



## **T Level Professional Development offer Teacher Regional Improvement Project (TRIP)**

A case study from the TRIP led by The Trafford College Group in collaboration with The Greater Manchester Colleges' Group



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## **Project aims**

The project originally aimed to develop strategic capacity across Greater Manchester (GM) to enable the effective implementation of T Levels from 2021.

The project was based on a view that the delivery of technical and professional education in GM has mainly focussed on individual colleges and pilot projects providing excellence within their own geography but this can sometimes run counter to a strategic response across a wider functioning economic area.

The emergence of the Combined Authority and devolution of certain skills functions, together with the recent achievement of Grade 2 for all GM FE colleges provided the opportunity to create a region-wide network of excellence whereby individuals and employers can be assured of high quality technical teaching and provision not only locally but across GM, encouraging wider discussion on the opportunities and implications of sector specialisms and high skills needs in the city region.

Tutors and learners would benefit from this project by being assured of the commitment and professional readiness of their leadership and the wider benefits that successful delivery will contribute to their own locality and the wider Greater Manchester economy. It was anticipated that there would be a medium to long term impact on the relationship with local employers and the co-creation of industry relevant curriculum.

However, in discussion with the ETF, it was agreed to focus the aims of the project more on practitioner development as opposed to the original focus on senior management capacity and development as part of a strategic approach to the delivery of technical education in GM. This would ensure a clearer emphasis on readiness and support requirements at a teaching and learning level, as well as other considerations around the actual delivery of T Levels (e.g. industry placements). Notwithstanding that, the project also wanted to retain some of the essence of being strategically ready at a GM level through identifying issues and solutions that could be adopted across the Colleges' Group – and agreeing an approach to ensure the sustainability of the project through collaborative implementation of T Levels.

The project therefore re-focused the aims on practitioner readiness through the following activities:

- 1) Reviewing the Outline Core Content in two T Level routes (Construction and Digital) and identifying:
  - Possible challenges for delivery (e.g. staff expertise, resources)
  - Possible challenges for learning (e.g. pedagogical styles, difficulty of content, inclusion)
  - Possible solutions using employers
  - Identified areas of support through the ETF TLPD offer
- 2) Identifying Greater Manchester wide challenges and possible solutions to implementation – ensuring alignment with the Gatsby Foundation “Routes Ready” already underway through the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA)
- 3) Identifying key issues with regards to T Level implementation at a national level and collating in order to feedback to DFE and ETF, including any recommendations for their consideration. This would also involve a “masterclass” session by Dudley College to provide insight on their approach to T Level implementation as a 2020 provider

## **Project overview**

The project was focused on developing a collaborative approach at practitioner and management level across the 9 Greater Manchester GFE Colleges. All but one of the GFE Colleges in GM are part of the 2021 wave of T Level providers. Partners agreed that the project would focus on two of the T Level routes for 2021 – Construction and Digital - and identified five key outputs:

- 1) A practitioner led review of the Core Content within the two agreed T Level routes at an individual college level, then shared and discussed with the collaborative practitioner group with a focus on:
  - Possible challenges for delivery (e.g. staff expertise, resources)
  - Possible challenges for learning (e.g. pedagogical styles, difficulty of content, inclusion)
  - Possible solutions using employers
  - Identified areas of support through the ETF TLPD offer
- 2) Each practitioner as part of the collaborative group Undertaking the Practitioner Self-Assessment for T Level readiness through Foundation Online
- 3) Practitioners and managers identifying GM wide challenges and possible solutions to implementation
- 4) Practitioners and managers identifying challenges with T Level implementation at a national level
- 5) Developing a sustainable model to carry forward the collaborative approach post project through maintaining the T Level Steering Group and the T Level Practitioner Group – working closely with GMCA & Routes Ready and reporting to the GMCG Principals' Group – as a critical success factor in T Level implementation in GM for 2021

In relation to the first output, Practitioners in each college worked through the Core Content on the identified T Level routes and completed a template specifying how elements within this content presented possible challenges for delivery and learning; whilst also specifying possible solutions using employers and possible areas of support through the TLPD offer. To support this activity, two separate GM T Level Practitioner Group events were delivered which gave staff in each college an opportunity to share ideas around the four themes for the two identified T Level routes. Both events were well attended and also had representation from GMCA to link into the Routes Ready activity, and the second event had representation from Dudley College (as a 2020 provider) and ETF.

