

TRANSFORMING TRANSITIONS



**Student Experiences of Further and Higher
Education
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Transforming Transitions – HEFCE Catalyst Project

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1. Executive Summary

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

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

Key conclusions

1. HE students' experiences of university do not appear to be clearly defined along the lines of prior qualifications. A range of complex, intertwined factors contribute to students' feelings of preparedness and success. Sometimes these are associated with prior educational experiences but sometimes they are not.
2. Many students reported feeling academically unprepared for degree-level study. This was particularly the case in relation to some aspects of academic literacy and, for BTEC students, was sometimes linked to aspects of subject knowledge too.

3. Students who had not studied mathematics post-16 reported struggling with mathematical elements of their first year course. This was the case for students irrespective of whether they had BTEC or A-Level qualifications.
4. Students demonstrated awareness of both the academic and pastoral support mechanisms available to them. Despite knowledge and information about these, many opted not to access this support.
5. There was some variation in assessment preferences and feelings of preparedness depending on prior qualification. Those with a BTEC reported preferences for essays and coursework-based approaches; they felt less prepared for exams than their A-Level peers.
6. Students reported mixed experiences of receiving feedback on assessed work. At both HE and FE levels, and across subjects, there were concerns raised about the quality, quantity and timeliness of feedback. Understanding how to act upon feedback and meet assessment criteria was also a challenge for some students.
7. Some participants felt that their prior qualifications prepared them well to be independent learners. Others reported challenges in relation to this and commented that they would have valued support during the transition phase.
8. A range of factors influenced the extent to which students felt a sense of 'belonging' at university and were able to develop social networks. These included: accommodation arrangements; financial means; participation in extra-curricular activities; and, the organisation of teaching sessions.

Recommendations and next steps

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

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

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

2. Introduction

The Transforming Transitions project is funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) through the catalyst fund. This fund commits up to £30 million in annual funding. The money aims to drive innovation in the HE sector, enhance excellence and efficiency in HE and support innovative solutions. As part of a wider programme involving projects across the country, its aim is to address student barriers to success by exploring the differential progress and outcomes of different groups of students through university. This project seeks to understand Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) students' experiences of transition across the divide between Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) and will design, implement and evaluate evidence based interventions to

improve differential education outcomes at university. Transforming Transitions focuses upon three particular subjects; Sports Science, Business and Computer Studies. It is a collaborative project involving a consortium of four selective, high tariff universities (University A, University B, University C and University D), four partner FE colleges (College A, College B, College C and College D), plus Pearson Education Limited who provide BTEC qualifications.

The report presents the findings from the qualitative strand of the first phase of the project and is organised in to three main sections. Following this introduction, we outline the research methods, including details of our sample, data collection instruments and analytical approaches. The second section presents the findings from the focus groups and interviews. Finally, the last section is a discussion of our findings, including key conclusions and implications for the next stages of the project

3. Methodology

3.1 Design and methods

For this strand of the project it was decided at the outset that for the qualitative research methods, adopting an interview based approach was congruent with the aim of gaining in-depth accounts of BTEC students' experiences of transition. The overall intention being to capture students' narratives and so report rich accounts, including direct citations from interview transcripts to ultimately convey the 'student voice'.

Student interviews took the form of either individual or focus group interviews, in both Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) contexts. Within the HE setting three groups of first-year students were organised to form the sample. This included: students with a BTEC entry qualification; students with a BTEC and an A-Level entry qualification; and as a comparator, students with an A-Level or IB entry qualification. The students taking part within the FE context were all second year BTEC students who were at the end of studying their course. All students were studying either Sport, Business, or Computer Studies.

The design of the interview schedules was built upon previous research conducted by the University of University B and Pearson Education (the provider of BTEC qualifications), exploring the university experience of BTEC students. Because this aforementioned study identified key themes considered to be relevant to the Transforming Transitions project, they were drawn upon to form the basis of the interview questions. In addition, because the final data collection stage of the Pearson Education project coincided with the first phase, relevant

interview data from the University of University B¹ was used in both studies. The resulting interview schedules covered the following themes, although 'advice to incoming first-year students' was excluded from the FE second year BTEC interview guide:

- Teaching, learning and assessment experiences including:
- Entry experiences
- Curriculum
- Ways of learning
- Assessment practices
- Experiences of literacy, numeracy and transferable skills
- Relationship and social experiences
- Advice to incoming first year students

The interviews schedules were constructed to adopt a semi-structured design. This made it necessary to plan the general structure of the interview in advance, constructing the main questions to be asked. The detailed structure of the interview was then worked out during the interview/focus group where the students were given the opportunity to construct answers at length and in their own words to a series of pre-determined open-ended questions. Prompts were also used to facilitate a broader coverage of a question, and probes aimed at exploring answers in greater depth (Drever, 1995; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

An essential part of planning the project involved consideration of the relevant ethical issues. Ethical approval for the research was gained from Ethics Committees in each of four HEIs taking part in the study. This involved completing ethical proposals, taking into consideration relevant information provided in the Data Protection Act (Great Britain, 1998) and also the ethical guidelines for educational research outlined by the British Educational Research Council (BERA) (2011). Key concerns included the need to gain informed consent from the participants assisting the inquiry. Therefore, prior to students agreeing to take part, they were provided with participation information sheets. These included: the purpose and aim of the study; the data collection methods; an offer to answer any questions about the research; and, information about the students' right to withdraw from the study. In addition, participants were also given a consent form on which their agreement to take part was provided by way of a signature. By providing a signature the students also confirmed that they had received information about: the study and had been offered an opportunity to ask questions about the

¹ The University B university study had included students studying Drama, Business and Management and Sport and Health Sciences.

research; acknowledged that they could withdraw from the study at any time; and, gave permission for their interview/focus group to be audio-recorded. A signature was also added by the interviewing researcher. Secondly, an important ethical concern relevant to the study is the respect of the participants. Rights for the participants' confidentiality and anonymity were particularly pertinent in terms of the storage and reporting of data. Strict guidance was therefore provided by university ethics committees to ensure data collection and storage in each of the four HEIs was adhered to. Assurance about confidentiality was confirmed for example, by personal information, including names and data, being assigned a reference number / or code as soon as possible. Thus, data was stored against this number/code rather than the name(s) of the participant(s). To further ensure confidentiality, within this report students' names have been removed. The only information provided, where relevant, is the particular qualification studied. Information about the course the students are studying and the university they attend is also withheld.

3.2 Sample and data collection

The interviews and focus groups were conducted on site, across each of the four Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and partner FE colleges. Table 1 displays information about the number of students who took part and how many interviews or focus groups were conducted.

University	No. of interviews/focus groups	No. of students
University A	8	12
University B	17	22
University C	7	21
University D	7	9
Totals	39	64

Table 1. Table to show the number of interviews/focus groups and students taking part in the study

Students were informed about the research by teaching staff/lecturers and were asked to volunteer. The participants taking part therefore, were self-selecting. As an incentive, participants were each given a £10 gift voucher as an acknowledgement of their support in taking part. The focus groups and interviews were arranged at agreeable times, endeavouring to cause minimal impact upon students' studies, fitting in around their day-to-day commitments such as lecturers and classes. The focus groups/ interviews were scheduled to last no longer than one hour, although if students indicated that wanted to talk for slightly longer their

permission, plus if necessary all members of the focus group, was requested. As indicated above informed consent was obtained from each student at the start of the interviews or focus groups, prior to data collection. In consenting to take part, the students agreed to each interview, or focus group being audio-recorded. The recordings were then transcribed by an independent body. On completion of the data collection the transcripts were then analysed.

3.3 Process of analysis

The analysis was conducted using 'bottom up' inductive coding, taking into account the evidence based themes as outlined within the student interview schedules. Data was therefore analysed using an approach based upon 'thematic induction' (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The first coding step involved independent open coding of two interviews by five researchers, followed by a face-to-face discussion of the themes attributed. The derived themes and sub-themes were then used to construct a codebook which included a description of the themes and sub- to help inform the first stage of the analysis which was undertaken by four researchers, using NVivo software. All the data was combined and equally shared between each researcher. One researcher analysed the data collected from their university, plus that of another. Periodic Skype meetings were also held during this stage of analysis as a means of confirming and analysing the validity of these initial themes. Following this, a further face-to-face meeting was held where an in-depth discussion lead to agreement on the final themes and sub-themes to be used. The analytical process therefore, became increasingly sophisticated and generated eight top level themes. The findings related to each of these themes are reported in the following section.

4. Findings

The findings in relation to each of the eight overall themes are discussed within this section.

- 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

While we report each theme separately, it is important to acknowledge that there remains some degree of overlap and interaction between the different areas. This is noted where relevant in our analysis and is explored in more depth within the Discussion section below.

4.1 Academic preparedness

The overarching theme of academic preparedness illuminated students' perceptions about how well prepared, or otherwise, they felt for Higher Education (HE). In terms of academic preparedness, the data was clustered into three key sub-themes in order to shed light upon specific areas of academic study:

Sub-theme	Definition
Academic literacy	How well prepared, or otherwise, students feel for higher education in terms of their academic literacy:
Numeracy, mathematics and statistics	How well prepared, or otherwise, students feel for higher education in terms of their numeracy, mathematics, statistics and mathematical skills.
Subject and content knowledge	How well prepared, or otherwise, students feel for higher education in terms of their academic subject and content knowledge ²

Each of these sub-themes which will be reported upon separately, below.

Academic literacy

A majority of the first-year university students, irrespective of qualification upon entry, commented that different aspects of academic literacy had presented challenges. Overall, there were 119 references from 30 sources made by Higher Education (HE) students about academic literacy. The key areas discussed include the responses to questions about: reading and understanding academic texts; pulling information together from academic texts and summarising; writing academic essays; writing evaluations and reflections; and referencing.

The **reading and understanding of academic texts** was an area discussed by some students and in particular, reference was made to academic journals. Comments indicated that students didn't feel prepared because engaging with this new style of writing was unfamiliar. This view is illustrated by an A-level student *'I'd never encountered journals before*

² Excluding specific references to academic literacy and mathematics, statistics and mathematical skills.

really, or if I had I'd only sort of stumbled on it accidentally. [Laughs] Um, so yeah that's quite alien'. Furthermore, difficulties were encountered due to the structure of academic articles. As one A-level student said, this change was 'daunting' to adjust to, making the understanding of text troublesome:

Maybe just reading academic texts, the articles. I'm not used to the article format, like seeing the abstract and the method and the discussion and whatever it is. Yeah, I'm not really used to that so I found that quite daunting. So, because when you want to write a good essay you want to include as much academic text as possible, but if you don't understand them I think it's quite hard to use them in your essay.

A few students also found reading academic text hard because of the frequent use of new subject specific abbreviations, jargon and terminology, as highlighted by a BTEC student 'I think with the reading as well, 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, so I think that's the only part I found hard about reading'.

In addition, the requirement to undertake wider reading lead to a few comments to suggest that upon entry to HE, a few students were unaware of this expectation, as well as the associated need to develop independence as a learner when undertaking this academic task, as a BTEC student explained:

I think I especially have found the fact that they leave you to your own devices a lot, they kind of just go "Right this is it." And then they expect you to find everything yourself – it that, because we should be able to do that, but that's something I've had to get used to doing. Like they kind of expect you to read around everything, even though when we first came we didn't know we had to do that.

Adjusting to the sheer volume of reading required during the first-year of study, prompted a few students to say that they would have liked more guidance about which specific key texts they should read, particularly at the beginning of the academic year. To highlight the problems faced, one BTEC plus A-level student indicated that this transition was daunting because accommodating to the increased amount of reading had in turn, made it more difficult to pull information together in order to achieve an understanding:

...so with the academic texts, um, it's very daunting, because obviously 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. And it's like trying to just pick out the main bits from it, which sort of, it does help your understanding.

I think this is really bad, but I feel like I've struggled more as I start the reading than the actual reading itself, if that makes sense. Because there's like so much in one chapter of a book, like you'll read one chapter of a book and it's like 10/12 pages, something like that and it's packed with a bunch of information and then you've sort of got to take time to read it, to understand it and then reinterpret it and then put it in your own words. So, I find that- like the thought of that and stuff is what I struggle with more than you know.

Moreover, a BTEC student who also spoke about the struggles experienced when adapting to a larger volume of reading, indicated that it had been experienced as an initial barrier which went on to have repercussions in terms of both their understanding and re- interpretation of texts:

It would appear from the comments above that the difficulties experienced by these first-year students when engaging with the reading and understanding of academic texts are also connected to the development of transferable skills, in particular effective time management and becoming an independent learner, both of which will be developed further in section 4.7. In addition, as briefly touched upon, these difficulties could also have implications for the undertaking of pulling information together and summarising texts.

A few students commented about problems experienced when required to pull information together and summarise texts. A lot of the difficulties related to identifying which key points needed to be lifted out, especially from academic journals and large amounts of text. Some students also explained that summarising texts could be challenging because they need to be accustomed to the guidelines about plagiarism. That said, students conveyed that they felt reassured about this aspect of **academic literacy** because their written work is often checked using for example, software such as the 'Turnitin' UK Plagiarism Detection Service. As one BTEC student who had also previously experienced the use of this detection software at college, remarked:

... people like to think that people don't just copy and paste things in there [in to an essay], but it's nice to know that if you take information from somewhere else and re-word it, it's nice to know that either you're doing it the right way so that you're not getting a high plagiarism score or you're doing it wrong and you need to change how you're writing things.

Turning to the sub-theme of **writing academic essays**, on the whole students' responses showed variation with some students indicating that they found this transition straightforward. In particular, students who had previously studied certain A-level qualifications (including alongside a BTEC course) reported that generally, they felt well prepared for essay writing, as well as reading. The subjects identified by students to assist their preparation included English Literature, History, Geography and French. Alternatively, some BTEC students highlighted that they felt unprepared for academic essay writing, as one student commented:

Essays we never really did any, so I would have liked to have done more at college I think. Because when I did my first essay I wasn't really sure if it was along the right lines or anything. It's similar to a report in the fact that it has introduction, main body, conclusion sort of thing, but I just sort of had to guess.

A different BTEC student also explained his/her difficulties [...] *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.*' Such challenges are not exclusive to BTEC students. Here, an A-level student describes the 'shock' of becoming familiar with writing an academic essay:

... like back in high school the topic would be kind of like straight to the point, 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? So, it's definitely a shock, like you have to try and be more creative to try and find more stuff to write about. So definitely a challenge.

Moving to **writing evaluations and reflections**, very few students referred this aspect of academic literacy because they hadn't experienced this form of writing within their degree courses and in the main, it was mostly Business students who responded to this question.

Yet, as noted by an A-level plus BTEC student, more opportunities to gain more experience in undertaking this form of writing would be helpful:

I think my experience with evaluation and reflection was quite limited this year, because we only had to write a small essay evaluating our group work – and I think that is an important part. But I think they should like you know, make you do it more often. If you know what I mean? Because we only had to do it once this year.

In contrast, the final sub-theme, **referencing**, prompted a majority of students to talk about their experiences, which were overall mixed, with a few students feeling prepared and finding the transition from BTEC, A-level or IB³ study, as being a natural progression, as noted in the comment made by a BTEC student ‘... *referencing I’ve been doing the whole way through college as well, so coming uni and referencing was pretty much, like natural to me as well*’. On the other hand, many students commented that previously they had none, or very little experience of referencing and therefore, found it to be challenging. This perceived lack of preparation, appears to be escalated by the need to learn and adapt to different referencing styles, which appears to be a ‘*step up*’ or a ‘*leap*’. This problem was raised for example, by Sports Science students who were required to use either American Psychology Association (APA) or Harvard reference styles. As a BTEC student said, becoming familiarised with this before entry to HE would have assisted their preparation:

I think it would have been really useful that during BTEC or something there was more learning about different styles of referencing, because obviously there is lots of different ones [for example Harvard and APA], you can’t learn the exact one you are going to be using later in life. But it would have been useful to do, like try one assignment, use this referencing and teach us about it and then do another assignment and other referencing, just learn more about it. So that would have prepared us better.

