

# ***TRANSFORMING TRANSITIONS***



A HEFCE Catalyst Project

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Authors: Debra Myhill; Pallavi Banerjee; Dan Herbert; Carol Robinson; Antonios Kaniadakis; Helen Lawson; Sara Venner; Rebecca Morris; Helen Mackenzie; Mital Kinderkhedia.

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Our hope is that the study contributes to transforming transitions across the FE/HE boundary and leads to a more equitable and socially-just education for all.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The *Transforming Transitions* project was one of a cluster of projects across the country, funded by the HEFCE (now Office for Students) Catalyst programme, *Addressing Barriers to Student Success* (HEFCE 2017). This call was prompted by growing concern about differential progression rates through university, and differential outcomes in terms of graduate employment and salary. Successive reports from HEFCE (for example, HEFCE 2013; HEFCE 2018) had flagged differential patterns of progress and outcomes for students from ethnic minorities, for disabled students, for mature students, and for socially-disadvantaged students. The *Transforming Transitions* project focused on the trajectories of students with vocational qualifications, principally the BTEC, because research had suggested firstly, that this group did less well at university, and secondly, that vocational students were also often from groups identified as progressing less successfully (i.e. they were more likely to be from low socio-economic background, to be minority ethnic, mature, or disabled). We were aware that the relationship between vocational education, social disadvantage and degree outcomes had not been fully investigated.

At the same time, internal data from one of the participating universities suggested that the first year of university was a critical year in determining future outcomes. Students who were academically successful at the end of year 1 were more likely to be awarded higher degree classifications at the end of their degree programmes, regardless of entry qualification. Thus what happens to a student in their first year of undergraduate study seems particularly critical. Given research which has highlighted some of the problems of transition from post-16 education to university (Jones 2008), both personal and academic, the *Transforming Transitions* project sought to understand the transition journey, through gathering both quantitative and qualitative data, in the hope that better understanding of the transition experience might lead to a transformation of outcomes.

The *Transforming Transitions* project was a collaboration of institutions across the FE/HE divide: the University of Exeter, Loughborough University, the University of Birmingham and Queen Mary University of London, and four providers of BTEC qualifications, Hereford Sixth Form College, Exeter College, Loughborough College, and City and Islington College. Person, the providers of the BTEC qualification, were also project partners. Research on student transitions has typically focussed on interventions for students in their new university educational environment (for example Leese, 2010). However, transition begins with the preparation of students for the next stage of their education, and this project has specifically sought insights into transition from both FE and HE perspectives.

## 2.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### 2.1 The project context

In 2016, HEFCE (now OfS) published a call for proposals for a Catalyst Programme entitled Addressing Barrier to Success. Driven by national data which suggested that students from different backgrounds were achieving differential outcomes at university and beyond, the programme set out to explore the problem in more depth and to evaluate interventions designed to address the situation. In the context of this, the *Transforming Transitions* project set out to explore both statistical data on access and progression across the transition, and student and lecturer voices on transition. The focus was on the BTEC as a prior qualification as research seemed to be indicating that students with a BTEC were not progressing to and through university as successfully as students with 'traditional' qualifications. We were also aware that BTEC students were also often representative of the characteristics of widening participation groups.

### 2.2 Key Findings

- The **Literature Review** confirmed that data appears to suggest that BTEC students are less likely to access university, less likely to progress through university to achieve 'good' degrees, and less likely to enter higher-paid graduate employment than students with traditional academic qualifications, such as A-level. However, the research also highlights the complexity of the relationship between prior qualification, access to and progression through university, and subsequent employment outcomes. In particular, it points to the overlap between the BTEC cohort and the widening participation cohort, making it difficult to disentangle whether it is the social disadvantage or the prior qualification, or a combination of both, which is most significant in determining these patterns of progress. A key conclusion, therefore, is to caution against making simplistic causal assumptions drawing only on prior qualification data.
  
- The **statistical analysis** of HE data showed that, at both national level and at the partner HE institutions, students with a BTEC qualification were less likely to progress successfully through university. The partner institution data flagged that this was an issue at the end of the first year. The process of undertaking this analysis, however, drew attention to the need for more consistent collecting of data in HE, and particularly in FE, in order to make more robust cross-institution and national level comparisons. There is also some misunderstanding of the requirements of GDPR, though this may reflect that the study was taking place just as GDPR came into force.



The *student interviews* indicated that:

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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 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,
- 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 and less 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 **Lecturer Interviews** showed that, In general, there was a high degree of correspondence between the lecturer perspectives and those of students, particularly in HE, picking up on similar issues of transition. But a key, and important difference, was that lecturers were much more likely to present these transition challenges as binary differences between students with BTEC qualifications and other students, whereas the students themselves suggested the boundaries between qualification routes in terms of transition are much more blurred.
  
- **HE Partnerships between HE and FE:** At the heart of the *Transforming Transitions* project was a collaboration between FE and HE institutions, and the insights gained from this have been particularly helpful. However, the process of research has made it very clear that there is very little shared working across the transition boundary and that mutual understanding of practices in the two sectors is relatively low. Transforming the experience of transition and securing greater equality of outcomes needs better partnerships between FE and HE.

### 2.3 Recommendations for future research, policy and practice

*Recommendation 1:* Further large-scale research exploring student perspectives of transition is important in ascertaining how generalisable the findings of this project are across more institutions and more subject areas, and to deepen the insights the interviews in this study have offered. The sample of students should move beyond the three subjects looked at here, and the data collection should capture not only prior qualification, but also student ethnicity, socio-economic status, and whether home or international students in order to allow more fine-grained analyses of the experiences of different groups.

*Recommendation 2:* Further secondary data set analysis, or further collection of primary data, looking at the interactions between prior qualification, ethnicity and socio-economic status is needed to better understand the way these factors interact in producing differential outcomes.

*Recommendation 3:* Universities, and their Guild of Students, should proactively consider how to make all students feel a sense of belonging, and to more effectively recognise the diversity of the student body. This might include, for example, considering the inclusivity of student societies; the nature of diversity in student representation on Guild or University committees; or how teaching methods might foster greater collaboration between students from different backgrounds.

*Recommendation 4:* Further Education colleges should consider how to encourage students to become more confident in working with students who are not from their own group, however

defined, and in building networks and relationships within and beyond college which generate social confidence.

*Recommendation 5:* Both FE and HE should consider the nature of academic support provided, including whether the level of support in FE is genuinely beneficial to learners in the long run; whether HE might need to increase support in year 1 to ease the transition; how to make visible and encourage students to make use of the support available at university; and whether there can be more common expectations across FE and HE in relation to, for example, academic writing.

*Recommendation 6:* Universities should systematically evaluate how inclusive their teaching and learning practices are, ensuring that *'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'* (Thomas and May 2010:9). This might involve ensuring a broader repertoire of teaching strategies are used, and it might mean supporting academics to understand that deterministic perspectives of IQ have now largely been rejected in favour of 'growth mindsets' (Dweck 2012), which highlight that appropriate attitudes and appropriate learning environments can maximise achievement.

*Recommendation 7:* Universities should review the assessment practices at subject level and encourage a broader repertoire of assessment types, sharing good practices in HE in innovative assessment methods.

*Recommendation 8:* Further Education colleges should consider how they are supporting learners in becoming more independent and more able to manage their own learning, and less dependent on detailed directive feedback practices.

*Recommendation 9:* Policy-makers should consider how best to create stronger FE/HE partnerships to create stronger mutual understanding and potential cross-sector partnership working. This might, for example, mean offering clear incentives for the development of local partnerships; and the establishment of a HE/FE national forum, supported at the highest level, and including representatives from other stakeholders, such as examination boards and wellbeing services. This body would have responsibility for addressing some of the issues raised in this report, and also avoid the very understandable tendency to position the problem in the 'other' sector.

*Recommendation 10:* Given the very variable consistency of data in HE and especially in FE encountered in this project, we recommend that the OFS considers whether there should be an

expectation of standard datasets to be maintained to build a strong national data set around access, progression and employment outcome.

*Recommendation 11:* Linked to the above, having a secure measure of social disadvantage is problematic with FE relying on Pupil Premium and HE relying on a range of measures such as POLAR data or the Multiple Deprivation Index. A reliable measure of social disadvantage is challenging, but if we are to address the barriers to success, it is critical that the measures we use are both reliable and valid, and used consistently across sectors.

For further information about this project, and to access the full qualitative reports on the student and lecturer interviews please visit the project website at:

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

The findings of the study are also reported in:

Banerjee, A. and Myhill, D. (eds) (2019 forthcoming) *Transitions from Vocational Qualifications to Higher Education*. London: Emerald. ISBN 978-1-78756-996-6

### **3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

In recent years, the range of post-16 qualifications on offer to school-leavers in the United Kingdom (Hayward and Hoelscher 2011:317) has expanded significantly and there has also been a substantial growth in the number of students entering university with a BTEC qualification. In 2015, for example, students with a BTEC qualification accounted for 15% of UCAS applicants in the 18 year-old group, an increase of 50% since 2011 (UCAS 2016). In this section, we review the literature which examines and explains the relationship between vocational qualifications, and access to, and progress through, university, thus mapping the educational terrain in which the *Transforming Transitions* project is placed.

#### **3.1 Perspectives on the value of vocational qualifications**

Unlike elsewhere in Europe, the British seem ambivalent about vocational qualifications, frequently positioning them as inferior to the A-level gold standard, rather than seeing vocational education as *'an essential pillar of its economy's competitiveness and capacity for innovation and central to the country's social cohesion'* (German Federal Ministry for Education and Research, 2015:3). Indeed, the Wolf Report review of vocational qualifications maintained that *'academic and vocational education in England have been bedevilled by well-meaning attempts to pretend that everything is worth the same as everything else'* (Wolf, 2011:8). Several studies have drawn attention to this positioning of vocational qualifications as 'inferior' (Gill and Vidal Rodeiro, 2014:10; Gill, 2018:301; Smith and White, 2015:698; Shields and Masardo, 2015:26). Such discourses are significant as they may affect students' own sense of self-worth as they progress through university, and how lecturers respond to them.

#### **3.2 Differential Access and Participation in Higher Education**

Despite the significant expansion of university education in England in the past 20 years, with more graduates than ever before (Hayward and Hoelscher, 2011:326), Crozier et al have argued that *'universities in Britain continue to be White and middle-class-dominated institutions'* (2016:39). Studies into entry patterns to university show that students receiving Free School Meals were significantly less likely to attend a Russell Group university (Social Mobility Commission 2016). Using POLAR data, (a postcode proxy for social disadvantage), UCAS report that despite some narrowing of the gap, advantaged students remain 5.74 times more likely to go to university (UCAS 2018) than their disadvantaged peers. Equally, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students are more likely to attend a local university than a Russell Group one (Runnymede Trust 2010), and they receive fewer offers (Noden, Shiner and Modood 2014).

Several studies reveal that similar issues of access present for students with vocational qualifications. Hoelscher, Hayward, Ertl and Dunbar-Goddet (2008) found that students with

vocational qualifications were much less likely to attend a pre-92 university than students with conventional academic qualifications. Similarly, Mian, Richards and Broughton (2016) found that BTEC students are more likely to go to low-tariff universities than to more elite institutions. The UCAS data for the 2016 entry cycle shows that only 2.4% of students with a BTEC were accepted at a high tariff institution (UCAS: 2016:25).

However, research also shows that there is an intersection between students with vocational qualifications and disadvantaged groups. Hayward and Hoelscher (2011:32) reported that students with vocational qualifications are more likely to be BAME, have a disability, or come from a low socio-economic background. Shields and Masardo (2015:5) also found that these students were more likely to come from low participation neighbourhoods, whilst Bhattacharrya, Ison and Blair (2003) found that more ethnic minority students chose vocational courses than did their white peers. Rouncefield-Swales (2014) found that BTEC students were more likely to be first generation HE students, and more likely to live in a low participation neighbourhood.

### **3.3 Differential Outcomes: Progression and Academic Results**

Once at university, patterns of progression for BTEC students do not match those of students with traditional qualifications. Rouncefield-Swales (2014), Round et al (2011) and Hayward and Hoelscher (2011) all report higher drop-out rates for BTEC students, even when controlling for prior attainment. Analysis of reasons for this attrition are not simply academic, but also personal and financial (Rouncefield-Swales 2014:19). At the same time, in terms of degree outcomes, students with BTEC qualifications perform less well than the sector-adjusted average (HEFCE 2013:25).

However, whilst this data might appear to signal a particular progression problem for students with BTEC qualifications, research points to the interaction of disadvantage and the BTEC cohort. Both Rouncefield-Swales (2014) and Round et al (2011) note the correlation between disadvantaged students and those taking vocational qualifications, and argue the strong link between disadvantage and attrition rates. Likewise, successive HEFCE reports (2013; 2014; 2015; 2018) point to poorer degree outcomes achieved by students from low participation neighbourhoods, and BAME students. Critically, this underlines that educational outcomes are interactional, not binary, and that simply considering entry qualification is unwise.

### **3.4 Differential Outcomes: Employment**

The only HEFCE report which considered prior qualifications, as well as student characteristics, in terms of employment outcomes was in 2013. This found that both socially-disadvantaged students and those with vocational qualifications were less likely to be in employment than their advantaged peers and those with traditional prior qualifications. Six months after graduation 39%

of students with vocational qualifications were in employment, compared with 66% of students with a UCAS tariff of more than 450 points (HEFCE 2013:24). Contrasting evidence, however, was provided by the London Economics (2013) report which maintained that *'both men and women in possession of BTECs plus degrees are more likely to be employed, and amongst those that are employed, more likely to be employed on a full-time basis'* (2013:17).

More recently, further evidence of a negative dividend for students with BTEC has emerged. The Social Mobility Commission report (2016) found that, whilst BTECs were a route to university for students from low participation neighbourhoods, nevertheless students *'with BTECs are most likely to access lower tariff university courses, which lead to lower wages'* (SMC 2016:91). Research is also highlighting the effect of subject choice on degree outcomes (SMC 2016) and Belfield et al (2018), noted that degrees such as law, medicine and dentistry lead to higher employment and salary prospects than other degrees. Belfield et al note that *'both the subject of degree and institution attended make a considerable difference to graduates' earnings'* (2018:5). For students with a BTEC qualification, routes into these subjects are more limited and less likely, and as noted above, they are also less likely to attend a high-tariff university, possibly generating a double disadvantage.

### **3.5 Conclusions**

What is evident from this brief analysis of the research is that the relationship between a BTEC prior qualification and subsequent access to, progression through, and successful employment outcomes from university is complex. On the one hand, the data does seem to suggest poorer outcomes on each of these measures. On the other hand, research also indicates that the cohort of students choosing a BTEC is also likely to share the characteristics of the widening participation cohort. This means it is very difficult to determine whether it is the social disadvantage or the qualification route which is most significant in determining outcomes. Certainly, it would be unwise to draw any simplistic causal assumptions based only on prior qualification. In order to better understand and address these differential outcomes, we might consider the research on students' experiences at university, particularly research which identifies the experiences of students who are not from the predominant white, middle class, traditionally-qualified group. This has drawn attention to, for example, different social capital or habitus (Reay et al 2009); lower self-confidence (Mazenod, Francis, Archer, Hodgen, Taylor, Tereshchenko and Pepper 2019); different learner identities (McCoy and Adamson 2016); and a sense of not belonging (Mountford-Zimdars et al 2015). Understanding transition demands consideration of both the challenges of academic transition from post-16 ways of learning to those at university, and understanding of the personal, economic and social issues that may act as constraints to access and progress.

## 4.0 METHODOLOGY AND PROJECT DESIGN

The project adopted an *explore-design-implement-evaluate* methodology, firstly by extending systematic data analysis and the investigation of BTEC students' learning experiences across the transition from one FE college and into one university to the transition, from four FE colleges and into four universities; and secondly, by designing and evaluating interventions which address the findings of these investigations, building on and scaling up the existing work undertaken at the partner universities. The project had three phases: investigation; explanation; and evaluation.

### 4.1 Phase 1: Investigation

The initial exploratory phase built on an earlier project conducted at the University of Exeter funded by Pearson (Myhill et al. 2017), focussing on students' experiences of transition, and statistical analysis of admissions and progression data at all four universities, further education colleges and via national datasets available from the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA). A Phase 1 Partner Symposium brought together all partners to develop a detailed Project Plan and to coordinate the phase 1 investigation. Upscaling this work and building on its findings, three robust data collection strands were undertaken to provide an evidence-based understanding of the ways in which students experience the FE to HE transition. The three data collection strands were:

- ❑ a single systematic review of extant research on BTEC students' educational and employment outcomes at university;
- ❑ a detailed statistical analysis of admission and progression patterns in FE and HE (from partner universities and HESA);
- ❑ a qualitative analysis of students' experiences of transition across the FE/HE boundary, and lecturer perspectives on BTEC student progression.

#### 4.1.1 The Literature Review

This adopted the principles of systematic reviewing, in line with Cochrane principles, with clear exclusion and inclusion criteria, and seeking to answer the question: what do we know about BTEC students educational and employment outcomes at university? The evidence arising from this was used to inform the qualitative strand of this phase, and the analysis and interpretation of project data.

#### 4.1.2 The Statistical Strand:

This was conducted in parallel with the systematic review and involved working with three different datasets. Institutional level historic admissions and progression data was approved for the project following ethics clearance. Planning units of partner universities extracted data and anonymised individual learner level data, which was then shared through encrypted files with the University of

Exeter. The files were aligned in the same format and merged to create a dataset for the project at Exeter where this analysis was carried out. Students were grouped by prior qualifications depending on whether they entered partner universities with A-levels, International Baccalaureate, BTEC, diplomas, certificate courses or a combination of these. At university level, analysis of historic progression data of all students (BTEC, BTEC plus A-level, and 'traditional' A-level/IB entry) was carried out at institutional, subject and subgroup levels, looking at in-year progression data and where available; end-of-year progression data.

