Transforming Transitions – HEFCE Catalyst Project

Phase 1: FE Tutor and HE Lecturer Perceptions of Student Experiences of Further and Higher Education
Transforming Transitions – HEFCE Catalyst Project

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1 Executive Summary

Transforming Transitions is a collaborative project supported by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) through their Catalyst Fund. The project aims to better understand and challenge the differential educational outcomes of BTEC students at universities, through research and the development of interventions designed to support students with BTEC qualifications as they apply for, and then enter, higher education. The project is chiefly focusing on three subject areas: Sports Science, Business Studies and Computer Science.

This piece of research forms part of the project and provides the evidence-base for intervention development. It is based on seven interviews with FE tutors and eleven interviews with HE lecturers which explore FE tutor and HE lecturer perceptions of the student experience as they transition from further to higher education. Key findings include:

- The data from this piece of research reinforce the rationale for this project: that BTEC students are less likely to perform as well as A level students, leading to differential outcomes throughout their time at university, and are more likely to drop out after their first year
- BTEC students are more likely to find challenging certain elements of study at higher education, including writing academic essays, reading and synthesising information, and research skills
- BTEC students generally find lectures a taxing way of learning. This is likely due to their unfamiliarity which leads to uncertainty as to how they contribute to overall learning
- Assessment methods are also perceived as an area where BTEC students will struggle, particularly with revision techniques and sitting exams
- Lack of confidence is a perceived as a barrier to progress and performance at both FE and HE levels. Lack of confidence may impact negatively on self-belief, which in turn impacts on learning and achievement
- BTEC students are likely to have been able to choose the ways of learning and assessment methods which suit them best. This is in stark contrast to higher education where lectures and exams dominate
- HE lecturers perceive BTEC students as having benefitted from significant amounts of support while at college, which may account for why they are perceived to find university pedagogy and assessment processes more tricky with a higher degree of self-reliance and motivation
- Live at home students, a high proportion of which are BTEC students, are much less likely to participate in the extracurricular opportunities available at university.
- FE tutors feel strongly that BTEC courses prepare students for employability and readiness to work through the development of transferable skills. However this training in skills development does not seem to readily transfer to higher education
2 Introduction

The Transforming Transitions project is funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) through the catalyst fund. This fund commits up to £30 million in annual funding. The money aims to drive innovation in the HE sector, enhance excellence and efficiency in HE and support innovative solutions. As part of a wider programme involving projects across the country, its aim is to address student barriers to success by exploring the differential progress and outcomes of different groups of students through university. This project seeks to understand Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) students’ experiences of transition across the divide between Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) and will design, implement and evaluate evidence based interventions to improve differential education outcomes at university. Transforming Transitions focuses upon three particular subjects; Sports Science, Business and Computer Studies. It is a collaborative project involving a consortium of four selective, high tariff universities (University of Exeter, University of Birmingham, Loughborough University and Queen Mary University London), four partner FE colleges (Leicester College, Hereford Sixth Form College and City and Islington College), plus Pearson Education Limited who provide BTEC qualifications.

This report outlines the findings from interviews and focus groups carried out with FE tutors and HE lecturers from the four participating institutions. The following section explores the methodological approach adopted, before the findings of the research are set out and discussed

3 Methodology

This research is a small-scale, qualitative study into FE tutor and HE lecturer perceptions of the student experience as they transition from further to higher education. Interviews and focus groups were held with the four participating institutions and their partner colleges. The sample is outlined below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>No. of FE interviews</th>
<th>No. of HE interviews</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>QMUL</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bham</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exe</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lboro</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Informal semi-structured interviews were chosen for data collection, due to their potential to provide rich data. The design of the interview schedules was built upon previous research conducted by the University of Exeter and Pearson Education (the provider of BTEC qualifications. Because this aforementioned study identified key themes considered to be relevant to the Transforming Transitions project, they were drawn upon to form the basis of the interview questions. In addition, because the final data collection stage of the Pearson Education project coincided with the first phase, relevant interview data from the University of Exeter\(^1\) was used in both studies. Questions focused on the following themes:

- Teaching, learning and assessment experiences including:
  - Entry qualifications (HE) Transition Experiences and Entry Qualifications (FE)

\(^1\) The Exeter university study had included students studying Drama, Business and Management and Sport and Health Sciences.
Curriculum

Ways of learning

Assessment practices

- Literacy, Numeracy and Transferable Experiences
- Relationship and social experiences
- HE lecturer perspectives on how BTEC students’ progress. FE tutor perspectives on BTEC student progress and access to university courses

The interviews were recorded and transcribed in full and thematic analysis was employed as the method of data analysis. The analytical process followed a team coding protocol and analysis was subsequently carried out by four of the researchers. One research fellow analysed the interviews that she conducted with the HE and FE lecturers at her own interview. A balanced set of interviews from the remaining six institutions were shared between the three research fellows across the three institutions. Three interviews were allocated to all researchers for coder agreement checking, and were coded at the same point in the research cycle. Notes on new codes were made as necessary, as were queries or concerns. Skype meetings were held periodically during which the researchers went through the moderation interviews to discuss new codes and to check and refine level of coder agreement. Codes were subsequently amended, as appropriate.

Coding followed the principles of bottom-up inductive coding, with initial open coding of the data, followed by axial coding, clustering the data into related themes. The coding process generated seven top-level themes:

- Academic preparedness
- Student performance, progress and pathway
- Assessment practices
- Academic support
- Ways of learning
- Social capital
- Transferable skills

A limitation of this research is that not all HE lecturers interviewed knew their individual students by academic background which may skew findings. In some cases individual lecturers will make a point of establishing the academic background of students at individual level, while others will have an awareness at cohort level and will only become aware of student background if there is a problem.
4 Findings

4.1 Academic preparedness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HE Academic preparedness</td>
<td>Lecturer perceptions of how well prepared, or otherwise, students are for their academic study in higher education with particular reference to BTEC students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Academic literacy</td>
<td>How well prepared, or otherwise, tutors and lecturers perceive students to be in terms of their academic literacy as they apply for, and then enter, university.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numeracy, mathematics and statistics</td>
<td>How well prepared, or otherwise, lecturers perceive students to be in terms of their academic numeracy involving mathematics, statistics and mathematical skills. Including: algebra; re-arranging and solving equations; laws of indices; linear and quadratic equations and their graphs; log and exponential functions; equations of motion (biomechanics); sets and Venn diagrams; differentiation and finding maximum; descriptive statistics – mean, mode, standard deviation, box plots, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject and content knowledge</td>
<td>How well prepared, or otherwise, lecturers perceive students to be in terms of their academic subject and content knowledge (excluding specific references to academic literacy and academic numeracy involving mathematics, statistics and mathematical skills)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This theme captured lecturers’ perceptions of student academic and numeracy literacy, including pulling information together from academic texts and summarising, writing academic essays, reading and understanding academic texts, and numeracy ability. HE lecturers were asked whether they felt there was a difference in preparedness between students from an A level background, and students with a BTEC. FE lecturers were asked to consider whether preparation for university differed between BTEC students and A level students, and if so in what ways.

4.1.1 HE lecturer perceptions of students’ academic literacy skills

A number of HE lecturers remarked on BTEC students’ general lack of academic preparedness for university. Comments included:

… there are other students you see from day one and you think well they’ve come along here and they really aren’t prepared for this at all and it’s disheartening when you see it, because there are other places as I say, where they could prosper

I worry that it doesn’t give students a rounded academic skill set ... I think in catering to certain students who have some strengths they’re almost magnifying their weaknesses if that makes sense. And I’m sure if we looked back over the records we would have had some brilliant BTEC students but I just know that some of them just really struggle. But as do other students who’ve done A Levels.

Several lecturers considered that it was not possible to draw a clear-cut distinction between the academic literacy skills of students based on BTEC and A level background alone. Their perception

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2 The project understands academic literacy skills to be: reading and understanding academic texts; pulling information together from academic texts and summarising; writing academic essays; writing evaluations and reflections; referencing.
was that, ‘Different students bring different attributes, different skills’ and an observation that, although there may be differences in academic literacy skills between students based on academic background, there may also be differences based on previous learning styles and cultural differences:

I mean personally if we were talking about accounting and finance students the majority of students come from mainland China so my Chinese students when it comes to numbers are brilliant. They even challenge me. But when it comes to writing or presentations then that’s a weakness, but it has nothing to do with their previous entry qualifications … So that’s a massive challenge, not only I guess for our department but across the business school and university or even the country, because it’s difficult to manage that variable particularly in year 1.

Another lecturer in the same focus group picks up on the point that students may not have a strong suite of academic literacy skills across the board and suggests that, ‘part of the problem’ is that students have to employ, ‘the whole breadth of skills’ regardless of the degree they are studying:

... so just like you’ve got students who struggle with the writing but are very good at the maths, there are lots of students the other way round, who are very good in the qualitative type writing they have to do, but when it comes to the maths and stats they struggle ... there are very few ideal students who have the skills right across the board.

Several HE tutors noted that writing is an area that first year students can find challenging. There does not seem be consensus between lecturers on whether one particular group of students might find essay writing more or less of a challenge than another group. Comments included:

I would say that they complain that they don’t know how to write essays, and I can see that … I’ve acted as the plagiarism officer for five years, and I’m confident that when students say, “I cannot write,” it’s not because they cannot write, it’s because they don’t know what to write about. I think the major struggle that they have when they need to put the thoughts together is their ability to understand how to approach the content at university level, and know that you don’t just read one paper and write about this paper. You need to read ten papers and come down with what you think.

Another lecturer makes a similar point about students often not knowing, ‘what to write, rather than how to write’, but that this may not be ‘totally their fault’:

Of course there is the technical component that they need to get practice about, knowing how to break down the components of an essay that is written for academic purposes. But other than that I think the main issue is knowing what to write about, rather than not knowing how to write ... But it’s not totally their fault. I think, again, it has to do a lot with how students are being taught.

This might include being signposted to the appropriate academic literature and being taught how to engage with it:

If you have lectures that are like a spurt of information, without any attempt to show how these things have been linked, how do you expect them [students] to do that [engage with academic literature] without getting some examples of, “I told you about this and about this and about this, now look at this.” But … you have to do that for them. If you don’t do that for them they just don’t know what it is and how to do it.

One lecturer suggests that social media might have a negative impact on student ability to write academically:
... writing clearly, writing in paragraphs as opposed to bullet points, which unfortunately today's social media culture is about short, quick, communications and I think all students struggle with getting to grips with academic writing’.

This lecturer does not consider that this is necessarily an issue confined to one particular group:

I couldn’t honestly tell you in terms of writing, whether any particular entry profile groups are stronger than the others ... if for example we get a student with A Levels in physics, chemistry and maths – very good A Levels, As, A*s, they may still have difficulty with writing essays.

Another lecturer observes that students who find writing more challenging than others are often those who:

... don’t tend to do lots of essays or reports as part of their degree. So accounting students, economics students, they tend to fall behind in their writing abilities at the academic level that’s required here at university.

An additional challenge for students is that there are different writing conventions within different disciplines:

So we’ve got a few, obviously there are key, core tenets of what the essay would like, but we’re going to be looking for different things. And I think the students particularly find it difficult to know exactly what’s being asked of them. So we do spend time in the modules where they’re going to face essays, to try and prepare them for specifically those modules.

Some lecturers consider that academic essay writing is an area that BTEC students will struggle with more than students from an A level background, in particular, ‘it’s that writing with argument and synthesising an argument. They can struggle with at times’. Another HE lecturer observes:

If it’s, “Write me an essay that studies accounting as a social phenomenon,” bang, it just goes ... Some of it is about their preparation before they come to university, but some of it is about the types of students we have. If they’ve chosen business accounting they’re looking for vocational programmes, they don’t really get that they need to do anything beyond that vocational stuff, and they struggle with it, they find it really difficult’.

Several lecturers also find that students find it hard to, ‘not just memorise pieces of information, but the fact that they need to bring different areas of information together and come up with a single colour from a spectrum’. In addition students it a challenge to argue a point and back up the argument with evidence quoting appropriate texts. One lecturer comments that:

... rather than referencing a specific point, they think it’s okay to go, “Well, these are my sources and I’ve just put them in a bibliography at the end.” ... we get the quote marks they put a quotation like it’s an authority, and then that’s their end of discussion on that point. And that’s not necessarily restricted to BTEC students, but I do notice it a lot in BTEC students. And obviously, having done a BTEC I know that that’s something that is a widely accepted practice amongst BTEC students.

Two HE lecturers comment on the ‘Google’ generation, and the way in which students research information. The ability to use the internet for research has:

... removed a lot of intermediary steps, through which a student actually learns more about the production of viewpoints of academic material and the like. And while the democratisation
of information, the ease of access to information, is on the one hand a great thing, it’s just led to a lack of control more than anything. So I think it becomes incumbent upon us to teach that control.’

