Chapter Five

Bringing vocational qualifications into the inclusivity agenda: The case of the BTEC

Lavinia Mitton and Alexander Hensby

Abstract

In this chapter, Mitton and Hensby explore one of the most under-researched intersections within white-BAME attainment research: the role of entry qualifications. It provides statistical analysis of BTEC access and attainment trends, while qualitatively exploring BTEC entrants' experiences of transitioning to higher education. The authors find that an increasing proportion of students (particularly BAME students) are entering higher education with BTEC qualifications, but they are often disadvantaged by a learning culture that presupposes and privileges A-level entrants. This undervalues key skills and attributes developed through these programmes, while helping promulgate a stigma around BTECs (along with vocational qualifications more generally) as inferior to A-levels. Moreover, this stigma risks creating a legitimating discourse that helps obfuscate the structural causes of the white-BAME attainment gap. Mitton and Hensby argue for the need to bring vocational entry qualifications into universities' inclusivity agenda so that BTEC entrants' needs and experiences are sufficiently recognised and supported.

Keywords: Higher education; further education; race and ethnicity; vocational qualifications; BTEC; A-level; examinations

Introduction

Previous chapters have highlighted how the combination of sector-wide massification combined with widening participation drives has increased the number of BAME students entering higher education over the past twenty years. The same is also true for students with entry qualifications that are not A-level (Katartzi and Hayward, 2019; Shields and Masardo, 2017). These two trends are not unconnected, especially when we consider one of the most popular alternative qualifications for university, the BTEC. For more than half a century, students typically took A-levels at age 16 to 18 before going to university, yet by 2020 18.6 per cent of students from England[1] held a BTEC qualification (UCAS, 2020) with approximately 10 per cent of all university entrants in the UK possessing *only* BTEC qualifications (Myhill et al., 2020). This reflects a significant growth spurt in the past decade: between 2011 and 2020, the number of students from England aged 18 accepted with a BTEC qualification grew from 25,700 to 41,600 (UCAS, 2020).

The marketisation of higher education has arguably shifted the balance of power between universities and students, so that whereas once students competed to get into university, universities now compete to recruit them. This was partly driven by the development of a National Qualifications Framework (NQF), which provides an officially recognised basis for university admissions staff to compare different qualifications. A disproportionate number of BTEC students are from widening participation backgrounds and by accepting students from this entry route, universities been able to make progress in increasing the number of students from ethnic minorities in particular. By 2019, the proportion of black students entering HE with only a BTEC was nearly

twice that of white students, with nearly a third of all black students entering HE in 2019 possessing at least one BTEC (Atherton, 2021). National data also indicates intersections with class, as students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are also more likely to enter HE with a BTEC. Using the POLAR neighbourhood classification model, data from UCAS (2020) found that 25.5 per cent of pupils from the most deprived areas took at least one BTEC, compared to just 10.9 per cent from the least deprived quintile.

With research for this chapter focusing on the University of Kent, table 1 demonstrates that entry statistics mirror the national picture. Using data that matches our survey and interview cohort, we can see that a relatively high proportion of black students entered with only a BTEC compared to students from other ethnic groups. Table 1 also highlights gender differences: a higher proportion of males entered with only a BTEC across all ethnic groups.

Table 1: Further Education qualifications of entrants (2013 Home), by sex and ethnicity, University of Kent

Further Education qualification	Asian		Black		Chinese		Mixed		White	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
A-level	83%	68%	68%	45%	88%	69%	76%	68%	75%	73%
BTEC only	6%	16%	13%	33%	0%	19%	8%	18%	8%	13%
Mix of BTEC + other	5%	10%	5%	10%	8%	6%	8%	6%	6%	6%
Other e.g. International Baccalaureate	2%	4%	4%	2%	4%	6%	6%	2%	3%	4%
Access to HE Diploma	2%	1%	5%	3%	0%	0%	0%	3%	4%	3%
Not known	2%	2%	5%	6%	0%	0%	3%	3%	3%	2%

Source: Qlikview, University of Kent.

The academic performance of BTEC entrants paints a mixed picture. The overwhelming majority of BTEC entrants do not drop out or repeat a year and most graduating BTEC entrants leave university with a 2:1 or above – the standard definition of a 'good' degree (Dilnot et al, 2022). These are sizable successes for these students, especially those who without access to BTEC courses might not have had the opportunity to attend university at all. Nevertheless, compared with the achievement of A-level entrants we can identify areas of concern. Though more than 80 per cent continue to their second year, BTEC entrants are more likely to drop out than A-level entrants. Many studies (e.g. Dilnot et al., 2022; McCoy and Adamson, 2016; Myhill et al., 2017; Rouncefield-Swales, 2014; Round et al., 2012; UCAS, 2016) have shown that the reasons for this attrition are not simply academic, but also personal and financial. Furthermore, several lines of evidence have shown that BTEC entrants are less likely to be awarded a 'good' degree than their peers who took A-levels, even if they had obtained the highest possible grade in their BTEC (e.g. Dilnot et al., 2022; Gill and Vidal Rodeiro, 2014; Myhill et al., 2017). Moreover, Shields and Masardo (2015) have established that BTEC entrants are less likely to perform well academically in research-intensive institutions.

