a few hours of timed, terminal external assessment. An element of intellectual elitism can be associated with the academic route, especially at Russell Group universities where timetabled taught hours can be minimal – the myth of the 'bright' intelligent student who effortlessly gains high grades (Dweck, 2006). In comparison success in the vocational option is gained through more ordinary means; achievement purchased in exchange for extended consistent effort and diligence throughout the duration of the course. The other questionnaire responses of these six A-Level students who expressed an indolent intended work ethic support the conjecture that they subscribe to this perception of academic courses. For example, one defined his 'highest, best ambition in the future' as "Space cowboy". His response to the question 'What sort of job do you think you'll have 10 years from now (aged 26 or 27)?' was "Noodle bar employee". Another responded to his career ambitions with "absolutely no idea", a third responded "working on a movie set?!?". The flippant tone of these questionnaire responses contrasts with other participants. Even the one T-Level student who only intended to do enough study to pass, expressed clearly defined career ambitions of "Child psychologist or social worker or teaching assistant". In conclusion this suggests that the reputation of T-Levels is as a qualification that requires sustained hard work. The students in this study enrolled to T-Levels are diligent and committed to their study.

Employers' perceptions provide useful insight here. Both groups of employers, those providing T-Level industry placements and those providing a week of work experience to A-Level students,

reported good attendance and punctuality by the young people placed at their organisation. A couple of the 112 A-Level students had lower attendance (>80%) and four of them weren't punctual. T-Level students were applauded for their determination and resilience by employers with only one student rated less than excellent or good. The one student reported as showing 'poor' determination and resilience did improve during the placement, but the employer wrote they had not met the standards expected for a full-time candidate for a similar role. Another measure of work ethos measured was students' willingness to collaborate, about which employers fed back entirely positively.

These employer responses as far as they are representative of the full cohort, appear to corroborate T-Level students' self-evaluation as being hardworking. However, employers also reported very positively on A-Level students' engagement in work experience. 108 of the 112 A-Level students were deemed either 'very enthusiastic and eager to please' or 'enthusiastic and willing'. Only one 'wanted to engage' but was unable due to extreme shyness. The vast majority of A-Level students were described as exhibiting 'excellent' or 'good' determination and resilience, with only 7 of them showing 'fair' resilience and determination. Ratings of A-Level students' willingness to collaborate were also very similar to T-Level students. Employer feedback therefore suggests that the working ethos that characterises these two groups of students is very similar when applied to the workplace. Students' self-evaluations demonstrate variance which may reflect their differing experiences through their school education and consequent emerging learner identities, but in application in working situations all students represented themselves and their courses extremely positively throughout their work experience.

7.3.5 Qualification reputation and parents

Another aspect to review regarding students' perceptions of the relative status and reputation of academic versus vocational education is their parents' educational level. First to note, a very similar proportion of both cohorts of students had parents who had attended university. 39.4% of the A-Level cohorts' parents compared to 36.1% of T-Level students' parents. If we consider graduate status as a measure of educational success, it is notable that an equal proportion of graduate parents supported their child to study a T-Level as an A-Level. This suggests the new qualification holds a credible reputation for these parents. Moreover, these graduate parents supporting their children in taking a T-Level include two medical doctors, an architect, an orthodontist and three teachers. Another studied Physics at a Russell Group university and one works in aerospace. This further endorses the conclusion that the T-Level holds a credible reputation with parents.

Chapter 8 Interviews

This chapter extends the questionnaire findings presented in the previous chapter with more in-depth, qualitative understanding of students' perceptions of the research foci: the progression opportunities provided by T-Levels compared to A- Levels; the factors that shape young people's career aspirations; and the relative status and reputation of T-Levels and A-Levels.

These research areas intersect and are interdependent: the progression opportunities afforded by college courses are determined by both the content of the qualification and the reputation and esteem it enjoys. Concomitantly, the status and reputation of a post-16 qualification is dependent upon the profile of students choosing to study it, together with their subsequent career and or study destinations. This reinforcing and reproductive circle is perpetuated since the status of qualifications influences students' choice of course so reinforcing the quality of progression opportunities achieved. Illustration of this iterative and compounding cycle can be seen in the responses of one of the interviewees, Emily, discussed below in 2.3. As a consequence of the close alignment and interdependence of these research themes, many of the students' responses provide illuminating insight to all three research questions. For example, Emily's narrative and perceptions are pertinent to both the impact of course choice on progression opportunities, and the perceived status of A-Levels compared to T-Levels.

The semi-structured interviews employed open phrasing of both stem and prompt questions in order to optimise opportunity for interviewees to interpret the question from their personal experience and perspective, and to be empowered to lead the flow of these conversational interviews (Newby, 2014). In this way each student interviewed brought their individual perceptions and understanding to the topics (Yin, 2008; Bryman et al., 2001).

8.1 Progression opportunities and career aspirations

To investigate the research foci of progression opportunities and longer-term career aspirations with this case-study sub-sample, interview questions focused on recording the intended destinations of these students post-college, as well as scoping the influence of family and home contexts on the formation of their career aspirations; their 'horizons for action' or idea of what the future holds for them (Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson, 1996). The domestic field creates a specific framework of habitus and symbolic capital to inform engagement with schooling. Thus the interplay of domestic and school fields together shapes young people's learner identities and the sense of agency they inhabit as college students to determine their own futures, as well as the reach and nature of those futures (Kolb and Kolb, 2009).

8.1.1 Amy, Sedah and Lucy: progression into technical careers enabled by T-Levels

Amy, Sedah and Lucy enrolled to the T-Level in Health with the Occupational Specialism of 'Supporting Adult Nursing' to facilitate progression to employment as nurses, a skilled technical profession. Amy chose the T-Level route rather than A-Levels or BTECs because it is "more specific to the job role I want to achieve in the future". She initially intended to progress from the course to university in order to gain the necessary undergraduate degree to qualify and register as a nurse. However her experience of the T-Level opened up new possibilities and at time of interview her preferred route was a degree apprenticeship, partly for ease and partly to suit her preferred ways of learning:

> "the route I'd rather do is a degree apprenticeship because they do them at [the local hospital]. So it's close to home. So it's easy to get to … I think that the way you're taught and how you learn is best suited for me. … It's more practically and you're on the ward doing, working while learning as well."

Amy said she would apply to university in case she did not manage to secure a degree apprenticeship:

> "So I'll apply to uni, see if there's an apprenticeship available for the time when I finish [college] and then if I don't get into uni, I'm gonna go into the workforce. I've got backup plans."

Amy had "loved going into school", she described herself as "a hardworking student", and she achieved a high GCSE profile of 6.89. Despite these academic achievements she ranked herself as 'towards the top' of her school year group rather than at the top and viewed her ability at college with similar caution or modesty. In response to the interview question "so are you kind of in the middle of the class would you say or top or …" she replied: "I dunno. I was like top set in senior school I don't know if that counts or not. But I'd like to think I'm smart". Using the colloquial term 'smart' to describe her intellectual ability downplays her academic excellence and acumen which indicates some diffidence in her learner identity (Wortham, 2005). Consequently she did not consider taking A-Levels, instead choosing T-levels to avoid too much examination and to have more coursework:

> "when I did Health & Social Care [BTEC Level 2, at school] with the coursework, it was a lot easier to me to understand and do than do the tests and exams. … I thought GCSE they were a big struggle, academ, well, not struggle, I don't know whether that's the right word. But I don't know what the word is. They were a lot on me."

She enjoyed the T-Level course but still found it academically challenging:

> "Sometimes it can get a bit too full on but I manage usually. ... just with how sometimes hard it is. So it's getting your head wrapped around what it actually is and what it means. ...

Amy's prior attainment at school significantly exceeded the entry requirements for A-Levels, but she elected for the T-Level route because it suited her preferred methods of learning since it was "practical", "doing ... while learning". Thus the new technical qualification has provided a more accessible pathway to the healthcare profession for Amy with her tentative, less-confident learner identity. The same can be said for two other interviewees who began this T-Level in Adult Nursing, Sedah and Lucy. Both had lower GCSE scores (5.62 and 4.5) and both shared a similar lack of self-assurance in their learning abilities. Sedah did not enjoy or engage well with school, rating her ability to learn as 2 out of 5 from a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from "didn't enjoy many lessons and found it hard to engage" through to "really enjoyed most lessons and learnt a lot from them". Sedah found college "quite stressful, feels like it's all quite pressuring, coming down on you". Like Amy she had not considered A-Levels as an option and nor did Lucy because she didn't have high enough GCSE grades in science (4.5 average GCSE score). Both Sedah and Lucy shared Amy's preference for learning through practice and for avoiding exams, as Lucy explained in her interview:

> "Yeah, I think I'm laid back and then until I do exams so I do stress out a bit but I'm more of a visual learner than I am just sat down, reading something. I'm more like practical, doing it that way. That's why I really did the T-Levels. Because it was more practical than just sat in the classroom."

Amy, Sedah and Lucy would all be the first in their families to study at university or to enter a registered healthcare profession. Arguably their parents' education experience and less academic cultural capitals – none had studied beyond school - may have influenced the students' own learning experience and informed their decision to reject the academic option at college. The T-Level course is thus a positive choice for these three career-motivated students. The course had facilitated a pathway towards to their chosen career, and had provided industry experience and development of skills to encourage them to aim for more specialised career goals requiring post-graduate qualifications (Esmond and Atkins, 2022a, Ch 5). Sedah had enrolled to the T-Level as the only option locally to becoming a dental nurse like her older sister. However, by the time of her interview she wanted to go to university, and to become a registered nurse before specialising. Lucy's career aspiration to become a midwife changed towards specialising as a paramedic. Similarly, Amy's intended progression goal had also changed as a result of her experience on the T-Level course:

> "I hope to be in palliative care. Because, or, like, working in a hospice somewhere like that, because that's like my passion at the moment is to get into palliative care. Making

> sure people are comfortable in their last moments and they get to enjoy that little bit of life they have left."

An emerging vocational habitus (Colley et al., 2003) can be discerned with these three students. The T-Level course content and the communities of practice they experienced on placement and on campus through experience of professional practices in areas set up and equipped as hospital wards with healthcare manikins etc. (Lave and Wenger, 1991), developed their technical skills and industry understanding. This enabled them to embrace the practical, material and immediate rather than the theoretical learning and experience of academia. It can be seen that the T-Level course has widened and improved their horizons for action, equipping them with the technical skills needed to access further training and professional careers.

8.1.2 Ashleigh: the only T-Level interviewee progressing directly to employment

Ashleigh is the only student of the 18 interviewed who intended to progress directly from college into employment. Direct entry to employment was the original policy progression intention of the T-Level qualification (DfE, 2017).

Ashleigh was very motivated to take the Digital Production, Design and Development T-Level and work in the IT sector like her Mum, who had been her main influence in choosing the T-Level course. However she could not take up her offered place on the T-Level at sixteen because her GCSE grades on leaving school was too low at 3.94. She "wanted to be on a T-Level really badly" but did not have the necessary grades. She needed to complete a Level 2 transitional course and resit both Mathematics and English GCSEs in order to meet the entry requirements of the T-Level course.

Ashleigh was attracted to the T-Level qualification because it was new:

> "Yeah, I was excited. I wanted to be the first one but obviously because I got set back a year I had to watch everyone else complete. At first I was like, oh, so annoying!".

The phrasing and lexis of her expression has a degree of naivety; she was "excited" to study the qualification because she wanted to be first, not because of the learning and qualifications she would gain. Similarly, in relation to the direction she received from her Mum she said "I like listening to her talking about what she does" which can be interpreted as childlike behaviour. Her response to an interview question of whether A-Levels were ever an option was "No. Dunno." She didn't seem to have heard of BTEC courses and in response to a follow-up question around what information her school had provided on post-16 choices she was vague: "We just had a lot of people into come and talk about colleges. Yeah, I think nothing really else to be honest. … I don't really remember".

Ashleigh didn't know how T-Level qualifications were assessed, wasn't familiar with UCAS points or tariff or how T-Level grades compared to A-Levels grades. Although she was sure her preferred progression destination was employment, she had not made plans about the sort of workplace or role she might apply to; "Really, no". She was very unprepared but also relaxed about her next steps:

> "I'm literally so confused and kind of like uh, things happen for a reason. I kind of don't want to like, have my mind set. I kind of want to let like let something happen. I mean, I know that sounds like really weird to say but like, I don't mind just sitting back and just seeing like, what the outcome is like, things might arrive in my life. So like someone might say, Oh, actually, we've got this kind of job or are you interested in this kind of area? So I'm kind of just okay with anything. I'm really got a mindset. I mean, when I finish I do want to get a job straight away, I'm not too sure what it's in, but ... Hopefully something IT. I wouldn't mind being like a project manager or something or trying to get higher, but it just depends."

It would seem that Ashleigh's casual approach and lack of focused planning was affecting her progress on the T-Level. She was the only T-Level student of the nine interviewed who had not secured an industry placement. The other two students interviewed from her T-Level in Digital Production, Design & Development had started their placement already at the time of interview (November of their second year). This College works with employers to secure potential placements for T-Level students, and the allocation of students to available placements is conducted on merit, students must apply and be interviewed in order to secure a placement. One of Ashleigh's peers, Luke, the T-Level student with the highest GCSE profile of 7.0 (discussed below in 8.1.6), had impressed his industry placement employer to such an extent he hoped to be offered a degree apprenticeship by the company. In contrast, Ashleigh's inability to secure a work placement can be interpreted as a consequence of her lack of focus or intent and relaxed, casual habitus compared to her T-Level course peers. Her reaction to not having work experience showed a lack of self-awareness. She said she really enjoyed the course,

> "It's really fun. The only problem is, is like work experience. So annoying. Like it's really difficult to find a placement, especially in the IT area because everyone's working from home now. So it's a bit difficult. I still haven't. I haven't done one yet. So it's hard to speak to like the area where they're supposed to like find a work placement, talk to them and see if I can help out a bit more but it's just really difficult especially because everyone works from home now because of COVID so no businesses really want to take you in or yeah, it's just really difficult."

To summarise, Ashleigh had one of the lowest average GCSE profiles of the whole case-study of 187 students and the lowest of the sample interviewed. She was very enthusiastic about

choosing to take a T-Level yet had little knowledge of any alternative options and was uninformed of the qualification's currency. She was the last student on her T-Level course to secure a work placement, and she was the only student of the 18 interviewed to want to progress directly into employment. Taking all this into account and including the fact that she had been shown alternative progression pathways by her mother who went to university in her thirties, "studying FDA business and management and MSc project management", it can be inferred that this progression into the job market results from her having fewer options available rather than a positive, deliberately selected progression route. As one of the only students in the case-study who had to retake Level 2, and the only one of the sample intending to progress to employment instead of continuing into higher education it is construed that students perceive the employment route as the pathway for those who are less academically oriented.

Further evidence that going straight into work after college is not an active choice based on the perceived employability value of their T-Level qualification but rather a last resort if the opportunity to progress to further study is not possible, was found with Amy. As demonstrated in 8.1.1 above, for Amy employment as a college leaver was a third option as back-up if she did not secure a degree apprenticeship or acceptance to university. Another student, Imran (discussed in 8.2.2 below), the second least academically able of the T-Level students interviewed, was the only T-Level student to choose employment as a second option, should he not be accepted at university. Out of this interview sample the more able progress to university either directly or via an apprenticeship degree, the least able settle for the workplace and enter the job market.

8.1.3 Amaka: career aspirations formed by domestic and school contexts

The four interviewees' narratives above have evidenced little correlation between parental education capitals and their own educational aspirations or intended progression pathways. Amy, Sedah and Lucy all intended to become undergraduates when none of their parents had studied beyond school. Conversely Ashleigh did not intend to continue with further study despite her mother holding post-graduate qualifications. Amaka's story in contrast does evidence considerable parental influence and reproduction of domestic cultural capitals and habitus, albeit generational reproduction is expected to build on parental achievement and incorporate elements of upward social mobility.

Amaka's home address was located in a postcode area characterised with the most deprivation, IMD decile 1. Household income was low so she was eligible for free school meals (FSM). The area she lived in was also categorised as Quintile 1 by POLAR, where less than 21% of young people have historically progressed to university (OfS, 2018). She identified as British Black of African heritage. Her parents had studied at the local university. Her Mum worked as a social worker and her dad was a civil engineer.

As a child and younger teenager Amaka's ambition was to become a fashion designer but she had been advised against it by her parents as too precarious and risky: "Cuz they're like, you have to have a job which has like high income so that you, like, you just have living ...., like, your living quality is better."

Amaka said she

> "was a bit upset at first. But then when I researched into more health side of things. I was like, okay, like, I can, that's fine. Like I could do it [fashion design] on the side as a hobby. Yeah."

Having accepted her parents' pragmatic advice to choose a financially secure career path rather than fashion design, she also followed their advice to aim for a high-status profession, choosing medicine of the three recommended – law, medicine or engineering. It is interesting that her parents steered her and her two younger sisters towards these more secure, less precarious roles even though they are, paradoxically, more difficult to access. They themselves were not medics or lawyers but they expected their children to realise these highest status professions. All three daughters were to follow in their footsteps and go to university: "Yeah. Definitely. Even taking a gap year it was like, No. You can't take a gap year." Their motivation for prohibiting a gap year seemed to be financial; "just like faster for me ... They say that you're in the workplace sooner." The familial habitus was characterised by a hard-working ethos. Amaka explained that she was expected to help with household chores and academically:

> "I need to be top of my class. ... Like even if, they always advise that even if you don't get the subject you should try like your hardest to do it to make sure, you like, you do, have, reap some benefits from it even if you didn't like turn out the best."

Her younger sisters were equally directed by their parents' guidance. Amaka used the phrase "it's just constant" which implied an element of frustration at the frequency of parental guidance. Both sisters:

> "think of uni and everything. But the more my Dad wants my youngest sister to be an engineer as well [as him]. But then my middle sister, ... wants to be either lawyer or chef. Well they tried to tell her to stick to law, because they just, they feel like that's better than being a chef and they're trying to, they were saying chef is a good career path to go to, go to, but then they're saying you have to do this".

As well as advice on progression destinations, Amaka's parents also guided her towards academic courses at college:

> "I think my Mum was my main influence because she told me about having A-Levels had like more weight to it than, doing like, if you went to [the campus that delivered

> vocational courses including T-Levels and BTECs] and you did the more practical like course but yeah, so I was like, Okay, I'm like to A-Levels."

Amaka had not achieved the necessary GCSE grades in science to take Chemistry and Biology A-Level which are necessary to apply to medical school. She therefore took the most relevant subject, Health & Social Care, which is not available as an A-Level. This caused some reservation initially:

> "Well, I wasn't too sure at first because it said it was a BTEC and I was like oh. But then when I was reading about it it said, I think, it'd be equivalent to an A-Level. So then that was fine. And because of the coursework because I did that in secondary school already I was like Yeah. So do me."

With a medicine degree out of reach and qualification as a medical doctor unattainable, Amaka instead intended to progress to the next best role, that of Physician Assistant;

> "They work alongside a doctor but they're more like the hands on the doctors with are like, are the main people who tell you what to do and give you the patient's information and stuff like that. ... Yeah, you need to do an undergraduate course on a health science or medical science, ... and then, you have to do a master's because the um, that course doesn't, isn't like an undergraduate course has to be a masters."

Amaka rated her academic ability as 'towards the top of her year group'. To contextualise this self-ranking, she attended a Catholic school with a focus on academic learning and its own sixth form. She left with a GCSE grade profile of 6.36. She had been entered for the double science GCSEs rather than separate GCSEs in Biology, Chemistry and Physics. This is a measure of her science ability; the more able take triple science. Her science grades were 6 and 5. After school she took the academic route as expected - most of her friends "did A-Level". Amaka continued to aim high and her aspirational medical career intentions were undaunted by her inability to apply to study medicine, nor affected by any doubt regarding her academic abilities. She had "picked my five already" universities, four or which were Russell Group and all had high entry requirements: "I think a ... some, a few of them are like ABB and other ones are, I think, AAB. Yeah." She didn't reference what BTEC grades (Distinction* - Pass) these universities required, nor did she comment on the validity of her A-Level in Art Textiles as entry for a science degree. Moreover, Amaka earlier in the interview talked about her struggle to achieve well with the science content of her Psychology A-Level. She didn't know why she wasn't "getting on well" with this subject:

> "Not really no. Because I have been revising. I do understand topics and everything. But I think when it comes to tests, I'm just I don't think that's like being portrayed like I'm not like retaining information. Yeah."

In contrast she learnt better in Textiles A-Level due to a slower, less pressurised pace:

> "I think with textiles is more she talks to us for like just a brief like briefly and then she just lets us do our thing, and work on our own pace which I like because it just less pressure takes the pressure off of me. If someone's working faster than I am, I'm still there."

She was achieving well in her BTEC Health and Social Care because "you take the test there and then. Yeah, you know, the assignment sort of thing before moving on."

Amaka's path through college and her intended progression post-college were clearly shaped by her parents' requirements and aspirations. Her parents' status was ambiguous; their education and cultural capitals were relatively high and they held professional jobs, but the family income was low and they lived in an area of the highest deprivation by all measures. Consequently her parents prioritised earning capacity and upward social mobility for their children's education and career pathways. It is not clear from Amaka's account whether they were aware of the difficulties she faced in attempting to follow their chosen path for her – to study and qualify as a medical doctor. Nonetheless, she dutifully reproduced her parents' ideals, and her horizon for action remained confidently broad and high, whilst adapting to and circumnavigating as far as possible any obstacles that occurred, such as academic ability (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000).

8.1.4 Riyaad: career aspirations formed by domestic and school contexts

Riyaad was similarly guided by his parents, particularly his mother's aspirations for him. With the highest GCSE profile (8.0) of the sample Riyaad chose A-Levels because "the traditional route seemed better for me – it let me study a wider range of subjects rather than focusing on one specific course or career path."

Furthermore, A-Levels enabled the opportunity to progress to study Engineering, Mathematics or Computer Science at Oxford University, Riyaad's aspirational goal. None of these three undergraduate degrees at Oxford or Cambridge universities are accessible without Mathematics A-Level.

Domestic contexts, which were rooted in a Bangladeshi culture, were very influential in the formation of Riyaad's career aspirations:

> "there's a strong cultural connection to like, going into medicine and things that's a very, like, respected role in the community. So it's been mentioned a few times but ... they're not trying to impose anything. But my Mum's very very keen on what I have to do and what have not to do and things like that. So she wants something that is respectable, would get good money and things because she wants me to take care of

> them in older age. So she was very keen on engineering, which I was before I worked out that I might want to be a software developer. ... as long as I'm doing something good, and I'm doing it well, she would be happy with it, I think. I hope so anyway."

Riyaad appeared keen to realise his parents' high expectations for him to gain a professional, respected career. He enjoyed independence to determine his own career within that overall aspiration however, choosing software development rather than the more traditional engineering profession his mother had preferred. She was content with his choice.

Riyaad's educational journey and aspirations do not appear at first sight to be reproducing his parents' cultural capital or habitus. Like Amaka, he lived in IMD decile 1 and POLAR quintile 1. Neither parent were graduates, and he recorded his parents' occupations as "restaurant manager and full-time mum". He identified as British Asian of Bangladeshi heritage. The disconnect between his ambition to study at Oxford University and his parents' experience is understandable to him however. His Dad

> "would have been an engineer, but unfortunately, due to personal circumstances, he wasn't able to finish his courses and things. So it didn't really work out for him in that sense."

Instead his Dad "went into the family business, which was owning a restaurant and a takeaway." His Mum worked as a "care worker, and I think it's her first job. Because she's an immigrant who came here." She didn't have the opportunity of attending university in Bangladesh where she was born because:

> "She got married very young to my Dad. She was 18 or 19 I think. So. She didn't really get a chance to. The qualifications aren't exactly the same here. But she was a science student. She was very keen on becoming a doctor when she was younger but she couldn't because, because she got married so young."

Riyaad's horizons for actions were also informed by his school field. He attended an independent school which boasts a strong emphasis on traditional disciplines and a constant striving for academic excellence. The school taught up to GCSE only, and pupils were expected to continue with academic study post-16. All his friends from school came to college to study A-Levels and the school didn't give any information on T-Levels or alternative vocational qualifications.

On entry to college Riyaad stated his highest career ambition was "Being an Education Officer in the Army" and this was still a goal at point of interview in his second year of college study, alongside studying Mathematics and Computer Science at university. He was interested in both becoming a software developer and a teacher. His motivations to join the Army as an Education

Officer were financial, the Army would pay for his teaching training, but also freeing of community constraints and convention:

> “I started looking at the military route. Because I don't really like the idea of sitting, having an office job. I feel like if I went down a military route, that would be a nice, like … opening up the world kind of. So I wouldn't have to settle down in one place straightaway. And I still think about the software developer option, but I'm less sure on that now. Now that I'm thinking about going into teaching, becoming an educational officer in the army. And then obviously, they fund your PGCE. And, yeah, I just like the idea of going into something that's not as conventional I guess.”

Riyaad enjoys a broad and ambitious horizon for action which A-Levels enable and T-Levels, or any vocational qualification, would not (Hyland, 2002). It is evident that both his domestic and school contexts are very influential to him, largely in a synergistic and mutually reinforcing way, but also creating a generational reinvention of cultural capital rather than reproduction. Throughout his interview Riyaad referenced his parents’ cultural heritage. He said of his Mum “she’s an immigrant who came here. And my Dad was born here, but he's got quite strong roots to back home.” ‘Home’ being Bangladesh. He spoke of “strong cultural connections” informing his parents’ guidance on his career pathway. Professions that enabled “respected roles in the community” were a priority and he was expected to provide for his parents in their old age. Intersection between his ethnicity and learner identity also informed his choice of universities which needed to be “very diverse. So I didn't feel out of place because in academia, it's very, like largely white”. He had visited a London university and consequently decided he would ‘fit in’ to city universities better: “when I went up to the campus, there were loads of people of different ethnicities, so I felt really welcomed there. Like, I actually had a place there.”

Riyaad’s career pathway is therefore cognizant of and navigating his cultural heritage and ethnicity. His learning identity seemed to have been formed outside familial influences, or perhaps had become characterised by independence because of his parents’ non-academic cultural capital and habitus. Riyaad spoke about how his interest in software development as a career stemmed from a boyhood hobby of coding:

> “So I'd spend quite a bit of time doing that myself at home, and I really enjoyed it like the idea of making this thing and I felt proud that I done this myself. So that really appealed to me. So at GCSE, I took up computing and obviously, I've taken up computing [at A-level], and the theory is not something I'm used to, I'm learning all of that, but the practical coding, I know most of that because I've done it myself and I still quite enjoy it a lot.”

Similarly as a college student Riyaad struggled to ask for support if he didn’t understand concepts “because I try to be self-sufficient, which isn't a good trait.” He wasn’t sure where that

had come from, “I just feel like if I have a problem, I'd rather try and deal with it first. And get out of the way, like, not to seem much of a bother.” This desire to not be a problem, to self-efface reveals significant humility, and perhaps a coping strategy relating to his experience as part of an ethnic minority (Wiltgren, 2023).

As well as teaching himself coding Riyaad had also independently pursued an interest in linguistics:

> “I just liked the idea of how language, not many people realise, but the way that language changes and the things behind it. It's very scientific. So I used to watch a lot of YouTube videos, I think was how I got introduced into it. ... And so I looked into it, like searching through etymologies online. It seems very fascinating see where words had come from how they changed, going through different languages and things like that.”

Consequently he took English Language A-Level as a way “to kind of ground me. Just to keep me going through my A-Levels because it will be something that I enjoy aside maths and computing, which I kind of have to take.”

This last statement, together with his wish to join the army as a way of opening up the world and avoid having to settle down suggests Riyaad is working hard to meet familial expectations whilst also living and learning independently to forge a wider horizon for action than that of his parents (Wang and Morav, 2021). However, both his and his parents’ aspirations for him could be furnished through studying A-Levels; the “traditional route that been like, tried and tested.”

8.1.5 Zuri: a T-Level success story

Whilst Riyaad’s progression opportunities could only be enabled by A-Levels, Zuri’s very high aspiration to become an architect was made accessible by T-Levels.

Zuri had “always wanted to be an architect like it's always been one of those dreams. Like those things that I aspire to be and I've just always kept on to it.” In interview her passion for construction shone through:

> “I just love the way that buildings are designed. I was found it like so intriguing. And now I just kind of want to be on the sustainable side of it, create more sustainable buildings and things like that.”

With a GCSE profile of 6.08 she comfortably met A-Level entry requirements, but chose the Design, Surveying & Planning for Construction T-Level as a “more practical and fast forward way of getting into the construction industry”. T-Levels provided this student with a way of realising her childhood dream of becoming an architect that the traditional A-Level route would not:

> “I got quite lucky because the T-Levels came out when I was trying to choose what to do. I'm not very good with constant theory and constant writing and everything like that.

> Like, I like the practical side. ... it's like a good mix of the two because it's both theory and practical, which I really like."

Zuri had ranked her work as in the middle of the ability group of her school and as shown here considered herself "not very good" with learning academic theory, in yet studying on the T-Level course has given her the confidence to apply to university to study a "seven or eight years" architecture degree. She talked confidently about the entry requirements and specific degree courses of a range of universities, and concluded:

> "So I just know that I need to get quite high on this T-Level. The grade boundaries are quite high as well. But, you know, I just got to work hard. Yeah."

Demonstrating considerable agency in her choices and apparently acting independently of both parents and school, Zuri made her own choices. She went to the same school as Amaka, and confirmed that the school had not provided information on any post-16 courses other than A-Levels, in yet she did not follow her peers onto the traditional academic route:

> "A-Levels didn't really stand out to me. So T-Levels look quite interesting, why not do that. So I thought yeah, let's try out T-Level. ... it was kind of like, I'm going into this not really knowing but it's definitely a good outcome. Yeah, I like it."

