



Deposited via The University of Leeds.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/143669/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Peake, R (Cover date: Dec 2018) 'We are not all equal!': Raising achievement and aspiration by improving the transition from BTEC to higher education. *Learning and Teaching*, 11 (3). pp. 80-96. ISSN: 1755-2273

<https://doi.org/10.3167/latiss.2018.110307>

This is an author produced version of a paper published in *Learning and Teaching*.
Uploaded in accordance with the publisher's self-archiving policy.

Reuse

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND) licence. This licence only allows you to download this work and share it with others as long as you credit the authors, but you can't change the article in any way or use it commercially. More information and the full terms of the licence here: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



'We are not all equal!' Raising achievement and aspiration by improving the transition from BTEC to Higher Education

Dr Richard Peake

Centre for Innovation and Research into Legal Education

School of Law, University of Leeds

September 2017

Total word count: 5,440 (excluding bibliography)

About the Author:

Richard Peake is a lecturer in Criminal Justice and Criminology, delivering undergraduate modules including Penology, Youth Crime and Justice, Inequality and Social Issues and Study Skills.

School of Law, University of Leeds.

BA (Hons) Criminal Justice and Criminology Programme Leader 2012-2016.

An appointed Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (FHEA).

Email: r.peake@leeds.ac.uk

Telephone: 01133-438261

Author Statement:

In the role of Programme Leader (2012-2016), having led a very successful BA Programme for four years, a keen interest was formed in teaching delivery and outcomes, which was challenged by a growing realisation that the A-level students generally achieved a 2:1 classification (or higher) much more consistently than students from any other route of entry. In the interests of equality and more importantly equity for students – this phenomenon deserved further investigation - particularly for those students arriving from vocational routes, whose outcomes appeared to be significantly lower.

About CIRLE:

Established in 2016, the Centre for Innovation and Research in Legal Education (School of Law, University of Leeds) aims to deliver innovative, high quality research and evidence-based practice in education and the professions in criminology and law, with a core focus on the continued enhancement of the student experience.

Abstract

An observation that students from the vocational route fare less well in degree-level studies, led to this investigatory research.

The data indicate a disparity of outcomes, suggesting that students suffer inequality, which does not diminish sufficiently during their studies. Analysing five cohorts on the BA Criminal Justice and Criminology programme, fewer than half BTEC entrants achieved a 2:1 classification, compared to over 90% of A-level students.

This research looks particularly at the skills deficit, caused by vocational teaching methods being very different – some skills acquired are useful, but few are academic and aimed at transition to University. It questions whether the assumption to view all new students as ‘equal’ is valid and if their experience of the transition to University is as smooth and effective as it could be.

As the majority of BTEC entrants achieved a 2:2 classification or lower, a toolkit was devised to smooth the transition, raise aspiration, self-esteem and improve outcomes.

Keywords

equality, equity, vocational, BTEC, transition, skills, aspiration

Aims of the study

This research sets out to measure the difference in achievement between students entering Higher Education (HE) via the vocational BTEC (Business and Technology Education Council) route and the more ‘traditional’ level three route – the A-level. The goal is to identify issues in the transition that may cause the BTEC students to struggle to adapt to academic study and identify skills deficits that may ultimately lead to underachievement and seeks to develop a strategy to optimise the performance of this student at degree level. Importantly, the aim is also to suggest how the aspiration of students entering via this vocational route can be raised. To gain a University place and simply complete a degree programme (any classification,

including an 'ordinary' award) may be judged a success and be seen as the optimum outcome by the BTEC students themselves.

Recent research from the Higher Education Academy (HEA) identified problems in these areas, suggesting that students from non A-level routes are far less likely to achieve a 2:1 classification (Shields & Masardo, 2015), often recognised as a 'benchmark', both by employers and those recruiting for both graduate schemes and postgraduate studies.

Quantitative data were collated to complete a five-year micro-level statistical study of students from the BA (Hons) Criminal Justice and Criminology (CJC) programme (approximately 50 students each year) and demands a high entry level of AAB at A level. Some 20-30% of the cohort are recruited from non-traditional routes (mainly BTEC, foundation and access programmes). The data will identify any attainment gap between vocational and academic entry routes and look in detail at both the nature and extent of identified deficits.

Qualitative data are drawn from students by means of a questionnaire, a focus group and a visit to a Further Education (FE) college to discuss the BTEC programme delivery with staff. This will add context and establish the nature and extent of any skills deficits, issues with transition to HE and why an attainment gap might exist.