Quantitative analysis has shown that this attainment gap cannot be fully explained by their entry qualification, although it is a cumulative and exacerbating factor. Rather, ethnicity, gender, and social class interact with, or have additive or cumulative effects on, a student's disadvantage, and BTEC entrants are, on average, more likely to have a cluster of characteristics associated with lower

academic attainment (Shields and Masardo, 2015). To be clear, it is widely acknowledged that while degree results in general are lower for students from disadvantaged socio-economic groups, they are lower still for BTEC entrants (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014). As Dilnot et al. (2022) report, these gaps in degree outcomes between students who took BTECs and A-levels, are evident even when comparing students with similar backgrounds and prior achievement.

Therefore, an important question to ask is: to what extent is the attainment gap explained by (1) the curriculum, delivery, and student experience of BTEC courses; (2) structural barriers in society faced by BTEC learners, or (3) by universities' failure to appropriately support BTEC learners? The Department for Education has focused on the first of these, citing the higher dropout rates and poorer graduation outcomes as reasons to make significant reductions in the number of BTECs that it will fund in favour of a new qualification called T-levels by 2024. Anecdotal evidence suggests that lecturers confronted with the attainment gap are likely to criticise the quality of BTEC programmes for insufficiently preparing students for university. However, as this book has already shown with regard to the white-BAME attainment gap, deficit readings risk absolving universities of any responsibility to consider the inclusivity of their own learning culture – including methods of teaching and assessment, and the expectation that students will adapt as independent learners (Read et al, 2003; Thomas, 2002; Leathwood, 2006; Stuart et al, 2011). This is especially pertinent for HEIs which rely on students with vocational qualifications for recruitment.

In this chapter, we argue that if universities truly want to embrace widening participation, they need to prioritise the needs of students in possession of vocational qualifications such as the BTEC. While it is clearly important to address the gaps in outcomes between students with different entry qualification types, we support the use of routes into higher education that lead students from widening participation backgrounds to success at degree level. At the time of writing, the new T-level qualification will soon usurp the BTEC as the preeminent vocational route to university but the analysis and conclusions drawn from this chapter are relevant for all vocational or 'non-traditional' qualifications.

As with the previous three chapters, we draw on interviews with undergraduates (N=62) studying at the University of Kent in the 2014-5 academic year to capture their path to higher education, and their experiences of adapting to the university field. Our focus is on interviewees who entered university through a vocational route, drawing on narratives of white as well as BAME students to trace how their student identities were shaped by their entry qualification. Findings unpack the different factors that may lead to a student choosing to study BTECs and highlight their particular value as a learning environment that develops self-confidence. The chapter goes on to explore BTEC entrants' experiences of adapting to higher education, paying particular attention to curriculum and assessment differences as well as the stigma students often feel as a result. We conclude that entry qualifications do not define a student's academic capability, but universities need to rethink how students who do not possess A-levels are recognised and supported institutionally. This necessitates bringing the BTEC – along with other vocational qualifications – into the inclusivity agenda of HE.

The post-16 qualifications landscape in England: the rise of the BTEC

Qualifications in England are characterised by a deep and longstanding divide between academic and vocational education (Baker, 2019; Brockmann, and Laurie, 2016). In education policy since the 1940s, vocational education has consistently been conceptualised as a separate and distinct form of

learning, with its qualifications generally undervalued and treated as second-best to academic qualifications (Avis, 2004, 2009; House of Lords Select Committee on Social Mobility, 2016). This hierarchy has been further sustained by the attitudes of parents and teachers and societal norms, despite the evidence of significant benefits for learners, business, and the economy that derive from young people taking vocational courses (Jin et al., 2011; National Foundation for Educational Research, 2015; Wolf, 2011). Vocational qualifications are positioned as 'other' and lesser to the more established currency for progression to university of A-levels. This arguably fuels students' own perceptions of their worth and suitability for higher education.

The qualifications that are the subject of this chapter are 'Applied General' qualifications that are taken as part of a full-time two-year course. These are classroom-based in broad vocational areas such as leisure and tourism, business, or health and social care, and do not include work experience. They are aimed at a broader range of students than an A-level curriculum. They are pitched at young people interested in a particular sector or industry, but unsure about what specific job they would like to do (Department for Education, 2016). Applied General qualifications are also aimed at students wanting to continue their education through applied learning while simultaneously fulfilling entry requirements for HE courses. The BTEC falls into this category. 'BTEC' stands for the Business and Technology Education Council, which was established in 1984. Today the BTEC is organised and awarded by Edexcel, a privately-owned examination board. Sitting midway on the academic-vocational continuum, the BTEC can be considered a hybrid, distinguishable from both academically focused A-levels and pure work-based training (Davey and Fuller, 2011). BTECs are not the only general vocational qualifications available in England, but they are the most popular.

