



Transforming Transitions





BTEC and Social Disadvantage

- ❑ BTEC students are more likely to be BAME, have a disability, or come from a low socio-economic background. (Hayward and Hoelscher 2011:32).
- ❑ BTEC students more likely to come from low participation neighbourhoods, (Shields and Masardo 2015:5).
- ❑ More ethnic minority students chose vocational courses than did their white peers. (Bhattacharrya, Ison and Blair 2003).
- ❑ BTEC students are more likely to be first generation HE students, and more likely to live in a low participation neighbourhood. (Rouncefield-Swales 2014).
- ❑ BTEC students are more likely to attend a state school than an independent school.

BTEC and University: a Problem

- ❑ UCAS data indicates that selecting universities are less likely to recruit BTEC students than those with traditional qualifications.
- ❑ 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.

Key Findings: Teaching

- ❑ Many students struggle with the changed nature of *academic support* at university compared with FE. They are very used to high support at FE and find university support less overt. Expectations regarding *academic literacy* were a particular problem; and in some courses so too were the expectations of *mathematical competence*. Some students were *reluctant to access support* available at university for fear of seeming inadequate.
- ❑ The transition to university from FE caused some difficulties and discontinuities for some students in terms of *ways of teaching and learning*. Large-group lectures, seminars which are not very participatory or interactive, and a fairly conservative set of teaching practices made the academic transition more challenging for some students unused to these ways of learning,

Key Findings: Assessment

- ❑ Different *assessment practices* in FE and HE were also problematic for some students.
- ❑ In part, this was about *type of assessment*, with many university courses making heavy use of academic essays and examinations for assessment, compared with a much more diverse repertoire of assessment types at FE.
- ❑ In part, it was about *less clarity in feedback* at university – in general the amount and quality of feedback in FE was considered better than at HE. However, many of these comments suggested that students wanted very precise feedback about what to do to secure good grades and were reluctant to be more independent in managing their own learning.

The Lecture

'There's a lot of students in the lecture theatre and for some of them I don't feel I've got a connection at all; I feel like I sit there, go home and do it on my own like over the screen rather than face to face'.

It was all one way, listening and you couldn't necessarily ask questions as you would do in sixth form'

You have 'knowledge thrown at you and then you go and learn it.'

... you can't really write it down but when I'm watching them back it's pause, play, pause, play constantly. But when I'm in lectures and they say the things really fast, I can't really pick up on the majority of it.

'The lecturer goes quite fast throughout so we have to kind of – we don't really have time to think much about what we do, it's just a really fast pace and then once we look over that and we realise we kind of get it or not'.

Key Findings: Social/Emotional

- ❑ Not all students feel ***a sense of belonging*** at university. Some students find it hard to fit in, or feel excluded by others and the judgments other students make about for example, the BTEC qualification or social/ethnic background. Universities seem to have a dominant culture, with its own set of values and interests, but which do not always allow space for the diversity of students and their interests.
- ❑ Linked to the finding regarding academic support, many students found the ***relationships with tutors*** very different at university compared with at FE. Typically, they formed close relationships with FE tutors, and felt able to ask for support, whereas at university lecturers often seemed distant or not to know them. This issue may have been more acute for BTEC students who often studied with the same tutor throughout their FE experience.

The Social Experience

I think there could be some other services as well for help, for education help, rather than social stuff. But when we had our Freshers it was mainly gain partying and we really didn't need that.

'People judge you and they're like, you've done a BTEC, you're not capable enough to be here.

In sixth form, I think, there is a stronger network because your classes are smaller, so it is easier to build networks, rather than university because it is a bigger amount of people, larger in number.

'it was a bit of a surprise at how academic people were, and I guess it's more of an income thing as well. So, I'd say probably there are a lot more, I'm probably generalising a little bit, but a lot more middle-class students.

People in uni - they're more into having the party life, while we don't really go out because our parents told us not to go out and I think people would rather be friends with people who want to party because that's what they do. So, because we don't drink or party they find it difficult to ask us to go out with them.

Key Findings: Diversity

It was very difficult to determine any finding which related *only* to students with a BTEC qualification, a reminder that the student group is highly heterogeneous and that there are dangers in treating any sub-group of the student population as homogeneous.

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 and shared direction**: - there are different cultures and admissions policies in 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;
- ❑ Need to recognise the presence of **dominant discourses/practices** and actively work to ensure they do not become normative.

An Inclusive Pedagogy

- ❑ **Inclusive pedagogy** is a method of teaching that incorporates dynamic practices and learning styles, multicultural content, and varied means of assessment, with the goal of promoting student academic success, as well as social, cultural, and physical well-being.

<https://www2.humboldt.edu/diversity/faculty-resources/inclusive-pedagogy>

- ❑ Inclusive teaching in higher education refers to the ways in which pedagogy, curricula and assessment are designed and delivered to engage students in learning that is meaningful, relevant and accessible to all.

<https://www.uow.edu.au/dvca/socialinclusion/inclusiveteaching/background/index.html>

- ❑ Inclusive learning and teaching ‘the ways in which pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment are designed and delivered to engage students in learning that is meaningful, relevant and accessible to all. It embraces a view that diversity stems from individual differences that can enrich the lives and learning of others’. (Thomas and May 2010:9)

Inclusive Pedagogy

- ❑ Inclusive teaching practices reject the deficit model often associated with students - *“It can be seductive to think that if non-traditional students are clever enough, or try hard enough, or persevere enough, or believe enough in their own ability, they can engineer their success at university”* (Devlin et al 2012:1)
<https://www.uow.edu.au/dvca/socialinclusion/inclusiveteaching/background/index.html>
- ❑ Deficit Discourses: locate the problem in the student, not in any other broader factors.
- ❑ It is worth remembering that a deficit discourse was accepted for many years to explain why girls did not achieve as well as boys: ie girls were not as clever as boys. We have come a long way but it is a salutary point when considering new deficit discourses.

Transformative Change

- ❑ What is needed is transformative change which genuinely addresses the issues of social justice across the transition, through university, and into the workplace.
- ❑ This *'necessitates a shift away from supporting specific student groups through a discrete set of policies or time-bound interventions, towards equity considerations being embedded within all functions of the institution and treated as an ongoing process of quality enhancement. Making a shift of such magnitude requires cultural and systemic change at both the policy and practice levels'*.

May and Bridger 2010:6

Further Resources

Project website:

<https://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/education/research/projects/transformingtransitions/>

Project Book:

Banerjee, Pallavi Amitava and Myhill, Debra [eds] (2019) [*Transitions from Vocational Qualifications to Higher Education: Examining Inequalities*](#). London: Emerald