The National Skills Academy

FOOD & DRINK

T LEVEL TOOLKIT FOR EMPLOYERS IN THE FOOD & DRINK SECTOR

Securing Engineering and Manufacturing Talent

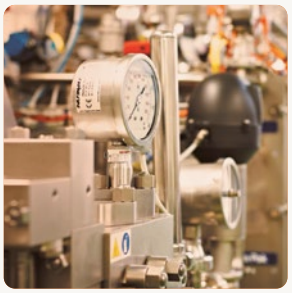
In partnership with GATSBY

INTRODUCTION

This toolkit is for food and drink employers. It explains how you can develop your technical talent pipeline by providing industry placements for T Level engineering and manufacturing students. It clearly explains the benefits and practicalities of industry placements using the real-life experiences of similar employers and provides guidance that is tailored to your business.

It also brings together and summarises essential information about industry placements specifically for food and drink employers, so you do not have to navigate the sea of general information available. The resources section includes links to all the key official websites that will help you.

This toolkit is based on the experiences, views and concerns shared with us – the National Skills Academy for Food & Drink (NSAFD) – by employers through interviews, surveys and meetings. We thank all those who generously gave their time to help us develop the evidence base for this resource. Special thanks go to the employers who have already hosted placements and whose valuable insights informed this advice.



WHAT ARE T LEVELS?

T Levels are a technical qualification for 16 to 19 year olds in England. These two-year courses are an alternative to A Levels and to apprenticeships. One T Level is equivalent to three A Levels.

A LEVELS

Subject-based qualifications

2 years at local college or school

T LEVELS

2-year technical programmes at local colleges, schools, training providers
80% classroom based
20% in a placement

Includes **industry placements** to build attitudes and behaviours and to develop practical skills

APPRENTICESHIP LEVEL 2/3

At least 8 months of work-based training

80% on the job
20% off the job

FOLLOWED BY POSSIBLE PROGRESSION TO

Higher education

Skilled employment

Higher/degree apprenticeship

Three post-GCSE education and training options

Technical qualifications are essential for developing the talent that businesses need to thrive. Engineering and manufacturing T Levels prepare young people to enter skilled occupations.

T Levels have been developed in partnership with employers. Because of this, they address the challenges employers face in recruiting skilled and committed technical staff.

Colleges, schools and other post-16 training providers deliver T Levels. The course is made up of 80% classroom learning and 20% industry placement.

Course content: T Levels in engineering and manufacturing are broad qualifications relevant to most engineering and manufacturing occupations, including those in the food and drink sector.

Each T Level includes a core component and an occupational specialism. Students also develop maths, English and digital skills relevant to the occupation.

Industry placements: A key part of T Levels is the industry placement. It gives students hands-on experience of working in the sector and the chance to put the knowledge and skills they learn in the classroom to practical use. The placement must be at least 315 hours (approximately 45 days) and can be with one employer or split across two if needed.

‘Hosting T Level students in industry placements has been highly beneficial: they bring strong technical knowledge, quickly become productive, and contribute real value to the business. Their presence also supports staff development, as employees enhance their leadership skills through mentoring and buddying’.

Gary Howard, General Manager, Redpack

Industry placement models: The format of placements can vary depending on your business needs. They can be completed in a single block, in multiple blocks, on a day-release basis or any other arrangement you agree with the school or college, and the student.

‘Our three-block placement model (two three-week blocks and one two-week block, totalling just over 315 hours) aligns well with business needs and allows students to gain deep experience across three different areas of the company’.

