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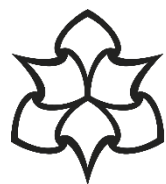
*Society for Research  
into Higher Education*

# **Considering the Impact of Further and Higher Education Tutor Imaginings of BTEC Learners upon Student Learner Identities**

**Research report**

**December 2022**

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Disclaimer: The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Society for Research into Higher Education

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## Executive Summary

It is acknowledged BTEC learners have less success within HE; however, data on progression and award gaps tends towards the quantitative, limiting the narrative and reasoning behind this picture. This research addresses the shortage of qualitative data, illuminating the ways BTEC students are differently imagined and supported within FE and HE, considering how these perceptions shape students' own emerging sense of self and belonging as learners within HE.

This was achieved through a multi-method qualitative approach, synthesising data from students' own lived experiences and the perceptions of academic staff working in further and higher education, from a Business and Law School context.

Key findings included:

- Tutors from both further and higher education shared perceptions of the strengths and challenges of students pursuing or entering University with BTEC qualifications.
- In HE, awareness of these strengths and challenges are responded to through development of general and tailored support, and sharing experiences with students.
- Students recognise a reduction in the level of one-to-one academic support in HE, but similarities were located in personal tutor support.
- Students placed value upon the wider network of support within HE, going beyond academic support.
- Tutors from both environments perceived a greater challenge for student transition in the expectations of developing as an independent learner within HE.
- Students found greater challenge in adapting to the social element of university than the academic side.
- Students acknowledged the support received in HE was crucial in their transition into university, cementing their decision to pursue HE and developing a sense of learner identity and belonging.
- The stigma of BTEC qualifications reduced self-confidence amongst the student participants, with greater impact before starting university.

# Main Report

## Context

The impact of entry qualifications upon student outcomes within higher education (HE) has attracted increasing attention, where differences in experience, progression, award, and further outcomes are apparent. Differences in entry qualifications has partially emerged from Widening Participation (WP) approaches adopted globally within sector to promote accessibility to HE, particularly for those from underrepresented backgrounds (Smith & Bocock, 1999). Here, universities are offering more spaces to underrepresented students who would have not previously have attended university, and are regarded as 'non-traditional' (Christie, 2007).

When considering prior education, certain level 3 qualifications are regarded as the academic, or more 'traditional' route into HE. For example, A-Levels in the UK, and the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) in New Zealand. Whereas other qualifications such as the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) and Vocational Education Training (VET), are considered as vocational. Many of these vocational qualifications were created as practical alternatives to the more academic qualifications. Therefore, students who obtained their university places via these qualifications are often regarded as 'non-traditional'.

Whilst an increase in HE participation has been observed globally, the impact of entry qualifications upon student experience and outcomes has been identified in multiple countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the UK, and the US (Abhayawansa et al, 2012; Devlin, 2013; Kahu, 2013; Langer, 2001; Zepke & Leach 2010). As a result, widespread interest has been cultivated regarding the outcomes of both traditional and non-traditional students comparatively.

In the UK sector, the vocational qualification route into HE is primarily the BTEC qualification, and it has been identified students with these qualifications face lower levels of progression, retention, award and outcomes (Huskinson, 2016; Office for Students, 2018). Whereas students with A-Level qualifications have improved rates of retention and attainment (Schofield & Dismore, 2010). The result is an increasing gap between traditional and non-traditional students, reduced student success, and conflicted feelings of belonging amongst BTEC students who feel misunderstood by HE (Baker, 2021).

Transitional challenges from further education (FE) to HE are documented for students with BTECs, with the question arising of whether the responsibility is that of the FEI or HEI. There is a view students lack the skills required for higher education, supporting a seamless transition between FE and HE (Shields & Masardo, 2015), in turn highlighting a

deficit approach (Lawrence, 2005). In response, HEIs have integrated specialised units to facilitate the 'less prepared student' (Lumsden et al, 2010; Plowden & Hathaway 2013), finding benefits to modules dedicated to assessment methods and academic development. Despite this, a gap still exists, and the current approach is driven by the quantitative, limiting the narrative and reasoning.