Zuri's wide and ambitious career aspirations were formed without her parents' input too; she "told" her parents about her plans. To some extent these career plans reproduced her parental educational capitals - both Zuri's parents attended university in Congo and her dad "redid uni here" - but unlike her parents she did not intend to work in the care industry. Wanting to realise her childhood dream of becoming an architect she took pleasure in subverting gender stereotypes:

> "When I told my parents I wanted to do construction they were like Whoa! You know, my parents do completely different things. I'm not actually aware of what they do. I do know that my Mum is a carer. ... My Dad ... he's like, he's, he works with the care group that my mom works for. So he's like the scheduler or something or employer or something like that. ... but yeah, it's definitely a different route that I'm going down."

Zuri's inherited social capital does not align with her very aspirational career goals. Her household was located in IMD decile 2, POLAR quintile 1. She had been born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and was a little self-conscious of her accent. She was unclear of the status of her parents' education; for example, when asked if her parents had gone to university she initially replied, "I suppose", and the fact that her Dad "redid uni here" implies his degree from the Congo was not recognised in England. Similarly, she was unversed in their careers saying, "I'm not actually aware of what they do" and hadn't felt the need to ask; "My Dad..., I haven't really actually asked him, probably should!"

Zuri's learner identity gained from her school experience had been modest and insecure but her horizons for action and her enjoyment of confounding social, cultural and gender expectations showed considerable unexpected resistance of traditional norms. As illustration, she found great pleasure in recounting the surprised reactions of people when she told them she wanted to be an architect:

> "Whoa! Because you don't really meet that many females in the construction industry. So every time I tell someone Oh, yeah, I want to become an architect they're like, Whoa, you know, like get more females in!"

Zuri demonstrated considerable agency and confidence. She enjoyed breaking down barriers to gender and social equality (Evans-Winters, 2021). To an extent this newly developed confidence can be attributed to her experience of the T-Level which had boosted her self-confidence and informed the growth and security of her learner identity, as illustrated in her interview in November of her second year on the course:

> "just learning about different things like materials used in the buildings and how buildings are actually built. And knowing more of the knowledge is like, Okay, I know that this is more, it's more interesting. It's like, knowing properly properly all about it. I just really like it. … It's inspirational."

Further, she was "really excited" about the industry placement that she had gained with a team of architects at the council. She expressed that her experience of learning on the course had "definitely made me more determined". It can be concluded that in this case, the T-Level course has significantly improved the progression opportunities of this student.

8.1.6 Luke & Ethan: negotiating gendered familial habitus

The learner journeys of Luke and Ethan derive from a very different cultural and social heritage. Both are successful students, Luke on a T-Level course and Ethan studying A-Levels. Both are male and identified as White – English. Their interviews revealed that the fathers of both students held attitudes to education and careers that echoed those described by Willis as working-class male 'laddish' learning to labour (Willis, 1978). Both students masked their academic successes and downplayed their career ambitions as a way of negotiating their fathers' habitus specifically, and more generally navigating the discourses of hegemonic working-class masculinity in England (Benjamin *et al.*, 2003).

Luke enrolled to the T-Level in Digital Production, Design & Development with a GCSE score of 7.0, the highest of the T-Level students interviewed. He was excelling at college and intended to study at university, albeit through a degree apprenticeship. Luke's education profile was very different to his parents who had no experience of university study. His Dad worked as a machinist and his Mum as a cleaner and in IT. Luke was quick to downgrade his Mum's work in

IT saying it wasn't impressive, "It's more making putting things in there and taking things out for people." He confirmed that she had not gone to college; "She used to be a cleaner for the company and they offered her a job and they taught her there." Luke said that his Dad

> "did not do so well in school. The common story which comes up is him ripping up his GCSE results as soon as he got them and not showing my Nan and Granddad."

Luke aimed and achieved high academically whilst simultaneously manifesting his Dad's rejection of academic success. For example he claimed disengagement from school saying it "wasn't particularly enjoyable. It's just something you had to get done". He presented his academic success as effortless and unexpected, without the mental labour that working-class masculinity characterises as effeminate (Willis, 1978, p.148):

> "personally I would put myself kind of topper end [of the class] ... Yeah, I've always, I don't understand it, but I've always been a little bit smarter than I even know myself and I don't know where it comes from. It just happens."

Luke's inherited habitus required him to present himself as unconscientious, unstudious (Simmons, Connelly and Thompson, 2020):

> "I'm, I'm pretty laid back when it comes to most things and I don't really take too much of a proactive stance when it comes to revision and stuff and I've got the kind of, Oh, I've done well in that test. I'll do well in the next one kind of view so quite laid back."

This may have contributed to his choice of the vocational/technical route rather than traditional academic learning which he disparaged saying he found "it easy but boring writing in a book all day". More positively, on entry to college he stated he had chosen the T-Level because he "wanted real world practice in my future career path!" He did not receive encouragement from home to study post-16. When asked whether his parents influenced or held opinions on his education and career planning, Luke responded with: "Not really, they say if you're happy with it, you go for it mate. If you don't want to do it, you don't do it mate." This reported colloquial speech echoes the 'working-class masculine habitus' as defined by Charlesworth as "a way of joking, bantering ... being a lad" (1999).

Luke's inherited habitus also necessitates a rejection of institutionalised cultural capital; he did not rate or prize academic qualifications. He referred to academic accreditation as a "bit of paper", valued only for getting a job. He considered the T-Level qualification was better than a BTEC because he'd been "told by many people that [employers] do also look [to see] you've sat through the classes and stuff as well." Moreover, being a full-time university student was a last resort:

> "there's always the option to kind of push down a university route if that or you can go straight into a job like this and then go for an, a degree apprenticeship later on in life. It

> doesn't really have to be now and it's just a bit more money you'll be making with that degree."

Arguably Luke's familial habitus takes the form of inverted snobbery whereby it is 'cool' to not be a professional (Whitehead, 2003). There is an element of shame or perhaps betrayal of origins associated with academic excellence and upwards social mobility. Pursuing academic success from such a starting point can result in hysteresis in the home environment as documented extensively by Hardy (2012), Reay (2017) and others. Luke's avoidance of such fracture could suggest the vocational education habitus can enable learner identities which accommodate such anti-academic dispositions (Colley *et al.*, 2003). Potentially, Luke's next steps could either consolidate this learner identity through an apprenticeship, for example Brockmann and Laurie (2016), or would adapt to new experiences and fields (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009). At the time of interview, following four terms on the T-Level course the way he presented himself educationally was at odds with his academic progress. He expressed an irreverential attitude to both education which he derided as "boring", and university which he scorned saying "University to me strikes like ... sitting there writing notes about someone speaking to you", and the acquirement of consecrated cultural capital - "bit of paper" (Hardy, 2012). This echoes his father's attitude, i.e. Luke does embody the naturalised habitus of his domestic field.

Ethan, an A-Level student, was similarly nonchalant about his college studies. He chose 3 on the scale of 1 to 5 of how much effort and commitment they would invest in their studies, and corroborated this at interview in December of his second college year with "I'd say, I don't work the hardest." He was going to "actually try" towards the end of his second year "cos first year I kind of just done nothing about half my studies, but now I kind of have a goal of what grades I want and all of that stuff." His use of the work "stuff" to denote his plans to progress to university and onto a profession creates a dismissive, casual tone to communicate that he is not trying too hard to be successful (Voyer, 2018).

Ethan was always going to study A-Levels after school, as all his friends at school were – so the influence of the school field was strong, in conjunction with that of his peers, which some studies have found to be a significant influence the generation of habitus (Brooks, 2003). His uncommitted approach to study dictated his choice of subject within the A-Level programme though:

> "At first I was thinking science because I was thinking like, I was directly driven on money at that point. I was like, I gotta do science ... because science now is like, growing. Then I realised I didn't really have like the, I guess the effort to put into science is a really tough subject. I didn't really have the effort to put into it, I guess. So I kind of

> looked elsewhere and I was like, what kind of relates to science and what can I use like that? And Psychology was the best one I found."

In saying this Ethan presents a confident learner identity similar to Luke's; confident and undaunted by academic learning. He says he lacks the work ethic to succeed at science, not the academic ability.

Ethan intended to study Psychology at university and become a psychologist. This profession intention is not formed by familial social and cultural capital. Neither parent had attended university. His father, uncle and elder brother worked as electricians and his mother worked as an assessor of Early Years Education trainees at an FE college. His parents were divorced and he did not talk with his Dad about education. His Mum's response to his application to study at university was "she enjoys the idea of me being out of the house all of the time." This parental attitude indicates a familial cultural capital unmatched with his career aspirations or immediate progression intentions. Neither parent reportedly demonstrated pride in his progression goals although when prompted to elaborate on his parents' views of his ambitions with the follow-up prompt question "Are they proud of your aspiration to go to university?" Ethan offered:

> "I think Mum is. She likes the fact of me going to uni I guess for the, I guess it is for the status of going to uni. I'd assume. But I think she just likes that I'm following kind of a path I want to follow."

In this response Ethan quickly counters his mothers' appreciation of the "status of going to uni". The way he downplays her pride at his academic achievement and upward social step by replacing it with her just being happy that he is doing what he wants is illustration of his desire to navigate his father and brothers' working-class masculine ideals (Whitehead, 2003). Similarly, he also dismissed the status of professions as unimportant to him: "I don't really care about any of that. Like, I don't think any of that affects me really." When asked what "status" meant to him Ethan replied:

> "like, high up in society that you know, I guess like a solicitor or something, you'd see as like, high point in society at some point, but I don't really, I don't think any of that is like appealing."

Ethan was also keen to distance himself from socially motivated, altruistic goals in his choice of specialty within the profession of psychologist. Whilst he spoke enthusiastically about the role of criminal psychologist, diagnosing why criminal acts had been committed and looking at "what could have happened to them like say in childhood or something like that", he was quick to reject social motivation as a driver. Ethan's response to the interviewer's comment

> "with the example that you just gave, that's quite socially motivated. As in understanding their context with a view to preventing them committing crime."

Ethan quickly refuted social conscious motivation. Or perhaps he was just being pragmatic. His retort was:

> "just understanding. So at that point, I'm not gonna be able to just, like, some people may be just be too far gone to stop. So kind of just knowing why and maybe trying to help or not help people with like, understand why people could do it, like, that as well."

He continued with clarification that his dominant motivation was monetary:

> "Um, I'm, to be honest, the main, the main thing I think about is, to do like the kind of psychiatrists or something like that, just for the pure facts of money. ... I guess, enjoyment will be something I think about it but it will mainly just be if there's money in it, I'm just gonna do it. That will make me happy."

Thus Ethan can be seen as continuing his familial habitus perpetuating his parents' inverse snobbish attitude to social and cultural capital as linked to established middle-class institutions such as HE and professions, even whilst pursuing these aspirational progression goals himself. In this Ethan can be seen effectively negotiating his Dad's expectations of him (Voyer, 2018), a reflection of hegemonic white working-class masculinity – his dad, uncle and older brother worked together as electricians and when asked what his parents thought of his university and career plans Ethan replied "I'm not gonna speak to my Dad about it" (Benjamin *et al.*, 2003). From this perspective his noticeable, somewhat strident emphasis that financial reward was his key motivator is understandable. Money is a job asset that translates directly across all forms of employment. It is found to be a high extrinsic motivator of working-class masculinity (Whitehead, 2003, p.299). Presenting "pure facts of money" as the reason for his choice of career effectively masks any social climb, status or altruistic motivations thus avoiding potential hysteresis.

There is a clear gendered pattern shared amongst these two male respondents. Both project an indifferent insouciance towards their education whilst simultaneously pursuing ambitious progression opportunities and wider longer-term career aspirations. In this they are navigating the reproductive expectations and cultural heritage of their fathers and male siblings to remain committed to traditional working-class, non-academic education and employment. They are effectively concealing their upward social mobile ambitions and masking their ability to succeed with academic education.

8.1.7 Tom and Tilly: pursuing a progression only available via the academic route

Tom and Tilly are two further interviewees aiming to progress to careers that depart significantly from domestic fields, nor reproduce familial capitals. Both had formed strong ambitions to become medical doctors. Medical schools only accept applications from A-Level students offering high grades, so both took the academic route through college.

Tilly lived in IMD decile 1, POLAR quintile 1. She identified as White – English, she was eligible for Free School Meals due to low household income and her Dad worked as a barber and her Mum worked part-time in marketing for the local rugby club. She recognised the ambitious nature of her career dreams when she was little: “it was always very aspirational goals. Like I'm wanna be a lawyer, I wanna be a doctor, like, it was like those type of things.” She had retained highly aspirational goals through school and into college, and was aware that she manifested a different learning identity and held different career goals to her family. Her parents had expected her to go to college and do A-Levels and were “all really proud” of her following her GCSE grade achievements. But beyond that she didn’t really know what expectations her parents held:

> “I don't know, compared to the rest of my family ... like, what they expected me to do. I don't think they expected me to be this far. I'm not gonna lie. I think they knew that I was quite intelligent. But in like ... compared to my family, but slightly more intelligent in some aspects. Or maybe they're just, they prefer practical work over ... which, ... I'm fine with that.”

It was evident that her parents’ experience and expectations were not formative of her horizons for action, and that she was working quite hard to reconcile her academic ambitions with her families’ non-academic habitus.

Tilly had left school with a very high GCSE profile of 7.41. She self-ranked her ability at school as top of the class and chose the academic route since she liked how "in depth everything is at A-Level" and she believed exams were the best assessment method for her. She considered that the more synoptic approach of A-Levels provided greater intellectual content compared to BTECs which wouldn't have challenged her enough. She opted to take an Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) on top of her A-Levels for extra stretch and challenge, and chose to research psychosomatic illnesses for it. Tilly worked hard, she did not display the nonchalance or casual work ethic of some of the male students interviewed including Ethan, Luke, Theo or Imran (discussed in 8.1.6 and 8.2.1, 8.2.2 below). Asked to describe herself as a student she said:

> “Um, I'd like to say I'm extremely hard working. I do put in a lot of hours at home and in college. ... I do try my hardest to everything. Yeah, I do say I'm a good student. I do participate well in class as well. And I'm okay, with making friends. I like to work with people to help them out. So I like to say I'm a good student.”

Tilly’s eagerness to be seen as a good student and her altruism – she liked to help others – informed her career ambitions. At school she had been “pretty set on being a doctor”. She chose to study Chemistry, Biology and Mathematics A-Level as the necessary entry requirements to study medicine at university, and on entry to college stated she planned to specialise as a consultant forensic pathologist. Unfortunately this progression opportunity was not realised as she did not achieve well enough in medical school admissions tests to make a

successful application. Her confident, intellectual learner identity was not affected by this disappointment and she switched her ambitions into the theoretical research field of biomedical sciences, aiming to apply her diligence to realising the academic goal of a doctorate. In some respects this new career goal was even less connected to formative influences at home which she had described as “practical”. Now she was hoping to study theoretical science, moving away from the practical aspects of medical practice altogether. In relation to her enjoyment of science she said “I didn't enjoy practicals but I think I'm more, I enjoy the theoretical side of it more.”

Tilly’s education experience informed her opinion on the relative status of qualifications. She explained that people generally “see A-Levels as probably the hardest one”, T-Levels were too new to judge and BTECs were for “people who just didn't do well academically and just want to do more practically.”

Tom, also intending to become a medical doctor, had experienced this interpretation of the relative status and reputation of Level 3 qualifications firsthand. Tom had studied an Extended Diploma before restarting on A-Levels. He

> “found it quite hard when I was doing my [BTEC] diploma, because I was made soon aware that the diplomas are not seen as ... equivalent to A-levels. So I was very quickly made aware that with, with certain universities, they won't accept the level 3 extended diploma ... everyone sees A-levels as better.”

Tom shared many contextual similarities with Tilly. He identified as White – English, he lived in postcode in IMD decile 1, POLAR quintile 1. Tom was the middle child of seven, all three older siblings and both parents took BTECs at college, or in his parlance “studied vocationals”, and no one in his wider extended family has been to university. Like Tilly his ambition of becoming a medical doctor is in many respects anomalous to his home field and parental occupations. Tom did not think his family affected his choices or career horizons: "they didn't really have any influence on me ... on what I've done.” Although his family were “very inclined” for him to go into medicine they seemed unaware it would take him into a very different career field requiring significantly different habitus (Jin and Ball, 2020). The main advice his parents gave all their children was “we were always told it was either ... go do your A-levels or your BTECs or go and get a full time job. You know, it was kind of one or the other.”

The binary choice given is between working and studying, it doesn’t differentiate between vocational and academic choices, and his previous decision to study on a BTEC course was prompted by his Mum’s encouragement:

> "it was mainly my Mum was like, she made me watch this criminal investigation documentary at the time. And she was like, oh, you should do this and that I thought was quite interesting. So, I went to go and do it."

Thus Tom had very much forged his own way. His inspiration to study medicine came from his personal experience of hospital care, from which he got to "know a few Doc's at hospital". He gained a job at a hospital during COVID and from that,

> "managed to get some work experience with pathologist and microbiologists and then it kind of blew up like in surgery and then kind of continued going from there."

Gaining this type and level of work experience in hospitals is unusual, especially without aligned or useful social capitals i.e. contacts within the medical profession generated from family members or parental social groups. It is reasonable to deduce this came from the way he presented himself with a very strong drive to help others and work hard. This is evident in his evaluation of his college experience which had "definitely more than exceeded" everything expected. Similarly all his college tutors had been "immeasurably helpful throughout" providing "constant support". He said his experience of studying these A-Levels had "pushed us into knowing what we want to do. And it's reinforced ideas for a lot of people I think".

8.2 Students' perceptions of qualification status and reputations

In some instances, interviewees' silences can be as interesting as what they say. Arguably this is particularly the case when interviewing teenagers, an age group that can be characterised as less communicative than children or mature adults. In these interviews students were often silent on the topic of the academic-vocational divide debate or of any public perspective on the value and reputation of qualifications. Questions on their perception of the status and reputation of A-Levels and vocational courses including T-Levels needed rephrasing and following up with prompt questions before responses were elicited. This suggests they had not consciously thought about the issue, and did not hold an explicit, known awareness of the existence of any scale of prestige. Some of the A-Level students had little knowledge of any other qualifications other than A-Levels, but that in itself is evidence of the dominance of the academic qualification; it suggests A-Levels were the only option, that alternative qualifications were not even in the picture or spoken about by influencers in their orbit. Other ways in which students seemed unaware of the academic-vocational debate were revealed in their lack of understanding of the different levels of qualifications. For example one of the T-Level students spoke of his older sister having a degree in events and hospitality, but actually it was a Level 3 BTEC taken at a sixth form college; evidence that any difference between academic and vocational qualifications was outside his sphere of recognition.

It was noticeable how most of the 18 students interviewed chose their college course with little apparent conscious deliberation. Only two of those interviewed made considered, researched, informed decisions for their post-16 education. Often the level of knowledge regarding standards, assessment methods or grade systems was low, rarely could it be considered well informed. From this sample of students it appears that teenagers don't think consciously about the longer-term or wider implications of their college course choice. At most some showed an awareness of the immediate progression options college courses can lead to. Thus their perception of the relative status and reputation of A-Levels and T-Levels was formulated on prestige values inherited implicitly from family, school and wider societal and media debates. The framework of societal system of values concerning types of education is powerful, sitting beyond young people's discernment and yet internalised and forming the foundations of their progression decisions post-school. The hegemony of this conception of the status and esteem of academic and vocational routes makes it imperceptible, informing students' individual decisions without conscious awareness. Without recognition of the discourse, interviewees did not articulate it, hence their silence on the topic.

8.2.1 Theo & Hannah: reflecting societal norms and the influence of education sector

The three highest achieving school-leavers in the sample, Riyaad, Tilly and Theo, all chose A-Level as a natural, automatic progression with little consideration of other options, thus supporting and perpetuating the higher prestige of 'gold standard' A-Levels. The progression of the more academically able interviewees onto the post-16 academic route seen here is in line with historical progression trends for English UK school-leavers (Relly, 2022). For most of the A-Level students interviewed moving onto A-Levels was just a given, the established, obvious option after school: "everyone that I knew was doing A-Level so I thought it was just the thing to do." This evidences a selection process embedded in school progression discourse which constructs moving to A-levels as the hegemonic norm. Thus their 'decision' to study A-Levels was the product of an established post-school trajectory which effectively precluded any other option. From their perspective, these students drifted without contention with the tide of consensus and expectation into studying A-Levels as a better option, without much conscious or active decision making (Atkins and Flint, 2015).

Theo is a good example of this process. Of all 18 students interviewed Theo was the most typically middle-class. He lived in a postcode designated as IMD decile 6, POLAR quintile 4. He had achieved well at school with a GCSE average grade of 7.38. He identified as White - English, both parents went to university and held professional roles and his elder sister had studied A-Levels and progressed to a Spanish and Politics degree at a Russell Group university. His parents expected him to follow the traditional middle-class route; they were "quite traditional like that. Yeah. They like the idea of having a good profession, a good career and working your

way up as well." They guided and helped him with his education choices. They had researched which college he should attend, but had not debated what type of qualification he should take, only A-Levels were in scope (Fisher and Simmons, 2012). After A-Levels they expected him to go to university: "because it's what they did and it's what my sister did. ... I've always been more academic anyway, so they just think that would be a path to go down."

Theo's school experience reinforced this process:

> "Well, I mean, I think when I was, you know, in sort of year 10 and 11 on the cusp of GCSEs. I just thought the path was you find something you're interested in, and then you study it at uni, and then you find a job and you work your way up in that industry or whatever."

When asked if he had any knowledge or opinion of the T-Level qualification he responded:

> "Yeah, I think if it's, if you can, if you know what you're doing and you're good at a skill or something, you enjoy doing skills that fits in a T-levels and that. I think, is a good opportunity for people that enjoy things like that. But um, I was I was a lot more academic in school anyway, so I don't think a T-level was suited to me. But I just didn't. I didn't have a skill that I really enjoyed, or was very passionate about that fit in with any of these courses."

Theo shows an understanding that the T-Level qualification focuses on skills development. He creates a dichotomy between practical skills and academic learning. He distances himself from T-Levels saying they are courses good for other people; "a good opportunity for people that enjoy things like that", but also said "I wasn't very practical at all to be honest" which is why he didn't think a "T-level was suited" to him. Arguably a more modest approach would have been that he was not suited to the T-Level, as in he did not have the necessary entry requirements to access the course successfully. Instead he stated that he "didn't have a skill that I really enjoyed, or was very passionate about that fit in with any of these courses."

Theo was confident about his academic abilities. He said he "was at the top of the class" in school, but wasn't making as much effort at college and consequently at the time of interview in November of his second year at college he described himself as "probably above average, like not - not nothing crazy". Theo's attitude to his studies can be interpreted as coming from a position of privilege – the academic route through college and on to university was his right. Of all 18 students interviewed he was the only one that stated that he would not work very hard at college. On a scale of effort and conscientiousness Theo placed himself at the lower end (2 out of 5): he would only "do enough work to gain a decent grade". It is interesting that the only two interviewees to place their effort at 3 out of 5 were both A-Level students too. A variety of motivations may lay behind the declared nonchalance of these A-Level students. They may be

playing to the myth of effortless intellect (Schubert, 2014); a stereotype, traditionally male, achieving elite academic success without toil or effort (Nyström, Jackson and Salminen Karlsson, 2019). Or as seen with Ethan (discussed in 8.1.6) may be navigating expectations of working-class masculinity which associates conscientiousness, "mental effort" in education with the "social inferiority of femininity" (Willis, 1978, p.148; Whitehead, 2003). In comparison T-Level interviewees all placed their work ethic at 4 or 5 on this scale. This mirrors the whole case-study whereby 68% of T-Level students described themselves as working hard compared to 55% of A-Level students, as explored in 7.3.4.

Theo was also confident about the progression opportunities that his academic pathway would enable. As a child his career aspiration had been to become a journalist. On entry to college he intended to continue his academic learning to undergraduate study. By the time of interview he thought he would delay this natural step of progression to university saying:

> "Um, I'm not going straight to university ... I've been looking into like water sports, instructor courses. So, you know, like, other things ... I like windsurfing. I think I'd like to do seasonal windsurfing, instructing. ... there's more options. And there's more things to say and more things to do. So I think I'm trying to explore those. ... I just have sort of gone off the idea of following a traditional path."

This water sports employment was probably an interlude. Theo saw it as

> "probably not as a career choice but more like a short-term kind of thing ... Yeah, if I find things you know, after that if I if I find I I'd like to go to university there's always that option."

In which case this rebellion away from the "traditional path" would become a 'gap year'; a traditional part of the English middle-class student pathway, a luxurious time-buffering afforded by middle-class economic capitals that remove the necessity of earning or of immediately beginning on a secure career path. Arguably, students coming from more prosperous backgrounds can afford to be more relaxed about their futures, taking greater risk (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000). For example, another A-Level student Meg, living in IMD decile 7, planned to become a film actress. Her parents were supportive and she relied on her mother to research acting schools for her. Again, the social and economic buffering afforded by her familial context allowing her to explore riskier options for her progression and extended her horizons for longer-term career aspirations.

Alternatively Theo's gap year approach is strategic; he is drawing on family-derived capitals to better navigate the complexities and realities of the professional occupational field, to take time to consider all options before committing, and potentially developing social capitals to enable a specific path once deliberated (Du Bois-Reymond *et al.*, 2001, 1998; Wyn and Dwyer, 2000).

Theo's confidence in the status and reputation of academic study meant he did not consider any other pathway: "To be honest. I just knew ... everyone, everyone that I knew was doing A-level". His more relaxed approach to his learning career stems from an inherited habitus and confidence in possessing high status cultural and social capitals that ensures he "will become somebody" (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000) despite or separate to the attainment of qualifications or demonstration of merit. He was clear however, that vocational qualifications would not provide the same opportunities and were not accorded the same level of esteem (Billett, Hodge and Aarkrog, 2022). When asked if universities value A-Levels and T-Levels equally he replied:

> "Oh, they might, they might say they do but I doubt it because T-levels and BTECs and things I feel like you know, more newly introduced in an official qualification sense when compared to A-levels. So I think if they were to see that someone got A-levels they might favour that because they know what it's about."

This view was echoed by another A-Level interviewee, Hannah: "the way I look at it, whether it's wrong or, is that, you know, you get A-levels and that's what everyone's looking for."

Hannah's horizon for action had always been wide and ambitious. Her childhood dreams of what she would 'be' when she 'grew up' included a "Firefighter at one point, police officer, professional footballer ... just things like that". These three roles have childish glamour with adventurous statuses. They are stereotypical roles reproduced in children's books and media. These childhood future imaginaries are untrammeled by reality; her parents worked as a nurse and a builder, so these childhood career dreams are a departure from the lived reality of her family context. The influence of the domestic field can however be seen in the typically boyish nature of these three future imaginaries. Hannah has three older brothers, so arguably the gender balance of the family home influenced her pre-school ideas of what was out there for her as an adult. This gender influence can still be discerned in her college years; Hannah took PE A-Level because she "was always known as like the sporty girl", as well as Law and Sociology. Her career aspirations were equally high at the start of college: "Being in charge, making lots of money, having a key role in my job". At interview in her second year her career interests had become more realistic and specific, still towards policing and "probation officers and stuff like that". Hannah was still aiming for roles often occupied by males, but now incorporating a care element showing the influence of her mother's career as a nurse. Her childhood future imaginaries of action hero roles had calcified into attainable, realistic roles providing community help and action, still retaining a 'tomboy' gender identity (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000; Paechter and Clark, 2007).

Like Theo, Hannah enjoyed a very confident learner identity, recording her school enjoyment and learning as 5 at the top of the scale. However her GCSE profile was 5.38, in the bottom third

of the sample for GCSE achievement. Hannah's confidence at school can be seen as the product of her position as the "academic" in her family, allowing her to maintain an assured learner identity through school and onto an A-Level programme at a college two hours' travel time away from home rather than her local college. In her discussion of her own post-16 choices and that of her older brothers, Hannah described the assumptions behind the academic-vocational divide quite clearly:

> "For me, it's kind of like I always planned to do A-Levels. The, there was a brief look [at doing BTEC or T-Levels] but it was kind of like I've always stuck to the, you know, do your GCSEs, do your A-Levels, go to university so I kind of went on that route, the full-time education the full lot."

This view of the A-Level route being best came from her Mum who had "been at lots of unis actually. She's been like three different ones. Got loads of degrees", and her eldest brother who had "done it all. He's done a Masters, Languages". Hannah had two other brothers, one of whom had started at college but withdrew without completing his course, and the other was "doing a sports course that by the end he's a fully qualified personal trainer … And then he's gonna go into the Navy". When asked why he had chosen to study an Extended Diploma rather than A-Levels like her, she said:

> "He isn't very, don't know about the word academic but he's not very like a English writer writing essays sort of person, which is the person I am, I mean, he is very much hands on practical sports. Any information that he can actually DO he will remember."

Hannah evidently considered that BTECs are suitable for people who are more practical and who are not comfortable with writing essays, and this was said without any negativity; she spoke of this elder brother and his intention to progress to the armed forces once he had successfully completed his Extended Diploma with pride. When asked specifically about how T-Levels were viewed compared to A-Levels she said "I don't really have a clue" and then "I dunno it's different, isn't it? But obviously I was going down the route of A-levels anyway." It is evident that Hannah considered vocational qualifications as useful qualifications for those that could not manage academic study, but for anyone that could succeed on the academic route, accessing 'powerful knowledge' was the only option (Beck, 2013).

8.2.2 Imran: a T-Level rescue story

Another interviewee's story is pertinent here. Mirroring the sentiment expressed by Hannah that those that can take A-Levels do, Imran had started A-Levels despite having an average GCSE profile of 4.67 and only the minimum grades required for enrolment to A-Levels; Grade 4 for English Language, two Grade 5s for Double Science and a Grade 6 for Mathematics (the minimum grade accepted for A-Level Mathematics). According to Imran, his parents were very

sure he should take A-Levels. His Dad was a taxi-driver and had not attended university, his Mum had studied at university in Bangladesh and in England she had decided to be a housewife. They expected him “to do the A-levels and all that … Oh, yeah, definitely yeah They wanted me to do A-Levels.” Like Theo, Imran had also been swept along with the general draw of A-Level study as the preferred option:

> “No, actually I did see [T-Levels] as a as an option but as, I didn't go for it because most of my friends are going to [the college campus with A-Levels] actually so I was like, you know what, I'll go to [there] as well.”

