

The HE progression of BTEC students: trends, challenges and tactics

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A research project commissioned by the:



CPCO Cambridgeshire & Peterborough
Collaborative Outreach Network

Rationale

- An identified widening access challenges faced in Essex and Cambridgeshire & Peterborough concerns the progression to higher education of those who take level 3 BTECs
- Whilst such learners are capable of succeeding in HE, comparatively few progress to higher-level study.

The national picture

Table 1: Young participation rates for each Level 3 qualification (2010-11 cohort)

Level 3 qualification type	Young participation rate
A-level	79%
Combination of A-level and BTEC	64%
BTEC	41%

Source: HEFCE. 2015. *Young participation from A-level and similar*. Briefing.

<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/yp/ypalevel/subject/>

HE success

- A slightly higher % of learners completing degrees through the BTEC route achieve a 1st class degree compared to individuals following the A-level pathway
- Employment rates for graduates on the BTEC route were higher than for graduates who followed the A-level route. They were also 'less likely to be economically inactive'
- Those opting for BTECs are more likely to come from WP backgrounds (40%) than their A-level counterparts (23%).

Sources: LSE. 2013. The outcomes associated with the BTEC route of degree level acquisition; S. Lynch, D. Sims, K. Wespieser. 2015. A literature review of the value of vocational qualifications.

Methods and Approach

- Desk research, including published reports, official data releases, etc. Aimed at identifying national and regional trends, along with explanations for these
- Primary research
 - Outreach and recruitment staff in partner colleges and universities (12, plus 4 with area remits)
 - Teaching professionals and others supporting BTEC learners (6)
 - HE tutors with experience of teaching those who have taken the BTEC route (5)
 - BTEC learners (29)
 - Undergraduates with BTEC backgrounds (18).

A wealth of information



How the East of England compares

Table 2: Young participation rates by region (2010-11)

Region in which Level 3 BTEC was obtained	Cohort with high grades	Cohort with lower grades
East Midlands	63%	29%
East of England	59%	28%
London	70%	50%
North East	74%	33%
North West	69%	37%
South East	56%	23%
South West	59%	24%
West Midlands	68%	37%
Yorkshire and the Humber	68%	35%
Total	65%	33%

Source: HEFCE. 2015. *Young participation in higher education*.

Local trends

- County level progression rates broadly in line with those reported regionally
- '30-34 % of level 3 BTEC learners would typically progress'
- 'Around 40% is about right'
- Outlier: '66% of eligible BTEC learners (on the extended diploma) applied to university this year (2015/16)'
- Course level variations:
 - 20% or less
 - a 'record 74%' this year
 - Subject variations consistent with national picture (Construction/Sciences - Hair and Beauty).

A large, *growing* pool of applicants

- For Essex in 2015, the number of students at the end of KS5 who had taken at least one vocational qualification was 3,814 (representing 41% of all level 3 learners)
- 40 out of 52 state schools and colleges in the county offered level 3 vocational courses in 2015
- Colleges accounted for 72% of vocational learners, although a number of schools were also large providers
- ‘An increasing number of schools are broadening their offer to include BTECs, often in combination with A levels’
- Some colleges are focusing exclusively on vocational provision (ref. Cambridgeshire & Peterborough)
- *The impact of linear A levels... we can speculate!*

The potential to progress

- Many who take BTECS are 'capable and passionate' about higher level study
- The example of London suggests greater potential, as do 'local' cases of high progression
- HE tutors:
 - 'BTEC can prepare learners better than A levels'
 - 'Looking at the performance of our third years, I could not tell you which ones did A levels and which did BTECs'
 - The acquisition HE relevant skills: inc. time and workload management, group and presentation skills, practical knowledge (noted by tutors, confirmed by learners).

The potential to progress

Table 3. HE programmes selected by level 3 BTEC learners in a partner college: 2014-15 accepted offers (UCAS)

BTEC course	HE Course	Institution
Ext. Dip. in Business	Management, Business and Event Management, Marketing Management, Arts and Festival Management, Accounting and Finance	Colchester Inst., De Montfort, Manchester Metropolitan, Hertfordshire, Anglia Ruskin, London South Bank, Kent
Ext. Dip. IT	IT Systems, Popular Music, Computer Science, Cyber Security, Computer Games, Computing, Theology	Colchester Inst., Staffordshire, Essex, Brunel, Canterbury Christ Church, Greenwich, Northampton
Ext. Dip Public Service	Law, Criminology, Logistics, Psychology, Forensic Science and Criminal Investigation, Rehabilitation in Sport and Exercise, Mechanical Engineering (Foundation)	Nottingham Trent, St Mark and St John, Swansea Met., Uni. Campus Suffolk, Central Lancashire, Leicester, Portsmouth, Manchester Met., Portsmouth
Ext. Dip. Music Tech	Popular Music, Music, Technology and Innovation, Technical Music, Music Production, Broadcast Audio and Music Technology, Creative Computing, Philosophy	Colchester Inst., De Montfort, Stirling, West London, Bournemouth, Leeds Met, West of England

The challenges to progression

Ideas!

The challenges to progression (1)

- Prior attainment
 - ‘Struggling with GCSEs’ - ‘less engaged’, ‘more job-focused’
 - Not gaining grades required for HE - some ‘BTECs who apply still need maths and English’ (HE tutor)
 - BIS (2016): HE progression greater amongst ‘high attainers’
- Learner confidence
 - ‘Feeling they’re not good enough to be at university because they don’t have A-levels’
 - I am ‘not clever enough to do A levels’ (level 3 student)
 - Link to low educational aspirations and WP backgrounds
 - *Aimhigher Greater Manchester (2009)*: ‘low aspirations and lack of confidence more prevalent amongst vocational learners. This can mean they may be put off applying to HE’.