In addition, many students highlighted various difficulties when locating and searching for credible peer-reviewed sources:

I’ve come up with this strategy – I Google and then it takes me to Wikipedia and then you know how Wikipedia it does referencing also, so I look at the sources where it came and then I go all the way back to them and I reference

³ One IB student took part in this study

them. So, it makes it much easier. But the first time I saw it I was like how am I supposed to find a peer reviewed essay on you know, this and that? It was really, really hard, definitely hard.

Interestingly, students did comment that various skills modules had helped them to understand how to reference, but students did also indicate that they would have liked further assistance and support to help them to get to grips with this key aspect of academic literacy.

Further Education (FE) students made 11 references to academic literacy from 5 sources of data. Three students talked about referencing, with one saying that a specific session had been held at college to provide guidance about Harvard referencing. Another student who was also studying A-Level English Language stated that this subject had assisted their knowledge of referencing. Difficulties experienced by FE students centred on writing within set word limits, writing evaluations and conclusions, and summarising text. Students studying BTEC and A-levels suggested that A-level study in particular had helped to raise their writing skills *'On my A-levels there's a way you have to write, but in BTEC...In my A-levels you get taught way you have to write, but in BTEC they're just like, 'write a report' and you just do it.'* Another student commented that the A-level qualification had helped them to learn to write more effectively because the required structure of an essay is always clearly provided.

One particular area not reported here is that BTEC students expressed difficulty writing in exams, including writing at length and under time pressures. This could be because these students have not undertaken examinations post-16, hence resulting in a potentially difficult transition. This will be discussed further in section 4.3, Assessment Practices.

Numeracy, mathematics and statistics

A further transition representing a challenge for students upon entry into HE concerns the study of mathematics, numeracy and statistics. Overall, with 120 references from 31 sources, the feeling of unpreparedness seems to be a particular problem for students who have not studied mathematics (including statistics and numeracy) 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 was a *'shock'* or a *'struggle'*⁴ suggesting that they did not feel confident in their mathematical ability. An A-level student who hasn't studied maths post-16 said:

⁴ In response to question 1 in the interview guide. See appendix 1

I think with numeracy skills for sure, I mean I'm familiar with all of them to a certain extent but then it's a matter of like it is three years ago and it's just all kind of come at once and it's kind of, I felt the lecturers were talking at us as if we already kind of knew it or were more certain of their knowledge of it. And I was literally looking at the screen and thinking I've no idea what that symbol means.

A BTEC student also commented:

Yes, so statistics and stuff, because it was sort of like 'out there' and it was different for me because I have never done statistics like that if it makes sense? And then some of the modules as well, like maths and stuff. I like did my maths exam in year 10 and I never did maths again after that, so having to come back and do it again was like, whoa [laughs].

In comparison, most students with a post-16 mathematics qualification felt better prepared to study specific modules which have a 'heavy' mathematical content. As an A-level student noted, *'I chose varied A-levels, so doing maths meant that doing accountancy and quantitative methods was okay, like it was manageable because like, I had that.'* However, not all students who studied mathematics post-16 reported that they felt prepared. This was illustrated by an A-level student who at times, needed to seek support:

I did AS maths so I found some of it okay and the rest a bit of a jump and I don't know, if you don't go out yourself and get help, then there's not really much there. I suppose you have to be proactive.' A BTEC student who had also studied AS mathematics, experienced struggles: *'I don't think it is just, like BTEC students [having difficulties]. I think everyone, unless you did A-level maths, you are going to have trouble with that. And I did AS maths and I still struggle with it so- not that I did very well in my AS maths but I still you know, have done some of the content already and I am still struggling with that.'*

Students went on to pin-point particular difficulties with mathematics, statistics and numeracy and out-lined the key problems when studying particular modules and subject areas. In Business, problems included studying the mathematical content in modules such as: Quantitative Methods, Economics (micro and macro Economics), Finance and Accountancy. Specific difficulties identified included for example:

- The interpretation and understanding of graphs, diagrams, flow charts and balance sheets.
- Statistics and their application (such as t-tests etc.).
- Using software such as Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)
- Algebra, equations and percentages.

In Sports Science, difficulties were raised by the mathematical content in specific modules, including Quantitative Methods and Biomechanics. Specific difficulties identified included for example,

- Statistics (often involving the use of the SPSS software).
- The interpretation and understanding of graphs.
- Logarithms.

A couple of students, one mixed A-level and BTEC and another with a BTEC qualification, stated that problems could be encountered because individuals perhaps do not have a mathematical 'brain', or 'mind'. This suggests that they view the subject as being required to be 'hard wired' in individuals. Other students indicated that their feeling of unpreparedness could have been eased if they had a greater understanding of the expectations involved with their degree study, as conveyed in the comments made by a A-level and BTEC 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.'* An A-level student also explained how their expectation changed upon entry into HE:

Yeah for me it was Biomechanics because after GCSE when I finished maths and physics that was it for me -like I thought I would never go back to it. [laughs] And when I came back here [to university] I realised I had to do a lot more maths and Biomechanics, so I spent most of my time going to the support sessions [with help from peer mentors] because I really struggled with maths after GCSE.

In addition, a few students expressed the view that some staff assumed that students' have reached a particular level of understanding, as an A-level student said:

I think they thought that the people who took it the laboratory classes] assumed that everyone had a descent basic knowledge of maths. I have a basic knowledge, but GCSE maths. So, they literally sped through it and I

got so lost because some of the equations, like there were so many stages to them and I had no idea what was going on.

But while many students reported difficulties, some also explained that were able to overcome their problems by working hard to understand new course material such as for example, statistics. In addition, a small number of students acknowledged that some teaching methods had taken into account that students might require extra support. This included the perspective of an A-level student, who said that the pace of the teaching prompted their understanding:

[...] with some of the harder stuff in terms of maths, it started [the course] way back to GCSEs, helped our work and slowly built up to A-level and then university style. I think that was pretty helpful. And then some of the newer stuff, it was obviously phased in slowly with new concepts being introduced each week which made it much easier to understand.

A few students also talked about being taught in different groups, depending upon their mathematical background. For some modules, students were divided into those who had studied mathematics post -16 and those who had not. Whilst a few students commented that this helped them, a small number suggested that they still struggled with the mathematical content, as explained by an A-level student:

Quantitative methods we had an extra lecture for the non-A-level maths students that focused on the concepts and explained them in a simpler way. But I did still felt I did struggle with the maths in that. And then in terms of finance and the rest of the modules, it was just the same[for] everyone else, so I did think it could have been slowed down a bit more for those that hadn't done A-level maths.

As indicated earlier, students also stated that they had actively sought support from peers, mentors, teaching staff and Maths Support Centres (MSCs) to help them to overcome their problems and this will be discussed in more detail in section 4.2, Academic support.

A small number of FE students also talked about mathematics and numeracy. Six references were made to this sub-theme from three data sources. BTEC students studying Business highlighted struggling with mathematics when studying accountancy and Information Communication and Technology (ICT) and one student who stated that they were '*not the best*' at maths was also studying GCSE maths again, to increase their skills. Two students

studying BTEC Computer Science noted problems in class because there is a big disparity in students' mathematical background and experience. One student went on to note their difficulties with numeracy, including the study of core maths⁵ *'Probably say the only thing would be numeracy, when we did IT with maths and we had to look at matrices and sort of convert them and stuff. I think that was the most demanding thing and then also core maths as well which was in addition to this BTEC which was just...a lot quite demanding for numeracy.'*

Overall, the difficulties highlighted above appear to be experienced by a majority of students, with many indicating that they don't feel confident in this subject. It appears that a post-16 mathematics qualification can help students' preparedness, although a few students who had studied mathematics at AS level still expressed difficulties.

Subject and content knowledge

The sub-theme of HE students' academic preparedness in terms of subject content and knowledge, includes 123 references, gathered from 25 sources.

Beginning with the perspectives of **HE Sports Science** students, many raised concerns that they felt unprepared to study particular aspects of subject and content knowledge included in their first- year undergraduate courses. Some students reported that while they had difficulties with mathematical content during their study of Biomechanics modules, they also struggled with the scientific content. Many BTEC Sports Science students reported that felt that they had a well-rounded understanding of the subject of sport, but highlighted that they felt unprepared for the Science subject content. In particular, some BTEC students explained that they experienced particular problems when studying Anatomy, Biology, Bioenergetics, Chemistry and Psychology, noting that their understanding of these subjects represented a 'leap' up from previous study. Students said this was a '*shock*', making them feel 'behind', *'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.'* A focus group with four Sports Science BTEC students also revealed that their previous study had concentrated upon the subject of Sport, therefore they faced difficulties understanding wider subjects such as Biology and Physiology at university because they were perceived as being taught in isolation, or 'stand-alone' and hence, more difficult to comprehend. In addition, many BTEC students

⁵ The 'core maths' qualification was introduced in 2014 for 16-18 year olds who have gained a grade C or higher at GCSE but do not wish to take AS/ A level maths. An aim of this qualification being, to better prepare students for future study and employment.

reported that they were unprepared for the amount of Psychology covered in the degree courses:

So, one of my best mates did Psychology at A-level and she is like, 'oh we've done this, we've done this' for almost every module, like 'we've covered this, covered that', and we feel like we're trying to play – well personally I feel I'm trying to play catch up the whole time.

Many of the difficulties associated with the Psychology content included the learning of new names, terminology and theories which hadn't been studied previously... *it is kind of the basic psychology and knowing all the different people [theorists] and things like that, that everyone's [A-level students] just had drummed into them for so long. They just know it, just like that and we don't [BTEC students], we've actually got to learn it.*

Indeed, many BTEC students emphasised that they felt at a disadvantage compared to A-level students when studying scientific subject knowledge. For example, one student commented *'[...] mainly human physiology it's very biology and chemistry combined. And obviously people that did an A-Level in biology or chemistry, they've got a humungous in-depth knowledge of chemistry and biology. So, they know a lot of more than I did, but it didn't feel it was a gap that set me behind an awful lot.'* Another BTEC student went on to say:

But some of my friends didn't think it would be as 'sciencey' as it was, and it shot them in the foot a little bit because they didn't put the work in, they got to the exam and then failed the exam because they didn't ... Okay, they didn't work, but again their base knowledge wasn't there. Whereas a lot of people can draw on what they had from A-levels.

This prompted a few students to say that they would have been better prepared if they had studied a science A-level alongside their BTEC course:

I personally feel like the entry requirements should change. I feel like you should have an A-level Chemistry or Biology. I think you need an A-level science, I don't think it should be just a BTEC. I think you need an BTEC plus an A-level because otherwise there's a lot of work you have to put in, a huge amount of work.

However, difficulties with the science content was not confined to BTEC students because some A-level students also explained that they had experienced similar difficulties. Central to their problems was the choice of science subject they had studied at A-level. For example, students who had previously studied Biology, experienced knowledge gaps for the Psychology or Chemistry content, and vice versa. A key step up was seen as the need to build upon their existing knowledge, in greater depth and at a faster pace. Although many students did not perceive this as being a particularly difficult transition. In addition, one A-level student went on to highlight problems raised by different exam board provision *'I think that there's modules that you can see where even different A-Levels like... so like AQA for PE was like really helpful for the physiology module whereas apparently OCR wasn't. Like some of my friends who did OCR PE really struggled with that module.'*

Moving to **HE Business**, overall students reported many difficulties with subject and content knowledge in modules such as Accountancy and Finance and this was associated with the mathematics and statistics content, as discussed previously. Many BTEC students felt well prepared for undergraduate study, stating they had a good understanding of Business and this had formed a good foundation, as one student noted:

... because my college course was quite business based, so I've actually found in some areas I've actually already got prior knowledge of it, if you get what I mean'. However, some BTEC students reported struggling with subject of Economics: 'But there was a couple like Economics [modules] which was basically 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.

As well, a handful of A-level students, particularly those who had not studied Economics, also experienced difficulties despite having an A-level in Economics. They still found the content troublesome, reporting that the course content differed to that studied previously, especially in terms of both micro and macro Economics. On the whole, it seems that A-level students who had previously studied Accountancy and Finance, Politics, and Psychology are better prepared, reporting that these subjects had assisted them to understand the subject and content knowledge in HE.

There were a small number of comments made by **Computer Science** students about content and subject knowledge. Two BTEC students highlighted that their previous study of web programming didn't fully prepare them for HE studies, so everything felt *'quite new'*. One

student went on to talk about programme languages ‘*I did a lot of JAVA prior to coming to university, but other programme languages such as PHP and CSS there was a bit more to take in, different types of syntaxes, but I think I handled it well.*

Finally, **FE students** made just 10 references to subject and content knowledge, collected from 5 sources. Two Computer Science students raised concerns about programming languages, a problem also raised above. One student said that they were ‘*worried that we are not going to know enough coding for when we go to uni, or enough knowledge on languages.*’ In Business, FE three students reported that they struggled with Information and Communications Technology (ICT), including using Microsoft office programmes. Another pointed to difficulties when studying accounting and using spreadsheets. Sports Science students’ also highlighted challenges when studying Psychology, plus aspects of Biology and physiology. One student also commented that risk assessment was problematic, simply because it was unfamiliar and therefore, felt unprepared for studying that aspect of the curriculum.

4.2 Academic support

This theme captured how students, active or otherwise, have been in accessing available support networks. There were two distinct sub-themes set out in the table below:

Sub-theme	Definition
Attitudes to accessing support	comments which reflect perceptions of and willingness, or otherwise, to access available support strategies including study skills, peer mentoring, tutorials, library skills
Attitudes to support from tutors	Comments which refer to attitudes and responses to support available from tutors

There were 227 references from all 39 sources regarding **attitudes to accessing support**. The stand out themes were around the more informal support networks amongst friends, in particular the identified skills certain friends had with which to help them; the personal reasons why many had chosen not to access support; the barriers to accessing support once a decision had been made to seek help. There were no obvious differences between any of the HE groups.