The second dataset came from Further Education colleges. At FE college level, the analysis considered the full post-16 cohort by qualification route and the key variables of gender, ethnicity, and SES, and also analysed the destinations of students by qualification, looking at choice of institution and programme, or employment routes.

The third dataset used was obtained from HESA. This national dataset was used to check trends across the population of all students who enter higher education from vocational qualification routes. We were able to look at popular degree courses in terms of subject areas for undergraduate courses taken by BTEC students also identify by mission group markers which universities were more likely to have BTEC students. We also analysed degree and employment outcomes for these students.

#### **4.1.3 The Qualitative Strand**

This strand sought to develop a nuanced understanding of the causes of differential outcomes for BTEC students and to hear first-hand the voices of the students. Our goal in this phase of the project was to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experience of transition in order to tailor the later interventions to identified need. We focused on Sports Science, Business and Management, and Computer Science, representing a spread of subjects across the four institutions with a substantial number of BTEC students in their cohorts. For each of these subjects, and in collaboration with our FE partners, we conducted a series of interviews and focus groups with students and with their tutors and lecturers, as outlined below.

##### *Sampling and Data collection*

The university students' sample comprised three different cohorts in year 1 of each of the four partner universities, based on their entry qualifications: BTEC students; BTEC plus A-level; and A-level/IB only. This avoided the risk of stereotyped assumptions and unconscious bias about any group, and also allowed the possibility of identifying mechanisms of advantage as well as disadvantage. The students taking part within the FE context were all second year BTEC students who were at the end of studying their course. The students were studying subjects related to Sport and Exercise Science, Business Studies, or Computer Studies.

Four separate semi-structured interview schedules were designed for the two student groups and the two lecturer groups (that is, from HE and FE). The questions drew on the literature review and all four were organised around the same themes:

- Teaching, Learning and Assessment Experiences
- Literacy, Numeracy and Transferable Experiences
- Relationships and Social Experiences

The precise questions were modified to take account of whether the interviews were with students or teachers, and whether they were in HE or FE. The full set of interview schedules can be seen in Appendices A-E. The interviews and focus groups were conducted with students, tutors and lecturers on site in both FE and HE contexts.

Table 4.1 displays information about the number of students who took part and how many interviews or focus groups were conducted.

| University    | Number of interviews/focus groups | Number of students | Number of FE tutors | Number of HE lecturers |
|---------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| A             | 8                                 | 12                 | 2                   | 6                      |
| B             | 17                                | 22                 | 2                   | 3                      |
| C             | 7                                 | 21                 | 1                   | 2                      |
| D             | 7                                 | 9                  | 2                   | 0                      |
| <b>Totals</b> | <b>39</b>                         | <b>64</b>          | <b>7</b>            | <b>11</b>              |

*Table 4.1. Showing the number of interviews/focus groups with students and lecturers*

The interviews were all audio-recorded, and transcribed by an independent body. The analysis was conducted using ‘bottom up’ inductive coding, and following the process of ‘thematic induction’ as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved attributing codes to segments of the data, and after the first phase of analysing, clustering them into coherent themes. The eight themes identified, partly reflect the interview schedule themes but also generated unanticipated ones. The themes were:

- Academic Preparedness
- Academic Support
- Assessment Practices
- Reasons for choice of FE study

- ❑ Ways of Learning
- ❑ Student perceptions and expectations of education pathway
- ❑ Transferable skills
- ❑ Social Capital

## 4.2 Phase 2: Design and Implementation

The findings of the three strands of data from phase 1 provided both *generalised* findings across groups, sub-groups and institutions and the *particularities* of groups and individuals involved which gave us an in-depth understanding of the experience of transition and its relationship to differential outcomes for BTEC students. The second phase was *explanatory*, building on the findings of phase 1 by considering the causal relationships which underpin the differential outcomes and determining interventions which address these. In this phase, we built on our existing interventions, where appropriate, making them more evidence-based, improving their design, assessing the cost-effectiveness and extending their reach across partner institutions. This stage and the evaluation phase used a Theory of Change model to support both the design of interventions and their evaluation. A Theory of Change model is valuable in planning for social change as it ensures that causal relationships are made explicit and that underlying assumptions are articulated. In particular, in cases such as this with complex causal relationships, *'the precise link between activities and the achievement of the long-term goals are more fully understood. This leads to better planning, in that activities are linked to a detailed understanding of how change actually happens'* (Harris, Hodgson and Noble 2014).

A Partnership symposium was held, bringing together the four FE and four HE partners, and Pearson to share the findings of Phase 1 and to develop the Theory of Change model for this project. An expert on Theory of Change models from one of the partner universities led the workshop to familiarise all partners with this way of working. We then developed together four interventions which addressed the identified barriers or issues arose from the first phase, each underpinned by a Theory of Change model and an Evaluation Framework. Each intervention was implemented across at least two partner universities or across two FE colleges, depending on the focus of the intervention.

The intention had been to develop interventions that were robustly designed and evidence-informed, rather than over-focused on 'good ideas activities' where the underlying drivers of change have not been examined. However, one limitation of the intervention stage is that the timeframe of the project narrowed what was feasible as an intervention focus and so our choices were more instrumental than might have been desirable. The four interventions focused on academic writing, online pre-entry/entry support, mathematics support, and personal tutoring. These all derived from evidence in the phase 1 data: however, the qualitative data highlighted

much more significant issues around, for example, ways of learning, and assessment practices which would have required longer development and implementation times.

### **4.3 Phase 3: Evaluation**

Phase 3 was the main evaluation phase where the Evaluation Framework was implemented for each intervention. The Evaluation Framework required the articulation of an explicit effectiveness question for each intervention, identification of the baseline and outcome data required to answer that question, and determination of the most appropriate methods of analysis in relation to that data. Our Evaluation Framework also included a *process* evaluation, eliciting qualitative data which provided evidence of both how the intervention was delivered and the circumstances or contexts which enabled or acted as a barrier to its success. In this way, we ensured a consistent and systematic approach to evaluation, combining both quantitative and qualitative data. Full evaluation reports were written for each intervention.

## **5.0 STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF PATTERNS OF PROGRESSION**

### **5.1 Taking up the vocational route**

In the UK, all students are provided free and compulsory education until the age of 16. Traditionally 16-year olds take GCSEs in a range of core and optional subjects at the end of year 11 in secondary schools. Thereafter, students make a decision whether to continue with academic qualifications and study in sixth forms or choose the vocational route and study in further education colleges which relies heavily on work-based scenarios.

Overall in the population of 16-18-year olds, a majority of students take up the academic route and study for A-level or IB qualifications. However, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are over-represented in vocational qualification cohorts. For example, data released by the DfE shows in 2017-18, 15.5% of A-level, 23.2% of applied general and 23.3% of technical level students (level 3) aged 16-18 in state-funded schools and colleges were from a disadvantaged background. In the same year, 33.3% of level 2 vocational students and 32.2% of technical certificate students in state-funded institutions were reported as disadvantaged at the end of key stage 4, compared to 27.7% in the potential cohort. Similar patterns of participation were observed in the previous year.

The choice of academic versus vocational routes could possibly be linked to differential prior attainment. Educational attainment strongly correlates to students' backgrounds such as poverty, family expectations, assumptions about ability, cultural capital, parental involvement in schooling and the cultures and practices of educational institutions themselves. Those with higher attainment often prefer the university sector. Contrary to policy claims, vocational orientation is only weakly connected to preferences, whereas high-status orientation is the main factor determining the choice of university sector. The academic/vocational divide finds its base in these choices.

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds with lower attainment often report how they were encouraged by their schools to take up the vocational route as their teachers thought they would not perform well in the academic route. It is impossible to guess how these students would have performed if they had been allowed to pursue the academic qualifications, but research evidence shows the long-standing influence academic and vocational routes can have continuing into the labour market.

This chapter reports on three statistical analyses investigating the access to and progression through university of students with a BTEC qualification. The first analysis considers national data; the second explores access and progression data from the HE partner institutions; and the final analysis looks at data provided by the partner FE colleges.

## 5.2 Admissions to Higher Education

Admissions to UK Universities are determined by prior educational achievement. Students make between one to five applications via the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). Admissions decision-makers then determine whether to accept or reject a candidate based on predicted examination results - and this includes a consideration of both post-16 qualification routes, subject choices and attainment, and university policies. Universities have their own set procedures and criteria for admissions to undergraduate courses.

In the context of prior qualifications, the vocational route has also been a matter of much debate, particularly the transition from vocational to Higher Education. Admission staff note meritocracy should continue to be the gold standard for fairness in admissions. Investigations into how applications from students with vocational qualifications are perceived and processed show these are done with the aim to enable institutions to meet institutional priorities and are not necessarily meant to offer equal opportunities. It should not come as a surprise then that these students are relatively underrepresented at elite universities and in courses held in high esteem.

UCAS entry tariff is a way of ensuring comparability across various qualification routes. Numerical scores are assigned to the possible grades that can be achieved in each type of qualification and points are then assigned to applicants. However, it remains unclear and debatable whether the various prior qualification routes have been aligned correctly. The different qualifications via their different curriculum, pedagogical approach and course work bestow students with different sets of skills, knowledge and understanding. As a result, this *difference* in terms of post-16 learning trajectories renders making direct comparisons between students who follow different qualification routes complex. Vocational entry route students have a unique skillset and strengths, as do students who come from academic qualification routes: these may not necessarily be harnessed in HE, but may be beneficial to learners in the long run.

Universities in the UK are classified into various mission groups. Amongst these, Russell Group universities are the elite and highly selective universities. These universities are held in high esteem as students graduating from them generally have better placements in the job market as shown by destination data nationally. These universities are sought after by UCAS applicants and are generally high-tariff providers – requiring a higher UCAS entry tariff for admissions. An analysis of population data from the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) shows BTEC students were less likely to study at a Russell Group university and were relatively more likely to study at low tariff providers (see Table 5.1).

| Mission group       | Academic     | Vocational   |
|---------------------|--------------|--------------|
| 1994 Group          | 90.3%        | 9.7%         |
| Guild HE            | 70.2%        | 29.8%        |
| Million Plus        | 69.9%        | 30.1%        |
| Other               | 76.1%        | 23.9%        |
| Russell Group       | 96.5%        | 3.5%         |
| University Alliance | 75.7%        | 24.3%        |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>80.2%</b> | <b>19.8%</b> |

*Table 5.1 Undergraduate students in higher education by qualification route and provider*

The Joint Academic Coding System (JACS) defined by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) is used to classify academic subjects consistently across the sector. The system is co-owned and maintained by HESA and UCAS. The summary statistics presented in Figure 5.1 follows this classification. According to this classification there are nineteen major subject areas in higher education. Analysis of this data shows clearly the different patterns of entry in different subjects. Compared to other subject areas, relatively higher proportion of vocational route students were studying subjects like Creative Arts and Design, Business and Administrative Studies, Biological Sciences, Subjects allied to Medicine, Computer Science and Social Studies. One of the possible explanations for the observed pattern could be that these were some of the more popular subject choices among BTEC students for the undergraduate course. Another possibility could be that BTEC students were more likely to be accepted in these courses – either due to their skillset or curriculum. Although the higher education landscape is beginning to change and there is a drive towards being more inclusive, all providers do not offer admissions to students from a vocational route such as BTEC. Figure 5.1 below shows the proportion of students by prior qualification in undergraduate courses across various subject areas (note that Sports Science is included under Biological Sciences).

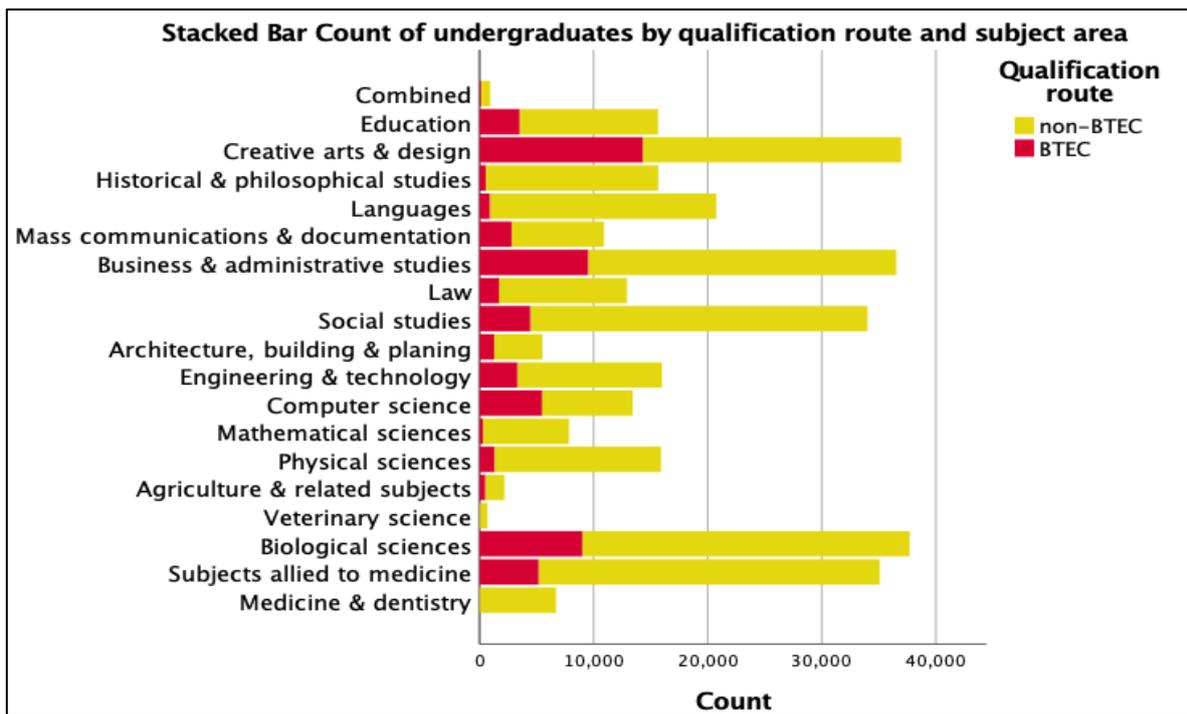
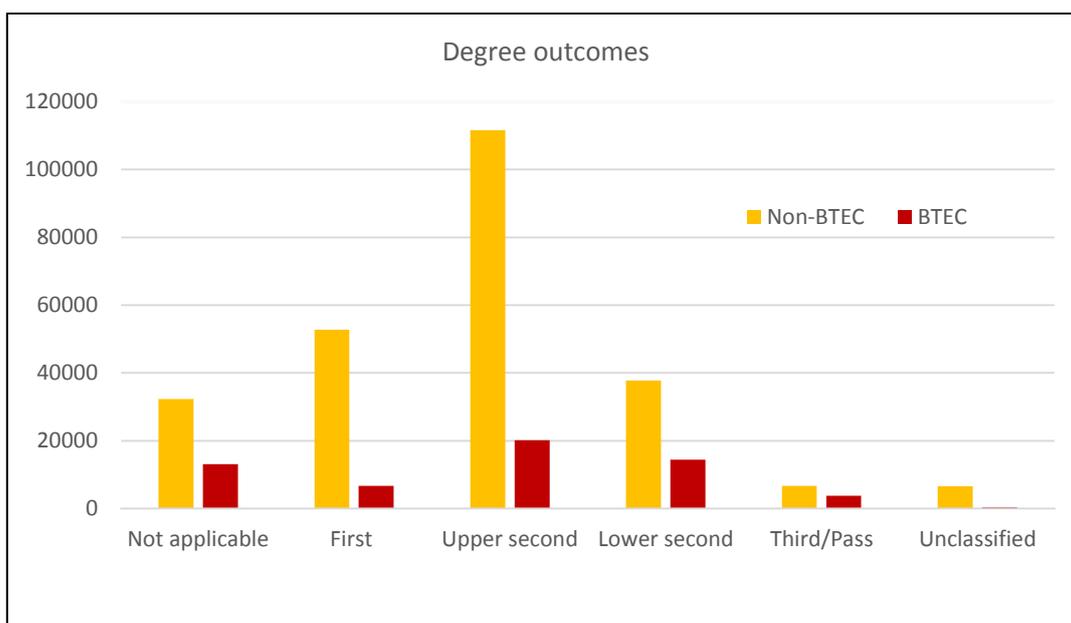


Figure 5.1 Students with BTEC qualifications in undergraduate courses  
(Source: Banerjee 2019)

### 5.3 Student Progression in HE

One important focus of the suite of projects in the *Addressing Barriers to Student Success* programme (which this project is part of) is to consider differential progression through university, not only access to it. Analysis of national datasets shows that the majority of BTEC students obtain a second-class degree and only a small proportion of this cohort gain a first, even if they had obtained the highest possible grade in the vocational qualification. Figure 5.2 below shows most students – from BTEC routes or otherwise - qualified with an upper second class honours. But it also illustrates differential degree outcomes, depending on entry qualification, with non-BTEC students more represented in the higher award levels, and vice versa. There were no BTEC students in the unclassified category, which may support the findings represented in Figure 5.2 that medicine and dentistry degrees do not have BTEC entrants. It should also be noted that certain qualifications obtained at first degree level are not subject to classification of award, notably medical and general degrees. These, together with aegrotat qualifications (where a certificate has been provided stating that a university student is too ill to attend an examination) are included within the *Unclassified* category.



*Figure 5.2 Degree outcomes in HE by prior qualification route on entry  
(Source: Banerjee 2019)*

The research reports published so far, responding to these data, suggest a deficit model for the vocational route. They indicate that students qualifying for various indices of deprivation entering university are somehow disadvantaged by their prior entry qualification, prior attainment in school, or continued underperformance at the University which subsequently lands them in lower level jobs. We argue that most of these problems are inter-related and start much earlier in the student life-cycle. Students qualifying for various deprivation indicators are similar in several aspects and often go on to have similar trajectories. They are very likely to underachieve in GCSEs, take up inferior qualifications, drop out or complete courses with a grade which cannot be cashed in very well in the labour market. This makes the entire issue of intergenerational mobility very complex.