The challenges to progression (2)

- Limited understanding of HE
 - ‘Not uncommon to encounter students who don’t know that they can go to university with a BTEC’
 - ‘Some don’t think the coursework and vocational nature of the BTEC will carry on at university’
 - ‘HE study would be like returning to GCSEs - involving less independent work’ (Level 3 student)
 - Some of the challenge lies in the way HEIs communicate offer
- Parental awareness and influence
 - ‘A levels the gold standard and BTECS for less qualified’
 - ‘The route they took’.
 - ‘They see BTECS as go and get a job, become a plumber’.

The challenges to progression (3)

- Financial cost
 - Potential brake on progression prospects, esp. if WP background and debt averse
 - Why against: ‘the loan side of it’, ‘the issue of debt’ (L3 students)
 - AH Greater Manchester (2009): ‘the vast majority of learners identified cost as one of the key barriers to HE progression’
- Opportunity cost of HE
 - Overlooked in the lit. but potentially higher for BTEC learners
 - Vocational nature of qualification, inc. work experience means ‘options’ on completion
 - Gaining of ‘contacts with potential employers’
 - Availability of jobs requiring L3 qualification e.g. technician, ‘supervisor in nursery’ (recognised by L3 students)
 - A-level students have to ‘start at the bottom or go to uni’ (level 3 student); *corrective*: further progress and training in employment.

Challenges to progression

- A less linear route taken:
 - School - employment - BTEC - HE
 - Family - BTEC- HE

Table 8: Age of highest qualification attained by route of attainment

	BTEC Level 3/4 & No A-Levels			A-Levels & No BTEC Level 3/4			A-Levels plus BTEC Level 3/4		
	All	M	F	All	M	F	All	M	F
Average	27.3	27.5	27.1	23.1	22.8	23.4	26.4	26.2	26.7

Source: London School of Economics. 2013. The outcomes associated with the BTEC route of degree level acquisition, 9.

- Local case based on internal progression: 32% were 19 +
- Interpretations and implications: ‘second chance qualification’ (LSE, 2013), HEFCE analysis.

Tactics and Strategies (1)

The message:

- GCSE advice
 - Ensuring learners receive 'the right advice' on 'doing the right GCSEs' so their 'HE options remain open'
 - Start early - 'lots of the things I've done on careers have focused on the transition year beforehand. In many ways, that's too late!'
 - Year 9 event - 'learners talking to post-16 providers about the qualifications you need to get onto higher courses'
- Post-16 options: informing learners and parents
 - 'Articulating a route-way beginning with GCSEs, incorporate BTECs, and moving on to a degree'
 - Presenting L3 BTECs as 'equivalent to A levels' (UCAS points), whilst also highlighting key differences: subject focus, coursework, placements....

Tactics and Strategies (2)

The message:

- A vocational (applied general) pathway: to and through HE
 - Focus 'on careers rather than HE' as the final destination. The HE component 'becomes part of the story'
 - 'Career objective is likely to have a strong resonance with those who have opted for a vocational study'
 - Confirmed by L3 and HE learners surveyed: being able to 'entre work at a higher position', 'so I can progress in the career I want'
 - Included mature student who became aware of the 'need for higher level skills when I was applying for jobs'
 - *In addition*, need to ensure HE courses selected are a 'good fit' - in terms of subject, style of delivery and method of assessment
 - *Key sources*: data on HE options taken by past students and feedback from alumni.

Tactics and Strategies (3)

The messengers:

- Alumni
 - Who took the BTEC route and are now undergraduates - talking about their experiences to level 3 learners, and featured in 'learner stories', student profiles.
 - Aimhigher Great Manchester (2009): links with former students as role models represents 'one the main enablers to HE progression for vocational learners'
 - 'We have a good alumni programme' - 'they come back in and do guest lectures': *I was where you are - doing a BTEC - then I went on to do a degree, and now I am X, Y, Z (HE Tutor)*
- Employers
 - 'Sharing their experiences and the pathways they took'
 - Particularly relevant for those 'from socio-economic backgrounds that wouldn't necessarily assume the opportunities are there'.

Tactics and Strategies (4)

The messengers:

- HE Tutors in FE Colleges
 - Strong links between FE and HE department amongst key explanation for high progression rates in certain subject areas
 - Involves 'tutors informing and demonstrating what can be done at degree level'
 - Confirmed by level 3 BTECs planning to progress: tutors providing examples of UG work, illustrating what HE lecture would involve
- Teaching professionals and other school/college practitioners
 - UCAS workshops
 - Personal statement support
 - HE drop-in sessions and talks
 - Two-way talks with local HE tutors in corresponding subjects - understanding BTEC curriculum, identifying gaps in HE provision.

Tactics and Strategies (5)

The messengers:

- University outreach teams
 - HE experience events, inc. ‘relevance of degrees to BTECs - lots of our degrees have vocational cores to them’, correcting popular misconceptions about what HE is - ‘massive lectures in dark rooms’
 - Opportunities to ask undergraduates what it was ‘like living there and away from home’, and to experience an undergraduate ‘lecture or class’ (BTEC students)
- HE staff and tutors
 - Understanding BTEC curriculum
 - Support for theoretical aspects of the degree programme
 - Compiling a glossary of terms
 - Exam support
 - Review own assessment methods.

Conclusions

- A set of *implementable* recommendations
- A dynamic situation: the new BTECs
- The need for more data and more research, including on post-graduation outcomes.

Thank you

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