As part of this exercise, there were a number of considerations that were applicable to both T Level routes and these related primarily to the issues of **pedagogy** and **inclusion** (and therefore presenting *possible challenges for delivery and for learning*). In terms of pedagogy, the potential challenge is the delivery of a qualification that has an exam based methodology for the Core Content in occupational subject areas that are more used to a continuous assessment model (mirroring in some respects the challenges presented within Apprenticeships through the move from frameworks to standards). The solution identified to this was the development of curriculum delivery models that focus on retaining knowledge within the long term memory – regular reinforcement of key information, development of revision and exam techniques – use of practice examination papers etc. – in order to successfully prepare students for a summative based assessment method. Linked to this was the challenge that many staff currently delivering technical and vocational qualifications are still not used to a pedagogical approach that involves retaining knowledge in the long term memory in order to pass an examination. Solutions identified for this include making use of the ETF TLPD offer – particularly the Pedagogy for Technical Teachers under Strand 3 of the TLPD offer – and also, where possible, developing in-house CPD opportunities to share pedagogical approaches used by A Level and GCSE teachers, which some colleges have already commenced.

The challenge of inclusion was also raised by a number of colleges as being a particular issue across both T Level routes. The first issue was in relation to prior attainment levels of students who would likely be looking to access the qualifications. Whilst at present, the maths and English Level 2 requirement is an **exit** requirement (in order to fully achieve the T Level qualification), all partners

felt that this should be an **entry** requirement – a view that appears to be shared by a large number of 2020 providers. Practitioners across the Construction and Digital routes felt that the entry requirement for GCSE Maths should be at least a Grade 5, with some colleges even suggesting it should be a Grade 6. This would therefore potentially exclude large numbers of students who would currently access Level 3 technical and vocational qualifications – the difference being the perceived change in both the level of demand and the level of difficulty within T Levels (including the change in assessment methodology). Whilst it was accepted that the introduction of T Levels would potentially raise the awareness and value of technical education through a much more demanding and rigorous qualification, the challenge would be attracting the cohort of students who would be ready to cope with the requirements of the qualification as it currently stands, a cohort who are more likely to undertake traditional A Levels (due to parental expectations and deeply ingrained hierarchal perceptions within England of qualifications associated with “success”).

Linked to the issue of the entry requirements on T Levels, there was also the perceived challenges over the so-called “Transition Year”, given that the existing understanding of this programme is a generic content based around maths, English, digital literacy and the development of employability skills. Dudley College, who are a 2020 provider and a Transition Year pilot college, shared their thinking on this as part of their Masterclass to the Practitioner Group. The options of an existing style of Level 2 provision, a more generic programme structured as outlined above or a “three year” T Level model were discussed by the Group at length on their merits to support inclusion and access to T Level routes. The general consensus was that “one size does not fit all”. In addition, GMCA have commenced a Transition Year strand to their Routes Ready work, which the colleges now have access to following this discussion.

A further issue in relation to inclusion was a view from partners that the change in assessment methodology would have resource implications for exam access arrangements, given the large numbers of students who attend GFE colleges with an identified need, including those with Education Health and Care (EHC) Plans. However, given that colleges have had to significantly scale up arrangements for exam access arrangements, as each college has thousands of young people re-sitting GCSE maths and English every summer, this challenge was felt to be far from insurmountable given the responsiveness to infrastructure changes already implemented. All partners felt confident in respect of providing the necessary support for students with SEND, and currently have structures and models in place to support students on existing academic and vocational (applied general and technical) Level 3 programmes. Partners did discuss the gender related issues to both the Construction and the Digital T Level routes, and discussed possible solutions to drive up participation from underrepresented groups through positive marketing campaigns and use of role models – both at college level and a possible wider GM level.