#### **5.4 Statistical Analysis of Institutional Data from Partner Universities**

This section summarises the statistical analysis conducted by making use of admissions and progression data from partner Universities for the academic years 2012-13 to 2015-16. The various prior qualifications were categorised into four routes:

- Group 1: included students with A-level or IB qualifications;
- Group 2: included students with only BTEC qualifications;
- Group 3: included those who had studied for a combination of A-level or IB and BTECs;
- Group 4: included students with all other qualifications such as diplomas and certificate courses.

The first step was to look at the patterns of entry and then to investigate the patterns of progression of students during the first year of their undergraduate courses by prior qualification. The data was collated for the three subject areas forming the sample for this study – Business Studies, Computer Science, and Sports and Exercise Science. There were some limitations in the data collected and the data quality was not uniform across all institutions. For example some of the datasets did not have information on prior qualification routes taken by students. The other problem noted was end of first year examination results were not available. Given these main variables had a lot of missing data, it was not possible to use the data from all four universities. One partner institution was unable to supply access, participation and progression data.

#### 5.4.1 Patterns of entry

The data provided, covering the academic years 2012-13 to 2015-16, had details of 5183 students enrolled in first year undergraduate courses in Business Studies, Computer Science, and Sports and Exercise Science at the three partner Universities. Table 5.2 below shows the aggregated student number data by JACS subject areas into three groups. The JACS subjects do not align perfectly with the three subjects forming our sample so a decision had to be taken about which JACS subjects to include in the analysis. The final analysis included:

- ❑ Group 1 Sport and Exercise Science - JACS (C6) Sport and Exercise Science;
- ❑ Group 2 Computer Science – JACS (I1) Computer Science; JACS (I1N1) Computer Science and Business Studies; and JACS (I3) Software Engineering;
- ❑ Group 3 Business Studies – JACS (N1) Business Studies; JACS (N2) Management Studies; and JACS (N4) Accounting.

Table 5.2 below presents the outcome of this analysis and shows that Business Studies is significantly the larger subject cohort in this study.

| Subjects                            | Number of students | Percentages |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|-------------|
| Sport and Exercise Science          | 1696               | 33          |
| Computer Science                    | 1091               | 21          |
| Business and Administrative Studies | 2396               | 46          |
| <b>Total</b>                        | <b>5183</b>        | <b>100</b>  |

*Table 5.2: Students across subjects aggregated by JACS subject areas*

The next step examined prior entry qualifications of all these students to estimate what proportion of students enter partner universities via academic and vocational routes. Table 5.3 below shows that the highest proportion of students were those with an A-level or IB qualification (74% overall).

There were relatively fewer students with vocational qualifications such as the BTEC (11%) and even fewer students had taken a combination of academic and vocational qualifications, diplomas and certificate courses (7.5%).

| Qualifications      | Number of students | Percentages |
|---------------------|--------------------|-------------|
| A-level/IB          | 3858               | 74          |
| BTEC                | 546                | 11          |
| BTEC and A-level/IB | 389                | 7.5         |
| Other               | 390                | 7.5         |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>5183</b>        | <b>100</b>  |

*Table 5.3 Prior qualifications of the cohort*

Drilling down to subject level, more BTEC students were enrolled for courses in Sports and Exercise Science, followed by Computer Science. Business courses recruited the lowest proportion of BTEC students (Table 5.4).

| Subject areas                   |                | Qualifications |            |                     |            |             |
|---------------------------------|----------------|----------------|------------|---------------------|------------|-------------|
|                                 |                | A-level/IB     | BTEC       | BTEC and A-level/IB | Other      | Total       |
| Sport and Exercise Science      | Numbers        | 1148           | 288        | 220                 | 40         | 1696        |
|                                 | %              | 68             | 17         | 13                  | 2          | 100         |
| Computer Science                | Numbers        | 765            | 111        | 70                  | 145        | 1091        |
|                                 | %              | 70             | 10         | 6                   | 13         | 100         |
| Business and Management Studies | Numbers        | 1945           | 147        | 99                  | 205        | 2396        |
|                                 | %              | 81             | 6          | 4                   | 9          | 100         |
| <b>Total</b>                    | <b>Numbers</b> | <b>3858</b>    | <b>546</b> | <b>389</b>          | <b>390</b> | <b>5183</b> |
|                                 | <b>%</b>       | <b>74</b>      | <b>11</b>  | <b>7.5</b>          | <b>7.5</b> | <b>100</b>  |

*Table 5.4: Students across case study cohort subject areas by prior qualifications*

When this data is analysed at university level, it reveals very different patterns of entry (Table 5.5). University A has a much higher percentage of BTEC-only students than either of the other two universities; whilst University B has a much higher proportion of students with combinations of BTEC and A-level. University C, on the other hand, enrolls a high number of students with Other entry qualifications.

| Qualifications      | Institution  |              |              |
|---------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
|                     | University A | University B | University C |
| A-level/IB          | 30           | 52           | 18           |
| BTEC                | <b>62</b>    | 18           | 20           |
| BTEC and A-level/IB | 35           | <b>56</b>    | 9            |
| Other               | 33           | 10           | <b>57</b>    |

Table 5.5 Percentages of first degree entrants by subject.

At subject level, the distribution of students from academic and vocational routes was not even. Most BTEC students in HE were in Sports and Exercise Science, followed by those with a combination of BTEC and A-level or IB qualifications. Computer Science and Business Studies had fewer BTEC students, and more students with A-level/IB qualifications were studying Business (Table 5.6).

| Qualification | Sport and Exercise Science | Computer Science | Business and Management Studies |
|---------------|----------------------------|------------------|---------------------------------|
| A levels/IB   | 30                         | 20               | 50                              |
| BTEC          | <b>53</b>                  | 20               | 27                              |
| BTEC and A/IB | <b>57</b>                  | 18               | 25                              |
| Other         | 10                         | 37               | 53                              |

Table 5.6: Percentages of first degree entrants in the three subject areas

#### 5.4.2 Patterns of Progression

The analysis of progression data was carried out to investigate what proportion of students from different qualification routes passed the end of first year examination at the university. Differential educational outcomes were noted by entry qualifications (table 5.7). The highest proportion of those who failed had a BTEC prior qualification.

| Qualifications | Whether passed first year of programme (%) |     | Total |
|----------------|--|-----|-------|
|                | No   | Yes |       |
| A/IB           | 6  | 94  | 3858  |
| BTEC           | <b>24</b>                                  | 76  | 546   |
| BTEC and A/IB  | 11   | 89  | 389   |

|       |    |    |      |
|-------|----|----|------|
| Other | 17 | 83 | 390  |
| Total | 9  | 91 | 5183 |

Table 5.7 Proportion of students who passed end-of-first year examination

Considering the data at subject level, across all three subject areas the highest proportion of those who failed their end of first year examination at the university had a BTEC prior qualification (see Table 5.8). The highest proportion of those who passed had taken A-level or IB qualifications. The data reveals that BTEC students were relatively more successful in Sport and Exercise Science. Given that the data has already shown that Sport and Exercise Science enrol proportionally more BTEC students than the other two subjects, it may be that there is a closer match between course expectations at university and the BTEC qualification; or alternatively, it may be that university Sport and Exercise Science courses are better aligned to BTEC students' needs and preferences because there are more of them on the course.

| Qualifications      |                | Sport and Exercise Science |             |             | Computer Science |            |             | Business   |             |             |
|---------------------|----------------|----------------------------|-------------|-------------|------------------|------------|-------------|------------|-------------|-------------|
|                     |                | No                         | Yes         | Total       | No               | Yes        | Total       | No         | Yes         | Total       |
| A-level/IB          | Numbers        | 48                         | 1100        | 1148        | 91               | 674        | 765         | 103        | 1842        | 1945        |
|                     | %              | 4                          | 96          | 100         | 12               | 88         | 100         | 5          | 95          | 100         |
| BTEC                | Numbers        | 54                         | 234         | 288         | 35               | 76         | 111         | 44         | 103         | 147         |
|                     | %              | <b>19</b>                  | 81          | 100         | <b>31.5</b>      | 68.5       | 100         | <b>30</b>  | 70          | 100         |
| BTEC and A-level/IB | Numbers        | 11                         | 209         | 220         | 13               | 57         | 70          | 18         | 81          | 99          |
|                     | %              | 5                          | 95          | 100         | 19               | 81         | 100         | 18         | 82          | 100         |
| Other               | Numbers        | 2                          | 38          | 40          | 36               | 109        | 145         | 30         | 175         | 205         |
|                     | %              | 5                          | 95          | 100         | 25               | 75         | 100         | 15         | 85          | 100         |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>Numbers</b> | <b>115</b>                 | <b>1581</b> | <b>1696</b> | <b>175</b>       | <b>916</b> | <b>1091</b> | <b>195</b> | <b>2201</b> | <b>2396</b> |
|                     | <b>%</b>       | <b>7</b>                   | <b>93</b>   | <b>100</b>  | <b>16</b>        | <b>84</b>  | <b>100</b>  | <b>8</b>   | <b>92</b>   | <b>100</b>  |

Table 5.8: End-of-first year examination results

The relationship between entry numbers and progression rates is depicted graphically in Figure 5.3, and this underlines an apparent significant difference in successful progression to year 2 for Sport and Exercise Science students, when compared with Computer Science and Business Studies. BTEC students were more likely to enter partner HEIs to study first degrees in Sport and Exercise Science, where they were also more likely to pass the end of first year examination.

Both Business Studies and Computer Science had fewer BTEC students and their progression rate was lower than Sport and Exercise Science.

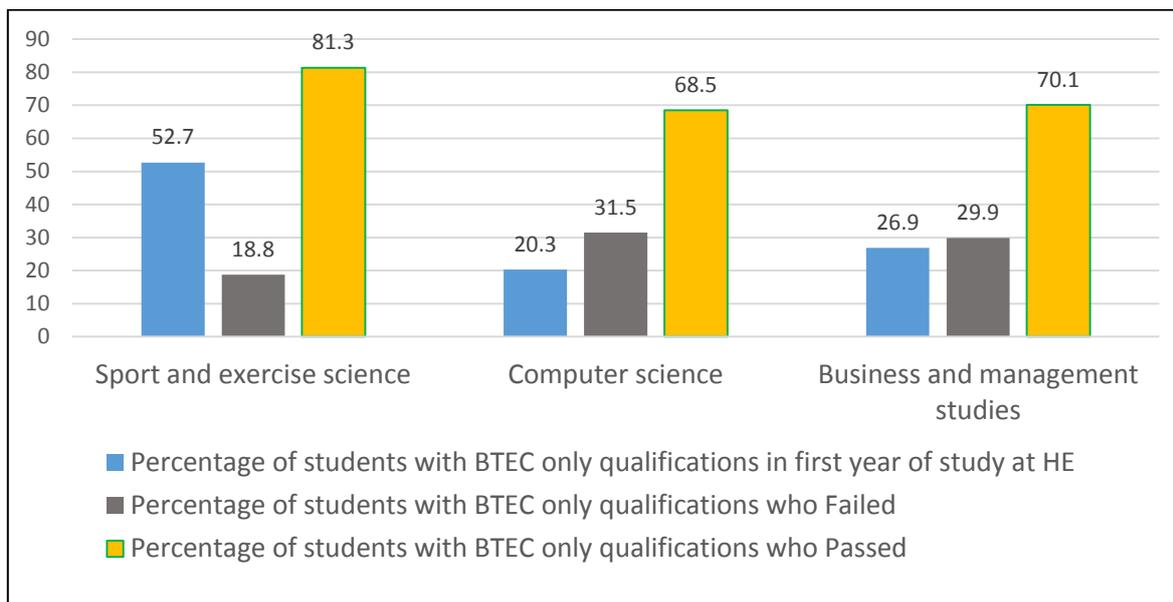


Figure 5.3: Subject-wise patterns of entry and progression for BTEC entrants

Overall then, this analysis of partner institution patterns of entry and progression broadly mirrors the national data presented earlier. Specifically, it shows that students with a BTEC-only prior qualification are relatively fewer in Business Studies and Computer Science, compared to BTEC students enrolled on Sport and Exercise Science degrees. The analysis also indicates that students with a BTEC-only prior qualification were also more likely to fail their end of first year examinations, although this likelihood seems to be less strong in Sport and Exercise Science. It is important to note, however, that the majority of students with a BTEC-only qualification *do* progress successfully. What this data is flagging is the differential outcomes between students with different prior qualifications, and it raises questions, which the statistical data cannot answer, about the reasons for these differential patterns of entry and progress.

## 5.5 Statistical Analysis of Institutional Data from Partner Further Education Colleges

The exploratory phase of the project included analysis of demographics, progression and destination data shared by the four partner Further Education colleges, referred to in this report as College 1, 2, 3 and 4. One of the key issues faced consistently throughout this project was that data was not collected and recorded in the same format by the different FE institutions. The initial data request asked for individual-level data for the full post-16 cohort, including: end of key stage (KS)4 results; KS5 qualification routes; the key *variables* of background indicators such as gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status (SES); and destination data, looking at choice of institution and programme, or employment. However, what we received from colleges varied from raw

individual level data, aggregated institutional level data, and images of graphs. As a consequence, it was not possible to create a common reporting template which could be used for data extraction.

The data was centrally analysed at the lead institution rather than by FE partners. In accordance with organisational policies and GDPR regulations, all shared data was anonymised by the provider. None of the students are identifiable in this report or any published outputs from this project. The analytical output was shared with the designated lead FE contact prior to wider dissemination in conferences, journal articles and reports.

Because the type of data provided by each FE college was so varied, this section of the report will present the analysis institution by institution. The purpose of this analysis was to explore what proportion of BTEC students' progress to higher education across partner FE colleges and whether these proportions have changed across the years. Where such information was available, we also wanted to explore whether these students were from a similar background.

#### **5.5.1 Further Education College 1**

Aggregated destination data for level 3 learners for the academic years 2013/14, 2014/15 and 2015/16 was provided, but there was no data regarding student background or grades achieved/awarded. Data collection for 2016-17 had not been completed at the time when data was shared, thus the most up-to-date dataset available was the one for the academic year 2015-16. Students with the following qualifications were included in the analysis:

- GCE AS Level – Level 3, Year 1 of A-Levels
- GCE A2 Level – Level 3, Year 2 of A-Levels
- BTEC 90 Credit Diploma – Level 3 Vocational, Year 1 (1.5 A-Level equivalent)
- BTEC Extended Diploma – Level 3 Vocational, Year 2 (3 A-Level equivalent)
- BTEC Certificate – Level 3 Vocational Year 1 (AS equivalent)
- BTEC Subsidiary – Level 3 Vocational, Year 2 (A2 equivalent)

Figure 5.4 below summarises the number of entrants and the number of students who passed the course. It is interesting to note that the number of level 3 entrants increased significantly every successive year. However, the pass rate remained fairly stable: each year a little over 91% of all level 3 entrants passed and achieved a level 3 qualification.

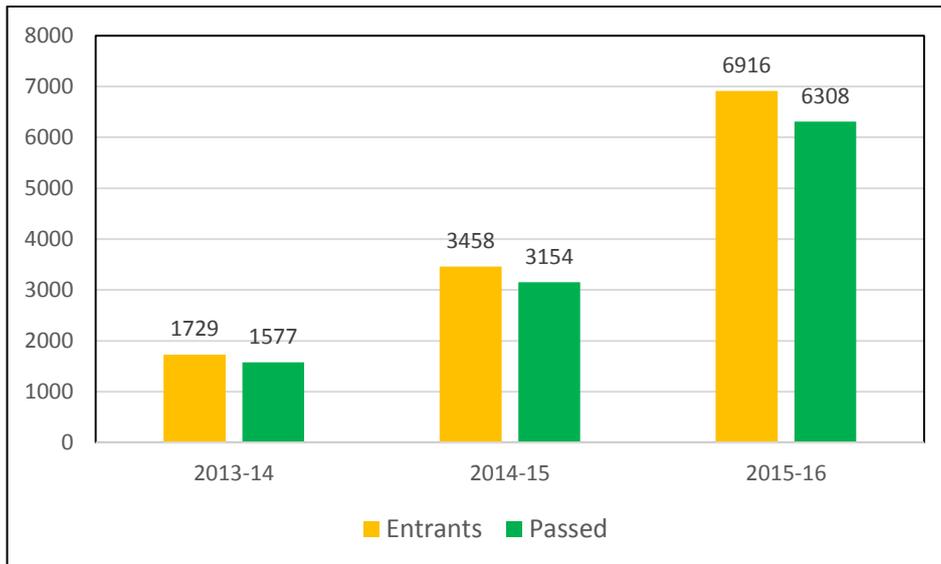


Figure 5.4: Total number of entrants and students who passed level 3 qualification

The next analysis examined the proportion of level 3 qualified students who progressed on to higher education, either by making a UCAS application to a university or by studying for a higher education degree at the further education college (see Figure 5.5 below). In 2013-14, 20% of all level 3 students progressed on to Higher Education – a little over 17% of these students had applied via UCAS to study at a University while 2% of them were studying for a HE degree at this college. In 2014-15, nearly 20% of all level 3 students progressed on to study for a higher education (17% via UCAS; 2.6% at FE college). Similar results were observed in 2015-16, where 21% of all level 3 students progressed on to higher education (17.9% via UCAS; 3.2% at FE college). Thus, it is fair to conclude nearly one-fifth of all level 3 students' progress on to study for a higher education degree each year at this institution.

