

# Will abolishing BTECs mean reversing widening access to higher education?

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- Report released in February 2021 and examines:
  - UCAS data on HE participation of learners 18-24 from 2011 to 2020
  - Findings from a survey of 48 members of the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON). The respondents are drawn from higher education providers (HEP) (including universities and Further Education Colleges) and also Uni-Connect partnerships.

**What the data shows**

- In 2020 over 45,000 18-year-old students entered HE with just BTECs or A-Levels/BTECs.
- What is of particular concern is that a disproportionate number are drawn from widening access backgrounds.

# % of students entering HE with BTECs or A-Levels/BTECs by POLAR quintile 2020



<b>POLAR quintile</b>	<b>% of BTEC or A-Level/BTEC students</b>
<b>1</b>	26
<b>2</b>	23
<b>3</b>	21
<b>4</b>	17
<b>5</b>	10



# Students from POLAR 1 quintile entering HE via BTEC or A-Level/BTEC

<b>Year</b>	<b>No. of students entering HE from POLAR 1 quintile</b>	<b>No. of BTEC or A-Level/BTEC students</b>	<b>% of BTEC or A-Level/BTEC students</b>
<b>2011</b>	21540	6145	28
<b>2012</b>	20230	4915	24
<b>2013</b>	20845	5495	26
<b>2014</b>	23225	6830	29
<b>2015</b>	24730	7430	30
<b>2016</b>	24980	7445	29
<b>2017</b>	25800	7545	29
<b>2018</b>	25310	6800	27
<b>2019</b>	26445	6660	26
<b>2020</b>	28885	7400	26

# % of students entering HE in 2020 by ethnic group and qualification

<b>Qualification</b>	<b>Black students</b>	<b>Asian students</b>	<b>White students</b>
<b>A Level</b>	67	76	79
<b>BTEC</b>	21	14	11
<b>A Level/BTEC</b>	12	10	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

# **What the survey shows**

# BTECs are essential to widening access to HE

- Over 90% of respondents felt that it was crucial for widening access to HE that the BTEC option was available to Level 3 students. There was also a strongly held view that removing the AGQ option would set back progress in widening participation 'by years or even decades'.
- *'The BTEC is really important to widening participation. It is not realistic to assume that all students will take the standard A Level route. The proposed changes would undo a decade of focused BTEC work with widening participation cohorts who have benefited from a university experience and education.'*
- **University of Leeds**

# BTECs align strongly with HE study

- there was a definite view amongst many respondents that BTECs, given their content, provided a better form of preparation for higher education study than A-Levels.
- *‘In some cases the BTEC is a better feeder into higher education than A levels. For example; having multiple modules with a range of assessment types such as coursework and presentations, these align to the range of assessments students could be given at university’.*
- **University College Birmingham**

# A-Level options are not available in all areas

- Some respondents highlighted the availability of A-Level routes in their areas as a barrier to widening access. A potential challenge of the T-Level is also ensuring that all options are available to all learners in every area of the country.
- *‘Colleges in Kent and Medway no longer provide A Levels so BTEC qualifications are the main route to Higher Education for the 7000+ Level 3 students studying in FECs. Approximately 1400 FE student’s progress to Higher Education each year with BTECs being the primary, and often sole, qualification. It is vital that the BTEC qualification is available as an option at Level 3. Without a BTEC option as part of their qualifications, many students in schools and colleges in Kent will not be able to easily progress to university.’*
- **Kent and Medway Progression Foundation**

# A binary system risks excluding widening access students from HE

- The respondents believe that there are a particular group of students, many of whom are from widening access backgrounds, whose needs are met uniquely by BTECs. They are concerned that in the compulsory education system certain students are labelled, often early in their schooling career, as destined for higher education.
- *'Although the proposed T Levels may be beneficial for some, many students from WP backgrounds may be categorised as 'T Level students' from a young age. This could truncate their academic progress and potential and negatively affect the student's self-esteem and academic ambitions for the future.'*
- **University of East London**

# T-Levels may not be conducive to HE progression

- It is recognised that a well-defined 'vocational' route into education/employment would be beneficial for many young people. However, as it is presented T-Levels are seen as primarily a route into employment and not higher education. They are not viewed as presenting a qualification option that will allow students who would have previously taken BTECs to still progress to HE.
- *'A T-Level has been designed for students who have an idea of a particular industry they wish to work in the future. The idea that T-Levels would be able to completely replace being able to choose and study a variety of BTEC/ vocational subjects does not make sense.'*
- **Brunel University**

# Conclusions

- Scenario 1: the numbers of students from low participation neighbourhoods increases.

## **Verdict: Unlikely**

- Scenario 2: the number of students from low participation neighbourhoods decreases, setting progress back 10 years.

## **Verdict: Possible**

- Scenario 3: the number of students from low participation neighbourhoods decreases, setting progress back 5 years.

## **Verdict: Highly likely**