Kate Taylor, Apprentice and Early Careers Manager at ABP Food Group

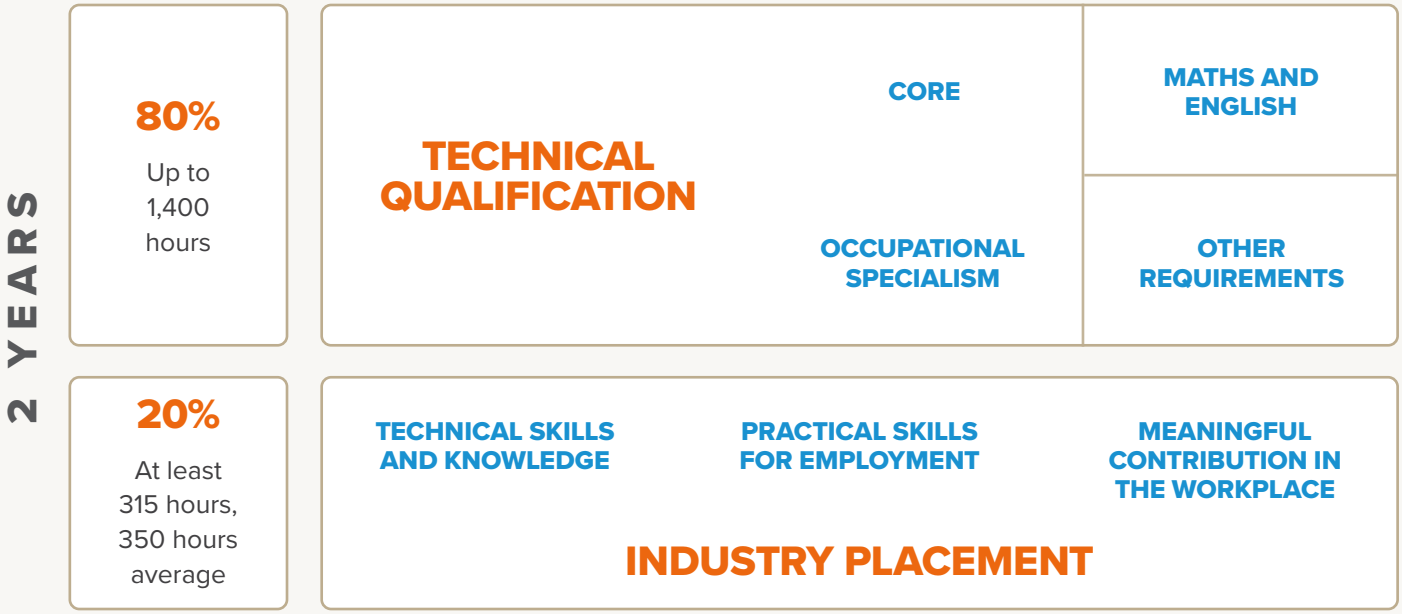
Progression: After completing a T Level in engineering and manufacturing, students can:

- enter employment in the engineering and manufacturing sector
- progress to higher education, such as an undergraduate degree or Higher Technical Qualification
- take an apprenticeship; this could be an intermediate, advanced, higher or even a degree apprenticeship.

T Levels are based on the same occupational standards as apprenticeships, so they provide significant prior learning towards an advanced or higher apprenticeship in a related subject or towards a higher technical qualification.

T Levels can also enable the student to take an accelerated apprenticeship, which recognise an individual’s prior learning or experience. For the employer they mean gaining a fully skilled member of staff in a shorter time frame and at less cost. For the student it is an excellent opportunity to progress to occupational competence.

ENGINEERING AND MANUFACTURING T LEVEL COURSE



T Level course structure

Schools and colleges plan their teaching to meet their specific needs, but it is usual for them to cover the core T Level content in the first year and the occupational specialism element of the course in the second year. We strongly recommend that you talk to your local T Level provider to find out how they deliver T Levels.

There are three engineering and manufacturing T Levels:

- maintenance, installation and repair for engineering and manufacturing
- engineering, manufacturing, processing and control
- design and development for engineering and manufacturing.

