

## Improving Transition from School and College to University (0306)

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### **Background**

Those entering HE with vocational qualifications are increasing with the proportion of BTEC students entering university rising to 23.4% in 2014-15 compared with just 13.5% in 2008 (UCAS, 2014). Universities are under pressure to offer more academic skills support to prepare students for their studies (Smith et al, 2015), but widening participation can present challenges for both students and institutions (Leese, 2010).

Brunel University London is proud of the diversity of its student body and accepts students with varying entry requirements. In 2014 we carried out a detailed statistical analysis of the performance of students with BTEC qualifications compare to those entering just with A-levels. This demonstrated that students with BTEC qualifications score less on average at all levels compared to A-level students with the same UCAS tariff points.

This led onto further qualitative work to find out more about the experiences of students entering University with BTECs. Findings from interviews and focus groups indicated that in their first year students with BTEC qualifications experience significant differences in teaching and assessment methods from the approaches used when they were in school or college.

### **The Improving Transition Project Scope**

Brunel University London secured funding from the Higher Education Academy Strategic Excellence Initiative for Vice-Chancellors to improve transition from school and college to university. Detailed here are the first phase outputs from this project, the impact of which is still being measured.

The project focusses on the transition of home and EU students with non-traditional entry qualifications through their first year of university and interventions (which are the outputs of this work) must fulfil the following themes:

- Inclusivity: All support mechanisms must be accessible to all first year students and not single out a particular group of learners.
- Collaboration: Interventions must be developed in consultation with staff and students.
- Tailored solutions: Interventions are designed to meet the needs of students and staff in a particular academic department.

It operates in four academic departments which have a high proportion of BTEC learners – the largest group of non-traditional entrants at Brunel – and pilots and evaluates support mechanisms to benefit this group. Our first phase outputs include the following:

- ‘Education Exchanges’ between FE and HE institutions to gather a clearer understanding of how effectively current BTEC courses map against Brunel’s first year programmes.

- A toolkit of resources aimed at tutors to support students' skills development in personal tutoring.
- Targeted academic skills support, which involves embedding study skills more effectively within the Year 1 curriculum through module redesign or in the provision of additional tailored skills support sessions.

### **First Phase Outputs**

#### **Education Exchange**

'An alignment between student and staff expectations is a critical factor in successful HE transition' (McEwan, 2015). Students come from a wide range of educational backgrounds, which influence their expectations of HE. For staff to comprehend why students have certain expectations, it is important to look at students' prior educational experiences to develop a clearer understanding of what and how they have been taught and, therefore, what students might expect they need to do to be successful in HE.

An 'Education Exchange' between FE and HE staff from corresponding disciplines allows discussions around the education experiences of students both pre- and post-entry to HE, and the likely challenges to successful transition. The 'Education Exchange' focuses on three areas:

- Teaching and assessment methods at Level 3 and in the first year of university
- Syllabi content at Level 3 and in the first year of university
- Academic skills support for students

This is particularly useful in increasing the understanding of the range of non-traditional qualifications that students enter HE with and the impact this could have on transition.

#### **Tutoring Toolkit**

The toolkit is designed to support staff in facilitating personal tutoring sessions. The focus of the toolkit is on developing skills that are intrinsic to success in HE regardless of the discipline students are in, such as:

- Time management
- Independent study
- Critical thinking and reading
- Exam preparation
- Creating personal learning objectives

The toolkit structure is sufficiently flexible to allow tutors to choose resources to support their sessions. For tutors wishing to have more guidance, example session plans are also provided. The toolkit will be available to the sector as part of the HEA outputs of this project.

## **Tailored Academic Skills Support**

Our research suggests that BTEC students may stand to gain the most from a strong programme of academic skills support in their first year in particular. BTEC students have identified challenges in particular areas, such as revision. Exam Preparation sessions covered:

- how to manage your time leading up to exams
- how to commit information to memory
- what to expect in the exams

These were piloted to Level 1 students in 3 academic departments. Students were asked to complete a survey on how they felt about revision and exams at both the start and end of the session to measure the impact, reporting a substantial increase in confidence in these areas (particularly among students from a BTEC background).

## **Conclusions**

I will discuss the interventions chosen and the results of the evaluations. I will also highlight how this work has been expanded into a 3-year project and outline the goals for the next phases of the project.

## **References**

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UCAS (2014). End of Cycle Report 2014. <https://www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/2014-end-of-cycle-report-dec-14.pdf> [Accessed on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2016].