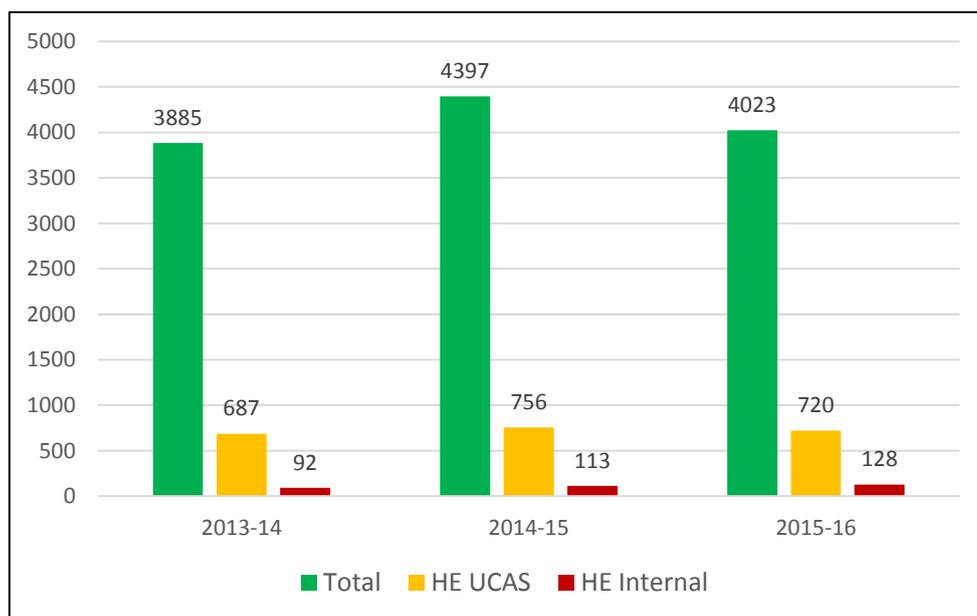


Figure 5.5: HE destinations via UCAS or internally

Across the four years captured in the data, most students progressed to four universities in the same geographical region of the college, one of which was a Russell Group university. Overall, students from College 1 were not likely to enter Russell Group Universities. Given the nature of data and information available, it was not possible to estimate what proportion of these entrants had a BTEC only qualification. The college did not have student background indicators collated in their records, and so it was not possible to ascertain how similar or different these students were in terms of their background and prior attainment.

### 5.5.2 Further Education College 2

Data shared by FE College 2 included information about courses, learning aims, gender, disability and eligibility for free school meals (FSM), which is used as a proxy indicator of socio-economic deprivation to ascertain whether the learner comes from a disadvantaged background. We were provided with summary statistics from aggregated institutional data and destination data was available for all students.

There were 260 level 3 students at College 2 during the academic years 2013-14, 2014-15 and 2015-16. The analysis in Table 5.9 presents subject data of those programmes closest to the three HE subjects forming the study sample. In College 2, these subjects were: Business Enterprise, Computing, Travel and Tourism (BECT); Business and Computing (BUCO); and Sport and Serviced Enterprise (SASE). The overall percentage of entrants by subject areas are shown in table 5.9 below.

| Programme area                | Frequency  | Percentage |
|-------------------------------|------------|------------|
| Business                      | 116        | 44.6       |
| Computer Science              | 93         | 35.8       |
| Sport and Serviced Enterprise | 51         | 19.6       |
| <b>Total</b>                  | <b>260</b> | <b>100</b> |

Table 5.9: Entrants by subject area

Pupil background indicators show 19% of all students had reported disability either as a difficulty or health problem. Classifying by gender, 30% of all entrants were females and 70% were males. The largest ethnic group was white and the smallest ethnic group was of Chinese students (see Table 5.10)

| Ethnic Group | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------|-----------|------------|
| Any Other    | 11        | 4.2        |

|                 |     |      |
|-----------------|-----|------|
| Bangladeshi     | 5   | 1.9  |
| Black African   | 20  | 7.7  |
| Black Caribbean | 10  | 3.8  |
| Black Other     | 6   | 2.3  |
| Chinese         | 1   | 0.4  |
| Indian          | 55  | 21.2 |
| Mixed           | 24  | 9.2  |
| Other Asian     | 18  | 6.9  |
| Pakistani       | 14  | 5.4  |
| White           | 96  | 36.9 |
| Total           | 260 | 100  |

*Table 5.10: Entrants by ethnicity at College 2*

Deprivation indicators linked to individual student records was unavailable; however aggregated institutional level data for 16-18-year olds filtered on the organisation's information management system showed in 2013-14, no students were noted as being eligible for free school meals (FSM). In the 2014-15 cohort, 26 students and in 2015-16, a total of 14 students were identified as FSM. Thus, the total number of all FSM students was 15.4% (40 out of 260 students). All these students studied for a certificate (1.5%) or diploma (98.5%). A breakdown by learning aim title, and number of FSM students on each programme, is presented in table 5.11 below.

| Learning Aim Title                          | Total number of students | FSM eligible students |
|---|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| 90-credit Diploma in Business (QCF)         | 37                       | 5                     |
| 90-credit Diploma in IT (QCF)               | 18                       | 11                    |
| 90-credit Diploma in Sport (QCF)            | 31                       | 6                     |
| BTEC Certificate in Business (QCF)          | 1                        | 0                     |
| BTEC Certificate in Sport (QCF)             | 3                        | 0                     |
| BTEC Diploma in Business (QCF)              | 28                       | 3                     |
| BTEC Diploma in Sport (QCF)                 | 2                        | 0                     |
| BTEC Extended Diploma in Business (QCF)     | 27                       | 1                     |
| BTEC Extended Diploma in Sport (QCF)        | 13                       | 0                     |
| BTEC Subsidiary Diploma in Business (QCF)   | 23                       | 2                     |
| BTEC Subsidiary Diploma in Sport (QCF)      | 1                        | 0                     |
| Diploma in IT (QCF)                         | 24                       | 4                     |
| Extended Diploma in IT (QCF)                | 51                       | 8                     |
| Subsidiary Diploma in Public Services (QCF) | 1                        | 0                     |

|            |       |    |
|------------|-------|----|
| Total      | 260   | 40 |
| Percentage | 15.4% |    |

Table 5.11: Learning aim title

The analysis of progression to Higher Education considered students from all courses (N=260). 88% of all BTEC students - 228 students from a total of 260 students - progressed to HE. Figure 5.12 shows progression to HE in terms of the three University subjects focused on in this study. Destination details were not available for the remaining students (n=32).

The destination data also indicates that most students progressed to non-Russell Group universities, including a local non-Russell Group university, which had the highest proportion of BTEC entrants each year.

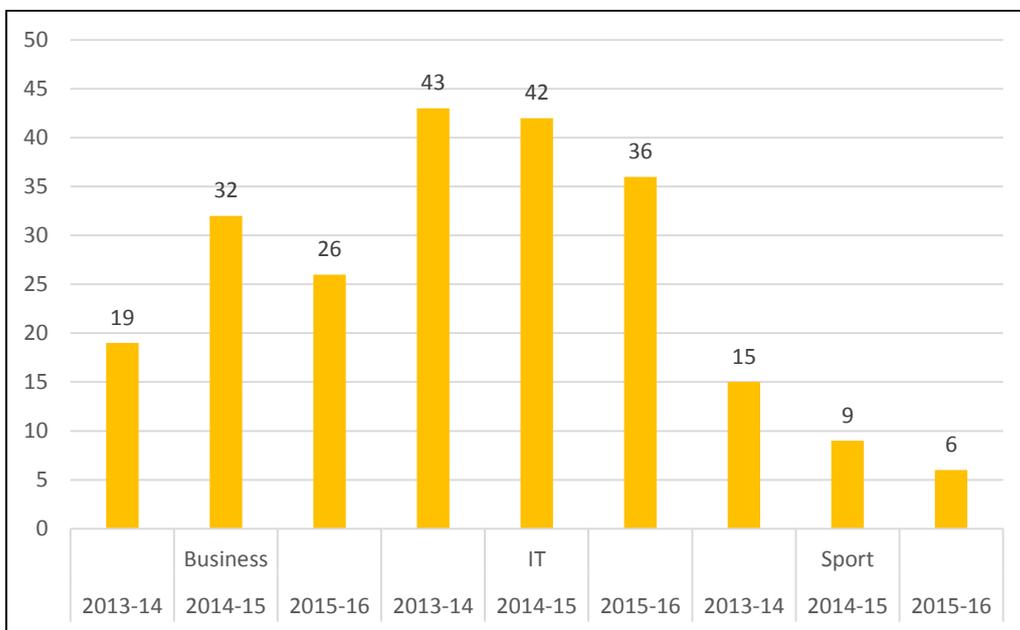


Figure 5.6: HE progression data from destination of leavers

#### 5.4.3 Further Education College 3

This college had a total enrolment of 3334 students over the 4 year data period, taking up a range of qualification routes such as A-levels and BTECs. Student records were available to us from 2013-14 to 2016-17. Table 5.12 below shows the number of students enrolled for each academic year (N=3334). 56% of all these students identified themselves as females and 44% as males.

| Academic year | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------------|-----------|------------|
| 2013-14       | 793       | 23.8       |

|              |             |            |
|--------------|-------------|------------|
| 2014-15      | 780         | 23.4       |
| 2015-16      | 861         | 25.8       |
| 2016-17      | 900         | 27         |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>3334</b> | <b>100</b> |

Table 5.12: All entrants at College 3 by academic year

An analysis of the available data by ethnicity (see Table 5.13) shows the highest proportion of students were from White British backgrounds.

| Ethnicity  | Frequency | Percentage |
|--|-----------|------------|
| 11: Asian/Asian British - Bangladeshi                | 2         | 0.1        |
| 12: Asian/Asian British - Indian                     | 13        | 0.4        |
| 13: Asian/Asian British - Pakistani                  | 4         | 0.1        |
| 14: Asian/Asian British - Any other Asian Background | 13        | 0.4        |
| 15: Black/Black British - African                    | 3         | 0.1        |
| 16: Black/Black British: Caribbean                   | 2         | 0.1        |
| 17: Black/Black British: Any other Black             | 3         | 0.1        |
| 18: Chinese  | 8         | 0.2        |
| 19: Mixed - White & Asian                            | 32        | 1          |
| 20: Mixed - White & Black African                    | 8         | 0.2        |
| 21: Mixed - White & Black Caribbean                  | 16        | 0.5        |
| 22: Mixed - any other Mixed background               | 28        | 0.8        |
| 23: White - British                                  | 3074      | 92.2       |
| 24: White - Irish                                    | 8         | 0.2        |
| 25: White - Any other White background               | 98        | 3          |
| 47: Other - Arab                                     | 3         | 0.1        |
| 98: Any Other  | 8         | 0.2        |
| 99: Not known/not provided                           | 11        | 0.3        |
| Total  | 3334      | 100        |

Table 5.13: Entrants by ethnicity

As Figure 5.7 below shows, the highest proportion of those who were offered a place at University had A-levels. Relatively fewer BTEC students were offered a place by a Higher Education provider. POS in the figure below refers to the programme of study.

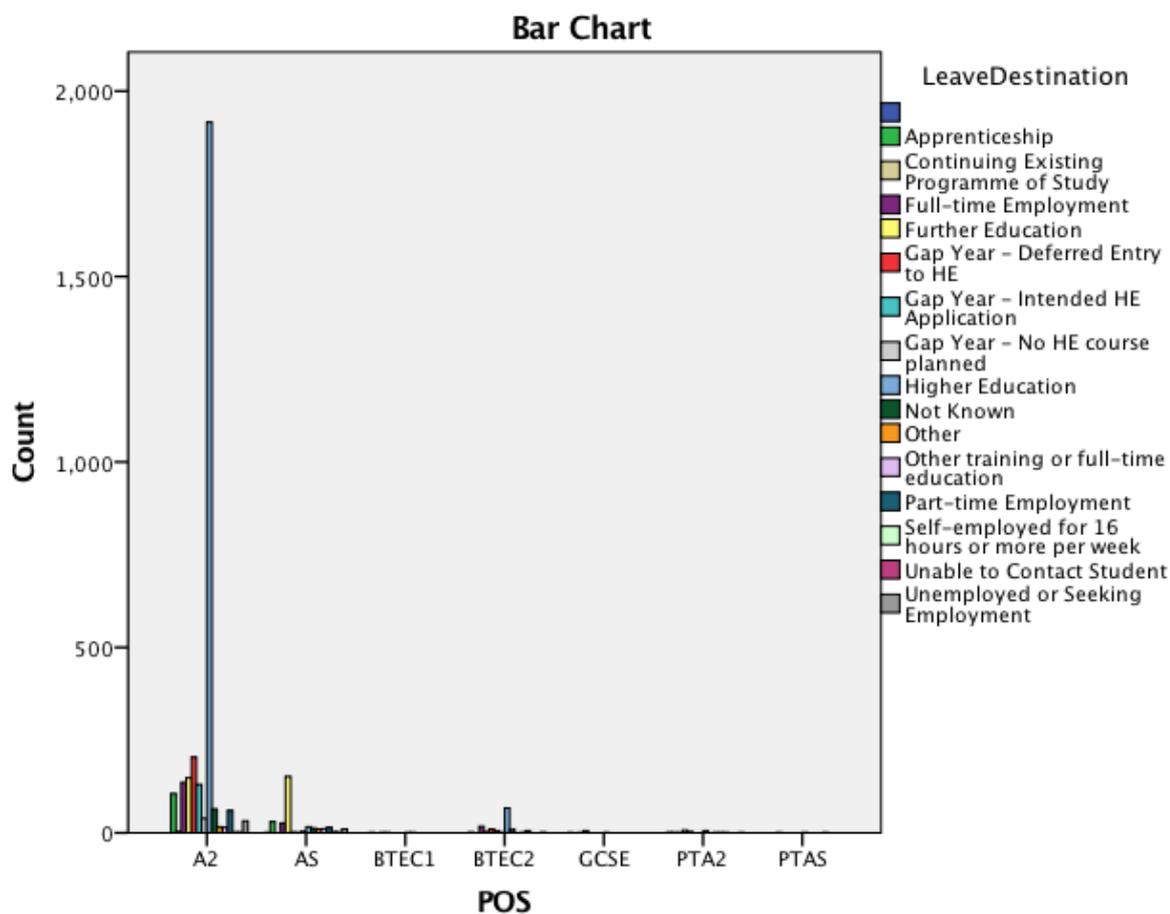


Figure 5.7: Destination of Level 3 students by programme of study (POS)

A further analysis of the data explored what proportion of BTEC students, relative to students with A-level qualifications, progressed into university (Table 5.14). This indicates that BTEC students constitute a very small fraction of all those who took up places at university. What the data cannot tell us, of course, is how many students applied and how many were offered a place: or in other words, does this percentage reflect student choice or university admissions processes?

| Academic year | Number of HE entrants | Percentage of all HE entrants |
|---------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|
| 2013-14       | 20                    | 3.9                           |
| 2014-15       | 16                    | 3.3                           |
| 2015-16       | 20                    | 3.9                           |
| 2016-17       | 12                    | 2.4                           |

Table 5.14: HE entrants with BTEC only qualifications by academic year

#### 5.4.4 Further Education College 4

FE College 4 provided student progression data for the academic years 2013-14 to 2015-16, but could not provide any other data. Across the three academic years, 4302 students had studied at this college (Table 5.15).

| Academic year | Frequency   | Percentage |
|---------------|-------------|------------|
| 2013-14       | 1356        | 31.5       |
| 2014-15       | 1413        | 32.8       |
| 2015-16       | 1533        | 35.6       |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>4302</b> | <b>100</b> |

Table 5.15: All entrants at College 4 by academic year

During these three years, 980 students (23%) had been offered a place in an undergraduate course by a university. For more details of destination of students, please see Appendix F. This included students with various qualifications offered at this college, such as A/AS-levels, BTECs, diplomas, and extended diplomas. While there was a lot of information on the various destinations of students who completed the course, this information was not linked to their qualification routes, making it impossible to ascertain what proportion of BTEC students entered Higher Education.

The inconsistencies in the way data was recorded and held by various FE colleges made it difficult to aggregate the data and answer the research questions. FE colleges often used self-recorded measures of attainment which were calculated by automated systems such as G score, average GCSE score. Similarly, various deprivation indicators were used, such as the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM), and a disadvantage uplift factor but not shared in the anonymised dataset. Student background indicators were considered sensitive by data providers and thus was not available for analysis. Going forward, it would be advisable to check there is secure understanding of data-sharing protocols, but also that there is a more common national dataset of information for FE colleges.

Despite the various limitations, the data show that some BTEC students do progress to HE. A majority of those wanting to pursue an HE degree apply via the UCAS application system, while a smaller proportion of students continue studying at the same college. Amongst those who apply, and for whom we have progression data, most students study at non-Russell group Universities.

## 5.5 Conclusion

Vocational students are not always accepted by elite universities nor are they accepted for admissions to all courses. Despite this, the number of students from vocational entry routes at

the universities in undergraduate courses continues to grow. In 2016, one in four students entering HE held a BTEC qualification, double the 2008 figure. It is therefore more important than even before to understand how these students perform when transitioning to university from their vocational entry route to what may be a more academically-focussed HE degree. Research conducted by the Higher Education Funding Council of England (now Office for Students) has highlighted the importance of this issue, showing that the biggest factor driving variations in student outcomes nationally is the entry qualification of students. For example, BTEC students have a smaller proportion of “good” degrees than all students with A-levels – even BTEC students with three distinctions get a smaller proportion than A-level students with three Cs.

The Social Mobility Commission report (2019) says that, at 16, disadvantaged students are more likely to enter Further Education than school sixth forms. It is now becoming increasingly important to include students with vocational qualifications in the demographic groups for which retention and success is monitored. The Office for Students could lead the change towards addressing barriers to student success by including students with vocational qualifications in their monitoring and reporting. At the same time, considering what data FE colleges might routinely collect might lead to a more informed understanding of transition.