The second lecturer also feels that students’ reliance on the internet to conduct research has had a negative impact on their ability to research. This lecturer had to remark 90% of their students work due to their lack of skill in researching, reading and understanding academic texts and articles:

... although we talked about it, we directed them to the library, they are given a library induction, they’re given lots of support by the librarians and the people working there. I have students who don’t use any of the articles, none of them. They just sit at home, go on Google and refer to blogs and some really bad not edited papers and other resources. And that includes all students

The difference in students’ levels of academic preparedness is a potential source of difficulty for lecturers in terms of finding an appropriate level at which to pitch the teaching and subject content and getting students, ‘all up to speed because they come from very different places, so trying to reach a base level’. This means that in the first year ‘some of our exceptional students who come in ... actually find the first year probably fairly straightforward. But other students who maybe just got over the bar to get in find it harder’. Another HE lecturer also describes the challenge in pitching the first year module:

... in such a way that is not going to be awfully boring for the good students, but it’s not going to awfully overwhelming for the weaker students. It’s somewhere in the middle ground, probably skewed towards the weaker end of the scale ... But at the same time it’s not fair for the people who do get three As at A Level for their work to be set at a level that isn’t appropriate for them. It makes it more difficult to push the A Level students higher if you know you’ve got some people in there that are weaker.

A number of HE lecturers comment on the challenges many students have in terms of their numeracy understanding. The diversity of academic background and students’ mathematical skills is discussed by a lecturer who considers that:

... we typically will have say a 50:50 split between those that have done maybe A Level maths or Economics and those that did maybe only maths up until the age of 16. So it’s very diverse. Within that then, often you’ll get students particularly entering year 1 who are very concerned about the more quantitative elements of the programme and that’s quite a strong feature of the programme, in part because it’s a BSc but also employers expect those numeracy skills ... I think I’d have to say that just as much as you get those sort of students who worry about the more quantitative elements of the programme, I’ll still probably hear about the same amount of students who are concerned about the softer side of management, so the marketing, the organisational behaviour, those sorts of modules. So to me it is quite a 50:50 split really, so I don’t really see a specific part of the curriculum raising a problem or concern across the board and I just think that’s down to the diversity of the students in terms of what they’ve studied and their skill sets as well.

One lecturer feels that students with a BTEC background and students who do not have maths A level may find the maths element more challenging than students with maths A level, ‘I suppose if they’ve done straight BTEC they won’t have done maths in sixth form’, in addition to which, ‘there are a number of our students who’ve done maths A Level and have got an A*, so there’s a big difference between the group’. Another lecturer agrees that, ‘the maths can be an issue’ for students but that this is not necessarily an issue for BTEC students alone. He points out that, ‘Some people may have
taken two, three attempts to get a grade B in maths, they really, really can’t do maths and they really, really struggle on that side of things’.

Another lecturer considers that:

... especially in this country, there is a fear of maths. Sometimes I give them an equation to do gas conversions, and if you look at the equation on a page with the all the terms it looks intimidating. But then I break it down with letters and it’s the simplest equation that you can imagine. Before the test, at least 50 questions, “Will that equation be on the test? Do I need a calculator?” I always say, “It’s not going to be on the test, but even if it was on the test you would not need a calculator.” It’s just basic arithmetic, it’s nothing. I don’t think that they cannot do it, it’s just that they think that they cannot do it, they get an engrained fear for maths.

For some lecturers it is specific aspects of the courses that will cause ‘less numerate’ students problems, such as one course’s more technical modules, the quantitative science element of one course and financial accounting on another. This lecturer states:

... there’s a particular concept in double entry book keeping, until it’s clicked the whole thing is just a struggle and a confusion ... introduction to management accounting and finance ... they’re slightly more technical subjects. There isn’t really any maths, but the ones who are less numerate struggle with it, which there’s quite a few of them, do struggle with it. ... I would say the BTEC students, it feels, anecdotally, that they struggle more with those ones, yeah.

Another lecturer describes how, given that there is no requirement for students to have, ‘anything beyond GCSE level B maths’:

... some students really struggle with the quantitative stuff. Some people who’ve got a grade B in maths are perfectly capable of doing maths, when we teach them in it they absolutely fly with it. Some people may have taken two, three attempts to get a grade B in maths, they really, really can’t do maths and they really, really struggle on that side of things.

A difference in subject knowledge between students that had taken subject relevant A levels and those who had studied BTEC or non-subject relevant A levels was commented on by some lecturers. For some of lecturers at HE level, BTEC students are perceived as having strengths where there is ‘practical application’ but ‘struggle with the really, really academic stuff. They’re not as good as the A level students’ and find ‘dealing with theory’ a challenge:

... I think the other thing that people struggle with in our curriculum, not so much in year one, but year two, year three as we go through, is the non-practical stuff, the theoretical stuff and dealing with theory, and understanding what it means to study business accounting as academic disciplines, so the social science background to that, the theoretical underpinnings of stuff. They’re absolutely fine, as soon as there’s practical application, no problem whatsoever.

A second lecturer teaches, ‘a complicated first year module’ and also considers that if students:

... haven’t done chemistry or biology at A level they’re going to struggle with it. And obviously if I’m dealing with students that haven’t done A levels, I know they definitely haven’t done those two A levels ... I think they’re [BTEC students] certainly worse prepared, as a rule, for the basic scientific content of the course. And that can be in terms of the chemistry and biology that I’ve mentioned, but also mathematics that we see in our biomechanics modules.
However, this lecturer makes the point that although a biology background does not automatically mean that a student will do well, ‘biology, chemistry, and maths are probably the students who are the most able to do what I’ve said is required’. They explain:

... both biochemistry and physiology draw from different areas. Even students who have a biology A level, biology and physiology are very different and you have to have peripheral information to be able to make sense out of it. Although students with A level biology coming into the lecture have said, “I’ve heard this before, I’ve heard this before, I’ve heard this before,” and you get the sense that they feel bored. When they actually have to put physiology together from the biological concepts they struggle. And biochemistry is the same thing, there’s some physiology, there’s some biology, there’s some chemistry, and they have to draw these things together.

4.1.2 FE lecturer perceptions of students’ academic literacy skills

At FE some tutors consider that the old style BTEC course was, ‘a less rigorous option’ than A levels and so did not give students the academic grounding that would prepare them well for university. However one lecturer commented that they felt this, ‘will change over time, because it’s a lot more difficult for students to access the higher grades on this course because of the more stringent resubmission and the introduction of exams’. One tutor summed up BTEC students’ academic preparation in the following way:

I think if I compared them with A level business studies students, they’ve had a lot more experience of research, so that will certainly help in that respect. And they’ve had much more experience at writing up extended projects, which they don’t get at A level. So there is that element to it. They get less depth of knowledge than they would on the A level, but then a lot of people study Business Studies at university having not done A level, BTEC, any sort of business studies before.

One FE tutor considers that there are certain HE courses for which BTEC students are particularly suited where universities will favour BTEC students:

.. especially with practical subjects like film production, media ... because they know they come in with a technical knowledge all ready to perform

In order to prepare BTEC students for higher education this lecturer notes that, ‘we have to go back and start delivering notetaking, essay writing, research skills. I mean if I use the word plagiarism one more time, it is... because they think you know I found it, so it is alright. And, it is about communication skills, communicating and writing that can be challenging’. Additional comments included:

I believe, looking down all of those literacy and numeracy skills, because of the level that I’m teaching on, I think the majority of my students would struggle with all of that. Writing evaluations and reflections is something that we pull very closely in with the qualification because it’s part of the criteria but students certainly don’t come in with those skills. We need to build on them and provide them with the additional knowledge and give them the practice on that.

With regard to specific elements of academic literacy several FE tutors comment that writing essays is regarded as a challenge for many students:

I think writing academic essays is something that a lot of students find very difficult because they’re not used to it. When they’re going through their GCSEs and there’s very little extended
writing at that level at the moment. So it’s a big task to get some of the students up to the challenge of writing academic essays, and I’ve particularly seen that at A level.

For some FE tutors students’ English Language ability is, ‘very much a defining factor at how well the students do within a lot of the written work. Those who are still working towards their GCSE English language, or those who have come and a grade 4 it might be now, their work is generally at a lower level due to their writing style’. This lecturers observes that, ‘they find essays challenging because of the use of English, and structuring their ideas … and it is about defending your points with logical clear arguments and producing evidence. Evidence that is valid, that is relevant’. Another lecturer observes that if students have not excelled in English language this might have an impact not only on their writing ability but they might also, ‘struggle with those deadlines and making sure the assignments read well and the format is correct’.

However one lecturer observes that both A level and BTEC students find essay writing a challenge:

> We build this into some of our assignments, ask them to write an extended piece. And they struggle with it because they’re just not used to it and they don’t really understand what we’re asking, when you say an essay they say, “What’s an essay?” They’re not used to it.

In addition to writing ability several FE tutors comment on student reading and research skills and student reliance on the internet:

> BTEC, the specification, is all about summarising, evaluating and reflection … It’s something that doesn’t come naturally where you have to be critical … And to be fair, academic texts, they don’t like reading a lot. I can’t remember when the last time I’ve seen a student with a book, a level 3 book. They tend to go straight onto the internet and research. So the back to basic, the root of research, isn’t there, so therefore – oh it’s on the internet, it’s current, it’s easier just to tap that word in and it brings up volumes.

Lack of preparation while students are at school is identified as contributing to this problem because at school, ‘they tend to give them stuff, and here I want them to go and research it. Obviously the majority have never seen a book in their life so they use the internet for most things, and it is about teaching them to use books’. Additional comments include:

> … they tend not to be prepared to carry out the research. We go through what is necessary for research, but then they look at BBC Bitesize or something that’s not big enough to complete the criteria necessary … rather than going down and using a book or researching from a quality reference.

One FE lecturer comments on the way that students conduct research on their course is influenced by the space in which students are taught. The room they teach in is equipped with computers which students use ‘to find stuff out for themselves … and then get them to do a bit of discussion before they feedback’.

Students’ referencing skills were also discussed in one focus group where it was considered that when students first arrive at college, ‘there is generally very, very, very little knowledge of referencing work’. These tutors felt that the, ‘top end students are very, very good’ at referencing correctly, however to gain a distinction at BTEC it is not always necessary to use referencing which ‘is not encouraging them enough’. A tutor from the same focus group describes how the College runs different types of support for students but they say, ‘is it done very well on the BTEC? No, I don’t think so, it’s not done very well as a whole’.
There were very few comments at FE which touched on numeracy. One comment included:

*Those that are weak in maths can sometimes struggle with the finance aspects of the course, obviously there’s quite a bit of accountancy in a business course and it’s unavoidable. And they will struggle a little bit with that and will need support sometimes to get through those units.*

In terms of subject knowledge FE tutors had contrasting opinions about the subject knowledge gained by students on a BTEC and on an A level course. Some tutors feel that the BTEC gives students a greater breadth of knowledge and, ‘a better understanding’ than A level because, ‘they have to write about it, they have to research it’, and, ‘BTEC goes into depth it covers, obviously covers a lot more because you have more time for it ... the BTEC has depth and breadth. Whereas the A level because of the time constraints it doesn’t have the same kind of depth to it’. One lecturer comments:

*I think, because of the sport nature, it’s obviously a total sport course ... they have to cover 18 or 19 different units depending what course they’re on, the breadth of coverage is far greater in sport than they would find of a student coming from an A level programme. So going on to a sport science degree they should have a bigger grounding in lots more areas than an A level student.*

In contrast one FE lecturer considers that BTEC students:

... get less depth of knowledge than they would on the A level, but then a lot of people study business studies at university having not done A level, BTEC, any sort of business studies before, so how relevant that is is debatable really.

### 4.2 Student performance, progress and pathway

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<th>HE and FE lecturer perceptions of student performance, progress and pathway</th>
<th>HE lecturer and FE tutor perceptions of student performance and progress, whether and how there is difference between students from A level and BTEC backgrounds</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Performance and progress at HE</td>
<td>HE lecturer observations on student performance, and perceptions of difference based on student academic background</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student progress and pathway at FE</td>
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This node captures HE lecturer perceptions how well they perceived students’ performance and progress during their first year of study, and includes perceived differences based on students’ academic background. This theme also captures FE tutor perceptions of BTEC capacity and readiness of higher education.

#### 4.2.1 Lecturer perceptions of student performance and progress at HE

There is a perception among the majority of HE lecturers that BTEC students are more likely to ‘struggle’ and perform worse during their first year than students with A levels. Progression data from HEIs bears out the assumption that the performance of BTEC only students will not be as good as A level students, or students with a combination of A level and BTEC. One lecturer observes that they would ‘expect’ to see a proportion of BTEC students, ‘at the bottom end of the average marks for the year’. The reason for this they consider is not:
... necessarily to do with their capability, it might be more to do with the kind of conflict between what they were used to and then the transition and I think it’d probably be fair to say that’s probably a relatively common pattern across the business programmes.

The perception that BTEC students are struggling is echoed by another lecturer from a different institution who says that, ‘we’ve said you can just come in with that BTEC distinction profile and the simple logic about that is we’re just setting them up for a fall’. This lecturer explains how, after it was picked up that progression and achievement statistics were dropping, they ‘dug more deeply’:

… and we saw that quite clearly our pure BTEC students coming in were having about a 10% lower first year experience. A typical A Level student was high 2:1, to Firsts, BTEC was sometimes 15% lower than that … the A Level experience is flat as far as attainment going through and your BTECs are creeping up over the course of the three years, which is great, but what that’s meant is that as a BTEC student you’re more likely to graduate with a 2:2 or below. If you come in at A Level or IB, you’re more likely to graduate with a 2:1 or a First. That’s not to say that you can’t [achieve] and you’re destined to follow that pathway [as a BTEC student], but that’s been the profile overall.