Most students knew what support was on offer, where to find it and for some there was a sense of *'satisfied with the support'* or *that '... there was a really great support network'*, and had the attitude that if you look for it you can find it. There were a few variables around the visibility of support between institutions, with a few feeling it was *'hidden'*, as in this BTEC + A-Level student who felt they hadn't sought advice or support because, *'I didn't know where to go or who to ask.'* or another who felt there needed to be more advertising *'you have to kind of actively seek it and sort of know it's somewhere.'* and another *'like you are told there is the maths building but unless you sort of really ask around you don't know.'*

Responses also suggested that many were not accessing the available support facilities despite this awareness. Quite a few retrospectively regretted not having accessed support when they needed it as this response from an A-Level student suggests, *'when I needed help I should have gone and got it.'*, or these BTEC + A-Level students *'I'm the kind of person that tries to do it by myself and I do agree that at some point I should have accessed what was available.'*, *'I would have probably emailed the lecturer and been like "Listen, can you explain this to me?...but yeah that's what I should have done and could have done but...'*

The reasons, and perceived barriers, behind this were both emotional and organisational. Firstly, quite a few students cited *'stubbornness'*, *'laziness'* or *'being independent'*. But for some it was about the perception of others, *'being scared'*, or thought of as *'silly'*, as reasons for not accessing the available support systems as in this BTEC student, *'I'm sure, it'll be stupid of me to go and ask,'* or this BTEC + A-Level student *'There is nothing wrong with asking, there is no such thing as a stupid question, that is what I have been told, my whole life...so you don't have to wait until you are desperate.'* A few felt learning to be independent was important as in these A-Level students, *'it's not handed to you on a plate, a lot of this is how much do you want it because that's how much you're going to get out of it.'*; *'here you have to be more independent and seek it if you need it.'*, or these BTEC students *'I'm sure I can do it on my own.'*; *'I don't think you need that much support, it's all independent and I think if you put in the time yourself then you get most out of it.'*

Secondly, organisational barriers such as available office hour timetables were perceived as not helpful as expressed by this BTEC + A-Level student, *'I found that the office hours are really limited, that half the time I'm actually in classes or have meetings to go to.'* Equally, the sheer volume of students, as in when there is a whole queue of students you might not end up asking your question, or even be *'bothered every time to go to office hours'*:

...because of how many people are waiting in that break time, and if you kept on asking them (the lecturers) then the students behind you would get impatient and then I feel like it's not working, so you need to be mindful of other students as well.

For some HE students informal peer support, peer mentoring or buddy schemes and help from PhD students were the mainstay of where the support they needed came from. A sense that this was within cohorts with one BTEC + A-Level student stating that *'we support each other massively.'* and another

'... for the exams we all go through it all.' Not only was a friend a preferred choice, but also the identification of certain key skills some particular friends had, inside and outside of the university as from this A-Level student, *'quite a few of them had already done accounting at A-Levels, so I found it helpful going to my friends rather than having to go to a lecturer.'* Or equally from these BTEC students *'I had a friend who was in my accommodation who had done A-Level maths and said he was willing to help me go through the content of the course.'* *'a family friend helped me, because he works in accountancy, but it was more for the finance side.'*; *'I asked a friend who was from the year above me who's already done his first year in sports science if he could send me one of his reports just so I could see how it was written and that helped a lot.'*

Buddy or mentor schemes available in the first year were referenced by a number of students. They were seen as optional and if requested, a mentor was assigned, usually by email. The nature or value of the support provided was mentioned by a few and perceived as helpful, as from this BTEC student, *'whenever I have needed anything, I've always just messaged my buddy and they've been able to help.'* or these BTEC + A-Level students *'... he's helped me out on a few occasions with course choices and module choices.'*, (BTEC + A-Level) *'... he visited me in my halls and was really supportive and taught me how to use the library services and stuff.'* However, for one BTEC + A-Level student, the support didn't span the entire year *'... mine stopped emailing, or the group, halfway through the first year.'*

There was some mention of specific types of support such as; skills modules, skills workshops and academic revision sessions; particular places to go, such as maths support centres or My career zone; to online 'virtual' support such as VLE platforms, YouTube and social media; or specific people such as lecturers and tutors during drop-in sessions and how comfortable the relationship was between tutor and tutee (which will be looked at in more depth in Attitudes to support from Tutors). Some comments were merely about their existence *'... there is a sport science Facebook chat as well, so if there was any major question I could ask there.'* or *'you*

could drop in on a certain day of the week and that's the same with other modules.' However, for some, it was about the specific value and impact they had had such as this A-Level student talking about an academic revision session, *'a lady came in and told you how to break it down and that made it a lot easier ... which was really helpful.'*; a BTEC + A-Level student who found the online virtual platform Piazza really, really helpful, *'I didn't want to access support but that method of offering support incentivised me.'*; another, *'I think the workshops offered are a really, really useful part of the learning experience.'*; and finally another BTEC + A-Level student referring to a maths centre, *'I did get that one -on-one help.'*

Suggestions for improving the existing support networks were made by some students who were keen to make recommendations based on their experiences. A few suggestions were made to improve such as pre- university guidance and advice as by this BTEC + A-Level student *'Just a bit more like guidance and advice beforehand, it would be a lot easier, but you kind of get thrown in because obviously we've all come from like different backgrounds.'* The timing of information available to first year students on entry to university could be improved as recommended by this BTEC + A-Level student:

... they send most of the uni stuff as a first year to your uni email so if you haven't set that up ... or you don't sign into it at that point because you think I'm not going to be emailed before I actually enter. So if you send something on how to use Learn or how to access things like that you wouldn't know about it until you entered. So if they sent it to your personal email... that would be helpful.

Equally, the kind of information pack given at one uni *'because the pack we did get was for social instead of the education part. If we had two CDs it'd be more helpful so you get both perspectives.'* And finally, increasing the amount of mentors and when they were available was suggested by this A-Level student *'I feel there should be more peer mentors like previous undergraduate students, like second years, to help you.'* Or this BTEC student *'... maybe asking a few people who have graduated to help mentor previous students... maybe giving them their Facebook names or by email.'*

Attitudes to **accessing support from tutors** was another sub-theme which all HE students from all entry routes into university had experiences and comments to share. There were 227 references from 38 sources. The main themes that emerged from the data were namely: a small number of positive experiences; for some their support from tutors at school or college had been better than at university; the nature of the reason to contact a tutor for support

depending on if the context was academic or personal; the communication, organisational and emotional barriers to accessing, or not accessing, tutor time; and a few making suggestions for how the tutor support system could be improved.

For some, there was a positive acknowledgment and appreciation of the availability and value placed on tutor support. A sense of *'just knock on the door', 'first port of call'*, was apparent and reflected further by these A-Level students when commenting on tutors availability *'she'd always be open and she'd make meetings outside her office hours, which I thought was a really nice approach.'*; *'My tutors are very welcoming, if you need help they'll be there whenever you need them...anytime of the day or night.'* A few especially valued how helpful their tutors had been such as these BTEC students, *'... replied straight away and she was happy to go through it (assignment) ... and I was quite impressed.'*; *'... your tutor is always there to help, which is really, really nice and that's sort of made a big difference. If we didn't have that I think it'd be hard.'*

In hindsight, for a few, a sense that not contacting their tutors when they had needed had been unwise and was something they wanted to choose in the future, *We had the opportunity of the office hours if we need to ask questions, but I personally didn't do that this year, so I think I'll probably make more use next year.'*

Some comparisons were made about how more personalised contact time with tutors at FE had been than at HE due to the fact that at FE they knew their teachers so well as felt by this BTEC student, *'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'*. Another student also attributed the lack of personal support from tutors to the large volume of students at uni *'I had more interactions with college tutors, but that's just because they have less students in the class.'* A sense of having to be more proactive themselves in seeking support was also mentioned by a few as in this response from a BTEC student, *'... it's also very different because you have to make you own decision whether you want to see them or not, whereas at school it was a dedicated thing every day.'*

Personal experiences were shared by quite a few where it depended on how comfortable students had felt with their tutor, a *'connection'*, to be able to ask questions had proved a barrier and seemed a bit intimidating as expressed by this A-Level student, *'... not necessarily intimidating, because obviously you don't know them as well, I found it not as easy to just go up to them and ask.'* or this BTEC + A-Level student:

... because of not having that connection there you're a bit reluctant to ask them questions in their own time, especially if they say they could only answer questions in groups of five or something. So things like that sort of put you off.

Another student found the experience even 'daunting' 'I'd be quite worried to go up to somebody and be like 'I really, really need help.'. Because you don't know them, so it's quite daunting.'

However, this 'not having that connection, for a few students, regardless of qualification on entry, had been a particularly bad experience , starting with ' I don't think they even know my name.' to frustration 'If I'd have had a different tutor it wouldn't have been the case where my work wouldn't have been understood, so it made it frustrating'. For these two BTEC students their relationship with their tutor had deteriorated to point of '...like I was literally crying for help but he didn't care. So I wanted to swap personal tutors but I didn't know how to go about it.'

'There was nothing about how I was getting on or asking how I am , he had no records of me, no attendance or anything, there was nothing like that, he was trying to get rid of me, kind of he didn't want me to be there.'

Communication issues around emails from tutors were mentioned by some in so much that a delayed response or no response from tutors meant students, again regardless of entry qualification felt they had no idea where to turn if they had a problem ' I never got an email or anything, so I asked around to see who else had been contacted and everyone had. '; ' have never met my personal tutor, '; 'I tried to contact mine a couple ,of times and they didn't respond. '; ' didn't hear anything from my personal tutor or even know who it was and then I got an email after Christmas.'

There were a few interesting comments around the context for going to see their tutor; personal support or academic support. For one A-Level student this meant ' I don't think they were necessarily equipped to deal with the student issues.', or these BTEC students ' I would go to him for other things but not really like subject wise. '; ' would go to him more about the overall academic how I'm doing overall, if there's any advice he could give like modules and stuff.' On top of this there was a perception, via first-hand experience and anecdotal evidence from a few, that not all tutors were fulfilling their role adequately, almost a sort of 'hit and miss which one you get' as from this particular BTEC + A-Level student;

I know one tutorial lecturer refused to answer emails sent before the exam because they didn't want to help anybody because they felt like it was giving unfair, which I understand, but I don't think it's fair, especially if you don't understand something.

One student explained to her friend how her tutor had talked her through the importance of attendance '*she's like, "Oh but mine didn't even mention anything like that, nothing."* And for another ' ... *he just does one second year module and then apart from that he just does postgraduate stuff so he doesn't really understand what's expected of us as undergraduates.*'

A few students volunteered suggestions for improvements to support from tutors around such as around timetabling '*they are obviously really busy but perhaps having different times would make it a lot easier for students.*'; earlier introduction by tutors '*I think it would have been good if they'd have made themselves known at the start of the year.* More of a group identity in tutorials would help as felt by one BTEC student:

... none of us really know each other so when we get together it's quite awkward. So what I'd say is I feel like it could be a lot more in depth if we knew each other, if we had an activity to get to know where we'd all come from.

And finally, increased contact time was recommended by this BTEC student:

... once every three or four weeks just because they've kind of seen us at the very beginning of the semester when there's not very much going on and at the end when you've handed everything in and it's kind of like well I actually need you in the middle when I needed help with this, this and this and I didn't have anybody to go to for that... you could almost um, become a bit closer with them if you had more meetings and that would make you feel more comfortable that you'd always got somebody to talk to.

Many **FE students** interviewed, regardless of course option, made comments about their experiences and perspectives of working with their teachers and tutors reflected in the sub-theme **Attitudes to support from Tutors** '*I'm satisfied.*'; '*I've got all the support I needed.*' and this BTEC student '*... throughout the two years I have had this like really good teacher.*' Teachers were accessible and readily available on a regular basis as experienced by these BTEC and A-Level students, '*You can always go and ask your teacher if you don't*

understand,’ ‘teachers’ do communicate with us on a daily basis.’ ‘... you have that one-to-one and I think that it has made my experience a bit more relaxed and a bit less stressful.’

However, the majority of comments were around the positive, personal informal relationships they had developed and how they valued being treated like an adult, by these BTEC + A-Level students *‘they give you a bit more respect, almost treat you like adults and don’t punish you if you do something wrong.’* or these BTEC students, *‘ So it’s more personal, you get to spend time with them and develop a better relationship.’ ; ‘I don’t need to go to workshops because I can ask him anything in the lesson... it’s so comfortable.’*

One BTEC student went as far as saying that good relationships were key because *‘if they don’t like you they don’t want to help you. If you get along with them they want to help you.’*, and this was echoed by a BTEC + A-Level student *‘I don’t think that it helped that I didn’t get on with my teacher at all. So I was more reluctant to ask for help.’* Furthermore, another BTEC student was especially honest and felt *‘... It all comes down to how nice you are to them. A lot of people don’t say that, but you have to be nice ... for them to actually be nice back to you in work ways basically.*

As well as good relations and support with work, tutors and tutorial time were seen as offering longer term direction, as in the case of these BTEC students reflecting on advice around targets and goals:

We’re getting guidance with in our tutor groups... advising us about where we are now in our first year, so we know what we need to do next year to be able to fulfil our ambitions.

... because I am capable of going... to do something that I’m passionate about rather than just stopping her, so he said just go further and see what you get out of it. I think that drove me a bit to get a degree.

They try to guide you to help you not to do that mistake again in the future, or just help you more in a grown up way.

There were a couple of BTEC students who did not share this view stating that *‘our tutor didn’t persuade us to go to university. Obviously he didn’t say not to go, but he didn’t prepare us, all we did was do our CV’s.’ ; ‘ our tutor time is mainly based on completing work rather than looking forward to next year or the year after.’*

Support systems that were mentioned as helpful were help/ worksheets, online resources uploaded to access from home and revision classes in maths and English. Like with a few HE students, there was the notion of becoming an independent learner *‘so we are kind of forced to go to the internet to search for answers ourselves or have our own knowledge.’* And there were a few comparisons made around levels of support between BTEC and A-Level courses by students doing both *‘there’s a lot more support in BTEC than there is at A-Levels, you have to be a lot more independent in you A-Levels.’* ; *‘We don’t have workshops as much with BTEC, but I think for the A-Level you do get the option, I think you can pop in if you have any problems.’*

4.3 Assessment Practices

This theme captured students’ attitudes and responses to assessment practices and methods in FE and HE. The full set of themes and their definitions are set out below:

Sub - theme	Definition
Assessment experiences and adaption	comments which express attitudes to assessment methods received, including adaption to new practices such as exams, essay writing, presentations, lab work and group work
Transition from FE to HE	comments which refer to adapting to similar and/or different assessment methods including exams, essay writing, presentations, lab work, MCQs
Assessment preferences	comments which express preferences for a particular assessment method
Assessment feedback	comments which express attitudes and responses to summative and formative feedback

The theme of **assessment practices** and its sub-themes had many of the students responding. The themes had definite overlap for example, talking about essays had relevance as an assessment preference, as an experience of adapting to a new assessment practice or

by way of making a transition comparison from college to university. But equally, there were responses which were felt to be more pertinent in one sub-theme as opposed to another.

At HE level, there were 59 references from 23 sources. The responses to **assessment preferences** varied depending on whether the students were BTEC, BTEC/A-Level mix or A-Level only. However, with regard to **essay writing**, the familiarity of this assessment was, for the vast majority of BTEC students, their preferred assessment practice. This was especially pointed out by BTEC students who had had no experience of exams during their programme of studies at FE. Compared to taking exams, many felt their strengths lay in essay writing rather than exams. This was confirmed by a BTEC/A-Level student who preferred more independent essays than exams *'as more accustomed to this- if I work for an independent essay I get more information than if I study for an exam'*. Another BTEC expressed her enjoyment for writing essays as, *"...I am able to get across what I understand better than in an exam."* An A-Level student commented that *'this was their preferred way of work'*. Yet, for one BTEC student, however, they responded that they would *'rather do a 10-20 minute presentation than write an essay as better at speaking than writing.'*

With **coursework**, for BTEC and BTEC/A-Level students, there was also a sense of familiarity and preparedness and being better at it than exams. One BTEC student felt *'I prefer the coursework element much more because it's easier to prepare for.'* whilst another BTEC student said that coursework helps to *'boost up grades because every module has either 15% to 20% coursework'*. A strong view held by another BTEC student was *'... I'm better at coursework than exams, so to be judged on exams alone to get into a good university isn't fair.'*

BTEC + A-Level students compared their experiences on both courses and said *'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'*, whilst another said *'we had coursework for our A-Levels, we understand how coursework here works as well as trying to meet the deadlines because we had many of these'*.

