



# 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 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.

# Introducing *Transforming Transitions*

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

- ❑ Phase 1: finding out more about BTEC students' educational experiences across the FE/HE transition;
  - We wanted to understand what the issues are, and particularly to understand student perspectives, rather than designing *interventions* because we thought they might be good;
- ❑ Phase 2: 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 how to tackle inequalities

# Key Findings (Warning!)

In many ways the over-arching finding is that, as with many similar issues, there is no single quick fix solution to the issue of differential progression rates, and no single intervention which will address the problem.

However, the depth of our Phase 1 analysis and the learning from the interventions do provide valuable pointers to potential ways forward and align well with other research findings on access and participation.

# What we found out from the interviews with lecturers

- ❑ The majority of HE lecturers feel that BTEC students do have the potential to succeed, but lack confidence;
- ❑ BTEC students are seen as having strengths in the practical elements of a course, but more likely to find mathematics and the academic course demands challenging, particularly essay writing and dealing with theory;
- ❑ Students from a BTEC background are regarded as less experienced in both exam preparation and writing under pressure;
- ❑ Lecturer perception is that the limited monitoring and personal support are more likely to be an issue for BTEC students than traditional students;
- ❑ Adapting to lectures is considered problematic for a lot of students, regardless of background;
- ❑ HE lecturers observed that live-at-home students (many of whom are BTEC students) are not as likely to engage with extra-curricular opportunities and more likely to struggle with independent learning because they slot back into home life.

# What we found out from the interviews with students

- Some transition issues are the same for both BTEC and non-BTEC students, such as how to cope with lectures; lack of close relationships with lecturers;
- BTEC students seem to have an advantage when it comes to doing group work and presentations;
- Academic writing and mathematics seem to be more of a problem for BTEC students, though often also mentioned by non-BTEC students;
- All students find the assessment processes at university less helpful than at post-16, though perhaps particularly relevant to BTEC.
- BTEC students seem to be less secure with independent learning;
- Some issues with BTEC students seem less related to the BTEC learning, and more to do with coming from a less advantaged background:
  - Living at home makes forming social friendships harder;
  - They are less likely to join societies and 'broaden' their outlook;
  - Groups formed at university are not always inclusive

# Phase 2: Intervention phase

## Design, implementation and evaluation

- ❑ Drawing on the findings of Phase 1, we have designed and developed interventions to address identified issues:
  - ❑ **Maths Support Intervention**: to address mathematical preparedness and confidence;
  - ❑ **Online Module**: An online academic support module available to students before enrolment/during the induction period
  - ❑ **Personal Tutoring**: to strengthen the academic tutoring and help students see tutorials as a key support mechanism
  - ❑ **Academic Writing**: to help students understand the kind of writing required at university

# Academic Writing 1

## □ Why Academic Writing?

- A lot of students found the expectations around academic writing the most significant challenge – particularly referencing; being critical, and traditional academic essays.

## □ Cross-Institutional Collaboration: All four partner FE Colleges

- City and Islington College
- Leicester College
- Hereford VI<sup>th</sup> Form College
- Exeter College

# Academic Writing 2

## Intervention

Tutors have access to a bespoke package of resources directed towards BTEC students and addressing:

- Being Critical,
- Developing an Argument;
- Structuring your Writing;
- Referencing

## Results – Best laid plans and all that ...!

- Learning from FE/HE partnerships

# Further Education Partnerships

- ❑ HE/FE partnerships have the potential to support the transformation of student transitions. However the process of establishing partnerships can be a tricky one.
- ❑ For interventions and partnerships to work effectively staff buy-in is essential. However buy-in can be a challenge to bring about for a number of reasons:
  - **Staff and/or students not seeing the relevance of the interventions**  
*'There are some that will continue to do their own thing and perform at a level where they are doing the bare minimum, that's all they want to do, the minimum, and they're happy with that' .(FE Tutor)*
  - **Lack of time**  
*'It was a bit daunting to begin with, because you just think, 'Oh God, I haven't got time to get my head round this', and I've got emails flying in all the time ...' . (FE Tutor)*

# Further Education Partnerships

- Lack of space in the curriculum

*'I did it in our target setting workshop, as opposed to in their lesson, because their lesson is so structured and we have certain things that we have to teach in every lesson.'* (FE Tutor)

- Demands/requirements of BTEC courses

*'You can't not pass a student because they've not referenced correctly, and they've not done an introduction and conclusion. You just can't. You have to pass them.'* (FE Tutor)

- **Communication** between the HEIs and FE colleges is crucial for effective working in partnership. However establishing lines of communication can be a challenge.

# Further Education Partnerships

## ➤ Ensuring high quality data collection

- *The resources are fantastic! I've printed out the poster and put it up all round the classroom and even in the corridor!*

On a very positive note:

## ➤ Tutors felt that:

*'... the whole process of HE working with an FE college prior to them attending university is a good thing'.*

# Key finding

Addressing fairer access and educational outcomes requires systemic change, not just interventions

## Recommendation

Establishment of a national HE/FE forum



**Thank you for listening!**