**Friday 17th January 2020**

**NEON supporting BTEC students working group**

*Alex Blower (Southern Universities Network), Chris Bayes (Lancaster University), Rebecca Foster (University of East Anglia) & Rebecca Sykes (University of Leeds)*

Participants were asked to discuss with each other their journey into higher education, focusing on what type of qualifications we took that led to our undergraduate studies.

***Alex Blower***

If we don’t engage in activity, like having conversations with people reading research and equipping ourselves with tools for understanding that we might not have otherwise, we are in real danger of making assumptions about particular groups of students. Only five people in the room had first-hand experience of studying a BTEC qualification. If we don’t work in partnership with people who do have experience, then we’re in real danger of creating activity based on assumptions that aren’t grounded in any facts or evidence at all.

That’s one of the reasons why NEON supporting BTEC students working group was founded because we want to ensure that when we are supporting this large group of students that what we’re doing is based in facts and evidence and we’re speaking with stakeholders who get it and we are co-constructing practice that it is going to be really effective.

**What is NEON?**

***Chris Bayes***

Those of you who are a NEON member, we’d be keen to have your thoughts, input and possibly participation within the working group moving forward, and if you’re not a NEON member please join and you can get involved. <https://www.educationopportunities.co.uk/programmes/working-groups/supporting-btec-students/>

NEON is the *National Educational Opportunities Network* (established in 2011), a professional organisation supporting those involved in Widening Access to Higher Education.

It is a member led organisation with members being largely drawn from English universities, although Scottish and Welsh university members are increasing.

Members are also drawn from school and FE sectors, as well as a healthy number of third-sector organisations e.g.- IntoUniversity and Brightside.

We are all members of the NEON supporting BTEC students working group and that’s why we’re talking about it today (Chris is the chair of the group).

One of our partners in the working group is Pearson, one of the BTEC qualification providers. This is a series of slides they presented at our summer symposium last year (slides 5-7), it shows the increasing numbers of students taking part in HE who have entered via a BTEC pathway, so you can see there’s a huge increase in the last 7 or 8 years of those students progressing into HE. What I find really interesting is 1 in 4 students entering HE have taken some form of BTEC national diploma and increasing numbers of students are doing BTECs alongside A levels.

The BTEC wasn’t created as a qualification leading into HE but it’s obviously evolved into that and if you think about the discussions around t-levels at the moment, we can see some parallels there.

Interesting to think that many teachers and advisors in IAG won’t have had experience of this BTEC route themselves.

The BTEC is sometimes correlated as an indicator of a student WP characteristic but that has started to change over the last few years.

The group was formed in September 2018. It came about after some colleagues of mine attended a seminar hosted by Brunel University about supporting BTEC students and they came back to Lancaster really fired up about doing something sector level around this.

We hosted our first meeting in London and we asked institutions to tell us what they were doing around the BTEC agenda and it became clear that no two universities were doing exactly the same thing, some were focusing on pre-entry advice and guidance, some on student success- there was different points of the student cycle covered. It was clear that this was an issue that a lot of people were interested in.

Subsequent to that we established terms of reference and decided that we’d focus on two specific areas of work. The working group has two sub-groups:

-Mapping interventions to support BTEC students using the NERUPI Framework (Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions)

-Providing transparent IAG for students and teachers

We’ve developed a set of guiding principles, evolving from these two groups we think it’s important that institutions think about these things when working with BTEC students:

* Championing fair admissions practices for BTEC students - Alex
* Conducting meaningful outreach activity with BTEC students in schools and colleges – Rebecca F
* Supporting the transition and student success of BTEC students at university - Becca
* Understanding the needs of BTEC students through engagement with research - Chris
* Developing BTEC students for future employment via career readiness initiatives – Dr Mark Smith (Lincoln)

**BTEC student admissions**

***Alex Blower***

One of the things that has been quite common in the discourse surrounding BTEC students and HE is there is a perceived level of snobbery when it comes to higher tariff institutions and BTEC entry requirements. Reference to article in the observer (slide 12) -universities don’t do enough to encourage BTEC students into HE.

(slide 12) HEPI – article in 2017- more needs to be done across the sector to support BTEC students in HE.

In terms of the messaging institutions give out, and this is from *Which University*, written by HELOA- advice to BTEC students applying to university-yes you can get into university! We are trying to get this message out to BTEC students. 95% of universities and colleges in the UK accept BTEC.

As part of my involvement in the working group I ran a scoping exercise to have a look at institutional approaches to BTEC using university prospectuses. Looked across 30 higher tariff institutions which included 24 Russell Group universities and six other institutions. I wanted to ask the following questions of those prospectuses:

1. Which qualification types were uniformly featured on their prospectus course pages?
2. Are BTEC entry requirements featured on those course pages?
3. Is there a clear approach to admissions relating to BTEC qualifications?
4. If I was studying for a BTEC extended diploma would I be able to understand my eligibility based on the information given? (This one was a bit more subjective)

13 out of 30 prospectuses detailed a clear approach to admissions relating to BTEC applications

10 out of the 30 prospectuses had BTEC qualifications uniformly featured on their course pages.