All three T Levels have the same core component that all students study. The core component subjects are:

- working within the engineering and manufacturing sectors
- engineering and manufacturing: past, present and future
- engineering representations
- essential mathematics for engineering and manufacturing
- essential science for engineering and manufacturing
- materials and their properties
- mechanical principles
- electrical and electronic principles
- mechatronics
- engineering and manufacturing control systems
- quality management
- health and safety principles and coverage
- business, commercial and financial awareness
- professional responsibilities, attitudes and behaviours
- stock and asset management
- continuous improvement
- project and programme management.

Each T Level also has occupational specialisms. Students choose one specialism to study.

Design and development for engineering and manufacturing	Maintenance, installation and repair for engineering and manufacturing	Engineering, manufacturing, processing and control
• mechanical engineering • structural engineering • control and instrumentation engineering • electrical and electronic engineering	• maintenance engineering technologies: mechanical • maintenance engineering technologies: mechatronic • maintenance engineering technologies: control and instrumentation • maintenance engineering technologies: electrical and electronic • maintenance, installation and repair: light and electric vehicles	• fitting and assembly technologies • machining and toolmaking technologies • composite manufacturing technologies • fabrication and welding technologies

BENEFITS OF INDUSTRY PLACEMENTS

Employers who have hosted industry placements highlighted multiple benefits.

Visibility: Industry placements promote your industry to a wide pool of motivated young people who may not otherwise consider working in the food and drink sector, two years before they enter the jobs market or go into higher education or apprenticeships.

Talent spotting for future roles: Industry placements create a pool of potential future staff who are already familiar with your company's culture and operations.

'As a leading UK food producer, we believe it is really important to grow our future talent pipeline. Qualifications with work-based placements like T Levels can help to source committed and engaged future staff with the skills our business needs'.

Sam Foster, Group Talent Acquisition Officer at Cranswick PLC

Developing existing staff: Mentoring industry placement students gives your staff an opportunity to develop their leadership and managerial skills. It enhances their professional growth and benefits their teams.

Demonstrating commitment to the community: Providing placements shows your commitment to investing in local talent and it strengthens your corporate social responsibility profile. The closer relationships with schools and colleges that come from working with them on placements also provide access to a local talent pool, benefiting both the community and your business.

Recruitment onto apprenticeship programmes: Hosting a T Level engineering and manufacturing student means you can assess if they would be suited to an apprenticeship in the future, like the level 3 food and drinks maintenance engineer apprenticeship.

'We were thrilled to welcome back three talented T Level students from Shrewsbury College, who had completed their industry placements with ABP, to join the company as engineering apprentices'.

Kate Taylor, Apprentice and Early Careers Manager at ABP Food Group

Additional support and resources: T Level engineering and manufacturing students can help your teams complete tasks more efficiently. They can contribute to daily operations and projects and ease the workload for your staff.

Benefiting from specific skills and knowledge: Students bring fresh perspectives and up-to-date technical skills, which can energise your team and contribute to innovation.

> **'The best thing about hosting T Level students is they bring new ideas and enthusiasm to the team. The T Level students come and say: "Why can't we try this?" It's refreshing and is a good challenge for us'.**
>
> Gary Howard, General Manager at Redpack

PLACEMENTS IN PRACTICE

Some tasks in food and drink businesses, like handling large-scale equipment, can seem unsuitable for a T Level industry placement student. When we spoke to other engineering and manufacturing employers who were new to hosting industry placements, they told us some concerns they had had before the placements started. Most of them are easily addressed with access to the right guidance and support and by taking a few practical actions. We've shared the concerns and addressed each one here.

Working with under-18s: These concerns usually stem from health and safety considerations and can be worked out once you know what tasks the student will be doing. There are very few legal restrictions on what young people can do in the workplace and they are mainly about exposure to harmful agents, such as radiation or toxic substances. Treat your placement student the same as a new staff member or apprentice by giving them an induction that includes health and safety training and information about navigating the site safely, alongside some context of how the industry works. You may need to carry out a risk assessment for young people at work. The Health and Safety Executive provide really helpful guidance on young people at work.