The review of the **Digital Core Content** provided a range of challenges, mainly related to currency of staff knowledge and expertise, as well as a number of possible solutions involving employers. However, one of the fundamental issues was felt to be the level of difficulty within the qualification, with several colleges commenting that some content was more aligned to first year degree standard rather than Level 3. There was also a view that the content was more “vast” than existing Level 3 qualifications and that there was more integration of specific pathways within the Core Content – e.g. software design alongside networking. There was also a concern raised that the T Level appeared to be specifying a particular type of programme language – e.g. Python – whereas many existing companies are not using this particular language and therefore would this put students at a disadvantage (whereas existing specifications were perceived to have more flexibility). A possible solution identified for this would be the opportunity to develop a wider skill set of programme languages through additional content, enrichment and employer led masterclasses.

In terms of other specific elements within the Digital Core Content, there was a view that some aspects would require regular updating for staff about industry and sector developments – including the Business Context, Emerging Technology and Legislation. It was felt that a solution to this would be annual updating from industry (possible extension of Industry Insights activity) and

masterclasses from employers. It was suggested that trends of emerging technology could be a useful annual input from BCS, and that the business context element could be enhanced through co-design and delivery from staff within Business departments – as well as employers. A particular challenge of the Digital Environments element was seen to be a need for centres to have up to date examples of hardware and peripherals that are used in current business environments – and up to date servers to practice on. This was felt to have potential resource and financial implications for colleges delivering this T Level – and could therefore form part of possible capital requests for 2021 providers. A further challenging element within the core content was identified as the Security element – mainly related to staff expertise in current security protocols, and the difficulty of this concept for students. A possible solution identified would be to possibly work with cyber security firms to provide case study materials and masterclasses.

The review of the **Construction Core Content** provided two very different views, depending upon the exact T Level that would be undertaken. Practitioners from the Building Services background felt that much of the core content was not dissimilar to that of the current BTEC Level 3 Building Services Engineering qualification – and that the difficulty would be more around the pedagogical changes required through the changes in assessment methods as discussed earlier. There is a view that elements could be enhanced through site visits that would make the content more “real” e.g. elements such as Legislation, Liability and Approved Codes of Practice (which can potentially be seen as quite “dry” in a classroom environment). Some elements that were seen to be potential challenges due to current staff expertise included Earth Science, Measurement and Information & Data. It was felt that integrating as part of work experience and the use of industry masterclasses were a possible solution to enhance the delivery of this. Some of the elements related to Digital Technology and Commercial Business were also viewed as requiring external input into delivery to support the existing skills and knowledge base.

However, the main concern in relation to the Construction Core Content was the view that the majority of students who would most likely follow the On-Site Construction T Level would struggle significantly with the level of demand and the level of difficulty – given that the vast majority of students currently undertaking the occupational areas within this T Level – i.e. Brickwork, Carpentry & Joinery, Painting & Decorating and Plastering – are operating at Level 1 and 2, with very few progressing into Level 3 due to the requirements of the industry. It was therefore felt by a number of practitioners that this particular T Level is fundamentally misaligned to the needs of students and the needs of industry.

In summary, the Core Content Reviews were successful in identifying a range of specific potential challenges for *delivery* from the individual elements within the subjects. The reviews also highlighted a number of possible solutions using *employers* through delivery of masterclasses, access to current industry standard resources within actual working environments, and the use of industry placements to support the development and practical application of core content knowledge. The reviews also highlighted how other practitioners within the college could support certain elements through co-design and delivery – e.g. Business Studies staff; and how external bodies such as BSC could provide support and masterclasses. The reviews were less successful in identifying specific challenges for *learning*, other than the universal view of the issues the changes in assessment methodology would bring. The view from practitioners was that they needed to engage with the actual specifications when available as opposed to just outline content in order to formulate clearer views on the specific subject related issues and solutions in relation to learning.