Review of related literature

There have been several studies in the area of transitions to degree studies, although the majority look at the traditional A-level route. With the varied entry qualifications seemingly accepted by universities on most programmes, it is important to look into both student transition and compare subsequent attainment of students from all entry routes.

A recent and welcome addition to the literature looked at vocational entry qualifications, student achievement and student support in HE - this HEA report talks specifically about 'preparation' for study and this is an important area to explore, as it appears that BTEC students predominantly lack basic academic skills (Shields & Masardo, 2015:6). It is pertinent to establish exactly who should be the provider of this training in preparation for the transitional process.

The BTEC specification booklet does not mention academic skills and alludes only to 'vocational' skills (Edexcel, 2012). Students are tested by group work/tasks, report writing, discussion groups, case studies and non-academic essay writing. There is no doubt that a learning ethic is instilled and very useful skills are assimilated, but students are not prepared for the rigours of academic study at degree level and the very specific skill-set required for tackling assessments, most notably essays and examinations.

Leese (2010) points out that previous research has identified a 'new' student type, moving away from the traditional student, with differing needs and one that might find

the transition difficult and more of a struggle to 'fit in' (Leese, 2010:242). If the typical student no longer comes from traditional routes or may be in either full or part time employment and could also be from a lower socio-economic background, then it would seem to be a sensible assumption that the transition must be adapted to include these 'new' students.

It is evident that the start of vocational qualifications being accepted as university entry qualifications can be traced back to a political sea change and the aim of the New Labour Government (1997 onwards) to see universities as places of education for all students who aspire to achieve, regardless of background. Entry should not be restricted to those from more affluent backgrounds – indeed in 1999 Prime Minister Tony Blair set a target to increase university participation for the 18-30 age group from 39% to an ambitious 50%, in line with the newly-elected Government's aim of increasing equality of opportunity. This target was not achieved and by 2006 the number had risen marginally to just under 40% and although it remained an ambition, the target was subsequently abandoned (Gill, 2008).

Hoelscher *et al* (2008) observed that a further aim of New Labour was to provide a more flexible and well qualified workforce but at the start of the initiative applications were largely to the 'new' universities and several traditional subjects seemed not to be selected (for example Dentistry, Medicine and Law) by those from vocational training backgrounds, with students drawn to more contemporary subjects, such as Computer Science and Creative Arts & Design (Hoelscher *et al*, 2008). This would suggest a correlation to the vocational nature of the BTEC course being more relevant to less traditional subjects. Potentially 'higher status' occupations seen as inaccessible by students from non-traditional study backgrounds, with such qualifications being frequently viewed as an 'alternative' route to university for those deemed not suitable when these choices were made at the appropriate time (Hoelscher *et al* 2009:140).

A review of BTEC Nationals (Mackay) points out that in 2013-14 students were disproportionately recruited to Design and Art (19.1%), Business and Management (16.1%), Biology and Psychology (13.3%) and Computer Science (10.5%) degrees, although despite a slight increase, 'elite' subjects such as Law (1.9%) and the Social Sciences (7.1%) are less represented in degree choices. Medicine and Dentistry at only 15 students nationwide from a total of over 105,000 progressing to degree courses in that period – was too insignificant to register as a percentage in the data. This is possibly an unintended outcome of allowing BTEC qualifications to act as A-level equivalent points for University entry.

This review also points out that BTEC students are almost twice as likely as A-level students to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and that almost half come from families with no prior experience of HE (Mackay, no date).

Shields & Masardo (2015) point out that recent research by UCAS (2014) indicated that in 2013 acceptance of BTEC students in high tariff HE institutions was much less than in lower tariff institutions by some considerable margin – only three per

cent in higher tariff institutions compared to 49% in lower tariff institutions. This could be due to greater expectations from the top universities – some university courses may only accept a BTEC with ‘Distinction’ or with a mix of BTEC/A level.

Numbers are increasing and BTEC students as a share of total applications for 2015 rose slightly in applications to just under 5%, although those studying for a mixture of A Levels and BTEC rose from 0.6% to 1.5% (UCAS, 2016:33).

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was utilised, combining quantitative data from student records and obtaining qualitative data from a cohort of BTEC students at level two of the three year programme..