Insurance requirement: If the student's work is part of normal business practice and you have employer liability insurance with a member of the Association of British Insurers or Lloyds, the student is treated as an employee for insurance purposes. If you are not sure, ask your insurance company. You will need to tell your insurer about the industry placement because it lasts longer than two weeks.

Student supervision: Tasks that need some supervision at first can quickly become independently managed: so students will boost the workforce capacity. Depending on the task, students can be supervised by apprentices or junior members of staff, with senior staff overseeing the overall placement.

Safeguarding: Schools and colleges are responsible for the safeguarding and welfare of students on industry placements – but you need to work with them. You do not need to get all your staff DBS checked. The school or college will guide you through any safeguarding requirements, and if one or two key staff members need to be DBS checked, your provider can tell you if funding is available.

Covering the course on the placement: There are no mandatory learning outcomes for placements, and you do not have to give students experience of everything covered on their course. The placement is about giving students practical experience and developing their skills. Students are assessed through employer feedback, logbooks and showing that they can apply the skills and knowledge they are learning.

CASE STUDY: ABP FOOD GROUP

ABP Food Group has more than 14,000 employees working in 50 locations across the UK and Europe. It is one of Europe's leading food processors, supplying quality beef to thousands of customers worldwide.

ABP has a well-established early careers programme that includes apprenticeships and graduate opportunities. They quickly recognised the potential opportunities of T Level industry placements, particularly for supporting the engineering and manufacturing areas of the business.

The company worked closely with Shrewsbury College and Yeovil College, both close to ABP sites, to develop a firm understanding of the T Level in engineering and manufacturing and see how it fitted with their business. This led to an initial offering of four student industry placements across two sites.

They created a placement delivery model with three blocks: two weeks in June, three weeks in September and a final three weeks in the following January. ABP felt this worked best because it gave students a more immersive and realistic experience of the workplace in different areas of the business but could also be tailored to the individual student's interests.

Week One: 16th – 20th June		
	Department	**Time**
Monday	Induction Day	08:45
Tuesday	Abattoir	05:00 – 13:30
Wednesday	Abattoir	05:00 – 15:30
Thursday	Abattoir	08:30 – 17:00
Friday	Boning Hall	08:30 – 17:00

Week Two: 23rd – 27th June		
	Department	**Time**
Monday	Boning Hall	07:00 – 15:30
Tuesday	Boning Hall	05:00 – 13:30
Wednesday	Retail	05:00 – 13:30
Thursday	Retail	07:00 – 15:30
Friday	Retail	08:30 – 17:00

Day 1 – Monday 16th June
On your first day on site, you'll be completing the site induction with our training team. Please arrive at ABP Shrewsbury for **8.45am**. Your induction will take place from **9am for the day**.

Day 2 – Onwards
As mentioned when we met last month, the team has created a fantastic plan that will give you exposure to our manufacturing sites. Please review the above timings and ensure that you're happy with them and that you're able to get to the site for the start time each day. The plan has been designed so that you're able to see both the start-up and shutdown of the processes in the abattoir, boning butchery hall and retail packing.

What to Bring
Please remember to bring your ID with you on your first day, as our security team will need to see it on arrival. Alongside that, please bring a copy of your passport and National Insurance (NI) number. This can be the official paperwork you received when you got your NI number, a payslip, or a P45 or P60 document.

What to Wear
Full PPE will be provided for the duration of your placement with us. However, please come appropriately dressed for being on site in a chilled environment. We recommend that you wear workwear-style trousers and bring a fleece for when you're in the factory.

Example of onboarding guidance for students with ABP Food Group

‘My advice to any employer starting their T Level journey is don’t rush into it – take time to develop a good relationship with your provider, understanding how they deliver T Levels and the type of students studying with them. Allow time to plan with the provider and within your organisation – getting the buy-in of your engineering managers and teams is crucial to success’.

Kate Taylor, Apprentice and Early Careers Manager at ABP Food Group

After a thorough health and safety briefing about the environment and machinery used in the business, all students spent time with the site services engineers and helped fix machine breakdowns.

