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

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A research project commissioned by the:

Essex Collaborative Outreach Network

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 3 qualification type</th>
<th>Young participation rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A-level</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination of A-level and BTEC</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BTEC</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


[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
  o Outreach and recruitment staff in partner colleges and universities (12, plus 4 with area remits)
  o Teaching professionals and others supporting BTEC learners (6)
  o HE tutors with experience of teaching those who have taken the BTEC route (5)
  o BTEC learners (29)
  o Undergraduates with BTEC backgrounds (18).
A wealth of information
How the East of England compares

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

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

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:
  o ‘BTEC can prepare learners better than A levels’
  o ‘Looking at the performance of our third years, I could not tell you which ones did A levels and which did BTECs’
  o 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)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BTEC course</th>
<th>HE Course</th>
<th>Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ext. Dip Public Service</td>
<td>Law, Criminology, Logistics, Psychology, Forensic Science and Criminal Investigation, Rehabilitation in Sport and Exercise, Mechanical Engineering (Foundation)</td>
<td>Nottingham Trent, St Mark and St John, Swansea Met., Uni. Campus Suffolk, Central Lancashire, Leicester, Portsmouth, Manchester Met., Portsmouth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BTEC Level 3/4 &amp; No A-Levels</th>
<th>A-Levels &amp; No BTEC Level</th>
<th>A-Levels plus BTEC Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>27.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 +
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....
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.
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 is 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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