



Transforming Transitions

HEFCE Catalyst Grant

University of Exeter; University of Birmingham; Loughborough University; Queen Mary University of London.

Leicester College; City and Islington College; Hereford VI College; Exeter College



THE PROJECT CONTEXT

Project Partners



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM



Loughborough
University



Queen Mary
University of London



CITY AND ISLINGTON
COLLEGE

Introducing the *Transforming Transitions* project

This project set out to better understand and reduce the differential educational outcomes of BTEC students at selecting universities by:

- ❑ conducting investigative interventions to explore BTEC students' educational experiences across the FE/HE transition;
 - The purpose of this was to understand the nature of the issues, and particularly to understand student perspectives, rather than implementing interventions because we thought they might be good;
- ❑ designing, implementing and evaluating evidence-based interventions to address identified issues of transition.
 - The purpose of this was to test out possible solutions and understand better the enablers and barriers to addressing inequalities

The Research Problem

Recent research highlights *differential outcomes* for BTEC students as they progress through University:

- ❑ A level students are more likely to achieve a first than vocational students; and students taking the BTEC Award and Diploma have a significantly lower probability of a first or at least an upper second than students taking an Applied A level.
- ❑ BTEC students are more likely to drop out of university when compared with those on a traditional academic pathway, even when accounting for prior attainment.
- ❑ BTEC students in Russell Group universities are less likely to complete than those elsewhere;
- ❑ the salary gap between BTEC students and traditional students is significant and at its largest in Russell Groups universities.

BTEC Students and Disadvantage

- ❑ BTEC students are more likely to come from a low socio-economic group or a low participation neighbourhood than 'traditional entry' students.
- ❑ BTEC students are more likely to be first generation HE students – 42.1%, compared with 32% of 'traditional' .
- ❑ BTEC students are more likely to be male, have a disability, come from a low socio-economic and non-white background as well as being older than the traditional student.
- ❑ Non-white BTEC entrants are more likely to study at a Million Plus institution (32.9%) and least likely to attend a Russell Group (17.8%).
- ❑ Thus BTEC students are a proxy group for social disadvantage and/or non-traditional entrants to university, as well as a clear example of entering with a different kind of qualification.

The study is thus both about access/progress with vocational qualifications AND about widening participation for low participation groups



THE METHODOLOGY

Data collected for the project

Phase 1: Exploratory intervention phase

- ❑ A statistical analysis of access and progression data of students in Sports Science, Business, and Computer Science by various qualification routes;
- ❑ An analysis of pedagogical approaches and tutor perceptions in these subjects through focus group interviews with teaching staff and students in both FE and HE;
- ❑ An analysis of student experiences of transition from FE to HE and the learning cultures they have experienced through focus group interviews with Year 1 students

Data collected for the project

Phase 2: Evidence-based Intervention phase

- ❑ Drawing on the findings of Phase 1, we designed and developed four interventions to address identified issues;
- ❑ Developed a Theory of Change model for the interventions;
- ❑ Developed a framework to evaluate each interventions;
- ❑ Implemented each intervention in at least two partner institutions.

