



Keele University are taking a proactive approach to planning how T-levels fit to benefit their organisation. We caught up with the team thinking about areas where the University can offer industry placements, and how they as an employer and a place of study can be involved in students' next steps on completion of a T-level.

Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your role?

My name's Andy Cotterill, I'm Head of Global Undergraduate Student Recruitment and Access here at Keele University. My team has taken the lead on T-levels across the university.

Can you give me some background about Keele University?

We describe ourselves as a medium-sized university in terms of student numbers; we've got over 12,500 students. We're 75 next year. The founding mission of the university was all around supporting the education of people for a changing world.

We're in North Staffordshire, just outside Newcastle-under-Lyme, and Stoke-on-Trent is our nearest city. These are areas where young people haven't traditionally gone on to higher education in huge numbers, but we are seeing a really positive shift in engagement. We have a real commitment to the local area, and the region as well – we have a lot of engagement with Staffordshire, Cheshire, Shropshire.

We've got three faculties: Health and Medical Sciences, Natural Sciences, and Social Sciences and Humanities. So we've got quite a diverse portfolio.

People are at the heart of our long-term strategy and how we recruit staff. We're trying to employ as diverse a range of people as we can and engage particular communities within our local area to show the opportunities here at Keele for training and development at different stages of people's careers.

We also try to make sure that we're supporting our local employers with their training and development needs.

Why do you think it would be good for the university to offer T-level industry placements?

I think there are a number of reasons why universities could and should do this. There's both a civic piece to it about how we engage our communities, but also a strategic element as well.

We are a big local employer with a diverse set of roles across our campus. We've got all sorts of different areas that other businesses may not have so we've got a wide variety of opportunities.

We want to think about how we keep our brilliant local young people. How do we show them that they can stay and lead happy and successful lives?

So if young people discover that we're a fantastic local employer with all these roles, they may want to work for us. And if they later chose to study with us and they had enjoyed the work they did on placement, they may then want to come back and work for us again. It's not just a nice thing to do, it also fits more broadly with our other priorities.

The other major strategic benefit is in enhancing our local relationships. Working closely with local T-level providers in partnership means that students have opportunities to see options from us as an employer as well as a place to study.

How has the university approached T-levels as entry requirements for degree programmes?

We have got dedicated T-level entry requirements for all of our programmes apart from medicine and veterinary science - though there is a route onto the foundation for medicine course with a T-level as well.

If you went to any of our undergraduate course webpages, you'll see exactly what we're looking for from particular T-levels and the grades required. Wherever we think there's not a legitimate barrier to entry, we've removed it at the admissions stage and tried to make the information as clear as possible. We road tested these criteria with a range of college and school partners. We're also really keen to hear from schools and colleges where we can make improvements to better suit the needs of their learners.

Which providers are you talking to about T-levels?

We've been talking about placements with City of Stoke Sixth Form College and Newcastle and Stafford College Group which are on our doorstep. We've then got a wider network of colleges that we engage with on all things T-level, from admissions to placements, where we host two roundtable discussions a year.

Which T-level routes are you looking at for placements?

We've started with Digital and Science, and we've also got teams interested in the Management and Administration pathways as they've got a range of business projects that they could do with some help on.

For Science we have a number of labs, and our local college is offering the lab technician occupational specialism. We've also got loads of research companies based on campus. So if Keele itself can host placements and get it right, we've got an expansion opportunity in the network that we could look at engaging from there.

What process are you going through to plan for placements?

I'd like to see us have a sizeable cohort of students on placement every year. I know that's ambitious but as the number becomes bigger the burden actually becomes smaller because we're only replicating what we're already doing. There is a scalable element to it all.

I've got an idea of what I would like to see, but I don't control the recruitment budgets and staff time of the departments so it's all about how we could support. So in future my team will take on some of the central liaison with the colleges, using our network to facilitate the right conversations. That will allow the departments to focus on the work and we can help with the rest.

I think the good thing is often that it's longer. We explain to colleagues here that placement students will actually do meaningful work. I think there's a fear of loads of paperwork getting in the way of the experience. But with that, and in terms of things like the health and safety and safeguarding, the colleges are super helpful. The team at Stoke gave us the pack that they send out to all their employers and it's got everything you'd expect such as risk assessment information. All we've got to do is think about them being under 18, which is not as complicated as someone who's under 16. Actually all of our staff do a mandatory safeguarding introduction, so it's the same training we already do.

Have you done any planning with departments to think about their progression routes and opportunities are and if they've got recruitment challenges that T-levels could help resolve?

This is something we're starting to think about. We've thought a lot around progression to study and whether the principle of a summer school as a prolonged engagement, which we know acts as a

recruitment tool for degree study, could also apply to industry placements as an extended introduction to employment here.

Feedback from the departments has been positive as well - when I spoke to our IT colleagues they said they're looking to write a multi-year workforce plan and T-levels would be a really good part of this.

We're trying to encourage students to use the placement as a shop window. Ultimately, if they love it, they might come. As an institution there's almost no loss. If they don't like the placement, but they like the university and want to study, great. If they love the placement and want a job here, great. We've always got two routes for them.

And to sum up, what knowledge and experiences would you want the students to take away with them - back into the classroom and into the rest of their life and career?

I'd want them to have a really positive picture of what one of the big local employers looks like. And I'd want them to know that there's somewhere on the doorstep that's all about their next step.

When they go back into the classroom, they will have developed a world of practical skills that they can apply back into their study that's of a really high industry standard and that they can use in applications for any job or further study. I think going away with an idea of where you want to go is a good outcome for a young person. And if they then go off to go elsewhere but feel more informed in doing that, that's a really positive thing for them working on their next steps. We can give them a great introduction to what work looks like, what study looks like, what a local option looks like.

I think done well, T-levels can be brilliant and I think we've got a duty to support young people going through them as an education sector, so I'd encourage other university teams to think really broadly about what you **can** do to help solve some of the challenges.

I do think that the network of people at universities who work with schools and colleges is massively underutilised in relation to placements because we think it's not our place, but it can be. We could say we won't worry about it; it's nothing to do with us. But the young people we work with are very much to do with us.

To find out more about how your organisation can get involved with T-level industry placements, visit: <https://employers.tlevels.gov.uk/hc/en-gb>