Quantitative data were obtained from the University of Leeds Banner administration system and recorded anonymously. Data from five BA CJC cohorts were collated and analysed from those starting in 2009/10/11/12/13, which gives data for students up to graduation in July 2016. Analysing this statistical data allows a degree of longitudinal depth to the research, enabling a comparison of the achievements of five cohorts of BTEC entrants, A-level students and other routes of entry (mainly Access and Foundation programmes).

The cohort of BTEC students that commenced in 2014 (eight of ten students agreed to participate) were followed more closely by way of a questionnaire and a focus group, to establish any weaknesses in the transition to HE and discuss any issues, charting their progress across years one and two and exploring their experience.

A visit was also made to a local FE college that has provided BTEC students to the BA CJC Programme in recent years, to discuss teaching, learning and academic skills with staff and to identify any improvements that could be made to better prepare students for the transition.

Ethical approval was granted by AREA Faculty Research Ethics Committee (ref LTLLAW-023) covering the period of the research and all research fieldwork was conducted and administered in accordance with the University’s regulations for processing and data handling.

All participants signed a simple consent form and were given an information sheet about the research. Research participants are anonymised.

The development of the BTEC qualification as a gateway to Higher Education

In 1984 the BTEC diploma was introduced, looking to attract those who would prefer to gain practical or vocational qualifications, rather than study purely academic subjects. The BTEC (Edexcel/Pearson) covered both GCSE level qualification (levels 1-2) and A-level (level 3), which can now include an extended project, but also can extend to degree equivalent (levels 4-7).

The BTEC level 3 was given A-level equivalent status and therefore made the qualification acceptable in applying to UCAS for a university place.

Marketing suggests that this is a flexible qualification that can be used either to gain employment or to move to degree studies, however the BTEC diploma is essentially centred on employment and marketing tends to advertise the vocational, employment and career elements:

More employers and Higher Education institutions than ever before are choosing BTEC-qualified candidates for their academic and practical knowledge and skills

Pearson BTEC information (www.qualifications.pearson.com)

Whilst BTEC subjects are vocational, there is some crossover as students may study subjects such as Business Studies and Information Technology, which can be continued at a higher level and most BTEC courses lead to a HE subject. On the programme studied, most BTEC entrants had taken the BTEC National Public Services qualification – but several other subjects, such as Business and Accounting were represented.

Widely accepted and in a sector generally keen to promote widening participation agenda, it has grown in popularity and is continuing to do so – in 2013-14 over 100,000 students gained degree places via this route. This parity of A-level status for the BTEC is the root cause of the issues addressed in this report, in that the qualification is accepted by UCAS, however no focus on appropriate higher level skills is evident within the learning aims or outcomes.

UCAS Tariffs were updated in 2016, a BTEC with D*D*D* has a value 168 UCAS points. In comparison a single A level at grade A* has a value of 56 points and a grade C is 32 (UCAS 2017).

The BTEC experience of learning and teaching

Coursework is largely centred on the vocational nature of the qualification and is usually driven by portfolios, which include completing practical tasks to achieve the learning outcomes. Currently there are no written examinations and the coursework accrues incrementally until the credits are achieved – assessments taking place typically weekly or following task completion. The BTEC Nationals review (Mackay) indicates that from 2017-18 the BTEC assessment format will include one written examination in some units or a class-based group assessment (Department for Education, 2016).

The BTEC (Public Services) specification document states that assessment will be via ‘assignment briefs’, which provide learners with ‘realistic, work-based

scenarios...’ (Edexcel, 2012:5) and makes it explicitly clear that the reason for taking the BTEC qualification is for employment in one of the uniformed public services.

Classroom style teaching combined with project work and practical work-related activities help to develop students’ behavioural skills, which can include teamwork, creative thinking and presentational skills

Pearson BTEC information (www.qualifications.pearson.com)

Basic skills required for higher education, such as academic essay writing, referencing, examination techniques, analysis and critical thinking are not embedded and this becomes an area of problematic transition that should be anticipated and needs to be addressed. Despite not providing training in most of the essential academic skills required for degree level study, the specification document does state that the extended diploma would see candidates ‘ideally placed’ to progress to degree programmes (Edexcel, 2012:5).