Major reform to government education policy has taken place following the recommendations of two landmark reports by independent panels set up by the government: The *Review of Vocational Education* (Wolf, 2011) and *The Sainsbury Report* (Independent Panel on Technical Education, 2016). Since 2010, the Conservative Government has sought to discredit the view that a vocational curriculum is inferior to academic options by making pupils choose at age 16 between an academic route with progression to university, and at the time of writing the recently established T-Level is intended to function as a technical vocational route on a par with A-levels. The government narrative in favour of distinct academic and vocational routes has since evolved to emphasise that students entering higher education with A-levels have 'better outcomes' than those taking non-A-level alternatives. This diagnosis does not address whether the problem lies with universities' neglect to adapt to BTEC students, and this chapter identifies areas where they have arguably fallen short. Despite the introduction of T-levels, it has become clear as the reforms have taken shape that BTEC qualifications will continue to be offered, so it remains necessary to understand how different types of qualifications affect trajectories and successes within higher education.

For many HEIs, accepting BTEC entrants has become an essential part of their recruitment strategy. With marketisation and massification policies transforming higher education in England for more than twenty years, universities compete with each other to maximise institutional growth and sustainability through undergraduate recruitment. Undergraduate tuition fees make up such a large fraction of universities' income that there has been a commercial imperative to accept ever more students. Consequently, universities have become increasingly willing to admit students with vocational qualifications. Data presented in table 2 shows that the acceptance rate for BTEC-only

applicants has increased by 13 per cent between 2011 and 2020, and at 87.9 per cent is now comparable to A-level applicants.

Table 2: Proportion of UK 18-year-old accepted applicants by qualifications held, England, 2011-2020

Applicant's qualifications	Proportion of applicants who were accepted (%)	
	2011	2020
A-level only	86.7%	90.7%
BTEC only	76.9%	87.9%
A-level & BTEC	83.1%	90.1%
Total	82.0%	89.4%

Source: UCAS (2020). UCAS Undergraduate Sector-Level End of Cycle Data Resources 2020.

Behind these overall figures, however, the proportion of BTEC entrants varies widely from one institution to another according to their position in the multi-level nested hierarchy of HE. The highest A-level grades remain the 'gold standard' for selection at the most prestigious research-intensive institutions (UCAS, 2020). Furthermore, there is marked variation in the proportion of BTEC entrants by degree subject, as data presented in table 3 shows. The pattern was broadly replicated at the University of Kent, which had relatively high numbers of BTEC entrants to its arts, business, sports science, and computing courses, and few to humanities and law. Table 4 further demonstrates how this intersects closely with ethnicity. Sports and Physical Education was the most represented subject among black students by a considerable margin, followed by business. A high proportion of Asian BTEC entrants had taken Information Technology or Business and Marketing.

Table 3: Degree subjects taken by BTEC entrants, England, 2013/2014

Degree subject	% of BTEC entrants
Creative Arts and Design (incl. Performing Arts)	19.1%
Business and Management	16.1%
Biological Sciences (incl. Psychology & Sport)	15.7%
Mathematics and Computer Sciences	10.2%
Subjects Allied to Medicine (incl. Nursing)	8.0%
Social Studies (incl. Economics & Geography)	7.1%
Communication Studies (incl. Media Studies)	4.3%
Engineering	4.1%
Law	2.7%
Physical Sciences	1.9%
Architecture, Building & Planning	1.7%
Linguistics and Classics (incl. English Lang & Lit)	0.8%
Historical and Philosophical Studies	0.5%

Source: David MacKay, Head of Stakeholder Engagement (HE), Pearson, The review of the BTEC Nationals and implications for Higher Education, (Presentation to University of Kent, 12 February 2016).

Table 4: Entrants with BTEC (2013 Home), by BTEC subject area and ethnicity, University of Kent

BTEC subject area	% by ethnic group and BTEC subject				
	Asian	Black	Mixed	White	Grand Total
Sports and Physical Education	12%	28%	6%	19%	20%
Information Technology	21%	10%	18%	10%	12%
Maths & Science	9%	7%	6%	15%	12%
Performing Arts / Arts	3%	11%	24%	14%	12%
Business / Marketing	21%	20%	18%	5%	11%
Health and Social Care / Childcare / Social Work	9%	8%	18%	11%	10%
Design and Engineering	3%	0%	6%	5%	4%
Humanities	6%	3%	6%	5%	4%
Other Social Sciences	6%	6%	0%	4%	4%
Music / Music Tech	0%	2%	0%	4%	3%
Finance and Economics	0%	2%	0%	3%	2%
Total	100%	100%	100	100%	100%

Source: Qlikview, University of Kent.