For one A-Level student however, the experience of coursework was not a preference, in fact it was something less familiar:

A-Level maths was exams, the maths that we are doing here is coursework ... which I find a bit weird because I'm not used to doing maths and coursework together... in terms of coursework I was a bit lost.

Around **assessment preferences**, many **FE students** made positive comments about **coursework**. They felt *'more progress with this assessment model than exams'* and that they *'broke down the exam pressure as don't have to worry about revision'*. They also felt that it was *'more practical...more time to find information'*. When given a brief *'it was easier to follow and less pressure'*.

In **Assessment experiences and adaption** we captured a range of responses from 55 references from 21 sources where students shared both objective experiences around what assessment practices they had encountered to more subjective plus more nuanced responses around adapting to assessment practices. In general, **HE students** agreed they had experienced a *'whole variety of everything'*; computer multiple choice, MCQ exams, MCQ short answer, practical work, coursework, group work, essay exams and presentations.

When exploring more detailed comments, it was apparent that there was a strong sense from many students, regardless of entry qualification, that there was no real shared understanding of what they should expect around the whole issue of assessment before coming to university; the structure or style of exams; the marks scheme and grading of exams and coursework; the revision skills necessary. One A-Level student at HE felt that as well as information on the course they wanted:

the examination expectations of each individual module and I'd like to know whether it's going to be multiple choice, whether it's going to be coursework essays expected and whether in those exams whether it's going to be based on particular texts or whether it's you're expected to do further reading.

This sense of *'not knowing'* what was expected was apparent regardless of the assessment method *'I feel like an exam's gone okay but then again I feel like actually I don't know how they're going to mark it. I may think I've got a good structure but they might not.'* said by one BTEC student. For another BTEC student *'...my essay was just tricky because you've got no idea what they expect from you.'* Equally confirmed by another BTEC student *'So like for the beginning when we started our coursework ...that is when I was struggling because I didn't know what to do, what were they expecting from us.'*

Similarly, a sense of being *'lost'* about the marking and grading of some assessed work was felt as in this A-Level student, *'you hope that you are answering the question properly because there is not a mark scheme in some cases.'* This opinion was echoed by a BTEC + A-Level

student '...you don't know what the topics are, what the questions are going to be, because that would be cheating, so having that mark scheme would have been helpful for that so we're not completely lost.'

A few students had more positive **assessment experiences** which had been helped by adapting over time, in particular this BTEC student:

I think I have adapted to it (assessment practices) much better in the second semester because I knew what they were looking for and how they're marking compared to the first semester where I had no idea.

Another, this time a BTEC + A-Level, felt adapting meant getting used to differences 'some of the grading schemes are just, they are different like with JAVA I had a really interesting grading scheme for the coursework compare to the exam.'

A few BTEC **students from FE** colleges also had positive comments to say about **assessment experiences and adaption** especially around structured help, understanding the criteria for how their work would be assessed, with one BTEC student commenting that:

...it has been quite easy because the input that we've been given is really easy and the tutor's helped us out as well with each assignment and we get a lot of input on how to do the assignment and what criteria we're trying to achieve.

One student doing both a BTEC and A-Levels made the comparison that:

When you do AS levels they don't really break down where we can get the marks, whereas with BTECs we have the power to get distinctions because it clearly breaks down what criteria we need to meet, so I think it's much easier to do our assignments because we know what we have to achieve, whereas in AS levels we don't have that, we're just guessing what we think we have to write.

With regard to developing as a learner from their first year to the second year, one BTEC student felt that having nine units each year had given them a chance to improve their work through the different assignments with a clear focus;

By the end of the second year we know how to get the grades that we want to get, which is good because I think the first year was trial and error and I didn't really know what grades I was getting, like how important they were for university.

Another BTEC student equally found adapting to writing assignments more concisely an issue at the beginning,

I found it difficult in the first year getting all the information into like one report and then as the year went by I started knowing what information was relevant to my assignments, so I had to just cut it through and it ended up a good piece of work.

Many HE students had something to say when comparing their **transition from their FE school or college to University**; 85 references from 27 sources. As with assessment practices, responses varied depending on whether the students were BTEC, BTEC/A-Level mix or A-Level only. There were some generally occurring themes around transitional experiences relating to: feeling prepared by known assessment practices such as giving presentations; no experience of exams by BTEC students; lack of revision skills by many students, not just BTEC students; clarity about how work was assessed in terms of mark schemes/assessment criteria; the amount of academic reading and; barriers to accessing support from tutors, which is discussed in section 4.2, Academic support.

For a few BTEC and BTEC + A-Level students it was clear they felt their chosen educational path had prepared them well for university, a few going further and believing they were better prepared for transition than their A-Level peers '...I agree with the juggling all the coursework assignments at once. I've noticed that A-Level people have found that quite difficult, so I think for us we're just used to doing it.

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 exams, so for me personally I feel better prepared for a lot of the assessment methods.

...with having coursework now and having exams as well, it's kind of easy for me because I sort of did that in college anyway because I did like a BTEC with an A-Level.

The giving of presentations was widely referred to by BTEC students as a familiar form of assessment from FE to HE. The sense of confidence with this type of assessment came across as reassuring to many, one BTEC student making the contrast that they felt *'more prepared than some of my friends that did A-Level who haven't done presentations before...I had 2 years preparation'*. Another said that *'I already had those sort of skills constantly in the back of my mind so I think that helped me compile the presentations and actually do it... I don't mind it as much as if I'd never done them before.'* Equally, a BTEC + A-Level student felt *'surprisingly I find presenting work easier, I'm quite confident when I'm in a group'*.

By contrast, one A-Level student, when commenting on enjoying the mix of assessment practices, reflected that *'obviously some people can be really good at presentation and some people can really not like talking in front of people whereas they can be really good at writing a long essay'*. And for one BTEC student *'it was actually quite difficult to adapt to actually putting your work together in a big group to make it all sound like one person's written it.'*

A significant number of students regardless of entry qualification made comments in relation to transitional experiences around academic writing skills; skills that were seen to be transferable; skills that were seen to be missing. For some BTEC students there was no issue:

'... like coming up for a plan for the essays BTEC has helped with essay based questions, just sort of knowing the points you're going to say.'

I had a lot of experience inreports, because that's like the majority of my course was like that. So when it came to like writing a report I could do it without having to worry if it was in the right format.'

BTEC + A-Level students made specific comparisons about how the approaches taught to structure essays in the two different courses, such as, *'...for A-Levels they tell you to start with a plan for essays so you have a basis. So you kind of have a habit of doing it later on.'* or *'In my A-Levels you get taught a way you have to write, but in BTEC they're just like, "Write a report," and you just do it.'*

For a few BTEC + A-Level students alike there was a mismatch between the expectations of writing reports at FE and essays in HE' as in this comparison, ' ...*they'd have to be written more thoroughly and we'd have to do a lot more reading, so much more preparation goes into it.*' Or this student voicing a not uncommon view:

Essays, we never did any, so I would have liked to have done more at college I think. Because when I did my first essay I wasn't sure if it was along the right lines. It's similar to a report in the fact that it has introduction, main body, conclusion sort of thing, but I just sort of had to guess.

And for all BTEC students there was the new experience of once an essay had been submitted, that was final, no resubmission:

...before we were used to- let's say I got a 60 at college it would have been a thing like you get a resubmission,... here (at uni) it's whatever you get, that's what you get back. So you don't get second chances.

The vast majority of students had something to say about exams, but the striking difference here was how unprepared BTEC students were compared to their peers who had done an A-Level course. Most noticeably for a few BTEC students a sense that having '*not done any for 2 years...getting back into it was difficult*'; ' ... *a lot of worry came from the fact that they were assessed on exams, especially by the fact that I did BTEC where it was all essay written*'; '*you're used to writing essays, you have more time for research whereas with exams like you have to work much faster.*'

On top of this, there was for some the sense of generally needing to be more on top of their work, more prepared, '*I've not been prepared*,' responded one BTEC student:

first of all in semester one I didn't do very well in my exams, but I did quite well in the coursework, in semester two I've done well-ish on the coursework, but I think obviously after getting my results back from semester one I'm like revising a lot more, so like preparing myself a lot more.

This was echoed by another BTEC student '*after I had my exams I was a bit shocked at having exams, so I've tried to be a lot more prepared, so I'm not so stressed.*'

Even for A-Level students who were familiar with exams, the type of exam, such as multiple choice questions was on the one hand *'thankful for MCQs at least there isn't that whole, you know, when you get a question wrong you deduct a mark, so thankful for that. It's a plus.'* But on the other, a few A-Level students found MCQs *'tougher to be honest because like hardly any MCQs in A-Level and here like it's 45 marks, 50?'; '...I'm a bit thrown by, because we didn't have them at A-Level or GCSE really. The closest you'd get to that really was a one liner. One line answer.'*

In terms of model answers, BTEC student felt examples as models had been useful at college *'you'd get given an example piece of work, on a different topic but so you knew what sort of thing, how it had to be laid out. But here wasn't that here, and I struggled a little bit.'*

On preparing for exams and revision skills, some responses focused on a general lack of revision skills as from these BTEC students, *'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. '*

it was a bit tough because we didn't get a lot of direction on it, like a lot of lecturers will be like, "Focus your revision on such and such "; but for anatomy it wasn't like that, it was very much, "Go away and revise". There was no direction. So what we all thought would come up in the exam didn't.

Whereas some BTEC + A-Level students said they had felt more prepared at college than at HE and stated this was due to looking at past papers *'it'd really help if they could put up a lot of past papers, like potential ones, or prospective ones (on Learn) for us to like have proper practice.'*

A sense from BTEC + A-Level students that the revision lists they had been used to at FE were missing and with this the lack of explicit information about exam structure as , *'knowing some structure, what is actually needed, will help the exam. The coursework I'm not too worried, because you have a task list... but for the exam you don't have a clue what you're doing'.* And for others, they were hoping for revision lists *'because usually they tell you that you're 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.'*; *'you'd have almost a tick list of what you needed to be mentioning to get that band. And for here you don't have anything like that.'*

Finally, concern for a few focused around the amount of reading preparation generally to be done at university as in this BTEC + A-Level student who felt it:

was a big leap from going to A-Levels to how much independent reading we have to do for uni as well because the reading lists are sometimes so long and it's difficult to know exactly what you need to remember for like the exams.

With regard to the responses around **assessment feedback by students**, there were 116 references from 32 sources. Comments by the vast majority of students largely focused around: the method or process of receiving feedback; the effectiveness of feedback to improve students' progress; the speed of receiving feedback back; the variation in feedback given between lecturers and; the lack of feedback after exams. There were also a few interesting comparisons made between feedback given on BTEC and A-Level courses by a few students who had been on both courses. On the whole there were more negative comments than positive.

With regard to using feedback for the process of feedforward in improving their work, many students, regardless of entry qualification, felt there was **a lack of any feedback after exams**. For these A-Level students it was hard to know how you were doing during the year from class tests and grades' *With the class tests that was the first bit of feedback we got, and with that it was just a grade, so you don't really know where you've gone wrong. So hard to know how to improve.*'; 'We were assessed on four different areas and it was just marks more than actual where you went wrong and what we could have better.' An opinion also shared by these BTEC students, 'I wish they'd put some of the answers- read them up...so we would do the exam but we wouldn't know if we're getting it right or wrong.'

I think post-exams ... 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.

They might end up ticking the whole thing but they might still only give you 50% and you're like you've ticked the whole thing but why it's only 50%? So you'd want to know why the mark's been awarded or why it hasn't been awarded or how could it be improved. (BTEC + A-Level)

For others, as in these BTEC + A-Level students, it was to do with their expectation of the amount and quality of detail in written feedback which was lacking *'I expected it to be more detailed, much more detailed actually. I think it would have helped.'*; *'...it's a bit vague, like I've had feedback like your structure's not very good and it's like, where do I go from there?'*, *'sometimes I have been given 3 paragraphs worth of feedback, but another time I have been given one line.'*

The process or format of how feedback was delivered was commented by some as being less personal. Some students felt they were missing on-to-one feedback, oral feedback or that when given, it was more generic than specific and individual. In the case of this BTEC + A-Level student *'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.'* A feeling also expressed by this BTEC student:

With essays and presentations that's within a little seminar you would get a little sheet with what you've done well and stuff. But that was still not one-to-one talking ... I did miss that because you don't really know what you can improve on really.

One A-Level student in particular, who had done no coursework at college, found that when you use 'Turnitin' on line to submit work it's quite difficult to interpret (lecturers) general comments when they got their work back:

... for one of the modules the lecturer actually gave a general feedback and said if you want to see me and go through it, so I went and it was a ten minute chat but she'd written all over my script and it's been useful for other modules as well.

However, for one BTEC student their attitude to feedback at university was more reflective *'...it's a different style you've got to get used... It's just sort of a lot more independent.'*

Some students felt there were inconsistencies around the process between some lecturers in terms of the amount of feedback *'so some lecturers were really informative and said what you did well and not so well. Whereas other lecturers didn't really give you much feedback.'*, or in relation to allocating marks, as in these two A-Level students:

I was given exactly the same mark and only had feedback on one piece of the work that I did and every time I went to query it he couldn't actually justify why I had the mark...I found that very frustrating because of the amount of work I'd put into the module and I couldn't see myself improving on the course.

Well I've had identical feedback to one of my friends but we got different marks so that was a bit shocking because we were working in a group but we had to submit something individually and we had exactly the same comments.

...some lecturers they'll comment on it (assignment) and they'll write like in full sentences and you can understand what they're trying to say. Other ones will use almost a different language it seems and you'll go like what does it mean? And you'll read it ten times and still I don't know what it means.

Another issue mentioned by a few was around the delay in receiving their work back and that by waiting 'you've moved on and have got other things to worry about' so when the feedback does come it has less impact on improving their work, 'In college the feedback would be pretty much immediate....Whereas at uni it's sort of you hand it in and you wait weeks and weeks to hear back.' Or, as in the case of this BTEC student, where opportunities for applying feedback were missing:

especially if you're sort of doing two courseworks overlapping and you've got feedback from one of them while you're still doing the other...you'd be like I can apply this to this coursework... rather than waiting three, four weeks later getting it back and then I can't remember what it was about.

For a couple of BTEC students, receiving feedback had been quite negative, even dispiriting and had made them question their ability:

I had an assignment and it had 80 comments on it and one of them was positive and the rest was this is wrong, this is wrong, this is wrong...it was really disheartening because i was like...maybe I can't actually do this.

it was so disheartening because it was like one of the first assignments and it was right at the start of the year and you're like oh my gosh, I've done

BTEC and I can't write because I didn't do a good enough course, I didn't do A-Levels. I should have done A-Levels.

However, a few positive responses to coursework and essay feedback were made around the use of tick sheets or marking criteria to help with progression, as in the case of this A-Level student:

...for the second one (piece of coursework) we got basic feedback online based on rubrics that it was marked on, we got to know which band it was...it was useful as it showed the different areas and how you scored, so you know how to improve for next time.

And an opinion shared by this BTEC + A-Level student '... the coursework that we've got back they've written stuff down, I think that's useful because you realise where you've gone wrong...they give a paragraph looking at each part of your work.' and these BTEC students 'they like ticked what we did well and what we didn't do well, so looking back at the first one and improving for the next one.', 'I've improved my grade on all three (essays). So yeah, the feedback for me has been quite valuable.'

Although, for one BTEC + A-Level student, ticking alone on their coursework had not been a constructive process:

They might end up ticking the whole thing but they might still only give you 50% and you're like you've ticked the whole thing but why it's only 50? So you'd want to know why the mark's been awarded or why it hasn't been awarded or how could it be improved.