There will be changes made to the BTEC vocational route following the Sainsbury Review, which sets out a ‘post-16 Skills Plan’ (Pearson, 2016; Department for Education, 2016) and some of these will help raise the skill level generally – making English and Maths part of the ‘common core’ curriculum for example and seeing a minimum standard achieved on completion will be very helpful (Exley, 2016)

The main recommendation is to separate students into two distinct pathways, choosing between ‘academic’ and ‘technical’, although there will remain the ability to move from BTEC vocational studies directly to degree studies by way of a ‘bridging provision’ for those who decide to change their study trajectory (Pearson, 2016). The report sees this delineation as important, but also recognises that movement between the two routes must still be allowed, although the details of how this might be achieved are somewhat sketchy (Department for Education, 2016).

There are calls for ‘high quality careers education and guidance’ to ensure that at 16, students are aware of all options available (Pearson, 2016) and this means that those who have not fully decided on their educational route at age 16 or have had their education delayed, will have more choice. Beginning incrementally in 2019, it will eventually see the current provision re-administered into fifteen vocational routes, but this will not be fully implemented until 2022.

Although the vocational BTEC is technically a ‘gateway’ to degree studies, it is evident that a number of colleges do not highlight this potential progression as part of any recruitment advertising, preferring to promote employment and career opportunities.

Unintentionally, this transition from a vocational programme to an academic degree programme produces a deficit of certain skills. These could be as basic as literacy (due to poor results at GCSE) and poor writing style, as it is possible to move

through some BTEC subjects with a minimum of written work, no academic essay writing and no real critical thought. Examples of the type of skills deficits presented by the research cohort by way of a questionnaire will be presented in due course. In short, in enrolling for and commencing a degree programme, BTEC students are entering a level of study that they are largely unprepared for.

If the onus to provide traditional academic skills is not with the BTEC course providers, due to the vocational nature of the training, then it falls to universities to take positive steps to improve the transition and address the skills deficit. This research is important in addressing such issues and raising aspiration, as if current application trends continue, the BTEC will be a route of entry for an increasing number of students.

Quantitative findings

Analysing five cohorts from the BA CJC Programme gives an indication of the 'gap' in attainment on the programme. More than 250 student records were analysed and a comparison made between the final classification of BTEC entry students and those who entered from the A level route, identifying the size of the 'gap'.

It is clear that those that entered the programme with at least the A-level grade requirement of AAB did exceptionally well, indeed at least 95% of students that completed the degree were awarded a 2:1 or higher. A smaller number of students accepted with grades of ABB or below also fared well, with over 80% receiving at least a 2:1 classification. Approximately 15% of students gained a first class degree and these came exclusively from the A-level entry route.

BTEC students attaining the benchmark 2:1 ranged from 27-50% (see figure 1). Interestingly, students receiving a third class degree or a BA Ordinary award (without Honours) or a Certificate of Higher Education - came almost exclusively from the BTEC entry route.