Choosing BTEC: the student perspective

The world of post-16 education is complex and there are a wide variety of reasons why young people might choose a BTEC course. However, choice is to some extent conditioned by the availability of different qualification types and individual subjects at FE level. There are four common types of settings that cater for 16 to 19-year-olds in England: Further Education colleges (FEC); specialist sixth form colleges; sixth forms within secondary schools and grammar schools; and private schools. BTECs are offered as well as, or in place of, A-levels in all these, but are much more commonly offered by FE colleges (Kelly, 2017; Smith et al., 2015). Furthermore, because of the cost of employing suitably qualified teachers, A-level or BTEC courses in any single subject can only be offered when a critical mass of pupils wishes to take it. Theoretically, pupils can choose to attend schools or colleges with the courses most suited to them. However, travel and the associated costs affects many young people's choice of post-16 destination. Consequently, a major restriction on choice of course is what is on offer locally. Stevenson et al. (2019) established that the close correlation between schools with high numbers of minority ethnic pupils and schools which offer predominantly BTEC rather than A-level qualifications means that many BAME secondary school leavers are prevented from accessing many university degree courses. Since schools in more disadvantaged areas are much more likely to offer only BTECs, young people do not have equal opportunities to access A-level courses over BTECs, and this may lead them to choose a set of qualifications that are not a good match for their aptitudes and work aspirations (Wolf, 2011).

Constraints in the range of FE available options may lead to young people taking BTECs out of necessity rather than choice. This may be further compounded by 'pupil inertia', the marked tendency for young people to remain at their current school and transfer into its sixth form at 16, rather than fully consider other choices (Kent County Council, 2022). Recalling arguments made in

chapter two, it is therefore important to consider the subjective rationality of pupil and student decision-making (Glaesser and Cooper, 2014) rather than assume that the policy rhetoric of consumer choice operates on a level playing field.

This is not to say that BTEC does not represent an informed and positive choice for many young people, however. Interview accounts especially highlight the value of BTEC for restoring students' confidence in their academic ability, providing a new beginning in a personalised and supportive learning environment. In particular, following negative experiences at GCSE level the BTEC's greater emphasis on coursework assessment was often emphasised as a key factor in students' decision-making. This was certainly true for Emily and Lauren, both of whom stating that the BTEC restored their confidence as a learner after initially struggling with A-levels. BTEC provided a fresh opportunity that helped them re-form possible selves as successful students, motivating them to apply to university:

> At first, I did four A-levels... I did pass some, but some of them I didn't do as well. So, then I decided to take the route of doing a BTEC course. (Emily[2], BA Business Studies – Black African)

> I did my first year at A-levels … I completely failed Psychology, and English I wasn't that great at. So, I thought, 'OK, my next challenge, I'll go to college'. (Lauren, BA Business Studies – White)

A key factor in the power of BTEC to restore students' confidence is the learning culture and environment. As we saw in chapter two, the competitive nature of contemporary state schooling can cause stress and anxiety for many young people, especially when this is presented as the only model for efficacious learning. This was particularly evident in Miranda's experience, whose academic potential made her a target for school expectations via its 'gifted and talented' programmes:

> In high school they tried to get me on gifted and talented programmes where they try and make you do extra things. But we didn't really have the funding for it so it didn't really help me much. It ended up hindering [me] if anything, which was part of the reason I hated high school. They predicted me A*s, which unsurprisingly, my mum was annoyed about. (Miranda, BSc Anthropology – White).

This competitive schooling culture is especially evident in the county of Kent, which retains a grammar school model. These state secondary schools select their pupils for academic ability by means of an examination taken at age 11, known as the '11-plus'. Grammar schools can be a good fit for those who enjoy intense academic subjects and thrive in high-pressure, high-expectation environments, but this can intensify the pressure young people feel to maximise their educational outcomes from an early age:

> I first started off at a grammar school, for like three months, and then I hated it, so I went to do IT [as a BTEC]. My mum was like, "You need good grades, you have to go to a grammar school, blah, blah, blah, and they have to be perfect. Now I'm a year behind the standard age, but in the long run I don't regret it. She's happy because I'm doing quite well. (Hannah, BSc Business Information – Black African)

The combination of institutional and parental pressure at FE level echoes BAME interview accounts presented in chapter two. In the case of Hannah this is intensified further when we recall her need to make a financial contribution to her single-parent household while at university, as discussed in the same chapter. For Hannah, the decision to study BTEC at college rather than her grammar school's sixth form represented a desire for more freeing environment where the atmosphere was less rigidly conformist:

> I wasn't being told off for wearing, like, clunky shoes or stripy hair or having piercings, which is fantastic, because I could actually, like, just be myself. And once I could just be myself in the situation that was fine, because that was the only problem I really had at school. (Amy, BSc Anthropology – White)