This was a similar experience for another HEI who found that between a third and two thirds of BTEC students were dropping about within the first twelve months of a course, and those students that did not drop out were progressing with low credits. They continue:

… it’s looking like this year in the programme where we did have a reasonably high percentage of BTEC only students, that those were the ones who have tended to struggle. And I think we will pay more attention to this as time goes on in future years about the progress of particular student groups.

This particular programme accepted students with BTEC only, D*D*D*, and there was no requirement for students to have an A level as well which, ‘for some staff that reinforces their existing perceptions I think of how BTEC prepares students for university’. The response from some HEIs has been to change student entry requirements to BTEC plus A level:

…. that programme has now tightened up … its entry criteria and in line with some of our other programmes and is requiring an A Level from 2018. So the direction of travel seems to be that the data we do have around progression indicates that BTEC students are struggling … And the way that that is being dealt with is to tighten up the entry criteria rather than to provide more support for the students when they’re here.

Requesting a BTEC plus an A level, ‘had had some success … and to actually talk to them about the fact that they are BTEC students and the fact that that doesn’t mean they can’t do really well … So to motivate them but to make them realise that there are different issues here they need to make the most of their time here and be aware of potential for issues’. In contrast one course at one HEI has amended their requirements and students no longer need an A level as well because, ‘having talked to local colleges that’s just an impossible timetable feat for them. So we’ve taken that requirement out, so they have just have to have the BTEC and the distinctions across the board’.

Some HE lecturers consider that BTEC students have the capacity to achieve and perform well academically but that this is dependent on the individual, ‘taking it seriously’ and, ‘having the right attitude’. One lecturer considers that, ‘if you get on track in your first year and take it seriously and really want to perform, if you’ve got some ability which you have if you passed the BTEC, then that can be enough for you to succeed’. They add that it, ‘impresses’ them that, ‘that some students here are
doing very well from a lower starting point’. Students’ lower starting points is touched on by lecturers, a number of whom do not feel there is parity between entry requirements. Comments included:

The A Level requirements are AAB and it says that it’s BTEC equivalent, which is actually DDM in BTEC, which – well I don’t know what more I can say about that really. There’s a big difference between DDM at BTEC and AAB at A Level.

However another HE lecturer disagrees with the way that, ‘an academic grade, or particularly a tariff point is supposed to represent academic potential … because there’s a big difference between what grades represent depending on the context of the student’.

The above data indicates that at a general level some lecturers have particular expectations and assumptions about the performance and progression of students according to academic background. However lecturers have very different levels of awareness at an individual level. One lecturer talked about how, ‘on a day to day basis’, they were ‘probably not aware of that, unless they’re my personal tutees’. However, at cohort level he is:

... very aware of it ... you’re very aware of the profile of your intake. So you know their backgrounds, where they’ve come from, you’ve got a list of those at the end of the year when you’re looking at the programme annual review. You’ve also got the students’ progression rates, success rates based on ethnicity, social background, and entry qualifications around that as well.

For another lecturer, ‘we don’t flag BTEC and A level students up because that could be seen as setting up problems from the start’. However, his ‘impression would be they [students with a BTEC] struggle with the really, really academic stuff, they’re not as good as the A level students on that’. In contrast one HE lecturer makes:

... a point of looking that up and trying to find that out and trying to run the programme accordingly and try and provide remedies that might help students accordingly on the basis that I could see that some of our students, a lot of our student BTECs were struggling and failing ... so when the students come I’ve made a point of sorting out a personal tutor group and we look for them to just sort of help in a slightly different way.

The majority of HE lecturers feel that BTEC students do have the potential to succeed. Indeed one lecturer suggests that, ‘the differentiator is who’s prepared to turn up and knuckle down and just engage. That’s the thing’. However it is also perceived by several HE lecturers that students from a BTEC background have been given, ‘very low expectations all the way through their education’. When students arrive at university this may lead to lack of confidence and a sense of unworthiness which can act as barriers to successful academic performance and something, ‘that inhibits them’ creating a, ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’:

I’m a BTEC student, I did BTECs because x, y, z – that makes me inferior in some way to x, y, z and therefore I’m going to have a problem. So you’ve actually built in a set of barriers before you get anywhere near university.

Additional comments on student confidence from lecturers included:

... if you think about the subliminal text that’s given to the students when they’re 16 about their sixth form choices, we hear all the time that certain students will say they got “well you’re not quite at A Level standard so why don’t you do the BTEC?” now all of a sudden I mean
obviously that pathway you’re back in the mix then with those A Level students and they’re sitting next door to you, but inevitably that’s going to play on your confidence – am I worthy to be here? Now that takes a bit of time of realising that actually it’s up for grabs now. That’s how we see it.

... we definitely see they’ve come as a big fish in a smaller pond and they were the triple D student and now all of a sudden they’re not. They were getting 80s, 90s and suddenly they’re getting 40s and 50s and I think that can be an amazing confidence zapper from that.

The effects of lack of confidence were reflected on by two HE lecturers who felt that it prevents students from asking questions when they are in a group because they, ‘don’t want to make themselves look silly’ which may subsequently impact on performance. Another commented that he thinks a lot of BTEC students feel that HE is, ‘really for A level students’ and that, ‘they’re almost apologetic’ at being at university:

... there’s a bit of that they’ve stolen a place at university. And when they get a bit of confidence and realise that they can do it, and a lot of them we see in their second and third year, despite being a disparity in the grades that seems to maintain a little bit throughout, there are BTEC students that fly and go in amongst the A level students for the top grades.

I don’t think that there’s a difference in their ability... there are two main things that compromise BTEC students, one is background, the academic background that they come with ... But the other thing that is a big compromise to them is that they feel themselves that they’re not as good as the A level students. So the confidence level when they are start is very different. They have to battle with dealing with information that is fairly new to them in comparison to the A level students, and feeling not very confident in doing that, which makes the process even harder.

Non-attendance is given as a key reason for non-progressing students:

.. these are the people that have not been following up on the lectures with ELE. And this is one thing we wondered whether ELE was a disadvantage, it was dissuading them from turning up, but actually all we found was that the people that were looking at ELE were the people that were turning up to the lectures anyway and using it for revision. So the people that were missing stuff weren’t even using it to catch up ... And it’s quite easy to fall into that – ‘I got out of the habit of coming, it’s a bit difficult, I’ll just stay in the background’ and then you get so far behind that like “I can’t catch up, I’m too embarrassed to go and ask” and stuff like that.

For another course the dropout rates for BTEC students was ‘huge’ or ‘if they didn’t drop out they were going through with low credits’. However, another lecturer comments that:

In terms of their progress, yes, there is a difference, A level students do better than BTEC students. But probably the best student I’ve ever taught in my 14 years here has been a BTEC student ... passing the first year is one thing and if you do, then there’s a good chance you’ll go on and succeed... getting the higher grades 2:1s and Firsts, is difficult, however it’s not impossible ... likewise the non-progressors, if you’re an A Level student there’s pretty much a 100% chance that you’ll progress from year 1 to year 2. That’s the pinch-point and it was only about a 60% chance as a BTEC student, although we’ve started to whittle that down.

There is agreement among HE lecturers that students from a BTEC background will perform best on the modules that are practise-based. At one university there are three sports-based degree programmes from which students can choose and the lecturer ‘speculates’ that BTEC students have
'a leaning towards this programme because a lot of that is applied, it’s about interaction. There’s a lot of practical based PE type coaching, games-based stuff to look at theory and practice. And that’s where they tend to do really well’. However in modules taken by students from all three programmes he states that students from the more practise based programme ‘do comparatively worse’ and ‘score lower’ than students from the other two programmes.

4.2.2 FE Student progress and pathway – Tutor perceptions of capacity and readiness for HE

The perception of the difference between BTEC and A level in terms of having an impact on student pathway from FE to HE is commended on by all FE tutors. One FE lecturer comments that BTECs are often not regarded as a qualification that is, ‘rigorous enough for students to be able to succeed’, a perception reinforced by the language employed to talk about BTECs which:

... can be sometimes derogatory by the government, by universities, by institutions, some BTEC students feel that they are not as academically able as other students. Once you have that mentality university is perhaps not seen as an option.

All FE tutors talk about managing student expectations of their pathway beyond further education and the factors that may influence student choice. One FE lecturer suggests that:

... it depends on the institution and it also depends on the student that is coming through the FE process and trying to guide them to the right place. What we don’t want to do is send them to a university with the wrong expectations and then it go wrong for them. We try and align it their skill bases and also what they are interested in doing.

However there are occasions when students want to go to university, the FE college considers that they are not academically able to cope but, ‘you can’t dissuade them from that. They have every right to apply and they have every right to accept an offer if they get one, but you know in your heart that perhaps ... they are actually not right or ready’. They also feel that it is, ‘not always helpful for universities to offer lower grades’ to students because, ‘university might not be the right place for them’. One FE tutor describes ‘appropriate’ courses as being ‘practical’ subjects:

... there are certain universities especially with practical subjects like film production, media that actually favour BTEC students because they know they come in with a technical knowledge already to perform.

All FE tutors talked about their perception that, in contrast to students who want to progress to university but may not be quite ready, there are also BTEC students who do not consider university as an option. FE tutor feel that it is very important that those students who have potential but have not previously considered university are made aware that this may be an option for them so that:

... it becomes very clear to them from us as first year tutors that those opportunities are still open to them. No, they’re not going to get into Oxbridge and, no, they’re not going to be able to the likes of history and whatnot through the BTEC route. But if you want to go on and do a more practically orientated degree, then there are many, many doors at many universities still open to them.

FE lecturers comment that the ‘culture’ we live in regards the A level as the standard, a viewpoint which is strengthened by the fact that, ‘you are now saying you have to have that plus an A level thus giving the A level again the kind of, key to university’, even though the BTEC is, ‘just as stringent’. This is further reinforced by the fact that, ‘some universities don’t even consider and they say in their
application no BTEC students’. Against this backdrop BTEC students often have the perception that they are not able to apply for university. Comments included:

... I don’t think a lot of students know at the beginning that with BTEC they can go on and go to university. It’s the traditional school, A level, university, I don’t think a lot of the students come into the college with that perspective that they’re going to go on to university afterwards. ... they think that the A level student are the brighter ones, and that they’re doing a more vocational route. They don’t see it as quite the same value, the same equivalence.

... a lot of the students here do see themselves as being on BTEC is being less than A level, and therefore them not being academically good enough to go to university, particularly when you are doing BTEC because you failed your GCSEs.

It’s often the second alternative, so if you’re clever enough you go and do A levels, but maybe if you’re not quite clever enough or you haven’t done so well in the exams, think about BTEC.

Added to this students from a BTEC background may be put off applying to university because of what they know about the ways of learning and assessment processes, particularly for students who have chosen a BTEC because it is coursework based and there are opportunities for resubmission:

I have a number of students across my groups who suffer with anxiety, and it really puts them off education. And they are questioning whether to go to university on or not, based on their perception of university is and the fact that it may well be a delivery and the exams as well, rather than the small groups where it’s lots of interaction.

In addition FE tutors perceive BTEC students as having a much trickier background than students who follow an A level course:

... I think society today there are a lot of social issues, the majority of my learners, like I said I’ve got over 100, they’re trying to balance home, work, probably looking after brothers and sisters, maybe a carer or they’ve had financial issues or they’re providing for the parents.

A few tutors also feel that some BTEC students do not have a clear understanding of what university entails work-wise, or the support that will be available to them:

... and the nurturing, the support mechanism, they probably won’t get as much — you’re thrown in, here you go. And I think they like the idea of university but I don’t think they understand the work behind it. Yes, the learners at level 3 think going to HE is an easy transition however there are big expectations and this may not be fulfilled.

One lecturer states that they try to ‘scare’ students in the second year:

We do drum it into them and we talk to them and we invite people to come and tell them what university experience is like, and you know to sort of scare the hell out of them, so they know what it is going to be like are ready for it.

### 4.3 Assessment practices

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This theme captures FE tutor and HE lecturer perceptions of student attitudes to, and preferences for, different assessment models.

4.3.1 Assessment methods and rationale at HE

The interviews with HE lecturers reveal that some courses include a variety of different assessment methods including coursework, reports, practical classes, case studies, website design, and reflective diaries. One lecturer comments:

So it’s really wide ranging in Year 1, so from group work, from in class tests, end of module exams, individual coursework, but also within that some of the coursework assignments aren’t necessarily essay based, it might be development of your CV, it might be doing more reflective tasks such as almost a 360 degree analysis of yourself.

Nevertheless, the dominant form of student assessment is by exam. Indeed one HEI lecturer talks about the, ‘blend of assessment’ that they have developed, ‘between the more formal sort of exam and in class assessment as well as presentations, group work, that type of thing and coursework’ but in the first year assessment continues to be weighted in favour of exams, but:

... having said that, again as they go through the programme, in the final year, should a student simply be choosing modules simply based on the form of assessment they could pretty much have a year full of non-exam assessment, so it could be primarily independent coursework, group work and that type of thing.