Imran had struggled with academic study and been withdrawn by the college because he had failed to pass the formative assessments of the first two terms. The following September he restarted on a T-Level. His recount of the previous year was that he hadn’t enjoyed A-Levels, he did not seem to consider that he did not have a learning disposition that suited academic study. In interview he explained:

> “Before this course I was doing A-levels as well. But that one just seemed really boring to me in a way it's just like, I'd just be sat down. I did Maths, Business and Accounting. … maths was really boring for me. It was just like, an irrelevant question which was like, not complex, it was just, the teaching and all that was kind of boring and it's all based around just that one, like. I don't know how to explain it to you. But it wasn't just in that field, it was just too general for me in a way, doing it to that type of degree.”

Imran presented his restart on a T-Level as a positive choice, not borne out of necessity because he had lost his college place:

> “I decided to change to the T-Level because you were given the chance to work in an actual office within the industry, which interested me a lot. Just went for it.”

He presents his decision as one made lightly, apparently on a whim.

He enrolled to the Planning, Surveying and Design for Construction T-Level and by the time of interview in his second year considered this vocational course superior to A-Level due to the valuable work experience and more relevant subject matter. His parents were now convinced too, once they “heard about the work that you could do with the T-levels”. Imran also favoured working and apprenticeship learning over the academic route post-college. When talking about his progression options he said: “I would like to do a apprenticeship degree. But if uni is the option that I have and I can't find a job related to the field. Then I'm gonna have to go to uni.”

When asked directly how he thought the universities perceive A-Levels and T-Levels Imran again presented a more favourable position for the new qualification in relation to A-Levels:

> "I think there will be interest with the idea [of T-Levels]. Obviously, ... most students do A-level and obviously it's new as well so. They're going to be probably more interested in the A-Level. Not interested in a way, but just used to the A-Levels coming in. But they might actually be more interested in T-level ever since it's new".

Imran's horizons for action and career trajectory (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997; Hodkinson, 2008b) was boosted significantly by his experience of the T-Level. He was enrolled to the same T-Level as Zuri, and like her aspired to become an architect. However, whilst the T-Level had facilitated Zuri's long-held ambition of architecture, for Imran the course generated this high-status goal. And whilst his confident learner identity seemed undented by his inability to learn effectively on the academic route, the A-Level subjects he had chosen would not facilitate access to an undergraduate degree in architecture, nor was he eligible for the required subjects for architecture – Mathematics, Physics, Design & Technology or Art & Design and often Further Mathematics too. In contrast, the T-Level provided a more successful method of learning and enabled him to apply to three universities to study Architecture. This second chance course may have been his secondary, replacement choice, but it significantly opened his horizon for actions to include a high-status profession.

8.2.3 Emily: influenced by issues of accessibility and the classification of knowledge

Two further students interviewed had ended up on a T-Level course as a second choice, but like Imran had benefited significantly from the course, which resulted in improved opinions of the status and value of the qualification.

At secondary school Emily had researched the different options available at college and was aware of the status of vocational qualifications including T-Levels, compared to A-Levels. She was sure that general opinion and especially universities "always will think A-levels will be better because they're more academic", so echoing the central debate on classifications of knowledge (Bernstein, 1971). On that basis she tried to enroll to A-Levels as the best option.

Emily lived in a postcode within IMD decile 9, very affluent, and POLAR 4 with high proportions of young people attending university. Her childhood dream had been to be a veterinary surgeon, and this was retained until her attempt to enroll to an A-Level programme at college. This aspirational career goal was formed in isolation from her parents and home field. Her parents:

> "just said whatever you want to do, like as long as you're happy and it's providing for you, do what you want. And I think they were quite shocked when I said I want to do science route because they were like, that's different. Because like everyone in my family is different. No one's, no one's done science, in even in my broad family. So they're all a bit like where did this come from. ... All of them [her extended family]

> finished school. Some of them went to college, some didn't. But no one's gone to uni. I'm the first one in like my wide family has ever gone to uni."

Emily had enjoyed school and had expected to enroll to science A-Levels but lower than expected GCSE grades meant she "wasn't allowed on to A-levels because I got fives instead of sixes." By her account, she was "picked up" from her distress at being refused enrolment to the A-Level programme and was "calmed down" by the offer to enroll on a T-Level course in Laboratory Science instead.

Like Imran, the T-Level, even though a compensatory option, proved a good support for Emily's learning style and enabled different, but equally high-status career ambitions, causing her to reassess the worth and status of the two types of qualifications. Again it was the work-related element of the T-Level in Laboratory Science that appealed to Emily, together with a curriculum that enabled the learning of theory through practical application: "I really enjoyed school. I really enjoy being at college. ... I love my work placement, because it's the science hands-on".

At interview Emily discussed effectively her difficulties with processing information at speed and the techniques she used to help herself understand and retain learning. She remained exceptionally enthusiastic and engaged at college as she had been at school. She described herself as passionate about her subject of science and talked very enthusiastically about how she always wants to be learning but at the same time is slower than her peers:

> "my mind takes quite a while to process. So that's why I avidly listen. And then like any little things I have to write down. ... If I've haven't got it noted down. I'll forget it. And then I need to apply that in my revision otherwise. Because if I don't write it down, yeah, it's it's gone gone. Because obviously I'm listening. I'm listening in one ear, and then I'm note-taking with my hand. So it's like, I've got to listen first. Then note-take. I can't do it the same time. Because I've got to take it in."

The T-Level course enabled Emily to learn at the pace that suited her, and the development of higher-level technical skills helped restore a more secure learner identity. This, together with an informed understanding of possible career pathways in science, meant she could replace the substitute plans she had conceived immediately after her rejection from A-Levels when the profession of veterinary surgeon ceased to be possible. At that time when she enrolled to the T-Level she adopted a substitute goal of becoming a veterinary nurse. Her experience studying laboratory science however meant her career goals changed to becoming a laboratory scientist. In interview she said she now preferred the "science behind" the practice of veterinary medicine; preferring theoretical science and its application rather than animal care. She was therefore effectively circumnavigating her initial disappointment at not being accepted onto the A-Level programme to secure alternative but equally high-status progression opportunities from T-Level study. Emily's pragmatic, rational choices enabled her to take back control over her

careership and navigate obstacles to forge an alternative career path within the confines of post-16 options available to her (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997; Hodkinson, 2008b).

The T-Level qualification effectively provided an alternative, technical route to high status careers (Hordley and Lee, 1970; Esmond and Atkins, 2022a, Ch 1). She explained that the T-Level in Laboratory Science qualification provides the necessary qualification and experience for application to a broad range of "general science degrees":

> "it's open to a lot of degrees because even though it's labelled as Laboratory Science, it is a very just science course, like we have tailored practicals but also we do just have a general science [unit]. So especially for like the degrees I'm looking at, they always say specialised in science, and it's most of the time always laboratory science course."

Emily talked at length about how theoretical the T-Level course was, alongside developing technical skills. As a result, she found during her industry placement in a university lab, that she and her college peers had more advanced technical skills than first year science undergraduates, enabling them to conduct laboratory experimentation with greater precision and with less instruction than the undergraduates. Nonetheless she remained sure that universities would prefer applicants offering A-Levels (Wheelahan, 2007). She believed T-Levels would have to continue to "hash out" the value of technical skills as equal to or as necessary to the study of science as academic theory. In this she directly, though without cognizance, referenced the fundamental issue underlying the academic-vocational parity of esteem divide - powerful knowledge (Young, 2007). It became apparent however that Emily had internalised the hegemony of academic knowledge in the determination of prestige values and status ranking: her main argument for parity of status for T-Levels with A-Levels was that the T-Level course did in fact contain an equal amount of academic study:

> "obviously, it's called a technical level. But we do a lot of theory. We still, we're in five days a week. One day is Lab Day, four days theory. So I think because people take the technical level as like, most of it. They don't actually look at our curriculum and see how much more theory than we have practical. And that was the same as last year. Last year we had maybe one practical every fortnight. Everything else was theory."

She concluded by arguing that academic knowledge was no use without practical skills;

> "they may say we don't go in, as in-depth of academic wise, we can do the practical stuff. And in science, you need that. You can't do your academic side without your practical side, because you can't actually carry out a practical when you don't know how to use the equipment."

In her eyes, technical skills were more difficult to develop; "you can always learn the academic side. Practical you've got to harness". Emily's ideas echo the debate regarding the possibility of

technical education providing alternative pathways to elite professions and the upward social mobility they offer. She argued that technical education formed an alternative route that circumnavigated the access issues of the traditional academic passage to prestigious professions. In this way technical education would work to erode the reproduction of inherited elite social capitals currently dominating English education and young people's careerships (Atkins, Esmond and Suart, 2019; Esmond and Atkins, 2020).

Emily's educational journey caused her to experience the academic-vocational divide theoretical debate first-hand and in real terms. First, she experienced emotionally the disappointment of being excluded from academic study as a school leaver. Second, she lived through a live, applied debate of the value of technical versus theoretical knowledge in her T-Level Industry Placement at a university laboratory. Thirdly, she directly experienced universities' uncertainty about the value of T-Levels. Emily applied for a place on several undergraduate courses in biological sciences but felt that universities "still don't, they still don't believe that [T-Levels] are good enough. … unis are like, Oh, maybe we should take maybe we shouldn't [accept T-Levels]." Even the university that had provided her placement "annoyingly, like on [it]'s UCAS like profile it says it doesn't accept T-Levels." Emily, always proactive and determined, persuaded the university through extended dialogue with the admission team and the undergraduate course lead, to accept her application and recognise the T-Level qualification as valid entry requirement for it. Nonetheless this does cast doubt over the reliability of the T-Level securing progression opportunities to university. As Emily put it: "it's just like, if someone [on a T-Level] wants to do a degree, are they able to do a degree?"

Lastly, in terms of living through the various elements contributing to the disparity of esteem between vocational and academic qualifications, Emily was worried about the longevity of this new qualification (Millar, 2018), fearing it would cease to exist; "Like, our whole class is worried". There were only five students on this T-Level Laboratory Science in the second year, and no one had enrolled to the first year. The concerns of the group that the qualification might be withdrawn, and the sense that they were guinea pigs in a policy experiment proved valid as they did end up being the only students to ever study a T-Level in Laboratory Science at this college, and other T-Levels were cancelled completely in March 2025 including the T-Level in Healthcare Science (Chowen, 2025a). Emily's concerns about the continuity of the whole qualification were shared nationally (Borrett and Foster, 2024) and proved perspicacious as student recruitment continued to falter (Patel, 2025).

Moreover, Emily's insight that "colleges were like, not forced, but they were really encouraged to take them" chimes with education sector concerns that the government was pushing the qualification onto the post-16 education sector despite wide ranging and vehement criticism (SFCA, 2023; House of Commons Education Committee, 2023a; Ofsted, 2023b). Concerns

about the amount of public funds dedicated to T-Level rollout were confirmed by the Principal of the host college, who also acknowledged the influence of financial incentives of capital investment and higher funding rates in choosing to adopt the qualification.

8.2.4 Matt: technical skills win all

There are many parallels and similarities between Emily's educational journey and that of Matt. Matt was enrolled on the T-Level in Digital Production, Design & Development. This was his third choice of qualification type, but like Emily, he was thriving on the T-Level. Also like Emily, Matt had learning difficulties. His were diagnosed and recognised as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC) and Dyslexia, visual stress and slower processing speeds (text and auditory). These contributed significantly to his learner identity, which was characterised by a keen awareness and mature understanding of how to manage his learning difficulties. Matt's GCSE achievements on leaving school averaged grade 5.36, which placed him in the bottom half of case-study participants for prior attainment, in yet he considered his work was usually towards the top of the ability range in his year group at school. He had enjoyed school and at college intended to 'aim for the very top grades, complete all extension work and more'. Matt lived in IMD decile 8, an affluent area from where the highest proportion of young people participated in HE historically (POLAR quintile 5). He identified as White - English, his father was a manager in the IT sector having studied Physics and Computer Science at a Russell Group university and his mother had not attended university, she worked as a SEND TA – Special Educational Needs & Disabilities Teaching Assistant.

T-Levels were Matt's third choice after A-Levels and then a BTEC Extended Diploma in IT:

> "My Dad originally wanted me to do A-levels. He wanted me to do physics, maths and computer science. But I was by that point, I was pretty determined to do the [BTEC Extended Diploma] engineering course. Because I enjoyed the design and building of the actual thing you design. And then I had a falling out in that course. And so I was, … I bounced around trying to find a college that would accept me to go do physics, maths and computer science A-Levels."

Unsuccessful in finding a college that would accept him to study these A-Levels with his prior attainment of GCSE average grade 5.36 and GCSE Grades 4 and 5 in Double Science, he heard through a friend about the T-Level in Digital Production, Design & Development and enrolled to it: "And my friend told me about this course. And I was like, … let's go do that."

Matt's journey through different qualification types shows little appreciation or valuing of prestige rankings. His dad valued the academic route most, but Matt had opted for a BTEC course instead because he liked making things. He transferred to the T-Level in Digital Production, Design & Development for the syllabus content of software coding rather than for

any preferred status, structure or for the industry placement aspect of T-Levels. However, he would have enrolled to A-Levels before the T-Level had he found a college that would take him.

Most of the students interviewed evaluated the status and reputation of qualification types according to universities' opinions. On this Matt said he thought universities perceive T-Levels "more like ... a BTEC where they would prefer you'd have A-Levels but BTEC will do." He elaborated on the wider societal perception of T-Levels:

> "I don't think there's a lot of understanding on how the T-level works. But I think people are becoming more and more open about it. When I'm going around, especially when I'm on industrial placement. A lot. I'm seeing a lot more T-level boards about. Or more companies willing to take them on. So I think it's slowly getting better but don't think it's getting better as fast as it could be."

Matt's learner identity remained strong and confident throughout these developments, which would have been discouraging to some young people - we have seen Emily's distress at being rejected from A-Levels for example, whilst Matt switched to the T-Level easily, "I was like, ... let's go do that". He was sure he was progressing well:

> "It's going well, of course it's, it's a fun course. It's, I would say it's pretty easy, but that's, but then I've done computer coding for a long time. But it's not that hard to get into. It's an easy course to start up in and it's easy basically. So it's good."

Matt saw university as a fall back, safety net option if he didn't get a degree apprenticeship:

> "I'm a little bit torn on whether to go to uni or find an apprenticeship somewhere. I might, I'd prefer to get an apprenticeship but trying to find apprenticeships in software at the moment is difficult."

In overview, the T-level course provided Matt with opportunity to develop his technical skills to an extent that neither A-Levels nor BTECs could since the T-Level curriculum develops software coding skills to a higher, more specialist level (Terry and Orr, 2024). He applied to university, but retained a sense that A-Levels were preferred by universities, and were generally higher profile and more accepted. He did not articulate his own opinion of the relative status and reputation of qualification types. Instead his responses to questions designed to elicit thoughts on this topic were tightly bound to the narrative of his course choices, rejection, acceptance and finally success. This narrow-focused view, closely filtered by personal experience is characterized by literality rather than abstraction; his interview responses consisted primarily of expression of his likes, dislikes and preferred future, which is a common characteristic of ASC. Matt projected a confident learner identity despite or perhaps because of his well-managed learning difficulties. With this lens, an element of defensiveness or self-preservation can be discerned in his discussion of his T-Level course where he bolstered his relative position within the course by

emphasising that it was easy for him. His ranking of the qualification as “good” therefore bears no relation to the public debate of the relative status of academic and vocational qualifications – it is good because it is easy for him, not because it provides a high standard of education. Indeed it is “not that hard to get into” which by most ranking criteria would place the qualification lower since ease of access often translates into inferiority in the academic-vocational divide debate; superiority determined by access for the elite only.

8.2.5 Izzy: determined to pursue the academic route

It is useful to bring discussion of these interviews to a close with a review of commentary provided by a student called Izzy, since she expressed the shared views of most of the interviewees, but whilst these perspectives with other interviewees were sometimes unconscious, unspoken or expressed with consideration and reflection, Izzy expressed them boldly. For example in response to a question about her opinion on the relative status of qualifications she replied with the simple and straightforward explanation:

> “I mean, I would rather have the A-Level but I'm not gonna say BTECs are bad because they're not. It's just what people can do, what they can't do. Yeah.”

Having established that she believes BTECs are only studied by students who can't take A-Levels, Izzy went on to explain that on this scale of prestige, T-Levels "would be in the middle ... BTEC would be last. All the way last".

Similarly Izzy was certain universities preferred applications from students with A-Levels; “Absolutely!” Izzy went on to say:

> “I don't really see a place for BTECs. I'm not saying that BTECs can't go on to university. I'm just saying like from what I've seen, there isn't much like space for it unless it's like the university is taking UCAS points.”

She elaborated that only the lowest ranking universities made offers based on UCAS points rather than specific grades. Izzy’s use of metonymy – she labels young people studying BTEC qualifications ‘BTECs’ – is revealing. In contrast she doesn’t homogenise A-Level students in this way. Izzy disrespects students of BTEC qualifications with this expression in a way that mirrors the slang use of the word ‘BTEC’ to mean of poor quality, a downgrade of something, or a rubbish version of something. This word is also used by some teenagers to refer to a dumb or idiotic person[27]. Most if not all of the interviewees rated qualifications in the same order, the others were just more moderate in their negative descriptions of vocational qualifications.

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[27] See the Urban slang dictionary entry for ‘BTEC’: https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=BTEC

Izzy's interview was characterised by an outspoken expression and strongly held views. She herself had demonstrated a great deal of determination to enroll to Philosophy and Classical Civilization A-Levels and Criminology Diploma with a GCSE grade of 4.27, lowest of the A-Level students interviewed and second lowest of all 18 interviewees. Moreover, she is the only student in this interview sample needing to re-sit either Mathematics or English GCSE. Izzy grew up in a single parent family with her mother who worked as a carer for the elderly. She had one sister, older, who had started studying A-Levels but became pregnant and had chosen to become a full-time Mum and not return to college to complete her A-Levels. Izzy was clear that she deliberately chose to study A-Levels in order to subvert stereotypical expectations for female school-leavers "who don't really pass their GCSEs". She believed girls with low academic attainment were passed on to certain vocational courses:

> "It's kind of a stereotype for people who don't really pass their GCSEs to go on to do like beauty therapy or makeup. And I didn't really want to do that. ... Beauty therapy, makeup, just stuff like that ... It kind of, girls who don't really pass the GCSEs are passed on to that. 'Oh, they're probably going to do like I don't know, like hairdressing and stuff like that'. And I didn't want to do that. I wanted to do something that isn't so, ... not so, female dominated, y'know?"

Izzy was navigating the qualifications landscape with a deliberate intent to refute or disprove expectations. Her parents:

> "didn't really have much expectations for me, it was more of my sister. Coz I wasn't really getting good grades. So they were just kind of like, she might go to college. She might not."

At the same time as working hard to not reproduce familial capitals and habitus and social-educational sector stereotypes whereby vocational, employment focused courses were for lower ability school-leavers, Izzy was also rejecting societal genderization and genderised workplace roles. When asked if she could remember what she wanted to be when she was little Izzy replied:

> "I honestly, I wanted it to be like the people, the person who like drove the JCB that picked up the stuff. I just thought it looked really cool. That's not really my thing now to be fair."

The childhood desire to subvert gender career stereotypes that this memory contains translated into a strong engagement with the gender politics agenda as a college student. Talking about college studies and next steps after college, she wanted:

> "to do something that isn't so, I won't say not so normal because it is normal. But not so, female dominated, dominated. y'know?" ... "which is why I want to go into

> philosophy. Yes, there's so many male philosophers out there and it's so annoying because they're all horrible people. I want to go on to do philosophy to then try like, because there's so many women philosophers and you don't, we probably have only learnt like three in A-levels. And that's not good."

Izzy's education journey showed a fight against being pushed or led, as she saw it, by social and education norms towards specific female dominated, non-professional job sectors (Brockmann, 2021). It is this that may have led to her ambition to gain a Doctorate in Philosophy. At the time of interview in year 2 of A-Levels she "would love to be a Philosophy lecturer, whether it's university or college." Izzy was very much operating outside familial field, uninfluenced and unguided by adults, and deliberately resisting the influence of school to form much more ambitious professional career goals that could only be achieved via the prestigious academic route.

Sadly Izzy's high ambitions proved unachievable, at least by the age of 18 after two years of A-Level study. She was only able to complete one A-Level at the end of her second year, gaining an E grade. There was an evident mismatch between her goals and the reality of her prior attainment and progress through her college learning. Also evident was her underestimation or lack of knowledge of the difficulty of undergraduate and doctoral study of philosophy, or of the job entry requirements of becoming a university professor. This disconnection probably would not have arisen had she benefited from familial habitus and capitals that matched her desired, intended field. If, for example, her parents had understood the university process and demands of entering these professions and appraised her of the challenges facing her. Or if she had inherited the appropriate social and cultural capitals to be able to discern for herself the remove between her own academic progress and that required by the profession she aspired to. At the same time, the scale of the disconnect between her reality and both her intended progression and her long-term career aspirations engenders an alternative interpretation of the narrative Izzy presents. From the perspective of hindsight, Izzy's bold ambition, extremely high aspiration and scathing judgement of BTECs appear performative and compensatory. Her determination to pursue the academic route and actively reject vocational pathways becomes a defensive action railing against the disappointingly unambitious career and life path that school, society and her family seemed to intend for her. From this viewpoint her audacious commentary on the relative status of the BTEC qualification – "all the way last" and the way she separated herself from "BTECs", vocational students, is a product of the tension she feels between her lived experience and future imaginaries. With this lens, her ambitious projected future successes become attempts to bolster her self-confidence and restore agency against strong contrary structural pulls.

Chapter 9 Discussions and Recommendations

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first expounds the findings presented in the preceding three chapters in the context of the literature and the theoretical frameworks guiding this study. The discussions are based on and structured by the aims of this study which are to explore students' perceptions of the progression opportunities provided by T-Levels compared to A-Levels; the influences shaping young people's career aspirations including their choice of college course, and students' perceptions of the relative status and reputation of T-Levels and A-Levels. The second part of this chapter reflects on the limitations of the study and its implications for education providers, for future policy in this area and for further research.

9.1 Discussion of findings

9.1.1 Students' perceptions of progression opportunities: T-Levels vs. A- Levels

Firstly, this study shows that students perceive T-Levels enable progression to employment in technically skilled roles, but following undergraduate study rather than at 18 at the end of college study. T-level students were effectively prepared for progression into skilled roles related to the T-Level course subject specialism. Students of each of the T-Level routes offered at this college were well informed of the sector related careers available, had experienced working in the relevant sector, and nearly three quarters intended to progress to subject-related undergraduate study in order to access skilled, professional roles. This indicates this new qualification is not repeating the problems of GNVQs which failed to provide clear stepped progression to employment as documented by Wahlberg and Gleeson (2003) and Hodkinson and Mattinson (1994).

However, the linear career paths of T-Level students indicated by case-study data were not necessarily the product of deliberate, informed future planning made by school-leavers at the point of entry to post-16 education, instead formed by pragmatic acceptance of the, in some cases, narrow and second-choice options available to them. This finding supports the premise that a reverse pragmatism towards education has develop ped in response to the mutability and precarity of the post-industrial workplace with associated difficulty of entry and of securing roles in the workplace. Post-16 education choices and the subsequent careers they lead to are seen as transient, and based on what is available rather than a considered pursuit of a prized, sought-after career (Wyn and Dwyer, 2000; Roberts, 2011; Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011). This affects students' horizons for actions, restraining their sense of agency or scope of options, resulting in a resigned acceptance of the limited options available, accepted fatalism determining post-16 choices rather than strategic investment choices. This interpretation has some traction with the stories that emerged from interviewees talking about their journeys from

school to college and projected futures. Most of the nine T-Levels interviewees' course choice was based on what was available to them; serendipitous or enforced rather than deliberate and informed choices, echoing the research findings of Du Bois-Reymond *et al.* (2001). Most were unable or did not wish to choose the A-level option due to their low prior attainment, an insecure learner identity or dislike of academic teaching methods. Some positively chose the vocational path. Either way, they had limited subject options within the vocational path: most colleges can only afford to offer one Pathway per T-Level Route, and just one occupational specialism for each T-Level Pathway. Poor student recruitment to the T-Level programme nationally exacerbated this issue through T-Level courses and specialisms being cancelled or withdrawn which further reduced the range of subject options available, as reported in a House of Commons parliamentary briefing (Lewis and Bolton, 2024).

Interviewee Emily illustrates well Hodkinson and Sparkes's (1997) notion of 'pragmatically rational decision making' in her approach to selecting post-16 education and career choices (see Chapter 8, section 8.2.3 for details). Emily had a well-defined career objective on leaving school of becoming a veterinary surgeon. She ended up studying Laboratory Science as the only option available. She did continue with her T-Level subject specialism by studying Biology at university, but that continuity veered significantly from her intended career path. Emily's careership was forged from pragmatic acceptance of the only option available to her at entry to college rather than her originally planned transition choices. Other interviewees shared similar non-linear careerships, supporting Hodkinson's (2008) position that school-to-career transitions are not the product of rational, informed and orchestrated decisions, but reactive, pragmatic responses to changing options and personal contexts. Some effectively turned serendipity to their advantage to "progressively construct a career" within their "choice biography" (Avis and Atkins, 2017, p.171). As illustration, Imran switched his finance career goals to architecture when the T-level in Construction became his only option (as explicated in Chapter 8, section 8.2.2). Others such as Tom presented in interview with a clearly developed career goal and path (A-Levels and medicine as detailed in Chapter 8 section 8.1.7), but conversation revealed uninformed choices made without appropriate guidance had caused him to start Level 3 study three times by the time of interview. Tom's learning journey and complicated school to post-college transitions reflect Bloomer and Hodkinson's study (2000) that shows life experiences significantly impact learning careers resulting in more complex and non-linear transitions from school to careers. It is therefore found that T-Levels constitute a useful addition to the post-16 qualification choice landscape for school-leavers, but broader subject and occupational options are needed to facilitate sufficient choice and appropriate fulfilment of more school-leavers' career aspirations.

Once enrolled and studying a T-Level course, the narratives emerging from interviewees show that the T-Level course syllabi and industry placements increased students' sector knowledge and awareness of the range of specialist career roles facilitated by their chosen subject. This is best illustrated with students enrolled to the T-Level in Health with the Occupational Specialism 'Supporting Adult Nursing'. Nursing had been their goal at the start of the T-Level but their progression intentions became more specialised and also of a higher status as a consequence of their learning on the course, with intentions to pursue postgraduate study for careers as paramedics and midwives for example. This pattern can be seen with the other T-Level routes researched within the case-study. The syllabi and skills development of the course prepared college leavers for employment in supportive roles such as nurse assistant, classroom assistant in primary school, or project manager assistant in the built environment. Most students rejected these options, preferring instead the higher status professional roles of registered nurse, primary school teacher or in the construction example, architect. Thus this new qualification has raised students' expectations, encouraged them to develop their technical skills further through undergraduate study and so facilitated development of a technically skilled workforce of graduates rather than college leavers.

T-Level policy discourse shows the qualification was designed as an exit qualification from education into the workplace, but in practice it is functioning as a bridging qualification for further study. With T-Levels seen as enabling access to university, especially for disadvantaged students, the qualification performs the same function AGQs have played for many years (Social Mobility Commission, 2017; Atherton, 2021). This refutes early literature on T-Levels which reported that universities would not accept the qualification, an issue acknowledged by this research. Terry and Orr (2023) also posited that the new qualification could not enable access to HE as effectively as AGQs because access to the qualification itself was restricted. Their study found T-Levels were not perceived as "universal qualifications accessible to the mainstream of students attending FE colleges, in the way that BTECs are" (ibid p.563).

Accessibility is key when evaluating progression opportunities– no onward progression options are available to a young person who can't access the course, or who is unable to complete or pass it. Entry requirements set the boundaries of accessibility, and T-Levels at this host college, in line with policy requirements, entail similarly high prior attainment to A-Levels. This has caused concern that the new qualification will be less inclusive and will "exacerbate rather than attenuate social inequality" (Esmond and Atkins, 2022a, Ch 5 p.80). My research partially challenges this concern: some of the T-Level participants perceived A-Levels as inaccessible even if they had the necessary GCSE grade profile, but saw T-Levels as manageable. Reviewing the responses of the nine T-Level students interviewed, representative of the whole cohort as I showed in the Methodology chapter, it is evident that T-Levels facilitated greater progression

opportunities than the A-Level programme would, had they chosen or been able to access it. They all spoke of their difficulty or dislike of desk-based, theoretical learning, preferring practical hands-on learning, and several chose the T-Level to avoid the external examinations of A-Levels. Thus the method of delivery and structure of the T-Level courses successfully accommodated these students' learning identities and aptitudes, and all nine interviewees successfully completed with either a Pass overall or a Merit, the equivalent of DDD to BBB grades at A-Level. The T-Level qualification here facilitated greater progression opportunities for these learners than the A-Level programme would. This connects with Vidal Rodeiro and Williamson's research (2019) which similarly found that for some learners "vocational courses can have a crucial role in stimulating and motivating students" and taking the vocational route rather than the academic prevented "dropping out", facilitating improved progression (p.742).

There is irony here though – these interviewees and other respondents chose the T-Level to avoid exams, and yet the T-Level is mostly examined. This assessment methodology is designed to give T-Levels greater 'rigour' to bring 'equal standing' with A-Levels by employing the currency of academic-based education (Raffe and Spours, 2007; Terry and Orr, 2023, 2024). The examination of theoretical content under timed conditions did indeed pose difficulty for case-study participants and they achieved lower grades for the Core element in most cases. Nationally this rigour has caused problems too, prompting the parliamentary judgement that T-Levels are only for the "academically gifted" (House of Commons Education Committee, 2023, para 53). Whilst examination of theoretical content did reduce achievement for participants of this study, the pass rate was equivalent to the A-Level cohort, despite the T-Level group having lower prior attainment and including a much larger proportion with declared learning difficulties or disabilities, as detailed in Chapter 7, section 7.2.2.5. This study therefore submits the new qualification is not just for the academically gifted, whilst recognising it is not as accessible as AGQs.