As this suggests, studying BTEC represented for many students a positive choice from the outset. Megan, for instance, studied a combination of BTEC and A-levels, but favoured the former for studying performing arts as it offered a more practical and personalised learning experience than was offered in the A-level curriculum:

> They rock! People go, 'Oh BTECs,' because they're stupid or whatever but it got me into Kent, you know. Like you created crazy bonds those two years with five people in my class and it was just the most amazing experience [...] I was to go into performing arts A-level it would be really studying the history of drama and all that boring stuff. (Megan, BSc Psychology – Mixed Asian)

It is also important to note that for many students, the enjoyment and satisfaction of studying at BTEC opened a door to the possibility of applying to university – an option that some had initially excluded following their experiences at GCSE and/or A-level. Indeed, some were unaware at the start of their BTEC courses that it could even be a route into higher education. As Joseph explained, BTECs can build motivation to enter HE:

> I was really doing well in my IT classes, so I just thought, 'you know, if I'm good at this, maybe progress on this road, maybe go to [university]. (Joseph, BSc Digital Arts – Black African)

Despite such motivations, the value of studying BTEC was tempered by inconsistencies in how vocational qualifications were recognised and integrated into the HE admissions. Amy, for example, was critical of the advice she received from teachers when choosing to study BTEC, claiming not to have been made aware that some universities and degree programmes did not recognise BTECs as a valid entry qualification. This puts more emphasis on schools and colleges to provide pupils with the right information that will enable them to make decisions that best correspond to their interests and ambitions. However, this is arguably compromised by schools' concerns to remain competitive in their league table performance, especially if it is felt that BTEC courses are more likely to yield consistently higher success rates than certain A-level subjects (Richards, 2016). Nevertheless, for many students BTEC was valued specifically for offering a pathway to academic success and university entry that circumvented examinations as the core mode of assessment.[3] As we have already seen, Lauren chose BTEC having failed her first year of A-levels. The opportunity to study at FE level without the stress of exams was crucial to restoring confidence in her academic ability:

> I did my first year at A-level and that's when it all went to pot, really. I have panic attacks when I'm sitting exams. […] I found the perfect course for me, and I gained three distinction stars which is the equivalent of three A* at A-level, but that was for doing all coursework and no exams at all. (Lauren, BA Business Studies – White)

James had a similar story, deciding to drop out of A-levels after struggling with his first-year exams. His transfer to BTEC was initially more circumspect, assuming it to be an inferior qualification. However, by allowing him to foreground his oral skills together with the experience of working closely with his teacher, the BTEC helped him develop confidence in his academic ability and readiness for university:

> My problem is that verbally in class I am fantastic but then when it comes to the exams, I don't do that well. So, I ended up dropping [A-levels] and doing a BTEC in Business. I was like, "Oh it is a BTEC..." but I thought, "screw it, I am just going to get the highest grade possible." Which I did. […] I put a lot of hard effort into that, and my teacher wanted to put us through uni standards. I am really grateful for him, he wanted to show us that just because you are only doing a BTEC, it doesn't mean that it is to any standard less than doing A-levels. Doing the BTEC showed me what I am possibly really good at. My BTEC teacher is a solicitor, so he decided that we would do also a couple of law modules and from there I really liked law, law seemed really interesting. So, I think it was good that I failed that year because [otherwise] I wouldn't have done the BTEC and I wouldn't be here now and doing a course which I really, really enjoy. (James, LLB Law & Business Administration – Black Caribbean)

James's experience illustrates the suitability of BTEC as an alternative pathway for university, to the extent that his teacher's professional background helped him identify a combination degree in law and business matched his interests and career goals (see chapter two). However, the heterogeneity of BTEC entrants should not be overlooked. A number of studies (e.g. Gartland, 2014; Gartland and Smith, 2018; Reay et al., 2005; Slack et al., 2014) have concluded that the strong emphasis in sixth forms compared to FE colleges on university as the 'natural' next step means that their pupils tend to be somewhat more informed, prepared, and confident about going to university. Like James, Megan benefitted from this encouragement for progressing to university:

> The fact I went to a sixth form was maybe one of the reasons I actually ended up getting into university because they pushed, pushed, pushed. (Megan, BSc Psychology – Mixed Asian)

To sum up, it should be evident from the narratives in this section that the choices students make regarding their post-16 qualifications are complex and not necessarily shaped by academic ability, but rather a combination of structural factors, personal preferences, and the influences of peers and families. This is consistent with previous studies – as well as findings from chapter two – which question the extent to which pupil and student choice operates from a level playing field, highlighting inequalities of class and race in particular (e.g. Archer et al., 2007; Archer and Yamashita, 2003; Ball et al., 1996, 2000, 2002; Glaesser and Cooper, 2014). Moreover, BTEC offers an alternative pathway to university which can not only restore young people's self-confidence following previously negative educational experiences, but also provide a nurturing learning environment. However, BTEC entrants' transition to university poses new challenges which not only

points to questions over their readiness for university, but also universities' readiness to fully recognise and support BTEC entrants. This is the focus of the next section.