## Research process

This qualitative research generates new knowledge of BTEC students within the university setting by synthesising data from students' own lived experiences with perceptions of academic staff within FE and HE, from a Business and Law context.

This was achieved through the following research questions:

RQ1 - How are BTEC students imagined as learners by HE and FE academic staff?

RQ2 – To what extent do these ways of imagining BTEC students engender different mechanisms of support and preparation for higher level learning?

RQ3 – How do BTEC students experience and characterise academic support from HE and FE tutors, and where might they locate differences and similarities?

RQ4 – How do BTEC students interpret these different modes of support to inform their own self-perceptions and their transition into HE?

Taking a social constructivist approach, and located within a feminist and narrative framework valuing lived experience, three participant groups were recruited: first year undergraduate students possessing BTEC qualifications (n=4); HE academic staff (n=9); and tutors with responsibility for supporting BTEC learners within local FEIs (n=2). Student participants completed an initial questionnaire, a time-based diary, and an interview to reflect on their experiences within their first year within HE. The staff groups were interviewed to gain insight into the ways BTEC learners are imagined, understood, and supported within both educational settings.

The data was analysed thematically utilising NVivo Pro to enable concepts and conclusions to be drawn directly from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

## Imaginings and experiences

The tutor interviews invited both groups to reflect upon their educational and professional experiences, enabling them to highlight how their perceptions and practice are shaped. This revealed how their practice was more informed through their own educational experience and non-teaching roles than their experience of supporting students in their current roles. For example, some tutors utilised coaching experiences. They all mentioned feeling 'non-traditional' in their career, as they adapted their original plans, and differentiated themselves from the 'traditional' lecturer or teacher. It is crucial to note the discipline specific context here of business and law education, which by nature is rooted in vocation, and attracts industry professionals as employees. This was illustrated by the tutor perception that BTECs are suited to vocational degree disciplines, e.g. finance and sport.

Similarly, students emphasised how they had adapted their original plans for FE and HE due to unexpected GCSE results. Here, they saw relevance in the BTEC qualifications, seeing alignment between the learning approach and their strengths. This demonstrates a strategic approach to their education. These strengths are reflected in the tutor perceptions, where work ethic, self-awareness, problem-based assessments, and communication skills such as presentation, teamwork, and leadership were recognised.

The students articulated frustration with the perception of BTEC qualifications, providing examples where they were made to feel 'less than'. This was apparent through support received within FE and the application processes for HE. For example, the value of A levels for certain universities in comparison to BTECs. Subsequently, they entered HE with low expectations. However, this acted as a motivation point to succeed and all student participants were proud of their BTEC qualifications, identifying transferable strengths in finding sources and time-management at university.