Apprenticeships were found to be the least popular progression option in this case-study. Just 22 of the 187 participants stated they intended to get an apprenticeship once they had finished college. This is perhaps unsurprising since it has been found that apprenticeships have not been adequately promoted, the T-Level specification does not match the requirements needed for transition to Level 4 apprenticeships (House of Commons Education Committee, 2023 para 37) and there is limited apprenticeship provision in England (UCAS and The Sutton Trust, 2023). These 22 respondents mainly sought 'degree apprenticeships' as a way of gaining university education without incurring the costs of fees or living away from the family home, which reflected the messaging of the college.

9.1.2 How are young people's career aspirations shaped?

A second aim of this thesis is to explore the factors that shape young people's long-term career aspirations, their view of what their futures hold for them. This thesis confirmed that students' post-16 choices are not an isolated disconnected act but the product of familial and community contexts, experiences and learning at school as well as structural historical, societal practices and expectations. In line with Bourdieu's theories of social reproduction, these inherited capitals and habitus, forged by school experiences, influence school-leavers' choice of college study which in turn shapes post-college progression opportunities, the next step towards their envisaged career goals. This research thus supports the concepts of 'careership' and 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997), seeking to evaluate if these contextual factors exert an enabling, constraining or preventative effect (Hodkinson, 2008,p.6). This approach thus avoids "the twin pitfalls of implicit social determinism or of seeing (young) people as completely free agents" (ibid p.29).

This research finds negligible effect of financial or community contexts in terms of dis/advantage on students' declared highest ambitions. This extends Sullivan *et al.*'s (2018) challenge of 'a direct origins-destinations link' (p.776) and supports the work of scholars including Bourdieu who do not see habitus as unchanging or fixed. Indeed this research shows that parental influence is more complex than the unseen doxic effect of 'what people like us do' (Kleanthous, 2022), and many of these students living in areas of socio-economic deprivation exhibit habitus inculcated from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds. It is seen that in the intersection between ethnic cultural familial and community expectations with class, cultural heritage is of greater influence on students' projected trajectories. Moreover, qualitative data reveals that many students regardless of cultural background, demonstrated sufficient agency to create a differing pathway to a new position within the hierarchy of career field, and college experience was instrumental in developing a suitable habitus and understanding of doxa to operate successfully in a new career field different to that of their families.

I will now discuss with relation to theory and relevant literature, firstly the influence of social economic contexts in shaping 'future imaginaries' (Bazzani, 2023), secondly the impact of school education and learner identities, and thirdly the effect of college courses on students' horizons for action.

Beginning with the influence of social-economic contexts and the formation of young people's horizons for actions, few discernible patterns emerged from participants' socio-economic profile and the qualitative data resulting from the open question in the Entry questionnaire 'If you realised your highest, best ambition in the future, what would you be or be doing at the top of your career?' For instance, the expressed ambitions of students with low household income

were similar to those of students with higher incomes. Similarly there was little evidence of the influence of community: the stated career aspirations of students living in Index of Multiple Deprivations (IMD) decile 1 were similar to those living in IMD decile 10, and nor was there any discernible difference between the responses of A-Level and T-Level students living in shared IMD deciles. Equally the aspirations of students living in HE Participation Of Local Areas (POLAR) quintile 1 were similar to those living in POLAR quintile 5. Interviews with a sub-sample of students explored further the influence of home contexts on early formation of habitus and of horizons for actions by asking interviewees to recall their childhood ideas of what they would be once 'grown up'. Interviewees' responses support the questionnaire data, showing that these childhood dreams of their future adult selves were just that; imagined futures unrelated to the reality of parental or familial experience. This confirms Reay's research (2017) that it is fallacy that the socially disadvantaged, the working-class, lack aspirations. Any detectable correlation is an inverse relationship between childhood aspirations and socio-economic profile. Three of the four students living in IMD 1 postcodes recalled holding very aspirational ideas of what they would be when they grew up: fashion designer, pilot and either a lawyer or a doctor. One of these three, eligible for FSM and with parents who worked as a barber and part-time in marketing for a rugby club, recognised the ambitious nature of her career dreams when she was little: "it was always very aspirational goals. Like I'm wanna be a lawyer, I wanna be a doctor, like, it was like those type of things."

Reay's application of Bourdieusian concepts to evidence the reproduction of social disadvantage and class inequalities in the English education system (2001, 2017) is particularly pertinent to this case-study given the high proportion of socially disadvantaged students. Reay argues that the English educational system was not set up to realise working-class education potential. "Instead it operates as an enormous academic sieve, sorting out the educational winners from the losers" with the losers directed or consigned to the vocational route (p.26). In this research however financial circumstances exerted inconsequential influence on participants' choice of college course or post-college progression intentions. Similarly community influence measured by both IMD and POLAR categorisations on choice of college course was minor, but a slightly larger proportion of school-leavers living in areas of deprivation (IMD 1-3) and areas with the lowest rate of progression to HE (POLAR quintile 1) chose to study A-Levels rather than a T-Level. Conversely T-Levels were slightly more popular than A-Levels for school-leavers living in more prosperous areas or those areas with higher rates to university traditionally (IMD 8-10 and POLAR quintile 5). In examining students' post-college ambitions from this perspective of socio-economic community contexts, this study again observed a slight inverse relationship between disadvantage and HE aspirations with those living in IMD 1-3 and POLAR 1 more aspirational as measured by their intention to go to university. Interview data also support this: all four interviewees living in IMD 1 postcodes, which were also in POLAR 1, were

studying A-Levels as a route to university. It is found that financial and social disadvantages fuel ambition for upward social mobility in this study, with the majority trusting the traditional academic route to university where they could. Students living in more affluent areas with higher household incomes were less intent on gaining institutionalised cultural capital in order to secure high status occupations. Arguably these students can take a more relaxed approach to forming and achieving career goals, benefiting from the luxury of time free from economic necessity (Bourdieu, 1986, p.247).

Now considering the influence of parental education experience on students' career aspirations, there is insubstantial evidence of the domestic transmission of cultural capitals in participants' post-college progression planning. 127 of the 187 case-study participants intended to go to university, only 48 of whom (37.8%) had graduate parents. More students (79 or 62.2%) without family history of university intended to progress to undergraduate study. Conversely, there was less evidence of intent to reproduce lower parental cultural capitals: only 37 of the 116 case-study participants (31.8%) whose parents did not attend university intended to go straight into employment or to an apprenticeship after college, like their parents. Interviewee narratives indicate most of the 15 participants who did choose an apprenticeship as their post-college progression probably intended a degree apprenticeship, so reducing this reproduction of non-academic parental education capitals further.

When reviewing the types of jobs held by students' parents though, there is evidence of reproduction of inherited social capitals and habitus, rather than institutionalised cultural capital: a higher proportion, 44%, of A-Level students' parents work in professions or managerial jobs compared to 30% of T-Level students. This evidences some mobilisation of familial capital from middle-class parents to influence their children's educational choices, as is documented in the studies of Ball *et al.*, (2002) and Reay *et al.* (2001). To a greater extent however, this study finds pertinence with research into the decision-making processes of the lower middle-class (Irwin and Elley, 2011): only a minority of participants in this study fully fit the white working-class type described in Reay's 'Miseducation' (2017) and few conformed to Willis' characterisation of 'lads' (1978); whilst only a minority presented as traditionally middle-class described in studies such as 'Making UP the middle-class child' by Vincent and Ball (2017). These participants then who aspired to university study without the inherited cultural capital of graduate parents, but benefitting from the social capitals and habitus of parents occupying managerial or professional roles, fit into the 'missing midd le' (Brooks, 2003). As such these students neither benefitted from the parental investment of 'concerted cultivation' enjoyed by students of upper and mid-middle-class parents (Lareau, 2002), nor the tension and distancing towards formal education of disadvantaged mothers as described by Gillies (2006). Instead the dominant finding of this research is an extensive level of aspiration for upward social

mobility, with the majority of students projecting horizons for action independent of societal, community and familial contexts.

The individual narratives elicited in interviews situate these demonstrations of agency within their specific contexts effectively, showing the various factors at play in interviewees' adherence, resistance and navigation of familial and community-produced capitals and habitus. The intersection of ethnicity and cultural heritage, class and gender illuminates the significant leaps in social mobility planned by the two interviewees Riyaad and Imran for example (discussed in Chapter 8 sections 8.1.4 and 8.2.2). Both identified as British Asian of Bangladeshi heritage and held high aspirations including studying at Oxford University and becoming an architect, seemingly disconnected from family contexts of social, community disadvantage, non-academic educational experience and jobs such as taxi driver, restaurant/take-away manager and 'full time mum'[28]. Ethnicity and cultural heritage explain these different trajectories however, mirroring that of minority ethnic school-leavers nationally, who are more likely to progress to degree-level study by the age of 19 than those of white British ethnicity (Martin, 2025). Imran's application to undergraduate courses in architecture in particular evidences the strong inclination towards degree-level study of ethnic students with below-average school attainment (ibid). Riyaad's career aspirations were clearly guided by his Bangladeshi community expectations but his learner journey and projected careership evidences his navigation of this influence. He accepted the expectation that he obtain a respected, professional career and as a male, provide for his family financially, but within this, his aim of becoming an Education Officer in the British Army would delay settling down and allow travel outside the community. He respected his mother's role as a 'full time mum', but also aimed to fulfil her personal ambitions; she had been "very keen on becoming a doctor" at "home" in Bangladesh but her over-riding cultural expectation that females marry young and stay at home with family prevented this. His learner journey had been characterised by independence and self-sufficiency, partly out of necessity as his parents were unable to support his studies in the same way as typically middle-class parents (Lareau, 2011) and also resulting from his educational experience as part of an ethnic minority which can encourage self-effacement as demonstrated by Wiltgren (2023). Riyaad's school experience had made him aware of potential hysteresis from domestic field at university (Reay, 2021), and he was again

[28] These contextual characteristics and ambitions are typical of the ethnic minority students participating in the case-study: half of 26 minority ethnic students lived in IMD deciles 1-3 compared to 29.6% of white students, illustrating an association between ethnicity and disadvantage. 19 of these 26 students (84.5%) intended to progress to university, 12 (46.1%) of them living in IMD 1-3. In comparison 105 of the 161 white students intended to go to university, 29 or 18% of them living in IMD 1-3.

navigating this potential cultural discord by choosing a city university with a diverse student population to help him 'fit in'.

Further evidence of cultural heritage producing strong parental guidance emerged from interviewee Amaka who identified as British Black of African heritage (detailed in Chapter 8, section 8.1.3). Her parents also steered her towards a respected profession obtained through traditional academic qualifications which had more "weight". Both Amaka's parents had attended university, but further upward social mobility to professions in law, medicine or engineering for her and her sisters was presented as a solution to the family's social and financial situation of disadvantage (Amaka was eligible for FSMs). Amaka's narrative reveals a strongly pragmatic, restrictive guidance from her parents; she was forbidden to take a gap year because it would delay her earning capacity by a year and prevented from pursuing her earlier dream of being a fashion designer. This contrasted with the reports of the White interviewees, none of whom mentioned explicit parental guidance on their career options. On the whole white interviewees did not mention advice or intervention from their parents, and when asked directly, the usual response was that their parents would support whatever decisions they made. The one typically middle-class interviewee, Theo, said his parents would like him to reproduce their social and cultural capitals by going to university and pursuing a profession, but were supportive of his plans to be a water sports instructor as an enjoyable pursuit, as detailed in Chapter 8, section 8.2.1. Actually this translated into the gap year that Amaka was denied, illustration of their ability to provide Theo with the free time from economic necessity to accumulate the cultural capitals commensurate with his class (Bourdieu, 1986, p.247; Duta, Wielgoszewska and Iannelli, 2021).

Another interviewee illustrating the intersection of social context, ethnicity, and gender is Zuri (reported in Chapter 8, section 8.1.5). Her mitigation of the influence of cultural heritage was very different to Riyaad, Imran and Amaka, all of whom had essentially accepted the advice they received. Zuri on the other hand presented as very aware of her ethnicity, she was born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Black, but had forged her very ambitious career aspirations without input from home. She enjoyed confounding familial and societal class and gender expectations and took pleasure in breaking down the barriers to gender and social equality faced by Black women and girls particularly (Evans-Winters, 2021). For this she received approbation from her family and community.

Both Zuri and another interviewee, Izzy, exhibited considerable agency in the formation of career aspirations that resisted gendered patterns, as discussed in literature such as Brockmann (2021) and Archer, Francis, Moote, *et al.* (2023). In Izzy's case (detailed in Chapter 8, section 8.2.5) her learner journey and future imaginaries deliberately refuted the social construction of 'male' and 'female' jobs, but the mismatch between Izzy's inherited and personal social and

cultural capitals with her desired profession prevented her from realising her goals. Zuri however had successfully challenged the gender binary present in Construction on her T-Level course, and with the benefit of apposite familial cultural capitals to help navigate her projected career goals, it seemed probable she would successfully negotiate gendered roles in the Construction workplace.

The intersection of gender, ethnicity and class shaped the career aspirations of two male interviewees as well. Both Luke and Ethan, discussed in Chapter 8, section 8.1.6, inherited a masculine, working-class informed habitus that required them to occupy gender-specific male, non-professional occupational roles achieved through practical 'hands-on' study in the manner of 'lads' (Willis, 1978; Charlesworth, 1999). Actually both successfully navigated these expectations set by their fathers. Both repackaged their career aspirations in a way that met the criteria of employment that their fathers respected – mainly earning capacity as is characteristic of less advantaged working-class families (Iannelli, Gamoran and Paterson, 2018), and Ethan simply did not talk about his education or career plans with his Dad.

I will now review the ways school experience shapes students' career aspirations in this research. Through a Bourdieusian lens education is "the most important agency where capital assumes an *institutionalized* form" (Moore, 2014, p.103), building on "the cultural capital previously invested by the family" (Bourdieu 1986, p.244). This case-study was therefore designed to scope the relationships between familial contexts and "scholastic yield" (ibid) or the qualifications gained at the end of school. The data does not show a strong correspondence between social disadvantage and lower school achievement. A third of student participants lived in IMD deciles 1-3, areas of significant social deprivation. The average GCSE profile of these 61 students was 5.88. By comparison, the average GCSE grade achievement of the 81 students living in the top, most affluent deciles IMD 7-10 was lower at 5.65, showing insubstantial influence of domestic field on school achievement. This appears to challenge the premise that school success is the product of matched habitus and cultural capitals as detailed extensively by scholars including Reay (for example 2017, 2015). Alternatively, the schooling these students experienced has effectively mitigated for restricted language codes (Bernstein, 2004; Aubrey & Riley, 2020), and managed habitus dislocation by providing compensatory action to enable students with non-academic capitals to succeed equally to their peers who did benefit from appropriate inherited habitus and capitals. This deduction is supported by research that shows schools in areas of significant social deprivation, as is the case here, are better able to tailor their support for less advantaged pupils because there are more of them. Disadvantaged pupils in these schools perform better than the average non-disadvantaged pupil nationally (Dellar, 2025).

I now discuss this study's findings regarding the impact of school experience on the development of learner identities, and how this translates into post-16 course choices, horizons and trajectories. This case-study shows that school-leavers with confident learner identities resulting from enjoyment of school learning gained higher GCSE grades; students' self-evaluation of their ability in relation to their school year group, and their self-assessment of their engagement with learning at school were both accurate in terms of the GCSE grades they achieved. This educational confidence led school-leavers to continue with the academic route through college, confirming the empirical literature that shows successful school-leavers continue to choose the academic pathway rather than the technical or vocational route (Sullivan et al., 2018; Apple, 2004a). It is seen that like the participants of Swift and Fisher's study (2012), these students "recognised that academic studies were more highly valued than the vocational paths" (p209).

More students with less confident learner identities who had not enjoyed school learning were attracted to T-Levels, and so were those with low prior attainment; nearly half of the 83 T-Level participants had GCSE profiles of <5.0, compared to less than a third of A-Level participants. The reasons these students gave for choosing the T-Level showed they considered it more accessible and easier as detailed in Chapter 7, Section 7.3.1. The contribution of this new technical qualification to post-16 options is evident when positively selected by students with less secure learner identities, including those with learning difficulties incompatible with the academic route. Pass rates for these students with low prior attainment (GCSE grades averaging 5.0 or less) was 70% as opposed 56.3% for those studying A-Levels, proving that the T-Level qualification is more accessible and inclusive in the tradition of AGQs (Allen, 2025). Moreover, the experience of studying a T-Level course boosted students' confidence, qualitative data shows; a departure from the effect of previous vocational qualifications such as GNVQ whereby students saw themselves as 'school failures' (Wahlberg and Gleeson, 2003). The T-Level qualification thus constructs a new form of learner identity in a new space between the 'non-academic' and the 'practical' – albeit for a narrow range of school leavers.

This research finding, that T-levels are forming a new type of learner but only for a minority of learners, substantiates the work of Esmond and Atkins (2022a) who argue this piece of VET policy reform is forming 'technical elites', predominantly male students mainly in STEM subjects (ibid p. 80). Interviewee Luke illustrates this development. We have seen that he was an academically able student who concealed and down-played that ability in response to pressure from male family members to conform to the 'laddish' presentation of British working-class masculinity which associates mental labour with the "social inferiority of femininity" (Willis, 1978, p.148). The Digital T-Level provided Luke with a solution –he could continue his technical education and realise his ambition for an elite occupation under the guise of a

vocational course that his father would see as operating within “a manly sphere of action” (Whitehead, 2003), so circumnavigating any habitus dislocation (Lehmann and Taylor, 2015) or hysteresis (Reay, 2021). In the manner of the technical elites Luke did excel in his learning, gain highly valued work experiences (Esmond, 2018) and was able to optimise this opportunity so that he secured a digital apprentice position with his industry placement employer. Luke is illustrative of an emergent new type of learner, enabled by a new form of education – both of which can be termed a technical elite. His exercise of agency to extend and adjust his familial inherited habitus through experience of the school field and attainment of institutionalised cultural capital at college is also demonstration that habitus is not unchanging and fixed, but endlessly transforming (Hardy, 2012, p.127; Maton, 2014, p.52), so contributing to the debate of habitus as a structurally deterministic concept (Jenkins, 1992; Lehmann and Taylor, 2015).

This research aimed to review the effect of college choice on all participants as the third step in their development of mature, adult careership and associated habitus: first domestic capitals, second school learner identities and third college course. This third stage of development at college can reinforce home and school formed capitals if field-habitus match of the chosen college course is comfortable, engendering a feeling of “fish in water” (Bourdieu, 1977, p.214). Colley *et al*. (2003) present the notion of ‘vocational habitus’ to describe this process of teaching a comfortable fit between students and the workplace they are training for. Vocational education teaches the required knowledge, skills and associated habitus based on the norms and values of specific work roles, such as mechanic, nurse, etc. to help students become ‘right for the job’ (ibid p.488). This means vocational education prepares students effectively for the workplace, but it also means horizons are narrowed to specific occupations. Thus, Kleanthous (2022) for example, argues that the qualifications awarded upon successful completion of the course, the institutionalised state of cultural capital, cements the social status of students, holders of that capital. Given that there is a strong correlation between lower socio-economic status/class and the FE sector that delivers this vocational curriculum (Atkins, 2010), academic success and continued study versus vocational post-16 education becomes a class-based issue which the English education system reproduces. Furthermore, Thomson (2014) suggests Bourdieu and Passeron found schooling operated purposefully to sift and sort young people into different educational trajectories, academic or vocational, and that the education field reproduced itself more than others (1990).

It was therefore important for this study to attempt to evaluate if case-study participants’ choice of college course worked to cement, broaden or restrict their horizons for action. The finding is that the impact of college course varies. Many of the T-Level courses do successfully inculcate a vocational habitus through the course structure and setting. For example, the T-Level in Health with the Occupational Specialism of ‘Supporting Adult Nursing’ delivered the knowledge,

skills and behaviours necessary for nursing in classrooms built and equipped as hospital wards with medical equipment used with dummy patients. This, together with the extensive industry placements, does effectively prepare students for a specific workplace, in this case Nursing. The effect of this course is to cement students' career aspirations in the sense of confirmed and consolidated, providing they liked the course and stayed to complete it. Their aspirations were not cemented in the sense of weighed down and static though – a range of aspired careers were identified by these students, all more specialized and higher status than that of healthcare assistant, the role the course was preparing for them if stepping straight into employment at 18. These T-Level students viewed the course as a springboard, at least up to registered nurse, but for most beyond that. The course had made them aware of a broader range of healthcare professions available following post-graduate study and so had fostered higher aspirations as a result of the course. At the same time, the T-Level does not hold as high currency in the field of education as A-Levels and whilst it may confer a higher level of institutionalised capital than previous vocational qualifications, it cannot enable as broad career aspirations as the academic route. To continue with this Health example, it cannot facilitate the high aspiration of medicine and in this respect is restrictive.

9.1.3 Students' perceptions of the relative status of T-Levels & A-Levels

Students' perceptions of post-16 qualifications confirm the persistent English academic-vocational divide: they see A-Levels as higher status than any form of vocational education, but the T-Level qualification, in so far as they were aware of it, was considered preferable and higher value than the alternative college vocational qualification – AGQs.

Participants' perception that A-Levels were higher status was based on their lived experience that those who could continue with the academic learning of school did, married with internalisation of public perception that academic learning is superior. A perspective that is invisible to them because it is so "deeply seated in … peculiarly English cultural attitudes" according to Fisher and Simmons (2012). Internalisation of this frame of reference meant participants judged their own progress and success by whether or not they could access A-Level study. Even interviewee Zuri who had positively chosen the T-Level and was thriving on the course, still framed her luck in having this new qualification as an option in terms of her difficulty with academic learning saying "With A-levels, … I'm not very good with constant theory and constant writing". Here she is typical of the case-study in assigning herself, and others who find academic study difficult, to vocational courses as a second option, for 'non-academic' students who are 'disaffected' with classroom learning (Brockmann and Laurie, 2016). As Edwards (2008) explicates, "in a system in which 'practical' studies have been regarded for so long as suitable only for the second best, it was not surprising that most of those qualified to take the academic route did so" (p.371). And so T-Levels remain bound, to an extent, in the

deficit model of vocational education evidenced in research studies of earlier VET qualifications such as the 14-19 Diplomas and GNVQs (Atkins, 2010; Swift and Fisher, 2012; Bathmaker, 2001 and others). Case-study students conceive of vocational education as “low-status, low-value” as noted by Atkins (2010 p.254) and studies such as that of Stalder, Choy and Le (2022), but, they perceive that T-Levels represent a new, higher status version in the form of technical education.

Some students were aware or had engaged with the academic-vocational debate, others had internalised the higher value of A-Levels to the extent that they had scant knowledge of the vocational alternative. For example, one participant with high GCSE achievement described himself and his peers as “tone deaf” to information on vocational alternatives. So, supporting the research conclusions of Relly: “when one route has no esteem in the eyes of parents and students, choice of the vocational route is not an option at all” (2022, p.51), it seems all participants attributed without question higher status to academic learning compared to practical or vocational learning. It was a truth to them that academic study and qualifications are inherently and intrinsically ‘better’ than practical or technical education. Some made this explicit stating in their questionnaires that “A-Levels are better”. Arguably the only interviewee who questioned the validity of the assumed superiority over T-Levels was Luke who was amply qualified to enrol to A-levels but rejected that option because academic learning was “boring”. Luke does seem to acknowledge and problematise the different selection and ranking of types of knowledge and skills as Apple called for (2004, p.43). But equally, when contextualised within his need to mask his academic successes, his deprecation of academic learning seems performative, a part of a coping strategy to retain respect from his father and connection with his community of social origin.

Equally from a Bourdieusian perspective, these case-study participants have absorbed the understanding that academic qualifications, as the consecrated form of elite cultural capital, hold a higher currency and value in the corresponding professional field of employment compared to vocational qualifications which have less currency in profession, or other prestige social or cultural fields (Thomson, 2014). Academic qualifications remain the prized cultural asset for nearly all these young people, reflecting societal norms and their personal experience of being advised by schoolteachers in favour of A-Levels, and receiving little information on T-Levels or vocational education generally from careers advisers. This process of schools providing partial information and impartial advice supports Schubert's (2014) arguments that, in Bourdieu’s words, “there is an ever increasing role played by the educational institution in the reproduction and legitimation of power” (ibid p.186).

T-Level policy discourse adopts academic markers of prestige in order to raise the status of the qualification. For example, the Core content is theoretical in the manner of the “core academic

curriculum" of reformed GCSEs and A-Levels (Gibb, 2015) and assessment is by external examination. This is another case of "academic drift" whereby VET reform does not bridge the divide but instead the new qualification "becomes more like that which they seek parity" (Raffe and Spours, 2007, p.42). Problems with the ensuing 'rigour' are noted above. The designation 'T-Level' was also designed to create a sense of equity with its opposite in the divide and from the start it was launched as "the gold standard of technical education" (DfE, 2018b), thus freeing it from the label of 'vocational' and the associated ambivalence that Terry and Orr (2023) observe. This attempt to raise the status of the new qualification had some impact within the study; T-Levels are seen to occupy a position above AGQs. This is a marker of success; although the educational value and status of AGQs has been continually contested (Wolf, 2011; DBIS, 2014; Kelly, 2017; Baker, 2020), it is the only vocational qualification enduring through this churn of legislated vocational reform, enjoying greatest longevity and public visibility.

The higher status of T-Levels above AGQs or 'BTECs' is a positive sign for the qualification. Longevity was found to operate as an important gauge of relative status and reputation for students. An unconscious notion of tradition and permanence conferred reliability whilst history bestows the notion of 'gold standard' education. Most of the A-Level students interviewed had moved without much thought onto A-Level study as the 'thing-to-do'. They valued the long lifespan of A-Levels, referring to A-Levels as 'the old faithful', as the traditional route, as established. BTECs were better understood than T-Levels because they had existed for longer. The newness of the T-Level qualification was a cause for concern due to a perception that vocational qualifications are transitory. Interviewees reported employers did not understand or know about T-Levels and university admissions tutors and lecturers lack knowledge of T-Levels and did not accept them, views that were congruent with the HE and policy sectors (Curnock Cook, 2022; Halfon, 2023).

The approbation and acceptance of universities was found to be a key measure of a qualification's value and esteem. Students' starting point when asked for their views on academic-vocational divide was the UCAS tariff and how many points each qualification was worth, if they didn't know they would say the T-Level was the equivalent of three A-Levels. Judging vocational qualifications by the measures of the academic in this way, undermines the value of the vocational. As Relly persuasively argues, "vocational and academic routes that make up education systems have different purposes, for different stakeholders with different outcomes" (2022). The divide cannot be resolved for as long as vocational education is judged by the criteria of academic provision. From the host institution's perspective the T-Level qualification resolved this paradox. It provided an alternative to the "elitism" of A-Levels and its purpose was "supporting student aspirations whether that was to develop employability skills or the skills to progress academically to HE". College leaders also reconciled the different

criteria of vocational versus academic education, saying that the workplace purpose of T-Levels and the skills an individual student needed for their personal growth, self-belief and resilience was one and the same (Chapter 6, section 6.4.1).

This thesis both challenges and supports Esmond and Atkins's (2022a) notion that T-Levels are forming 'technical elite' education. It agrees that the qualification gains prestige and inherent superior value through distinction from and contrast to vocational education generally, and specifically vocational qualifications such as those that prepare for service and caring occupations. The naming of the T-Level qualification to align with A-Levels, its similar entry requirements and adoption of academic assessment methodologies all support this argument. Moreover, students of these qualifications can develop into 'technical elites' benefitting from superior opportunities for skills acquisition enabled by a new form of capital - 'technical capital' – which enables negotiation of more highly valued work experiences (ibid; Esmond, 2018). In challenge, the T-Level qualification encompasses Health and Childcare Pathways which Esmond and Atkins identify as part of the lesser 'welfare vocationalism' (2022a, Ch 6). In addition, Terry and Orr's study (2023) demonstrates that the T-Level is elite in the sense of not inclusive, for "high-flying students" only (p.565) which will prevent the qualification from becoming universal, the second part of a binary offer in Level 3 post-16 education. Finally, whilst T-Levels occupy a position superior to 'BTECs' in the eyes of participants, they remain a second, lesser option to A-Levels so the label of 'elite' as synonymous with prestige, is limited to a narrow margin as the best of the inferior category of qualifications.

9.2 Conclusions and recommendations

9.2.1 Limitations of the study

Whilst this study has been successful in surveying the views of both T-Level and A-Level students on the impact of this new qualification on their progression opportunities and career aspirations together with their evaluation of the relative status of the qualifications, there are necessarily limits to the scope of the research undertaken. These are partly due to my capacity as an individual researcher and partly to the availability of participants; I intended to review the entire T-Level cohort of 117 students. Unfortunately, despite repeated requests to engage with the study, only 83 of the 117 of students participated. However, this is a 70% response rate and these participants were representative in terms of characteristics and courses, and since forced participation may have distorted responses, I accepted this range of T-Level participants and matched the comparative A-Level sample accordingly.

A larger scale study encompassing several colleges located in different geographical regions and with varied social and economic contexts would have lent the study greater applicability to the implementation of this national policy reform. Conversely, this is a governmental initiative

intended to transform the chances of school-leavers across England as well as the national economy, so the isolation of a specific localised implementation is appropriate and relevant to test the universality of the qualification.

The focus of this study is students' perceptions of their futures and the impact of their college courses on the opportunities they perceive are available to them. The data collected describing their prior attainment, household location, ethnicity and gender provides a lens through which to understand these perceptions and how they were formed. Whilst this information is factual, stored in the host institution's database, additional information, such as their parents' education and occupations, has greater subjectivity being provided through an open-text answer in a questionnaire. There is no method available for external verification of this information, but I believe it has greater validity for being representative of their understanding and knowledge of their parental history. For example, one response to the request for information on the university or subject of their parents' degree was "not a clue". From this qualitative data a wealth of information can be inferred about the significance or not of his parents' education on his own choices. In this way, this data has greater pertinence to and logic with the parameters and approach of this research which is to observe and describe lived experience.

