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Abstract

In this paper we argue that narrowing attainment gaps at degree level necessitates understanding vocational qualifications. Not enough is known of how individual entrants with vocational qualifications may have a cluster of characteristics associated with low academic attainment, which may lead to added disadvantage. This paper focuses on the disparities in students' confidence in their academic capabilities by qualification and ethnicity. Our evidence base is administrative records and survey data (N=3858) collected from 'Stonecrest University', an anonymised English university. Results indicate that in the pursuit of their inclusivity agenda other universities should also monitor the academic attainment of students with vocational qualifications.

Why the BTEC matters

Qualifications in England are characterised by a deep and enduring academic-vocational divide.¹ Vocational qualifications are positioned as 'other' to the more established currency for progression to university of A-Levels and continue to confer less esteem. BTEC is a particularly well-established 'brand'. BTECs are work-related qualifications suitable for a wide range of students, intended to accommodate the needs of employers as well as allow progression to university, so-called 'hybrid' qualifications.² Today, applicants to university increasingly hold BTECs. Three reasons for this are the raising of the leaving age for compulsory education to 18, the withdrawal of the Applied A-Level, and that BTECs have become more embedded in the UCAS Tariff points system. The number of students from the UK placed through the UCAS main scheme holding a BTEC qualification has almost doubled since 2008, to 85,000 in 2014. The proportion of placed UK applicants who held a BTEC qualification increased from 13.5 per cent in 2008 to 23.8 per cent in 2014.³ In 2014 Mary Curnock Cook, Chief Executive of UCAS, predicted future trends:

It is estimated that in just five years' time, there could be 10,000 fewer English 19-year-olds with A-levels and over 20,000 more English 19-year-olds holding vocational... qualifications such as BTEC.

But she also added:

1 Brockmann, M. and Laurie, I. (2016). Apprenticeship in England – the continued role of the academic–vocational divide in shaping learner identities. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 68(2).

2 Davey, G., & Fuller, A. (2011). *Hybrid qualifications-increasing the value of vocational education and training in the context of lifelong learning*. University of Southampton.

3 https://www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/analysis_note_2015_02.pdf

It threatens also to make widening participation far more difficult: those from more disadvantaged backgrounds are significantly more likely to hold vocational rather than academic qualifications. (*Research Fortnight*, April 2014)

In this paper we present evidence that confirms this analysis.

Who are the BTEC entrants?

Encouraging BTEC applicants supports a strategy to widen participation because the choices students make regarding their post-16 qualifications are not necessarily shaped by their academic ability.⁴ But an attainment gap exists at degree level. Statistical modelling has revealed that even when their other characteristics are controlled for, students with vocational qualifications are less likely to receive a first or upper-second class degree.⁵ It is also known that some students with vocational qualifications struggle in the first year of university.⁶

This may be because individual BTEC entrants often have a cluster of characteristics associated with low academic attainment. For Stonecrest, understanding BTEC entrants is essential to understanding the white-BME attainment gap because a higher proportion of Black entrants, both male and female, had BTEC-only qualifications than their peers from any other ethnic group. There was a strong class profile overlapping with ethnicity, with half of BME BTEC entrants coming from sub-£25k households (Table 1). It is also relevant to the pursuit of inclusivity that nationally BTECs are gender biased, and to a much greater extent than A-Level subjects. A much higher proportion of males than females entered with a BTEC-only qualification. Further, the subject distribution is along traditional gender-stereotypical occupational roles, with females dominant in Health and Social Care, and males in Information Technology, and Sport. This pattern was replicated at Stonecrest.

Table 1 Social and academic profile of students by highest entry qualification

		Household income is below £25k %	Went to independent or selective institution %	First in family to go to university %
A-Level	White	23.0	26.8	40.6
	BME	36.8	17.0	31.6
	All	26.5	24.3	38.5
BTEC (+/only) and Access	White	44.1	2.0	56.3
	BME	50.0	0.0	37.8
	All	46.1	1.3	50.2

Source: Stonecrest University online student survey of Home domiciled undergraduates, November 2014; n=3858.

Furthermore, nationally, students with vocational qualifications are more likely to be from areas with low participation in higher education. At Stonecrest, around one in five BTEC

4 Ball, S., Maguire, M. and Macrae, S. (2000) *Choice, Pathways and Transitions Post-16: New Youth, New Economies in the Global City*. London: Routledge-Falmer.

5 Shields, R and Masardo, A. (2015). *Changing patterns in vocational entry qualifications, student support and outcomes in undergraduate degree programmes*. HEA.

6 UCAS, *Progression Pathways*, Jan 2016.

entrants were classified as in a Low Participation Neighbourhood. This was considerably higher than A-Level entrants. A higher proportion of BTEC entrants than A-Level entrants were the first in their family to go to university and didn't go to an independent or selective school or college. These observations suggest that individual BTEC entrants often have a cluster of characteristics associated with low academic attainment. These may interact or have additive or cumulative effects on their academic disadvantage.

Table 2 shows that overall, white A-Level entrants are the most academically confident as a group, followed by white BTEC entrants, then BME A-Level entrants, with BME BTEC entrants the least confident group. This shows how ethnicity and qualifications intersect, creating wider disparities. For example, the level of confidence in skills in writing essays and assignments and in critical thinking is lowest for BME BTEC entrants. It is unclear why this should be. There could be issues with the particular different types of essays (format, structure etc.), or more overall perception of a bigger step-up in the requirements of assessment between BTEC and degree.

Table 2 Comparing skills audit confidence by Highest Educational Qualification and ethnicity

Confidence in	White students		BME students	
	A-Level	BTEC/ Access	A-Level	BTEC/ Access
Oral skills: group discussion / debating	61.5	59.5	61.8	59.0
Maths (if applicable)	38.4	35.9	47.3	47.7
Referencing and use of citations	60.2	60.8	53.8	55.4
Understanding and learning from assessment feedback	79.2	80.2	73.6	72.6
Writing essays / assignments	69.0	63.0	58.8	54.7
Critical thinking	77.6	71.3	67.6	62.0
Exams	54.5	37.8	55.3	40.4

Source: Stonecrest University online student survey of Home domiciled undergraduates, November 2014; n=3858.

Discussion

Encouraging BTEC applicants supports widening participation, but nationally a degree attainment gap exists between A-Level and BTEC entrants. Our quantitative analysis indicates that ethnicity, class, gender, and qualifications intersect. Individual BTEC entrants often have a cluster of characteristics associated with low academic attainment, perhaps explaining some of the disparity in academic performance. These characteristics may interact or have additive or cumulative effects on a student's disadvantage. Our results indicate that in the pursuit of their inclusivity agenda other universities should also monitor the academic attainment of students with vocational qualifications.