One HE lecturer states that they don’t do ‘a lot of innovative assessment’ and assess:

.. very traditionally, if I’m honest, that’s just not going to change in the near future, especially on certain programmes. So ones where we’ve got professional accreditation and it’s required, we’ve got an external pressure to assess in certain ways.

Assessment methods include closed book exams and class tests, the aim of which is to, ‘give them experience of taking tests, and get feedback about how well they’ve done’. There is a, ‘relatively low proportion of coursework in year one, the proportion of coursework builds up as they go through the degree. So by the end of the degree, their third year modules, hardly anything is assessed purely by examination, there will be coursework stuff around that as well. We do a few group assessments, although not many’. This lecturer also considers that students from an A level background are ‘quite conservative’ in their assessment preferences as:

... they’re used to final exams, if they’ve done the A Level route and anything that is not a final exam is often quite challenging. Just a conservatism almost is exhibited there I think. Others will be used to different forms of assessment, but still I think if it’s something new, a lot find that quite a challenge.
This conservatism is also perceived by another lecturer who also feels that students, ‘don’t like unusual things something that they didn’t do before’. They consider that, ‘if you change that essay into a book, there’s like a little twist to it, it requires critical analysis or a little bit more depth, they don’t want to do it, they struggle ... it’s almost like a mental blockage in their own mind’.

BTEC students, on the other hand:

... embrace the coursework early on. They seem to get to grips with what’s being asked of them in terms of, “I know how to put this together, I know about putting reference lists together,” and those sorts of things, as long as they stay within our guidelines. What I tend to find with those guys is that that’s sometimes outweighed by their lack of self-belief in what they can actually do in terms of, “I don’t know the basics of this stuff”.

One mode of assessment that a few lecturers talk about as being popular with students is multiple choice questions (MCQs) which one lecturer feels that they love’. This is perhaps because MCQs are:

... the easiest way to engage with an assessment because it’s black and white, this is the question, these are the answers, choose one. And most people have some sort of experience with MCQs, be it Facebook or school, or whatever, they know what to do with an MCQ.

However another lecturer feels that MCQs, ‘suit some students, it doesn’t suit other students’, particularly when they used to negative mark and at least forty students would need to resist in August. They no longer negative mark but:

I’m in two minds about that. Part of me says that if they pass the module they should really be able to not guess. And part of me says it’s year one, it’s a basic level, you need to give them as much as they can to carry over to year two and do well ... based on the size of the cohort it’s the only thing that we can do. In year two they start having some short answers and some essay, but still with some MCQ. And then year three is all essay.

There are a number of factors that play a part in the type of assessment method chosen. Some HE lecturers feel that a degree course should be aimed at the higher achieving students and that it is ‘important’ for students to be able to write under pressure:

The course needs to be based on students who’ve got two As and a B at A Level and they’re studying an academic course. That needs to be rigorous and for that reason I would stand by the assessment techniques we have and I think it’s important that we are getting people to write under pressure.

In addition the number of students on courses at HE level has an influence on the type of assessment employed at HE. For example, where there are 400 students on a module, exams and MCQs are regarded as the only realistic assessment method. In addition exams are perceived as being the most rigorous way of assessing students and guard against plagiarism. Given the numbers of students the flexibility to assess in ways which they might prefer is not seen as a viable option by the majority of HE lecturers. One lecturer, for example, talks about feedback:

I mean you know, for me like learning from feedback is almost the most powerful way of learning. I mean no-one’s intelligent the first time so it’s really how you respond to feedback – that’s intelligence isn’t it, or knowledge? But on the other hand I do recognise that with mass education that can’t really happen at university to the same degree and no-one’s going to be sat in an office with three or four students sat round discussing things. We don’t do that and we’re not going to, it’s not practical.
The large number of students on a course also means that it is not possible to give feedback on assignment drafts, ‘apart from research projects’, ‘it’s just not practice, it’s not feasible to read through drafts’ and give detailed feedback on what they should do. Further comments include:

“It’s a huge group, we’re talking about more than 200 students. So small seminars and small group teaching is next to impossible, as is a variety of different formats of assessment. So we assess with multiple choice questions, which suit some students, it doesn’t suit other students, but it’s only a single way of assessing.

4.3.2 HE Lecturer observations on assessment preference and experience

Some HE lecturers perceive students from a BTEC background as being less experienced not only in, ‘being required to do exams, written exams under pressure’ but also exam preparation compared with students from an A level background. One lecturer commented, ‘I think the adaptation to lectures seems better than to the assessments ... But people don’t say “Oh I just don’t get the lecture”, they’ll say “I don’t know how to revise,” or “What do I do with this? What are we going to be asked? How do I deal with this”? Another comments:

... certainly when you’re talking to personal tutees who are BTEC students, they just don’t know what they’re meant to be doing to get ready for exams. It’s a real struggle. They’re used to having this constant diet, a rolling diet of stuff going on all the time ... We have year one modules which are 100% assessed on end of year exams. The structure here is if you take a 10 credit module in autumn term up to Christmas, and it’s 100% exam assessed, you do the teaching up until Christmas, the exam isn’t until the following summer. They just don’t know how to deal with that ... I think all the students feel a little bit unsure, but certainly the BTEC students feel most unsure about that.

The timing of exams in the year is also mentioned by an HE lecturer who comments that he could, ‘observe a clear difference’ between BTEC students and A level students who are used to, ‘going away, doing revision notes, following old tram lines ... even when the sun shines’.

One HE lecturer describes how assessment processes are a concern for prospective students and parents at open days. This lecturer says that they make it clear that, ‘the exam is an inherent part of the assessment’ but that they make the point that, ‘in HE the focus is on application knowledge as opposed to trying to recite or memory recall. Whilst there are elements of that and there will be particularly in say year 1 it’s more about the application’. However at one HEI a lecturer describes how students, ‘learn not to be as scared about exams’. They perceive there to be a certain amount of ‘learned helplessness’:

... they’ve done it as GCSE students successfully so they got onto the BTEC in the first place, but then not having done it for a couple of years and then they’re back in, they lose faith and confidence with that. So we do do work on reminding them about revision technique, exam technique and the nuts and bolts, so that’s not providing an extra hurdle. So I think all these little bits glued together just would explain the 5, 6% increment drifting up.

One HE lecturer also observes that BTEC students, ‘seem to have had a broader exposure to different assessment methods, bar exams’ and are, ‘much more confident with approaching their practical sessions, so approaching practical laboratory work’.

I think some of the very high achievers don’t like doing group work, they’ll just depend on their own devices because that’s worked. Others may value group work and the contribution others
may make to bring up the end product to the best it can be. The type of experience that BTEC students get in schools and colleges, that they like the groupwork, they like the presentations, they like coming up with a product or some more vocationally oriented type of assignment. Whereas the A Level students may be more happy or more comfortable with writing essays and um, sitting examinations.

One HE lecturer also talks about BTEC students’ loss of confidence in revision technique, ‘that’s where they’d forgotten what strategies they employed when they were doing their GCSEs ... I think it comes down to confidence as opposed to inability to do it ... typically the A Level students are still outperforming the BTECs across the different styles of assessment’. On the positive side this lecturer continues:

The one thing I’ve noticed, and it’s probably the way in which BTECs are assessed in a modular way and they assess them through assignments, is that they do embrace the coursework early on. They seem to get to grips with what’s being asked of them in terms of, “I know how to put this together, I know about putting reference lists together,” and those sorts of things, as long as they stay within our guidelines.

Another HE lecturer comments that:

Literacy skills, in the coursework can be good but I do think there can be issues within exams, where I suspect that BTEC students, probably in the second year when it really becomes a bit more stressful, again it’s down to these written assignments under pressure that you get the weakest link ... Answering what you’re being asked to do in a format that makes sense and is clear and shows the knowledge and understanding, where you’re having to do it under pressure in the exam. So you have to know it and it’s being able to put it down on paper as well, which is a difficult challenge.

At the same time some lecturers are very aware that some students would appreciate more immediate validation of their learning than exams and assignments offer:

This year I will start giving them a few MCQ questions at the end of the lecture, just pop up and say this is one for the lecture, I’m going to run out of questions doing that [laughs], there will be some repetition. But it’s something that they have mentioned again and again that they would like some sort of way for them to confirm their knowledge at the end of a lecture or at the end of a series of lectures.

The ‘uniform type of feedback’ is commented on by this lecturer who considers that BTEC students are more likely to need personalised, rather than generic, feedback:

If it’s a question about a lab report... Sometimes a student will identify themselves, and again in that apologetic way, “I’ve done a BTEC and I just don’t understand the basics.” But I think we do have, it’s not a one size fits all, but there is almost a uniform type of feedback and approach to tutorials. I think the more experienced staff and the people that understand that there potentially are differences in the background of BTEC and A level students would be able to tailor an individual tutorial, or tailor some oral feedback to a student that might be more suitable.

4.3.3 Assessment methods and rationale at FE

All BTEC tutors remarked on the ways in which they were as flexible as possible with regard to student assessment in order to support BTEC students through assessment processes. Comments included:
We run any type of assessment that suits the student. I mean there are some students that through whatever reason personal, mental health issue don’t like doing presentations, and so we can still get them to present but we just do an audio recording, instead of a video with them being filmed in front of a class, as an example.

The above tutor feels that students, ‘respond to that flexibility’ and that assessing students in a variety of different ways, ‘adds a bit of diversity to the course’. In addition another lecturer remarks that:

Because were offer such a variety of assessment students do recognise that there will be some tasks that they won’t like, they won’t prefer. But there will be other tasks within the same assignment that are more suited to them. And we are very supportive, so when a student has a particular barrier we will try and support that student to achieve the outcome that they should get.

The type of assessment methods offered for one level 3 Business course, ‘is as practical as we can make it’ and include: an assignment for each unit, a presentation, running a meeting, an academic poster, a series of emails or posters:

... to demonstrate understanding of a particular topic and the ability to present it in different ways, maybe as a PowerPoint, maybe as a written report, maybe as an email. In other words, typical business documents that they might be asked to produce in the workplace.

Setting up a meeting means that, ‘we’re able to observe it in a different way, which then takes some of the pressure off those writing skills, especially for those who aren’t so academic but can still get the qualification through that way’. Another comments that there is, ‘an unbelievable list of types of assessment’:

... it varies from subject to subject so in economics you’ll see more examination, accounting – slightly less examination, business and management – even less examination still ... And even within that you’ll see different practices again so even if coursework dominates as it does in some subject areas, that coursework has the whole variety of individual essays, group work based essays, group reports, individual reports, presentations, blogs, wikis and on it goes.

The majority of FE tutors feel that that assessment methods complement the vocational nature of BTECs. Comments included, ‘it’s vocational so they’re going to be doing presentations, they get assessed officiating, get assessed coaching in the gym, so it’s a very vocational qualification’, and ‘a lot of BTEC students that are much more confident with approaching their practical sessions’ such as laboratory work. In addition all FE lecturers are very aware that BTEC students can, ‘struggle with exams’ together with a recognition that that ‘they are level II students for a reason. Because they didn’t do very well at school’. The majority of FE lecturers also consider that students, ‘tend to do quite well in presentations, rather than the written classic essay style’. This perception that BTEC students perform best when there is a practical element to their learning and assessment is to some extent echoed by several tutors. These tutors consider that it is the combination of practical application and individual support that is most effective in ensuring assessment processes are positive and constructive for BTEC students. Their comments include:

These students [BTEC students] quite often need quite a lot of TLC. They need a lot of group work, and help communicating with each other, and they get lots of that if they come through this route.
... we try and nurture them, I think is the right word, where they have the right support. So if somebody really hates presenting, we’ll get them to present but maybe in front of the tutor instead of in front of the whole group initially, to build up their confidence, because we don’t want to put them off completely. If there’s work to be done then obviously we’ll liaise with learning coaches to discuss strategies of how we can help them and I’m very upfront with my learners – “What can I do to help you? How can we turn this around?” And they’ll probably give me suggestions as well and we try and meet halfway.

A lot of the assignment work, the assessment work is case study based. It’s based on real businesses or real scenarios that they’re expected to keep up to date with and demonstrate understanding. There is underlying theory, theory in accounts, theory in motivation, in all the sub-business topics there is a little bit of academic study there. But very quickly it’s applied ... And we’ll use case studies that we’ll look at in the classroom. We’ll then move on to do role plays, the students will be asked to do investigative work and do presentations back to the group, so developing their presentation skills as well. It’s as practical as we can make it.

We are very supportive, so when a student has a particular barrier we will try and support that student to achieve the outcome that they should get.

‘Fear of exams’ is talked about by an FE tutor who says that there are a number of students on BTEC courses who, ‘have qualifications which may get them on to the A level’ but, ‘they don’t like exams, and there is a fear ... a lot of my learners that I’ve had have said they hate exams, so the BTEC is brilliant for what it stands for and it gives them the opportunity to apply for advanced apprenticeships and university’. In addition all FE tutors also talk about the wider support that they are able to provide students. As one tutor comments:

... we can provide help with understanding of the content we’re delivering ... if they have the right statements in place, we can have extra time, 25% extra time to do that. They have scribes, they can have people to read their work before it’s handed in.