## 6.0 STUDENT INTERVIEW ANALYSIS: STUDENT VOICES ON TRANSITION

### 6.1 Introduction

Our findings are condensed into three main themes. (See Appendix H for a complete list of codes rising from the thematic analysis). To begin with, **Ways of learning** considers learning experiences, ways of learning and how academically well-prepared the students feel for their chosen university courses. Equally important are any challenging transition experiences the students feel in terms of their subject knowledge and skills, and their experiences and preferences in terms of ways of learning. Following on from Ways of Learning, the theme of **Assessment practices** captures students' vocal and varied views about the assessment practices they experience, including a significant section on assessment feedback. Further analysis looks at how students have adapted to these assessment experiences, and how this directly links to attainment outcomes. Finally, **Social experiences** pulls together comments concerning students' social transitions, notably, the varied range of issues surrounding students' social networks with peers and friendship groups, and in relation to their accommodation choices too.

### 6.2 Ways of learning

#### 6.2.1 Academic literacy

Academic literacy for the purpose of this study is seen as '*proficiency in reading and writing about academic subjects, with the goal of contributing to the ongoing conversations of an academic field*' (Neeley 2005: 8). A majority of the first-year university students, irrespective of qualification upon entry, feel that different aspects of academic literacy has presented challenges. In terms of reading, comments indicate that students do not feel prepared due to the unfamiliarity with this new style of reading, such as the understanding of academic texts, particularly academic journals, and also how academic articles are structured. As one A-level student said, this change was '*daunting*' to adjust to, making the comprehension of text troublesome. Equally, a further barrier was the frequent use of new subject specific abbreviations, as well as subject-specific vocabulary, in that '*it takes longer because I feel like every few sentences I'm looking up like a word because I didn't know what it meant*'. Finally, adjusting to the volume of reading required during the first-year of study is equally daunting, as in the case of this A-Level and vocational student:

*...there's these big hefty books, 600 pages and they might sort of give you two or three chapters. Like with marketing we get this and it's - read three chapters for this lecture - and the chapters are about 100 pages long.*

However, with academic writing there is considerable variation, with some students indicating that they find this transition straightforward, whilst for others this is less so. Those who have studied A-levels (including alongside a vocational qualification) which involve essay writing feel largely

well-prepared for writing essays, whereas vocational students and those with an A-level where writing was not important feel more unprepared. One interesting comparison in the case of this student doing both an A-Level and a vocational course was that *'In my A-levels you get taught the way you have to write, but in BTEC they're just like, 'write a report' and you just do it'*.

On top of this, students are not familiar with the expectations at university of what 'academic writing' should be, as evidenced by this vocational student:

*... academic essays, there is an academic way of writing which you really have to follow and which is a lot different to what we're used to. It's not necessarily about knowing the content or having points to get across, it's just the way you put it down on the paper is the hardest bit.*

Similarly, an A-level student describes the 'shock' of becoming familiar with writing an academic essay:

*like at A-levels, so you know like okay I can write like 200 words, 300 words, 500 words and you're fine. But here like he said it's like 2500 words- after like two paragraphs you're like, what else can I write about this?'*

A final challenge is referencing, with a majority of students commenting that they have no, or very little, experience. This perceived lack of preparation appears to be escalated by the need to learn and adapt to different referencing styles, which students cited as a 'step up' or a 'leap'.

### **6.2.2 Numeracy, mathematics and statistics**

This is an equally strong theme in the interviews, but only in relation to certain subjects, such as Sports Science or Business Studies, which include mathematical elements in their modules. Feeling unprepared seems to be a particular problem for students who have not studied mathematics post-16, resulting in a time lapse, or 'gap' in their study of the subject. Many of the students questioned said that the study of mathematics, statistics and numeracy is a 'shock' or a 'struggle' suggesting a lack of confidence in their mathematical ability. Other students indicate that their feeling of unpreparedness could have been eased if they had had a greater understanding around the expectations involved with their degree study, as conveyed by this vocational plus A-level student:

*... 'but if there was some sort of warning, like we are going to slap you in the face with finance, we are going to slap you with accounting, like start getting ready with the maths. Obviously, they tell us that, but I didn't expect as much.'*

### **6.2.3 Subject and content knowledge**

Many of the Sports Science students with a vocational qualification felt they had a well-rounded understanding of their subject. Yet, some said they felt unprepared for the scientific subject content in their degrees, particularly Anatomy, Biology, Bioenergetics, Chemistry and Psychology. Indeed, many Sports Science students with a vocational qualification felt at a disadvantage compared to A-level students when studying scientific subject knowledge. Students reported that this was a 'shock', making them feel 'behind' as *'If you don't have that science background it is very hard to get on to that base level with everyone else, unless you are putting in a huge amount of work'*. However, difficulties with the science content is not confined to vocational students, as some A-level students comment that they too have experienced similar difficulties despite previously studying Biology, or experienced knowledge gaps for the Psychology or Chemistry content, and vice versa.

There is a similar set of experiences for undergraduates in Business Studies. Students report many difficulties with subject and content knowledge in modules such as Accountancy and Finance, and this is associated with the mathematics and statistics content, as discussed previously. Equally, some students without an Economics A-level reported struggling with the subject of Economics *'... if you'd done Economics A-level you wouldn't have to worry about and if you hadn't, you had no experience in it whatsoever and it was like horrific really, it was really hard.'*

### **6.2.4 Academic support**

The interviews reveal that students' experiences of academic support post-16 and at university are diverse and complex. Most students know what support is on offer or where to find it. However, responses also suggested that many are not accessing the available support facilities despite this awareness. A significant amount of students retrospectively regret not having accessed support even when they know they needed it. The reasons, and perceived barriers, behind this appear both emotional and personal. For example, quite a few cited their own 'stubbornness' or 'laziness' for not accessing available support. Yet, for some it is more about the perception of others, and how they feel about needing support. One student explained *'being scared'* to ask for help, another was concerned about being thought of as *'silly'*; whilst yet another felt it would *'be stupid of me to go and ask.'*

However, the strongest and most frequently cited difference between FE and HE is the nature of the relationship with tutors. More personalised contact time with tutors at FE means they know teachers well and can build strong relationships. For example, one student reflected that at university, in contrast to FE *'I don't feel they have that personal connection with you to say "You*

could also do this". I think they just look at it and go "That's fine". Because they have so many to check I suppose'.

Optional Buddy or Mentor schemes available in the first year are referenced by a number of students. They are seen as optional and, the value of the support provided is mentioned by a few as largely positive *'whenever I have needed anything, I've always just messaged my buddy and they've been able to help'*.

### **6.3 Assessment practices**

#### **6.3.1 Feedback on assessment**

The most strongly voiced theme relating to assessment is the issue of the nature and helpfulness of feedback given on assessments in HE, regardless of the entry qualification they possess. Assessment feedback is defined as *'all feedback exchanges generated within assessment design, occurring within and beyond the immediate learning context, being overt or covert (actively and/or passively sought and/or received) and, importantly, drawing from a range of sources'* (Evans 2013:71). In general, students are not positive about their university experiences of assessment feedback, especially in relation to how effectively it enables them to learn from it and therefore inform future effort. Many students, regardless of entry qualification, feel there is a lack of constructive feedback after examinations. A consequence of this for some is that they find it hard to know how well they are progressing or what they needed to improve, as voiced here by a vocational student:

*I think post-examinations ... it would be good to have a lecture where your lecturer just goes through where people made the majority of mistakes. Just so then you can learn from it, because otherwise you get your paper back and you got this percentage but you don't actually know where you went wrong on it. So it's hard to know where your knowledges actually are.*

In addition, many students are disappointed with the amount and quality of written feedback on coursework assignments. Some students find their feedback lacks detail, cited by this A-Level and vocational student *'I expected it to be more detailed, much more detailed actually. I think it would have helped'*. On top of this, the process or format of how feedback is delivered is mentioned by some as being less personal than that experienced post-16, with an A-Level and vocational student making a direct comparison: *'Feedback from university is by email and then feedback at school was obviously one-to-one. So I found it easier to gauge what I had to improve when it was on-to-one'*.

### **6.3.2 Assessment Preferences**

Considering the HE cohort, some students voice a strong preference for coursework essays rather than examinations, and students with vocational entry qualifications are more likely to be in this group. This links clearly with their FE experience, where vocational courses place greater emphasis on coursework than A-level or IB. Yet, the differences between vocational and A-level entry routes are not binary, with some A-level students preferring coursework essays. Those students who had experienced coursework in their post-16 learning have a sense of familiarity and preparedness and being better at it than examinations *'we had coursework for our A-Levels, we understand how the coursework here works as well as trying to meet the deadlines because we had many of these'*. Equally, some students have made a deliberate choice post-16 to choose courses with more coursework as they feel better able to demonstrate their learning this way. One student reflected *'I changed from A-Level to BTEC because of the coursework based element and I'm terribly bad at writing essays and the exam environment'*.

Overall, the FE cohort are also more likely to express preferences for coursework rather than examination, and their views largely echo those made by the HE students. They felt they could demonstrate *'more progress with this assessment model than examinations'* and that this *'broke down the exam pressure as don't have to worry about revision'*.

### **6.3.3 Changes in assessment experiences across the FE-HE Transition**

On the whole, there are two main occurring themes around transition experiences. Firstly, a sense of preparedness when engaging in known assessment practices such as giving presentations, or writing essays, including some students who believe they are better prepared for transition than their A-level peers, as in the case of this vocational student:

*What I've noticed like as a BTEC there was more of a variety of assessment methods so I did a lot of presentations as well as essays and like one to one interviews. Lots of people who did A-Levels did like essays and then it was examinations, so for me personally I feel better prepared for a lot of the assessment methods.*

Secondly, many students hold views on examinations, notably, the lack of any experience of exams for vocational students has posed a particular challenge. For some it is about having *'not done any for 2 years...getting back into it was difficult'*, and that *'... a lot of worry came from the fact that we were assessed on examinations, especially by the fact that I did BTEC where it was all essay written'*. Those students who experience examinations post-16 feel they have been better prepared at FE than in HE, with some students saying they had expected to receive revision lists, based on previous experience of being *'given a sort of list, maybe not the questions that are*

*going to be asked, but definitely a list that'll help you to answer questions'. Indeed, many students cite a lack of revision skills and how to manage revision, however, for the vocational students this is especially an issue, as they felt that 'I think probably some revision skills sessions, that would have been really useful. Particularly for us who haven't actually been doing revision like for the last two years.'*

#### **6.4 Social Transitions**

Although academic and social transitions are inevitably intertwined and, whilst there is often no clear single reason why students might consider dropping out of university, a lack of social integration can nevertheless play a crucial role (Jones 2008). Identifying with, and forming social bonds with others are seen as important in fostering a sense of belonging. (Tinto, 1998; Braxton, Milem and Sullivan 2000; Yorke and Longden, 2004; Maestas, Vaquera and Munoz Zehr 2007; Thomas 2012; Mountford-Zimdars, Sabri, Moore, Sanders, Jones, and Higham 2015). Therefore, for this study we were interested in exploring the various issues surrounding students' social networks with peers and friendship groups, and choices made by first-year students when deciding their accommodation are also considered. A key factor here is that students' social experiences contribute to their sense of belonging or fitting in, and it was evident that for some students they did not feel part of the dominant university culture.

##### **6.4.1 Social networks**

Interviewing the FE students studying vocational qualifications at college reveals that, whilst some students have built strong friendship groups and good supportive peer relationships, it is clear that not all groups are equally as strong. In addition, there appears to be stronger connections within the subject group, rather than wider college groups, as in *'we only speak to who comes in to the lesson'*.

The HE students' reflections on their friendship groups at university, in general, draws out similar ideas and experiences, regardless of entry qualification. The challenge that large subject cohorts pose on making friends, *'when there's 300 people in a lecture theatre it's quite difficult to kind of become close with peers'*, means there is less of a sense of group identity, and not all students find their closest friends within their particular degree programme of study. However, sometimes the shared subject interest is key to forging friendship groupings by *'the fact that we all have a similar interest which is our course.'*

The way others viewed their qualification is, for some vocational students, a factor which influences their friendship networks, with one student reflecting that *'even with my closest friends, there's always like an ongoing joke about people that did BTECs'*. The comment voiced here, and by some other students, suggests that the stereotyping around having a vocational qualification

could potentially raise damaging psychological issues, especially in relation to identity and confidence building (Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*, 2015).

#### **6.4.2 Accommodation choices**

Those first-year HE students choosing to live at home due to the financial cost and the comfort of having family support, as well as some who lived in accommodation off campus, find participating in the opportunities that university offers in terms of establishing new and broader networks at first, slightly harder as cited by one A-Level student, '*... during the start, the welcome week and the first few weeks it did, it was a lot more difficult living at home.*' However, on reflection, students feel that the benefits of family support outweighs the disadvantages.

Establishing social networks is for some students made more challenging by the dominant culture of university life, particularly in relation to drinking and partying, and to attitudes to education. More emphasis upon educational support would have been helpful for one student:

*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 going partying and we really didn't need that.*

Forming friendships largely within accommodation groups and therefore outside of their subjects are also discussed by students as '*the majority of my friends are in my halls*', whilst another explained that these tended to be stronger friendships '*we're kind of a bit like a community if you know what I mean, so we're all really good friends*'.

#### **6.5 Conclusion**

There are some significant themes emerging from this analysis of student voices across the transition. When considering ways of learning, a crucial theme for universities needs to be more awareness of the multiple starting points of students on some programmes in terms of disciplinary knowledge, and to consider how to accommodate this diversity into the programme of teaching. This may be relevant to all degree courses, but may be particularly critical where a degree subject accepts students with a wide range of different A-Levels or vocational subjects. An additional strong theme concerns the nature of the relationship between students and tutors, which appears to be closer and more constructive in post-16 settings than at university.

In terms of assessment practices, two central themes emerge namely, *the types of assessment*, and the *helpfulness of assessment feedback* after reflecting on the perspectives voiced by these students. With regard to the *types of assessment*, there is more diversity in types of assessment on the vocational courses than there is in A-levels. Equally, diversity exists in types of assessment

in university undergraduate programmes, which vary from subject to subject. Students' voices reveal no real consensus around what kind of assessment is preferred, thus reflecting the diversity of previous learning experiences and personal preferences. Hoping to reduce differential outcomes, universities need to ensure that students experience a diversity of assessment types, which includes a reduction in the reliance on examination and the written essay.

With regard to *helpfulness of assessment feedback*, this is a more complex issue, and from the voices of the students, a significant one. The students' dissatisfaction with the feedback they receive at university may not be simply related to the quality of the feedback provided. Although Post-16 students do tend to receive more feedback, more individualised feedback, and more feedback aligned to defined performance standards, this may possibly be due to the high accountability culture in FE, rather than to any superior professional understanding of effective feedback. The question of what kind of learners' universities aspire to foster, more especially, how they might in the future support students away from a somewhat dependency-driven assessment culture to a more independent, self-directed engagement with learning and assessment is therefore an important one.

Finally, it would seem that these students' voices bring with them different kinds of social capital, and this may be realised in differing degrees of engagement and belonging. For some, including vocational, ethnic minority and international students, this may be about being more likely to form friendship groups with people like themselves. However, some students sought to create new networks of friends, and thus build relationships across multiple networks. In supporting a move towards more inclusive and equitable student experiences, selective universities, who have maybe been historically less 'open' to non-traditional students, should possibly prioritise on-going commitment to gain a holistic understanding, including the educational, social and cultural backgrounds of the whole student cohort.

[To see the detailed full report on the lecturer interviews, please visit the project website at: <http://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/education/research/projects/transformingtransitions/>]

## 7.0 LECTURER VOICES ON TRANSITION

### 7.1 Introduction

This section outlines the findings from interviews and focus groups carried out with Further Education tutors and Higher Education lecturers from the eight participating institutions, which helped to inform the project's understanding of students' transition from FE to HE. A full methodological description of the interview process and analysis is outlined in section 4 of this report. Here we present the key themes arising from these interviews: staff perceptions regarding academic preparedness; student performance and progress; academic skills; academic support; ways of learning; and personal and social issues of transition (See Appendix I for a complete list of codes rising from the thematic analysis). The focus is on perceived differences between students who studied vocational qualifications, and students who studied A-levels.

### 7.2 Academic preparedness

A number of HE lecturers remarked on BTEC students' general lack of academic preparedness for university. Some lecturers considered that academic essay writing in particular is an area that BTEC students struggle with more than students from an A-level background, noting that, for example, *'it's that writing with argument and synthesising an argument they can struggle with at times'*. In contrast, another lecturer believed that *'when students say, "I cannot write," it's not because they cannot write, it's because they don't know what to write about'*.

Several HE tutors noted, however, that writing is an area that *all* first year students can find challenging and that *'Different students bring different attributes, different skills'*. As one lecturer highlighted, *'part of the problem'* is that students have to employ *'the whole breadth of skills'* regardless of the degree they are studying. For some of the lecturers at HE level, BTEC students were perceived as having strengths, where there is *'practical application'* but to *'struggle with the really, really academic stuff. They're not as good as the A-level students'* and find *'dealing with theory'* a challenge. The difference in students' levels of academic preparedness is a potential source of difficulty for lecturers in terms of finding an appropriate level at which to pitch the teaching and subject content and getting students *'all up to speed because they come from very different places'*.

In FE, some tutors considered that the old style BTEC course was *'a less rigorous option'* than A-levels and so did not give students the academic grounding that would prepare them well for university. However, one tutor commented that they felt this *'will change over time, because it's a lot more difficult for students to access the higher grades on this course because of the more stringent resubmission and the introduction of exams'*. With regard to specific elements of academic literacy, several FE tutors commented that writing essays is regarded as a challenge

for many students. Some tutors attributed this to students' English language competence, feeling as one tutor said, this is *'very much a defining factor at how well the students do within a lot of the written work. Those who ... are still working towards their GCSE English language, or those who have come and a grade 4 it might be now, their work is generally at a lower level due to their writing style'*.

Lack of preparation while students are at school was identified as contributing to this problem because, as one tutor highlighted, at school *'they tend to give them stuff, and here I want them to go and research it'*. Another tutor commented that *'we go through what is necessary for research, but then they look at BBC Bitesize'*. Research skills were also mentioned by a few HE lecturers who commented on the 'Google' generation and student reliance on the internet, which one lecturer commented has *'... removed a lot of intermediary steps, through which a student actually learns more about the production of viewpoints of academic material'* and *'led to a lack of control more than anything. So I think it becomes incumbent upon us to teach that control'*.

