

NON-VERBATIM MINUTE

DETAILS

- DATE:** Wednesday 21st July 2021
- TIME:** 14:00-15:00
- METHOD:** Zoom Meeting
- THEME:** Widening Opportunity
- CHAIR:** The Rt. Hon. Damian Hinds MP
- SPEAKERS:** The Rt. Hon. Damian Hinds MP, Former Education Secretary and APPG Chair
Mo Wiltshire, Director of Education and Youth at Stonewall
5 T Level students - Amandeep, Eshana, Leah, Maya, and Niall
- PARLIAMENTARY ATENDEES:** Toby Perkins MP, Lord Lucas, Jane Hunt MP, Nick Fletcher MP, Baroness Morris of Yardley, Damian Hinds MP

MINUTES

1. Introduction

Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for T Levels, The Rt. Hon. Damian Hinds MP, welcomed speakers and attendees to the virtual meeting of the APPG for T Levels and explained that the focus of this meeting would be the role that T Levels can play in widening opportunities for young people. He noted that there would be contributions from students themselves later in the meeting, who would speak to their own experiences studying T Levels, one year in. He also welcomed Mo Wiltshire, joining us from LGBTQ+ advocacy charity, Stonewall.

The Chair informed attendees that there had been a last-minute change of speaker, as David Johnston OBE MP, former Chief Executive of the Social Mobility Foundation, who had been due to speak at this meeting had to withdraw earlier in the day so that he could present a Ten Minute Rule Bill. The Chair informed attendees that he would provide opening remarks in the place of David Johnston OBE MP.

2. The Rt. Hon. Damian Hinds MP, Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for T Levels, and Former Secretary of State for Education

Damian Hinds introduced himself, stating that he had previously chaired the APPG for Social Mobility, and previously sat on the Education Select Committee, as well as his work as Education Secretary, and now as Chair of the APPG for T Levels. He said that he would discuss some broad observations on T levels, widening opportunity and social mobility, some key factors for success, and some of the of the issues which must be worked through.

He stated that T Levels were first and foremost about employment and employability, as qualifications co-designed with employers. He said that employers are concerned with behaviours, as well as skills and academic learning in English, Mathematics, and Digital capabilities, all of which are key components of T Levels. He also spoke of the importance of real industry experience in T Levels, as it provides a “foot in the door” with employers,

provides workplace experience to demonstrate on a C.V., and provides an opportunity to build 'soft' workplace skills.

He then discussed parity of esteem in qualifications, and how technical qualifications must be on a quality on par with academic qualifications. He noted that this is difficult to achieve, and requires ongoing work, and is why students should be convinced the qualification is worth more time in college and in class. He then said that clarity and communication about the qualification is important for employers, and that, for social mobility, T Levels students must have options available to them, be that work, university, or higher technical qualifications. He also discussed the transition year as an 'innovation', which gives young people time to explore their interests for a large core qualification.

He spoke about some of the policy issues regarding widening opportunity and social mobility, and stated that advice and guidance is key. While this must come through schools, it's also vital that careers information and discussion comes through parents. The second issue he identified was sufficiency of industrial places, as students need access to quality work experience placements in the sector of their choice, regardless of where they live, and suggested that this would require a certain responsibility for businesses to take on students.

3. Mo Wiltshire, Director of Education and Youth at Stonewall

Damian introduced Mo, Director of Education and Youth at the UK's biggest LGBTQ+ charity, Stonewall. Mo introduced herself and stated that she uses she/her pronouns. She then provided historical context of LGBTQ+ discrimination in education in the UK, as Stonewall was formed to oppose section 28, which prohibited the promotion or presentation of homosexuality as a "*pretended family relationship*" in schools. She said that the legacy of this legislation lives on in education, and rethinking qualifications provides an opportunity for positive innovation. She said that Stonewall work with over 1600 workplaces, many of whom are apprenticeship providers and are likely to be industrial placement providers within the new T levels, and also work alongside schools, colleges and local authorities to create freedom and equity for all to access their potential.

She said that Stonewall commission research on the experiences of LGBTQ+ community as part of their work, and noted their five-yearly School and College Report, and also their one-off report, *Shut Out*, which looks at the experiences of LGBTQ+ people not in education, training or work. She then gave some results of this research, saying that 45% of LGBTQ+ young people, and 64% of trans young people, have experienced bullying at school, and half do not feel able to tell an adult. This experience generally improves as students progress through the education system, but for LGBTQ+ students in sixth forms and college settings, 16% report regular bullying. She stated that two thirds of LGBTQ+ college students said that teachers only sometimes or never challenge homophobic or transphobic language when they heard it, and that two thirds of those who had been bullied said this had a fundamentally negative effect on their plans for continuing education.