Some FE tutors will, ‘give them additional preparation time and they’re aware of what they’ve going into. And of course there are retakes as well’. Another tutor describes how small classes mean that tutors are able to recap all the work done before giving out the assignment brief. They add:

You can do almost mock tasks in class ... so students know what is coming, but if people still aren’t quite understanding what you’ve been teaching, you can then take the time and maybe not give the assignment then, change the assignment schedule, put that back and actually revisit it as a group. So when it comes to support, there is a lot of individual study, there is also peer assessment group work, group tasks ... But again, once it’s been handed out as an assessment we’re not allowed to guide them towards any criteria on that.

The key reason that resubmission is seen as a positive practice is the opportunity for learning and development. Comments included:

It’s very difficult for them to produce a fantastic piece of work, an assignment, and get it right the first time. And I’m a great advocate for BTECs, I think it gives you the opportunity to try again one more time and we do give them a lot of support about how to write assignments, give them examples all the way through, we have workshops, learning coaches, we have um, tutorials with individuals as well and they can come and see me or any of the members of staff.
Assessment can be partly a development process, whereby students are submitting work, they’re getting feedback, and they resubmit a second piece of work that is hopefully much better. And they’ve learnt through that process of review and resubmission.

FE tutors, ‘can’t say what they [students] need to put into their assignments’ so if students, ‘ask how to complete an assignment it’s very difficult for us, we’re not permitted to tell them how, what to put, and where to put it’. However there is flexibility within the BTEC course which is not available at A level so that, ‘if people still aren’t quite understanding what you’ve been teaching, you can then take the time and maybe not give the assignment then, change the assignment schedule, put that back and actually revisit it as a group’. In addition to this, one FE lecturer remarks that they:

... shouldn’t be setting assignments unless we are totally sure that the students have all the information they need to complete an assignment. When we do feedback we can identify where they have not met criteria, but we cannot inform them of what they need to do to put into that to get that area better.

In contrast, FE lecturers consider that A level students will have experienced a lot of external assessment:

... and there’s a lot more pressure on the learners to study in their own time and research, and be prepared for that. Because at the end of the day, if they go into the exam and fail, they have one shot at it. Whereas with the BTEC they have more opportunity to take their time, gather things in, and because it’s an open book assessment, so you’ve got a computer, you’ve got all the information (...) in front of them, it’s a lot more of a relaxed environment, I think.

For some FE lecturers there is concern that BTEC assessment processes do not adequately prepare students for the predominantly exam-based assessment methods at HE, particularly the resubmission opportunity. Even though BTECs have changed and will include more assessment by external exam students will still have the chance to resubmit, ‘which perhaps does not prepare learners for the kind of rigorousness of university’. BTECs have now started to employ exams for assessing courses, ‘to try and match the academic rigour’ of A levels. However this FE lecturer identifies a, ‘side effect’ of introducing more rigorous assessments: ‘The students who tend to come to college because they weren’t particularly brilliant at exams in the first place, so by forcing them through a level II exam now, is very stressful for them’. Another FE tutor suggests that the BTEC needs to be more, ‘rigorous’ in order to prepare students for ‘the shock of a deadline’. They feel they should be telling students to, ‘run, crawl, get there and submit it’ but this is not stringently enforced. This FE tutor adds that when writing an assignment students will often ask, ‘how many words for me to get a distinction’, or if they are three or four points away from, ‘getting the full grade’ they will come to him and say, ‘if you let me resubmit I will get it. At university you can’t do that’. FE lecturers acknowledge that the resubmission option for BTEC students, ‘does not give a clear understanding of what university is like’. In the second year of this course, ‘we try to be more stringent and that is part of the process of preparing them so that is the QCF. The NQF which is a new qualification, has tried to address that by having four exams’.

### 4.4 Academic support

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This theme captures the support mechanisms and strategies available to HE and FE students including institutional support, tutor support, and individual tutor strategies put in place to ensure student success.

4.4.1 HE Tutor support and awareness of background

There is no common approach to whether HE lecturers are either made aware, or make themselves aware, of student academic background. In the case of one HEI, a lecturer feels that there are, ‘elements of a disconnect’ between the levels of awareness of those involved in admissions and setting entry requirements where, ‘the diversity of students enrolling’ is, ‘reasonably well known’, and the, ‘general awareness amongst staff’ for whom it can be a surprise that ‘we even accept BTECs as a qualification’. Some lecturers have an awareness, ‘from an overall demographic, but not individual students unless they identify themselves as struggling’. Several HE lecturers remark that they will only find out about a student’s background if students are struggling. Comments included:

I genuinely don’t look at the background of my students unless they struggle with some issues and they contact me to speak more on these issues and accordingly I look back and I see the background information.

... certainly it is there and you can see, but I’ve never been curious to be honest to explore more their previous background ... I don’t know anything about the students I teach first year, I have around 170, 190 students every year. I also have them as the personal tutees but even when they come to me I don’t know their background at that stage unless it comes into conversation but I wouldn’t go and search it out before I see them.

If they [students] come into me and say, “I’m struggling on your module,” or whatever, I wouldn’t necessarily know their background. And the help, the advice you give students would pretty much be the same, that may not be right, but it is. Personal tutees, yeah, you know their background, you’d look them up.

It is a similar situation at another HEI where any students who are struggling are picked up through formal mechanisms:

.... but then you’re not taking any consideration into a student’s background at all, you’re just looking at absolute performance ... there’s no auto system for the monitoring of progression in that sense at an individual level. It becomes a risk based thing based around individual current academic performance.

Another lecturer describes how they would only actively find out a student’s academic background if they were tutoring them on a one-to-one basis:

... whenever I’m dealing with them on a one to one or small group basis I’m very aware of what their background is but when I’m teaching them in larger group scenarios or certainly when I’m giving lectures I would have no idea at all and I imagine that might be the case for others.

In contrast to the above, other lecturers make a point of finding out their students’ background. In these cases individual lecturers have developed a variety of methods for finding out who has studied
a BTEC and so may find certain aspects of a course more of a challenge than students who studied A levels. This then means lecturers are able to offer or suggest targeted support. For example, one HE lecturer is able to adopt a distinct and personal approach to supporting students by telling students within the first couple of lectures that if they have not certain A levels they may find the work, ‘a bit more tricky’. They describe this approach as ‘a bit contrived’ but:

... it tends to draw people out, I get quite a good mix of people coming down to the front afterwards, and a lot of those tend to say, “I didn’t do A levels, I’ve done BTEC.” And it used to be almost apologetic from people, “I snuck in here on a BTEC,” which is ridiculous. But it’s a good opportunity, that first point with them, to put their mind at ease a little bit and say, “I did a BTEC.” And it’s good to tell them that the director of undergraduate studies ... did a BTEC and went on to university, did a PhD. So if you can see them at that point, if they’re in any way apologetic at that point and then I tell them that, they’re like, “Oh my gosh, we might be able to do this.” ... It’s instilling a bit of belief in people that they can do it, and it always helps when I tell that that was my background.

Tutor groups are also a way that specific support can be offered. At one HEI certain tutors are deliberately assigned students from a BTEC background ‘and they’re aware that they’re BTEC students and we look for them to just sort of help in a slightly different way’:

... to motivate them in some respects but at the same time to make them realise that there are different issues here that they need to make the most of their time here and be aware of the potential for issues.

... to recognise early as students come along, to actually talk to them about the fact that they are BTEC students and the fact that that doesn’t mean they can’t do really and students do do really well.

Some HE lecturers would like to offer targeted support to students with a BTEC background but are wary of making things worse for a student rather than better by making them feel inferior to other students. Comments included:

The last thing I want to say is “okay so you came here with a BTEC, so you’re more like to have a few problems, so what’s going on”? We have to be more subtle and professional than that, so in short as a personal tutor providing pastoral support through those organised meetings.

... We’ve tried to put on things like that time management programme and things like that and they just don’t turn up because in a way you go to early – nothing’s gone wrong, “so why are you picking on me?” It’s awful, but you kind of need something to go wrong and then you can say “Look, okay, this is the reason why.” But it’s awful, you do need that stick rather than the carrot, to entice them to come and listen.

One HE lecturer describes how he is:

... conscious of walking a tightrope. Of saying “Okay, everyone in the whole cohort, if you’re a BTEC student I’m going to need to talk to you afterwards because...” I would never do that, I don’t think anyone ever does that. But in some ways that would be useful because it’s just a targeted approach ... “I can give you a bit of information that might help you”. Because there’s no generic student, but there are definite frequent things that we encounter with students that have got your background. But yeah, making someone feel different is never a good thing in any sort of ostensibly homogenous group.
Indeed the targeted support offered by one HEI to students did little to encourage them to actually attend what was on offer. As a result they have built in tests to act as a, ‘safety net’:

... We use the success in those academic tests to put them in touch with that support, because we found that when we did it earlier and it was just, “Would you consider - ?” or “In our experience we’ve found that people with this qualification struggle a little bit more – “ then it just falls on deaf ears and no-one turns up. So this has been a way through. I mean we’re literally getting four or five people bothering to turn up when we were asking maybe 30 or 40 to turn up.

In terms of pastoral support HE lecturers will not have the level of personal information about a student that FE tutors have. One lecturer talks about the difficulties of providing appropriate support and assistance to students in HE if they do not disclose relevant aspects of their personal situation:

As a personal tutor, unless they disclose that, you do not know that they have been accessing all of these different types of support because they are struggling so badly ... If you then go to an appeal and you haven’t got a good reason for saying why didn’t I use the university’s extenuating circumstances, you’ll lose your appeal as well. So those students just get excluded, often just because they were too shy, too nervous, didn’t understand what they could do to help themselves ... disproportionatetely our live at home students, who will often come with a BTEC, fall into that latter group of not disclosing. They don’t realise that actually there is as much support here probably as you’d have at school or college, but you have to go and find it’.

A lecturer from another HEI echoes the above thoughts about BTEC students coming forward and asking for support:

I think the BTEC students don’t early enough say, “I’m struggling.” I can understand why perhaps, or they don’t come and speak to...all students seem to have...some of them, you speak to them, they say, “Talking to a lecturer is absolute last resort,” that’s the last thing. They’ll read their notes, their read a book, they’ll Google it, they’ll ask their friends, and only then would they actually come and ask a member of staff.

Sometimes, however, seeking out help from a lecturer may not be successful:

Students sometimes have a path towards a support structure very, very closely related to the module, but sometimes it’s knocking on a door that will never open, and that’s frustrating. I think this is what makes them disheartened and has an impact on their performance ... If you have a lecturer who will come to the lecture and every single time say, “My office is there, if you struggle come and see me,” or if you get approachable vibes from someone you’re more likely to use the support that is on offer. But not everybody is like that, and I think that they do need that encouragement to go and see an academic.

However other HEIs take an active approach to monitoring student progress and offering support. Strategies include checking the progress of students who have ‘come through with alternative non-standard A Level qualifications’. They continue:

Just a very quick glance, 10 seconds if nothing else, at their academic record. That might then alert me to an issue. It might be specifically an issue to do with them as an individual student that I can put a support process into place for, but it might also be identifying particular modules that particular types of students struggle with that I might then contact module leads to then have something that we might want to have a look at how we might improve support for those students.
Another comments:

At university there’s a realisation that, “Actually I’m amongst a cohort of a lot of people,” and whilst the staff do set aside time for tutorials it’s probably not anywhere near what they’re used to and having that access.

Teaching a core module in year 1 was another deliberate way that one lecturer is able to monitor student progress:

… It just provides me with a week by week opportunity to see them, get to know them, they get to know me. If there’s housekeeping that needs to be done, problem solving, firefighting, it just means that you’ve got really easy access, and consistent access to it, so that’s been deliberate but it’s worked really well.

4.4.2 HE Institutional support

All the universities interviewed provide academic support and advice to students through, for example, academic development workshops on essay writing, referencing, report writing, use of the different IT packages, presentation skills, ‘roving help’ provided by maths students, a ‘skill sessions around effective reading, what makes a good essay answer’ which is identified as ‘a skills gap … I think before, some students went through the net in terms of those sorts of skills and now I think we’re very much targeting that more directly’, and helpdesks where students are ‘made to feel comfortable to ask any question to do with chemistry or understanding of those particular topics that might have come up in my module’, ‘sessions on preparing for exams, supplying students with annotated literature reviews, notetaking (which is something that students particularly struggle with) and peer mentoring’.

Support is often provided by Masters or PhD students who will be experienced in particular area of work, such as statistics, and a lecturer will liaise with that person when a piece of work, for example a lab report, is due:

So I’ll make sure they know exactly what’s in there. And I can talk through the types of things that I’ve told the students already, just to make sure we haven’t got a contradictory message. Because that’s the worst thing that we can have is I’m saying to the students, “These are the types of things I’m looking for in your introduction, methods, results and discussion section.” They go along to the writing desk and they come away confused that they’ve just been told something different.

There is a recognition that different students bring different challenges and this may have nothing to do with entry qualifications and has, instead, to do with, ‘the nature of the material. It’s a different way of thinking and suddenly they are faced with finance which is a completely new module, new style of learning, new style of delivery and therefore we tend to have our own frameworks of support for that’. The support framework for one course at one HEI includes targeting students who are deemed at risk at the end of year 1. At the start of next academic year, ‘we have regular one to one meetings with them to alert them and make them aware that look it’s important that you catch up with the previous year if you want to progress’. One lecturer comments that even though their academic workshops are voluntary a lot of students sign up to them. However, for the majority of lecturers there is a sense of frustration from lecturers that students do not seek advice and support when they need to, even though they are made of aware of and directed to this support. Comments included:

…the problem is that they don’t understand the importance of attending these modules … They don’t feel they were actually supposed to go … This year it was a lot better because Z came to
my module to reinforce the importance of the writing and they did better. But it was hard work.