### **7.3 Ways of learning**

As one lecturer described them, lectures are the *'cornerstone of higher education'* and widely used at university, particularly where cohort sizes are large. For many students transitioning into university, the lecture experience is wholly new, and several lecturers reflected that all students can find this challenging because, *'they're not used to what a lecture is'*. Another lecturer observed that:

*They're sitting in one of the five big lecture theatres we've got, and there's 220, 230 students in there, it's like, "Wow." So maybe they get a little lost in that, but it's the nature of the beast.*

Several lecturers noted that teaching large groups in a lecture can create a sense of disconnect with the student, generating a feeling of *'distance'* and *'detachment'*, and that one consequence of this was a more passive learning context, because students are reluctant to participate in big groups. One lecturer reflected that *'you can try to make it as interactive as you can and you can have activities that break up the lecturing. It can be challenging and students, some engage, some don't engage particularly well'*. Several lecturers felt that this reluctance to speak up and participate was not related to background, nationality or qualifications, but because they do not know each other very well. Further reasons given for students not liking lectures as a way of learning were because students find them *'complex because of notetaking skills'*, and because they require *'a level of concentration that they aren't used to'*. As outlined earlier, there is a perception among all HE lecturers that BTEC students feel very comfortable with learning by doing and, as one lecturer highlighted, are *'much better at the practical side of things'*, or *'hands on'*

methods, as another lecturer put it. These include *'interaction'* such as coaching and games-based learning to look at theory and practice.

One reason for transition challenges may lie in the contrast between teaching approaches at university and in post-16 education. FE tutors' teaching and learning strategies are also varied and often accommodate individual student learning styles likes and dislikes. In talking about ways of learning, FE tutors described how learning draws on real life situations, the real world, and, for example, use live briefs from businesses so that learning can be applied to non-academic settings. Tutors considered that most students enjoy this way of learning and, as one tutor commented, for the students, *'It is like "Wow!" because it comes to life'*. There was also evidence in the tutor interviews of adaptation of ways of learning to try and prepare students for expectations in HE. One FE college in the study had created a unit that is *'just lecture based'* in order to ease the process of adapting to this new way of learning. Other tutors reported available support, which included drop-in sessions run by the library to address essay writing and Harvard referencing, and tutors themselves also covered different academic skills in tutorials each week.

#### **7.4 Performance, progress and pathway**

At HE, there is a perception among the majority of HE lecturers that BTEC students are more likely to *'struggle'* than A-level or IB students, more likely to either be, as one lecturer observed, *'at the bottom end of the average marks for the year'*, and more likely to drop out during their first year. Some lecturers expressed a view that students with vocational qualifications will not transition as readily to university study as compared with A-level or IB students and are more likely, as one lecturer commented, *'to struggle with the really, really academic stuff, they're not as good as the A-level students on that'*. However, there is also recognition by some lecturers that students with vocational qualifications do have the capacity to perform well and to progress but lack confidence:

*I don't think that there's a difference in their ability... there are two main things that compromise BTEC students, one is background, the academic background that they come with ... But the other thing that is a big compromise to them is that they feel themselves that they're not as good as the A level students.*

One lecturer believed that this, in part, is due to students from a BTEC background having been given *'very low expectations all the way through their education'*. However, there was agreement amongst some HE lecturers that students from a BTEC background perform best on the modules that are practice-based.

The perception of the difference between BTEC and A-level in terms of having an impact on student pathway from FE to HE was commented on by some FE tutors. There are, of course,

BTEC students who do not consider university as an option. FE tutors argued that it was very important that those students who have potential, but have not previously considered university, are made aware that this may be an option for them. Some FE lecturers felt that students from a BTEC background may be put off applying to university because of what they know about the ways of learning and assessment processes at HE. Others focused more on wider perceptions of the value of a BTEC qualification. One FE lecturer commented that BTECs are often not regarded as a qualification that is *'rigorous enough for students to be able to succeed'*, a perception reinforced by the language employed to talk about BTECs which, *'... can be sometimes derogatory by the government, by universities, by institutions'*. Several FE lecturers commented that current *'culture'* regards the A-level as the standard. Indeed as one tutor observed, *'you are now saying you have to have that plus an A-level thus giving the A-level again the kind of, key to university'*. Nevertheless, one FE tutor expressed a view of BTEC students which itself reinforced a negative view of students who choose vocational routes: *'they are level II students for a reason. Because they didn't do very well at school'*.

## **7.5 Assessment practices**

Although some university courses include a variety of different assessment methods including coursework, reports, practical classes, case studies, website design, and reflective diaries, the dominant form of student assessment remains, in most institutions, the examination. Some HE lecturers felt that a degree course should be aimed at higher achieving students and that it is *'important'* for students to be able to write under pressure. In addition, lecturers argued that the number of students on courses at HE level influenced the type of assessment employed at HE. For example, where there are 400 students on a module, examinations and multiple-choice questions were sometimes regarded as the only realistic assessment method: *'we assess with multiple choice questions, which suit some students, it doesn't suit other students'*. Examinations were also perceived as a way to guard against plagiarism. Given the numbers of students, the flexibility to assess in ways which they might prefer was not seen as a viable option by the majority of HE lecturers. The large number of students also meant that lecturers felt it was not possible to give feedback on assignment drafts, *'apart from research projects'*, and that *'it's just not practical, it's not feasible to read through drafts'* and give detailed feedback on what they should do to improve.

Some FE tutors were very aware that BTEC students can *'struggle with exams'*, and that assessment practices in FE were often very different. BTEC tutors described how they were as flexible as possible with regard to student assessment in order to support BTEC students through assessment processes – for example, *'We run any type of assessment that suits the student'*. Tutors reported that students sometimes received additional preparation time, and they tried to ensure that students understand exactly what is being asked of them in an assignment. The

majority of FE lecturers also considered that students '*tend to do quite well in presentations, rather than the written classic essay style*'. The majority of FE tutors felt that that assessment methods complement the vocational nature of BTECs.

For some FE lecturers, there was concern that BTEC assessment processes do not adequately prepare students for the predominantly examination-based assessment methods at HE. This view mirrors comments by some HE lecturers who perceives students from a BTEC background as being less experienced not only in '*being required to do exams, written exams under pressure*' but also in examination preparation, compared with students from an A-level background. This is coupled with perceptions of students' lack of confidence in how to revise. However, lecturers also perceived students with vocational qualifications as having been exposed to a much broader range of assessment models than students who have studied A-levels. Feedback mechanisms were also mentioned. One lecturer felt that BTEC students were more likely to need personalised, rather than the more generic, more '*uniform type of feedback*' often adopted at university.

## **7.6 Academic support**

All the universities involved in the study provided academic support and advice to students through, for example, academic development workshops on essay writing, referencing, report writing, use of the different IT packages, presentation skills, and helpdesks. However, the interviews make clear that there is no common approach to whether HE lecturers are either made aware, or make themselves aware, of student academic background. Some lecturers reflected that they had an awareness '*from an overall demographic, but not individual students unless they identify themselves as struggling*'. Several HE lecturers remarked that they only found out about a student's background if students were struggling. Another lecturer described how they would only actively find out a student's academic background if they were tutoring them on a one-to-one basis. In contrast to the above, other lecturers made a point of finding out their students' background. This then means lecturers were able to offer or suggest targeted support. Some HE lecturers would like to offer targeted support to students with a BTEC background but were wary of making things worse for a student rather than better by making them feel inferior to other students. One HE lecturer described how he is '*... conscious of walking a tightrope*'.

## **7.7 Personal and social issues of transition**

As noted in the literature review, the research suggests that problems with transition to and progress through university may be as much to do with personal and social issues, as with academic preparedness or capability. The student interviews (see section 6) voiced many perspectives which related to non-academic barriers and constraints, but these were less evident in the lecturer interviews. One theme, however, which was raised several times related to how students engaged with the university experience and formed social or friendship groups. HE

lecturers observed that live-at-home students, many of whom are BTEC students, were not as likely to engage with the extra-curricular opportunities available to them as other students:

*... not many of them engage in all the other stuff around the university. So they're not the ones who join the sports teams or the clubs. They may belong to the guild, religion based groups.*

On one accounting degree, the HE lecturer perceived a split between live-at-home students, many of whom are from the local ethnic minority communities, and students who live in halls:

*.. who are doing the normal student thing of living away from home, living in halls, doing that, engaged in all the clubs and societies, and they tend to stick together as well. So we do have a split that way.*

Lecturers reflected that certain groups of students, including BTEC students, were not *'engaging in events, internships and societies ... or doing the stuff that increases their social capital ... they aren't doing internships, they aren't engaging on events and societies when employers are here'*. One lecturer, in observing that some students got much less involved in a breadth of activities whilst at university, linked this to how it played out in the teaching context, noting that:

*So that's where the differentiation comes, and that's probably how we identify groups of students actually. If you sit in a classroom you can actually see them sat together doing that, and mixing those groups, forcing them to mix is very, very difficult.*

It is hard in some of these comments to disaggregate students with a BTEC qualification, from students who live at home, or from who students who are from an ethnic minority or socially disadvantaged background. But there appears to be some recognition in these comments that these students do not always build new relationships and networks at university which may advantage them in the future.

## **7.8 Transferable skills**

Lecturers tended to regard A-level students as being more used to independent learning while BTEC students, many of whom are live-at-home students, *'tend to struggle with independent learning'* and *'long deadlines'* because *'... they are used to being checked up on'*. The majority of HE lecturers believed that BTEC students have had more support and *'hand holding'* through their FE course and may *'struggle'* with *'the limited monitoring we do'* and find it hard to organise their own learning. One lecturer observed:

*Because in a way we're not ticking them in, ticking them out' and '... anything where they've got to do something on their own initiative, on average they seem to not be able to break it down in to, "I need to do this, then this, then this."*

Managing deadlines was mentioned by many lecturers as causing students particular problems. As one lecturer explained, '*... they struggle with work when there isn't a deadline, something you'd leave in front of them*' because '*... they're so assessment driven that their learning is just so focused on what's the next assessment ... And everything else goes out of the window*'. However, developing students' independent learning is a key element of BTEC courses and indeed one FE tutor commented that '*managing your own time and meeting deadlines, if you don't do that in BTEC you can't get the higher grades*'.

At the same time, the BTEC qualification was seen as having strengths in developing students' transferable skills through '*group discussions, presentations, meeting deadlines, working independently, reflection on own work, advice and support when you need it*'. Lecturers recognised that the focus was very much on vocational skills and '*readiness for work*' and '*reality*' because '*this is about fending for yourself when you're out there*', rather than academic skills. One FE tutor drew attention to the fact that the BTEC qualification:

*... is all about transferable skills. You've got group discussions, presentations, meeting deadlines, working independently, reflection on own work, advice and support when you need it. So that's there ... So those transferable skills, how they can practice in real life, is crucial. Because this is about fending for yourself when you're out there.*

FE tutors also deemed the communication skills learned through a BTEC course as particularly important because '*of the way in which some of our learners communicate. They use 'you know' and 'innit', and 'oh yeah'. When they go out in the real world they can't communicate like that*'.

## **7.9 Conclusion**

This analysis of lecturer interviews reveals some clear synergies in perspectives between lecturers and students. There appears to be a common recognition that both ways of learning and assessment practices at university can create challenges for students in their first year at university, and that there are differing levels of academic support across the FE/HE transition. However, the lecturers and tutors are more inclined towards binary distinctions between students with BTEC qualifications and those with A-levels than are the students, who offer a more complex picture, with much more blurred boundaries between the different qualification routes. For example, the students themselves recognise that some A-levels provide a stronger preparation for academic writing than others, and that this is not simply a BTEC issue.

A risk of making binary judgments about BTEC and A-levels is that the diverse needs of diverse students is overlooked in favour of simpler assumptions. A further risk is that believing BTEC students are less well-prepared for university may lead to different decisions being made regarding entry requirements, particularly requiring BTEC students to also hold an A-level. Such decisions, given that the data indicate the interaction of widening participation characteristics with BTEC choices, might have the unfortunate consequence of decreasing access to university and at the same time widening the participation gap. The student voices are a salient reminder that groups which share one common characteristic, such as a qualification route, are not homogeneous, but diverse and heterogeneous.

[To see the detailed full report on the lecturer interviews, please visit the project website at: <http://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/education/research/projects/transformingtransitions/>]

## 8.0 THE INTERVENTIONS

### 8.1 The design of the interventions

Each of the four interventions was informed by the findings from Phase 1 (see Table 8.1). However, because of the short timeframe of the project, the interventions developed had to be feasible for implementation in a restricted time period. As a consequence, they tackle the more instrumental issues raised in Phase 1: the more significant findings relating to, for example, ways of learning, assessment practices, and creating a sense of belonging would have required a longer timeframe for development and implementation.

| <b>Intervention</b>        | <b>Aims</b>  | <b>Partners involved</b>  |
|----------------------------|--|---|
| Academic Writing           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To provide support materials to enable a greater awareness and understanding around the expectations of academic writing for students, especially BTEC students, as they transition from FE colleges to HE institutions;</li> <li>• To aid academic writing progress through having a better understanding of how academic writing is assessed at HE, through the opportunity to practise within the context of their current FE course.</li> </ul> | University of Exeter, Exeter College, Hereford VI Form College, Leicester College, City and Islington College |
| Improved Personal Tutoring | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To make available to tutors information on students' academic background;</li> <li>• To develop improved guidance to tutors;</li> <li>• To develop an improved recording system to encourage participation and record outcomes from meetings</li> </ul>   | University of Birmingham, University of Exeter  |
| Mathematics Support        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To identify and address gaps in students' mathematics knowledge;</li> <li>• To develop and improve targeted support for all first-year students;</li> <li>• To develop and enhance mathematics and statistics support provision targeted students who are facing difficulties.</li> </ul>   | Loughborough University, University of Birmingham   |
| Online module              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Targeted at pre-entry and first year students.</li> <li>• To explain the ethos of the university;</li> <li>• To provide a platform for academic and soft skills development;</li> <li>• To address the transition gaps identified by each student.</li> </ul>   | QMUL, University of Exeter, Loughborough University   |

*Table 8.1: an overview of the four interventions.*

## 8.2 Key findings from the evaluations of the interventions

### 8.2.1 Academic writing

- ❑ The positive views echoed by tutors and students suggest support provided to students was well received and useful. Students' responses from interviews highlight that some students progressed in a few of the core criterion identified throughout this project, notably referencing, addressing the question, and developing a logical line of argument.
- ❑ The process of implementation revealed that FE tutors lacked a clear understanding of how a research intervention is delivered. Some tutors did not follow instructions provided by the research team, and this added further complexities in assessing the impact of the intervention.
- ❑ When the resources were used, there were inconsistencies in the how they were delivered; one tutor emailing resources to students, one tutor using their own resources; one tutor being co-opted from another department to deliver the resources.
- ❑ A shared cultural understanding between FE and HE tutors around academic literacy was not achieved during the intervention period. More sustained time to work with the FE tutors and support their use of the materials was needed, and ideally more opportunities for meaningful exchange between FE and HE tutors in relation to expectations of academic writing.

### 8.2.2 Mathematics support

- ❑ Survey data showed that students had accessed various forms of support at different levels. A greater proportion of students with no post-16 mathematics qualifications accessed support compared to students who had studied mathematics to a higher level.
- ❑ Students spoke positively about how the available support had assisted their learning. For example, the use of lecture capture allowed students to review their learning and offered flexibility.
- ❑ The implementation of new software packages such as ALEKS (Assessment and LEarning in Knowledge Spaces) also highlighted the requirement for staff training.
- ❑ Students were also found to choose physical, 'people-based' support, indicating that software cannot simply replace this type of support. Rather, online support seems to be better placed in forming a wider, more holistic package of mathematics and statistics support.

- ❑ The evaluation suggests that students had developed their skills as independent learners through understanding how to access and utilise relevant resources and forms of support to assist their understanding of troublesome topics.

### **8.2.3 *Personal tutoring***

- ❑ Student attendance over the complete first year were below the number of mandatory meetings outlined in the relevant university-level guidance. This is potentially of concern if we are to argue that students and staff benefit from a set number of meetings. However, the findings point towards the need for a more nuanced understanding of the amount and type of support that students might actually need and wish to engage with. Stipulating a specific number of meetings may be a useful starting point for ensuring communication between tutors and students, however in order to maximise participation and engagement with support systems, students need to feel that they are accessible and offer something of value.
- ❑ The timing and attendance at meetings could be particularly important when students begin their first-year study. This has the potential to facilitate the building of staff/student relationships and access to required information and services at the outset, including that provided in a tutor 'information giving' role. However, one difficulty with this approach is the provision of dedicated (and flexible) time by staff.
- ❑ There is a lack of high quality, accessible data available in order to examine student and staff participation in the tutoring system.
- ❑ There are mixed views about the extent to which tutors should be made aware of students' prior academic pathways and prior/current attainment. Seeking students' consent to share the information that they provide to universities at the time of admission would be a simple, cheap and easy way to ensure that tutors have a better understanding of the students that they will be supporting in the coming years.

### **6.2.4 *Online module***

- ❑ Online modules can be useful pre-entry preparation tools, especially since students demonstrate higher levels of engagement and responsiveness during that phase.
- ❑ The project findings showed that as well as students needing support with the academic transition to University, there is also an emotional transition that they have to go through. Addressing the emotional transition is better suited for the pre-enrolment stage whereas academic transition comes after the first few weeks of enrolment.
- ❑ The module needs to be effectively embedded in the culture of the School or Department and in organizational processes that are involved in recruitment, admissions, teaching, learning and assessment, personal tutoring and so on. This

way, the module can become a platform that would help 'configure' stakeholders involved in the transition of the students and align their goals.