It also needs to be borne in mind that this study is located in a specific temporal context. It captures a snapshot of the design, implementation and reception of the T-Level qualification in its second and third year of delivery. Subsequent research conducted after full rollout would be of value to identify any further changes to policy, whether implementation at national scale is achievable and to review the reception of the qualification once established, if indeed it is. At the time of this research, the reputation of the qualification was impacted by its newness, exacerbated by the history of VET policy churn. Even the leader of this college that had predicated its strategies for growth and financial security on being a leading provider of T-Levels, acknowledged it could be withdrawn in favour of further policy reform.

9.2.2 Research overview

In this section I return to my research questions to outline my key findings.

9.2.2.1 RQ1: What are students' perceptions of the progression opportunities provided by T-Levels compared to A- Levels?

The students who contributed to this research perceive T-Levels enable progression to employment in technically skilled roles. Leaders of the college hosting the study confirmed that their objective in becoming an early adopter of the new qualification was to develop students' technical skills, as well as preparing students for undergraduate study in technical subjects.

The employers who participated confirmed that their industry placements students had mostly developed an appropriate skillset and sector knowledge.

The study showed that this new qualification has raised students' expectations, enabling a wider range of students to apply to undergraduate study than A-Levels facilitate. In this way, the T-Level facilitates development of a technically skilled workforce of graduates rather than college leavers. However, it does not function so well as an exit qualification.

Restricted and declining student recruitment at the research site, representative of a national recruitment problem has further limited the range of subjects and occupational training offered, which brings this study to concur with Terry and Orr (2023) that the T-Level could be rendered an elite vocational qualification rather than a "universal qualification accessible to the mainstream of students attending FE colleges" (p.563) that the policy discourse intended.

9.2.2.2 RQ2: How are young people's career aspirations shaped?

This research finds young people's ambitions and long-term career aspirations are not defined or constrained by social and financial familial and community contexts. Nor do these contexts, or parental educational experiences and occupations exert significant influence on students' choice of route through college - academic or vocational, or their intended progression post-college. Wider, societal career precarity has introduced a strong pragmatism to students' sense of careership however, which in some case has a reverse application to school-leavers' choice of college course, whereby they accept what's offered with a sense of defeated pragmatism rather than confident future-planning agency.

The dominant trend identified with participants' long-term career aspirations was an extensive level of aspiration for upward social mobility, with the majority of students projecting horizons for action independent of societal, community and familial contexts. It is seen that financial and social disadvantages fuel ambition for upward social mobility in this study, with the majority of disadvantaged students trusting the traditional academic route to university where they could.

Interviews with students of Bangladeshi and African heritage revealed stronger, more interventionist parental influence in their educational choices and careership compared to White interviewees who reported a non-interventionist approach from their parents and in some cases an anti-education or else unsupportive parental presence. Thus this study generates understanding that the role of family influence is contextually varied and nuanced.

Students were aware of gendered occupation roles with some female interviewees actively engaged in challenging genderization. Male student participants were more conformist to gendered roles however, as seen with interviewees' narratives and on a wider scale through enrolment records which show for example just two males studied the Health T-Level with the Occupational Specialism of Supporting Adult Nursing compared to 48 females.

More students with less confident learner identities or who found academic pedagogy and assessment difficult to manage or unenjoyable, and those with learning difficulties and disabilities, were attracted to T-Levels, and so were those with low prior attainment. Retention and pass rates show the T-Level qualification accommodated these students more effectively than A-Levels would and interviewees reported that studying on the T-Level had boosted their confidence and restored their learning identities previously dented by formal schooling.

This research therefore submits that the new qualification is not just for "the academically gifted" (House of Commons Education Committee, 2023, para 53), whilst recognising that it is not as accessible as AGQs.

It recognises the concept of T-Levels forming a new type of learner described as a 'technical elite' (Esmond and Atkins, 2022a, Ch 5). The technical skills developed on the courses together with extended work experience have the potential to enable vocational students to access elite technical occupations beyond the scope of other vocational education. At the same time, it is evident that the qualification is not as inclusive as AGQs, and if problems with expansion and low, falling student recruitment persist, it is in danger of becoming an elitest course in the sense of only for the few.

9.2.2.3 RQ3: How students perceive the relative status and reputation of T-Levels and A-Levels

Students' perceptions of post-16 qualifications confirm the persistent English academic-vocational divide. They have internalised the notion that academic education is intrinsically higher status and better than vocational, and those that can study A-Levels do. The T-Level qualification is therefore bound within a deficit model, as second choice for 'non-academic' students.

T-Levels however occupy an elite position within the vocational qualification landscape. This perception is based on a correlation between accessibility and status; the T-Level qualification's relative inaccessibility caused by its entry requirements being the equivalent of A-levels, resulting in a higher status. In this way, the T-Level qualification is seen as a bridge across the vocational and academic divide.

Students' ranking of T-Level above 'BTECs' is a mark of success for this new qualification since longevity confers status, and the T-Level is a new addition to the post-16 qualification landscape. However, in part that superiority is gained through its nomenclature – it is labelled as technical education and so defined by, and benefitting from its distinction from vocational education. From this perspective the T-Level qualification deepens the divide.

Students' perception of an emerging higher status for T-Levels compared to other VET was paradoxically based on its adoption of academic rigour and assessment methodologies,

together with university approbation, although the level of university acceptance remained a cause for concern with students. This research therefore finds that the addition of this new qualification to post-16 education does not address or affect the fundamental, entrenched intellectual snobbery particular to English class-based education system which forms and perpetuates the academic-vocational divide. It creates a more prestigious form of vocational education gaining its status through its alignment with the academic and distinction from the vocational. In this way, the qualification blurs the dichotomy, more than bridging it.

T-Levels are found to be a useful addition to post-16 options delivering a high-quality form of technical education, providing that the relatively narrow range of subjects and occupational specialisms aligns with a school-leaver's career interests.

9.2.3 Contribution to knowledge

This thesis contributes to the body of knowledge regarding vocational education reform in the post-16 sector, and how this particular qualification affects the academic-vocational divide.

Firstly this research extends empirical literature documenting the design, implementation and reception of the multitude of VET reforms introduced over the past 70 years. In many cases the proposed qualification reforms were withdrawn prior to delivery, so research studies of English vocational qualifications focus mainly on GNVQs, 14-19 Diplomas and apprenticeships from the 1990s and 2000s. This study brings research of VET reform up-to-date with insights to the lived experiences of this latest qualification rolled-out to the post-16 sector.

Secondly in terms of contribution to the study of the process of policy reform, the iteration of vocational education reform researched here was presented as revolutionary, designed to end decades of policy churn. Policy discourse claimed it would address the profound and growing inequalities of the English post-16 education system. This study found that students were implicitly aware of this policy churn, placing trust in the academic route partly because it is well-established and permanent. Concomitantly, some students spoke of their fear the T-Level qualification they were studying would cease to exist, and so did one of the college leaders participating in the case-study. The study also records the caution of the university sector in embracing the new qualification. This thesis therefore provides a record of policymaking in process, identifying issues of design and implementation as they arise, observed first hand.

Moreover, at the time of writing in the Autumn of 2025, new, wide-ranging, fast-paced post-16 policy reform was announced creating further significant and substantial policy churn with even greater rapidity. Pertinent to this thesis, the DfE had previously committed to withdrawing AGQs of the same size and subject areas as T-Levels and either withdrawing AGQs the equivalent size of one A-Level or replacing a select few by an AAQ (Advanced Alternative Qualification). The first of these AAQs were introduced for teaching in September 2025. One month later a white paper

announced “new, rigorous qualifications” to replace both AGQs and the new, one month-old AAQs:

> “We will make ‘V Levels’ the only pathway of vocational qualifications at level 3 for young people. These will sit alongside A levels and T Levels, providing simplicity and clarity as well as quality”.
>
> **(HM Government, 2025a, p.9)**

Thus this thesis witnessed in AAQs the phenomenon peculiar to English VET of a qualification banished, or destined to vanish, just as it began to emerge (Keep, 2015).

This study also contributes to the burgeoning literature on the T-Level qualification, much of which is pessimistic (Terry and Orr, 2023, 2024; Esmond and Atkins, 2022a). This study however finds the T-level qualification to be a valuable addition to the post-16 qualification landscape. Research provides biographically informed insights of students studying a T-Level identifying instances of high-quality technical skills development, successful progression and boosted learner identities. There is little evidence in this study of students’ experience of T-Levels of a division forming within vocational education or the creation of ‘welfare vocationalism’ as described by Esmond and Atkins (2022a Ch 6). That said, this study confirms at a local scale the quality issues reported by Ofsted (2023b) and the operational implementation issues identified by the House of Commons Education Committee (2023b). Despite this significant national, governmental criticism, the DfE announced an expansion to the scale and range of T-Levels in a White Paper of October 2025 because “T-Levels are already demonstrating their value” (HM Government, 2025a, p. 35). New courses are to be developed “in areas such as sports science, music technology … music performance and art and design” (Chowen, 2025b). This despite low recruitment and poor reception forcing the withdrawal of some T-Level courses earlier the same year, as documented in Chapter 5 section 5.2. This thesis with its focus on the first stage of T-Level policymaking is therefore timely and could contribute effectively to the formation or at least understanding of the second phase of T-Level development.

Lastly, this thesis contributes to long-standing debates about how the status of vocational education may be raised (Billett, 2020; James Relly, 2021; Raffe, 2015). It is found that the reputation of the T-Level qualification describes a status closer to the academic than other vocational qualifications, but arguably because of ‘academic drift’ (Raffe and Spours, 2007, p.42). This has two negative consequences; one is that it fails to provide an inclusive vocational offer for school-leavers, but instead functions as a niche qualification. Secondly, from this perspective, it not only fails to address the academic-vocational divide, but deepens it. The qualification gains status by denying connection or form as vocational.

9.2.4 Next steps and recommendations

This study highlights the importance of tradition and longevity in establishing a positive status for qualifications. There is evidence of caution in the reception of the T-Level qualification with students, parents, schools and education providers. In some cases hostility is evident, for example the sector organisation the Sixth Form College Association has campaigned vigorously on behalf of its member colleges against the replacement of full-time AGQs by T-Levels (SFCA, 2022, 2023, 2025). The Department for Education therefore needs to avoid actions that fan the fear of withdrawal, such as the sudden announcement of T-Levels being replaced (DfE, 2023a). The recent Curriculum and Assessment Review reviewed the existing national curriculum and statutory assessment system in England to ensure it is fit for purpose and meeting the needs of children and young people (GOV.UK, 2024). The adoption and implementation of the Review's recommendations, interacting with Post-16 Education and Skills proposals (HM Government, 2025a) will determine the place of the T-Level qualification within post-16 education. A research project to review the application of these recommendations would be apposite.

Further fieldwork to ascertain the quality of students' experience of the T-Level qualification in its more established form should be conducted to inform future development of T-Level courses. More Routes, Pathways were developed and introduced since the fieldwork of this research was conducted, for example in Animal Care and Management, Agriculture and Land Management, and creative areas such as Craft and Design. Research of the implementation of these T-Levels preparing students for very different occupations including crop production, upholsterer and floristry would be valuable, especially if the proposed second phase of T-Level expansion is implemented (HM Government, 2025a).

Lastly, a study of the process of policymaking in this cycle of VET reform is apposite. In the conduct of this student-focused research set within an employer and institution context, issues in the design and implementation of the new qualification were identified including: a rushed schedule; inadequate investment of education expertise; an agenda set by political motivations and exacerbated by party political intervention. Through this fieldwork a picture has emerged of a qualification that is ambitious and successful in isolated pockets of delivery but without strategies to be scaled to national reach, nor designed to cater for more than a narrow segment of school-leavers. Scholarly research of the policy discourse situated within the wealth of theoretical and empirical literature on past VET reform would be beneficial to inform future policy endeavours, especially as a consultation proposing yet another new Level 3 qualification and a second phase of T-Level development was proposed in October 2025, seemingly disconnected from the parliamentary and sector concerns expressed regarding the first phase of T-Levels. It is apparent that there is a need for the research community to help influence

current and future governments, to prevent them playing with education policy reform as if it was the biggest train set in the world (Keep, 2006).

Word count of thesis: 71,728

Appendix A Student Participant Entry Questionnaire

Questions and sequence design

<table>
<tr><td colspan="3">Introductory section: Identifier, participation information and consent questions.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Section break
Participant focused questions:</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Q: Do you study A-Levels or a T-Level course? [binary]⬇</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Q: Why did you choose to study A-Levels rather than T-Levels or another Level 3 course such as BTECs? [open-text format]</td><td>Q: Why did you choose to take a T-Level course rather than A-Levels or another Level 3 course such as BTECs? [open-text format]</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Q: Are you re-taking either GCSE English or Maths [binary]</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Q: What was your attitude and experience of secondary school? [Likert-scale]</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Q: Think about the classes you were in at secondary school and the marks you gained through Years 10 and 11 – how did your learning and achievements compare with the rest of your year group? [Likert-scale]</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Q If you realised your highest, best ambition in your future, what sort of job/work would have at the top of your career? What would be or be doing? [open-text format]</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Q What sort of work/job do you think you will have in 10 years from now (aged 26 or 27)? [open-text format]</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Q: What do you intend to do when you leave college? (multiple choice – 3 options)⬇</td></tr>
<tr><td>A1: get an apprenticeship
⬇</td><td>A2: get a job
⬇</td><td>A3: go to university
⬇</td></tr>
<tr><td>What industry sector do you want to be an apprentice in? For example, in construction or a healthcare profession or ….?</td><td>What industry sector do you want to work? For example, in construction, in healthcare, in IT services etc.?</td><td>Please give as much information as you can on the subject you’d like to study at university, which type of university you’d like to attend,</td></tr>
</table>

		or the location of the university you'd like to go to.
Q: What approach are you taking/going to take to your studies at college? [Likert-scale]		
Q: What are you expecting to get from your lessons and from your course? [open-text format]		
Section break Family/home context questions:		
Q: Do you live with your parents or guardians? [binary]. If no – skip to thank you for participating. If yes:		
Q: Did your parent/guardian(s) go to university? [binary]		
If yes: Do you know what they studied at university and which university they attended? [open-text format]	If no, skip to next question about college	
Q: Parent/ guardian 1: Did they attend college after school? [binary]		
If yes: What type of course did this parent/ guardian take at college? [multiple choice]	If no, skip to next question about parental work	
Q: Does this parent/guardian usually work? [multiple choice]		

If answer is 'Yes, full-time': What sort of work do they do? [open-text format]	If answer is 'Yes, part-time': What sort of work do they do? [open-text format]	If answer is 'Sometimes does, sometimes doesn't': When they work, what sort of work do they do? [open-text format]	If answer is 'Full-time parent /guardian': Did they work before looking after family? If yes, what sort of work did they do? [open-text format]	If answer is 'No job at present': Have they worked previously? If yes, what sort of work did they do? [open-text format]

Final section: thank you for participation and contact details for any questions.

Appendix B Student Participant Exit Questionnaire

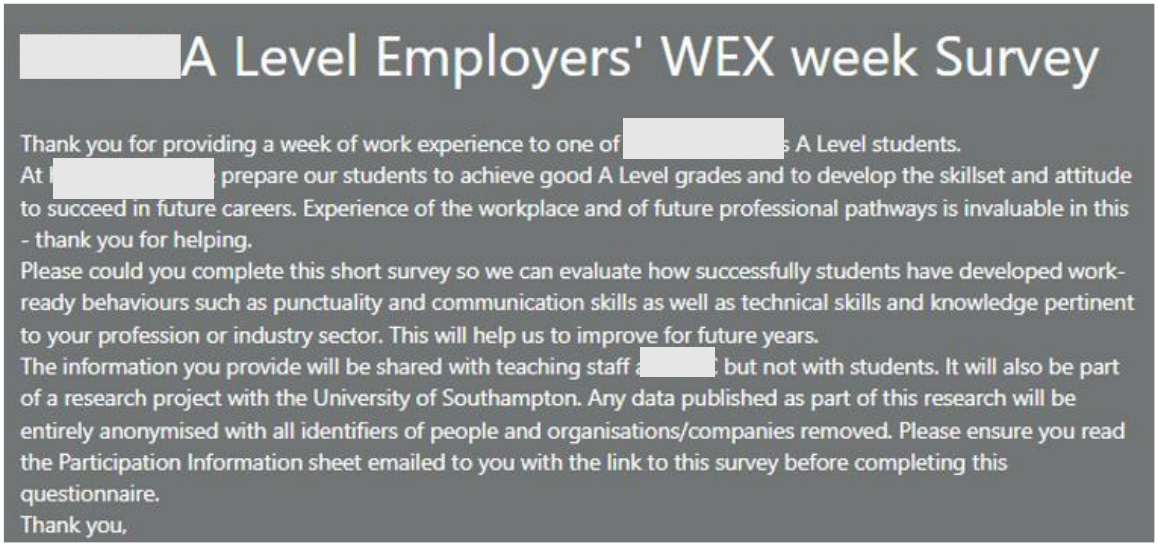
Questions and Sequence

Introductory section: Identifier, participation information and consent questions.
Section break Next steps:
Q: Do you study A-Levels or a T-Level course? [binary]
Q: What will you do in September when you've finished college? [multiple choice – 9 options] ⇩

Follow up q to response 1 'Go to university' Which degree course(s) do you want to study at uni, and which unis have you applied to? [open-text format]
Follow up q to response 2 'Start a Degree Apprenticeship' What subject/industry is your degree apprenticeship in? Have you been offered one yet? If yes, please give details. [open-text format]
Follow up q to response 3 'Start full time employment' What job do you want, and in what sector? Eg shop manager in retail sector [open-text format]
Follow up q to response 4 'Start an apprenticeship (with more college study, not university study)' What type of apprenticeship do you want? Have you been offered one yet – if yes please give details. [open-text format]
Follow up q to response 5 'Stay at [this college] for another year' What course will you be taking when you stay here for another year? [open-text format]
Follow up q to response 6 'Start at a different college (not university)'

What type of course will you take at this other college, and which college? [open-text format]
Follow up q to response 7 'Take a gap year before going to university' What uni course will you study after your gap year? Have you applied already and to which universities? [open-text format]
Follow up q to response 8 'Take a gap year before starting full time work' What type of work will you start after your gap year/time? [open-text format]
Follow up q to response 9 'Other' What are your other plans for after college? [open-text format]
Section break The impact of college on career aspirations
Q: What are your career aspirations? [open-text format]
Q: Have your career hopes changed since you started at college? In what ways and why? [open-text format]
Q: How has your college course helped with your career aspirations? [open-text format]
Final section: thank you for participation and contact details for any questions.

Appendix C A-Level Employers' questionnaire

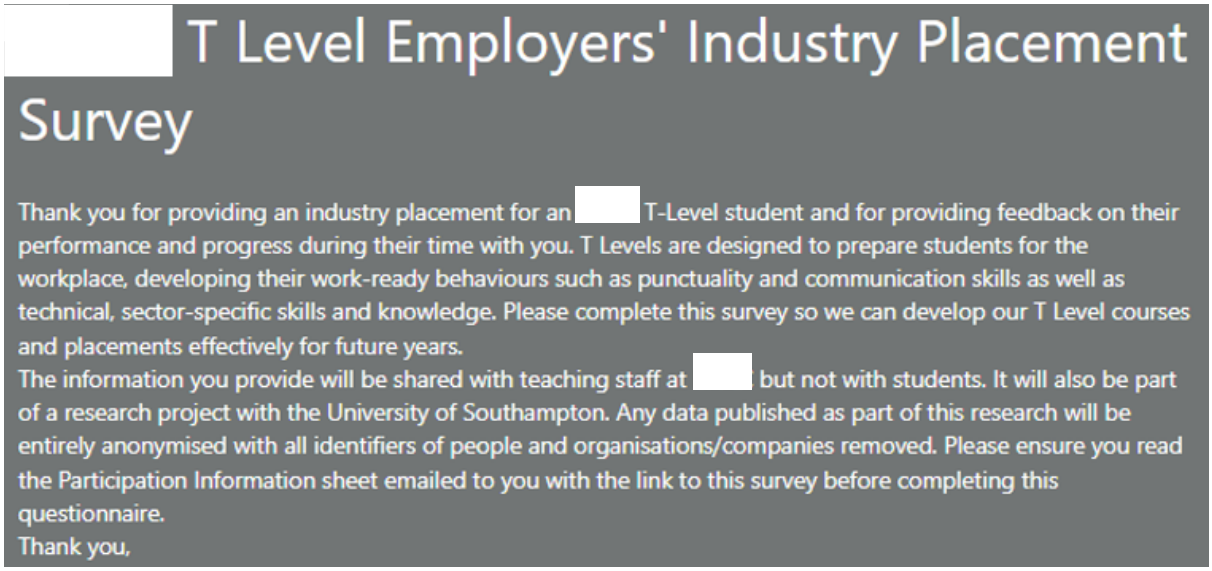


[redacted] A Level Employers' WEX week Survey

Thank you for providing a week of work experience to one of [redacted] A Level students.
At [redacted] prepare our students to achieve good A Level grades and to develop the skillset and attitude to succeed in future careers. Experience of the workplace and of future professional pathways is invaluable in this - thank you for helping.
Please could you complete this short survey so we can evaluate how successfully students have developed work-ready behaviours such as punctuality and communication skills as well as technical skills and knowledge pertinent to your profession or industry sector. This will help us to improve for future years.
The information you provide will be shared with teaching staff at [redacted] but not with students. It will also be part of a research project with the University of Southampton. Any data published as part of this research will be entirely anonymised with all identifiers of people and organisations/companies removed. Please ensure you read the Participation Information sheet emailed to you with the link to this survey before completing this questionnaire.
Thank you,

Introductory section: Identifier, participation information and consent questions.
Section break: Workplace readiness questions.
Q: Was this student punctual? [binary]
Q: Please rate their attendance [Likert scale]
Q: Please rate this student's attitude and approach to work with you [Likert scale]
Q: Please rate this student's confidence and ability work independently at the start of the week [Likert scale]
Q: Did their confidence and ability work independently improve by the end of the week [multiple choice]
Q: How good was this student at managing stress and showing determination and resilience? [Likert scale]
Q: How effectively did this student communicate with you and with other team members? [Likert scale]
Q: Was this student able to collaborate with others in the workplace? [Likert scale]
Q: Please evaluate this student's leadership qualities. Were they able to take the lead at times? [multiple choice]
Q: How would you describe this student's knowledge of your profession/sector/workplace? [Likert scale]
Q: Would you be able to offer work experience to an A Level student again next June? [multiple choice – 3 options]

Appendix D T-Level Employers' Questionnaire



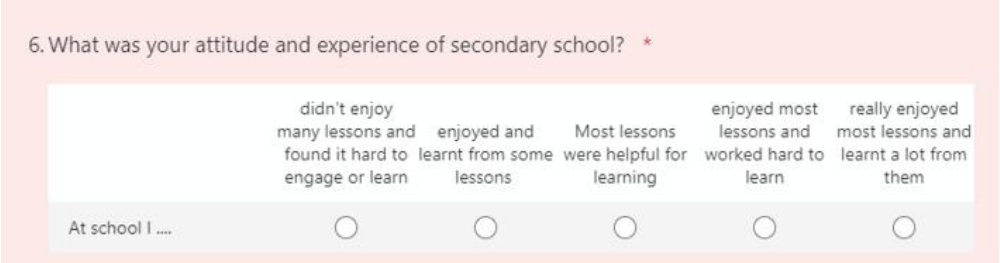
Introductory section: Identifier, participation information and consent questions.
Section break: Workplace readiness
Q: Was this student punctual? [binary]
Q: Please rate their attendance [Likert scale]
Q: Please rate this student's attitude and approach to work with you [Likert scale]
Q: Please rate this student's confidence and ability work independently at the start of the week [Likert scale]
Q: Did their confidence and ability work independently improve by the end of the week [multiple choice]
Follow up q: Are you able to add anything to explain the progress or lack of made by this student? [open text format]
Q: How good was this student at managing stress and showing determination and resilience? [Likert scale]
Follow up q: Did their ability to manage stress and/or show resilience improve during their work placement? [open text format]
Section break: Team work
Q: How effectively did this student communicate with you and with other team members? [Likert scale]
Q: Was this student able to collaborate with others in the workplace? [Likert scale]

<table>
<tr><td colspan="4">Q: Please evaluate this student's leadership qualities. Were they able to take the lead at times during their placement? [multiple choice]</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">Follow up q: Can you add more information about this student's ability to work effectively within teams? [open text format]</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">Section break: Technical Skills
T-Levels are designed to develop students' industry sector specific technical skills</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">Q: In your opinion, does the T-Level course developed and taught at [redacted] cover the correct technical knowledge and skills learning for your industry sector?
[multiple choice – 3 options]</td></tr>
<tr><td>A1: Yes, the range and depth of both knowledge and skillset is effectively covered by the T Level course
No follow up question</td><td colspan="2">A2: Most of the necessary sector knowledge and skills are covered by the T Level course
No follow up question</td><td>A3: Some gaps in knowledge and skills
Follow up question: Please detail these gaps in either knowledge or skills
[open text format]</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">Q: How would you describe this student's technical skillset?
a. Technical skills
b. Technical knowledge
c. Understanding of sector
[Likert scale]</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">Q: In your opinion, were these gaps in this student's knowledge or skills present because they were not covered by the course, or because the student hasn't learnt effectively?
[multiple choice]</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">Section break: Industry Placement</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">Q: Please comment on the length and timing of the T Level industry placement – would you make any changes? [open text format]</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">Q: Has this placement benefitted your organisation / your team? [multiple choice – 4 options]</td></tr>
<tr><td>A1: Yes, a useful addition</td><td>A2: To some extent</td><td>A3: Resource of supporting and supervising outweighed benefit, but worth doing to 'grow' the next generation of workforce</td><td>A4 Resource of supporting and supervising outweighed benefit so we can't offer again</td></tr>
<tr><td>No follow up question</td><td>What changes can we make to ensure you gain more benefit next time?</td><td colspan="2">We are sorry to hear this. What differences are needed to make the placement more beneficial to you/ your organisation?
[open text format]</td></tr>
</table>

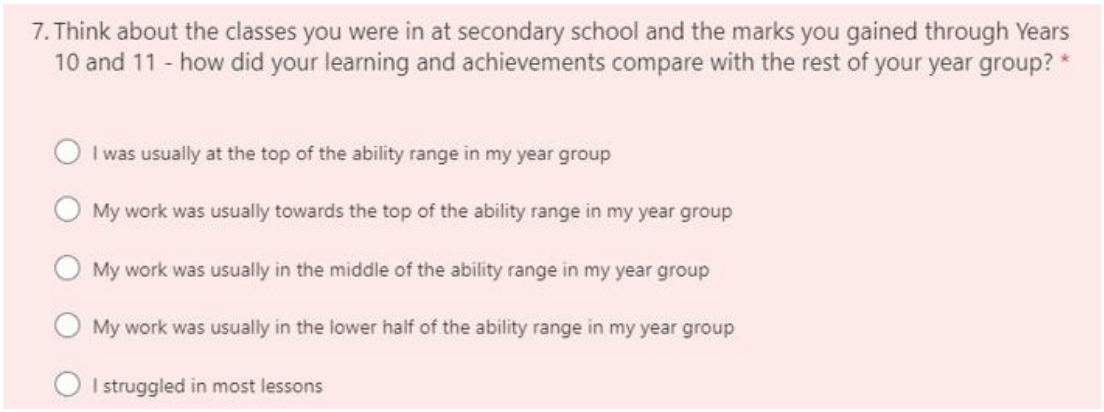
Q: Please evaluate this student's leadership qualities. Were they able to take the lead at times during their placement? [multiple choice]		
Follow up q: Can you add more information about this student's ability to work effectively within teams? [open-text format]		
Section break: Technical Skills T-Levels are designed to develop students' industry sector specific technical skills		
Q: In your opinion, does the T-Level course developed and taught at xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx cover the correct technical knowledge and skills learning for your industry sector? [multiple choice – 3 options]		
A1: Yes, the range and depth of both knowledge and skillset is effectively covered by the T-Level course No follow up question	A2: Most of the necessary sector knowledge and skills are covered by the T-Level course No follow up question	A3: Some gaps in knowledge and skills Follow up question: Please detail these gaps in either knowledge or skills [open-text format]
Q: How would you describe this student's technical skillset? a. Technical skills b. Technical knowledge c. Understanding of sector [Likert-scale]		
Q: In your opinion, were these gaps in this student's knowledge or skills present because they were not covered by the course, or because the student hasn't learnt effectively? [multiple choice]		
Section break: Industry Placement		
Q: Please comment on the length and timing of the T-Level industry placement – would you make any changes? [open-text format]		
Q: Has this placement benefitted your organisation / your team? [multiple choice – 4 options]		

<table>
<tr><td>A1: Yes, a useful addition ⬇</td><td>A2: To some extent ⬇</td><td>A3: Resource of supporting and supervising outweighed benefit, but worth doing to ‘grow’ the next generation of workforce ⬇</td><td>A4 Resource of supporting and supervising outweighed benefit so we can’t offer again ⬇</td></tr>
<tr><td>No follow up question</td><td>What changes can we make to ensure you gain more benefit next time?
[open-text format]</td><td colspan="2">We are sorry to hear this. What differences are needed to make the placement more beneficial to you/ your organisation?
[open-text format]</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">Q: Do you have any other feedback for us – we’d be very grateful for any information or suggestions you could give us. [open-text format]</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">Final section: thank you for participation and contact details for any questions.</td></tr>
</table>

Appendix E Interview questions for college leaders

Stem questions for semi-structured interviews with college leaders
• What was your motivation for introducing T-Levels to the college?
• Please describe the delivery and assessment format of the T-Level qualification. And of A-Levels in their current format but pre-Covid
• Please list the benefits of T-Level qualification compared to other vocational qualifications, as defined/promoted by the DfE.
• To what extent do you as college leader support/agree with the introduction of T-Levels as replacement for FT BTECs/CTECs – what is the rationale?
• Why should some students choose to study A-Levels? and why should some choose T-Levels
• Do you anticipate, or do you know whether the GCSE profile of AL students at XXXXX differs from that of TL students at XX?
• What was your motivation for making your College the leading provider of TL in the region?
• I have asked students to reflect on their attitude and approach to school:  6. What was your attitude and experience of secondary school? * didn't enjoy many lessons and found it hard to engage or learn / enjoyed and learnt from some lessons / Most lessons were helpful for learning / enjoyed most lessons and worked hard to learn / really enjoyed most lessons and learnt a lot from them At school I .... a. Do you anticipate difference between the responses of AL students and TL students, on balance? b. Is either qualification better suited for students at either end of the continuum, as you understand it?
• Is employability the main purpose of 16-19 education?

