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**Title** Widening Participation through acceptance of applicants with non-traditional entry qualifications - The BTEC dilemma  
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## **Widening Participation through acceptance of applicants with non-traditional entry qualifications - The BTEC dilemma**

### **Background**

The recruitment of well-qualified undergraduate students remains fiercely competitive across Higher Education (HE) Institutions in the United Kingdom. After A-levels, BTEC Nationals are the qualification most commonly used at entry. However, there is evidence that students entering HE with BTECs are more likely to experience significant issues during the transition to HE, drop out, or perform poorly (Bowden, Abhayawansa, & Bahtsevanoglou, 2015). In addition, students with BTEC qualifications are more likely to come from WP backgrounds compared to their peers with A-level qualifications (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS], 2015; Shields & Masardo, 2015).

### **Methods**

We used a mixed- methods approach to explore the progress and experience of BTEC students at a Russell Group University in the UK. Our study was informed by a pragmatist philosophy a single paradigmatic stance that is popular in mixed method methods for its ability to support the combined use of divergent methodologies (Johnston & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Morgan, 2007). We carried out studies to explore a) the experience of BTEC students in their first year of HE and also b) BTEC student outcomes in terms of academic achievement at the end of year one.

We undertook in-depth semi-structured interviews from a phenomenological perspective to explore the lived experience of 8 BTEC students during the first semester of their first year of study. For the quantitative study, we analysed progress data for all first year home students during the year 2014 /15 to identify which factors were associated with academic progress at the end of year one including sex, entry qualification, GCSE attainment and a measure of socioeconomic status. We chose to analyse progress at the end of year one as this is the most common time at which students drop out of HE, and is also the measure of progress employed by the Teaching Excellence Framework. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS.

### **Results**

Our qualitative findings suggest that BTEC students find HE extremely challenging. They also find the transition from FE into HE a difficult one to make, reflecting the findings in the wider literature. Students expressed the feeling that university was “harder” than they had expected academically, and some felt “overwhelmed” by the demands and commented that there were gaps in their underpinning knowledge which meant they had to do more study just to understand the concepts outlined in lectures.

None of the students had joined any clubs or societies, citing that there “*wasn't enough time*” due to their study commitments.

Our quantitative study examined the progress of all home students (n=4,170) registered in year one during the academic year 2014/15. Students with EU and overseas status were removed from the dataset as they were unlikely to have undertaken a BTEC and A level qualifications, and also did not have a UK postcode which was required to measure whether a student lived in a Low-Participation Neighbourhood (LPN). We found a significant difference in the proportion of LPN students by entry qualification (Chi Sq = 89.44,  $p < 0.001$ ). BTEC students (44%) and BTEC students who have one A-level or more (40.1%) were significantly more likely to be from a LPN than A- level students (22.9%). In addition, for students who completed the first year, we calculated the mean end of year mark by entry qualification and found that BTEC students scored a significantly lower average mark than BTEC plus A-level or A-level students (55.1 % versus 62.2%, and 63.8% respectively). (ANOVA -  $F = 62.04$ ,  $P = < 0.001$ ).

Finally we carried out a regression analysis examining progress of first year students who achieved 50% or more at the end of year one with students who did not, in relation to a number of characteristics (including sex, socio-economic background, and number of GCSEs obtained). Using logistic regression analyses, we found that BTEC students were 72% less likely to achieve 50% or more in year one compared to A-level students and students with BTECs plus at least one A-level were 39% less likely. Our results also demonstrated that coming from a LPN, being male and not having five GCSE's (including English and Maths) all exerted a negative independent effect on student achievement at the end of Year One.

### **Strengths and Limitations of the study**

The use of mixed methods provides a methodology that enables researchers to analyse the subjective experience of students during their studies alongside quantitative academic progress data, providing a rich understanding of the research topic. The benefits of combining methods to evaluate and monitor WP initiatives can lead to greater insight regarding outcomes, thus offering the evidence base that is needed to know '*what works*' to effectively widen access to HE.

One of the limitations of the study was that the quantitative analysis was confined to one year of data at a single university, though we are seeking to expand the dataset over the coming year to investigate trends over time. However, our current findings reflect national data on BTEC performance in HE (BIS, 2015) and they therefore represent a significant issue for all HE Institutions who accept BTECs as an entry qualification, since ensuring students are appropriately prepared to undertake their studies, is a vital component of student experience.

In conclusion, there is substantial evidence that BTEC students achieve less well than their traditionally qualified peers in HE, both at the university in this study and also across the UK (Bowden et al., 2015; Shields & Masardo, 2015). There are two possible courses of action to address this; the first is to alter entry criteria so that only

those BTEC students who are academically more prepared and able are offered a place to study, and the second is to provide additional support to BTEC students, particularly during transition into HE and during Year One. The University in this study has opted to provide additional support and is currently developing a transition programme for BTEC students and students with other non-traditional qualifications.

## References

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