BTEC entrants' transition into higher education

The previous chapters have highlighted how universities uphold a dominant culture that presupposes a model of the 'normal' or 'ideal' student, both inside and outside of the classroom (Thomas, 2002; Read et al, 2003; Stuart et al, 2011). Though students from any background may experience pressure and anxiety to 'fit in and get on' once at university (Bathmaker et al, 2016: 77), students who lack prior academic and social capital to conform to these norms and expectations are likely to struggle the most. While this has shown to apply to students from working-class backgrounds and students of colour (Read et al, 2003; Jessop and Williams, 2009; Yee, 2016), we argue that attention should also be afforded to students with vocational entry qualifications – particularly those for whom two or all three of these characteristics apply. All of our BTEC entrant interviewees expressed at least an awareness of how the qualification was negatively perceived in popular culture. This perception is aptly illustrated by the multitude of user-supplied definitions of 'BTEC' in the popular wiki site Urban Dictionary. A typical example reads thus:

> Used to express something of lower-grade, a downgrade of something, or a rubbish version of something. Also used to refer to a dumb or idiotic person. Originates from the BTEC qualification, said to be taken by dumb people in order for a work-force job. Examples include: *'Nokia is the BTEC iPhone'; 'You're some BTEC wasteman'; 'eBay is the BTEC Amazon'* (Urban Dictionary, 2019).

Such stereotypes arguably derive from derogatory readings of sorts of narratives presented in the previous section, namely those of pupils who succeeded at BTEC after initially struggling with A-levels, or those who sought to avoid taking exams. This stereotype may also be fuelled by the uneven way BTEC operates as an entry qualification for higher education. While the sector as a whole has become more accommodating of BTEC entrants, they are not accepted by all universities or degree programmes. According to Dilnot et al (2022: 4) approximately 7 per cent entering the often higher-ranking and 'prestigious' Russell Group universities possess BTECs, with negligible numbers admitted at Oxford and Cambridge. Though Kent admits BTEC entrants onto many of its degree programmes, our interviewees frequently found their qualifications unfavourably compared with A-levels by fellow students:

> I get constantly asked by foreign students 'Oh, the BTEC, that's easier, isn't it?' Or, 'Oh, it's lower.' (Amy, BSc Anthropology – White)

> People go, 'Oh BTECs,' 'cause they're stupid. Everyone's like, BTEC, like you're dumb or something because you're doing a BTEC. And I don't know, I thought that as well. (Megan, BSc Psychology - Mixed Asian)

The power of this stigma is perhaps most evident in Megan's admission given her aforementioned positive experiences of BTEC ('They rock!'). Some students were more bullish in asserting their BTECs' grade equivalence to A-level, as well as the fact that it had got them into university regardless. Indeed, some cited the fact that they the university had awarded them an 'academic excellence' financial stipend in recognition of their attainment at FE level. In any case, though, the

widespread nature of this stigma posed a challenge for incoming BTEC entrants, one that has the power to compound existing feelings of unbelonging relating to ethnicity or class background. It is therefore essential that universities accepting vocational qualifications seek to address this stigma, especially as the impact may easily go under the radar. After all, these qualifications constitute neither an identity group nor a protected characteristic. Yet as we will see in the next section, this is an issue for university learning and teaching as much as it is for wider campus culture.

Transitioning into different modes of teaching, learning and assessment

According to Bernstein (1996) and Young (2008), a key challenge in students' adaptation to university relates to the need to reposition themselves in a hierarchical field that valorises certain forms of knowledge over others. Where students perceive a misalignment, they may question the value of their existing knowledge and its suitability for the HE field. Recalling findings from chapter three, this relates not only to curriculum-based skills and knowledge but also the academic capital that students are expected to accrue to successfully navigate the rules and conventions of university study (Bernstein, 1996; Watson, 2013). Despite providing a pathway for university access, stigmas surrounding the value and rigour of a BTEC qualification appear credible when higher education learning and teaching presupposes A-level knowledge and skillsets. BTEC courses typically privilege applied knowledge and work-related skills, which many students specified as a key attribute of their courses compared with A-level equivalents. This is well illustrated through Amy's recollection of her Countryside Management BTEC:

> We had to go out and do species identifications and just really practical work, and then would be back in the classroom, I was so happy to be learning about stuff that actually applied to me. (Amy, BSc Anthropology – White)

Megan also enjoyed the practical side to studying her BTEC in performing arts on the grounds that 'you see the result', one which contrasted with her chosen BA in Psychology where outcomes were limited to 'a piece of paper'. While Megan's adjustment issues are overshadowed by her change of subject, Daniel felt that his BTEC in computing provided only partial preparation for his BSc in Business Information Technology. He believed that the degree's greater emphasis on programming implicitly privileged his A-level peers:

> The BTEC course I did in computing is very different to what I'm doing in university. I don't think there is anything actually like my BTEC offered as a course – my BTEC was quite hands-on, whereas the computing I'm doing is very much programming, which is two very split ends of the discipline. (Daniel, BSc Business Information Technology – White)

Similarly, Joseph felt that his BTEC did not align with the prior knowledge course conveners took for granted when studying for his degree in Digital Arts:

> The level of math was above what I've done. [The BTEC] gave me the knowledge when it comes to the computer side, understanding what a computer does, about components, tech, and all that. But what it did not give me is the mathematics. (Joseph, BSc Digital Arts – Black African)

Rebecca had assumed that her decision to study a BA in Health and Social Care would entail a smooth continuation of her BTEC of the same name. However, she felt unprepared for changes in the expected styles of writing and referencing, as well as the emphasis on critical thinking:

> Obviously, many people go to uni and say, 'Oh, it's difficult, more reading,' so I was expecting it to be difficult compared to college… but it's way different from the health and social care we do in college. Referencing in college and referencing in university is very different, and then the things we learn here. Criticising a book or something, we didn't do all that in college. […] Sometimes when I'm doing my essay it's difficult, it's difficult to write in academic language, especially in second year because that's when they expect you to do more. (Rebecca, BA Health & Social Care – Black African)

Of course, some readers may feel that these struggles are an inevitable and even necessary part of the process of adapting to university-level learning and assessment. This may hold some truth, but what remains significant is how students often felt *disadvantaged* in their preparedness for higher education. Whether this constitutes a valid criticism of their course or not, it brings to the fore perceptions that among BTEC entrants that A-level students were more suited to the learning they encountered at degree level. As noted in chapter six, this perception can also be unwittingly reproduced by academic staff (i.e. statements such as 'you should already know this from your A-levels…' – see chapter six) which may diminish BTEC entrants' motivation for study.

Admittedly, the transition from BTEC to degree level study is smoother for some academic subjects than others since BTEC qualifications were initially designed to prepare pupils for fields of employment rather than higher education. The smoothness of this transition can also be dependent upon the optional units offered by any single school or college. In contrast, the Russell Group (2017) promotes the view that certain A-level subjects (notably mathematics, English Literature, modern and classical languages, history, geography, physics, chemistry, and biology) are uniquely effective as 'facilitating subjects' for a diverse range of disciplines at degree level. This may account for Joseph and Daniel's struggles with the amount of maths in their respective degree subjects. Nevertheless, it should be the responsibility of the institution, not the student, to address any misalignments existing between a programme's required skillset and the entry qualifications it accepts.

This returns us to one of the book's key themes, that of staff-student interactions. We have already seen in chapter three that the pressure to succeed academically, combined with a fear of 'sticking out', has resulted in many students of colour misconstruing independent learning as akin to 'self-reliance'. This entails the avoidance of interactions with academic staff, even when students admit to struggling with their work. The transition to a more impersonal and distanced relationship at degree level – owing both to larger cohort sizes as well as the modular system – is arguably more pronounced for BTEC entrants than it is for A-level entrants. BTEC courses tend to have smaller class sizes than A-levels and involve regular interaction with one main tutor, a model that particularly benefits pupils who respond well to teacher-directed motivation. This was particularly the case with regards to assessment. With the greater emphasis in the BTEC on mastering a task before moving on to the next one, the tutor typically provides feedback until the required level of competence has been achieved. This could involve, for example, repeated marking of drafts and extending submission dates. Moreover, summative assessment generally takes place *after* the learning outcomes have been achieved. These teacher-pupil interactions have the potential to engender

strong relations of mutual trust, relations which stand in stark contrast to student-staff interactions at university. Both Daniel and Charlotte admitted to struggling with the lack of regular assessment feedback they had received at BTEC, as well as the opportunity to revise and improve their work incrementally:

> It was very different from a BTEC where you had constant feedback, where you could constantly go back and forth between your tutor, coming to university where you hand the work in and that's final. (Daniel, BSc Computer Science – White)

> [At BTEC] you have that guide, that fallback in case like you're a bit confused on what to do, or you do a draft and say, "Can you read my essay for me?" And then they actually go through it. But in university you can't do that. You can only ask your peers to help you proofread [or] double check if you've done something right. And it's a bit more independent, which is good to some degree, but at the same time it's hard because you want that someone of greater authority to make you feel like, yes, you've done the right work, just to give you that reassurance. (Charlotte, BSc Psychology – Black African)