- I've asked students to gauge their academic profile whilst at school:



a. Do you anticipate a different profile of responses from the two samples of students?
b. Do you consider either qualification is a better option for students who self-assess themselves at either end of this spectrum?

- The survey seeks to ascertain students' 'horizons for action' – what they believe is possible for them in terms of career/employment. Some academics consider aspirations are set by family and school context and this shapes choice of AL or TLs. Do you consider these two qualifications enable different horizons for action?

- To what extent do A-Levels prepare students for employment?

- Arguably the DfE is seeking to gain parity of esteem and status for academic and vocational education by moving the goalposts – by replacing the goal of access to university with another goal – access to HTQs and IoT, thus avoiding comparison between TL and AL.
  a. What are your views on HTQs and IoTs?
  b. Is this a coherent ed policy/strategy in your view?

- Is it right to create a post-16 education qual that forces school children into choosing a pathway HE or employment at 15/16?

- How do you feel about Jo Saxton, recently appointed Chief Regulator of Ofqual, stating that the size of the T-Level qualification should be reduced to enable students to take an A-Level alongside?

- Are you comfortable with the EFSA using funding mechanisms to control curriculum design and delivery, for example through de-funding BTECs?

Appendix F Interview questions for students

Student Interview Questions		
Question	**Prompts**	**Follow up questions**
1. How would you describe yourself as a student?	Prompts: conscientious or laid back? Middle of the class, or top, or?	
2. What are you hoping to do in the future?	Prompts: office, outdoors, creative, health, business world, retail, education, sports, media, digital police, armed forces etc.	Follow up q: and if you were really successful, what position/role would you hold?
3. Can you remember what you wanted to do or be when you were little?		Follow up q: and at secondary school? Follow up q: And in Year 11 when you applied to college?
4. In what ways have your ideas about your future changed during college?	Prompts: become more aspirational? Become more focused?	Follow up q: Have you learnt about new jobs/careers that you weren't aware of before?
5. What were your reasons for choosing to study AL/TLs?	Prompts: subjects on offer - Assessment types - Peers – where did your friends go? - Choice of campus - Parent influence - School influence	Follow up q: How did your experience at school influence your choice of college course? Follow up q: Was your choice of course at college influenced by your GCSEs?
6. What do ALs/TLs give you in terms of future opportunities, CV, salary, job satisfaction?	Prompts: How will you feel when you achieve your ALs/TL?	Follow up q: Is there a difference in your opinion between having 3 ALs or a T Level or and Ext Dip/voc qual? Follow up q: Do you have any idea how employers view these different quals? And universities? Follow up q: How do you think ALs and TLs are perceived by others – in college, friends, family, government?
7. What are your family's/carers' expectations for you?	Prompts: uni or not, work or not, career and status	Follow up q: what education do parent figures have? Follow up q: What sort of work do they do? Follow up q: How does their experience affect what they want for you? Follow up q: To what extent and in what ways did they guide or steer you when making your course choices?

		Follow up q: Do you have older siblings or cousins? What have they done since

		they left school – in what ways do their choices/ experiences affect you?
8. What has it been like studying on this course?	Prompts: - workload - Classroom time, activities, teachers, teaching/learning - Type of work set, study, assignments - Level of challenge, content - How is it assessed? - College environment, feel - Social life, peer group(s)	Follow up q: What sort of grades are you expecting? And hoping for? Follow up q: How was the course presented/promoted? Follow up q: How has the actual experience compared to what you were promised/thought it would be like? Follow up q: In what ways has it been different to how you expected it to be?
9. How much understanding of the workplace/ industry sectors have you gained?		
10. Have you applied to university?		Follow up q: If yes, which ones and why, which courses and why Follow up q: if not, what other plans do you have, why not uni?
Is there anything else we haven't discussed, or you would like to add?		

Appendix G example student interview transcript

Izzy

Tue, Nov 15, 2022 11:45AM • 15:04

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

levels, philosophy, btech, university, philosophers, chose, therapy, criminology, learning, classics, cruises, greek mythology, beauty, work, mum, exams, entry requirements, english, grades, gcse maths

SPEAKERS

Nicola Kingsley, Izzy

Nicola Kingsley 00:05

So if I can begin, how would you describe yourself as a student?

Izzy 00:36

I mean, I'm really hard working. It just doesn't. I don't know. Like, I've done so much philosophy in the last few months. I've done over 30 hours, and I'm still on a D and it's so annoying.

Nicola Kingsley 00:50

Don't worry, it'll come.

Izzy 00:51

Yeah,

Nicola Kingsley 00:51

it will come

Izzy 00:53

but I say I'm hard working, I can get distracted. But I do work hard.

Nicola Kingsley 00:59

Yeah, absolutely. So when you were at school, was it clear what you were going to do when you finish school at the end of the year 11?

Izzy 01:10

No. Absolutely not.

Nicola Kingsley 01:13

What happened?

Izzy 01:14

I, To be fair, I didn't put much thought into it. I just applied for philosophy and thought this will probably be fun.

Nicola Kingsley 01:21

Was it always gonna be A-Levels or was there, did you look at extended diplomas or T-Levels?

Izzy 01:27

I was gonna go to [another college in the area] to do a course on beauty therapy. Because at that time, I wanted to go on a cruise and like do massaging on cruises and stuff.

Nicola Kingsley 01:38

And that sounds nice.

Izzy 01:39

Yeah.

Nicola Kingsley 01:39

And but you didn't do that.

Izzy 01:41

No.

Nicola Kingsley 01:41

How come?

Izzy 01:42

Because I don't know. It's kind of a stereotype for people who don't really pass their GCSEs to go on to do like beauty therapy or makeup. And I didn't really want to do that

Nicola Kingsley 01:54

You didn't want to be part of that stereotype.

Izzy 01:56

No

Nicola Kingsley 01:58

So, is that the subject, the beauty and, is that the subject which you say is the stereotype that fits people who haven't passed their GCSEs?

Izzy 02:08

Yes. like, like beauty therapy, makeup, just stuff like that? It kind of, girls who don't really pass the GCSEs are passed on to that. 'Oh, they're probably going to do like I don't know, like hairdressing and stuff like that. And I didn't want to do that.

Nicola Kingsley 02:28

So what did you want for yourself?

Izzy 02:30

I wanted to do something that isn't so, I won't say not so normal because it is normal. But not so, female dominated, dominated. y'know?

Nicola Kingsley 02:43

Yeah, absolutely.

Izzy 02:44

So which is why I want to go into philosophy. Yes, there's so many male philosophers out there and it's so annoying because they're all horrible people. I want to go on to do philosophy to then try like, because there's so many women, philosophers and you don't we probably have only learnt like three in A-Levels. And that's not good.

Nicola Kingsley 03:08

No. So that's interesting. So you've got quite into that Polit gender politics agenda.

Izzy 03:14

Yeah.

Nicola Kingsley 03:15

Where did that come from?

Izzy 03:18

Just, I don't know

Nicola Kingsley 03:20

home or lessons or ....?

Izzy 03:23

I guess it just kind of came up. I guess. I didn't really know where it came from.

Nicola Kingsley 03:31

Um, good for you. So if there had been, supposing your passion had been in business for the sake of argument, just as an illustration, would you have gone and taken business A-Level and a couple of other A-Levels or would you have thought about going and taking that extended diploma in in Business at [the other vocational campus of the college]?

Izzy 03:51

I probably wouldn't have gone to [the other vocational campus of the college]

Nicola Kingsley 03:53

okay. Why is that?

Izzy 03:55

I don't know what it is. It just gives me the heebie jeebies.

Nicola Kingsley 03:59

The campus, the place?

Izzy 04:00

Yeah, just the place around it. Like, I live quite near there and whenever I drive past it like I have to go there tonight for GCSE maths and I don't like it. Like the park next to it has always creeped me out. Cos so much stuff happen there and I just I don't wanna have to be near that every day.

Nicola Kingsley 04:17

No. So if the business extended diploma courses, if all the vocational courses were based here,

Izzy 04:23

yeah, probably I would try it out. I mean, I would rather have the A-Level but I'm not gonna say BTECs are bad because they're not. It's just what people could do what they can't do. yeah

Nicola Kingsley 04:26

Okay, so you don't have a problem or you're not, what what do you think about the BTech qualification in itself? Is it a good thing or?
[Izzy shook her head]
Oh okay, so if you can do A-Levels, you do and if you can't do, and if you can't do A-Levels you do BTech?

Izzy 04:51

Yeah.

Nicola Kingsley 04:53

What about T-Levels? Where do they stand in that?

Izzy 04:55

Um, I guess like, T-Levels would be in the middle of that. So like, BTEC would be last. All the way last and then T-Levels would be here.

Nicola Kingsley 05:06

So the entry requirements to get onto a BTech are lower are they?

Izzy 05:12

I mean, I don't know, but just me personally, I wouldn't want to do a BTech.

Nicola Kingsley 05:17

Yeah. So that would suggest that you feel it doesn't have as much prestige or status as

Izzy 05:24

I mean. Not really, I just I, there's something about doing exams at the end of the term which I enjoy. Because like, if you're doing no exams at the end, I feel like I wouldn't try as hard because, like, if you're just doing exams throughout the year, you would know what you got after that test. And that could work towards your grade. But if you get something on a test in A-Levels, you can always work on that. Because it's not the actual thing. So

Nicola Kingsley 05:59

yes, so it suits your style of learning better. Do you think that the universities have a preference? Do you think that they see A-Levels as better than BTECs?

Izzy 06:12

Absolutely.

Nicola Kingsley 06:13

Okay. That's interesting.

Izzy 06:15

Yeah, I think because I've looked at so many universities and when you click on the, like, entry requirements, it will always say A-Levels first. And I don't really see a place for BTECs. I'm not saying that BTECs can't go on to university. I'm just saying like from what I've seen, there isn't much like space for it unless it's like the university is taking UCAS points. So

Nicola Kingsley 06:45

yeah. And then which universities have entry requirements as the UCAS points, are they the Russell Group or?

Izzy 06:55

Winchester, Chichester. I think Anglia Ruskin. I know that's on my list,

Nicola Kingsley 07:05

and where did they sit in the ranking of universities?

Izzy 07:08

I actually I think they're like at the bottom, but

Nicola Kingsley 07:14

where might you go? where are you hoping to go?

Izzy 07:16

Um, well, yesterday I had a look at Liverpool and I really want to go to Liverpool but I need to do the third year of criminology, but the second year of criminology, but I need to convince them to let me do that. But I actually needed to talk to you about

Nicola Kingsley 07:34

Yeah, we can have that conversation. Absolutely. Yeah, no, Liverpool's a great university. It's good fun

Izzy 07:40

Yeah. And like some of my family live there so I can go see them when I want.

Nicola Kingsley 07:45

Okay, so yeah, alright. We'll talk about that. So your mum and dad. Did they? Did they? What do they do?

Izzy 08:01

I have no idea what my dad does. It's

Nicola Kingsley 08:04

Is he outdoors or is he an office or, do you see him much?

Izzy 08:11

Not really

Nicola Kingsley 08:12

Sorry.

Izzy 08:13

That's okay. My mum, she's a carer for older people.

Nicola Kingsley 08:19

So does she go to university to

Izzy 08:21

No. she just she like works at a job and then she does like online learning to kinda

Nicola Kingsley 08:29

to get the qualifications whilst being paid. That's quite hard, isn't it?

Izzy 08:32

Yeah.

Nicola Kingsley 08:34

And did they have any expectations? You know, when you were growing up? Can you remember what you wanted to be when you were little?

Izzy 08:44

I honestly, I want it to be like the people the person who like drove the JCB Yes.

Nicola Kingsley 08:49

Oh, yeah,

Izzy 08:50

that picked up the stuff. I just thought it looked really cool. That's not really my thing now but to be fair, they didn't really have much expectations for me, it was more of my sister. Okay, cos I wasn't really getting good grades. So they were just kind of like, she might go to college. She might not.

Nicola Kingsley 09:11

And is your sister older, or younger?

Izzy 09:13

Older.

Nicola Kingsley 09:14

And when what does she do in the end? How much older is she?

Izzy 09:17

She's four years. She was in college doing A-Levels. So it was when [name of campus delivering mainly A-Levels] were like together and she was doing law, psychology, criminology. But then she got pregnant, had to drop out.

Nicola Kingsley 09:34

Okay. So she's busy being a mum.

Izzy 09:37

Yeah.

Nicola Kingsley 09:38

Do you think she'll, was her intention before she became pregnant to go into university was that

Izzy 09:42

Yeah. She was going to go on to university to do psychology.

Nicola Kingsley 09:47

Quite clear about that. Well, you never know she might, she might come back to it

Izzy 09:51

Yeah.

Nicola Kingsley 09:54

Okay, so you're quite clear then that you want to do philosophy that's nice.

Izzy 09:58

Yeah.

Nicola Kingsley 10:00

And then what kind of a job might that turn into?

Izzy 10:04

I would love to be a Philosopher lecturer, whether it's university or college. I wouldn't want to be a secondary school teacher. I wouldn't be able to stand it. But just like teaching people, and I don't um. Like making sure that like, being able to know like when if I have a class of students and then they come out of the A-Levels with high grades, especially when they weren't doing so well at the start of the year. I feel like that would feel like a massive accomplishment. Not from not just for me, but from them as well.

Nicola Kingsley 10:41

Yeah. And to have helped them to get Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I agree with that one. Um so has your, your decision.... How, how did you get to choose the A-Levels? So you were at school you were thinking that maybe you'd do the beauty therapy and then you changed your mind and decided to do A-Levels. How did you pick philosophy? What was it philosophy philosophy and

Izzy 11:07

classics and then criminology. But I did choose English first but then I dropped English

Nicola Kingsley 11:11

Which type of English.

Izzy 11:13

Both. It was English language and literature

Nicola Kingsley 11:15

The combined

Izzy 11:16

Yeah.

Nicola Kingsley 11:18

And can you remember how you ended up choosing those three

Izzy 11:21

Honestly I'm a very impulsive person. Like, I don't, I do things and I don't think it through. So like, I was looking at philosophy and I was like, Yeah that sounds fun. And I just like put it in a basket or whatever it was called. And I chose Classics because I do really like Greek mythology and learning about Ancient Greeks. So that was just kind of clear. Why I wanted to do that. And then

English. I, To be fair, I don't even know why I chose English because I only got a five. So I think it was just like a, because I didn't know how I wanted to do, like, I definitely didn't want to do anything maths based I hate maths so much. Um I didn't want to do any, like, law or business because it's boring. So I chose English.

Nicola Kingsley 12:16

I mean, that's a logical thing to have chosen. But not history?

Izzy 12:21

not history no.

Nicola Kingsley 12:24

With the classics. So how did you develop that love of Greek mythology?

Izzy 12:31

Um , phhh

Nicola Kingsley 12:32

Did somebody give you Percy Jackson books to read or

Izzy 12:36

No, I got them after I started to like it then they were really bad. Like

Nicola Kingsley 12:41

do you not like them? My children love Percy Jackson.

Izzy 12:43

The thing is where I know the actual stories so well. I just kind of, I read it and I'm like, that's not true. And it annoys me. But yeah, no, I it was in year seven, because I don't know. I started to get into like space and then I got into Greek myth, I don't know how it kind of linked but it just did.

Nicola Kingsley 13:12

Good for you. Okay, and so sort of last type questions um. What affects, you you, like I was saying you had this beauty therapy idea and then you chose these A-Levels. How has your idea of what's available for you in the world out there and your future career has that changed at all during your time here at [this] College.

Izzy 13:36

Yeah. Yeah, it's, the thing is philosophy such like a, you can't really do much with it. But you can with classics. If I went on to do classics I can work in a museum, I can work as a teacher I can work as, like, um just something else. And then with criminology I could go into criminal law

Nicola Kingsley 14:02

or policing

Izzy 14:04

Yeah. So like there's a lot more choices out there for me, but with beauty therapy is literally just be massaging people on cruises or working in a spa.

Nicola Kingsley 14:14

Yeah. Yeah. You can do quite a lot with philosophy, actually.

Izzy 14:18

Really

Nicola Kingsley 14:18

Well yes. Because of the skills that it gives you in project management and time management and managing your studies. But also that critical and analytical thinking skills that it gives you to be able to read something and make sense of it. and so on, is transferable to virtually any profession out there. Philosophers become lawyers, philosophers become policy makers for the government, as well as teachers and all that kind of stuff. Lots of jobs that you can do, but you'll learn more about that when you're at uni doing philosophy. Okay, I think that's brilliant. Thank you very much.

Izzy 14:34

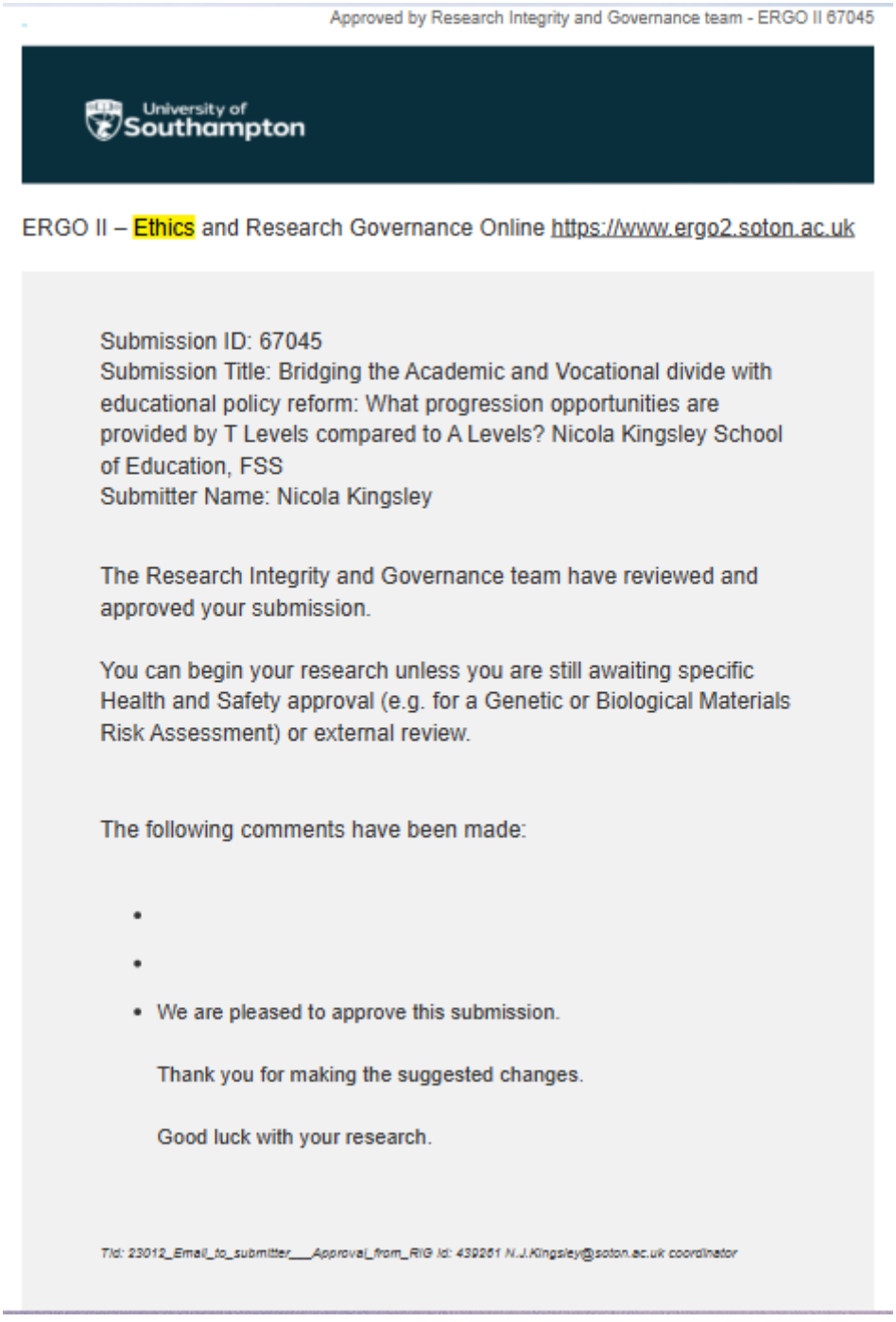
Yeah, Thank you.

Appendix H Thematic Analysis Themes and Codes

Themes, sub-themes and codes

Theme	1. TLs a route to employment	2. status and reputation	3. Progression opportunities
Sub-themes	a) employment b) degree apprenticeships c) university	a) UCAS tariff and points b) university recognition c) university entry requirements d) College course entry requirements e) GCSE prior attainment f) longevity	a) home expectations b) family education and careers c) influence of school and home on college choices d) learner identities e) career aspirations f) impact of college courses
Codes	college course seen as: ...route to employment ...degree apprenticeship ...university	A-Levels T-Levels BTECs / vocational qualifications university application UCAS tariff UCAS points university recognition university acceptance/entry requirements college course entry requirements GCSE prior attainment longevity tradition salary "academic" / theory	home/parental expectations parents' education siblings' education familial jobs influence of parents/home on choice of college course influence of school on choice of college course GCSE attainment school experience effect of GCSE profile on choice of college course effect of school experience on choice of college course self-perceived learner identity university course/subject choice impact of college course on career goals impact of college course on university course choice childhood imaginings of adult job/roles current career goals longer-term career aspirations height of career hopes/aspirations

Appendix I Ethics Committee confirmation of approval



Approved by Research Integrity and Governance team - ERGO II 67045

University of Southampton

ERGO II – Ethics and Research Governance Online https://www.ergo2.soton.ac.uk

Submission ID: 67045
Submission Title: Bridging the Academic and Vocational divide with educational policy reform: What progression opportunities are provided by T Levels compared to A Levels? Nicola Kingsley School of Education, FSS
Submitter Name: Nicola Kingsley

The Research Integrity and Governance team have reviewed and approved your submission.

You can begin your research unless you are still awaiting specific Health and Safety approval (e.g. for a Genetic or Biological Materials Risk Assessment) or external review.

The following comments have been made:

-
-
- We are pleased to approve this submission.

  Thank you for making the suggested changes.

  Good luck with your research.

Tid: 23012_Email_to_submitter___Approval_from_RIG Id: 439261 N.J.Kingsley@soton.ac.uk coordinator

Appendix J Example of Occupational Standards – Performance Outcomes

Occupational Specialist Content

Occupational Specialism: Surveying and design for construction and the built environment

Performance Outcome 1: Measure the built environment

Knowledge Specific to Performance Outcome	Skills
Law • Permissions required to undertake survey work including geospatial, e.g. drone use. **Digital Technology** • How the Internet of things contributes to the measurement of the built environment, . • Geospatial equipment, their applications, suitability and use. • Digital engineering techniques and appropriate software. • Geospatial information conveyance and sourcing, including GIS, cartographic and other commercially available data. **Measurement** • Types of measurement and detection. • How to capture, process, manage, use and quality assure data, including geospatial. • Calculations required and how to undertake them.	• Explore requirements of the task using open questioning and listening. • Gather information from appropriate sources specific to the scope of works including Geographical Information Systems (GIS). • Determine the level of accuracy required. • Capture data using appropriate measurement methods. • Process data using appropriate techniques e.g. classification, presentation. • Extract and manage data using appropriate techniques e.g. restricting access, secure disposal. • Quality assure the surveying measurements. • Communicate health and safety risks associated with the task and environment using appropriate methods, e.g. briefing. • Assess health and safety risks associated with the task and environment. • Select and use tools and equipment with accuracy and efficiency, e.g. electronic measurement devices, automatic levels, lasers, scanners and global positioning systems. • Operate equipment and perform tasks safely. • Manage waste including the quantification, classification and disposal of waste

• The principles and limitations of measurement e.g. parallax. • Techniques used to gather data, including geospatial data e.g. Global Navigation Satellite Sytems (GNSS), photogrammetry. • The importance of coordinating systems, projects, transformations and datums. • Construction industry measurement standards, guidance and practice, including measurement rules. • Good survey practice, e.g. whole to the part, local vs national and error propagation.	

Performance Outcome 2: Analyse the built environment

Knowledge Specific to Performance Outcome	Skills
Project management • Project programmes, e.g. relevance and techniques for reporting. • Digital workflows, e.g. the relevance and use of digital engineering techniques, protocols, BIM Execution Plans (BEPs), Employer's Information Requirements (EIR) and Common Data Environments (CDE). **Sustainability** • How sustainability is embedded into solutions. • How and why sustainability seeks to balance economic, environmental and social objectives, e.g. whole life including decommissioning.	• Sequence and prioritise tasks. • Analyse information available to determine requirements of the task. • Interpret information and data, including from visual and other sources. • Convey data, e.g. measurement and cost data using appropriate techniques.

Performance Outcome 3: Design the built environment

Knowledge Specific to Performance Outcome	Skills
Design • How designs are prepared, including design briefs, work stages, schedules, specifications, recommendations and programmes. • The level of detail needed in designs for different situations and the importance of detail in communicating the design intent. • The implications of statutory obligations to designs e.g. utility diversion. • The use and importance of specifications, e.g. as applicable to design guides and legislation. • The relevance of measurement in the design process, e.g. area (net and gross) volumes, height and length • Technical drawing techniques • Inclusive design, including equality and diversity by impact assessment. **Health and safety** • The CDM Regulations 2015 and the duties of the designer. • The identification and design of hazards and risks and methods of assessment, e.g. Design Risk Assessments (CDM 2015). • Fire and Emergency Safety, e.g. the Hackitt Review. **Relationship management** • Negotiation, mediation and conflict management techniques and their suitability for different situations. • Consultation requirements, e.g. the expertise input of 3rd party knowledge.	• Identify information and data required to complete the task. • Quality assure information and data, including 3rd party expertise. • Conduct precedent research, including best practice, benchmarks and design guides. • Use suitable data i.e. quality assured in line with best practice. • Model design using digital software and other tools and techniques. • Present appropriate design information and data using different methods and formats. • Manage data in a collaborative environment, e.g. common data environment. • Communicate design and construction risks using appropriate methods, e.g. Design Risk Assessments (CDM 2015). • Manage relationships, e.g. the application of techniques for negotiation, mediation and conflict management. • Provide creative solutions to challenges arising from requirements. • Adapt design proposals in response to design constraints, and stakeholder feedback in terms of time, cost and material factors.

• Processes of collaborative design, e.g. coordination of team input and clash management. **Digital Technology** • Digital design tools, e.g. Computer Aided Design (CAD). • Digital specification tools, e.g. the National Building Specification (NBS), BS1192. • Digital data, e.g. spreadsheets and schedules. • Digital presentation, image handling and desk top publishing, e.g. brochures and reports	

Performance Outcome 4: Verify delivery of the built environment

Knowledge Specific to Performance Outcome	Skills
Sustainability • Legal obligations relating to pollution and waste. • Environmental performance measures that must be met and how they are measured. • Principles of heritage and conservation. **Valuations** • Industry valuation standards, guidance and practice and how these are used to verify delivery of the built environment. • Valuation benchmarking and how this is used to verify delivery of the built environment. **Measurements** • Types of measurement for the combined data, e.g. cross checking interfaces and valuations. • Techniques for value engineering, e.g. cost, quality and time.	• Verify suitability of information and data from appropriate sources specific to the scope of works. • Interpret information and data, including from visual and other sources. • Present information using oral, visual and written communication. • Use software with accuracy to verify specific items utilising appropriate tools, e.g. CAD, BIM and spreadsheets. • Complete costings analysis through the use of market rates and spreadsheet software, including best value and whole life costing. • Apply appropriate mathematical techniques in a construction context, e.g. areas, volumes, quantities, units and tolerances.

• Rules of measurement and contractual implications, e.g. RICS rules.	