With the responses around **assessment feedback by FE students**, there were also references to the method or process of receiving feedback; the amount of detail in the feedback; the speed of receiving feedback back; the variation in feedback given between lecturers and; the overall usefulness of formative feedback by the vast majority of students. There were in addition a few interesting comparisons made between feedback given on BTEC and A-Level courses by a few students who were on both courses.

A few of students made direct comparisons to how feedback at college was more detailed than at school, more individual and seen to facilitate progress in their grades as referenced by these BTEC students' *corrections from my teachers also helped so you could go through*

the course and get good grades.’, ‘so I knew I needed to progress my assignments to make them better which was really helpful.’:

... they look specifically at your work rather than in school it's more of a general class thing...individual so we can build on our work, which helps us get the higher grades basically.

... feedback is really detailed and it's not just like one sentence, it's more like a little chunk where you know what you've done and what you've done right and wrong. And how you could improve if you were to do it again.

One particular student went further and praised the effort made by their teacher to mark their work:

because we spend hours on our assignments and it's nice to know they also spend time to read through each bit and make sure that they mark it they give good feedback rather than just a couple of lines ... which is really helpful.

By contrast, others felt, in certain instances, feedback was less detailed and therefore less helpful, especially for these BTEC students:

I would say everyone who gets feedback does have to speak to the teacher, even if they receive the feedback on email because about half the things you don't understand how you've done it wrong.

some of our lecturers when they marked, it was generic, like, "For it to pass put in more detail on a certain topic," it wasn't more specific on what we needed to include. And some we didn't actually get verbal feedback, it was just put on Moodle you get a feedback sheet.

4.4 Reasons for choice of FE Study

Sub-theme	Definition
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reasons why students' had chosen their preferred FE pathway	preferred way of learning, assessment method or choice of subject
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AT HE and FE level, there were 90 references from 23 sources with regard **reasons for choice of FE study**. Reasons for this route were very similar for students who had taken the BTEC or BTEC plus A-Level route. The choice of subject and course relevance were key for quite a few as in these responses where students felt they didn't want to study anything else as this was the only option for them:

... business studies is more specific...you can specify what you want to learn which makes the course more interesting." ... always knew I wanted to do business... and that's why I moved to BTEC.

The units I learnt in the BTEC course were far more interesting than what I learnt on the A-Levels because it gave me like a broader aspect of where I want to go after the two year course.

For one student in particular it was important to choose a course they loved *... thought I'd just do it to get a qualification for something I enjoy doing.'*

As well as the enjoyment of the subject, for one FE BTEC student their choice of A-Level pathway was based on their perception of how to get into university ' *I was like I need some A-Levels in case I want to go to uni.'* Equally, a few BTEC students were unaware of alternative pathways at FE other than the traditional A-Level route:

But then I found out that if you do an extended course you can still get the grades to get to a good uni. And since I was little we always used to drive past the University of Birmingham and I used to always say I want to go there when I grow up.

Yet for a few, the absence of choice after getting their GCSE results meant for these BTEC students 'seeing my results from high school I was like probably a BTEC would be better because it's more coursework than exams. '; 'couldn't do A-Levels and this was the only option I had. '; '6th form didn't let me in.'. For a few it was about changing course after having started AS level then not doing so well as in these BTEC + A-Level students, ' *didn't get the grades to go into the second year so came here.'* , ' *failed my A-Level and then looked for an alternative and thought I can still come out with good results or 3 distinctions which is equivalent to 3 A-*

Levels., *'went from doing ASs where I didn't do so well in IT as a BTEC to find something to do, and I enjoyed computers.'*

There were many comments by BTEC and BTEC + A-Level students relating to their preferred way of learning through coursework rather than exams as they felt *'I've always been better with coursework.'* or that it was a better option as *'simpler for me'*. Equally important was their perception that choosing the BTEC route would be the least stressful option; *'I chose all BTECs this year to have less stress ... and I think it's just they've got no pressure when you've got BTECs.'*, *'I thought it would be more useful to have one that's more coursework based to take the pressure off around that time.'*

... it gives you a bit more time to really concentrate on the A-Levels when it comes to the exams because you would have had the coursework and the assignments out of the way.

When it came to responding about assessment methods, it was clear that for many BTEC only students, the lack of exams, exam stress or a sense that they would not perform as well with this assessment method were also crucial factors influencing their education pathway at FE; *'never been an exam person.'*; *'not great with exam stress.'*; *'felt under pressure doing them, and thought it would be easier doing it in assignments and coursework.'*; *'During exams I could panic or not achieve as much as I probably could do whilst doing a BTEC.'*

For few BTEC plus A-Level students the combination of both course types was seen as a positive choice to reduce the exam pressure *'so having the assignments just breaks down the exam pressure at the end of two years so I don't have to worry about revision.'*

However, for one A-Level student it was also clear, *'I do better at exams.'*

An additional emerging theme which came out of the data, particularly from BTEC and BTEC plus A-Level students, in **reasons for FE choice of study** was the perception that their chosen pathway would be beneficial for creating options, including going to university *'did A-Level business last year and I really struggled with it, and I didn't adapt very well to it. So I thought I'd try the BTEC, I still need business for university.'*, *'BTEC did really help me get into University I'd say. Because that's where I have better- now knowledge.'*; *'With the unis that I'm looking at they don't need grades, they just need points. So it's quite helpful having the BTEC because it's got quite a few points behind it.'*

There were, in addition, a couple of reasons given which were quite arbitrary, but nevertheless had influenced the decision process; being an *'impulsive decision'*; or the result of advice *'was recommended by my teacher.'*

4.5 Ways of learning

This theme captured students' reflections on the ways they were learning at university or in FE, and the similarities and differences between the two institutional settings. Three sub-themes categorised these learning experiences: **attitudes and preferences to ways of learning** (152 references from 26 sources); **different at HE** (93 references across 25 sources); and, **similar from FE to HE** (24 references across 15 sources).

Sub-theme	Definition
Attitudes and preferences to ways of learning	students' responses that state an attitude or preference to ways of learning
Different at HE	students' responses which express a difference to ways of learning previously experienced
Similar from FE to HE	students' responses which express a familiarity to ways of learning previously experienced

One of the most commonly mentioned **new experiences for HE students** was the transition to learning through lectures. This was frequently described as something that was challenging and requiring adjustment. Students commonly noted the large group size of a lecture compared with the much smaller class sizes of A-Level and BTEC groups in the post-16 phase. This created a sense of detachment, or anonymity: one A-Level student explained that *'there's a lot of students in the lecture theatre and for some of them I don't feel I've got a connection at all; I feel like I sit there, go home and do it on my own like over the screen rather than face to face'*. The heavy demands on listening were noted *'It was all one way, listening and you couldn't necessarily ask questions as you would do in sixth form'* (A-Level), and a view that it was a rather passive experience where you have *'to sit there and listen'* (BTEC) or have *'knowledge thrown at you and then you go and learn it.'* (BTEC and A-Level).

Students felt that this had an effect on their capacity to learn, with some finding it *'difficult at first to even concentrate in a much larger room where you don't have that one to one support'* (A-Level), and that *'I feel like I don't learn as much in some lectures as I could'*. Students noted

the variability of the quality of the lecturers, but one BTEC student specifically commented on the fast pace of learning expected in a lecture:

the lecturer goes quite fast throughout so we have to kind of – we don't really have time to think much about what we do, it's just a really fast pace and then once we look over that and we realise we kind of get it or not.

A number of students –with both A-Level and BTEC qualifications - suggested that there was less opportunity to ask questions and address challenging material or misconception within a lecture setting. Again, the size of the lecture was cited as the issue with some students drawing comparisons with their smaller sixth form classes.

A very small minority of students however, were positive about lectures, with one BTEC student reflecting that *'the lectures were easy to understand'*. Two BTEC students also related positive experiences of lectures to personalities and delivery style of the lecturers. One stated that *'Some lecturers are great because they make it quite interactive'* (BTEC and A-Level) while another commented that *'you don't want to miss his lectures'* (BTEC). The interaction and positive atmosphere within lectures was reminiscent of their time at college for these students. Another BTEC student suggested that having some *'lecture type lessons at my school, which you just literally had to take notes from...helped quite a lot'* (BTEC) in terms of preparation for university.

There were conflicting views expressed about the use of technology to support and enhance learning. Lecture capture was discussed by a number of students. This was clearly a different approach to that experienced at FE. One BTEC student felt positive that the absence of a recording made you attend the lecture, similarly another BTEC another felt positive that lecture recordings was a real benefit to learning because in a lecture:

... you can't really write it down but when I'm watching them back it's pause, play, pause, play constantly. But when I'm in lectures and they say the things really fast, I can't really pick up on the majority of it.

Another BTEC student was negative about the fact that few lectures were recorded and had used Youtube videos as a substitute. An A-Level student said that although her courses rarely used lecture-capture, she instead recorded them herself using her mobile phone.

As can be seen in other sections, perceptions of increased independence emerge through this theme too. Developing this skill has been a key difference for some students in the transition from college to university. A small number of A-Level and BTEC plus A-Level students acknowledged that the nature of university teaching and learning required them to be more independent. While some noted the challenges with increased reading and individual note-taking, there was also a sense that developing independence was *'just the nature of university I think'* (BTEC plus A-Level) and an important skill both at university and for the future. None of the BTEC students used the word 'independent'. However, the BTEC students were very aware of the ways of learning that their qualification had promoted and the skills they had developed:

a lot of it was teamwork, we were allocated teams and we had to work together with people we probably wouldn't choose to. And we had to, I guess organisation skills, finding when we could meet up, finding times when we were all free to meet up and go through the group work. And in terms of the seminars, being able to have a debate, and also presentation skills.

For BTEC students, group work was one of the few similarities that were noted in terms of pedagogies at college and universities. One commented that *'we do a lot of group work, which we did a lot of in my BTEC, which I prefer a lot'*. Another BTEC student commented on the use of group presentations at university to promote and assess learning. She felt that this was similar to college where a *'lot of it was group work just because we were such a small group that it sort of made it easier if you all did it together'*.

Many concrete examples of **preferences towards ways of learning** were offered. The BTEC students commented on the use of presentations in the Business degree; high quality and supportive tutorials; and the practicals in Sports Science, with one student reflecting that *'I just prefer labs because I like getting hands on and being practical'*. One BTEC student singled out a particular lecturer as *'absolutely amazing, every single lecture, anything we needed to read, anything that was of importance he literally broke it down for you into each section so that you could digest it'*. The A-Level students cited the support for referencing and academic writing given early in their university course and the mathematics support; the clear follow-up reading some lecturers provided and the breadth of support:

...not only do they have in the PowerPoints, you've got the recordings online and they give you additional readings online. So you have got the information and you, kind of, know where to go. It's a lot more detailed, rather than at college.

There was also appreciation for research-informed teaching and the way that *'whereas at school you just learn out of a textbook, but here they give you who's doing what research and the conclusions from that'*. Both BTEC and A-Level students commented on an online statistics platform where students could ask questions and get feedback. Taking this set of comments as a whole, it is possible that the A-Level students are appreciating more academic ways of learning and its support, whereas the BTEC students are valuing ways of learning that are consonant with their FE experience.

The BTEC students from the FE colleges were frequently comparing their post-16 experiences with ways of learning they had experienced in school. From a positive perspective, they felt the teaching was *'more relaxed than school'* and the relationship with college teachers was different. They felt they were supported well as the teachers helped them get *'through the course and get good grades'*, but they did not feel this was such scaffolded guidance as in school, which they seemed to appreciate *'you're not guided through the work in college, like you are at school'*. This appeared to link to their awareness that they were being taught to think for themselves, and one student said *'I think school teaches you, taught me how to answer the questions, but college has taught me, like, you get a question, we give you the content, but you use the content to answer the question.'*

They were also positive about the way the BTEC course was giving them confidence in how to give presentations, work in groups and research independently. They were also very positive about active learning approaches which did not involve sitting and listening. Another strand of comments related to the quality of assessment and feedback. They valued, for example, doing business reports rather than examinations, and felt they received strong support for assignments, which outlined what expected. They felt clear about the assessment criteria: as one student noted *'all the criteria for the different assessments are on the VLE, so if you weren't sure you could just go on there and find it'*.

Negative comments on ways of learning were sometimes very context-specific, such as the student who claimed that *'we had to do all by ourselves because the teacher was just useless'*. Another group noted the pace of learning at college compared with school, explaining that *'whereas here you spend just one lesson on that topic and then you move on, so I think it is much more, here is quicker, with school secondary school it takes over like two days'*. Some students spoke of lectures at FE and *'quite a lot of chalk and talk'* though these were not necessarily negatively viewed.

4.6 Student perceptions and expectations of education pathway

This theme focused on students' attitudes and responses to their progress and performance, and whether this has or has not matched expectations. Responses were divided into two subthemes based on whether participants were currently studying at FE or HE level.

Subtheme	Definition
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.
FE students' expectations and perceptions of performance and progress	FE students' attitudes and responses to their current educational experience; how they feel they're progressing; their perceptions of HE as similar or different to school or college.

Comments associated with **students' expectations and perceptions of performance and progress** in relation to their educational pathway were common across the course of the interviews. For HE students there were 183 references from 27 sources and for FE students there were 92 comments from 14 sources. These high numbers are perhaps to be expected based on the topics covered in the interviews and the focus on the transition from college to university and academic performance. Many of the students that we spoke to were very keen to share stories of their academic development and progress, and of the successes and challenges that they faced while studying. We discuss these in more detail below, first drawing on responses from **HE students** and then focusing on those from **FE students**.

A number of the university students from the three different entry pathways spoke about their route to university, emphasising a story of academic success at GCSE and college level. As a result of this, students reported their aspirations in terms of applying to 'top' universities to study their subjects of choice but were also aware that their BTEC qualification may have made it more difficult for them to gain entry. One student commented that *'I always knew it was going to be difficult to get in here with BTEC; everyone knows that, with University C being such a prestigious uni...'* This viewpoint appeared to be echoed by a number of other

BTEC students (including those who also held an A/AS Level qualification) when discussing the application process. One student reported being rejected from University B the first time they applied due to confusion about which BTEC course they had actually completed. On applying again the following year:

rang up the uni and actually told them what was on my qualification certificate, and then that's when one of the ladies at the students' information was like, 'That's a really good qualification, we actually look for that.' Whereas no one actually told me that before.

At another university a group of BTEC Sport students reported having to wait longer for their offer to come in than for any of their other university choices. On querying this, one student was told “*If you don't do A-Levels you'll be put to the bottom of the pile. We'll look at all A-Levels first and then we'll look at you.*” For these students, the application process seemed to underline some of the perceived differences between those who had taken BTEC qualifications and those who had followed a more traditional route. Their experiences draw attention to a potentially opaque system in some institutions where an apparent hierarchy of qualifications informs decision-making in relation to admissions. By contrast, one student felt that for their, the BTEC qualification was what ensured that they *could* gain access to an institution such as:

...before going to university I was really adamant that I wasn't going to go because I didn't think that I was clever enough to go. And I guess because University A is such a good university to go to as well, because I knew that the A-Level requirements were AAB, and I know that realistically I probably wouldn't have got in if I did A-Levels because, like I said, I'm not so good with exams.

For this student then, the BTEC offered a route in to university, an option that perhaps might not have been considered beforehand due to her perceived underperformance in exams. There is an interesting tension here between exams existing as a potential barrier to university yet simultaneously this student has opted to pursue a degree course with significant proportion of examined components. Assessment practices and preferences emerge as an important theme for BTEC students across both FE and HE sectors and are explored in more depth in section 4.2 above.