Mo said that in FE colleges, greater emphasis on self-direction has consequences in personal choice for behaviours, perception of less structure perception or oversight and less visible support services. As such, that transition from school into college is a pivotal moment where a number of young people not in education, training or work left the system. She noted the importance of learning from the existing experience of the education sector. For T Levels, with the blend of classroom based learning and industrial placements, she said we should explore a joined-up approach, ensuring that LGBT+ young people are supported by all those around them. She emphasised the importance of pastoral, mental health and safeguarding support that is LGBTQ+ inclusive so that there are no additional barriers for young people seeking help.

She said that T Levels provide a fantastic opportunity for LGBTQ+ students, as mass provision of large-scale industrial placements gives a chance to break down perceived stereotypes in relation to different professions, by taking those principles of inclusivity from educational experiences into wider sectors. This has the potential to transform inclusion and social mobility in the actual sectors where the placements are taking place. She noted the importance of designing inclusion into the process from the start, and ensuring this happens in placements as well. This means embedding anti-bullying approaches, pastoral support, safeguarding, mental health support, and careers guidance that is LGBTQ+, inclusive, as well as working with providers in industrial placements to create frameworks to ensure that help for those young people who need it is signposted.

4. T Level Student Panel

Damian thanked Mo for her contribution, and introduced the three students from Walsall College, Leah, Amandeep, Eshana and Maya, from Grimsby Institute, and Niall from Fareham College. He then invited them each to speak for about what they are studying, why, their experiences, and what they want to do in the future with their T Level qualification.

4.1. Amandeep

Amandeep introduced himself as a student of T Level construction, design, surveying and planning at Walsall College. He said that he had chosen the course due to the broad coverage of the construction industry, and the 45-day placement with Balfour Beatty, which he felt had given him insight into working for an established company, allowing him to learn current methods of working, and insight as to what they are looking for in future employees. He highlighted that the academic element is broad, covering everything from law to science to building technology, which he has also enjoyed. He said the course has made him aware of different jobs in the industry, and what they entail, which has been formative in career planning. He said that he wanted to pursue a future career as an architect, and has had the opportunity to use architecture software through his course.

4.2. Leah

Leah also studies the T Level in construction, design, surveying and planning at Walsall College, and stated that she was not sure what she wanted to do in the future upon leaving school. She didn't want to go to sixth form, but wanted to be challenged. She found the course through the college website, and was mostly attracted to the 45 day placement offer. She said that she hopes to be a quantity surveyor, and had just completed a placement at Balfour Beatty, which she said made her feel like an adult in the working environment. She said she really valued the combination of placement and college hours, and that placement had given her a sense of direction for what she would be doing after college.

4.3. Eshana

Eshana said that she also studied the T level in construction, and that she chose it because she didn't wish to follow a traditional, solely academic route. She is interested in design and architecture, and feels that the course has opened her eyes to opportunities she didn't realise were there. She said her placement had given her an insight of how the working world operates, and has helped her weigh up what she wants to do in the future.

4.4. Maya

Maya introduced herself as a T Level Childcare and Education student from Grimsby Institute. She said that she enjoys the balance of T Level study, which has allowed her to build relationships in the classroom that would not be available through solely theoretical study.

She said that placement had showed her different kinds of experience and ways that her theory work could be put into practice. She said she valued that T Levels have been designed alongside employers, and that she eventually wants to become an art teacher.

5.5. Niall

Niall said that he is studying the digital production, design and development T Level course at Fareham College, and that he mostly studies software development. He said that he chose the course because it gave him the chance to do work placement, but also to go to university eventually. He said that he has really enjoyed both his lectures and his work placement, and that he is now looking at both university courses and apprenticeships. He said that he had only decided to look into apprenticeships after a good experience during his T Level placements.

5. Q&A

Damian thanked the students for their contributions, and invited questions for the speakers from attendees.

The first question came from AECOM's Hilary Jeffery, who asked what the students would have ended up doing if T Levels had not existed, and what challenges they think this would have presented. Maya replied that, if not for T Levels, she would have studied a different qualification in childcare, though this may have created a more difficult route to where she eventually wants to be. Damian invited a response from Bethany, another student who was attending, but had not spoken in the initial panel. Bethany also said that she would have taken a different level 3 course in childcare, but that her T Level had helped her to get a summer job in her chosen industry, and that she believed that an alternative course would not have helped her to get her foot in the door in this way. Niall said that he would have also taken a level 3 course and so felt he would have missed out on a work placement. Amandeep said that he would have gone to sixth form, and studied subjects that such as art and design that relate to his chosen career path, though with much less specificity.