Appendix K T-Levels available for delivery in September 2021

Courses with Occupational Specialisms delivered by the host college marked in red

Route	Pathway	Occupational Specialism
Construction	Design, surveying & planning	**Surveying and design for construction and the built environment**
		Civil engineering
		Building services design
		Hazardous materials analysis and surveying
Digital	Digital production, design & development	**Digital Production, Design and Development**
Digital	Digital Support Services	**Digital Infrastructure**
		Network cabling
		Unified Communications
		Digital Support
Education and Childcare	Education	**Early Years education and childcare**
		Assisting teaching
		Supporting and mentoring students in further and higher education
Health and Science	Health	Dental Nursing

		Supporting Healthcare, Option A: Supporting the Adult Nursing Team
		Supporting Healthcare, Option B: Supporting the Midwifery Team
		Supporting Healthcare, Option C: Supporting the Theatre Team
		Supporting Healthcare, Option D: Supporting the Mental Health Team
		Supporting Healthcare, Option E: Supporting the care of Children and Young People
		Supporting Healthcare, Option F: Supporting Therapy Teams
Health and Science	Healthcare Science	Technical: Optical Care Services
		Pharmacy Services
		Assisting with Healthcare Sciences
		Dental Technical Services
		Technical: Prosthetic and Orthotic services
Health and Science	Science	**Laboratory Sciences**
		Food Sciences
		Technical: Animal Sciences

Appendix L Research site website T-Level course

Information on the T-Level in Construction

AVAILABILITY & DETAILS

Design Surveying & Planning for Construction – T Level SF1-CONSTL/P01

VENUE
South Downs Campus

DATES
Academic Year 2024-25 (2 years)

Type of study
T Levels

Examination board
Generic award - no awarding body

APPLY NOW

HOW TO APPLY

CONTACT US

PRINT COURSE INFO

OVERVIEW

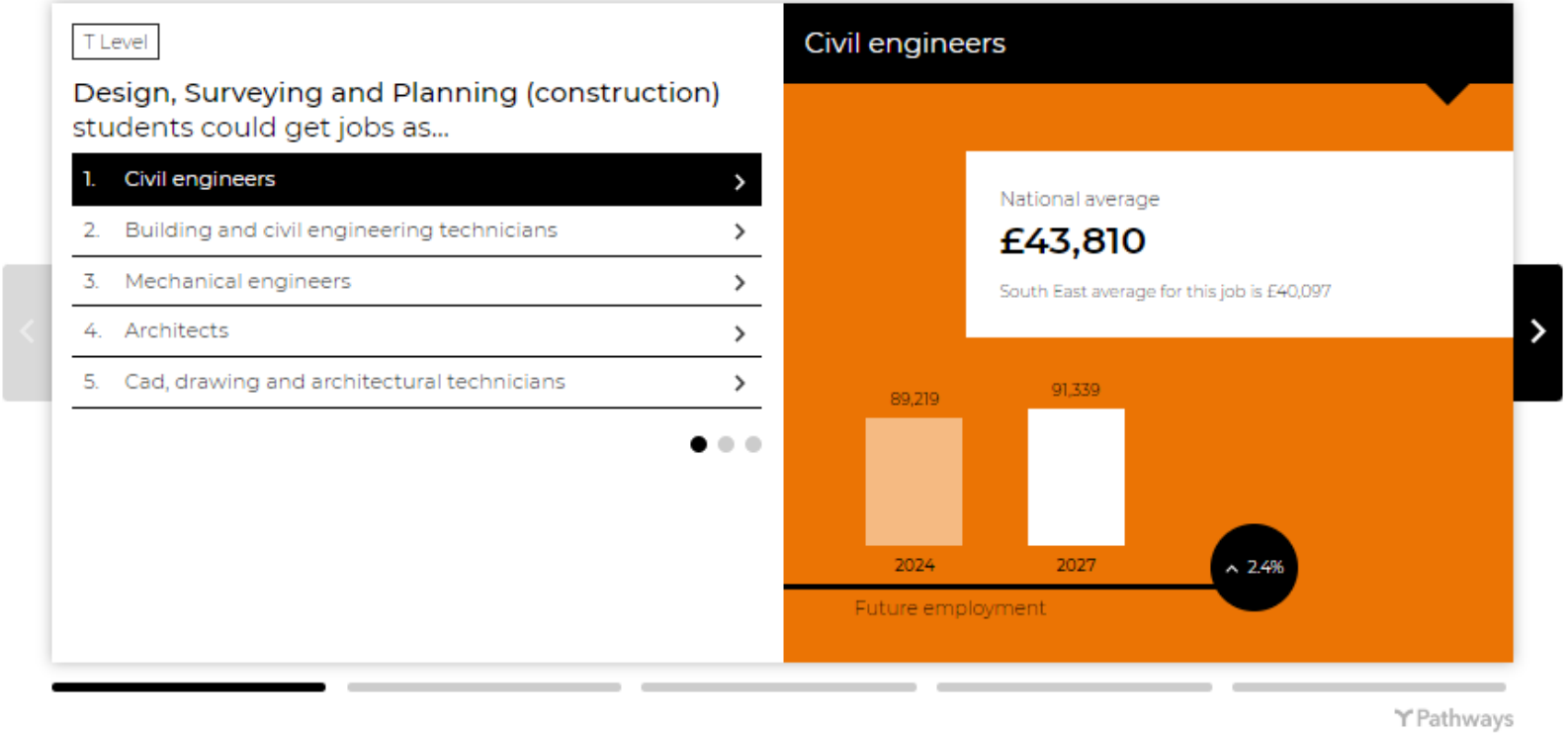
This two-year course has been developed in collaboration with employers and businesses to meet the needs of the industry and prepare you for the world of work. Employers involved in designing the T Level in Design, Surveying & Planning include the Morgan Sindall Group and Skanska UK.

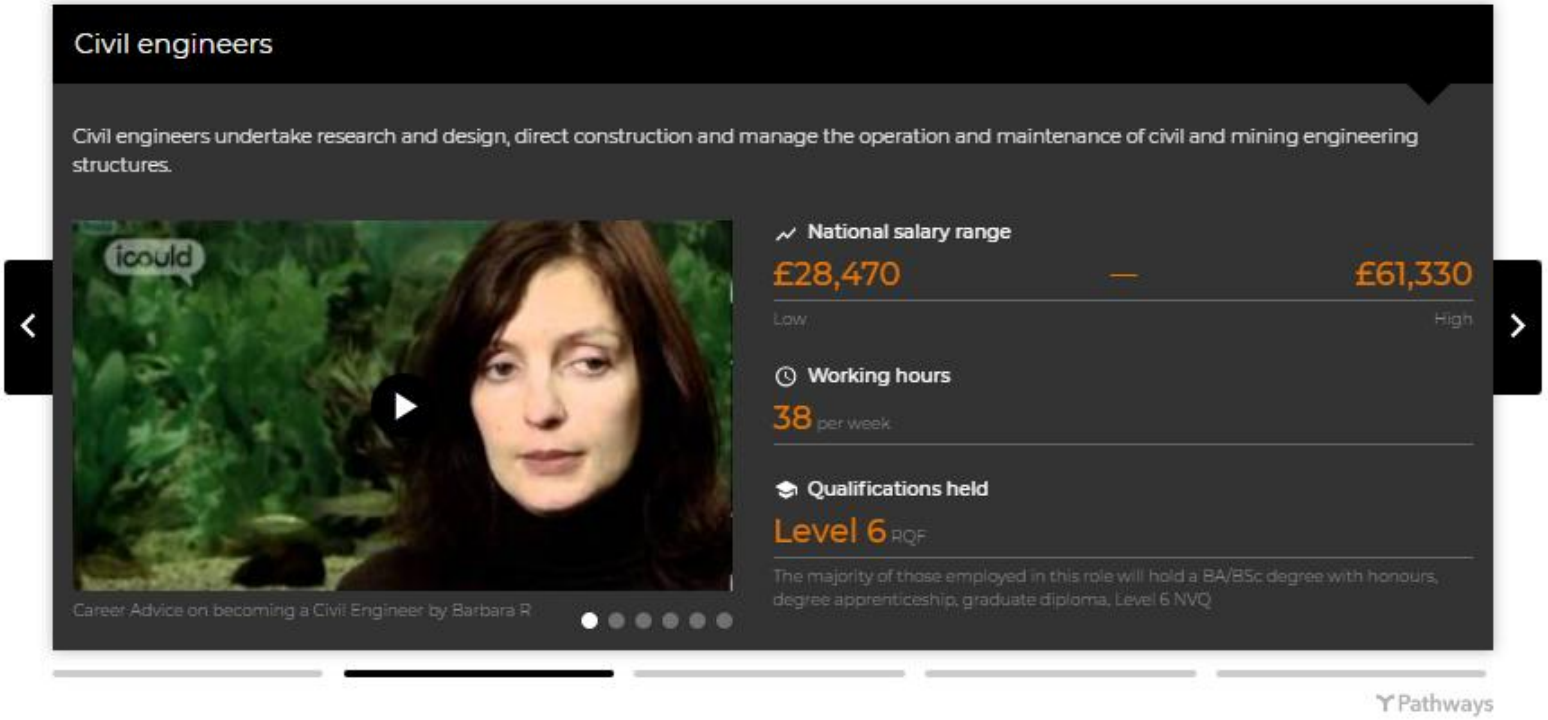
ENTRY REQUIREMENTS +

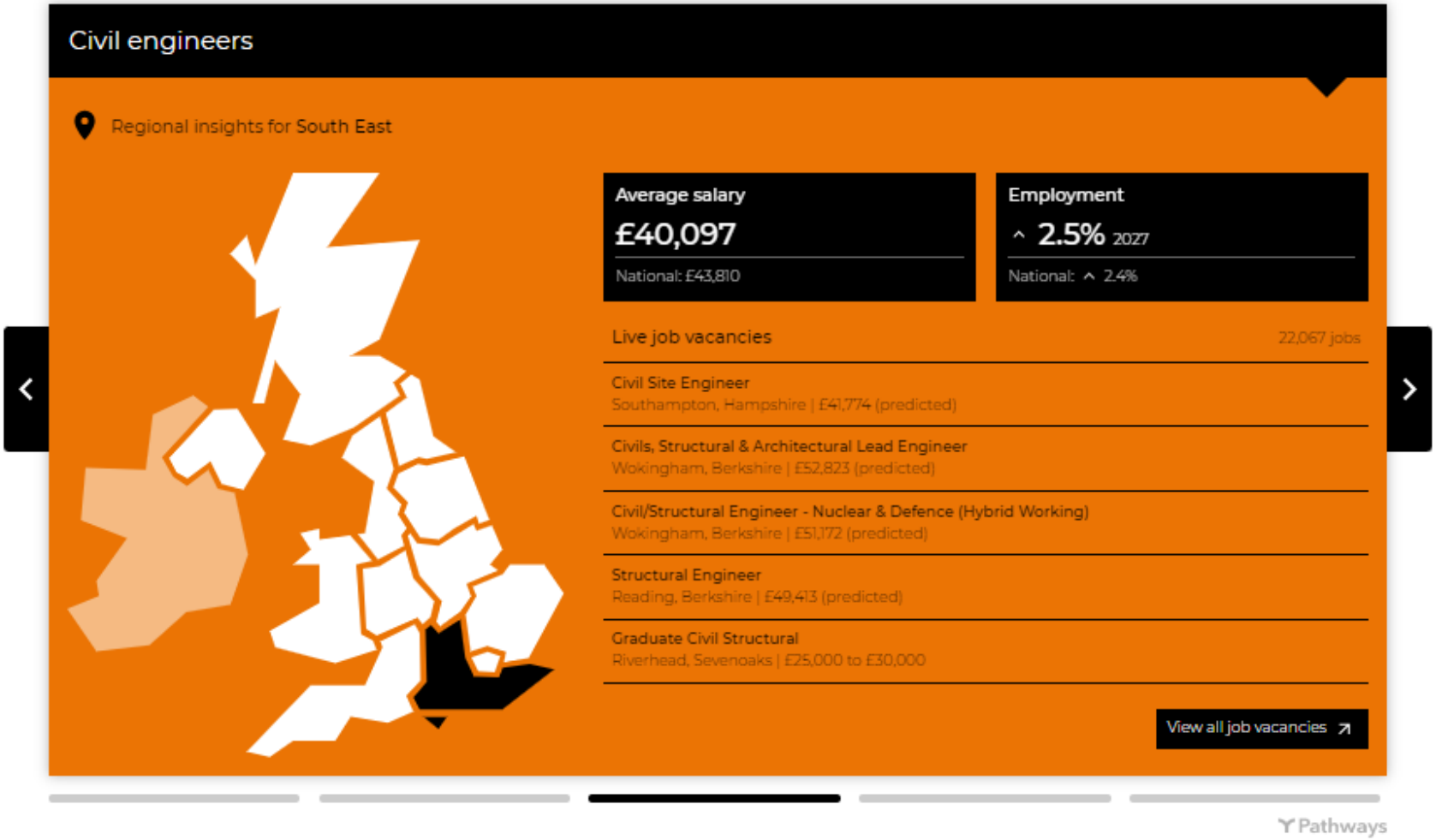
STRUCTURE +

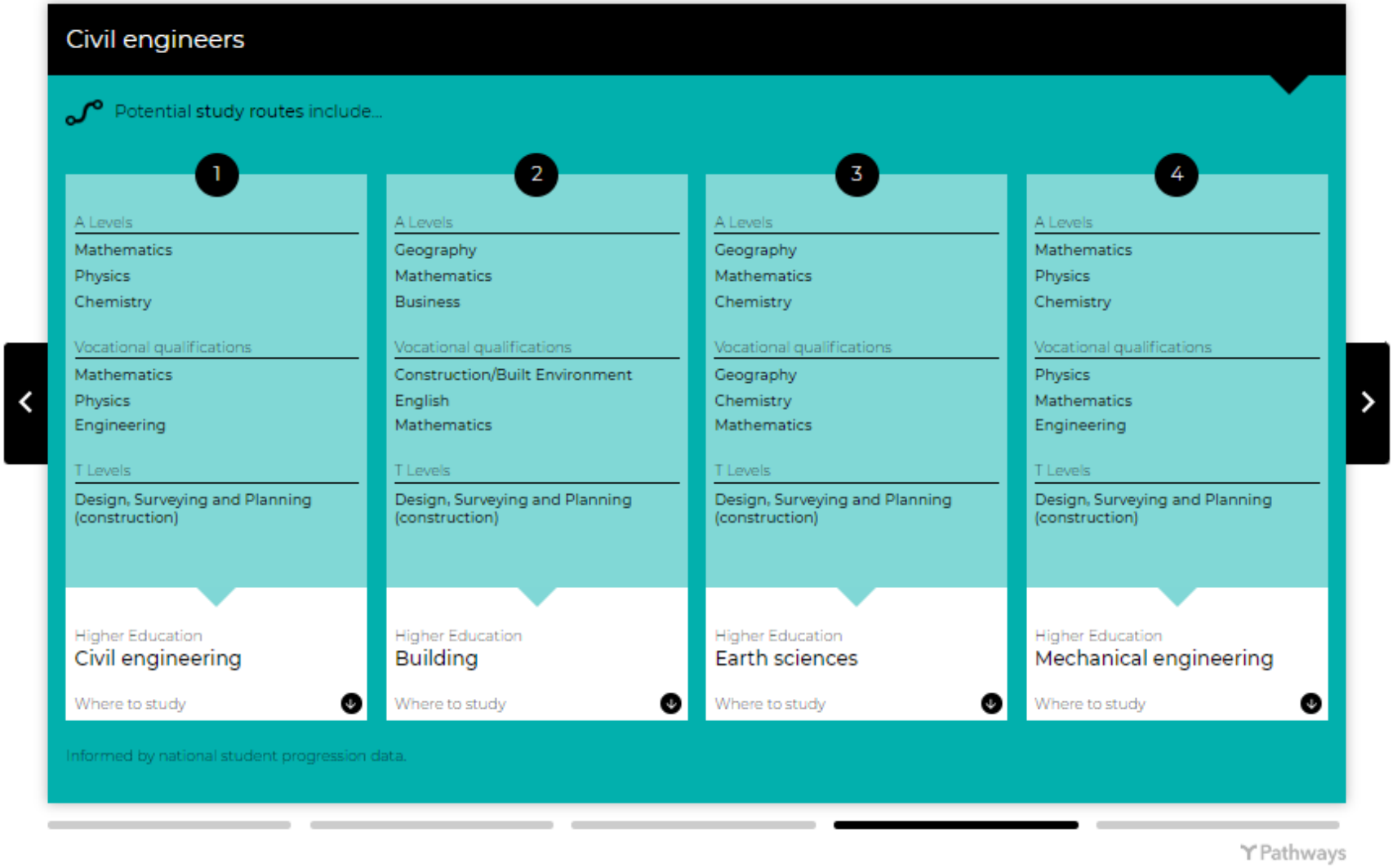
ASSESSMENT +

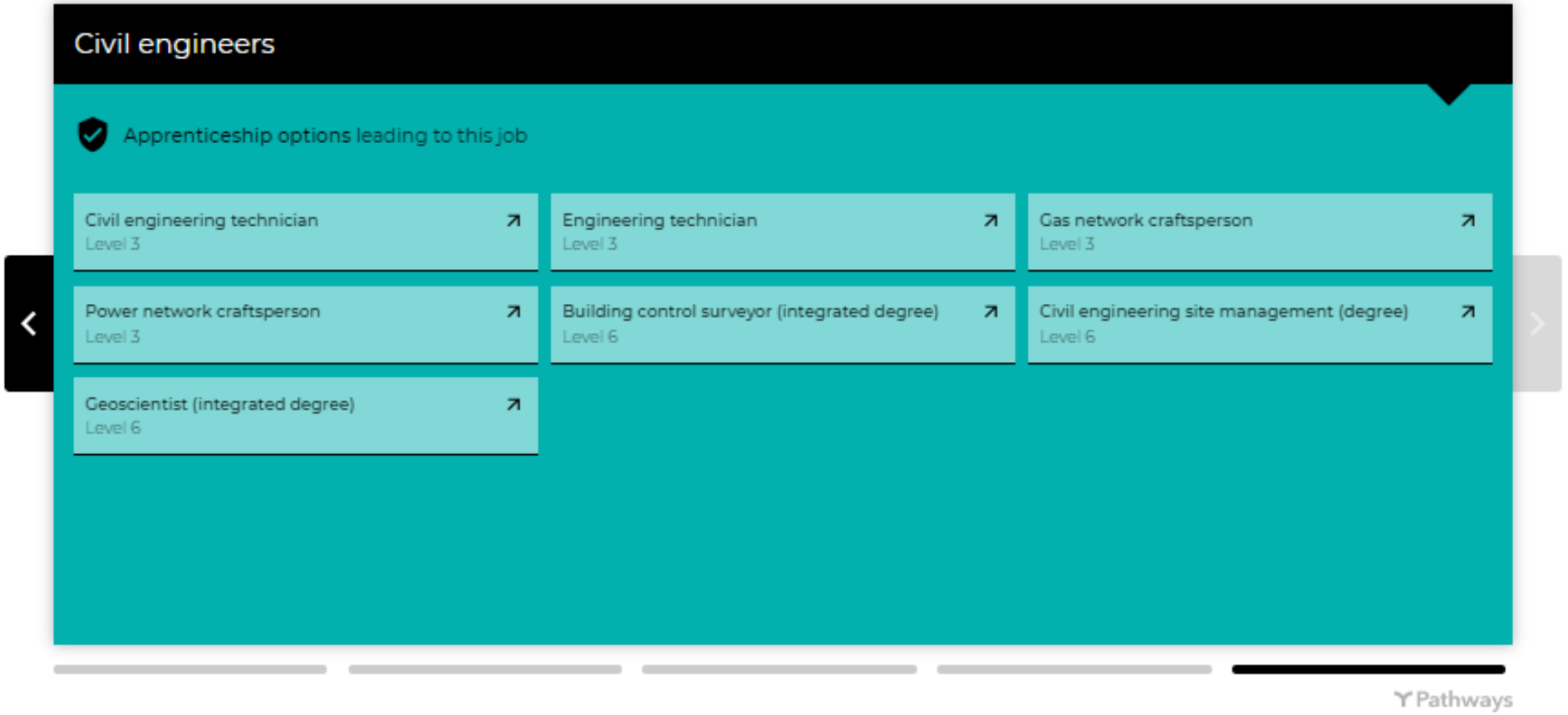
PROGRESSION +


T Level
Design, Surveying and Planning (construction) students could get jobs as...
1. Civil engineers
2. Building and civil engineering technicians
3. Mechanical engineers
4. Architects
5. Cad, drawing and architectural technicians
Civil engineers
National average
£43,810
South East average for this job is £40,097
89,219
91,339
2024
2027
2.4%
Future employment
Pathways


Civil engineers
Civil engineers undertake research and design, direct construction and manage the operation and maintenance of civil and mining engineering structures.
icould
Career Advice on becoming a Civil Engineer by Barbara R
National salary range
£28,470
—
£61,330
Low
High
Working hours
38 per week
Qualifications held
Level 6 RQF
The majority of those employed in this role will hold a BA/BSc degree with honours, degree apprenticeship, graduate diploma, Level 6 NVQ
Pathways


Civil engineers
Regional insights for South East
Average salary
£40,097
National: £43,810
Employment
^ 2.5% 2027
National: ^ 2.4%
Live job vacancies
22,067 jobs
Civil Site Engineer
Southampton, Hampshire | £41,774 (predicted)
Civils, Structural & Architectural Lead Engineer
Wokingham, Berkshire | £52,823 (predicted)
Civil/Structural Engineer - Nuclear & Defence (Hybrid Working)
Wokingham, Berkshire | £51,172 (predicted)
Structural Engineer
Reading, Berkshire | £49,413 (predicted)
Graduate Civil Structural
Riverhead, Sevenoaks | £25,000 to £30,000
View all job vacancies
Pathways


Civil engineers
Potential study routes include...
1
A Levels
Mathematics
Physics
Chemistry
Vocational qualifications
Mathematics
Physics
Engineering
T Levels
Design, Surveying and Planning (construction)
Higher Education
Civil engineering
Where to study
2
A Levels
Geography
Mathematics
Business
Vocational qualifications
Construction/Built Environment
English
Mathematics
T Levels
Design, Surveying and Planning (construction)
Higher Education
Building
Where to study
3
A Levels
Geography
Mathematics
Chemistry
Vocational qualifications
Geography
Chemistry
Mathematics
T Levels
Design, Surveying and Planning (construction)
Higher Education
Earth sciences
Where to study
4
A Levels
Mathematics
Physics
Chemistry
Vocational qualifications
Physics
Mathematics
Engineering
T Levels
Design, Surveying and Planning (construction)
Higher Education
Mechanical engineering
Where to study
Informed by national student progression data.
Pathways


Civil engineers
Apprenticeship options leading to this job
Civil engineering technician
Level 3
Engineering technician
Level 3
Gas network craftsperson
Level 3
Power network craftsperson
Level 3
Building control surveyor (integrated degree)
Level 6
Civil engineering site management (degree)
Level 6
Geoscientist (integrated degree)
Level 6
Pathways

OVERVIEW

This two-year course has been developed in collaboration with employers and businesses to meet the needs of the industry and prepare you for the world of work.Employers involved in designing the T Level in Design, Surveying & Planning include the Morgan Sindall Group and Skanska UK.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

Five GCSEs at grade 4 or above including English Language and Mathematics.

STRUCTURE

Core Units:• Supporting knowledge including health and safety, information and data capture, scientific principles and their application in the built environment and standards for scientific measurement• Principles of design in the built environment, roles of different disciplines, design process from conception to completion and life-cycle assessment• Structure of the construction industry, integration of the supply chain, how projects are procured and managed and current/future factors impacting the industry• Importance of sustainability, environmental legislation, policies and initiatives, principles of heritage and conservation, lean construction and waste management, energy production and use• Building technology including construction methods, forms of construction, regulations and standards and manufacturers' instructions• Relationship management including types of stakeholders, customer service principles, the importance of teamwork, equality, diversity and representation including related legislation, employment rights and responsibilities• Digital technology including digital engineering techniques, opportunities for the use and adaptation of technology• Business and commerce including business structures, values and objectives, corporate social responsibility entrepreneurship and innovation, principles of project management, quantification and costing

ASSESSMENT

You will be assessed through two exams, industrial placement, employer-set project and an occupational specialism project.

PROGRESSION

You could progress onto an Apprenticeship, study a university degree or start full time employment.

Appendix M research site T-Level information

[redacted] was chosen as the only college in [redacted] in 2020, the launch year of this exciting qualification, to bring you the first three T Levels in Construction, Digital and Education & Childcare.

Now, with experience and innovation driving our curriculum, we have introduced further T Level options including **Health & Nursing**, **Laboratory Science**, **Medical & Healthcare Science** and **Digital : IT Infrastructure**. For those starting at [redacted] in September 2023, there will be the opportunity to study new courses such as Business & Management, Engineering & Manufacturing and Finance.

WHAT ARE T LEVELS? −

You now have the choice between studying T Levels, **A Levels**, a **Vocational course** or taking an **Apprenticeship** route when you leave school, therefore, we're here to help you decide whether this next level qualification is right for you.

- T Levels will follow GCSEs and will be the equivalent to three A Levels
- They also take the same time to complete as A Levels, meaning you will have your T Level qualification after two years
- This new qualification is a mixture of classroom learning and at least 45 days of on-the-job placements (315 hours), with an employer in the industry you are studying your T Level subject in
- It is a five-day-a-week study programme – 80% of your time will be spent at college and 20% will be on placement
- They have been designed with employers and businesses to make sure the qualifications meet the needs of the industry and prepare you for the world of work
- It will be graded overall as a Pass, Merit, Distinction or Distinction*

For more information click here – **The Parents' Guide to T Levels**

ARE T LEVELS RIGHT FOR YOU? +

T LEVEL SUBJECTS +

T LEVEL FACILITIES +

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS +

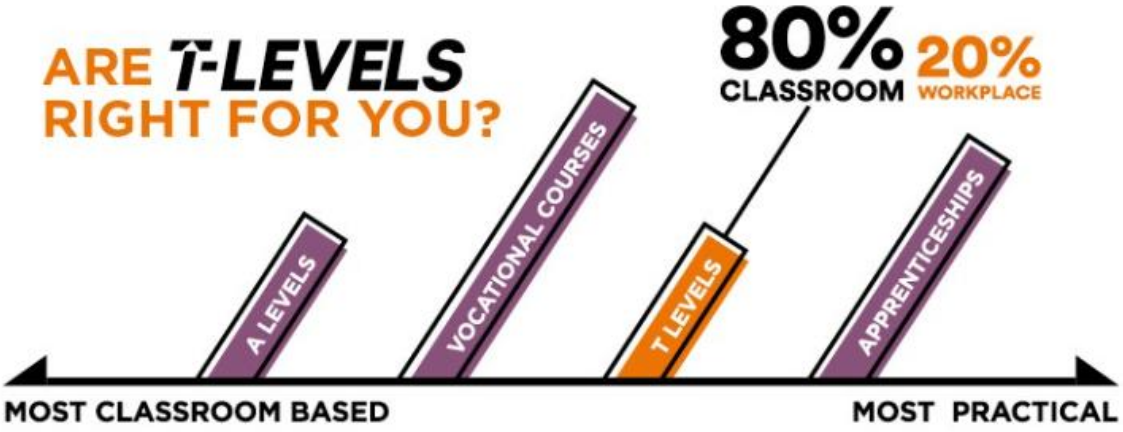
THE TRANSITION PROGRAMME (PRE-T LEVEL) +

INDUSTRY PLACEMENT +

WHAT EMPLOYERS HAVE BEEN SAYING ABOUT T LEVELS +

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER MY T LEVEL? +

ARE T LEVELS RIGHT FOR YOU?



This next level qualification might be right for you if you –

- have just finished your GCSEs
- want to get into a skilled job
- like a mixture of classroom and practical learning
- want the knowledge, skills and experience to get the job you want
- are interested in spending time with employers to try out different job roles

T LEVEL SUBJECTS

Animal Care & Management

Biomedical & Healthcare Science

Business & Management

Design, Surveying & Planning for Construction

Digital : IT Production, Design & Development

Digital : IT Support Services & Infrastructure

Education & Childcare

Engineering & Manufacturing – Design & Development

Health & Nursing

Law & Legal Services

Media Content Creation & production

Maintenance, Installation & Repair (Light & Electric Vehicles)

Appendix N All T-Level participants' responses about their choice of course

Why did you choose to take a T-Level course rather than A-Levels or another Level 3 course such as BTEC?
because T-Levels is more fun - you don't stay in classes for whole of the 2 years
The T-Level supported the subject i wanted to study whereas the T-Level didn't
its a new course and was the course that interested me the most plus i want to go down this route for a job in the future
Nursing was only available as a T-Level
I thought the placements would be really useful to gain practical experience, especially when applying for university.
I found the course interesting and I thought that this would be a good route for my future, if i decide to go to university.
I'm the type of person who can learn through both practical learning and by sitting down in a classroom and making notes. the T-Level nursing is perfect for me because not only is it giving me a head start in the nursing career I'm aiming for, but it is also giving both the classroom and practical element that exceed in
it sounded easy. i was wrong
Because the person I had a interview with told me that I can do a T-Level, and that it would be better for me when I said I like coursework.
because i liked that it had not only the academic side of learning but also the practical side.
It's less stress because it's only one course
Because the T-Level seemed more fitting for my wants
I felt it would be a better way for me to learn and gain experience
Less exams than A-Levels, industrial placements, equivalent to 3 A-Levels.
As my teacher assessed grades for biology wasn't what I needed also I thought I wouldn't cope with the work load that comes with with doing biology a-level also the t-level includes work experience which will help me decide whether or not to go down the midwife or veterinary route.
Work experience that you don't get with a A-Level.
Never wanted to do A-Levels, was perfect course for my chosen career pathway.
?
As I wanted to be a teacher and this course seemed better suited and would provide me with constant relevant knowledge. It also allowed me to only focus on one classroom/ course instead of dotting around to many different subjects.
Because it was specific to something I was interested in but you still get good qualifications from it
I chose to take a T-Level course as it sounded interesting and the course related to what I want to achieve in the future.
It was equivilant to 3 A-Levels and gave me a good amount of work experience
There was a higher focus on work experience than other options.

I originally chose three A-Levels but then found out about the T-Level and realised it would be better off for my career and I will get a lot of experience
because i thought it would offer me more
To try something new
I have picked this this course as I like to be a project manager and i am interested in designing buildings
Because the course I wanted to do as A-Levels wanted high grades
because they don't have a construction course in anything other than a T-Level
I chose the T-Level course as the course itself seemed more appealing to me than the other A-Level options I had.
Because it offers A-Level content and work experience.
tried a-levels for a year, hated it, to much work too fast, not enough support, even when i asked for it, (At a different college, not HSDC)
I chose this course as I get to attend work work experience alongside academic learning
Grades weren’t high enough to do A-level
So that I could gain more work experience hours.
Because practical learning is the method of learning for me personally, it also has my interest of career as a course subject choice
it was more appealing to me
Because of the benefit of doing both in class work and on the job placement
This course offered the qualifications that I wanted any better then any other course
less exams
More hands on, and I prefer to do practical things and not write lots of essays.
It was the only good option available to me.
i enjoy computing and coding
I personally enjoy the fact that there is a lot of hands-on work and it's course is unique and i couldn't find any other courses that made ma as interested as this one.
I feel that the T-Level better suits what I want to go into when I'm older. As well as it mixing academic and hands on work, I find it easy but boring writing in a book all day and want real world practice in my future career path!
Personally i found the content of the tlevel course better than the level 3 BTEC.
I took a T-Level as it seemed more interesting and focused than an A-Level.
Because the course that I take is more specific to the job role I want to achieve in the future.
T-Level are brand new and it thought it would be great to be apart of something we haven't seen before. I was eager to be able to learn but also be apart of a work placement so I can put theory into practice.
I took a t-level as I knew it was a new course idea and was more specialised in the medical aspect of nursing and caring instead of health and social care.
Because I'm not an academic person and I would rather get experience in the work place.