Different students bring different attributes, different skills and I think our challenge is just about trying to figure out how we understand that and how we help the student understand what skills they have and what skills they need to develop in order to complete the programme ... students need to be encouraged to seek advice, they need to ask for help, they need to have the confidence to ask for help, of someone connected with the module, even if it's not the module leader, the support staff, the PhD students, the RAs, graduate teaching assistants or whoever it may be, who is there for support ...

... The one frustration that many of us have is getting the students to identify their own need for support and to be brave enough to access it. Or not even be brave, to just do it, because many of them just don’t until it’s too late. So the help is there for them, we have a huge suite of academic support, pastoral support, available for them, it’s about encouraging them to access it.

I should add that within that students do have to be proactive as well and whilst we can offer personal tutor appointments and all that sort of stuff, the student also has to take responsibility in this process.

Support available at one HEI to develop students’ academic preparedness is driven by the diversity of student academic background and experiences. There is a standalone module, described as ‘a depository of resources’ where students attend an initial lecture which sets out ‘all of the generic conventions of study, so how they’ll be assessed, different types of assessment, how to approach those, what the marking criteria look like, but also signposting them to all the different ways that they can access support, whether that’s through personal tutoring, whether it’s through student services, whether outside agencies within the university like the wellbeing centre’. In addition students:

... work their way through a resource on academic honesty and plagiarism, they also take a quiz which assesses whether they’ve understood that. And then beyond that they have access to academic development workshops on all sorts of things like essay writing, referencing, report writing, use of the different IT packages, presentation skills. These are entirely voluntary but lots and lots of students sign up to them, not just first years ... So that’s a way of for them to identify along with their personal tutors which skills they particularly would like more support with, and there are lots of links to other things they can access outside the university and the generic skills resources that the university offers.

4.4.3 Student support at FE

There is a wide variety of support available to students at FE not only to guide them through their academic work but also to address any issues or problems that might hamper student performance. Comments included:

... it is an open door situation. I am more than happy to spend time with a student that needs some assistance, or wants to talk about an issue

[Students] might get an extra hour a week with someone who can just spend some time with them going through the things that have been taught in lessons. And I think as tutors we’re very good at picking up where someone might be struggling, and communicating with each other
One FE lecturer comments that they will do all that they can to support a student through their course to ensure that they complete, ‘it’s not just about standing up in the classroom and delivering, there’s support and care that goes beyond that’:

... we’re dealing with human beings so they can come in all bright and cheery at the beginning of September and then some incident may have happened and could cause an issue, which could impact their learning. I’m a great believer we’re dealing with people and therefore everyone deserves an education so I’ll look at doing probably distant learning if it’s a medical issue ... then we’ll look at extensions, look at making sure that the learners are progressing in the right timeframe, manageable, and not having an impact on their grades due to a situation out of their control. And I think the nurturing of that has to be really important. I feel like I’m the mother of the course actually. I can’t help it.

The above tutor will also ‘tend to get parents in, if they’re 16 to 18 and talk to parents about how they can help me ... and that way I’ve covered every angle’ because, ‘can’t mess with mum and dad can you?’

The extent of the support available to students at FE is perceived as both ‘positive’ and ‘negative’. The majority of FE lecturers acknowledge that students need to be better prepared for university in terms of the reduced pastoral support available to students in HE. As the above illustrates, students receive a lot of one-to-one support and one FE tutor asks ‘is this really a good thing’? because ‘when they go to university all that network of support fails to be available, then those students will struggle’. Not only is but the ‘time set aside for tutorials probably is not anywhere near what they’re used to’. For this tutor:

... the question that we face is you know I want to help you but is helping you hindering you. So, you know and it is a conversation I have with the teachers because what I want to do next year is perhaps decrease the support for some learners, to prepare them for university but then that could jeopardise their success in the college. So it is a tough one.

The change in the level of pastoral support available to students at HE compared with FE is also a concern for this tutor, ‘I mean we are all over them all the time, helping them out, improving their work’. Additional comments include:

... I think they like the idea of university but I don’t think they understand the work behind it. Yes, the learners at L3 think going to HE is an easy transition however there are big expectations and this may not be fulfilled.

This concern has shaped the support developed by one college which has been designed to better prepare students for university:

... I’m making it stricter ... no colloquial language, no contractions. So I’m preparing them for the grammatical requirements of university. And that is very interesting because they still write ‘don’t’ and I write ‘No you write ‘do not’. And it’s about getting the team and the teachers on board to say ‘Look we’re preparing for university. At university they can’t use colloquial English, they can’t use contractions. It’s formal writing.

This college is also considering creating a unit that is ‘just lecture based’ and ‘see how the students get on with that. And therefore that would be a good reflection of how to deal with university. It’s just a possibility for us to think about in the future’. Support currently available includes drop-in sessions run by the library which include essay writing, Harvard referencing, and tutors cover different academic
skills in tutorials each week. There is also support provided for students who have not achieved the grades needed in maths and English:

... those students that haven’t got the grades, is it four or five these days, will be doing resits, so they will be getting extra sessions per week in their English and their maths if needed to do those resits. So they’re getting support beyond the Business lessons.

4.5 Ways of learning

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This theme captures the dominant ways of learning at HE and FE and perceptions of student preference.

4.5.1 Lecturer perceptions of students’ responses to, and preference for, dominant ways of learning

Lectures and seminars are the, ‘cornerstone of higher education’ and are the dominant ways of learning at HE given the large numbers of students. All HEIs lecture to large numbers of students at one time. Numbers can range from over 200 up to 400, and so, ‘when you’re in that size it’s pretty hard to do much else’. In order to help students learn certain aspects of a course such as muscles and attachments lecturers might include mini online quizzes in addition to practicals. Comments included:

... so they can actually physically figure stuff out ... And those practicals are supervised by our MSc physiotherapy students who know their stuff. And so it means we can put them in quite small groups with an MSc student without needing 30 members of staff there.

The practical components of the course are very important because that’s where we have maybe a couple of opportunities per module to make science visible in front of them, and that engages them quite well ... practical classes are where the tipping point for them is, they realise that what they have learnt in lectures is right there and they understand it, they can use it, to do a calculation, to make a measurement, or to make a muscle twitch or something like that.

One lecturer considered that, ‘the adaptation to lectures seems better than to the assessments’ but several lecturers feel that in the first year all students can find lectures difficult because, ‘they’re not used to what a lecture is’. Comments included:

I think all of our students, not necessarily by qualification, struggle with lectures when they get here, they just don’t get it. They don’t get this idea of basically creating their own set of materials and ideas from their reading and their lectures.

They’re sitting in one of the five big lecture theatres we’ve got, and there’s 220, 230 students in there, it’s like, “Wow.” So maybe they get a little lost in that, but it’s the nature of the beast.

For another lecturer BTEC students, ‘don’t know how to learn, just osmosis learning, they think by turning up that’s all they need to do. You can sometimes see them in lectures ... the impression is they’re ... rabbit stuck in the headlights’. Picking up on the perception that students feel lost in lectures
referred to above, a feeling of ‘distance’ and ‘detachment’ when teaching a large groups is touched on by several lecturers who consider that this can have a negative impact on student participation. In the same way that there is frustration for some lecturers that students do not ask for actively seek support when they need it, there is also frustration that ‘students don’t actively participate, they don’t seem particularly engaged. They’ve bothered to turn up but they don’t engage verbally either with peers or with staff. Comments include:

... you can try to make it as interactive as you can and you can have activities that break up the lecturing. It can be challenging and students, some engage, some don’t engage particularly well. I think if you ask students they would probably unanimously say that they prefer smaller group teaching.

The other thing is that social influence of you don’t want to put your hand up and ask the question … So that’s always one we struggle with, you can run discussions boards or Q&A things electronically, it’s getting them even to engage in that is difficult. I don’t know whether they feel, “Oh, I’m going to feel pretty stupid if I do this,” in whichever way, but actually everyone’s been through that.

One HEI also complements their, ‘large class teaching’ with seminars and tutorials so that, ‘students who’ve come from sixth form ... feel a bit more confidence to speak or ask questions’ but other lecturers do not have the same success with student participation:

... the biggest challenge I’ve personally had throughout my time at here is to encourage participation particularly during tutorials. It’s almost impossible, particularly with Asian students, it’s literally impossible to get them to ask questions and engage and participate. No matter how friendly you create your tutorial environment it’s still a challenge and although I’ve personally done a lot of research and I’ve tried to use several methods during tutorials ... there are many walls and they’re very difficult to break down.

I think that part of the problem is in tutorials they don’t come prepared for it. There is no knowledge, they haven’t researched that area, and then they are not brave enough because they don’t have anything to say and don’t know the subject, and they don’t want to feel or look foolish in front of everybody.

For several lecturers this reluctance to speak up and participate is not related to background, nationality or qualifications but because they do not know each other very well, ‘So to launch into group work or to stand up in front of their peers and give a presentation, that’s something that does take time to develop’. Nevertheless the general perception is that students prefer to learn in small groups:

They don’t feel that they can learn best in these circumstances and they are very much less likely to participate. If you ask them questions. There will be no answers. I think it’s a little bit daunting for them in the first year. They like tutorials so they like smaller classes.

Another adds ‘You just intuitively know, and you see it in their faces, that they get more from the smaller interaction because they’re more comfortable to ask questions, in a way it’s a safer environment’. Although:

... this is not to suggest that learning does not take place in large scale formats, or that large scale formats doesn’t have a value, it has all kinds of value in terms of community identity, conveying messages, collective experiences, entertainment, edu-tainment, enthusiasm, confidence, there’s an incredible set of reasons for that that drives aspects of learning.
This lecturer employs technology as a way of encouraging students to participate in lectures:

... click throughs so they can actually (fire back) some questions and I’m trying to do some (quantitative) stuff so they – at least key words and I do have some responses, but generally they’re not keen to interact. One to one is very much appreciated. I did this with my undergraduate module this year and I offered each single student a time slot of 15 minutes to discuss a draft of their assignment and they were really happy with this and this was acknowledged in the feedback.

However one lecturer considered the BTEC students were actually stronger than A level students in terms of their contributions in class because:

I think a lot of very able A Level students prefer to keep quiet. Now there are bound to be differences among BTEC students but I think at the better end, at the more confident end, they are very, very good, particularly in my area, where it can be about issues, it can be about their personal experiences, how they experience sport and PE up to that point in their lives

Further reasons for students not liking lectures as a way of learning are because students find them ‘complex because of notetaking skills’, they require ‘a level of concentration that they aren’t used to’ and:

...more and more we’re finding that all our students are wanting to be told, whereas that’s not how we work. We pose questions. And sometimes they struggle with that, and certainly that increases throughout the degree.

As outlined in the previous section above, there is a perception among all HE lecturers that BTEC students are ‘much better at the practical side of things’ and feel very comfortable with learning by doing, and ‘hands on’ methods which include ‘interaction’ such as coaching and games based learning to look at theory and practice. Comments included:

... that’s where they tend to do really well, on that kind of programme ... Then on the SPECs programme they have outdoor education which is delivered through some baseline lectures and then they go to Coniston for three days. They go to the Raymond Priestly Centre and that’s a SPECs one, so it’s very much hands on, it’s totally their environment, they love it.

They [BTEC students] prefer group work, activity simulation. Activities like that they respond really well to those. They respond well to giving presentations, and debating and anything that requires them to move around. The moment they have to sit down and just listen, listen, listen because it requires a level of concentration that they are not used to.

Although there is not the flexibility to adapt ways of learning to individual student needs or preferences one tutor considers that more experienced staff are aware and understand that, ‘there potentially are differences in the background of BTEC and A level students would be able to tailor an individual tutorial, or tailor some oral feedback to a student that might be more suitable’. In addition one lecturer is keen that all students should have the opportunity to experience different learning styles and ‘go outside their comfort zones to look at something in a different way’:

So for instance those students that prefer dealing with hard data, with reading, with lectures and that kind of more formal dissemination, communication, get them to do role playing, which can be very much outside of their comfort zone but the point is to try and develop that style of learning’. 
4.5.2 Tutor perceptions of students’ responses to dominant ways of learning

In the same way that FE colleges support their BTEC students through the use of a variety of different assessment methods to suit individual preferences, FE tutors’ teaching and learning strategies are also varied and can accommodate individual student learning styles and dislikes. Ways of learning on BTEC courses might include a, ‘45 minute didactic session ... and then they are given the opportunity to try it, and so they are learning it through practice and I think that is a really big deal’. Another FE tutor says that they, ‘tend to try and mix, we try to hit audio, visual and kinaesthetic within every lesson, and also people will try and do individual, pair, and group tasks within every lesson as well’. In one college every student has an individual learning plan, they have information, ‘on every student’ and they try, ‘as best we can, within the timeframes and with what is practical, to teach as many different styles for as many different students as possible’. Comments include:

... in my class I’ve got people who really struggle with written work on the board, but video they’re brilliant with. So we use a lot of video, a lot of diagrams in the thought process, rather than reading. But how we actually teach really depends on the group.