They were also shown the end-to-end processes involved in meat production: from the abattoir, boning and butchery, through to packaging and retail. The focus was on power supplies, energy sources, the intricacies of operation and understanding the process flow. This meant some early starts and late finishes for the students. Full personal protective equipment was provided, but students were asked to dress for work in a cool environment: warm fleeces were essential.

At the end of each placement block, the students presented their work to the engineering managers and college staff, demonstrating their understanding of the engineering processes and machinery used in specific areas of the business. They also worked to complete a technical project by the end of the final placement block. The project had to show tangible benefits to the company. This was a demanding task for the students, but they all fully engaged and contributed to the challenge, resulting in impressive final reports and presentations. One team proposed introducing specialist technology into production machinery, potentially saving the company more than £1,000 a year – a great result!

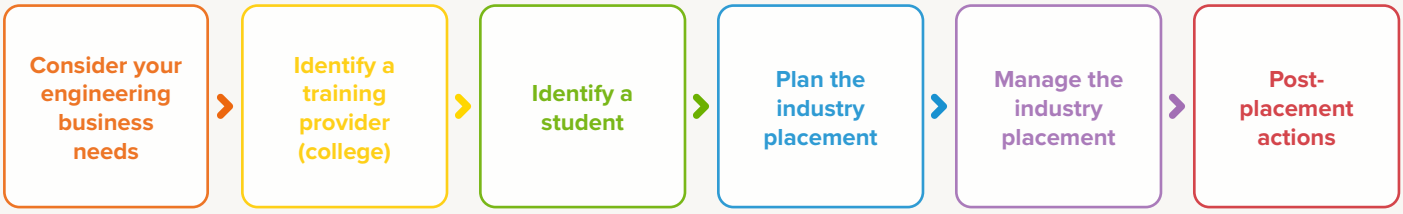
The industry placement provided other long-term benefits by supporting ABP’s workforce pipeline:

‘I like the concept of acquiring industrial experience along with the theory/ knowledge required in the classroom. Additionally, you can start building relationships with an employer in the field of work you are studying. Once I have completed the qualification, I hope to begin an apprenticeship with ABP’.

Loan Davies, T Level student in design and development for engineering and manufacturing: electrical and electronic engineering

Loan with fellow T Level student Laith

THE T LEVEL INDUSTRY PLACEMENT PROCESS



The T Level industry placement process

Consider your engineering business needs

Before you offer an industry placement, think about your current business needs, but also what you will need in five years or so. Consider which engineering and manufacturing roles and occupations you might want to recruit for, and what skills your business, your supply chains and the wider sector need to develop. This will help you identify the tasks and areas of work in your engineering function where a student can add the most value to your business, while also being a rewarding industry placement for them.

Identify a training provider

Next, find the right T Level provider to link with. If you offer apprenticeships or work experience, you may already have a relationship with local schools, colleges or other post-16 providers. Ask what their plans for industry placements and T Levels are. Or you could take this as an opportunity to connect with other providers in your local area.

If you need help, we can help you connect with your local college, visit our NSAFD website or email us at info@nsafd.co.uk. You can also use the DfE's online tool find a T Level school or college.

You do not need to wait until you have everything in place before you contact a local school, college or provider. It is often best to get in touch early to allow time for the right conversations.

Providers will advise you on:

- which T Level engineering and manufacturing subjects they offer
- their goals and objectives and how your industry placement fits into this
- how to work out the best placement model, whether that is day release, a block (single or multiple), a mixed approach or having the placement at a specific time of year
- how they will help you design the placement
- what documentation is needed and whether they provide templates and checklists, for example, for induction, health and safety and progress reviews
- the checks that take place to make sure the placement is going well
- how students are prepared for the placement, for example, being told the behaviours expected of them and the importance of turning up on time
- how they will work with you to support students when they are in their placements
- how you will review the student's progress with them.

Establishing a good relationship with your provider is key to successful industry placements. Get to know the relevant head of department and the employer engagement staff – we can help you with this.