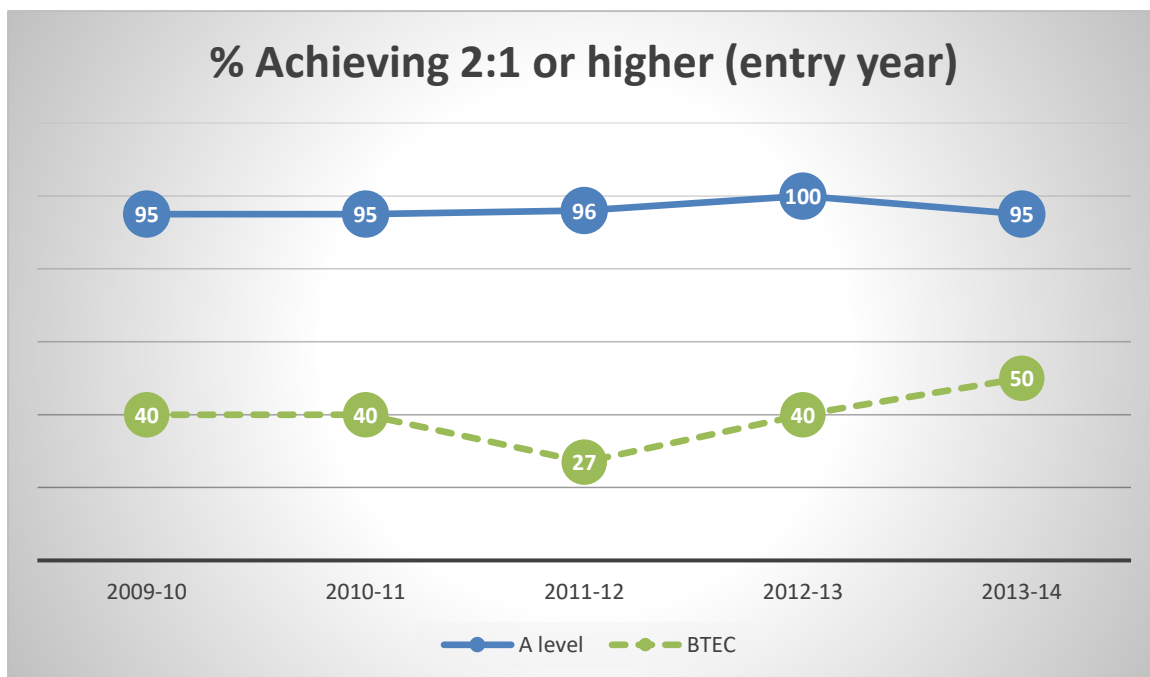


Figure 1: Programme completers by entry route

Those that entered via Access or Foundation programmes fared slightly better than BTEC entrants, but were still over-represented in the lower classifications. Whilst this study has not looked closely at Access or Foundation routes of entry, these findings are broadly in line with the findings of Shields and Masardo (2015), which found that non A-level students struggled to achieve a 2:1 award. It is also worth noting that the final year performance of the BTEC students is generally much better than the second year, suggesting that with more time, the required standard could be achieved, enabling more candidates to attain a 2:1 qualification.

When the programme accepted students with grades marginally below the AAB offer, the results were almost the same as those with AAB or above (see figure 2). This similarity in performance by A-level students and the starkly differing performance of BTEC entry students is noteworthy.



Figure 2: Programme completers by entry route and A-level offer (AAB/ABB)

In this micro-level study, the cohorts are fairly small in number, but this is a sizeable gap and reflects the difficulty of transition and the lack of appropriate and necessary degree-level skills.

Qualitative findings

To give the research some context, qualitative research was conducted in three areas. Firstly, a questionnaire to gauge both the ambition of BTEC students and question their decision-making process in applying to study at degree level, following this vocational training and award. Secondly, a focus group to investigate the issues of transition and academic skills training on arrival at university, the settling in process and their experience of first year study. The cohort being followed entered the programme in 2014-15, therefore at the time of the research were completing year two. Finally, a visit to a FE college to examine teaching delivery and discuss if staff consider that the BTEC develops a good skills-base to move to HE.

A questionnaire was designed and implemented via Bristol Surveys and administered to the students in the cohort ($n=8$ being the total number of completing BTEC students in a cohort of 48).

Not an original aim, but the research questions the aspiration of the student coming to university from a vocational programme. It is interesting to assess motivation and their reasoning in moving to HE and importantly, what they were looking to achieve? It is also a useful first look at assessing the skills developed on their vocational

programme and how they adapted to their first year of study. A skills audit was taken at this point and this is useful in identifying the skills deficits that potentially disrupt the transition.

Seven students completed the questionnaire and it was apparent that all felt confident at practical tasks, presentations and time management, but they struggled with critical thinking, writing academic essays and examinations (no respondent had taken an exam as part of the BTEC programme). Only four believed that their academic writing was of a good standard and only one felt competent at academic essay writing. Only one student had any experience of gathering evidence to inform an essay and had previously used a referencing system.

The respondents were divided on whether they believed that A-level students were more suited to the degree studies, four agreeing and three disagreeing.

Interestingly aspiration was quite high, five said they were aiming for the benchmark 2:1, but all felt that BTEC had probably been easier than doing A-levels. Four said that the aim of taking the BTEC was to enter a degree programme, but three stated that it was something they learned about during their studies, although interestingly no respondent said that the reason for taking the BTEC was to gain employment in that field – which is a stated aim of the BTEC programme.

Only one respondent said that academic skills training was available at the college and that was not presented as part of the curriculum, but additional if required and consisted of just a single session. Five felt that additional academic skills training on or before arrival at university would be useful.

Focus Group

The focus group builds on the questionnaire and it gave an interesting insight. The first point made by the members of the group was that they did not feel equal, there was a belief that the A-level students did not feel that BTEC students ‘deserved’ their place.

‘They think we are ‘dumber!’