- ❑ It is essential that dedicated teams with a variety of skills (Technical, Student Engagement, Learning Support and Monitoring) need to be in place alongside the online module for the successful adaptation and integration of the module into the wider curriculum. Better coordination between teams in the same University is key.

Due to time constraints, we could only evaluate the immediate short-term effects of each intervention on students, and so it is not possible to determine the longer term impact of the interventions on student outcomes. The designing of interventions with clear evaluation frameworks from the start does mean that the evaluations have raised a range of findings, many of which point to the inter-relatedness of interventions to address student outcomes. It is also worth reiterating the point made at the start of this section: that the interventions which might address more profoundly the barriers and constraints raised by the student interviews could not be designed, developed, implemented and evaluated in the timeframe. It may well be these interventions which offer the most promise for the future.

## 9.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 9.1 Introduction

As outlined in the introduction and the methodology chapter, the *Transforming Transitions* project set out to better understand the patterns of access to and progress through university for students with a BTEC qualification. Methodologically, the study adopted a design of *explore-design-implement-evaluate*, and through this sought to understand BTEC students' learning experiences across the FE/HE transition, and then to design and evaluate interventions based on the findings from that analysis. In the end, the qualitative data from the student and lecturer reports proved to be extremely rich and informative, and raised many unexpected insights. The majority of our key findings derive from that data set, rather than from the evaluation of the efficacy of the later interventions as we had originally anticipated. In this section of the report, we will outline the key findings from the project, consider the implications for future research, policy and practice, and address the limitations of the project.

### 9.2 Key Findings

#### 9.2.1 *The Literature Review*

The *Literature Review* confirmed that data appear to suggest that BTEC students are less likely to access university, less likely to progress through university to achieve 'good' degrees, and less likely to enter higher-paid graduate employment than students with traditional academic qualifications, such as A-level. However, the research also highlights the complexity of the relationship between prior qualification, access to and progression through university, and subsequent employment outcomes. In particular, it points to the overlap between the BTEC cohort and the widening participation cohort, making it difficult to disentangle whether it is the social disadvantage or the prior qualification, or a combination of both, which is most significant in determining these patterns of progress. A key conclusion, therefore, is to caution against making simplistic causal assumptions drawing only on prior qualification data.

#### 9.2.2 *The Statistical Analysis*

The statistical analysis of HE data showed that, at both national level and at the partner HE institutions, students with a BTEC qualification were less likely to progress successfully through university. The partner institution data flagged that this was an issue at the end of the first year. The process of undertaking this analysis, however, drew attention to the need for more consistent collecting of data in HE, and particularly in FE, in order to make more robust cross-institution and national level comparisons. There is also some misunderstanding of the requirements of GDPR, though this may reflect that the study was taking place just as GDPR came into force.

#### 9.2.3 *The Student Interviews*

The findings here are particularly insightful and important, with implications both for future research and practical change. They underline the diversity of the student population, and the complex interacting factors which shape the transition experience. Broadly speaking the key findings relate either to the academic experience at university and the social experience of university, and we outline these below:

- ❑ 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.
- ❑ 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.
- ❑ 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.
- ❑ 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 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,
- ❑ 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 and less 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.

#### **9.2.4 The lecturer interviews**

In general, there was a high degree of correspondence between the lecturer perspectives and those of students, particularly in HE, picking up on similar issues of transition. But a key, and important difference, was that lecturers were much more likely to present these transition challenges as binary differences between students with BTEC qualifications and other students, whereas the students themselves suggested the boundaries between qualification routes in terms of transition are much more blurred.

#### **9.2.5 HE Partnerships between HE and FE**

At the heart of the *Transforming Transitions* project was a collaboration between FE and HE institutions, and the insights gained from this have been particularly helpful. However, the process of research has made it very clear that there is very little shared working across the transition boundary and that mutual understanding of practices in the two sectors is relatively low. Transforming the experience of transition and securing greater equality of outcomes needs better partnerships between FE and HE.

### **9.3 Recommendations for future research, policy and practice**

#### **9.3.1 Recommendations for Research**

*Recommendation 1:* further large-scale research exploring student perspectives of transition is important in ascertaining how generalisable the findings of this project are across more institutions and more subject areas, and to deepen the insights the interviews in this study have offered. The sample of students should move beyond the three subjects looked at here, and the data collection should capture not only prior qualification, but also student ethnicity, socio-economic status, and whether home or international students in order to allow more fine-grained analyses of the experiences of different groups.

*Recommendation 2:* further secondary data analysis, or further collection of primary data, looking at the interactions between prior qualification, ethnicity and socio-economic status is needed to better understand the way these factors interact in producing differential outcomes.

#### **9.3.2 Recommendations for Practice**

*Recommendation 3:* Universities, and their Guild of Students, should proactively consider how to make all students feel a sense of belonging, and to more effectively recognise the diversity of the student body. This might include, for example, considering the inclusivity of student societies; the nature of diversity in student representation on Guild or University committees, or how teaching methods might foster greater collaboration between students from different backgrounds.

*Recommendation 4:* Further Education colleges should consider how to encourage students to become more confident in working with students who are not from their own group, however defined, and in building networks and relationships within and beyond college which generate social confidence.

*Recommendation 5:* Both FE and HE should consider the nature of academic support provided, including whether the level of support in FE is genuinely beneficial to learners in the long run; whether HE might need to increase support in year 1 to ease the transition; how to make visible and encourage students to make use of the support available at university; and whether there can be more common expectations across FE and HE in relation to, for example, academic writing.

*Recommendation 6:* Universities should systematically evaluate how inclusive their teaching and learning practices are, ensuring that *'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'* (Thomas and May 2010:9). This might involve ensuring a broader repertoire of teaching strategies are used, and it might mean supporting academics to understand that deterministic perspectives of IQ have now largely been rejected in favour of 'growth mindsets' (Dweck 2012), which highlight that appropriate attitudes and appropriate learning environments can maximise achievement.

*Recommendation 7:* Universities should review the assessment practices at subject level and encourage a broader repertoire of assessment types, sharing good practices in HE in innovative assessment methods.

*Recommendation 8:* Further Education colleges should consider how they are supporting learners in becoming more independent and more able to manage their own learning, and less dependent on detailed directive feedback practices.

### **9.3.3 Recommendations for Policy**

*Recommendation 9:* Policy-makers should consider how best to create stronger FE/HE partnerships to create stronger mutual understanding and potential cross-sector partnership working. This might, for example, mean offering clear incentives for the development of local partnerships; and the establishment of a HE/FE national forum, supported at the highest level, and including representatives from other stakeholders, such as examination boards and wellbeing services. This body would have responsibility for addressing some of the issues raised in this report, and also avoid the very understandable tendency to position the problem in the 'other' sector.

*Recommendation 10:* Given the very variable consistency of data in HE and especially in FE encountered in this project, we recommend that the OFS considers whether there should be an expectation of standard datasets to be maintained to build a strong national data set around access, progression and employment outcome.

*Recommendation 11:* Linked to the above, having a secure measure of social disadvantage is problematic with FE relying on Pupil Premium and HE relying on a range of measures such as POLAR data or the Multiple Deprivation Index. A reliable measure of social disadvantage is challenging, but if we are to address the barriers to success, it is critical that the measures we use are both reliable and valid, and used consistently across sectors.

#### **9.4 Limitations of the Study**

A major limitation of this study was the two year timeframe imposed in the original call. This meant that it was impossible to follow any students either through transition, or to the end point of their university studies. This also meant that we had to select interventions which were feasible to implement in the timeframe, meaning that arguably our interventions tackled the less important issues. The bigger issues suggested by this study, around belonging and fitting in, inclusive pedagogies, and changing assessment practices, for example, are not amenable to short term interventions but require sustained development, implementation and evaluation.

Another limitation is that the BTEC students we interviewed did the BTEC qualification prior to its revision, underlining the need for further research to establish whether students' transition experiences have changed.

#### **9.5 Conclusion**

Overall, this study has emphasised the dangers of creating binary distinctions between sub-groups of the student body, and the critical importance of recognising the heterogeneity of the student body. In focussing on the BTEC as a prior qualification, it has highlighted the complex inter-relationship of factors which may contribute to success or lack of it, and warns against simplistic assumptions about the BTEC as a prior qualification. Although there may be some differences *between* students with different prior qualifications, there are also differences *within* these student groups. In the end, our study may have generated more insights into the inclusivity of HE, and the discontinuities in learning experiences between FE and HE, than it has informed understanding of BTEC students in particular. If we are to create transformative change which genuinely addresses the issues of social justice across the transition, through university, and into the workplace, the nature of change needed is significant, and as May and Bridger (2010:6) argue, it '*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'.*

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A: The HE Student Focus Group interview schedule

### Teaching, Learning and Assessment Experiences:

#### Entry Experiences

1. You are now at the end of your first year at university: in terms of your course, have there been any shocks or surprises? [*some things easier/more challenging than expected?* ]
  - How well do you feel your College course prepared you for this first year at university?
  - Is there anything that it would have been helpful to know before starting the course?

#### Curriculum

2. Have you found any gaps in your knowledge that you needed for your degree course for which your College course did not prepare?
  - Have you struggled with any of the academic content on your degree course?
  - Have you found any of the academic content easy or relatively easy?
  - What support is available for you on your course e.g. *personal tutors; workshops; study skills; mentoring etc.?*
  - Have you accessed any of this support? If so, what?
  - Is there any support that you would have liked to have had?

#### Ways of Learning

3. How similar or different has your experience of learning at university been compared to your College course?
  - Have the teaching methods at university been similar or different from your College course? [probe for examples: *e.g. large lectures; group and pair work; practicals; placements*]
  - If yes to different - How do you feel you have adapted to these differences?

#### Assessment Practices

4. Are the ways that your work is assessed at university similar or different from your College course? [probe for *academic essays; reports; oral assessment; presentations; lab work; multiple choice; etc.*]
  - If yes to different - How do you feel you have adapted to these differences?
  - Has feedback on university coursework been similar or different from your College course?

### Literacy, Numeracy and Transferable Experiences

1. We are interested to know if there have been any literacy or numeracy demands on your course which you have found challenging. [Use the Interview Prompt Sheet]
2. We are also interested in the broader set of study and life-skills you have experienced on your course: [Use the Interview Prompt Sheet]

### Relationship and Social Experiences

1. What kind of interaction and relationships do you have with your university tutors? How does this compare with the interaction and relationships with your college tutors?
2. How strong do you feel you and your peers are as a subject group at university? How does this compare with your group identity at college?
3. How easy have you found it to make friends at university? Have you made friends from within your course or across subjects?
4. Are you aware of different entry qualifications to your course? Does this affect student interactions with each other in any way?
5. Are you living at home or in student accommodation? Has this influenced your experience of university in any way?

### Concluding Questions

1. Now you are at the end of your first year, what advice would you give to incoming students to help them enjoy the transition into university?
2. Is there anything else we haven't ask that you'd like to tell us?

## Appendix B: The FE Student Focus Group interview schedule

### Teaching, Learning and Assessment Experiences:

#### *Transition Experiences*

1. What made you choose BTEC rather than A-levels or other course choices? Are you glad you made this choice?
2. You are now nearing the end of your BTEC course: what choices have you made for the next step in your career? [i.e. *University; apprenticeships; employment*]
  - Tell us why you have made this choice
  - How well do you feel your College course prepared you for this choice? {If university, probe for how they chose their university}

#### *Curriculum*

3. Have you struggled with any of the subject content on your BTEC course?
  - Have you found any of the subject content easy or relatively easy?
  - What support is available for you on your course e.g. *personal tutors; workshops; study skills; mentoring etc.?*
  - Have you accessed any of this support? If so, what?
  - Is there any support that you would have liked to have had?

#### *Ways of Learning*

4. How similar or different has your experience of learning on BTEC been compared to your school experiences?
  - Have the teaching methods been similar or different from the teaching at your school? [probe for examples: *e.g. group and pair work; practicals; placements*]
  - If yes to different - How do you feel you have adapted to these differences?

#### *Assessment Practices*

5. Are the ways that your work is assessed on BTEC similar or different from your school assessments? [Probe for *essays; reports; oral assessment; presentations; lab work; multiple choice; etc.*]
  - If yes to different - How do you feel you have adapted to these differences?
  - Has feedback on BTEC coursework been similar or different from school?

### Literacy, Numeracy and Transferable Experiences

1. We are interested to know if there have been any literacy or numeracy demands on your course which you have found challenging: [Use the Interview Prompt Sheet]
2. We are also interested in the broader set of study and life-skills you have experienced on your course: [Use the Interview Prompt Sheet]

### Relationship and Social Experiences

1. What kind of interaction and relationships do you have with your BTEC tutors? How does this compare with the interaction and relationships with your teachers at school?
2. How strong do you feel you and your peers are as a BTEC group?
3. How easy have you found it to make friends at college? Have you made friends from within your BTEC course or across subjects/courses?

### Concluding Questions

1. Is there anything else we haven't ask that you'd like to tell us?

## Appendix C: The HE Lecturer interview schedule

### Teaching, Learning and Assessment Experiences:

#### *Entry Qualifications*

1. How aware are you of the entry qualifications of the students you teach (A level entry; IB; BTEC etc.)
  - Does your department monitor the progress of students with different entry qualifications through its programmes?
  - Have you noticed any difference in progress based on entry qualifications?

#### *Curriculum*

2. Are there particular areas of the curriculum content with your year 1 students seem to struggle with?
  - Is this all students or some students? (*is it linked to entry qualification in any way?*)
  - Have you taken any actions to address this problem?
  - Are there any support structures in place to support students who might be struggling with different aspects of the curriculum including study skills?

#### *Ways of learning*

3. How would you describe the dominant ways of learning in your subject? (e.g. *lecture; seminar; group work; practical work; work placements*)
  - Do you notice any differences in the ways students respond to these ways of learning? (*ie not liking group work or lectures*)
  - Are you aware of whether any of these differences link to entry qualifications or background?

#### *Assessment Practices*

4. What assessment practices do you use in year 1? (e.g. *examinations; essays, group presentations; practical assessments etc.*)
  - Do you notice any differences in the ways students respond to these ways of learning? (*ie not liking presentations or essay writing*)
  - Are you aware of whether any of these differences link to entry qualifications or background?

### Literacy, Numeracy and Transferable Experiences

5. Do you notice any literacy or numeracy demands on your programme which students seem to find challenging: [Use the Interview Prompt Sheet]
6. We are also interested in the broader set of study and life-skills that students might experience on your course: [Use the Interview Prompt Sheet]

### Relationship and Social Experiences

7. What kind of interaction and relationships do you develop with your BTEC students? [probe for pastoral support]
8. How strong do you feel your BTEC group is as a group? Does it have a group identity?

### Concluding Question

9. This study is particularly interested in the progress and experiences of BTEC students. Do you have any perspectives which might inform our understanding of how BTEC students progress through your programme?

## Appendix D: The FE Tutor interview schedule

### Teaching, Learning and Assessment Experiences:

#### *Transition Experiences and Entry Qualifications*

1. Do you think there are any barriers for BTEC students in going to university?
  - What about getting into the more elite universities?
  - Do you prepare your BTEC students in any way for their progression into university?
  - Do you think there any differences between HE expectations and BTEC expectations of a student?
  - What do you see as the strengths of a BTEC qualification?

#### *Curriculum*

2. Do you have any professional knowledge of how the BTEC curriculum differs from the A level curriculum?
  - Are there particular areas of the BTEC curriculum content that your students seem to struggle with?
  - Are there particular areas of the BTEC curriculum content that they seem to find easier?
  - Are there any support structures in place to support students who might be struggling with different aspects of the curriculum including study skills?

#### *Ways of learning*

3. How would you describe the dominant ways of learning in your BTEC course? (e.g. *lecture; seminar; group work; practical work; work placements*)
  - Do you notice any differences in the ways students respond to these ways of learning? (*i.e. not liking group work or lectures*)

#### *Assessment Practices*

4. What assessment practices do you use in your BTEC course? (e.g. *examinations; essays; group presentations; practical assessments etc.*)
  - Do you notice any differences in the ways students respond to these ways of learning? (*i.e. not liking presentations or essay writing*)

### Literacy, Numeracy and Transferable Experiences

1. Do you notice any literacy or numeracy demands on your programme which students seem to find challenging: [Use the Interview Prompt Sheet]
2. We are also interested in the broader set of study and life-skills that students might experience on your course: [Use the Interview Prompt Sheet]

### Relationship and Social Experiences

1. What kind of interaction and relationships do you develop with your BTEC students? [probe for pastoral support]
2. How strong do you feel your BTEC group is as a group? Does it have a group identity?

### Concluding Question

1. This study is particularly interested in the progress and experiences of BTEC students. Do you have any further perspectives which might inform our understanding of how BTEC students progress through your programme, and access university courses?

## **Appendix E: Interview Prompt Sheet**

### **LITERACY SKILLS**

reading and understanding academic texts

pulling information together from academic texts and summarising

writing academic essays

writing evaluations and reflections

### **NUMERACY SKILLS**

understanding mathematics/statistics presented in class

working through problem/tutorial sheets

using calculators or software such as SPSS for statistics

Maths Topics:

- Algebra – re-arranging and solving equations, laws of indices
- Linear and quadratic equations and their graphs
- Log and exponential functions
- Equations of motion (biomechanics), Sets and Venn diagrams
- Differentiation and finding maximum
- Descriptive statistics – mean, mode, standard deviation, box plots, etc.