In terms of possible solutions at a GM Level, the following ideas were discussed by the Practitioner Group:

- Given the challenges around attracting and retaining staff within these T Level subject areas, could a “consortium approach” to delivery be considered or a model of sharing “bank staff”?
- Developing a collaborative approach to sourcing industry placements, taking into account that the “ask” for 2021 is clearly defined across the 10 GM Local Authority areas and this would enable a more targeted approach, and an approach that would be better for employers rather than 9 colleges competing for placements – at a time when educational demands on employers already seem to be greater than ever
- Establish a clear “ask” of employers for activity to complement industry placements such as masterclasses to support delivery, staff development etc.
- Linked to the above – raising the awareness of employers about T Levels through a coordinated event, targeted at subject area, supported through GMCA and key networking bodies such as Manchester Digital for example
- Developing a collaborative approach to delivery models to share time, expertise and resource; as well as providing a consistent student T Level experience across GM
- Identifying and developing a common approach to the implementation of the Transition Year, to ensure consistency of delivery and quality to students across GM

#### *Lead organisation:*

The Lead Organisation, Trafford College Group, was responsible for the following activities and outputs:

- Refining the project aims following the original submission and feedback from ETF
- Setting up and coordinating the Project Steering Group and Practitioners Group
- Coordinating the key project activity of the Core Content Review
- Arranging the 2020 provider masterclass – through Dudley College
- Maintaining the review of TLPD activity
- Coordinating views in relation to GM wide solutions and national implementation considerations
- Leading on options to maintain the viability of the activity beyond the project lifetime
- Maintaining links with GMCA around the Routes Ready activity and enabling representation at the Steering and Practitioner Groups
- Coordinating the Case Study and monthly reports

#### *Partner Colleges:*

- Undertaking the Core Content Review activity for the Construction and Digital T Level Routes
- Contributing to the Steering Group and Practitioner Group
- Coordinating TLPD activity within each college
- Undertaking Practitioner Self-Assessment through Foundation Online
- Contributing to the views in relation to GM solutions, national considerations and opportunities to sustain the project beyond the initial lifetime

## **Positive outcomes and expected impact**

One of the most positive impacts from this project has been the opportunity for the 9 GFE Colleges in GM to start to undertake a collaborative approach at practitioner and management level to implementing these transformational qualifications from 2021. The willingness and enthusiasm for 9 colleges to commence a collaborative project of this kind is a positive impact that cannot be understated, and sets a platform for a future working relationship between the GM colleges at practitioner level that could be hugely beneficial for the students and communities of the city region.

Another key benefit of the project has been the opportunity to provide space, time and resource to enable practitioners to commence their planning for 2021 implementation and to share concerns, ideas and solutions with their colleagues in other colleges. In some cases, practitioners are the only experts in their respective field within their college, so the opportunity to engage with fellow subject specialists across GM has been a positive outcome of the project.

The Core Content Review activity has now provided a template and resource that can be shared amongst the colleges to clearly identify possible challenges for delivery and learning, and possible solutions using employers and TLPD. This should prove highly useful as colleges now start to develop and firm up their delivery plans for 2021. This should enable partner colleges to more effectively implement T Levels through a timely and collaborative approach to working through challenges and solutions. This resource has identified particular skills gaps and training needs across GM, as well as identifying how employers could be used to support the delivery of elements of the Core Content.

The involvement of GMCA (Routes Ready) and Dudley College (as a 2020 provider) has been highly successful in ensuring that partner colleges are fully aware of the T Level requirements from a policy perspective, but also, and crucially, fully sighted on the practical implications of planning for delivery. This has enabled partner colleges to reflect, discuss and firm up their own thoughts about what they need to do in order to successfully implement these qualifications for 2021 – and how a collaborative approach might be a solution to some of the challenges presented.

