EngineeringUK
INSPIRING FUTURES TOGETHER

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE INQUIRY: INTRODUCING T LEVELS

April 2025

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Public Accounts Committee inquiry: Introducing T Levels

EngineeringUK response to Public Accounts Committee call for evidence

Background on EngineeringUK

EngineeringUK is a not-for-profit organisation that works in partnership with the engineering community, including over 400 businesses, to ensure that the UK has the skilled engineering and technology workforce needed to create growth, spread opportunity, and deliver clean power. We directly reach over 120,000 young people each year with activities such as the Big Bang Programme, which is designed to excite them about the variety of opportunities presented by a career in modern engineering and technology.

EngineeringUK has welcomed the roll-out of engineering and technology-related T Levels over the past 5 years as a key solution to closing skills gaps and as a mechanism of simplifying the post-16 qualifications landscape. Our joint report with Make UK, 'Ensuring T Levels deliver the workforce of the future' (published in 2022), explored the outlook for engineering and manufacturing T Levels following their introduction and offered recommendations to help scale up the supply of employer industry placements.

This consultation response focuses on the 9 engineering and technology-related T Levels (of 21 in total) which have been rolled out to date:

- **Construction**: Building Services Engineering for Construction; Design, Surveying and Planning for Construction
- **Digital**: Digital Business Services; Digital Production, Design and Development; Digital Support Services
- **Engineering and Manufacturing**: Design and Development for Engineering and Manufacturing; Maintenance, Installation and Repair for Engineering and Manufacturing; Engineering, Manufacturing, Processing and Control

Response to NAO report and challenges identified

The NAO report highlights a series of difficulties in the roll-out of T Levels, such as lower-than-expected growth in uptake. For example, it refers to the fact that only 25,000 students enrolled in a T Level in September 2024, just over a third of the DfE's revised target of 60,000 (set in 2022).[1]

[1] NAO, Investigation into introducing T Levels (March 2025)

Engineering and technology-related T Levels are unlikely to be an exception to this trend, having accounted for around half of students completing their course in August 2024 (c. 3,600 students of 7,300 in total).[2]

Building on the NAO's findings, we want to draw the Committee's attention to the following challenges:

- **Work placements**: We are encouraged by the fact that over 95% of students who completed a T Level in 2024 fulfilled the 45-day requirement, though remain concerned by capacity constraints on teachers and employers limiting the expansion of placements. Indeed, the NAO report estimates there may be around 6,500 students per year without an industry placement by 2027/28, based on DfE's employer survey data. Polling conducted by EngineeringUK and Make UK in 2022 found that 44% of engineering and manufacturing employers cited lack of staff capacity as the main barrier to delivering T Level industry placements, followed by time commitments (41%). During employer focus groups convened as part of the same study, we also heard about challenges for students travelling long distances to work placements (with many engineering sites based in rural locations), as well as health and safety concerns in safety-critical industries such as nuclear and aerospace

- **Limited awareness among students and employers**: EngineeringUK's recent report – 'What teachers know and think about routes into engineering and technology' (published March 2025)- found promising signs that teacher awareness of T Levels is growing, with 89% of secondary and FE STEM teachers surveyed aware of the qualification, despite only a small fraction (11%) working in institutions offering T Levels.[3] Nonetheless, there is a major challenge for the DfE and schools to spread awareness of T Levels among students through careers advice, with Ofqual finding in August 2023 that up to 43% of students had no understanding of T Levels.[4] Meanwhile, many employers still have a weak understanding of the qualification, with EngineeringUK survey data of engineering and manufacturing employers in 2022 showing that whilst most had heard of T Levels, only 28% understood what they involved. Moreover, a large proportion of SMEs report not having heard of T Levels at all[5]

- **Excessive specialisation**: In engineering disciplines alone, there are 25 different specialism pathways in the engineering and manufacturing T Level, 26 specialism pathways in Construction and the Built Environment T Level, and 9 pathways in the digital T Level. T Levels are not competency-based qualifications like apprenticeships. Learners should be