### **TRANSFERABLE SKILLS**

actively participating in group discussion

presenting your work to others

managing your own time to meet deadlines

managing your own learning independently

taking on board and reflecting on feedback to improve work

seeking advice and support when you need it

## APPENDIX F: College 1 Examination Data

Data extracted from the Funding, Finance and Management information system (MIS) College 1. The courses were limited to level 3 groups of 18 or more, 16-18 learners, in Business, IT or Sport

| <b>Academic year 2013-14</b>   | <b>Entrants</b> | <b>Passed</b> | <b>Female</b> | <b>Male</b> |
|--|-----------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|
| 90-credit Diploma in Business (QCF)  | 67              | 58            | 24            | 43          |
| 90-credit Diploma in IT (QCF)  | 75              | 66            | 8             | 67          |
| 90-credit Diploma in Sport (QCF)   | 173             | 165           | 31            | 142         |
| Award in Instructing Outdoor Fitness (QCF)                                     | 13              | 13            | 0             | 13          |
| BTEC 90-credit Diploma in Travel and Tourism (QCF)                             | 91              | 81            | 84            | 7           |
| BTEC Certificate in Business (QCF)   | 56              | 50            | 29            | 27          |
| BTEC Certificate in Sport and Exercise Sciences (QCF)                          | 51              | 49            | 22            | 29          |
| BTEC Extended Diploma in Business (QCF)  | 44              | 41            | 16            | 28          |
| BTEC Extended Diploma in Sport (QCF)   | 167             | 163           | 43            | 124         |
| BTEC Subsidiary Diploma in Understanding Enterprise and Entrepreneurship (QCF) | 24              | 22            | 12            | 12          |
| Certificate in Higher Sports Leadership (QCF)                                  | 15              | 15            | 7             | 8           |
| Certificate in IT (QCF)  | 65              | 59            | 17            | 48          |
| Diploma in Enterprise and Entrepreneurship (QCF)                               | 8               | 8             | 2             | 6           |
| Diploma in Personal Training and Instruction (QCF)                             | 13              | 12            | 0             | 13          |
| Extended Diploma in IT (QCF)   | 37              | 37            | 2             | 35          |
| Extended Diploma in Travel and Tourism (QCF)                                   | 80              | 78            | 69            | 11          |
| GCE A2 Level Business Studies  | 38              | 37            | 20            | 18          |
| GCE A2 Level in Physical Education   | 29              | 29            | 13            | 16          |
| GCE AS Level in Business Studies   | 98              | 80            | 41            | 57          |
| GCE AS Level in Physical Education   | 53              | 49            | 16            | 37          |
| Subsidiary Diploma in IT (QCF)   | 28              | 25            | 6             | 22          |
| <b>Total</b>   | 1225            | 1137          | 462           | 763         |
| <b>Academic year 2014/15</b>   | <b>Entrants</b> | <b>Passed</b> | <b>Female</b> | <b>Male</b> |
| 90-credit Diploma in Business (QCF)  | 102             | 91            | 35            | 67          |
| 90-credit Diploma in IT (QCF)  | 111             | 101           | 9             | 102         |
| 90-credit Diploma in Sport (QCF)   | 180             | 169           | 41            | 139         |
| Award in Instructing Outdoor Fitness (QCF)                                     | 14              | 14            | 1             | 13          |
| BTEC 90-credit Diploma in Travel and Tourism (QCF)                             | 74              | 63            | 66            | 8           |
| BTEC Certificate in Business (QCF)   | 80              | 69            | 44            | 36          |

|  |                 |               |               |             |
|--|-----------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|
| BTEC Certificate in Sport and Exercise Sciences (QCF)                          | 39              | 38            | 15            | 24          |
| BTEC Extended Diploma in Business (QCF)  | 49              | 47            | 16            | 33          |
| BTEC Extended Diploma in Sport (QCF)   | 146             | 142           | 28            | 118         |
| BTEC Subsidiary Diploma in Business (QCF)                                      | 31              | 29            | 15            | 16          |
| BTEC Subsidiary Diploma in Sport and Exercise Sciences (QCF)                   | 29              | 26            | 16            | 13          |
| BTEC Subsidiary Diploma in Understanding Enterprise and Entrepreneurship (QCF) | 15              | 14            | 7             | 8           |
| Certificate in IT (QCF)  | 58              | 52            | 17            | 41          |
| Diploma in Enterprise and Entrepreneurship (QCF)                               | 15              | 15            | 6             | 9           |
| Diploma in Personal Training and Instruction (QCF)                             | 14              | 14            | 1             | 13          |
| Extended Diploma in IT (QCF)   | 47              | 44            | 3             | 44          |
| Extended Diploma in Travel and Tourism (QCF)                                   | 52              | 49            | 50            | 2           |
| GCE A2 Level Business Studies  | 40              | 38            | 20            | 20          |
| GCE A2 Level in Physical Education   | 30              | 30            | 7             | 23          |
| GCE AS Level in Business Studies   | 95              | 82            | 50            | 45          |
| GCE AS Level in Physical Education   | 36              | 24            | 7             | 29          |
| Subsidiary Diploma in IT (QCF)   | 34              | 31            | 8             | 26          |
| Total  | 1291            | 1182          | 462           | 829         |
| <b>Academic year 2015/16</b>   | <i>Entrants</i> | <i>Passed</i> | <i>Female</i> | <i>Male</i> |
| 90-credit Diploma in Business (QCF)  | 118             | 105           | 53            | 65          |
| 90-credit Diploma in IT (QCF)  | 114             | 110           | 8             | 106         |
| 90-credit Diploma in Sport (QCF)   | 146             | 134           | 28            | 118         |
| 90-credit Diploma in Sport and Exercise Sciences (QCF)                         | 30              | 26            | 11            | 19          |
| BTEC 90-credit Diploma in Travel and Tourism (QCF)                             | 49              | 47            | 48            | 1           |
| BTEC Certificate in Business (QCF)   | 82              | 73            | 47            | 35          |
| BTEC Certificate in Sport and Exercise Sciences (QCF)                          | 37              | 36            | 11            | 26          |
| BTEC Extended Diploma in Business (QCF)  | 68              | 65            | 21            | 47          |
| BTEC Extended Diploma in Sport (QCF)   | 147             | 143           | 35            | 112         |
| BTEC Subsidiary Diploma in Business (QCF)                                      | 50              | 48            | 29            | 21          |
| BTEC Subsidiary Diploma in Sport and Exercise Sciences (QCF)                   | 23              | 22            | 9             | 14          |
| BTEC Subsidiary Diploma in Understanding Enterprise and Entrepreneurship (QCF) | 22              | 17            | 11            | 11          |

|   |             |             |            |            |
|---|-------------|-------------|------------|------------|
| Certificate in IT (QCF)                                   | 51          | 48          | 9          | 42         |
| Certificate in Sports Massage (Soft Tissue Therapy) (QCF) | 14          | 13          | 1          | 13         |
| Diploma in Enterprise and Entrepreneurship (QCF)          | 8           | 6           | 4          | 4          |
| Diploma in Personal Training and Instruction (QCF)        | 14          | 14          | 1          | 13         |
| Extended Diploma in IT (QCF)                              | 81          | 74          | 5          | 76         |
| Extended Diploma in Travel and Tourism (QCF)              | 43          | 40          | 39         | 4          |
| GCE A Level in Business Studies                           | 52          | 51          | 26         | 26         |
| GCE A Level in Physical Education                         | 14          | 13          | 3          | 11         |
| GCE AS Level in Business Studies                          | 121         | 95          | 60         | 61         |
| GCE AS Level in Physical Education                        | 39          | 35          | 12         | 27         |
| Subsidiary Diploma in IT (QCF)                            | 21          | 20          | 5          | 16         |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>1344</b> | <b>1235</b> | <b>476</b> | <b>868</b> |

## APPENDIX G: COLLEGE 4 STUDENT DESTINATION DATA

| Destination of all students 2013-2016   | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|-----------|------------|
| Missing data  | 36        | .8         |
| 04 - Part-time employment   | 3         | .1         |
| 10 - Full-time employment   | 25        | .6         |
| 11 - Unemployed   | 6         | .1         |
| 54 - Entered further education  | 11        | .3         |
| 55 - Entered higher education   | 76        | 1.8        |
| 75 - Full-time education or training  | 37        | .9         |
| 77 - Not in Education, Employment or Training   | 6         | .1         |
| 95 - Continuing existing programme of learning  | 1282      | 29.8       |
| 97 - Other (including pregnancy)  | 3         | .1         |
| 98 - Destination unknown  | 49        | 1.1        |
| Apprenticeship  | 49        | 1.1        |
| EDU1 - Traineeship  | 4         | .1         |
| EDU2 - Apprenticeship   | 86        | 2.0        |
| EDU3 - Supported Internship   | 1         | .0         |
| EDU4 - Other FE (Full-time) - including Community Learning provision                                | 278       | 6.5        |
| EDU5 - Other FE (Part-time) - including Community Learning provision                                | 21        | .5         |
| EDU6 - HE   | 729       | 16.9       |
| EDU6 - HEOTH1 - Other outcome - not listed  | 4         | .1         |
| EMP1 - In paid employment for 16 hours or more per week   | 90        | 2.1        |
| EMP2 - In paid employment for less than 16 hours per week   | 27        | .6         |
| EMP2 - In paid employment for less than 16 hours per weekEDU6 - HE                                  | 2         | 0          |
| EMP4 - Self-employed for 16 hours or more per week  | 2         | 0          |
| Gap year before starting HE   | 3         | .1         |
| GAP1 - Gap year before starting HE  | 10        | .2         |
| HE  | 175       | 4.1        |
| In paid employment for 16 hours or more per week  | 15        | .3         |
| In paid employment for less than 16 hours per week  | 9         | .2         |
| Not in paid employment, looking for work and available to start work                                | 6         | .1         |
| Not in paid employment, not looking for work and/or not available to start work (including retired) | 2         | .0         |
| NPE1 - Not in paid employment, looking for work and available to start work                         | 51        | 1.2        |
| NPE1 - Not in paid employment, looking for work and available to start workEDU6 - HE                | 2         | .0         |
| NPE2 - In paid employment for less than 16 hours per week   | 54        | 1.2        |
| OTH1 - Other outcome - not listed   | 52        | 1.2        |
| OTH4 - Not known  | 962       | 22.4       |
| Other FE (Full-time)  | 50        | 1.2        |
| Other FE (Part-time)  | 14        | .3         |
| Other outcome - not listed  | 67        | 1.6        |
| Self employed   | 3         | .1         |
| Total   | 4302      | 100        |

## Appendix H: A summary of the Thematic Coding of the Student Interviews

| Theme   | Definition   | Number of References |
|---|--|----------------------|
| <b>Academic Preparedness</b>  | <b>How well prepared, or otherwise, students feel for their academic study in higher education</b>   |                      |
| Academic Literacy   | How well prepared, or otherwise, students feel for higher education in terms of their academic literacy  | 130                  |
| Numeracy, maths & stats   | How well prepared, or otherwise, students feel for higher education in terms of their academic numeracy  | 120                  |
| Subject & content knowledge   | How well prepared, or otherwise, students feel for higher education in terms of their academic subject and content knowledge (excluding specific references to academic literacy and numeracy) | 137                  |
| <b>Academic support</b>   | <b>How students, active or otherwise, students have been in accessing available support networks</b>   |                      |
| Attitudes to accessing support                                      | Students' perceptions of and willingness, or otherwise, to access available support strategies including study skills, peer mentoring, tutorials, library skills                               | 227                  |
| Attitudes to support from tutors                                    | Students' attitudes and responses to support available from tutors   | 203                  |
| <b>Assessment practices</b>   | <b>Students' experiences, attitudes and responses to assessment practices and methods in FE and HE</b>   |                      |
| Assessment experiences and adaptation                               | Students' attitudes and responses to assessment methods received, including adaption to new practices such as exams, essay writing, presentations, lab work, group work                        | 55                   |
| Transition from FE to HE  | How HE students felt they have adapted to similar and/or different assessment methods including exams, essay writing, presentations, lab work, MCQ's   | 85                   |
| Assessment feedback   | Students' attitudes and responses to summative and formative feedback  | 116                  |
| Assessment preferences  | Students' preferences for a particular assessment method   | 59                   |
| <b>FE study</b>   | <b>Students' responses and attitudes to FE study</b>   |                      |
| Reasons of choice for FE study                                      | Students' reasons for why they chose their particular FE path  | 90                   |
| <b>Social capital</b>   | <b>Students' experiences of social networks and extra-curricular activities</b>  |                      |
| Extra-curricular activity   | Awareness of, and involvement with clubs, societies, social networks within course, team activities (e.g. sports teams)  | 29                   |
| Group identity  | How far students identify, or not within a group, including academic/sport/Halls/club  | 127                  |
| Social networks   | Extent to which students have social networks and the quality of social experiences. For HE include whether students live at home or in student accommodation during first year                | 104                  |
| <b>Students perceptions &amp; expectations of education pathway</b> | <b>FE and HE students' attitudes and responses to their progress and performance and whether this has, or has not, matched expectations</b>  |                      |

|   |  |     |
|---|--|-----|
| FE students' expectations and perceptions of performance and progress | FE students' attitudes and responses to their current educational experience; how they feel they're doing; their perceptions of HE as similar or different to school or college                              | 92  |
| HE students' expectations and perceptions of performance and progress | HE students' attitudes and responses to their current educational experience; how they feel they're progressing; their current perceptions and expectations of HE; reflections and advice to first year self | 184 |
| <b>Transferable skills</b>  | <b>Promotion and development of transferable skills during FE and HE course</b>  |     |
| Carried through from FE   | FE students' attitudes, perceptions and responses around skills they feel they have transferred from college to university   | 73  |
| Gained at HE  | HE students attitudes, perceptions and responses around skills they feel they have gained between leaving college and being at university  | 45  |
| <b>Ways of learning</b>   | <b>Attitudes and responses to new and familiar teaching methods and ways of learning</b>   |     |
| Attitudes & preferences to ways of learning                           | Student responses which state an attitude or preference at HE and FE   | 152 |
| Different at HE   | Students' attitudes and adaption which express a difference to ways of learning previously experienced   | 93  |
| Similar from FE to HE   | Students' responses which express a familiarity to ways of learning previously experienced   | 24  |

## Appendix I: A summary of the Thematic Coding of the Tutor/Lecturer Interviews

| Theme  | Definition   | Number of References |
|--|--|----------------------|
| <b>Academic preparedness</b>                 | <b>Lecturer perceptions of how well prepared (or otherwise) students are for academic study in Higher Education</b>  |                      |
| Academic literacy                            | How well prepared, or otherwise, tutors and lecturers perceive students to be in terms of their academic literacy as they apply for, and then enter, university.   | 39                   |
| Academic numeracy                            | How well prepared, or otherwise, lecturers perceive students to be in terms of their academic numeracy.  | 23                   |
| Employability                                | Vocational nature of BTEC course. Students/staff see BTEC courses as preparation for future work/employment  | 28                   |
| Subject and content knowledge                | How well prepared, or otherwise, lecturers perceive students to be in terms of their academic subject and content knowledge (excluding specific references to academic literacy and numeracy)  | 27                   |
| <b>Assessment practices</b>                  | <b>Dominant assessment methods at FE and HE and rationale for approach. FE tutor and HE lecturer perceptions of student attitudes to, and preferences for, different assessment models; assessment support available at both FE and HE</b> |                      |
| Assessment support                           | Types of support available to both FE and HE students  | 11                   |
| Perceptions of student assessment experience | Perceptions of the type of assessment methods that students prefer   | 11                   |
| Assessment methods and rationale             | The dominant assessment methods at FE and HE, and reasons for their dominance  | 41                   |
| Challenges                                   | Tutor and Lecturer perceptions of assessment challenges experienced by students  | 31                   |
| <b>Pathway, performance and progress</b>     | <b>HE lecturer and FE tutor perceptions of student pathway (including aspirations), performance and progress during their first year of study; whether and how there is difference between students from A level and BTEC backgrounds</b>  |                      |
| Pathway                                      | Tutor perceptions of the readiness and capacity whether HE is right for all students or whether there are some students that do not 'fit' HE   | 50                   |
| Perceptions of aspirations for FE students   | Perceptions of the different pathways that students aspire to and why, and what might affect their decisions, including confidence.  | 14                   |
| Performance                                  | HE lecturer perceptions of student performance during their first year   | 33                   |
| Entry qualifications, Rigour v lenience      | Also covers equivalence  | 46                   |
| Progress                                     | HE lecturer perceptions of student progress during their first year  | 57                   |
| <b>Social capital</b>                        | <b>Extent to which lecturers perceive students to have social networks and the quality of social experiences. For HE include</b>   |                      |

|                                 |   |           |
|---------------------------------|---|-----------|
|                                 | <b>whether students live at home or in student accommodation during first year.</b>   |           |
| Extra-curricular activity       | Awareness of and Involvement with clubs, societies, social networks within course, team activities (e.g. sports teams)  | 2         |
| Group identity                  | How far students identify or not within a group Eg. Academic/university/sport/Halls/club etc  | 22        |
| Live at home students           | Lecturer perceptions of students who do not live on campus  | 4         |
| Networking and Opportunities    | Lecturer perceptions of if and how students engage with networking opportunities  | 6         |
| <b>Student support</b>          | <b>Pastoral and academic support available to students; Tutor and Lecturer awareness of student background and possible support needs</b>   |           |
| Awareness of student background | How aware, or not, Tutors and Lecturers are of student background   | 17        |
| FE student support              | Types of support available for students   | 54        |
| Institutional support           | Types of support available for students   | 59        |
| Relationship with tutors        | Student awareness of available support from tutor   | 76        |
| <b>Transferable skills</b>      | <b>Promotion and development of transferable skills during FE course</b>  | <b>23</b> |
| <b>Ways of learning</b>         | <b>Key pedagogical approaches at FE and HE and rationale for these approaches; Tutor and Lecturer perceptions of student experiences, attitudes and responses to new and familiar ways of learning.</b> |           |
| FE Key ways of learning         | The dominant pedagogical approaches at HE and the rationale for these approaches  | 21        |
| HE Key ways of learning         | The dominant pedagogical approaches at FE and the rationale for these approaches  | 34        |
| Preference and challenge        | Tutor and Lecturer perceptions of students preferred ways of learning, and perceptions of the most challenging ways of learning   | 76        |