The use of the TLPD offer has been a real benefit to many of the partner colleges who have taken up both on-line and face to face training. This will significantly aid the implementation of T Levels for 2021. However, much of the activity has been on awareness raising, and any continuation of the project must give thought to the use of the offer for practical implementation. The project is currently looking at a collaborative delivery approach to the Middle Management TLPD programme; and will also consider a collaborative approach to the Pedagogy for Technical Teachers programme – although this latter element would be agreed after the lifetime of the project. Again, this will have positive benefits for the implementation of T Levels across GM for 2021. Practitioners in partner colleges have also been completing the Practitioner Self-Assessment module for Foundation On-Line – which has helped individuals to identify their own training needs. However, at this time, the project has not developed a mechanism to pull those results together, being personal to an individual practitioner. It will be considered that the self-assessment at organisational level is completed and reviewed amongst the partners to look at common areas of need and how a collaborative approach could support this – but this will likely occur after the current project lifetime has ended.

The creation of the Project Steering Group has provided a platform for curriculum senior managers across the GM GFE colleges to come together and commence collaboration around the implementation of T Levels. This should help ensure a more successful and consistent implementation for 2021, as well as establishing the basis for continued and improved partnership working across the colleges to the benefit of students.



*Members of the GMCG TRIP Practitioners Group*

## **Future activity to support T Level implementation and delivery**

*Please describe how you will take forward your project and put into practice learnings and findings from TRIP delivery.*

The project has identified the following actions to sustain the activity beyond the current TRIP, which will be shared with the GMCG Principals for consideration and approval:

- Maintain the existing Project Steering Group and Practitioners' Group to ensure that the outcomes and the learnings from the project have a continued and positive impact on the implementation of T Levels in GM for 2021
- Consider the extension of the project activity to the two other T Level routes – Health and Education – and run all four groups as separate standalone Practitioner Groups – but linked into the work of GMCA through Routes Ready
- Identify, recommend and action clear GM wide solutions to implementation following initial ideas generated through the project – e.g. collaborative delivery models, sharing of staffing resource, GM wide approach to sourcing industry placements, a collaborative approach to the Transition Year model, common entry requirements etc.
- Develop a GM wide TLPD plan to achieve economies of scale, enable continued collaboration and to complement individual college TLPD activity – focused on practitioner development and middle management development
- Ensure that T Level implementation forms part of college Quality Improvement Planning – with a particular focus on initially addressing the *Intent* element of Quality of Education under the Education Inspection Framework



## Recommendations for preparing for T Levels

*Please list some recommendations for the wider sector to support T Level preparedness.*

The project has identified the following recommendations for the wider sector to support readiness for T Levels:

- Start to engage with the content as early as possible to identify where there are variances to existing qualifications and what difficulties these may provide from a delivery and learning perspective
- Where possible, establish local / regional networks of practitioners to support joint practice development – this is particularly important for smaller institutions / departments who may have single subject teachers
- Identify any physical resource gaps from within the content and identify solutions – either capital or collaboration models – to ensure these are in place for delivery
- Ensure a clear organisational development plan is in place – for Governors, Managers, Practitioners and Support Staff – using the TLPD offer to support implementation
- Agree entry requirements and be clear on expectations for maths and English – many providers are moving towards a high grade in GCSE as being an *entry* requirement as opposed to an *exit* requirement – and the level of demand/difficulty of the T Level would seem to support this view
- Establish employer groups at a subject level who can support with the delivery of industry placements – as well as masterclasses, resources, staff updating etc. The Career Ready model is a highly successful, although little known, blueprint as a starting point
- Engage with wave 1 and 2 providers to gain insights into some of the practical considerations and solutions to implementation
- Ensure clear involvement with any local authority T Level developments – e.g. Gatsby Foundation Routes Ready – and representation on any working groups

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