Teaching and learning at FE is described by all FE tutors as being practical, and is aimed at developing students’ employability:

The BTEC is very much vocation orientated and we’re thinking about the students in terms of their future working lives and the skills that they’re going to need. At A level it’s much more academic, much more, I would regard as traditional in terms of delivery, we teach the theory, we use a lot of case studies, we use a lot of report writing, essay writing. But we are focused on the exam and exam preparation. So it’s quite different to the BTEC.

In talking about ways of learning FE tutors describe how learning draws on real life situations, the real world, and, for example, live briefs from businesses so that learning can be applied to non-academic settings. Tutors consider that most students enjoy this way of learning and for the students, ‘It is like “Wow!” because it comes to life’. Comments include:

... very quickly ... it’s applied, it’s used to real life situations. And we’ll use case studies that we’ll look at in the classroom, we’ll then move on to do role plays, the students will be asked to do investigative work and do presentations back to the group, so developing their presentation skills as well. It’s as practical as we can make it.

... students seem to enjoy they enjoy discussions and debates, they enjoy what we call simulation activities. We often pretend to be a business ... so they enjoy that. They enjoy when they get live briefs from companies, because they can actually understand the world of work.

When it comes to group working, some members aren’t so responsible or let them down, which is what real life’s all about isn’t it? So this is why we do encourage a lot of group work discussions ... they had to raise money for a charity and had to work in groups, probably a group they’d never worked with before and had to arrange the promotion, the products, displays, selling the products and it got quite nitty gritty. It got heated at times because there was the odd one or two that worked really hard but some hadn’t, but that impacted on their grade, which I think is fair ... I say in the real world you will work with people that you may not really enjoy working with, and therefore, it’s a reality check.

We do mock interviews, they have to role play being interviewed and being the interviewer. In one particular unit I role play being a chat show host and I interview them about being an
entrepreneur and exporting for the first time, and they’ve got to think on their feet. They’re prepared, they’ve got a few notes with them, but they’ve got to think on their feet and answer questions.

However some FE tutors also remark on the challenges of getting students to work effectively in groups:

... because a lot of them are quite shy. They will back away from it. And one thing I’ve noticed different from previous years is that we’ve got students from different countries, from different backgrounds, who come in and maybe it’s not in their nature or their culture to really get involved in some of the things that you’re doing. So they will sit back and it’s very difficult to make sure that learning is happening when they’re not wanting to get involved in the group work.

I think they just have mixed feelings towards group assignments, group works, because they might have very strong group members and encourage each other, and they might have free riders.

In addition there is a perception that level 2 students in particular find it difficult to sit and listen in lectures because, ‘the focus isn’t there’. This lecturer feels it is therefore very important that the level 2 classes:

... are very engaging, there’s a lot of work, a lot of research. They might go out into the city centre and have a look at some of the businesses there. You’ve really got to keep short, sharp, engaging activities to keep them focused, whereas with level 3 you can give them a lot more of the traditional academic lectures, but you’re still bringing in those activities and making sure that they’re fully engaged.

### 4.6 Social capital

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<tr>
<th>Social Capital</th>
<th>Lecturer perceptions of the extent to which students have social networks and the quality of social experiences.</th>
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<td>Social networks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group identity</td>
<td>How far students identify, or not within a group, including academic/sport/Halls/club.</td>
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This theme captures the extent to which tutors and lecturers perceive students to have social networks, and the quality of their social experiences. At HE this includes differences in students who live at home and students in student accommodation during their first year.

#### 4.6.1 HE Lecturer perceptions of student social networks

HE lecturers observe that live at home students (many of whom are BTEC students) are not as likely to engage with the extra-curricular opportunities available to them which also has an impact on group identity:

... not many of them engage in all the other stuff around the university. So they’re not the ones who join the sports teams or the clubs. They may belong to the guild, religion based groups, they may belong to the Sikh Society, or whatever, that kind of thing, but they don’t tend to do other stuff around there. So that’s where the differentiation comes, and that’s probably how we identify
groups of students actually ... If you sit in a classroom you can actually see them sat together doing that, and mixing those groups, forcing them to mix is very, very difficult.

In addition certain groups of students, including BTEC students, are not ‘engaging in events, internships and societies ... or doing the stuff that increases their social capital ... they aren’t doing internships, they aren’t engaging on events and societies when employers are here, they’re not doing, I’d hate to say this, they’re not doing the stuff that increases their social capital’.

Some HE lecturers consider that it is important to, ‘make students realise that there are different issues ... and they need to make the most of their time here’.

... there are groups of students with a similar background that hang around together. And I think it’s sometimes there’s comfort in the fact that they’ve had a similar route in, they’re struggling with similar things. On the flipside of that, a lack of belief within that group can keep them where they are.

One of the science courses are perceived as, ‘very sociable’ with students have, ‘fairly active social lives’

... there’s a very, very strong social aspect to the course because of the teams that they’re involved, which makes Thursdays very poorly attended [laughs]. But there’s a very strong social coherence in there ... and the fact that they do quite a lot of practical work and they work in small groups, so they get to know each other better. From different parts of the activities they get to know different people, so if they are hockey players they know the hockey team, but when they do practical classes they don’t choose who they’ll go with, so they’ll meet other people and they have to work together. They get mixed quite a bit.

For business courses lecturers consider the students identify themselves by discipline, ‘So we know that economics students have a very strong sense of their own identity as economists, so that’s probably the strongest of identities in the business school’. However, in the main, students identify themselves according to a range of things including hall of residence, nationality, sport that they play, friendship circles, and the societies that they move in, but not whether they are BTEC or A level students:

I would imagine that they never ever identify themselves according to BTEC status and in fact it’d be quite possible or I wouldn’t be surprised if a BTEC student went through the business school never having a conversation with anyone about their BTEC background or certainly not necessarily bumping into anyone else and that being a talking point at all. It’s something that exists below the surface in a way.

On one accounting degree HE lectures perceive a split between live at home students, many of whom are from the local ethnic minority communities, and students who live in halls:

.. who are doing the normal student thing of living away from home, living in halls, doing that, engaged in all the clubs and societies, and they tend to stick together as well. So we do have a split that way. I don’t think that’s necessarily by qualification, there are other things that define those groups, and that’s about ethnic background, living at home and where they live, that kind of thing.
There is also a perception among the majority of HE lecturers that live at home students are much less likely to participate in the extracurricular activities available to them such as sports teams or clubs but may belong to religious based groups:

... but they don’t tend to do other stuff around there. So that’s where the differentiation comes, and that’s probably how we identify groups of students actually. If you sit in a classroom you can actually see them sat together doing that, and mixing those groups, forcing them to mix is very, very difficult.

4.7 Transferable skills

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<tr>
<th>Transferable skills</th>
<th>HE Lecturer perceptions of the transferable skills students bring with them and whether there are any differences due to student academic background, and FE lecturer perceptions of the development of transferable skills at FE</th>
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<td>Carried through from FE</td>
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This theme explores HE lecturer perception of the transferable skills students bring with them and whether there are any differences due to student academic background, and the promotion and development of transferable skills during at FE including but not only: actively participating in group discussion, presenting work to others, vocational skills, independent learning; working with others; managing time to meet deadlines; managing workload; effective empirical research skills; effective desk based research skills; seeking advice and support when you need it; taking on board and reflecting on feedback to improve work

4.7.1 HE lecturer perceptions of students’ transferable skills

A number of the skills classed as transferable have been discussed in previous sections of the report. These include participating in group discussion, presenting, working with others, vocational skills and working with others. Also discussed in previous sections is the perception held by the majority of HE lecturers that BTEC students have had more support and ‘hand holding’ through their FE course and may ‘struggle’ with ‘the limited monitoring we do’ and ‘the less frequency I think of the looking over the shoulder and checking’ at HE. This may have an impact on independent learning skills, and a perceived lack of independence was mentioned by all HE lectures interviewed:

So I think sometimes it’s not just the simple fact of they’re not independent learners and other people are. It’s a case of they don’t know how to be independent learners. And some of them pick that up quite quickly, all they need is pointing in the right direction. Whereas ... they don’t seem to have that much confidence that they know what they’re supposed to be doing at a given time. And we stand up at the front in a lecture and say, “Go away and do your recommend reading,” but whether or not people are not doing that because they don’t feel they’ve got the basics, or they’re doing that and then there’s a full stop and there’s no more wider reading ... we assume that they’re going to go away and be able to be independent learners, when that’s a skill in itself.

Further comments on BTEC student inclination for independent learning include:
I think the type of BTEC student that I come across regularly will require a much more hands on approach from staff, as opposed to being an independent learner ... I think throughout the BTEC they get a much more one to one or tutor based system where they get a lot more support.

... my impression is that they’re used to being to a very structured programme, I don’t know, spoon fed is a bit...I don’t quite mean spoon fed, but do this, do this, do this, do this. And therefore anything where they’ve got to do something on their own initiative, on average they seem to not be able to break it down in to, “I need to do this, then this, then this.” They seem a bit bewildered and, “I don’t know where to start, so I don’t.”

Additional comments highlight lecturers’ perception that BTEC students find it hard to organise their own learning:

Because in a way we’re not ticking them in, ticking them out. They’ve got homework related tasks that they’re not going to particularly get marked on but they form the basis of what we cover next and it’s kind of implicit that they’re going to get on with that. I think that that’s been a big struggle but you do see a number of A level students who don’t cope with that equally.

... anything where they’ve got to do something on their own initiative, on average they seem to not be able to break it down in to, “I need to do this, then this, then this.” They seem a bit bewildered and, “I don’t know where to start, so I don’t.”

Managing deadlines is mentioned by the majority of lecturers as causing students problems, ‘... they struggle with work when there isn’t a deadline, something you’d leave in front of them’. Further comments include:

... they struggle with work when there isn’t a deadline, something you’d leave in front of them ... they’re so assessment driven that their learning is just so focused on what’s the next assessment ... And everything else goes out of the window.

I’ve got students who were struggling with managing deadlines. They need support and they need to speak to somebody but they just panic ... So reminding them in a friendly way that the key objective is to be here and to manage deadlines and to study, but in a more friendly way, I think it has worked in my case.

... they are used to being checked up on, to have to hand in homework, have had tasks they have to do on a frequent basis. We give them long deadlines ... You’ve got this long gap between the studying and the assessment for it, horrible, horrible situation for those students to be in and they just feel unsure about what they do. I think all the students feel a little bit unsure, but certainly the BTEC students feel most unsure about that.

We stand up at the front in a lecture and say, “Go away and do your recommend reading,” but whether or not people are not doing that because they don’t feel they’ve got the basics, or they’re doing that and then there’s a full stop and there’s no more wider reading. So sometimes I think it’s perhaps that in some cases, and it can be true of whatever background actually, is that we assume that they’re going to go away and be able to be independent learners, when that’s a skill in itself.

A level students are regarded as being more used to independent learning while live at home students ‘tend to struggle with independent learning’ because:
Certain groups seem to struggle more, the live at home students I think especially, because they’re not around other students ... So when they’ve finished their lectures and they’ve finished their classes, they get on a train, a bus, whatever, and they go home. And they’ll not do anything else, they slot back into home life, friends from home, that kind of thing. They’re not in that sharing a flat in the halls. Everybody else is going to the library and writing up their lecture notes, or whatever’.

4.7.2 FE tutor perceptions of students’ transferable skills

The BTEC is seen as having strengths in developing students’ transferable skills. However the focus is very much on vocational skills and ‘readiness for work’, rather than academic skills, although there is some crossover, including communication skills, collaborative skills, time management, which, ‘for an employer is absolutely crucial’, teamwork, presentation skills, and interview skills. Comments included:

[The BTEC] is all about transferable skills. You’ve got group discussions, presentations, meeting deadlines, working independently, reflection on own work, advice and support when you need it. So that’s there ... So those transferable skills, how they can practice in real life, is crucial. Because this is about fending for yourself when you’re out there.

My main thing throughout the entire year is working on those transferrable skills and making sure they’re ready to go into the work environment. So things like participating in group discussions, managing your own learning, reflecting, are things that I try to take into every lesson ... Because the course is promoting those transferrable skills and they are good at those, typically, at those sorts of things.

[The BTEC prepares students] for reality. Can they go into work and put in a presentation on a management report? Yes because they know what a report looks like ... Can they arrange a meeting at work? Yes because they’ve done meeting agendas, minutes, all of those things. So we are training them to be more practical, we are training them to be more realistic and give them the skills and knowledge they need in order to become employable long term. Whichever route they take now it’s about employability at the end isn’t it? And having the confidence to do that.

The perception is that BTEC students are independent learners, resourceful and confident in terms of giving presentations and participating in discussion groups, whereas:

... the more traditionally academic A level student is not so confident in those areas but is academically more rigorous. Those transferrable skills are definitely more BTEC orientated ... managing your own time and meeting deadlines, if you don’t do that in BTEC you can’t get the higher grades. So there’s a deadline for a handing it in, and if you miss it you will only get the pass criteria mark, you will not get the higher level work mark. And they have a number of units that they are submitting at the same time, first and second assignments, so they have to be really good with their planning.