As the course that I am doing is the course I wanted to do, I wanted to go down the construction career path.
I chose a T-Level because i thought it would be more practical compared to classroom work in an A-Level.
The T-Level course sounded more fun and there is more practical involved in it compared to A-Levels
Because it offered something more interesting and closer to the career I wanted to persue in life
I prefer a practical based course and to be out doing my course rather than a classroom and exam based course.
You get experience as well as learning
T-Levels of A-Levels because of being able to put theory into actual practice. Just a more engaging way to learn. T-Levels over BTEC because of the work experience. I thought that it would be me at an advantage over everyone else applying to the same jobs/apprenticeship as me. Stigma about BTEC being supbar compared to A-Levels would also be a factor, however not largely in my own case.
I chose a Tlevel because it was the next step towards my chosen carer.
It's a long story but it was more of a last minute decision. But I thought focusing on one course would be easier than three different courses and I thought it would trying something new.
I chose the t-level option because i imagined it to be a more practical and fast forward way of getting into the construction industry, through my knowledge of practicality and information.
I took a T-Level rather than A-Levels because of the practical work experience
Because of the industry placment aspect of it.
I have always been interested in software engineering and I was originally going to do A-Levels but I had a 5 in maths while I needed a 6 and I needed at least a 6 in one science but I didn't so if I wanted to do my A-Levels I would end up doing something I didn't want so that's the main reason and second reason is growing up as a girl I was always told about things girls can do and cant and I don't believe that there is something a guy can do but a girl cant so I just want to prove to them that I can do what any other guy can do but mostly because I've just always been interested in computers .
As there wasn't any A-Levels of level 3 courses in this area of work.
Because you gain practical experience and are able to put the knowledge learnt in class into practice while on placement.
I liked the course details
I knew a-levels would be too hard for me as I was a below-average learner in school and only achieved average GCSE Grades.
because the course I wanted to was a Tlevel
More practical rather then just theory and the course seemed more right for me
I found this course more interesting
because i wanted to be a quantity surveyor
the course is more hands and i learn better with hands on lessons
A-Levels are ment to be quite difficult and the nursing T-Level appealed to me
i find myself to struggle with exams and like to work practically.

i do not cope well with exam stress and the idea of getting experience apeiled to me and i wanted to do more practical work with the same knowledge
To get experience in the industry as well as relevant knowledge I can use within a setting
Because I thought it'd be convenient to only study one subject and still get the equivalent to 3 A-levels, it allows me to focus on the one subject and do better than i would have studying 3
I liked the idea of industry placement as well as on campus learning.
Industry placement
It gives you many opportunities like both education and work experience.
it was new and the course lets you interact with companies
its a straighter course to my goal

Appendix O All T-Level participants' responses about course expectations

What expertise, knowledge or experience do you expect to receive from your course and College?
im hoping to get a better ideas about construction or architecture to achieve my goals.
Getting a good understanding of software development
to understand and complete all levels of coding and business sides of software and technology
Advanced/Basic medical knowledge and nursing experience
I expect to establish a general understanding of health, from which I can then specialise further in midwifery at university.
Knowledge in science, like biology and chemisry and experience in working in laboratories
the basic clinical knowledge needed to be a good nurse and how to perfect skills that are apart of a nurses day to day schedule in a ward
knowledge for my future job
More of the software based stuff
i work as if i am in a real ward, working with simulation mannequins
midwifery knowledge
enough to achieve distinctions in order to do architecture in university
How to prepare for university or work
Most skills and knowledge i would need to get into uni or find a job
Knowing the appropriate information relating to my uni course.
A qualification
Wide range of work experience
?
Placement experience, knowledge on planning, risk assessments and much more on how to be a teacher.
I would expect to know the basics of healthcare and also have good experience from the placements
I'm expecting quite a bit of work experience in the medical arena, and also a lot of knowledge on the body, and bodily systems etc.
A thorough understanding of cirriculum, how to support children's individual needs, theories, good hands on experience, understanding of child development
Industry placement in a primary school every week + block weeks
The standard first aid and nursing skills that will transfer over to being a paramedic
More placement and on the job knowledge.
More on business as when it comes to the coding part of the course it helped that I did gcse computer science
everything i need to know about construction
Medical science based knowledge

knowledge for my future course
Good knowledge on cyber security, business and general knowledge of computers and infrastructure.
Enhanced knowledge on IT.
The necessary knowledge
Work placement and all knowledge that is required to help me understand children's different needs, and why it's important to safeguard them
Medical and healthcare science
I have the opportunity to put my learn't theory into practice and gain experience of what it is like in a setting. I have learn't how to meet the individual needs of the children, a deep understanding of the curriculum, and how to be an effective and supportive practitioner.
Doing t-level Nursing will first of all teach me all of the practical skills and knowledge needed of how to treat patients correctly and assure that my professional skills are up too the highest standard possible. Also, doing a t-level I will learn every theory work needed for a medical profession from human biology, data handling, ethics and physics. I will also gain masses of experience from my placements and work experience, which is one of my favorite parts of the course cause your constantly gaining knowledge in a practical setting and getting experience from different areas of interest.
having better knowlegde on coding
On the job experience in the field of IT and the theory knowledge to back that.
I'd like it to give me a pointer on what I'd like to specialise in
all that i need for uni
Programming, data, cloud
The ability to use python.
experience on how to develop and maintain code and how to plan teams of people in order to create good functioning code
How to be able to fix code to make the bugs disappear, be able to make games that open a window which is interactable.
To become better at software development and further myself in other aspects like business context and project planning.
SPECIALISATION within paediatrics
I receive knowledge on Lab equipment and how to use them effectively and what PPE to wear in different times and also about how to work in a lab etc
to gain knowledge about the nursing profession and learn what they do and what basic skills they have
I expect to gain basic knowledge from my course and then be able to grow my knowledge even more when I join a work place.
A key idea on healthcare and needed skills for the profession for the future.
Anything to do with applying IT knowledge with real life scenarios
I expect to learn a lot of important information about the construction industry that can help me follow a career path in the future.
I would like to experience what an architect does and the knowlege and details that happen on an construction site

I expect to receive a insight into what life would be working and at university and I would expect to have a lot of knowledge about nursing before I go off to uni
Basic nursing training and extensive knowledge on how to nurse and what nurses do
Excellent knowledge in construction and be able to have a large variety of choice.
How to deal with certain situations with children and the right way to handle them
Software/coding knowledge in Python and SQL. Problem solving skills and logical thinking as well as industry experience in which have hopefully improved skills such as communication and collaboration.
The expertise,knowledge and experience I need in order to work with children.
Not really sure how to answer this question, sorry.
some useable references for past papers to help prepare for future tests.
High level skills and knowledge of network and computing skills
How to support childrens learning and how to implement this in practice.
experience in working in a work place and just growing to be able to be a better person more social because ill be with same people for the next 2 years and definitely more knowledge.
Hopefully a good understanding in the construction area and be able to take my own knowledge into a company to get my views across and be a good and important member of the business
An understanding of child development, a deep understanding of the curriculum and how to be an effective and supportive practitioner.
Nursing experience and hands on experience
Enough understanding to make me feel comfortable and get good grades and a good job
an good understanding of IT
Enough to help me succeed
Everything I need to know to do as well as I can
how to be a quantity surveyor
to know how to pass the course
Not sure
enough to provide me with what i need to go to university and succeed within my future.
i expect to receive a lot of work placement experience in different parts of nursing.
Understanding of child development, curriculums, and how to meet children's individual needs and provide a good level of care for them.
how to code, how to do things I don't wanna do, how to work to a deadline, how to manage a work space, also some business stuff that'll probably be useful
cyber security and basic infrastructure knowledge
IT Experience from industry placement
The course I'm current doing will provide me with theory, practical, knowledge and experience required.
CAD, Use of maths in construction, design,
the basic knowledge of a low class architect

Appendix P All A-Level participants' responses on choice of course

Why did you choose to study A-Levels rather than T-Levels or another Level 3 course such as a BTEC?
I chose to do a mixture, 2 A-Levels and one equivalent (level three criminology)
I believe I do well in the exam style courses.
Idk
Because i wanted to do the actual thing I think
Because I prefer written-based work
I need the A-Levels I chose for university
Most universities list A-Levels as part of their requirements to get onto courses.
Easier route into my selected course at University
law economics accounting
Didn't know what to properly do but also I knew I could do more than BTEC. A-Levels are a good middle ground.
idk
I believe A-Levels are the best fit for my future career choice in veterinary work
I chose A-Levels because I wanted to study subjects that I'm interested in
need that to get into university (medicine)
I am not sure
To get into university
Because A-Levels are stronger in terms of university applications and it also allows me to study multiple fields rather than being confined to just one.
No specific reason
University
the A-levels had all I wanted to do
i wanted more variation by doing 3 subjects
To be able complete the highesT-Level of education I can.
To expand my chances of getting into a university.
It it is the most suitable qualification for the universities I want to get into and for the career paths I want to pursue.
My choices for education all lied behind doing A-Levels
I didn't want to limit my options, or have my final grades based on a group project so I didn't want to do BTEC. As for T-Levels , I wasn't sure (and I'm still not sure) what career path I'll take, so T-Levels would've been far to specific.
as i wanted to challenge myself
Because they gave more options as to what I wanted to do in the future

I believe it will give me better opportunities later in life, it also had courses I was interested in.
Because I need A-Levels for my University Course.
i took both A-Levels and A-Level 3 btec
i don’t know, i wasn’t really shown many options (wasn’t introduced to T-Levels)
Will give me more opportunities in the future
I wanted to be able to do a mix of a few things, and I wasn't sure what i wanted to do in the future so T-Levels seemed to direct towards a certain job.
A-Levels are better
Because it would give me better options for my career
I'm interested in more academic subjects, I've never really enjoyed practical subjects.
I didn’t really know about t-levels or their options, and was mainly recommended by teachers to take A-Levels.
i didn’t understand enough about T-Levels and didn’t know what i would do with a btec
Courses available were not what I was looking for in the areas I wanted or the qualification I wanted
A-Levels seemed like a better route to take because I want to go to university.
More interesting and better opportunities involving uni
Not just one option to stick with
A-Levels had all the courses i wanted to study
I can study 3 separate subjects so there is no need to specialise early. A-Levels are also more suitable for getting into more prestigious universities which is more suited to my goals.
They had the courses I was interested in
thought it would be better for my career path
It seemed like the most academic option for me
As that is what is required for the career I want to pursue
Felt more reliable
becausse i couldnt find any that intrested me
wanted a wider range of subjects to study
Because I liked the look of the courses and they will help me to get to where I want to be after college
to help for university and help with qualifications for the future. i was intrested in the subjects and thought they would be useful for what i intend to do.
Because t-levels were a new thing and I didn’t want to risk it
It was better suited to the way I have learned/worked in the past, when I was doing similar academic subjects.
A-Levels are a much stronger course to take/ higher acceptance rate, when going into career routes such a medicine/pharmacy.
Better qualifications and bigger differences between subjects so not always learning the same things
Wanted to get the best qualifications for university
Because I enjoy taking a range of subjects and wasn’t ready to commit to one course. And Unis look for A-Levels

Because they were the subjects I was interested in and they are the requirements for what I want to do at university
As I got a variety of choice and feel like I will learn my course in more depth.
The path i wanted to take in life could only happen if i took the three courses i have as they're more academic based.
Because I want to move on to university with A-Levels
I felt that I would be able to get more out of A-Levels, as it is more diverse and enables me to be able to study multiple things at once.
because i didn't really know what T-Levels were and i just understood the alevwls i wanted to take more
I preferred the subjects available in A-level courses
Because I thought that it would give me more opportunities.
its a range of different skills
Because it felt the most academic - I found courses I like
Because it had the courses i wanted to uptake
I felt like it would be a challenge and based off what I chose, I thought they were better
The subjects I wanted to do were A-Levels
Because I was encouraged to my by teachers
Uni
i preferred the A-Level courses
Preferred the way A-levels are assessed
it suited me more as i don't know what i want to do in the future yet
Because I wanted to study a variaty of subjects in order to get a more broad view of career choices when i leave college
Interesting and gives you more opportunities for the future.
I would like to attend University.
The courses were better suited to me and what I wanted to do.
I already did a BTEC, and wanted to try out doing A-Levels
The traditional route seemed better for me - it let me study a wider range of subjects rather than focusing on one specific course or career path.
Told to
I chose A-Levels because I wanted to do more than one subject, rather than focusing on just one.
I chose 2 A-Levels, psychology and sociology, and one btec ,health and social care, but I chose these as they lead me on to different paths of what I'd like to study in the future.
I enjoy studying and learning about the subjects I'm doing in depth. I think exams are a good way for me to learn and apply my knowledge
So I had a variety
I thought A-Levels were better qualifications
gives me a wider range of subjects as im not sure what i want to do
The course that I want to take in University requires A-Levels

They’re perceived as more respectable.
I’m not too sure
Felt like A-Levels were less specific hence would give me the chance to explore different job prospects and use the alevels to go to a university as I do not have an exact dream job yet.
I never really researched thoroughly into them and I already had my A-Levels planned out in senior school so I didn’t really think about other options at that point.
Because I'm interested in A-Level courses rather than the others
I liked the subjects and it helps my career path
As a student I’m much more academic, and so 3 A-Levels worked more to my strengths than a more practical, vocational T-Level
The subjects I enjoy aren’t all in a single T-Level
i choose A-Levels for more variety
I feel like they stand me in good stead for careers in the future, as they are the standard and that's what most places would be looking for. Unless the career was very specifically related to the T-Level subject.
I would like to go into Medicine.
There was more choice/options along with added freedom of picking whatever course I want.

Appendix Q Responses from T-Level participants intending to go to university after college

Please give as much information as you can on what you subject you want to study at university, which type of university you'd like to attend, or the location of the university you'd like to go to.
i would like to study something related to architecture or linked to construction - in Portsmouth university.
I want to study IT at university however I haven't decided on a location
Pediatric Nursing, unsure of what university
I would like to study midwifery and am mainly considering universities in the south and east of England.
Maybe biology - not sure where
i would like to attend kings college London to study an honours midwifery degree. it would mean that my placements would be in major London hospitals.
midwifery, either southampton or bournemouth
London, brighton or southampton
Architecture at portsmouth
Portsmouth university studying psychology with children's learning
I don't know yet something related to IT preferably and a decent uni for IT
veterinary nursing course i would like to go to a uni that's further away from my house so i can seperate home life with school life.
childhoood and youth studies with psychology
Midwifery - Southampton or Bournemouth
I would try to study something about teaching or choose something like child phycology so It can benefit my teaching approach. I would like to go to a local university like, Portsmouth, Southampton or Winchester.
I would like to either do a paramedic apprenticeship or if I can't a paediatric apprenticeship but if I can't do any I would study to become either of those
A medical subject, I'm yet to look to see what is on offer in that area but something there. And I would prefer and university nearby/not too far from home.
Early years learning and development course
Primary teaching with QTS
I would like to do medicine in university and would prefer to go Southampton
Biomedical sciences at Portsmouth Uni
Primary teaching
Diagnostic Radiography and medical imaging University of Portsmouth?
Childhood and youth studies, sussex or portsmouth.
I would like to do paramedic science In university, and I would like too attend either Bournemouth, Surrey or Portsmouth uni
Medical University and paramedic science
either brighton or plymouth uni and mental health nursing
go in to a course similar to this where lots of coding.

I want to further my software design and development T-Level allowing me to reach higher positions in the future. I have applied for the sutton trust US university trip so time will tell on the location!
PAEDIATRIC NURSING
Haven't got that far yet
I want to study adult nursing and I want to go to an university near where I currently live
I would hopefully like to go into quantity surveying at Uni of Portsmouth.
I would love to study midwifery at uni or do a midwifery apprenticeship, I'm not sure where at the moment.
I'd like to further stydy nursing, maybe at Southampton University
I want to go to chichester university to study primary education
I haven't really thought that far ahead but for what I want to be / the path I want to take, university would be the best option. Also I think finishing this course, the most sensible route would be to go to university.
I want to study architecture overall or interior design, and i would like to go to a university that is encouraging as well as tough, to build up my character as a future businesswoman. I hope that the location would be somewhere close to family(portsmouth).
a primary teching cource, portsmouth or chichester.
that I'm not sure yet still looking at some universities at the moment
I would like to study Primary Teaching with QTS.
I would like to go to a local university and do a nursing degree
I want to study children's nursing at university, I wouldn't mind going to any University, near or far as it would be a great experience being able to see different parts of the country, having independence away from home and meeting new people or making new friends you definitely wouldn't know.
quantity surveyor course
paramedic science, brighton, or go into the army and be a combat medic
i haven't done a lot of research, but i hope to get a degree in psychology and am not sure which university would be best for me.
i would like to maybe go to brighten uni as i like the sound of it and the life there however i am not sure weather i would like to change and maybe do an air hostesses corse then work in that industry while i am young and use this qualification when i am older to go to university then and have a more solid job when i am older.
I would like to study Early childhood studies at East London University
i want to either go to bristal or portsmouth uni and study architecture

Appendix R Responses from A-Level participants intending to go to university

Please give as much information as you can on what you subject you want to study at university, which type of university you'd like to attend, or the location of the university you'd like to go to.
Location near countryside, possibly to study law. Full independence from home
Social sciences like sociology or criminology and I would like to go somewhere win a big city like London or Birmingham.
Psychology
I want to study human rights law in university as I'm quite passionate about advocating for others and believe I can make a difference in doing so.
I want to go to one of the top 20 universities that's not too far from Portsmouth, I want to study Biomedical Science and then maybe a postgraduate course on pharmacology or toxicology
I'd like to either take sports science or sports coaching in uni which I could do at the university of portsmouth
Looking at attending a Russel Group University but unsure about the subject, currently seeking advice from Joe Sillence as part of the Southern University Network.
I'd like to attend a Russel Group University in the UK to study biochem and then specialise in neuroscience
not sure yet
Not sure on university, would like to do a degree in psychology. Essex would be a university of interest if I had to give one.
Chemistry or biochemistry
I have no preference over the location of my university, though I'd have to attend one that offers a course on veterinary science. Ideally a university with a good reputation, though I dont particularly mind
I'm applying for Southampton, Buckingham, Kent and Medway and lancaster to study medicine and go on to become a surgeon
Pharmacology
Equine nursing Equine university Hartpury
I would currently like to study something such as human biology or another form of biology in aims to enter the medical profession.
Computer Science or Physics or Mathematics at Oxford/Durham/Imperial etc.
either criminology or something else don't know what uni

I would like to study law with criminology. Still undecided on where to go.
Modern history, either Russian or British. Not necessarily a top university, but one with an enjoyable and relaxed learning environment, and preferably not local.
i would love to study Psychology and i haven't thought about the university yet
In university I would like to study something to do with the mind and children as well as a language alongside
I would like to study accounting more and further my knowledge of the subject and possible job options within it.
Veterinary Medicine, i'm thinking of going to either Edinburgh, Surrey or Bristol, but i'm still currently looking at what my best option would be as i can only apply to 4 different universities.
university somewhere close to home, studying something along the lines of forensic science
No clue
I am considering studying some form of history, but I'm not sure yet whether it would be ancient or modern. I definitely don't want to attend a prestigious university like Oxford or Cambridge, but apart from that I don't really know which type. I'd like to go to a university near me, or at least not too far away from home.
I either want to study a scientific degree like biochemistry, or medicine to become a doctor.
law at uni of southampton or portsmouth
I would like to study psychology at Portsmouth university as it has good feedback by students who has previously attended and isn't far so I can save on accommodation
Possibly business hospitality or international business in Manchester university.
criminology with applied psychology or other way round. most universities that specialise in psychology are further north
not too far from home, portsmouth or southhampton most likely
Computer science and I have little preference on the specific university at this time.
I would probably study at the University of Portsmouth. I haven't yet decided on the course.
im not sure yet
Im not exactly certain, but my goal for now is to take biomedical science in imperial or manchester
philosophy, religion and ethics southampton, birmingham or manchester
plymouth
maybe a business course or a sociology course. possibly at Bournemouth or bath
Criminology and law or criminology and sociology

To be honest, nearer to the time, I will predict which of my A-level grade/s will be higher than the rest of them and then decide what and where I will go from that knowledge. Every University is in my mind, I haven't yet deducted/selected any.
Want to go into medicine/ pharmacy. University of Southampton or any good university
i would either like to study multimedia journalism or criminal psychology at a university that has one of the best pass rates for those subjects
I would like to attend a good university preferably an hour or two away from home. I'm not sure on what subject but either psychology or economics.
I want to go to uni in London to do either undergrad medicine or undergrad forensics/bio chemistry then maybe post grad medicine
Paramedic science or any paramedic course and I want to go to a university close to home but still kind of far I have looked into Brighton
I would like to study psychology or criminology as i enjoy the subject and it necessary for the path i want to take. I'm not sure of the university as of yet but it will be around london area so i can explore new places and people.
Philosophy
i wanna go somewhere a bit far away but close enough to come back, a sort of relaxed uni that will be rlly supportive and communicative and at the moment i'm either talking about an art or psychology course of one that in a way combines them
I am not sure yet
I would like to study BA Acting at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland in Glasgow.
I'd like to go away from Portsmouth. Maybe sports in society or law.
Psychology or Criminology
I don't know what I would like to do
Some sort of media/ film course
i'd like to study psychology at university, somewhere not in portsmouth
i'll want to do some sort of policing degree and i'd want to go to a university somewhere far enough that allows me to try living somewhere new
im not sure yet, perhaps a uni nearby where i live, and do courses centered around my a levels. or im thinking of perhaps going abroad to get some outside experience.
graphics or something similar, Bristol or bath university.
I want to study Computer Science because it's the subject I enjoy the most out of what I'm doing. I'd like to attend a University with a good Computer Science course, preferably a Russell Group.
I'm not sure yet. Maybe law or something in the police I.e detective or something but I'm not sure.
UCA Farnham

Mathematics or Computer Science is what I want to study at Uni and I plan on going to a Russel Group university.
I dont know what university or type but I think when I leave college I may be interested in media at university.
Not too sure yet.
I would like to do a undergraduate degree in medicine and a masters degree in neuro science hopefully. I would love to go to Brighton and Sussex medical school.
Accounting
A uni in a big city, either human geography, a PE based degree, or Audiologist degree at Southampton depending on how well i do at A levele
Southampton University
Music somewhere in London. If not, politics perhaps.
Medicine at the moment. To become a dermatologist. Hopefully a good medical university such as southhampton or Edinburgh.
Medicine, Southampton University
I'd like to attend a Russell group university, but I'm not sure what course yet
Medicine or neuroscience
media, not too far away from portsmouth maybe brighton
Medicine. Either St George's, Queens, Southampton, UCL.
Either law or anything within Eng Lang

Appendix S Responses from participants who intended to 'get an apprenticeship' after college

What industry sector do you want to be an apprentice in? For example, in construction or a healthcare profession or .... ?
Engineering, Meteorology / astronomy
I would like to get a student paramedic apprenticeship so I can learn on the job
Either business or a hospitality/catering apprenticeship. Whatever i think will help me the most with what i want to do.
IT Support
Police
health care
Accounting apprenticeship
Construction
Construction
Technology with cyber security, AI, or data specialism in mind.
Caring profession. Any work that helps other people
creative
in IT
Health care
Healthcare
Nurse
Accounting
Journalism
IT Infrastructure
Accountancy
Boat or aerospace engineering.
architecture

Appendix T Participants' responses regarding their 'highest, best ambition' for their careers

T-Level respondents

If you realised your highest, best ambition in the future, what would you be or be doing at the top of your career?
i want to be an architect probably be good at managing, speaking to my team.
Being in charge of a software development team
I don't know something to do with technology or sports
Being a nurse working at Great Ormond Street Hospital
Head of Midwifery
Maybe something to do with biology - not sure at the moment
i would be a midwife working in a London hospital after attending a Russel group uni
architect
I would have open a shop, that I could run comfortably
midwife or trauma surgeon
midwifery
Architect
Working with children in early years
I don't know
surgical veterinary nurse.
Child psychologist
A midwife, going on to lecture midwifery at a university.
Editing football videos
teaching in Primary education, making children's learning experience fun and fulfilling and enjoying doing so.
I don't understand
Radiology, sonography or something similar.
A manager in a childcare setting
Primary school teacher / assistant headteacher
To be a single responder in a rapid response car for am ambulance crew
My career choice is to be in the military in the medical field
I don't know but I don't think that far ahead I think now and not the future
i will be a project manager
Health
project manager
A CEO of a large tech company
I'm not sure yet.
Consultant in my field
Primary teacher/assistant head
Radiography or sonography
A manager in a childcare setting.

Experienced paramedic- Once you have been working as a registered paramedic for two years, you can progress to roles that allow you to carry out more treatments, specialise in specific areas and take on more responsibility.
a game developer
Overseeing the IT systems / Infrastructure for a major company
Be a specialised doctor/ surgeon
don’t understand
Something IT related
skilled programmer
being head of a product development team
be able to run a business which has the ability to make new games and improve on bugs very quickly.
Lead software developer at a respected aerospace company
Be a head nurse in a neonatal unit or in GOSH.
no idea
A nurse
It would be my dream to set up my own business.
Nurse-dentist
Probably head of an IT department at a large company
Hopefully a quantity surveyor
Architect
I would love to become a midwifery team leader or higher
Being a head nurse or Matron
A head of a project or head of a part of a project e.g. director of health and safety, chartered surveyor.
Teaching
If I wasn't financially well, probably would work harder to get into a position that pays well and continue to learn to get to that point. If i'm smart about my finances and earn enough to retire early, i'd probably just do a job that I enjoy for the sake of having something to do without the stress of having to worry.
I would like to have my own business.
Radiology and maybe specialise as a sonographer and work my way up the carer path.
Architecture or being the CEO of a famous architectural firm, changing lives and saving the planet through eco friendly builds.
Network management
primary teacher or a TA
I would probably be in Software engineering
Be in a good job that i actually enjoy and be making a good amount of money.
Primary teacher/assistant headteacher
I would like to a mental health leading nurse
Hopefully still the same as where i start.
Head of IT compnay
Don’t know
?
quantity surveyor
a paramedic
Have my own clinic
forensic psychologist or somewhere within mental health
have my own business or be qualified in what i do with time to do things i love on the side

Preschool manager
I don't know as I honestly don't even know what I want to do for sure, but I guess living pay check to pay check living comfortably with not too many work hours but enough to fill the week, in charge of my own team perhaps
CEO
Video Editing
Working in the education sector.
unknown
architect

A-Level respondents

If you realised your highest, best ambition in the future, what would you be or be doing at the top of your career?
Undecided, high up in marine policing area
I have no idea.
be a therapist or a psychologist
I don’t know
Author-illustrator maybe idk
Sports physiotherapist
Making changes in the criminal justice system.
I would be studying neurological science are developing cures/treatments to different mental illnesses
havent realised yet
Somewhere in in the field of psychology
Doing chemistry or biochemistry research
I'd be working in a veterinary clinic, possibly with my own firm
I have no idea
I want to be a heart surgeon, and study medicine at southampton
SAS or SBS
Equine vet
Earning 6 or 7 figures working as a self employed trader/reseller/investor/stock broker.
I don’t know yet
CEO
Acting
???
Lawyer
Lawyer
I would work in the education sector in government.
Psychologist
Making enough money to be comfortable, working in something physics related with computers (I'm really not sure yet).
in the police, working with child abuse mainly
I would be working in the health care sector alongside children and young people
I would most likely be working towards becoming a chartered Accountant. Or something involving my knowledge of computing.

Veterinary Surgeon travelling the world with a qualification in Exotic Veterinary Medicine, going to the different zoos and animal orphanages round the world to help the animals. Also, working towards getting a PhD in that as well.
not sure what career i would like to do in the future
CSI
Working hard
I would have my own business and it would be doing very well.
Wolf of wall street
High ranking in the British Army
I would be doing something historical, possibly working with/at a museum.
Successful in scientific research or medicine.
earning loads of money
A private therapist, or counselling psychologist, with my own clinic
I would be an entrepreneur running many business particularly in the hospitality industry.
working hard
i would be happy and rich
hopefully achieving whatever ambition i'm after
Ideally working with computers somewhere in a field that interests me.
i'm not sure
I'm not 100% sure yet
Some kind of doctor or medical researcher
In the military as an officer
Programming
i would have a good job and be one of the best in the career im doing
not sure
Police inspector
human resources or recruitment consultant
Police captain
Contributor to resolving global issues.
I want to get into medicine and become a doctor
i would like to be a the top of the company i'm at, getting as much useful information out to the public as possible
Investment advisor
Either a doctor or a biochemist. Maybe an actress also.
Paramedic
I want to be an accountant
Probably along the lines of criminal/psycho analysis, enjoying my job whilst making a living for myself.
Have a doctorate in Philosophy
I would go further into drama and acting, or further pursue fashion.
i would want to be happy in what i was doing and be able to help other people and just be living nicely and be happy in my job
I am not sure
acting
I don't know.
Being in charge, making lots of money, having a key role in my job.
I would like to be a psychiatrist
I'm not sure
I'm not sure

Film director
Teaching
i want to work as a psychotherapist
Very high rank in the police force
living comfortably
?
Hard working
Part of a team of indie game developers .
I'd like a well paid job and to be successful. Maybe go to Uni but I'm not sure what career path I want to take yet.
Working for Disney animation studios
Being an Educational Officer in the Army while taking a PGCE to start teaching Mathematics at secondary school.
Space cowboy
I'm not sure.
Social working, therapy or teaching or something along those lines I'm not too sure yet.
I would be a forensic pathologist.
?
A chartered accountant
baby screening audiologist
Barrister
Professional musician.
Owning a business
Happy and having flexibility at a job that I enjoy and want to work at with good pay
I would become a doctor, not sure what I would specialise in yet.
I don't know
Specialised in a science field
Football Commentary/Journalism
An accountant for a large firm
media work
Working somewhat high up in a respected company, where I would be the person that gets asked questions if someone needs help with something for example. Essentially being the go to guy, although maybe not directly at the top.
Helping patients and preforming surgeries to ensure that can live a healthy life.
I don't know

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