They felt instantly aware of the difference in skill levels, although the group members did not tell their peers that they had a BTEC qualification (or at least did not volunteer the information). All believed that many viewed this as a ‘lesser’ qualification and there even seemed to be some stigma attached – which had seen some ‘name-calling’ and ridicule at college.

‘There go the BTEC-ers!’

‘I don’t let people here know I am from a BTEC’

BTEC assessment was mainly by weekly essay - however the essay was not critical in any way - it did not need to include evidence, analysis, referencing or form an argument. It was felt that this encouraged both ‘informational’ and ‘informal’ writing

styles and although it formed a good habit of producing written work to a deadline, it bore no resemblance to the style of academic essay required at degree level.

A mandatory practice essay in November of year one and subsequent summative assignments in January came as **'quite a shock'** and a steep learning curve. Students encountered Harvard referencing and the need to include evidence and analysis for the very first time.

All students complete a bespoke academic skills module in semester one (Criminal Justice Study Skills) and all in the group felt that without the information and practical tasks taught on this module, those first assignments would have been even more challenging and stressful.

'Without that module, I would have been lost'

Students found the skills training module very helpful and also the suite of tutorials available at skills@library at Leeds, however it was felt that for the A-level students and others this was merely a refresher, whereas for the BTEC entrants, it was evident that many of these skills were being encountered for the very first time.

'I had not sat an exam since school – I was really not prepared for the amount of revision or the examination itself'

The group felt that there was some difficulty 'fitting in' to their new surroundings. As well as feeling unequal, some felt that socially it was very different and that they did feel 'inferior'.

Visit to a Further Education Establishment

This was conducted to discuss the teaching, learning and assessments with an established BTEC provider and to give context to the research, particularly to help formulate solutions. An interview was conducted with a BTEC Public Services Programme Director.

The teaching was as expected; mainly classroom-based with practical and work-related tasks and students were closely monitored on these tasks. Students were involved in discussion groups, with a member of staff in attendance to lead the sessions, moving between tables to facilitate discussion - but with no group feedback. There is no requirement to teach academic skills and therefore it is not something that is taught as part of the curriculum.

An issue discussed was attainment and what might be viewed as a successful outcome. For example, a student who arrives at age 17 with GCSE results of mainly B/C grades, but goes on to gain a BTEC and possibly a 'Distinction' is seen as a successful outcome - if that student goes on to gain a BA of any classification - then a very successful outcome.

To achieve a BA (Hons) 2:1 from a Russell Group University is obviously an excellent outcome for a student who may not have been offered a place on an A-level programme, possibly due to poor GCSE results at age 16.

This contrasts with the student focus group, where it seemed that most see a 2:1 classification as a good outcome, but a lower grade as still acceptable. A third class degree is not an outcome that is encouraged, but it would seem that views and goals are conflicting as to exactly what a successful outcome looks like - success is certainly relative.

A central feature of the research is connected to aspiration, but success would seem to be relative and by that same token – *so is aspiration*. Raising confidence, self-esteem and instilling the idea that students should aim higher than simply passing the degree with any classification is the key to raising aspiration - not easy when students may have come from a background of low educational attainment at the GCSE stage.

Recommendations

Due to the vocational pedagogy of the BTEC, it is unsurprising that students lack key academic skills, such as academic essay writing, critical thinking and referencing - the BTEC steering documentation clearly states that the qualification is designed to give practical skills aimed at employment. It is clear that as well as the uncertainty of understanding exactly what is required to succeed at degree level and the combination of a new environment and lacking some essential skills makes the transition much more challenging than for students from traditional routes.

Arriving with a belief that you are not equal to these students is also problematic and a difficulty that needs to be overcome with better academic training and increased socialisation in the induction process and the first few weeks.

As long as the BTEC remains vocational and teaching and learning is conducted with a mix of practical tasks and supervised classroom learning and with no requirement to include degree-appropriate academic skills - it would appear that the responsibility for addressing and alleviating this deficit lies with HE institutions. Universities therefore must address the skills deficits and improve the transition.

In the micro-level study of five BA CJC cohorts, the statistics presented are brief but conclusive and they must be used to positively highlight deficiencies and find a way forward that will attempt to level the playing field. This should be done without the somewhat divisive approach of separating BTEC students on arrival and simply imposing extra skills training in the hope this will remedy the situation.

The situation could be improved by the implementation of several initiatives, although this will unfortunately and unavoidably involve some degree of separating BTEC students from other students – a ‘toolkit’ to overcome transition deficits and lack of formal academic skills training (see figure 3).