Having gained a place at their current university, the majority of students we spoke to were keen to discuss their feelings of preparedness for studying at degree level. **Academic preparedness** in relation to specific aspects of academic literacy, numeracy and subject knowledge is discussed separately in the section 4.1 above. However, there were also numerous comments about more general feelings of preparedness, sometimes framed within the context of the students' FE level qualifications. There was considerable variation within these responses with some students reportedly feeling adequately prepared for their degree course, and that their expectations had been realistic while others felt that this was not the case. A small number of students suggested that they had not really known what their degree course would entail in terms of content and workload prior to starting. One BTEC student commented that this was because her course was new and she was in the first cohort to study it but suggested that in future years it would be useful to have student representatives to inform prospective candidates about the course prior to and following application. On a related matter, a group of A-Level students felt that it would have been helpful if their established course had provided some preparatory materials to support their start to the degree and to give an indication of the type of reading and content that would be covered:

....I also applied to do business management at Durham and although it was my insurance they gave like a list of things we should be doing over the summer and I don't think we got that with University A...in terms of work and things I think if we'd had the option, so if we wanted to then we could have worked on it before we got here.

Closely linked to students' views on preparation prior to starting the course, were their perceptions of the purpose of the first year of their degree and how they had performed during this time. There were comments across all groups of students regardless of entry qualification that the first year was viewed by staff and students as a 'trial' year or, as one BTEC student suggested, as an opportunity to "catch everyone up" to the same level. Some students spoke about their academic performance at the end of their first year at university and a sense of success and contentment emerges. One combined BTEC and A-Level student said:

I believe I've done quite well, I've got 50, 60, high 60s. So I think for my first year I haven't pushed myself as much as I could have, but I think I've got the balance right. And I'm happy with my results and the feedback I've got' while a BTEC student said 'I might be pushing a 2:1 just about, I think it might be a 2:2 more than likely, but considering it's the first year there's always room to improve.

These excerpts and others like them within our dataset point to an understanding of the first year being an introduction to the course but also with a sense that high performance has not been the main priority at this stage because the grades do not contribute towards the final degree classification. For A-Level students this appeared to be a source of frustration in some cases. In one focus group, a student said:

I also kind of think the importance of first year is not considered that much, because when you first join the course and you say to people "Oh I'm really struggling with statistics or economics" like sometimes the impression you get is oh its first year, it doesn't really count.

This triggered another member of the group to suggest that students should "do loads more work in the immediate time, so do some work after a lecture or stuff like that, because yeah you will regret it later on or I've like regretted it now". These students felt that if they had increased the amount of independent study that they had completed during the first year, they would be in a stronger position to perform well going in to the second year.

For a small number of BTEC students there seemed an awareness that while the first year may not contribute towards final degree marks, the grades achieved could impact on future work-related opportunities. This BTEC student commented that academic performance in Year 1 was important for securing a work placement. She argued that students should be more aware of this so that they can adequately prioritise their work:

I think because everyone told us before that first year is easy, you can just chill, relax, I think that's just a lie. I would tell them they can chill and relax but they just have to make sure they prioritise their work always because even though they say first year doesn't count it does actually count when you look at it, like for your placement they do still look at your first year, even though it doesn't count, they do still look at how you've been doing. So definitely just prioritise your work in your first year.

Similarly, this BTEC student critiqued the notion of first year being a relaxing introduction to the course:

...a lot of people come to uni in the first year thinking that it's really easy and just have that attitude where they'll do the bare minimum. A lot of people on

my course, so 40% is a pass, so that's all they want. Whereas there are a lot of third years now who are graduating who have said when they are going for interviews employers are looking at their first year transcripts. And it's very hard to back up a statement of 'why did you only get 40%'. So definitely work hard.

These excerpts highlight the participants' awareness of and consideration for their future careers. They are forward thinking and looking beyond performance as a goal in itself, and instead are mindful of the impact of this on subsequent opportunities. The degree is positioned as another step on the education pathway, a route to entering and being successful in their chosen profession.

Students with BTEC, A-Level and mixed qualifications reiterated the need to “*work hard*” and “*go to lectures*” as advice to those wishing to achieve academic success in their first year. A small number of students, however, touched upon the challenges of balancing academic performance with other aspects of university such as having a social life, extra-curricular activities, and employment. These factors were noted as having a potentially negative impact on overall performance but equally the students explained that, from their perspective, they were important aspects of their lives. Two students with a combination of A-Level and BTEC qualifications explained the need to have a part-time job in order to support themselves financially ‘*I want a good enough basis to understand, but at the same point I can't be waking up going, “I have no money, I have no food...”*’:

I was working for the whole semester, the first semester and my grades has gone down slightly because I felt like I was doing more work than actual revision and I actually revised at least a few days before the exam and because I didn't have that time. But I needed the money because I was spending more for uni, like joining societies, applying for the gym, travelling. And so I felt like I needed the money.

Succeeding in their studies is important to these students but their responses also remind us of the tension that exists in terms of balancing their commitments. In order to live at university and to have an enjoyable time there, these students feel that it is important to work and have an income. They acknowledge that this places constraints on the amount of time that they can commit to their course but also view it as a necessary element of university life.

For the **FE students** in our study comments associated with **expectations and perceptions of performance and progress** tended to fall in to three main categories: factors that they felt encouraged good academic achievement; factors which potentially hinder progress and achievement; and comments focusing on preparation for university or the workplace. The responses within this theme focus on more general views and perceptions of performance and progress. It is important to note that more specific references to some of the issues are dealt with in more depth in the section 4.1 Academic preparedness, section 4.3 Assessment practices and section 4.5 Ways of learning.

Comments focusing on factors encouraging performance and progress were fairly limited, perhaps due to the fact that most referred to more specific issues and so were coded elsewhere. The main issue that emerged was in relation to students feeling that they had developed and become more focused on their studies. One BTEC student for example stated that:

I think I've evolved in college because I've done it a bit before, made sure it's right, checked over it, and then handed it in. Just to make sure that I'm doing it right, because there's a lot more responsibility on you to actually correct it and make sure that you're doing the right thing... in college I found that if I do something wrong it's actually quite a good thing to learn from your mistakes, and that it's not always a bad thing that you've done something bad.

This student begins by discussing the need for increased independence when completing and improving their written work. However, there is also a sense that they are reflecting more generally upon developing a more mature approach to learning, recognising that making mistakes is acceptable and an important way of making progress and improving. Another BTEC student at the same college commented that '*I think they're a bit better in college because I think the lecturers look at you a bit more as grown-ups.*' This perception of being treated more like an adult and the expectation of taking responsibility for your own achievement echoes the experience of the student above and the focus on independence.

Despite these positive comments about progress and performance, a number of **FE students** felt that there were issues with their studies which meant they were not making the progress they felt they should be. A recurring topic here was the level of challenge associated with the course. A small focus group of BTEC students suggested that the course content and

assessments were too easy and did not require them to do much in the way of preparation or independent study:

I think it is because BTEC work is not hard enough for, it is not engaging enough so, because like the first year, I would not even think about doing the work at home like I just leave it to the end and I will be fine with that, I will still have all my distinction stars without even trying maybe hard.

This perceived lack of challenge and lack of engaging delivery of the programme led this student to feel that they were not learning much in terms of knowledge and skills and yet, in terms of the final assessment, could still achieve the highest grade possible. This is an interesting paradox, and one that raises important questions about how rigorous and challenging the BTEC qualification is perceived to be by both students and staff in FE colleges. By contrast, students at other colleges also drew on the issue of challenge but instead felt that it was sometimes difficult to keep up with the level and quantity of work expected and do well in terms of performance. A BTEC student from FE College F commented that *“everything was going so fast...And then within about one or two lessons we’d have to go on to another topic. And it was rushing through... and I just couldn’t really keep track...”* A student studying BTEC and A-Levels at FE College G also noted they, *“found it challenging to keep up with the workload”*, specifically referring to the quantity of written work expected to be done.

Without further exploration it is difficult to provide insight in to the factors or mechanisms driving the perceptions above. It could be the case that the transition from school to college plays a role here and the expectations that students held about their college courses have not been realised. There is perhaps also an issue with the perceptions of teaching staff, their approach to BTEC courses and the potential the influence that this may have on students’ experiences.

FE students’ expectations and perceptions of performance and progress were frequently framed by how prepared they felt for the next stage of their education or career pathway. Again, rather than referring to specific literacy, numeracy skills or subject knowledge, within this section we included students’ more general feelings of readiness and their aspirations for future ventures. The majority of students, regardless of entry qualification, felt that their FE level courses had prepared them for university or work. Some students linked this with their views of what university was like, drawing on their perceptions of similarities between FE and HE in terms of **assessment models** i.e. the use of coursework or transferable skills as in

developing presentation skills or teamwork. These issues are discussed in further detail in section 4.3, assessment practices, and section 4.7 on transferable skills.

A final aspect of FE BTEC students' feelings of progress were associated with their ability to gain a place at university. While these students considered themselves to be ready to study at university and indeed were keen to do this, a small number of them were aware that having a BTEC qualification potentially makes the application and admissions process more complex than if they had just taken A-Levels. The following comments exemplify the views of a focus group of BTEC Business students '*...most of the courses wanted just A-Levels, they didn't want BTECs. It was actually hard to find some, like specific ones that we wanted to do that take BTECs as well*':

*I find that universities are still quite prejudice against the fact people do BTECs over A-Levels, given they are worth the same amount of UCAS points so say someone got 3 A*s and someone got 3 B*s erm... the person who got 3 A*s would be revered higher than the BTEC student, just because BTEC has got that whole stigma it is not as hard working and not as dedicated as A-Levels.*

The students here highlight a number of concerns that they have with the process of gaining a place at university: first, that their current BTEC qualification has limited their potential HE options; second, that their BTEC is afforded a lower status than A-Levels by some universities; and finally, as a result of this status issue, the supposed equivalency between the qualification routes is not recognised by the admissions teams at some of the universities that the students have explored. Despite the aspiration to continue their studies at university, they realise that their BTEC may hamper educational progress and limit the choices and opportunities available to them.

4.7 Transferable Skills

Sub-theme	Definition
Carried through from FE	refers to skills utilized at FE level which students found useful transitioning from FE to HE level of study

Gained at HE	captures skills students have acquired at the HE Level
FE HE gap	refers to a lack in transferable skills when transitioning FE to HE study

This theme identified skills that are for the promotion and development of **transferable skills** during FE and HE courses. Primarily, transferable skills can be described as; independent learning; working with others; managing time to meet deadlines; managing workload; effective empirical research skills; effective desk based research skills. There were 73 references from 28 sources in the theme **Carried through from FE**; 58 references from within 21 sources in the theme **FE/HE Gap**; and 45 references from 19 sources from **Gained at FE**.

The importance of these skills was particularly valued by one FE BTEC student:

I think transferable skills are like one of the biggest things that we get from this course, along with knowledge...things like group work... If you did AS levels we wouldn't have been able to learn as much as we did doing BTEC.

In relation to essential organisational skills, quite a few HE students', but mostly those that had done a BTEC, mentioned the familiarity of **independent learning** and managing their own learning, which **carried through** as a skill toward their university experience from planning out their own time to coming and going 'without a set routine every day.' as from these BTE students, 'I found with my BTEC we were quite left, so we had the assignment set and then we were left to go and do it on your own, so I'm just kind of used to being independent.':

I think we all knew an expectation of coming to any university is that you do have to be more independent and I don't think that's a bad thing at all. Obviously in some areas of the course different people need like different kinds of support but ultimately if want to like be learning going into the real world, getting out own jobs, you can't be spoon fed.

Yet one particular A-Level student also recognised this as, 'A-Levels is independent, and in uni... it is just an upgraded version'.

Another crucial organisational skill, namely **time management**, especially around managing workload and meeting deadlines with assignments, was seen as an important skill **carried through from FE** as referenced by these HE BTEC students '*it came into good use here when handling multiple exams, multiple coursework and midterm tests.*', '*it is very similar here (at HE) and I feel that's prepared me, I can juggle them quite easily and switch one to the other... thanks to like my **BTEC**.*'

there were a lot of deadlines in BTEC so I know how to manage my work and I do meet all my deadlines so that was a big skill, because A-Levels there wasn't necessarily deadlines it was more you need to do the homework and it's in for next week.

Equally from this A-Level student too '*the amount of work here seems bliss compared to A-Levels so like I don't feel I have an issue with meeting deadlines because it feels like I have got loads and loads of time.*'

In addition, there were communicational skills **carried through from FE**, again especially from those that had done a BTEC. These were in relation to **teamwork and working with others**. They were valued especially in terms of confidence building and being able to '*communicate with people you've never met before.*', '*able to express opinions in group work.*':

... group work has helped us like get more understanding about how each student is different and their opinions.'; it takes you out of your shell to be more confident, more prepared and more punctual.

But also on a wider level as well in terms of good preparation for the job market as perceived by this BTEC student:

... it helps build your confidence when you're like presenting in class or business members or lectures. So if you like go to uni when you're working in the work field you are able to present to other people with confidence.

The giving of presentations during **FE studies**, particularly those on BTEC courses, were mentioned by some students as giving an essential skill set in terms of communication to others with confidence, a skill which had been observed by this students lecturers '*In my BTEC I think my presentation skills improved an awful lot. And lots of lecturers were really shocked at how well I could present things.*'

There was also an interesting comparison going on between a few BTEC students who were comparing themselves to their peers who had done A-Levels:

... I've felt like more prepared for them than my friends that did A-Level, who haven't done presentations before. You've spent like two years being taught how to present and you're obviously more confident.

In terms of **Gained at HE**, research skills at university were definitely more independent and for these BTEC and BTEC + A-Level students a skill they had acquired since starting HE '*I think I learnt as I went along... the first semester it was kind of the starting point but the second semester I think I got my head around it.*', '*the fact that we had to do our own research and find extra journals, not just the ones that have been provided to us, or find extra books... it really helped with our own research skills.*'

With organisational skills, as well as references by some to being '*a bit more organised,*' or '*using time efficiently,*' and generally focussing, '*to take the initiative to study at particular times and not fall behind with my work,*' there was evidence from a few students that managing their time more efficiently had been a process of improvement from one term to the next as from this A-Level student:

... there is multiple of deadline at once, you have midterms, you have got exams coming up, so there is a lot of things to juggle, so I think time management is something, is a skill that you need to kind of build which I think from semester A to semester B, I think I have kind of got better at.

However, **time management** was seen by a few as equally important as a broader life skill such as from these BTEC + A-Level students, '*finding when we could meet up, finding times we were all free to meet up.*' or '*... that you set your own targets and aims instead of other people setting them.*' or '*you learn a lot about managing your time and prioritising... it's a good skill that like I feel like I'm learning, because it'll help me when I have like a career and I have a family to think about.*'

In terms of gaining independence, a few responded that this was not just about **independent learning**, but as much about independence in life as in the case of this BTEC student, '*probably a bit more independent, yeah, and it might be the case you have to go to lectures on your own.*', and this A-Level student '*you learn to be more independent and that*

independence can be brought across to your course, so you're like living on your own, you're learning on your own as well.'