[2] EngineeringUK, T Level results 2024 (August 2024)
[3] EngineeringUK, 'School report: What teachers know and think about engineering and technology' (March 2025)
[4] https://feweek.co.uk/dfes-spending-on-t-level-public-awareness-efforts-revealed/
[5] EngineeringUK and Make UK, 'Unlocking talent: ensuring T Levels deliver the workforce of the future' (October 2022)

able to build a broad base of technical knowledge across a range of subject areas, rather than a deep but narrow specialism in a specific area. Moreover, the large number of specialism pathways make it very difficult for FE colleges to deliver the provision. We are also concerned that the specialised nature of T Levels contributes to the gender divide, replicating the pattern observed in many apprenticeships

In light of these challenges, we suggest that the Government:

- Support STEM employers to scale up the supply of T Level industry placements by promoting examples of innovative best practice, such as large employers working with SMEs in their supply chains. In tandem, keep under review financial incentives for employers to support the provision of T Level industry placements, such as previously for SMEs via the Employer Support Fund (ended March 2024)

- Update IfATE's occupational maps (now overseen by Skills England) to reflect the position of T Levels alongside new vocational pathways, such as foundation apprenticeships, within the 16 to 19 qualifications landscape

- Build on previous marketing campaigns to spread awareness of T Levels and what they entail among prospective students, teachers, and parents. In particular, young people and parents must also be reassured of progression routes from T Levels into higher education and advanced apprenticeships

Gender-specific challenges in T Levels uptake

The NAO's analysis of T Levels and their progress so far, while expansive, overlooks the gender-specific challenges in the uptake of this qualification to date, and we would strongly encourage the Committee to consider this in the context of this inquiry.

Indeed, whilst the overall number of students completing T Levels in 2024 was relatively balanced (44% female), this masks a significant gender disparity across subjects. For example, just 9% of students completing an engineering and technology T Level in 2024 were female, falling as low as 2.8% for building services engineering.[6] This stands in contrast to other T Level subjects, such as education and early years (95% female) and health and science (85% female).[7] This is also significantly less than the proportion of engineering and technology apprentices who are female (17%) and STEM graduates (38% female).[8] Engineering and Technology T Levels also lag behind

[6] EngineeringUK, T Level results 2024 (August 2024)
[7] EPI (Nov 2024), student access and outcomes for T levels and the T level transition programme
[8] The Leading Countries Breaking Barriers For Women In STEM | CloudZero

STEM academic qualifications at Level 3 pathways, with 23.3% of the A Level physics cohort and 17.5% of those taking A Level computing cohort being young women in 2024.[9]

Currently, only 15.7% of the engineering and technology workforce are women. With demand for skilled engineers and technicians on the rise as highlighted in recent studies, encouraging more female students to pursue engineering and technology T Levels, alongside other technical and vocational pathways into this sector, will be essential to ensuring we can meet future workforce demands. Aside from the need to grow the numbers of young people entering the sector, improving the diversity of thought in the engineering and technology sector will support innovation, which is vital in this sector.

Engineering and technology T Levels have also struggled to attract students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. A recent report by the Education Policy Institute (EPI) found that the engineering and manufacturing pathway attracts the lowest proportion of disadvantaged students, at 19% of total students, compared to 29% for education and 27% for finance and accounting.[10]

More must be done to address this underrepresentation in the T Level pathway. The current lack of diversity in the field of engineering and technology creates significant societal inequity, limiting access for certain groups to jobs that are in demand and offer wages that are about a third higher than average.[11] Improved careers advice, information, and guidance (IAG) will be imperative to increasing the diversity of entrants to engineering and technology T Levels.

For more information, please reach out to James Gordon (Public Affairs Advisor). Our CEO, Dr Hilary Leevers, would be delighted to brief the Committee on our work.

[9] EngineeringUK, A level and Scottish Higher Results (August 2024)
[10] EPI (Nov 2024), student access and outcomes for T levels and the T level transition programme
[11] EngineeringUK, The Engineering and Technology Workforce (September 2024 update). "People working in engineering and technology occupations earned more on average than all other occupations at £39,163.74 gross pay."