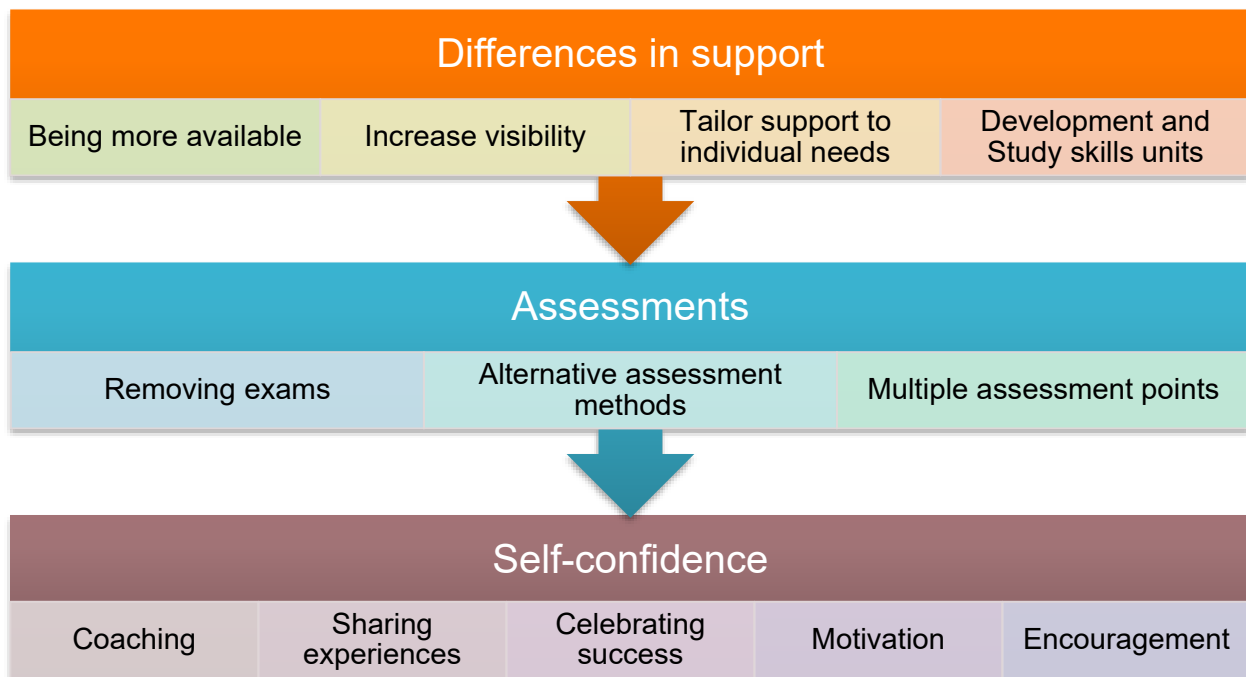
## Developing support

Considering support, students stated support in FE was 'always there'. They valued reassessment opportunities, tutors' references to their personal experiences in education, and awareness of crunch points between different programmes. Within HE, they valued personal tutoring systems, and felt secure in the wider university support network. Whilst the wealth of wider support in comparison to FE was recognised, awareness of this could be raised. Similarities were drawn between academic support in both environments, but increased personalised support in FE was acknowledged. However, this was counteracted by an appreciation of the support beyond academic within HE. For example, counselling, careers, placements. This aligns with the challenges identified by tutors in the broader transition to the university environment, particularly in adjustment to the academic



requirements, differences in support, assessment, and self-confidence arising from heightened self-awareness.

In response to the identified challenges, HE tutors referred to the creation and development of tailored support in each area:



In broader support, HE tutors referred to curriculum reviews in response to differentials in student progression and award. This included a review resulting in the removal of all exam assessment methods in favour of alternative methods such as presentations, essays, portfolios, and quizzes. This was positively received; however, the long-term impact of this is unclear. As widely adopted within the sector (Lumsden et al, 2010; Plowden & Hathaway 2013), development and study skills units have been embedded within programmes. These are designed to broadly support personal and professional development, focusing on digital, communication, and academic skills.

On a personalised level, HE tutors stated personal tutoring systems had been adapted to a coaching style approach in recognition of creating personalised support opportunities to facilitate success. They stated previous leadership and coaching roles had assisted them in this role, with focus upon providing motivation, encouragement, and celebrating success. Tutors reported the successful implementation of this relied upon increasing visibility and availability to support students.

In contrast, student participants attributed transitional challenges to the social side of university, rather than the academic requirements. This was in reference to creating and maintaining friendships. This suggests academic support is adequate in terms of aiding transition, but more is required to facilitate social transition. Therefore, the student participants suggested FE should create a more realistic impression of university life. This

is reflected by FE tutor responses, whereby visit or taster days were perceived as instrumental in managing expectations of university life.

Ultimately, the students expressed a sense of belonging at university. For one student, this was exemplified through the support received from personal tutors and broader student support services:

*“I definitely feel my place at university is more appreciated through the support I’ve been getting. Everybody is willing to help as soon as they can” (Student Participant)*

Critically, their success and sense of purpose as a ‘university student’ was validated by their marks, performance, feedback, and relationships, particularly towards the end of the academic year. However, this sense was disrupted throughout the year due to challenges in social life.

## **Becoming independent learners**

Despite these support mechanisms, tutors from both environments believed the change in focus from getting the grades in FE, to broader learner development in HE was the most significant barrier for students in their transition to learning at university level. FE tutors mentioned how foundations of independent learning were encouraged through their teaching styles. However, they noted the structural barriers in place (such as league tables), emphasising supporting students through assessment, over learner development.