This sense of relating transferable skills to a wider context than university was also evident with communication skills. There was a sense by a few that the value of this skill was as important for potential future jobs as it was for their present studies, *'with business we often do presentations which, say, it helped prepare us for corporate roles.'* from one BTEC student, and this *BTEC + A-Level* student, *'we get placements here, so I think it helps with ... oh "I can communicate with customers" or "I can communicate with people in the office."*

Comments referencing transferable skills **Gaps at HE** came from several students regardless of entry qualification, and were largely about the shock of how independent they had needed to be with regard to managing their own learning; a sense of not being used to *'totally independent'* learning and for a few a feeling of being *'left to our own devices.'*, or, as put by one BTEC student, *'university expects you to do it all yourself.'* Other comments, as in below, support this yet mention in particular comparisons about their transition from FE to HE;

'one of the biggest shocks for me was how independent you have to be ... I got a lot of help at college and here it's like just do it yourself, which I suppose obviously like with working we need to take things on our own initiative.' (BTEC + A-Level)

'I wasn't not independent at school but I think there was a lot of interaction between teacher and student with BTEC you did have to be independent but not to the extent at uni. Because the teacher would always ask "how's it going?" or "Have you done this ?" or "You should do this." And I didn't get that at uni.' (BTEC + A-Level)

I think school could have, like I said about making your own aims, they could have maybe introduced that near the end of the year because that was a big difference. And maybe having a bit more freedom, because then you have to wake up a bit and realise that you need to actually do work.' (BTEC)

A couple of students advocated how *'more guidance would have been more helpful'* and would have helped their transition to more independent learning. This BTEC + A-Level student suggested:

... I think that can be a bit tricky at times and that's what I meant about lectures having a bit more information. Not necessarily more information about you know, what you have to learn in itself, but more information about you know, guiding you to what you have to do after the lecture. I think that would have helped.

The remaining responses in this theme referenced a difficulty with **time management** *'the biggest thing is my time management is not great.'* and, as with independent learning, a comparison was made to their organisation and time management in FE as from this A-Level student, *'Because I think it is different from sixth form where you are kind of helped through the process.'*, or this BTEC student:

Managing your own time to meet deadlines, school was more lenient with that, so if you missed a deadline they'd be like, "Okay, just hand it in next week",'. You'd get told off obviously, but you don't get penalised, fined or capped at 40%.

For one BTEC student, constraints with time management come from having a part- time job and *'trying to fit work ... as in a job, it's hard you'd either have to work on the weekends, or you'd have to try and find hours.'* And one response from an A-Level student with regard to not being prepared for the amount of group work they had had and therefore the time management involved in this *'... and so meeting with different groups is so difficult especially when people are like on four different courses, to timetable it's just too difficult to organise.'*

4.8 Social capital

The theme of social capital captured the nature and extent of students' social networks and the quality of their social experiences. The data was clustered into two sub- themes

Sub-theme	Description
Social networks	The extent to which students have social networks. The quality of social experiences and friendship groups. For HE, this sub-theme includes whether students live at

	home or in student accommodation during their first year.
Extra-curricular activity	Awareness of, and involvement with clubs, societies, social networks within course, team activities (e.g. sports teams)

Social networks

This sub-theme explores the social networks students are involved in and the quality of their social experiences and friendship groups. The students made 222 references to social networks within 34 sources of data.

The interviews highlight that students who lived at home made that decision based on a variety of reasons such as the financial cost, the comfort of having family support and ease of location. These students, plus some who lived in off campus accommodation, appear to have found it slightly harder to participate in the opportunities that university offers in terms of establishing new and broader networks. Students who lived at home recognise this, with a few commenting that they found it initially difficult to establish friendships, as illustrated by this A-Level student:

During the start [of the first-year] it was a lot more [difficult] because of the people who were there the whole day spent more time with each other. Then as the course went on and time went on you see them a large amount of time, so it didn't really make that much of a difference But, during the start, the welcome week and the first few weeks it did, it was a lot more difficult living at home.

Yet on balance, students felt that the benefits of family support outweighed the disadvantages. One BTEC student reflected that *'I have missed out on a few things, but at the same time it's really nice just to live at home and just have that comfort as well that support, especially during the exams'*. A different BTEC student said *'I think it's [living at home] made it a lot easier, I don't know what I'd do if I was in student accommodation. I probably wouldn't last two days.'* Whilst another BTEC student explained that:

I've spent a lot of time with my family, we're really close as a family so for me when I was choosing my unit was really important for me as a person to find someone close to home as well. So, when I did find out that I got into

the University it was really the best thing for me. I think for me, my family when it comes to uni, they do support me quite a lot.

For a very few students, the opportunities for socialising and establishing new networks was restricted by the need to travel home, as one BTEC student explained, *'I won't enjoy myself too much, I won't drink because I have to drive home'* but also that *'I can't really participate in sports because it is early starts and that means I have to get up 4.00 in the morning, or something'*. A small number of students also stated that the cost of living in halls had played a role in their choice to live at home. Overall, it appears that the financial savings were perceived as being worthwhile:

...like obviously weighing up paying for halls here or a ten- minute drive, I just decided to stay home. But the first couple of weeks it was a bit like, oh maybe I should have moved out. Because like the first few lectures people already seemed to know each other and stuff, but like I've made like a close group of friends now and so for me it's not felt much different to moving out.

For some students, establishing social networks was made more challenging by the dominant culture of university life, particularly in relation to drinking and partying, and to attitudes to education. For one student, more emphasis on educational support would have been helpful:

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 about partying and we really didn't need that.

It was evident that some students saw the university as fundamentally about gaining a degree, a view sometimes shaped by parental influence, for example one student noted *'my parents have pretty much conditioned me to think that education comes before friends, so in that way I think I don't really need that many friends as long as I've got close friends I can rely on'*. In the same focus group, another student said they had made a new friend who, like them, believed *'education is a higher thing than social life'*. One BTEC plus A-Level student reported how their particular friendship group had decided that *'our education came first'* because they had noticed their grades were dropping. They decided not to go to the common room where they got distracted but felt this meant other people *'stopped asking us completely if we wanted to go to the common room to play some kind of game or do something. So again because of*

how we are, it's stopped us from making friends'. Another BTEC plus A-Level student⁶ commented that:

people in uni think they're more into having the party life, while we don't really go out because our parents told us not to go out and I think people would rather be friends with people who want to party because that's what they do. So, because we don't drink or party they find it difficult to ask us to go out with them.

Three international students also drew attention to the difficulties of initially feeling homesick at the start of their first-year and, as this A-level student said, becoming adjusted to studying in a new country '*I'm an international student, so it's like you have all of that on your mind and then you have this course that you've never touched before, it's completely different from the way you thought it was going to be*'. Another international student reflected on their experience '*I found it pretty hard because my family were living in Dubai at the time so in Freshers' week, well when I was feeling a bit down it was like they were so far away, you felt alienated almost and this was like my first time in the UK*'.

Several of the FE focus groups revealed that students had built strong friendship groups and good peer relationships which were supportive. One student reflected that '*my group, we've been really strong this year, we've been there for each other. And I think that group atmosphere, being all together and being able to work with each other, really helps*'. These relationships established stable friendships where '*we're all very close, we're all pretty much really good friends*' and where '*we have a lot of banter, a lot of funny times with each other, and I think we've grown to really like each other*'. This, in turn, lead to academically - supportive peer groups where '*we also help each other out, when we have an assignment if somebody's struggling we all go over, make sure they're all right, help them out in any way that we can*'. In some cases, the friendship groups were partly pre - established because '*a lot of us knew each other before, I knew at least four of them because I'd danced with them all. So, a lot of us knew each other, knew of each other, so we just clicked straight away*', but for other students their concern about being new in a group and making friends was overcome by the friendliness of the group '*I get quite bad anxiety about classrooms and especially going into new places, but it was a very smooth transition, very welcoming*'.

⁶ Both these BTEC plus A level students are ethnic minority students.

However, it was also clear that not all groups were equally strong. Some students' comments suggested that their friendship groupings were quite restricted: one student said '*we don't come in to like talk to everyone. We only talk to people that we know*', and another in the same focus group said, '*we only speak to who comes in to the lesson*'. There appeared to be stronger connections to the subject group than to college groups with some students saying they did not mix with students on other courses. Some students were less integrated into the groups and viewed as '*people who very much keep themselves to themselves*'; but at the same time, one student's perspective on their experience was that '*I didn't know anyone because I live so far away*'. There is a sense here that while friendship groupings may be strong, they may not be inclusive. At the same time, some groups appeared to be divided into those who were keen to work and those who were less motivated. One student reflected that:

I think that was quite a big divide in our group. There was a group of us that wanted to get on and do work in every lesson, tried their best to put down the right notes. And then another group that would just be a bit disruptive and just talk and leave it all to the last minute.

In another group, attendance seemed to have been a problem with sometimes only three students attending out of 20, which the students explained as '*people dropped out through the year because they couldn't be bothered or they come in whenever they can, when they make time for themselves*'.

There were a cluster of comments which suggested that the nature of the BTEC and its ways of learning facilitated better peer group relationships, as one student explained:

I think everyone would agree, like presentations and being more confident, taking yourself out of your shell, talking to new people, I think that helped, because if you're not comfortable and you're shy, coming to a BTEC course kind of opens your eyes a bit more and like you get to talk to other people that you've never met before.

Another student in the same focus group elaborated on this, noting that '*you have to work with certain people you haven't worked with, I think that's improved like now, I think we do get along, so I speak to people I've never spoken to before*'. A slightly different line of thinking was expressed by another student who felt that in A-Level groups students were more competitive and more focused on grades, and that people who did not get good grades were looked down

on, whereas *'with BTEC it's good because no one looks down on you in any shape or form, you're just an individual that's coming here to study and we're all like engaged in our own life.'*

In general, the HE students' reflections on their friendship groups at university drew out similar ideas and experiences, regardless of entry qualification and it was frequently said that everybody was initially *'in the same boat'* at the beginning of their first-year course. Whilst students seem to most commonly find their friends within their subject course *'I've found my closest friends with my course'*, they were also conscious of the challenge that large subject cohorts posed to making friends, and that *'when there's 300 people in a lecture theatre it's quite difficult to kind of become close with peers'*. This meant that there was less of a sense of group identity and students within one subject cohort did not necessarily know each other well:

...if I met like hundreds of people I wouldn't be able to pick out many people and say oh they're on my course, to stop and talk to. I feel like there's two or three people you sit with every time you go to a lecture but other than that I wouldn't really know who was on my course.

Sometimes the shared subject interest was key to forging friendship groupings *'the fact that we all have a similar interest which is our course. And we also have an interest in programming so, you know making friends and having things to talk about hasn't been very difficult.'*

The BTEC students, appear slightly more likely to talk about forming small friendship groups within their degree subject cohort. One student reflected that *'in business because it is such a huge, huge course, I think that once you've sort of made friends with someone on the first day that was sort of it, you stuck to your groups and that was it'*, and another said that *'I just stuck with a couple of friends really'*. These friendship groups included supporting each other academically as well as socially, as with this one student who belonged to *'a really tight group. I think there's only like seven of us and I think it was really good that we all met on the first day because then we were able to do like revision groups and all get together to actually work'*. One student directly contrasted this with their college experience where, *'we were a small group everybody knew everybody really, and it was a lot of my friends'*. One A-Level student also noted that the sixth form experience made forming relationships easier than at university:

... you meet a lot of people, and you build like communication through seminar groups. Other than that, there is not a lot in terms of the course because lectures are so big whereas in sixth form, I think, there is a stronger

network because your classes are smaller, so it is easier to build networks, rather than university because it is a bigger amount of people, larger in number.

One BTEC student felt that university required students to become more independent because, for example, you might be *'picking a module where you don't know any of your friends who are on it. So probably a bit more independent, yeah, and it might be the case you have to go to lectures on your own'*. For several A-Level students, this was an advantage creating broader, more diverse networks:

...in all our different modules you'll be in a different like presentation, different project group and stuff like that. And I've really enjoyed that because you end up meeting so many really interesting people normally from all over the world.

Another reflected on the way networks can be loose rather than tight friendship groups *'there's a lot of people I know but I'm not really close with, but they're really nice and you can just sit with them in lectures or get to know them through your tutorials. It's really nice.*

Students also commented positively about other ways of learning, including working in small groups, such as in laboratories because they had helped to facilitate the formation of social networks. On the other hand, another A-Level student found the modular pattern with *'people from different courses doing the same ones'* and felt that *'when there's 300 people in a lecture theatre it's quite difficult to kind of become close with peers'*. A similar perspective was offered by a BTEC student, who felt that tutorial groups of twenty were *'quite big'* and *'you sit next to someone different every time and they don't want to talk to you and you don't really want to talk to them.'* Some students naturally make friends easily, whereas others struggle more, but students' preparedness, or the nature of groupings at university may need some attention. On one degree programme, a residential course was mentioned by two students as having been very helpful in this respect *'I think that's where a lot of us made most of our friends and we're still friends with them now, the ones we met in [name of place]'*.

Taken as a whole, many of the interview comments made about moving into student accommodation or halls, provide insights into how this transition is experienced and the ways in which students begin to gain a sense of independence and personal development as an adult. One BTEC student highlighted that living on campus not only made it easier in terms of *'closeness and receiving support'* but also the feeling that:

...it does make you more independent because you have to cook for yourself, you've got to do all this [juggling academics and student life] and I do feel more confident because I've had that independence, that exposure.

Importantly, students also discussed forming friendship groups outside of their subjects and these took place largely, within their accommodation. Interestingly, some students felt they had built stronger friendship groups through their accommodation, rather than through their subject groups. One student said that *'the majority of my friends are in my halls'* and another explained that *'we're kind of a bit like a community if you know what I mean, so we're all really good friends'*. The enjoyment of being in halls was increased for some Sports Science students, where combined accommodation and course worked well *'it's good that you're in halls for first year, I think that helps. And especially because where we are we're all sport science pretty much. So, you get to know everyone on your course at the same time because you're all in the same area'*. One student who did not live on campus in the first year said that they had *'found making friends quite difficult' and concluded that 'I would always recommend first years to be in student accommodation, just because it's so much better on campus and automatically make friends like straight away'*. One BTEC student commuted into the university every day for personal reasons, and felt that this had affected their capacity to build a friendship group:

I feel like during Fresher's and things like that I did miss out quite a bit and obviously I probably haven't made as many friends, like flatmates and things like that, but I've still made a few good friends. But I think the commute for me, I'm just tired of driving to and from every day so I've got myself a place with her next year, so that'll be –yeah I think the social aspect of things that's probably what I've missed out on quite a lot'. Indeed, other students recognised that the transition to university 'might have been more difficult for those that lived out, rather than the ones that lived at home.

Some of the BTEC students felt their friendship networks were influenced by the way others view their BTEC qualification. One student reflected that *'even with my closest friends there's always like an ongoing joke about people that did BTECs'* whilst another felt *'people judge you and they're like, you've done a BTEC, you're not capable enough to be here'*. However, they seemed confident about their decision to do a BTEC, with one student saying:

I did it because I knew I wanted to do sport and I absolutely loved doing my BTEC, I learnt so much and I had a great time doing it' and another argued that 'the way I see it is well, we've finished and we're at the same place, like at a good uni to get a good degree.

Similarly for another BTEC student, coming to university was also something of a culture shock:

it was a bit of a surprise at how academic people were, and I guess it's more of an income thing as well. So, I'd say probably there are a lot more, I'm probably generalising a little bit, but a lot more middle-class students. So, I guess it was tough to adapt to, but it was definitely worthwhile.