To help both parties understand each other better, invite them to your workplace so they get a feel for your business and visit the school or college so you can understand how they deliver engineering and manufacturing T Levels and see some of the work students get involved with.

Identify a student

Finding the right student for your industry placement is similar to finding the right person for a full-time role. Tell the training provider about any skills and knowledge you need the student to have before the placement.

The student will build on this foundation during their industry placement with you, as they learn the practices and regulations specific to your organisation.

The provider will find the students that are a good fit for the engineering and manufacturing aspects of your business based on what you tell them. You can then choose the right person for your business.

Consider a selection process along these lines:

- **Write a clear role description for the industry placement:** The provider can help with this and might be able to provide a template. Describe your organisation, the student's role and responsibilities and the kind of person you want for the industry placement. Include the skills the student will learn during the placement.
- **Ask for applications:** This helps you choose students with a genuine interest in your industry and gives students an opportunity to test their CV and application skills.
- **Assess the student applications:** As with any application to join your organisation, you may want to consider each application before taking it any further.
- **Organise a taster session:** To give students the opportunity to learn about your industry, why not ask those interested to spend a day or half day at your business to see what you do and to experience the environment.
- **Interview the student applicants:** You can most likely do this with the education provider. Interviewing the students helps them practise their interview skills. Some young people will not have had expert help to prepare and may be a bit anxious about doing an industry placement. Consider what you can do to help them feel relaxed and confident enough to show you their best during the recruitment process.
- **Tell the education provider your decision:** Once you have selected the candidate(s) you want for your placement, allow time for the student(s) to confirm their acceptance, either to you or the education provider.

'We were sent CVs from the students and then offered the students the opportunity to go through an interview, short assessment and tour of the workplace. It was slightly more informal than a usual interview process, but it gave both the students and us a valuable experience ... MK College Group were brilliant, really supportive'.

Janet Marshall, Senior Talent and Development Business Partner at Cranfield University

Plan the industry placement

Your provider will guide you through every step to plan a successful industry placement. When you identified a training provider you told them about your industry, so they can now work with you to create documentation detailing the learning opportunities for the placement. They can show you example templates for the objectives used in similar industry placements. They can also share examples of projects you can set for your industry placement students and give you tips on planning them.

The following table shows what to expect from your training provider and what will be expected of you.

What your training provider will do before the placement:	What you need to do before the placement:
• Carry out the required health and safety checks. • Make sure necessary safeguarding checks and procedures are in place. • Check the right insurance is in place. • Work with you to draw up a formal plan with the detail of the placement, including the learning goals and objectives for the student. • Discuss how to support any students with special educational needs or disabilities.	• Assign a willing and capable supervisor(s) for the student. • Identify necessary equipment and its access. • Prepare a workplace induction that includes health and safety procedures (include anything specific to your business, such as machinery or processes), company policies and team introductions – similar to a new employee induction. • Review the legal and policy requirements that need to be in place, including health and safety, safeguarding and insurance. • Agree what happens when the student starts their placement and what your expectations of the placement are, these will be shared with the student before the placement starts.

Manage the industry placement

You may be pleasantly surprised at how straightforward it is to manage T Level industry placements. The school or college will be with you every step of the way.

What your training provider will do during the placement:	What you need to do during the placement:
• Monitor the placement by visiting or calling you and the student at agreed times. • Conduct regular reviews with the student and their supervisor to monitor their progress and address any concerns. • Carry out formal mid-placement and end-of-placement reviews to capture the student's learning and provide feedback to the student. • Be available to address any questions or concerns.	• Give the student a variety of tasks to support them to achieve their placement objectives. • Consider supporting the student with a mentor or other member of staff. • Provide regular feedback so that the student can improve. • Give the student time to update their placement logbook. • Check and sign-off student timesheets and logbooks weekly. • Contribute to student review meetings. • Tell the school or college about any successes or concerns so they can provide support. • Look after the health, safety and wellbeing of the student and ensure compliance with the Equalities Act 2010, in the same way you would for all employees.