As we saw in chapter three, Charlotte sought to build her own peer networks to help support her transition to independent learning, though this did not necessarily compensate for – or help stimulate – proactively seeking support from academic staff. Moreover, some students were also conscious that their degree programme would also entail a return to exams as core mode of assessment. As noted earlier in this chapter, assessment methods are where the divide between A-level and BTEC learning is most evident. For many years, BTEC assessment patterns did not include exams as courses prioritised the development of 'industry ready skills' (Wolf, 2011). Though some courses have since introduced timed written tests (itself a belated recognition of their additional function as an alternative pathway to higher education), BTEC courses continue to favour continuous assessment and portfolios. To some extent, this is also true for degree programmes, though written exams comparable to those at GCSE and A-level are also prevalent – especially on core modules. For this reason, BTEC entrants felt relatively prepared for the self-discipline of doing coursework but acutely aware of their disadvantage relative to A-level entrants when it came to sitting exams. Indeed, for interviewees such as James the experience of transferring to BTEC had internalised a belief that they were poor exam performers:

> I was like, 'Exams are not for me.' I do better when I have coursework… When it comes down to the exams, I don't do that well. (James, LLB Law – Black Caribbean)

The return of exams therefore had an unsettling effect on BTEC entrants' sense of competence as university learners. This was further compounded by a perception that module conveners were ignorant of how exams specifically disadvantaged the BTEC learners in class. For Lauren, this was felt to have negatively impacted her performance in her first year of study:

> When I was at college, I was on a BTEC which is obviously all coursework and I'm so much better at course work than I am at exams. So, when I came here, I didn't realise I was going to be faced with six exams at the end of the first year. That's what really held me back. (Lauren, BA Business Studies – White)

Debates have of course raged for many years over the value of exams as a model of assessment, with familiar critiques including their tendency to capture a 'snapshot' rather than performance over an extended period, that they reward 'shallow' rather than deep engagement with the subject, and that they advantage pupils and students from privileged backgrounds (Hyman, 2021). This has gained intensity in recent years following the sudden shift to remote 'open book' exams during the COVID-19 pandemic, with concerns over exacerbating the 'digital divide' countered by the benefits of eliminating performance anxieties associated with high-intensity examination halls (Shakeel et al, 2021; Bansal, 2021). Whichever way one feels about this debate, however, they lead us to fundamental questions over what degree-level education and achievement should mean in an increasingly massified HE system. With there no longer being a common transition to university (Christie, 2009), it is not sufficient to pursue BTEC recruitment while upholding norms and expectations that directly inhibit their capacity to succeed from the onset.

Conclusion

Despite increasing numbers of students entering higher education with BTECs, universities have struggled to arrest their differential attainment compared with A-level entrants. This should be a priority for the sector for a number of reasons. First, it exposes inconsistencies in the way vocational qualifications are recognised within higher education. In embracing the BTEC as a valid pathway to higher education, many universities (including Kent) have been able to expand their recruitment reach and income. Yet once these students arrive at university, they encounter a learning environment that still largely presupposes A-level curricula and assessment skills. Though it might be true that some BTEC entrants were poorly advised at FE level, or they pursued educational pathways which reflect inequalities of subject and qualification choice in their local colleges and sixth-forms, their performance could be improved through a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Second, this chapter has foregrounded an important intersection between entry qualifications and the white-BAME awarding gap. We can see familiar themes and dynamics across both: the structural privileging of an 'ideal' or 'normal' student profile both inside and outside of the classroom, reduced access to modes of support which have hitherto supported educational success, and the onus placed on the students themselves to make up the difference. Though this chapter has drawn on the accounts of white as well as BAME BTEC entrants, the former does not at least have to contend with racial unbelonging. Recalling themes explored in chapter three, the combination of these factors (as well as class) is likely to exacerbate a desire to self-protect from interactions that risk drawing attention to students' competence as a student. As the next chapter will show, this can negatively affect BAME BTEC entrants' motivation to seek improvement in their academic performance.

Third, the awarding gap between A-level and BTEC entrants raises questions over the learning environment of higher education more generally. As we will later see in chapter eight, the massification of universities places academic staff in a quandary over the interactions and support it can and should offer to students. It is our belief that insufficient attention has been paid to the lives of BTEC entrants as a group of students in their own right, including their educational backgrounds, motivations for studying at university, and the challenges many of them face. While the BTEC itself

may have a limited future as a pathway to higher education, the same challenges are likely to apply to those with other vocational qualifications, including the T-level.

It is for this reason that we argue that vocational qualifications should be brought into universities' inclusivity agenda. Through no fault of their own students with BTEC are positioned outside of common constructions of the normal student, though much like commuters they do not constitute an identity or protected characteristic and so are less likely to mobilise as an interest group. Moreover, any institutional strategy seeking to improve the academic attainment of students of colour should also take note of BAME students' prior educational qualifications.

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[1] Contextual data and analysis for this chapter focuses exclusively on England. Although pupils can take BTEC qualifications in Northern Ireland, they are not offered in Scotland or Wales. Instead, they respectively award the Higher National Certificate (HNC) and the Welsh Baccalaureate (Bacc) as vocational alternatives to A-Level.

[2] All student names in this chapter have been anonymised, with pseudonyms applied consistently across all chapters in this book.

[3] Examinations were not formally included as part of BTEC assessment until 2016.