Extra-curricular activities

It was also evident that extra - curricular activities were also a source of social networks and friendships. 29 references were made to this sub-theme from 20 data sources. FE students only made 3 comments about extra-curricular activities and all these encompassed the sporting activities they took part in. One Computer Studies student did talk about how this had helped to extend social networks, *'they allow the college students to go to the gym, trampolining, ice-skating. I used to go ice skating and then you will meet some people that do different courses there'.*

In HE, unsurprisingly for the Sports Science students, participating in sporting activities was important, particularly for the BTEC group. Being part of a sports team was reported as a positive experience, *'the best thing'*, by everyone who mentioned it. For one student, the sports activity allowed for a more varied friendship network, meaning that they were *'able to go, right, I'm on my course with my course mates and then I go and have a chat with my team mates and then when I want a break from the team I go back to my course mates'*. One BTEC student *'wanted to do as many sports as I could, but realised at Fresher's that they're all very expensive to sign up to'*. A-level students also commented positively about being involved with sports clubs and activities, as this student illustrates how they can facilitate the creation of friendships:

I would say try something new as well. So, for me I started scuba diving, I'd only really done it once or twice before and now I'm doing it like every week practicing and it's been really good to meet new people and make really

*good friends with them because they enjoy what you're doing like you said.
And so, take in every opportunity you can.*

Students also got involved with university societies which not only engaged with their personal interests, but helped create a more diverse network of friends. One student reflected that:

...the people that I've met from different courses have been through the societies and through my flat mates so there's no - one in my flat who's doing the same course as me and we all have different friends and like we're quite sociable.

Whilst another had joined '*different societies like sailing and although I'm in "Women in Business", quite a lot of the girls who are in that society aren't actually doing business management or in the business school, so that's been really nice and I've met some of my closest friends from the societies*'.

An A-level international student of African origin also discussed how friends advised joining the African community society but they felt that they were '*here to learn new cultures, new people, I don't want to go back to the same group of people you know*', suggesting a desire to broaden experiences. In the end, however, they did join the African society because it helped them feel less homesick, a point touched upon previously '*you still need to be around like people so you don't feel too homesick, because they're going to be listening to the same type of music you listen, they eat the kind of food you want*'.

There was a sense in many of these comments that university societies gave students the opportunity to broaden their experiences, both through the society focus and through the wider network of people that it brought students into contact with. Significantly, only one A-Level and BTEC student mentioned joining a society, although some BTEC students recognised that it might be a good thing to do, and one expressed a retrospective regret at not joining any societies:

...there's not much engagement going on between us and people on other courses and I did say to myself I'm going to join societies but I just never ended up doing it. But I think this year I am planning on joining more societies so I can meet more people.

One BTEC plus A-Level student who lived at home observed that they '*didn't get involved with lots of societies because we have that travelling around, you know events start at maybe 6*

but then lectures finish at 12, so there is a lot of travelling around between home and uni'. This therefore, might further indicate how living at home could influence student life.

5. Discussion and conclusions

5.1 Discussion

In this section we draw together key findings from our results as a means of providing a rationale for the development of interventions during phase two of the Transforming Transitions project. Our study provides an in-depth exploration of both FE and HE students' experiences of their studies and their feelings of preparation for university. Crucially, and unlike much other widening participation research, we focus our attention on the role of prior qualifications during the transition phase. Our findings suggest that despite differences in outcomes between BTEC and A-Level students at university, there is no straightforward distinction in the educational experiences, aspirations and perceptions of preparedness from these two groups. Instead the data that we have point towards a much more complex picture. Students' sense of academic success at university is influenced by a wide range of interacting factors –some of which appear to be associated with prior qualifications but some of which are not. We discuss these issues in more depth below, drawing on relevant literature where appropriate.

Students' expectations of university life appeared to play an important role in their transition to and adaption to HE. There was considerable variation across our participants in terms of whether they had felt adequately prepared for university and the extent to which their expectations had been met. Concerns relating to current academic and future success were frequently associated with a mismatch between students' pre-transition prospects and their actual experiences of their first year at university. There were a range of areas within which this divergence occurred. Those which appeared most significant though included academic expectations in relation to subject and content knowledge and pedagogical approaches used at university. In relation to academic literacy, there was some sense that BTEC students felt less prepared at the start of their degree; by contrast, A-Level students who had taken 'essay-based' subjects (e.g. English Literature or History) reported feeling that they could cope adequately with these elements of their course.

The issue of learner identity emerges as important in relation to student expectations and experiences. Our data indicate students' perceptions that when starting university they needed to take on a 'university student' identity. This is key within the context of the current study as the focus on transitions allows us to explore where and how these shifts in learner identity

occur. While we have not tracked the same students across the FE/HE transition, it is possible to identify both what students feel that they need to 'become' prior to starting university but also how their learner identity has developed following their first year in HE. Students' perceptions of what it is to be a university student may well have developed long before they begin studying at post-16 level. One of the most significant elements of learner identity that emerges from our data is the perception that at university it is essential to be independent: to be able to take on board new knowledge via new teaching and learning methods; to self-direct further study; and to act autonomously in order to seek and receive support. Questions arise, however, over the extent to which students understand exactly how they might develop this skill and the role of the university in supporting this from the outset. While there were some students who felt that their FE courses had provided adequate opportunity for them to work autonomously, there was also a group of students who felt that there was a considerable leap in terms of academic expectations, and in HE they were left without the level of scaffolding and modelling that they had previously experienced and which had supported their development as independent learners. There is clearly work to be done in supporting students, and perhaps particularly students from non-traditional backgrounds, to develop stronger learner identities that enable them to go on and be successful throughout their degree course but also as part of developing a culture committed to lifelong learning.

Closely tied to the issue of independence is that of access to support whilst at university. Successful support systems can be instrumental in enabling socialisation and adaption at university. The students that we spoke to were clear that there was adequate support –both academic and pastoral –available to them. Crucially though, many revealed that they had chosen not to access this in their first year despite acknowledging that, at the time, it would have been very useful to do so. This is an important finding as it moves beyond simple arguments suggesting that what students need is more information or awareness of support available. It suggests that actually, if universities believe the support that they are offering is valuable, then they perhaps need to consider how to more successfully embed it across the board and to ensure that it is accessed by students who would most benefit from it. This may involve some form of incentivisation to encourage students or relevant staff to engage with support mechanisms. It may also mean that organisationally, greater consideration needs to be given to the availability, planning and delivery of targeted support and for students to be able to more clearly understand its potential benefits.

For the HE students in our study, the mathematics and statistical elements of their degree course were frequently the areas that troubled them most. For a number of the students, this element of the programme or the depth of knowledge required came as an unwelcome shock,

particularly for BTEC students or those without an A-Level qualification in Maths or a science subject. Some felt that they had not had adequate information about this part of the course prior to application. The time lapse between taking GCSE Maths and starting the degree was felt to be the most significant factor that put students at a disadvantage compared to those who had done some form of maths study in the interim. This resulted in feelings of stress, lack of confidence, reduced motivation and underperformance. While there have been myriad recent policy shifts in relation to GCSE and A-Level Maths qualifications and the National Curriculum these are likely to have only limited impact in the short-term and for those students who stop studying maths at GCSE level. Instead, our data would suggest support for an intervention that works to develop students' maths skills and their willingness to engage with maths, either immediately prior to starting at university or during their first year.

The role of assessment emerged as a persistent theme for students irrespective of their qualification background. Our findings highlight the challenges that students studying vocational FE courses face in relation to awareness of and confidence in tackling the assessment approaches at university. BTEC students reported feeling relatively unprepared for exams at university due to having two years (during their BTEC course) of non-examined study. Support with preparation for exams and development of exam skills was rarely mentioned. Recent changes to BTEC qualifications mean that they will soon all include some form of external assessment (usually a written exam). This is a significant development in terms of potential preparation for university although it is not clear how aligned the new BTEC examinations will be with those taken at degree level. Exploring the impact of these new BTEC qualifications on students' perceptions of preparedness and eventual success at university will be a useful focus for future research.

Our data also suggest that, in comparison to studying at college (both BTECs and A-Levels), HE students sometimes were unclear about *how* they were being assessed i.e. the criteria being used and how marks or grades were allocated following both formative and summative assessments. Similarly, concerns were raised about feedback received on work with a number of students comparing it unfavourably with the more personalised, detailed and supportive approaches found at college. Ensuring that relevant assessment information is available, accessible and shared equitably with students is clearly important and would be a useful focus for supporting all students.

Recurring through many of these themes relating to academic preparedness and transition is the notion of negotiating the 'rules of the game'. From our findings, this appears to be the case in relation to the social aspects of university. The BTEC students in our study report mixed

experiences of 'fitting in' during their first year of university. Some had very positive stories while for others accommodation arrangements, dominant cultures associated with drinking and socialising, larger teaching groups or financial constraints were sometimes cited as reasons why developing friendship groups and social networks was more difficult. Social integration and a feeling of belonging emerge as key elements here. For selective universities who perhaps historically have been less 'open' to non-traditional students, a commitment to understanding the social and cultural backgrounds of the whole student cohort should become a central objective, supporting a shift towards more inclusive and equitable student experiences.

The transitions experienced by many of the students in our study are described as complex and multifaceted. Significantly, they reach beyond the purely 'educational' and are also substantially influenced by social, cultural, economic and geographic factors. Through widening participation initiatives and encouraging students with a broader range of qualifications, the diversity of student populations is likely to continue to increase. If we are in agreement that promoting access to university for students from different academic and social backgrounds is a positive move for society then it is vital that *all* universities are active in supporting and implementing such intentions. This should include them taking an interest in the transitional experiences of students with different characteristics and behaving in a way that encourages such students to apply to their institutions. It also means that universities should be open to the different abilities, skills and needs that these students bring and be willing to develop and support these where possible. That is not to suggest, however, that universities should have to cater for every different group separately. Rather they should be able to have open and flexible structures and processes in place which allow them to provide effective learning experiences for all students irrespective of their background.

Overall, our findings suggest that in order to best support students' transition in to university and through it, it is vital that those in a position to do this look beyond the deficit model approaches that have often dominated within discussions about inclusion and widening participation in higher education. The BTEC participants here do not appear to have particularly different levels of aspiration, motivation or academic potential when compared to their A-Level counterparts. While there are some specific areas which might warrant further support for these students (e.g. elements of academic literacy or mathematics), this is not necessarily due to them lacking in capacity to engage with these skills but more about a lack of experience or opportunity in the immediate years prior to starting university. Interventions which address preparation and transition to university and are focused on the development of

students' learner identities are welcomed. Both FE and HE partners have an important role to play in supporting the development and implementation of such approaches.

5.2 Limitations

One limitation of this phase of the project is that we have just focused on the transition in to Higher Education and experiences of the first year of university. Students, of course, experience a wider range of transitions and trajectories than this and we are aware that these are given relatively little space within this particular study. However, the emphasis on FE-HE transition is not surprising given the focus of the Transforming Transitions project and the fact that the first year of HE study is the period when student drop-out is most likely to occur. The challenges associated with this is what the overall study is designed to explore and tackle.

A second limitation of this phase is in relation to our sample. The self-selecting nature of our participants plus the retrospective nature of the interviews means that we are likely to have a sample skewed towards students who have been more successful with their studies or who have a particular issue or grievance that they wanted to share. It also means that students who dropped out of university prior to the interview period were not approached to participate, meaning that the stories of this group – who were potentially those who most needed the kind of support and intervention that we are proposing – have not been heard. Our sample also has implications in terms of generalisability. We are aware that our participants do not speak for all BTEC students, all A-Level students nor all FE/HE students. Their responses are often heavily context-driven and are reflective of a wider set of educational and life experiences. Nevertheless, we have been able to capture a range of voices across different settings; these provide important and rich insights in to the issues associated with the transition of non-traditional students and a springboard for determining areas for future improvement within the system.

5.3 Implications and next phases of research

The findings here have a number of potential implications for those working within the FE and HE sectors. Our findings help to illuminate some of the potential explanations for the relative underperformance of this group of students; they also point towards steps that could be taken to better support students and potentially improve academic performance and retention in the first year. These elements will be taken forward and used to inform the next phase of this project which involves the development, implementation and evaluation of such interventions.

The study finds that there frequently appears to be a mismatch between students' expectations of HE and their experiences of it during the first year. Many students reported

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

The current study also adds to the existing knowledge base surrounding transition and the experiences of students associated with the 'widening participation' agenda. It raises important issues surrounding the equity of the university admissions process and the attitudes towards and of different groups of students based on their post-16 qualifications. Our findings make it clear that while these differences in qualifications may have some influence on students' future academic success, this should not be overstated. Our work highlights that many of the feelings of concern are shared by those entering university with A-Levels, BTECs or a mixture of the two. As a result, we would suggest that any new interventions to be introduced require careful targeting in order to avoid exacerbating already existing discourses of deficit associated with some groups of HE students.

Methodologically, we also feel that this study contributes to a 'co-production' approach to the provision of support within HE settings, actively involving individuals and groups that may potentially be affected by the research and its outcomes. The insights provided through the interviews will directly inform the decisions made surrounding interventions and evaluation methods. Since conducting the interviews, subsequent focus group discussions have been conducted with HE students in order to seek feedback on the findings and proposed interventions. The Transforming Transitions project aims to move away from a 'done to' approach to intervention, instead using evidence and the experiences of relevant stakeholders to inform potential developments.

6. References

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7. Appendices

Appendix 7.1

TRANSFORMING TRANSITIONS: FE STUDENT FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Introductory brief

- ☐ Thank the students for agreeing to participate.
- ☐ Explain the project - we are conducting this study to better understand the university learning experience of students that have taken different qualifications at post-16 study.
- ☐ We will be recording your responses.
- ☐ Secure consent (written signed consent).

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? [ie *University; apprenticeships; employment*]

Tell us why you have made this choice

How well do you feel your College course prepared you for this choice?

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 eg *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: *eg 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

We are interested to know if there have been any literacy or numeracy demands on your course which you have found challenging:

6. We are also interested in the broader set of study and life-skills you have experienced on your course:

Relationship and Social Experiences

7. 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?
8. How strong do you feel you and your peers are as a BTEC group?
9. 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

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

Appendix 7.2

TRANSFORMING TRANSITIONS: HE STUDENT FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Introductory brief

- ☐ Thank the students for agreeing to participate.
- ☐ Explain the project - we are conducting this study to better understand the university learning experience of students that have taken different qualifications at post-16 study.
- ☐ We will be recording your responses.
- ☐ Secure consent (written signed consent).

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?*]
2. How well do you feel your College course prepared you for this first year at university?
3. Is there anything that it would have been helpful to know before starting the course?

Curriculum

1. Have you found any gaps in your knowledge that you needed for your degree course for which your College course did not prepare?
2. Have you struggled with any of the academic content on your degree course?
3. Have you found any of the academic content easy or relatively easy?
4. What support is available for you on your course eg *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

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

Assessment Practices

1. 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:

- Reading and understanding academic texts:
- Pulling information together:
- Referencing:
- Writing academic essays:

Broader life skills

1. We are also interested in the broader set of study and life-skills you have experienced on your course. Prompt sheet
Independent learning/time management/working with others/research skills

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 asked that you'd like to tell us?

Appendix 7.3

Prompt sheet to accompany student interview schedule

Have a look at this list of learning experiences you will likely have had so far on your degree course and tell me a little about each, with examples if helpful:

- Reading and understanding academic texts
- Synthesising (pulling information from different texts) and summarising material from academic texts
- Research skills
- Writing academic essays
- Writing evaluations and reflections
- Actively participating in group discussion
- Presenting your work to others
- Using digital technologies (specialist software/hardware)

Thinking about a broader set of study and life skills in the context of your degree, how well do you think you are coping with:

- Actively participating in group discussion
- Practical work (including drama performance)
- Presenting your work to others
- Working with others on assignments
- 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