‘The T Levels guidance made the process much easier for us as an employer and helped us navigate the whole placement positively. Shrewsbury College were excellent, offering consistent support throughout’.

Kate Taylor, Apprentice and Early Careers Manager at ABP Food Group

Post-placement actions

To maximise the benefits of hosting an engineering and manufacturing T Level industry placement for both the student and your business, there are several steps you can take after the placement. We have included some suggestions.

Explore immediate opportunities:

- Consider extending the placement if it suits you and the student.
- Offer the student part-time or holiday work while they are studying.

Consider long-term recruitment:

- Evaluate the possibility of offering the student a permanent role after they complete their education. This could be straight after their T Level course if you have a suitable vacancy.
- Explore the possibility of offering the student an apprenticeship to support their progression in your workforce.

Work with the school or college:

- Review the placement experience to identify what went well and what could be improved for future placements.
- Consider offering placements for the next cohort of T Level engineering and manufacturing students.

‘The student’s gone to university, and so we’re keeping in contact. They’re part of our alumni, so we keep in contact with them until they’re ready to join … In university, they can come to us as a summer intern and once they’ve finished, they can come to us as a graduate, potentially’.

Leigh Maxwell, Employment and Skills Partner at Thames Water

Not ready to commit to an industry placement yet?

Consider speaking to your local T Level engineering and manufacturing provider about giving a talk about your organisation or hosting a site visit. This is valuable to students and gives you an insight into their skills and the course with minimal commitment.

RESOURCES AND LINKS

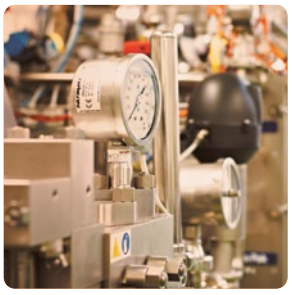
We have collected trusted guidance to help employers who want to offer industry placements.

Resource	Link
General information about T Levels and industry placements and support to help embed these in your business from the National Skills Academy for Food & Drink	Contact the National Skills Academy for Food & Drink
General information about T Levels and industry placements from DfE	About T Levels and industry placements
Specific information for engineering and manufacturing placements from DfE	Industry placement models for engineering and manufacturing
Guide for employers who want to host a placement from DfE	T Level industry placements employer guide
Search for T Level providers near you (DfE)	Find a T Level school or college
Guidance on working well with the education provider from DfE	Working with the right school, college or other provider
What you have to do and what the education provider will do to make sure placements are safe, compliant and successful (DfE)	Legal compliance for industry placements
Guidance on planning the industry placement from DfE	Selecting projects and tasks for an engineering and manufacturing industry placement Engineering and manufacturing route: Example industry placement objective templates Industry placement delivery approach examples
Induction checklist for employers to use to support students from DfE	Day 1 induction checklist
Advice on how to mentor students on industry placement from DfE	Effective mentoring for industry placement students
Gatsby Charitable Foundation also provide support and guidance for anyone who wants to mentor students on an industry placement	Support for industry placement mentors
Information on where a T Level in engineering and manufacturing can lead from Skills England	Occupational map for engineering and manufacturing

Resource	Link
Information on where a T Level in engineering, manufacturing, processing and control can lead from Skills England	T Level in engineering, manufacturing, processing and control: The progression profile
Information on where a T Level in maintenance, installation and repair for engineering and manufacturing can lead from Skills England	T Level in maintenance, installation and repair for engineering and manufacturing: The progression profile
Information on where a T Level in design and development for engineering and manufacturing can lead from Skills England	T Level in design and development for engineering and manufacturing: The progression profile

Note: This booklet was written in February 2026. For the latest guidance visit the government website on how to discover your future workforce.

We have also drawn on material from trusted sources, which are listed below. We thank them for supporting our initiative to raise awareness and engagement in the food and drink sector:



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