The next question came from Lord Lucas, who asked how university courses such as architecture, which have historically required A Level Maths, have responded to T Levels. There was also a question from Steve Waterstone, asking if any of the T Level students intended on going to university. Niall said that many university courses had not yet published entry requirements that included T Levels, and were focussed more on BTEC qualifications. This had created difficulty, as he was unsure which courses he was eligible for. Amandeep added that he was not concerned, about this, as the T Level is a full Level 3 qualification which includes study of maths.

Bob Millington asked if it was possible to secure T Level placements in SMEs. Damian said this was possible, and asked if any students had done so. Maya said that she had completed placements in primary schools and small local nurseries. Damian suggested that it can be easier to secure a large number of placements from larger companies such as Balfour Beatty. It takes more time to engage with lots of small employers to secure enough placements, but this is an area of focus for many colleges.

Nuala Burgess asked what the in class components of the course were like, and how students found the English and Maths. Amandeep said that, on his construction course they had not covered as much English, but that the maths component had been quite challenging. Niall said that his digital course involves two hours of maths and one hour of English each week. The subjects are taught with a view to application, with English classes on writing in the workplace, and maths classes on tax, for example.

Damian asked the students how big a part of the learning is focussed on digital skills, computer skills ICT skills, and how useful they find this. Leah said that this is something she does everyday on her construction course. She also said that they study maths within construction, and that English is incorporated into the rest of the course. Damian then asked how they found the academic study in the course, and if it felt this was a natural extension of school study. Leah said that there were varying abilities in English and Maths within the course, but that this had been exaggerated by the disruption her year group had faced whilst finishing school during the pandemic. She said that a major difference was that English and Maths were not treated as discrete subjects, but were incorporated into other elements of study.

Francisca Von Blumenthal asked what the T Level students wish to do once their course finishes if they don't want to go to university. Leah said she would like to do a university apprenticeship, so she can study part time while working. Bethany said she was hoping to go directly to employment, but had also not ruled out further study.

Damian noted that there had been a number of questions on other level 3 qualifications. He said that there was an ongoing review of the Level 3 landscape, and that questions remain about the long-term plans for other qualifications. He said that there have been previous issues in the education system when trying to add things on without taking anything away, meaning a simpler, more streamlined set of qualifications never emerges.

Damian then asked the students whether post-COVID 19, opportunities should remain for virtual or part virtual placements and distance placements. Niall said that he had completed a blended placement, part virtual and part in office, and he thought this was a good idea as it reflected broader trends in the workforce.

Hilary Jeffrey from AECOM asked whether students see their connection with their placement organisation continuing after the placements, and if they would consider applying for a job there in the future. Amandeep said that Balfour Beatty would open applications for former placement students for a degree level apprenticeship, which is four years blended work and university study, and that he would certainly apply for this. He said that he had experience of working there, and had built relationships with the employees. Bethany added that she had loved her placement in a small nursery, and would certainly apply to work there.

Damian said that the message needed to be communicated to employers that placements are an opportunity to invest in the future and draw in talent. He mentioned that Mo Wiltshire had discussed gender stereotypes in certain jobs, and he then asked her how it can be communicated to all young people what opportunities and placements are available to them. Mo said that this was being explored by the Apprenticeship Diversity Champions network, and that the first, and most important issue, is to ensure that all students are able to equally access positive and fulfilling placements. She also said information, advice and guidance must be appropriately resourced so that positive case studies can be gathered and shared.

Damian mentioned some other questions about spreading awareness of T Levels, and asked the students how they had come to find their courses. Maya said that it was communicated to her by her college when applying for another course, and while she was not initially familiar with T Levels, the college took the time to explain what the course was.

Damian then asked the students to give one sentence on the benefit of T Levels, based on their own experience. Niall said it was the combination of A Level style academic knowledge, alongside industrial placement, benefitting students as they transition towards work. Bethany said that it was the placement hours, and that the course was developed alongside employers.



Damian finally asked the students what they felt could and should be better about their T Levels experience. Amandeep said that the first year of the course was more theoretical, and that a better balance throughout the course would make it more enjoyable. Niall agreed, though acknowledged that this had been complicated by COVID-19.

6. Conclusion

Damian drew the session to a close, and thanked all the speakers and the attendees, and in particular, the Parliamentarians who attended. He highlighted the next meeting of the APPG for T Levels, which will take place on the 15th of September, marking one year of T Levels. He also noted *T Level Week* from the 13th to 17th, September, and encouraged Parliamentarians to engage and visit providers. He also thanked the APPG's sponsors, AECOM, the Education and Training Foundation, and The Gatsby Charitable Foundation, as well as Connect for their work as the Secretariat. The meeting then drew to a close.