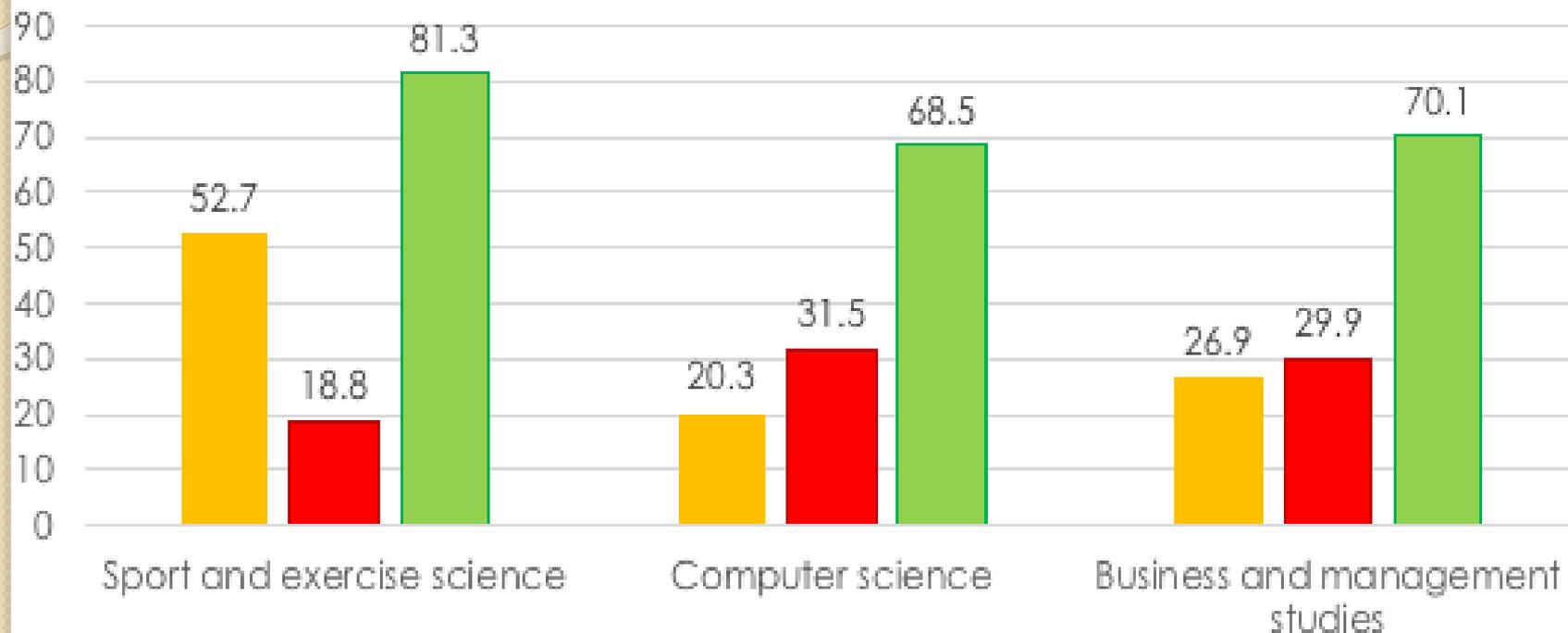


FINDINGS FROM THE STATISTICAL DATA

Findings from HE admissions data

- ❑ Students with BTEC-only qualifications constituted 11% of all first-degree entrants (N=5183) at partner Universities between 2012-2016;
- ❑ BTEC students were more likely to enter partner HEIs to study first degrees in **Sport and Exercise Science**, where they were also more likely to pass the end of first year examination;
- ❑ Their next preferred option to study amongst these three subjects was Business and Management and they were least likely to study **Computer Science**.
- ❑ At one HEI, ($n=1760$), most entrants in Sports and Exercise Science had BTEC-only qualifications (44%).

BTEC entrants' subject-wise progression to second year of study



- Percentage of students with BTEC only qualifications in first year of study at HE
- Percentage of students with BTEC only qualifications who Failed
- Percentage of students with BTEC only qualifications who Passed

Findings from HE progression data

- ❑ The highest proportion of those who progressed to the next year of study had A-level or IB qualifications (94%);
- ❑ More BTEC students failed the end of first year examination as compared to entrants with other qualifications (24%);

Qualifications	End of first year examination results at University (%)		Total
	Failed	Passed	
A/IB	6	94	3858
BTEC	24	76	546
BTEC and A/IB	11	89	389
Other	17	83	390
Total	9	91	5183

Key message: National datasets

- ❑ UCAS data indicates that selective universities are less likely to **recruit** BTEC students than those with traditional qualifications.
- ❑ HESA data shows these students are more likely to **drop out** or attain **lower grades**.
- ❑ **Prior qualification** is one of the main factors correlated with end of first year examination results.
- ❑ The TT data shows that patterns of admission and progression broadly reflect this national data.
- ❑ It is critical, however, to note that despite the difference at least 76% of students with BTEC-only on entry progressed successfully.

Key message: data for public policy and research

- ❑ There is considerable variation in the way institutions collect data at institutional level, but also at programme/module level
- ❑ Various legal, institutional and cultural barriers exist to using data and these need to be removed
- ❑ There is a widespread lack of knowledge and understanding on the part of staff of public bodies of the circumstances in which information may be disclosed, to whom and for what purposes



FINDINGS FROM THE QUALITATIVE DATA

Learning Cultures

- ❑ Academic literacy and numeracy
 - Expectations around academic writing and independent reading
 - Problems with the level of mathematics required for some disciplines
- ❑ Assessment practices
 - Overdependence on conventional academic formats (essays etc)
 - Difference in clarity of assessment criteria and assessment feedback
- ❑ Lectures
 - Size of lectures intimidating; and pace of coverage difficult
 - Uncertainty about how to make notes and learn from lectures
- ❑ Relationship with tutors/lecturers
 - FE students tend to have very close and positive relationships with a small number of teachers who provide high support;
 - HE students tend to have a larger number of tutors, more variable relationships with them, and often see them as distant

The capacity to be an independent learner seems to be an issue, with some students expecting more support, more direction, even more spoon-feeding.¹⁷

Social Cultures

□ 'Dominant' social cultures

- white middle-class groups perceived as the dominant group
- dominant culture of 'drinks and partying' is not amenable to all

□ Differences in networks and friendship groups

- some students, perhaps especially BTEC groups, formed friendship groups with similar people
- more advantaged students have access to wider networks outside university, and some deliberately joined groups at university with new friends to 'expand their horizons'
- student union societies are not always inclusive

□ Differences in social, cultural and economic capital

- some students have had experiences which have prepared them for university eg: living away from home; managing money; travelling independently
- substantial differences in financial support can create barriers eg: through having to work when others are socialising, or not being able to afford social events



CONCLUSIONS

Explanatory Factors

Curricula and learning, including teaching and assessment practices: Different student groups indicate **varying degrees of satisfaction with the HE curricula**, and with the **user-friendliness** of learning, teaching and assessment practices.

Relationships between staff and students and among students: **A sense of 'belonging'** emerged as a key determinant of student outcomes.

Social, cultural and economic capital: Recurring differences in **how students experience HE, how they network and how they draw on external support** were noted. Students' financial situation also affect their student experience and their engagement with learning.

Psychosocial and identity factors: The extent to which students feel **supported and encouraged in their daily interactions** within their institutions and with staff members was found to be a key variable. Such interactions can both facilitate and limit students' learning and attainment.

Mountford-Zimdars et al (2015: piii)

Culture Change

- ❑ Need to **change deficit discourses** and stereotyping: less about what disadvantaged students can't do, and more about inclusive discourses which recognise the strengths of diversity and difference;
- ❑ Need for **organisational change**: - different cultures and admissions policies different departments at the same university; different kinds of encouragement in FE for accessing top universities; different opinions about student needs/academic responses among various learning units in both FE and HE;
- ❑ Need to foster genuinely **inclusive pedagogies and curricula**: academics can be resistant to adapting to meet diverse learner needs because of traditional/conservative outlooks on educational standards and practice or because of pressures of assessment regimes.



Further Information

- ❑ Full Project Report due imminently
- ❑ Detailed full analyses of the interviews with students and lecturers available imminently;
- ❑ Book coming out in the autumn