The student focus group was very much against being separated or treated differently, so any initiative would have to be implemented sensitively:

- At the pre-study stage in the form of a 'bridging' course, either by distance learning (booklet, e-learning or podcasts) or residential would help instil basic academic skills. A residential course would also introduce students to the HE study environment and the wider issue of socialising.
- A voluntary mentoring scheme which pairs a BTEC student with a successful continuing student may also be helpful in helping students settle in and understand what being a university student is all about - in addition to helping with academic skills.
- More frequent, regular, scheduled one-to-one meetings with a dedicated personal tutor for the BTEC students to discuss academic issues and check on progress (that said, all students can seek help and personal tutor meetings in addition to the formal schedule of meetings).
- Identified additional skills training if required.

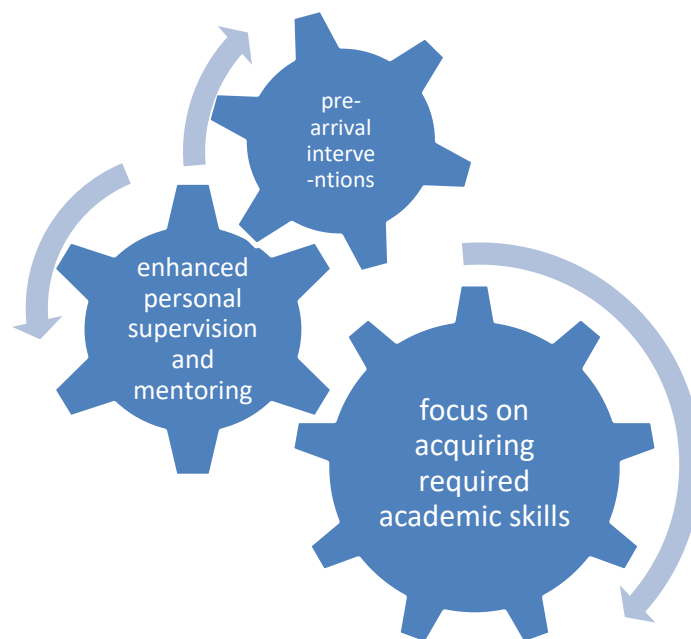


Figure 3: Components to smooth the transition: the 'Toolkit'

In itself, this toolkit will not alleviate the problem but would help in some way to directly challenge the issues that this report has raised and improve the transitional 'settling in' period (figure 3).

The BTEC teaching is robust and very practical in nature, consisting of short modular tasks, but having no academic essay writing as part of the course or assessments,

therefore although the BTEC gives access to degree courses, it does not instil the necessary academic skills training for degree level study.

Raising aspiration and increasing confidence is difficult, as the BTEC students in the sample generally aspired to the benchmark 2:1 on arrival, however the lack of degree-specific academic skills makes the transition more difficult and may cause some students to lower their aspiration. It generally takes longer to overcome these issues – sometimes too late to be in a position to attain this classification. If simply gaining a degree is seen as a relatively successful outcome by FE colleges, then this could also impact on aspiration. The positive skills of the BTEC students should be accentuated (group work, seminar discussion and presentation skills for example), in the hope that this will breed confidence, however most of the issues revolve around a basic deficit of degree-specific skills.

Whilst the focus group was not keen on a residential school or any separate treatment on arrival, it would be possible to communicate with BTEC students who have accepted a place over the summer months – as the results are available and places confirmed several weeks before the A-level applicants. This could be done by bespoke study booklets or a series of informational podcasts prior to arrival.

‘Settling in’ is vital to a smooth transition. BTEC students have been educated in a system of very close monitoring and to suddenly have little or no support, which may be overwhelming and could cause problems with attendance and engagement. This should be improved by implementing closer support on arrival and offering regular support throughout the first year, by way of a dedicated personal tutor and/or mentoring. Administered sensitively, this would help smooth the transition and aid progression and would be available in years two and three until the student decided it was no longer necessary.

Conclusion

It may seem perfectly logical to treat all arriving students equally, but based on these findings, this report suggests that consideration be given to students from non-traditional entry routes to improve the transition and outcomes. However when striving for *equality*, this does not always produce *equity*, an equitable solution would address individual needs above the group. When conducting a study of part-time law students, Francis and McDonald labelled this phenomenon ‘equivalency’ (Francis & McDonald, 2009:220).

