



## Transforming Transitions – HEFCE Catalyst Project

# Phase 1: Student Experiences of Further and Higher Education

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# 1. Executive Summary

## The project

Transforming Transitions is a collaborative project supported by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) via their Catalyst Fund. The study, as a whole, seeks to understand Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) students' experiences of transition between Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE). It will also involve the development and evaluation of evidence-informed interventions to support this transition. The study focuses upon three particular subject areas: Sports Science, Business Studies and Computer Science. This report outlines the findings from the first phase of the project which involved exploring current HE and FE students' experiences of and attitudes towards their studies. The findings from this phase will be used to inform the development of interventions which could potentially address the differential outcomes for BTEC students.

A combination of one-to-one interviews and focus groups were used within both HE and FE settings. At university, three groups of first-year students formed the sample: students with a BTEC entry qualification; students with a BTEC and an A level entry qualification; and students with an A level or IB entry qualification. The students taking part within the FE context were all second year BTEC students at the end of their course. The interviews allowed for the exploration of a range of themes, including: teaching, learning and assessment experiences; entry experiences; curriculum; experiences of and attitudes towards literacy, numeracy and transferable skills; relationships and social experiences; and, advice to incoming first year students in HE. The resulting interview data was analysed, using thematic induction and assisted by the use of NVivo software. Key conclusions and findings are outlined below.

### Key conclusions

1. HE students' experiences of university do not appear to be clearly defined along the lines of prior qualifications. A range of complex, intertwined factors contribute to students' feelings of preparedness and success. Sometimes these are associated with prior educational experiences but sometimes they are not.
2. Many students reported feeling academically unprepared for degree-level study. This was particularly the case in relation to some aspects of academic literacy and, for BTEC students, was sometimes linked to aspects of subject knowledge too.
3. Students who had not studied mathematics post-16 reported struggling with mathematical elements of their first year course. This was the case for students irrespective of whether they had BTEC or A Level qualifications.
4. Students demonstrated awareness of both the academic and pastoral support mechanisms available to them. Despite knowledge and information about these, many opted not to access this support.
5. There was some variation in assessment preferences and feelings of preparedness depending on prior qualification. Those with a BTEC reported preferences for

essays and coursework-based approaches; they felt less prepared for exams than their A Level peers.

6. Students reported mixed experiences of receiving feedback on assessed work. At both HE and FE levels, and across subjects, there were concerns raised about the quality, quantity and timeliness of feedback. Understanding how to act upon feedback and meet assessment criteria was also a challenge for some students.

7. Some participants felt that their prior qualifications prepared them well to be independent learners. Others reported challenges in relation to this and commented that they would have valued support during the transition phase.

8. A range of factors influenced the extent to which students felt a sense of 'belonging' at university and were able to develop social networks. These included: accommodation arrangements; financial means; participation in extra-curricular activities; and, the organisation of teaching sessions.

## Recommendations and next steps

The findings from this phase of research indicate that there are a number of steps that universities and colleges could take in order to support the learning experiences and progress of their BTEC students. This study builds on previous research in the field by emphasising the importance of the transition phase and the potential for post-16 providers and HE institutions to work together to improve outcomes for students. In developing interventions to support students during this transition, the findings here indicate that it is important not to overstate the differences between BTEC students and their A Level counterparts. Our data reveals that, with just a few exceptions, students' experiences of the transition period are influenced only to a certain degree by their prior qualifications. It therefore becomes very difficult to determine what support would be more suitable or valuable for a BTEC student as it is quite possible that A Level students may benefit too. This has implications in terms of the targeting of new interventions and ensuring equity of opportunity across the full cohort of students.

The study finds that there frequently appears to be a mismatch between students' expectations of HE and their experiences of it during the first year. Many students reported feeling underprepared on arrival at university. This would suggest a transition support package may be a useful approach to tackle this issue. This could take the form of an induction module that may seek to address a range of topics including basic academic literacy requirements and skills, introductory reading, an outline of subject and content knowledge prior to starting the first year. A programme of mathematics support would also be valuable for students who had not continued with mathematics at post-16 level. Our study raises important questions about the support networks available to students at university; it suggests that while there is adequate information and awareness of these, some students are still not accessing them when required. As a response, universities could explore how they might encourage, incentivise or formalise some of these support mechanisms in order to ensure that students who need them most are using them. Finally, the data here indicates differences in assessment preferences and preparedness depending on prior qualifications. Supporting BTEC students to become more familiar with examination practices, but more broadly with assessment expectations and standards in HE, may be helpful in 'levelling the playing field' in this respect.

This phase of work adds to the existing knowledge base surrounding transition and the experiences of students associated with the 'widening participation' agenda. It raises important issues surrounding the equity of the university admissions process and the attitudes towards and of different groups of students based on their post-16 qualifications. The findings presented here should ideally be read in conjunction with the lecturers' report which explores similar themes and issues but from the perspectives of teaching staff in colleges and universities.