Further notes in relation to our response to the Public Accounts Committee

Here are a few of our thoughts on why female participation in engineering and technology T Levels (9% of those completing their course in 2024 were female) is significantly lower than for engineering and technology apprenticeships (17%):

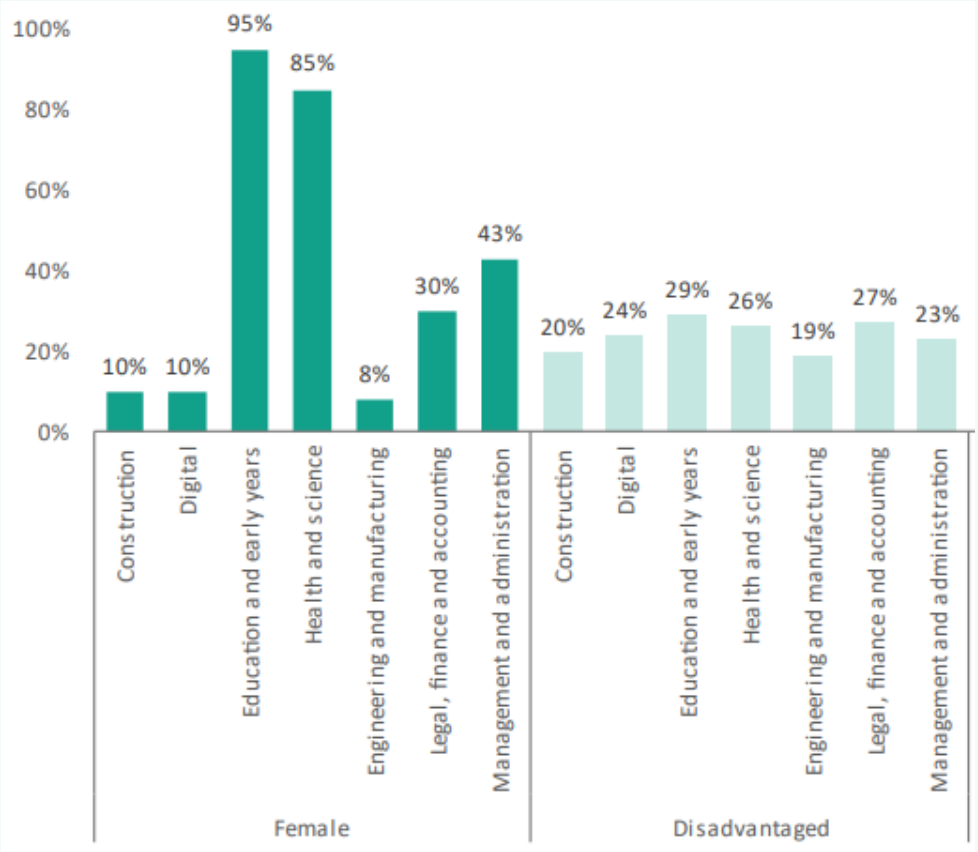
- T Levels are still a relatively new qualification, so it will take time for a culture shift (particularly among hard-to-reach groups, such as girls) to bed in. The latest data we have available is for the cohort that started a T Level in 2022 (the third year of roll-out) - since when enrolment has increase from c. 8,000 to 25,000 starters per year (as of AY 2024/25). Female starts in engineering and tech-related apprenticeships as a proportion of overall starts increased by 90% between 2017/18 and 2023/24, so we could see a similar increase over time

- The language used in T Level course titles and messaging may be off-putting for girls - for example, construction or manufacturing, which may be less appealing to KS4 girls as these are linked to traditionally male-dominated sectors

- It's worth noting that low female participation isn't a general issue across all T Levels; rather, it is specific to STEM courses. Female participation is 44% across all T Level pathways, and as high as 95% in education and early years and 9% in health and science (see graph below - from EPI paper). According to the Education Policy Institute (EPI), "these gender imbalances mirror those in employed occupations and sectors"; the same paper finds that girls were also 3% more likely to withdraw from their T Level course, rising to 6% for construction T Levels

- For engineering and technology apprenticeships, the data on gender divide (17%) is somewhat distorted by a higher proportional uptake of higher-level (Level 5 and above) apprenticeships by women. For entry-level (levels 2 and 3, equivalent to T Levels) the proportion is far lower. For example, female participation in engineering-related apprenticeships increased the most at levels 4 and 5 where the numbers have increased by 480% between 2017/18 and 2023/24 (source)

Proportion of T Level students by characteristics in select T Level pathways



In connection with this and in comparison with the other routes, here is a link to the Department for Education data on applied general qualifications (including BTECs): 'Student counts - vocational qualifications by subject and student characteristics (end of 16-18 study)' from 'A level and other 16 to 18 results'.