The findings of this research has demonstrated that ‘equality’ may not a particularly useful position to adopt and it would be beneficial to identify particular groups to improve the transition. It is also evident that a lack of ‘equivalency’ can take many forms, including academic and social.

Teaching staff may also reflect that little or no information is afforded to them about entry routes as cohorts commenced their degree programmes, therefore this issue may not have been recognised.

Some may also consider the recommendations as 'extra' help, but this paper would argue that the intention is to promote the skills already gained, overcome identified deficits required for degree-level study, develop a suitable skill-set and offer guidance - not to offer additional practical help with assessments or other course work. It would also help students engage with the skills training widely available at the University of Leeds.

BTEC students come from diverse backgrounds and some have experienced poor educational outcomes at GCSE level. It could be argued that if these students attain a degree of any classification then this relative success may be viewed as sufficient by both educators and the students themselves. In the spirit of widening participation, if the aim of the university sector is that all students are able to achieve their maximum potential, then it is hoped that the findings and recommendations of this report may provide a strategy to move forward and make a change to benefit these students.

The main objective is to raise awareness and promote parity for students entering via traditional and vocational routes. A 'skills gap' is evident and statistics demonstrate that this has an impact on performance in HE and ultimate attainment, with no more than 50% of BTEC entrants achieving a 2:1 classification in this study. To take no notice of this marked difference in attainment and not to attempt to smooth the transition would be very much against the spirit of the widening participation.

Whilst closer collaboration with FE colleges may offer some reward, it seems unlikely that academic skills training will be incorporated into the BTEC teaching and the responsibility therefore lies with universities to provide assistance with transition and skills training either before or on arrival.

The causal issue is that a purely vocational programme of study enables the student to gain a place on an academic degree programme, despite the two types of study being very different, even incompatible. Addressing the lack of academic skills and making the arrival environment more accessible are the main elements in successfully smoothing the transition.

References

- Department for Education. (2016), *Post-16 Skills Plan, Cm 9280* (London: OGL).
- Edexcel. (2012), *BTEC Level 3 Public Services Specification* (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd.).
- Exley, S. (2016), 'Sainsbury Review: what changes are on the way for post-16 education?', TES FE online. Available at: www.tes.com/news/further-education/breaking-news/sainsbury-review-what-changes-are-way-post-16-education [accessed 6 July 2017]
- Francis, A & McDonald, I. (2009), 'After Dark and out in the Cold: Part-time Law Students and the Myth of 'Equivalency''. *Journal of Law and Society*, Vol 36 (2): 220-247
- Gill, J. (2008) 'Labour concedes it won't deliver its 50% target on time', *Times Higher Education*, 17 April 2008
- Hoelscher, M, Hayward, G, Ertl, H and Dunbar-Goddet, H. (2008), 'The transition from vocational education and training to higher education: a successful pathway?' *Research Papers in Education*, Vol 23 (2):139-151
- Knox, H. (2005), 'Making the transition from further to higher education: the impact of a preparatory module on retention, progression and performance', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, Vol 29 (2):103-110
- Leese, M. (2010), 'Bridging the gap: supporting student transitions into higher education', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, Vol 34 (2):239-251
- Mackay, D. (No date), 'Qualification reform: the review of BTEC Nationals', Available at: www.aston.ac.uk/EasySiteWeb/getresource.axd?AssetID=266700&type=full&service_type=Attachment [accessed 9 August 2016]
- Pearson BTEC Information. (2016). 'Information for BTEC students', available at: www.qualifications.pearson.com [accessed 14 June 2016]
- Pearson. (2016), 'Handy Guide to the Sainsbury Review', available at: www.pearson.com/uk/about-us/news-and-policy/handy-guides/a-handy-guide-to-the-sainsbury-review.html [accessed 7 July 2017]
- Shields, R & Masardo, A. (2015), *Changing patterns in vocational entry qualifications, student support and outcomes in undergraduate degree programmes*. (York: Higher Education Academy)
- UCAS. (2017) 'Tariff Calculator' available at: <https://www.ucas.com/ucas/tariff-calculator> [accessed 5 January 2018]
- UCAS. (2016), 'UK Application Rates by the January Deadline (2016 cycle)', (London: UCAS)

UCAS. (2014), '*UCAS Response to the Ofqual Consultation on New A-Level Regulatory Requirements*', (London: UCAS)