*‘We give them as much support, as much as they like to do that assignment and assessment, to get them through, okay? And when you’re at university that’s taken off, yeah and then do you sink or swim.’ (FE Tutor Participant)*

This in turn, creates a deficit in the support provided within HE. Although this is a wider challenge, HE tutors felt this is more significant for students with BTEC qualifications. This suggests the support in HE is not adequate in initiating development of independent learners, raising questions regarding their expectations of incoming students. From the student perspective, they recognised this emphasis of HE, particularly through the wider support available, and felt their BTEC qualifications enabled them to develop independent learner skills.

## **Additional findings**

A key feature emerging from all participant groups was the stigmatic perception of BTEC qualifications, and how this was influenced both by experience and public discourse. Although, all participants highlighted how their perceptions of BTEC qualifications had changed through their educational and career experiences. This draws further question into

how the stigma is being reproduced. For students, they mentioned experiencing this more acutely in the time leading up to enrolment at university.

Finally, the tutors highlighted factors beyond BTEC qualifications which they believed were a greater significant impact to student transition in HE. These included family experience, local transport infrastructure, previous educational opportunity; indicating social capital is the predominant factor to consider. This is illustrated through the emerging concept of an idealised level-playing field with the university environment in response to not being aware of student's previous education amongst the HE tutors. However, this was responded to through a broader inclusive learning approach.

## Conclusion

This research feeds directly into the national discussion of supporting students with BTEC qualifications. As previously mentioned, the current research in this area and strategies undertaken by HEIs are driven by the quantitative. By taking a qualitative approach and by connecting further and higher education, this research raises awareness of the needs of BTEC learners to promote accessibility and inclusion, ultimately supporting student success.

This research found tutors from both FE and HE perceived similar strengths and challenges of students pursuing and entering HE with BTEC qualifications. Support in HE was developed in recognition of the needs of students with BTEC qualifications. Whilst students valued this support, it was not the difference in learning or academic support which impacted their transition to university or feeling of belonging, but wider social challenges of changing environments.

## Recommendations

Several recommendations have been identified. Crucially, tutors from both environments wanted to strengthen the links between FE and HE. This can be achieved by creating clear communication channels, and aligning expectations of the student journey.

Additional recommendations are split into two categories: further research, and support mechanisms.

### Further research

1. There are limitations of this research through the number of participants, the Business and Law context, and the inherent bias of self-selection. This project should be extended, prioritising perceptions and experiences of tutors who might not have the same exposure to students with BTEC qualifications, and students who are less inclined to speak about their experiences than those involved in this study.
2. Whilst more knowledge has been generated in the manifestation of BTEC qualification stigma within certain environments, additional research is required to develop knowledge into how and where this is reproduced.
3. Tutors emphasised how their 'non-traditional' route into their current roles had shaped their perceptions and practice. In addition, they highlighted how sharing their experience with students was beneficial in creating and maintaining relationships with students and encouraging independent learners in comparison to their practice of their 'traditional' colleagues. Therefore, further research regarding the routes taken to a teaching role in both environments, and how this might impact teaching practice may provide additional insight into how teaching and support practice is informed.
4. More research is required evaluating the impact of accreditation bodies upon inclusive curriculum design and assessment methods. Whilst this is discipline orientated, there are wider implications when considering the volume of students undertaking more vocational university programmes.

### Support mechanisms

1. Student and tutor participants reflected upon how impressions and expectations of university life are created. Opportunities should be created for students to experience university life during their decision-making process. This should be collaboratively facilitated between FE and HE.

2. Tutors from both environments and some students highlighted how adjusting to the time structure of university was a challenge. Therefore, emphasis should be placed upon developing time management skills in the early stages of university programmes, and within FE where possible.
3. Student participants perceived greater challenge in adapting to the social side of university life. Further support is required in minimising social challenges upon beginning university programmes.
4. Tutors from both environments claimed their participation in the research was a valuable opportunity to reflect on their practice. This was significant where the interview overran and a follow-up had to be arranged, demonstrating how they had reflected over time. It would be beneficial to offer time and space to enable staff members to reflect on their practice in conversation with others.

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