Communication skills are deemed particularly important because ‘of the way in which some of our learners communicate. They use ‘you know’ and ‘innit’, and ‘oh yeah’. When they go out in the real world they can’t communicate like that’. Time management can also be a problem which FE lecturers have to deal with:

I do monitor attendance and punctuality because we teach it as a workplace and we try to get
them into the routine, like if you’re 20 minutes late it constantly has a knock on effect, then you’re missing out on your learning, or if you’re missing days you’re missing out on your knowledge. But if you’re in full time employment you wouldn’t be in your job very long. The sort of carrot I wave ... anyone that’s late, absences, may not come back in the second year, or they’re on a six week probationary contract and it’ll be reviewed if things don’t improve. Depending on family backgrounds ... education’s not always important for every family ... and some want to really better themselves and do well and go to uni, and make their parents and families proud by going uni.
Discussion of findings

The data from this piece of research underscore the rationale for this project: that BTEC students are less likely to perform as well as A level students, leading to differential outcomes throughout their time at university, and are more likely to drop out after their first year. An analysis by one HEI showed that, although the attainment of A level students was flat and BTEC student attainment rose over the course of the degree, starting points were lower and BTEC students on the whole do not make up enough ground to match A level student degree outcomes. Thus A level students who achieved a 2:1 or a First at the end of their first year maintained that level of achievement, while BTEC students were on average 15% lower and are more likely to graduate with a 2:2 or a Third.

There appear to be certain issues and challenges that a higher proportion of BTEC students will experience at university than students from an A level background. The first area is academic preparedness. A number of lecturers considered that BTEC students are more likely to struggle with academic writing. In particular developing a coherent argument and backing up that argument with evidence quoting appropriate texts, and correctly referencing their sources. The different levels of ability within the student cohort presents a challenge for some lecturers during the first year in terms of finding an appropriate level at which to pitch their teaching. There is a tension between wanting to ensure that the stronger students are pushed, but the weaker students do not feel overwhelmed. For courses that have a quantitative element the perception is that students who do not have maths A level may find those elements of the programme more of a challenge. Similarly several lecturers consider that for some courses students who do not have subject specific A levels will find certain aspects a challenge, especially the basic scientific content of a course. A number of these concerns are mirrored at FE, suggesting that there are support mechanisms which could be developed at FE to better prepare students for university. A number of FE tutors consider that a BTEC course may not prepare students adequately for academic study at HE, particularly writing academic essays, reading and synthesising information, and research skills. Moreover both FE tutors and HE lecturers refer to student reliance on the internet to conduct their research and how this negatively impacts on the content of their work. In addition English language ability is also cited as a, ‘defining factor’ for student achievement at both FE and HE.

Further factors affecting BTEC students’ progress that were mentioned by HE lecturers include lack of confidence, and a sense of inferiority to A level students. Both these perceptions are alluded to by FE tutors who remark on the ways in which they manage student expectations. The interviews with FE tutors indicate that they feel they are very well placed to guide and advise students on their next steps after college. In some cases BTEC students may not have considered university as an option even though they have the capability because they see the pathway to university as being via A levels, and therefore regard A level students as ‘the brighter ones’. On the other hand FE tutors will come across BTEC students who are keen to go to university but tutors do not feel that they are academically prepared. This highlights the point that lowering entry requirements for some students may not necessarily be helpful for students where they are not ‘ready’ for HE. There exists therefore a challenge for HEI’s to discern those students who have not yet achieved academically but have the potential to do so, and those students for whom HE is not ‘right’.

The research suggests that a big challenge for students is around assessment and for the majority of lecturers this is where a significant difference in aptitude lies between A level and BTEC students. Although degree courses will include a variety of ways to assess students, exams are the principal method of assessment, which are the least preferred form of assessment for BETC students, many of whom choose a BTEC course precisely because assessment is coursework and practice based. Added to this there is nothing like the flexibility at university as there is at FE where tutors will, ‘run any type

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3 The new style BTEC courses include more assessment by exam which is a cause for concern for FE tutors.
of assessment that suits the student’. All FE tutors comment on the wide range of assessment options available to students and will offer, ‘an unbelievable list of types or assessment’ which are designed to complement the vocational nature of the BTEC course. This choice of assessment methods is accompanied by a lot of individual support and ‘TLC’. Indeed, there is a strong sense from FE colleges that they will do all that they possibly can to enable students to achieve and progress.

In the same way that exams are the main form of assessment at university due to student numbers, lectures and seminars are described as, ‘cornerstone of higher education’ because, ‘it’s pretty hard to do much else’ when teaching large numbers of students at the same time. A few lecturers feel that BTEC students will find learning through lectures more challenging than other students, but more suggest that all students will find it hard, regardless of background. There is recognition that this may be because many students will find it difficult to speak in front of a large group of people they do not know for risk of, ‘making themselves look silly’, but students are also reluctant to engage in smaller groups such as tutorials and seminars. This is another source of frustration for lecturers. Ways of learning at FE are varied, practical and aimed at developing students’ employability. Tutors will, ‘teach as many different styles for as many different students as possible’ which possibly accounts for why BTEC students will find it demanding to be confined to lecture-style teaching and learning.

There is no common approach to whether individual HE lecturers are either made aware, or make themselves aware, of student academic background. The research highlighted that some HE lecturers are very aware that some BTEC students in particular would appreciate tailored feedback on their coursework, rather than generic feedback, but student numbers mean this is not a viable option at institutional level. Some lecturers have adopted unique strategies to find out students’ academic backgrounds and will then offer support and advice as appropriate. However other lecturers are, ‘conscious of walking a tightrope’ and wary of singling out students from BTEC backgrounds to suggest that, because of their academic background, they will struggle with the course. Even though some lecturers will adopt their own approaches for finding out students’ backgrounds, it is considerably less than the ‘TLC’ that students will receive at college, at university level there is much more onus placed on the student to seek out the support that is available. A number of lecturers voice their frustration that students who are struggling do not take advantage of what is on offer and the resources available, and there is a perception that it is BTEC students who are more reluctant to be proactive because of the ‘handholding’ they will have had at college. This highly structured support system at FE gives rise to a tension which tutors themselves acknowledge: by helping students they might, ‘actually be hindering’ them because they are not encouraging self-reliance, but not providing support and direction may jeopardise their performance at college.

There is a mismatch in how well equipped BTEC students are in terms of their transferable skills. At FE tutors perceive the BTEC as developing communication skills, collaborative skills, time management, teamwork, and presentation skills. Despite these skills being regarded as transferable, according to HE lecturers, they do not seem to easily transfer from the FE to HE setting. Indeed HE lecturers perceive these to be areas where BTEC students in particular will struggle. The reason for this may be due to the context in which BTEC students have learnt these skills. BTECs are strongly geared towards employability rather academia, even though FE Tutors recognise that employability may not be the immediate next step. It may be that students not perceive these transferable skills to be pertinent to their academic learning as well as employment. This is perhaps evidenced by BTEC students’ aptitude for the practice-based elements of courses where they perform well.

6 Conclusion

Despite students’ differential outcomes at university, all lecturers consider that BTEC students have the capacity to perform well once at university. The challenge lies in enabling students to flourish at
university, regardless of academic background and experiences. However, three of the participating HEIs have addressed the differential outcome problem by changing their entry requirements so that students will no longer be accepted without an A level. In contrast one HEI has amended their requirements and now asks for Distinctions at BTEC and an A level is no longer a condition of entry. The request for an A level in addition to a BTEC is a source of concern as this approach risks closing a pathway to university for significant numbers of students. The majority of HE lecturers would like to be in a position to offer a greater variety of ways of learning and assessment methods. In some cases individual lecturers will amend or adapt their teaching methods or assessment practice to take account of the needs of students from academic backgrounds other than A level but there is an acknowledgement that may not a viable way forward cross-institutionally, given student numbers. It is hoped, therefore, that the interventions coming about through the Transforming Transitions project will go some way to ensuring that students from different academic backgrounds are not disadvantaged by unfamiliar assessment methods or pedagogy.
APPENDICES

TRANSFORMING TRANSITIONS:

HE LECTURER FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Introductory brief
☐ Thank the lecturers for agreeing to participate.
☐ Explain the project - we are conducting this study to better understand the university learning experience of students that have taken different qualifications at post-16 study.
☐ Explain that we are interested in their personal views and experiences, not a departmental line.
☐ We will be recording your responses.
☐ Secure consent (written signed consent).

Teaching, Learning and Assessment Experiences:

Entry Qualifications
1. How aware are you of the entry qualifications of the students you teach (A level entry; IB; BTEC etc)
   ➢ Does your department monitor the progress of students with different entry qualifications through its programmes?
   ➢ Have you noticed any difference in progress based on entry qualifications?

Curriculum
2. Are there particular areas of the curriculum content with your year 1 students seem to struggle with?
   ➢ Is this all students or some students? (is it linked to entry qualification in any way?)
   ➢ Have you taken any actions to address this problem?
   ➢ Are there any support structures in place to support students who might be struggling with different aspects of the curriculum including study skills?

Ways of learning
3. How would you describe the dominant ways of learning in your subject? (eg lecture; seminar; group work; practical work; work placements)
   ➢ Do you notice any differences in the ways students respond to these ways of learning? (ie not liking group work or lectures)
   ➢ Are you aware of whether any of these differences link to entry qualifications or background?

Assessment Practices
4. What assessment practices do you use in year 1? (eg examinations; essays, group presentations; practical assessments etc)
   ➢ Do you notice any differences in the ways students respond to these ways of learning? (ie not liking presentations or essay writing)
   ➢ Are you aware of whether any of these differences link to entry qualifications or background?

Literacy, Numeracy and Transferable Experiences
5. Do you notice any literacy or numeracy demands on your programme which students seem to find challenging:
   [Use the Interview Prompt Sheet]
6. We are also interested in the broader set of study and life-skills that students might experience on your course:
   seeking advice and support when they need it
[Use the Interview Prompt Sheet]

**Relationship and Social Experiences**
7. What kind of interaction and relationships do you develop with your BTEC students? [probe for pastoral support]
8. How strong do you feel your BTEC group is as a group? Does it have a group identity?

**Concluding Question**
9. This study is particularly interested in the progress and experiences of BTEC students. Do you have any perspectives which might inform our understanding of how BTEC students progress through your programme?
TRANSFORMING TRANSITIONS:
FE LECTURER FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Introductory brief
☐ Thank the lecturers for agreeing to participate.
☐ Explain the project - we are conducting this study to better understand the university learning experience of students that have taken different qualifications at post-16 study.
☐ We will be recording your responses.
☐ Secure consent (written signed consent).

Teaching, Learning and Assessment Experiences:

Transition Experiences and Entry Qualifications
10. Do you think there are any barriers for BTEC students in going to university?
   ➢ What about getting into the more elite universities?
   ➢ Do you prepare your BTEC students in any way for their progression into university?
   ➢ Do you think there any differences between HE expectations and BTEC expectations of a student?
   ➢ What do you see as the strengths of a BTEC qualification?

Curriculum
11. Do you have any professional knowledge of how the BTEC curriculum differs from the A level curriculum?
   ➢ Are there particular areas of the BTEC curriculum content that your students seem to struggle with?
   ➢ Are there particular areas of the BTEC curriculum content that they seem to find easier?
   ➢ Are there any support structures in place to support students who might be struggling with different aspects of the curriculum including study skills?

Ways of learning
12. How would you describe the dominant ways of learning in your BTEC course? (eg lecture; seminar; group work; practical work; work placements)
   ➢ Do you notice any differences in the ways students respond to these ways of learning? (ie not liking group work or lectures)

Assessment Practices
13. What assessment practices do you use in your BTEC course? (eg examinations; essays, group presentations; practical assessments etc)
   ➢ Do you notice any differences in the ways students respond to these ways of learning? (ie not liking presentations or essay writing)

Literacy, Numeracy and Transferable Experiences
1. Do you notice any literacy or numeracy demands on your programme which students seem to find challenging:
   [Use the Interview Prompt Sheet]

2. We are also interested in the broader set of study and life-skills that students might experience on your course:
   [Use the Interview Prompt Sheet]
Relationship and Social Experiences
1. What kind of interaction and relationships do you develop with your BTEC students? [probe for pastoral support]
2. How strong do you feel your BTEC group is as a group? Does it have a group identity?

Concluding Question
1. This study is particularly interested in the progress and experiences of BTEC students. Do you have any further perspectives which might inform our understanding of how BTEC students progress through your programme, and access university courses?
LITERACY SKILLS

reading and understanding academic texts
pulling information together from academic texts and summarising
writing academic essays
writing evaluations and reflections

NUMERACY SKILLS

understanding mathematics/statistics presented in class
working though problem/tutorial sheets
using calculators or software such as SPSS for statistics

Maths Topics:

- Algebra – re-arranging and solving equations, laws of indices
- Linear and quadratic equations and their graphs
- Log and exponential functions
- Equations of motion (biomechanics), Sets and Venn diagrams
- Differentiation and finding maximum
- Descriptive statistics – mean, mode, standard deviation, box plots, etc.
TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

actively participating in group discussion
presenting your work to others
managing your own time to meet deadlines
managing your own learning independently
taking on board and reflecting on feedback to improve work
seeking advice and support when you need it