10 out of the 30 prospectuses held information regarding BTEC entry requirements which would be specific enough for students to understand their eligibility.

In terms of the Russell Group angle:

10 detailed a clear approach to admissions relating to BTEC applications

6 had BTEC qualifications uniformly featured on their course pages

8 held information regarding BTEC entry requirements which would be specific enough for students to understand their eligibility.

This is not good enough. If we look at the International Baccalaureate (which is studied by significantly less number of students compared to the BTEC qualification) those entry requirements were uniformly featured in 26 of the 30 prospectuses. If we’re looking at the volume of BTEC applications, it is significantly more than the IB!

However, there were examples within the sector of really good practice when it came to the transparency of entry requirements- University of Manchester, Birmingham and Liverpool all had found ways and mechanisms to do this.

I understand the challenges that institutions face but what we should be able to do is provide transparent and clear information about entry requirements especially for students who are from backgrounds which are under-represented in HE.

The University of Manchester- they use a key to help students identify their eligibility. They use small shapes with the different labels

- BTECs considered in relevant subjects

-BTECs only considered when combined with A levels

- BTECs not accepted

I would love to see this transparency being used as standard practice across institutions. If we are not doing that then we are doing a dis-service to students.

Some people may argue that the information missing in the prospectus can be found online. However, not everyone will be able to find this information as easily as someone who works in the sector. Also, there is a problem with Digital Inclusion- internet access may be limited due to cost reasons- not everyone can easily pop online!

Institutions need to be doing more to meet students in the middle- how can we expect students to make big changes when we don’t offer them the tools to do so? We can all lobby for change within our own institutions.

**Conducting Meaningful Outreach Activity with BTEC Students in Schools and Colleges**

***Rebecca Foster***

I used to work at a Further Education college which is how I’ve got into BTECs as part of my NCOP and then worked for the university outreach team.

A lot of what I base my pre-access outreach activity on is from the conversations I’ve had with tutors and administrators in FE colleges.

A lot of things I’m going to talk about today are things I’m currently trialling at my university to help share best practice and there will be opportunity to discuss if you think this would work at your institution or chance for you to offer your perspective.

School liaison-the primary way we can influence the influencers-explain these things whilst they are there in the room rather than trying to access them through admission processes.

The first thing I implemented when starting this role is a ‘flexible offer’- I am only responsible for my group of colleges (understands that not every institution will have this flexibility). I offer a week out to my colleges and they can book in as many tutor groups as they want me to work with within that week. My outreach is more bespoke, and I can talk to students about what they *want* to know about. Vocational courses and career prospects are the things that students and their parents are asking about most frequently.

Find out what it is that colleges want you to be talking out- can I be written into colleges’ Gatsby plans and personal development plans? Can I tick those boxes? I can lighten their workload and be that consistent member of staff that comes in to talk to the students.

In one particular college I’ve been written in for 4 weeks of activity into their personal development plan and we’ve written that into a scholarship for students if they complete all those 4 weeks- so it works as an incentive as well.

Another thing with FE colleges which I try to get across is when I’m talking from an outreach perspective as opposed to a recruitment perspective at these colleges I am not competing with them. A lot of colleges can be quite reluctant to get people in to do school liaison because if I’m talking as a HE provider and they have in house HE, they think that I’m trying to steal their students. They say that my students are more suited to doing our courses. So, I try to make it really evident that this is not what we’re trying to do and I put their courses in my presentation as well and this usually initiates a positive relationship with them from the start.

Colleges are competitive, so it helps to show them evidence of outreach working- I bring the evidence of my evaluations to colleges I’ve struggled to get into and showed them how much students are finding it useful. This really works to get that activity.

Understanding barriers such as high staff turnover- having an appreciation of this really helps.

I do try and make sure that in my presentations I use research-based information on what we know about BTEC learners and their main barriers to HE such as their confidence and sense of belonging. Showing that we are able to resonate with them. We’ve created a series of videos called ‘*Have you ever wondered heroes*’ and we record BTEC students from some of our departments, talking about their journey into HE, discussing their struggles and how they’ve overcome these- because we know with student ambassadors, they’re not always available to go into schools to speak to students so we embed these videos into our presentations. This helps boost confidence levels in BTEC students.

I try to draw on the advantages of being a BTEC student for their skill set-e.g. adhering to coursework deadlines- it’s about reigniting that confidence in them.

Some colleges have 5000 students, I can’t talk to all of those students. Based on research that’s been carried out by our Education department, I try to talk to BTEC students from these four main cohorts because this is where most of our BTEC students are in our local area:

-Business

-Computer Science

-Health Sciences

-Sport

I also tend to find that university academics in these subjects are more willing to deliver guest lectures to resonate with students as their areas have more of a vocational aspect.

What I’m also trying to intersperse throughout my programme is some BTEC specific events and also making sure that other events are adapted for BTEC learners- that’s a quick win. Currently trying to figure out whether we should be doing BTEC specific events or incorporating BTEC learners into other stuff- going to try both and see what works best.

Working with Pearson to put a BTEC Awards event on in June- the reason I’m doing this is because we have a regional issue in East Anglia that people don’t want to leave the local area to study at other institutions. The award event is trying to firstly, get BTEC students to see how brilliant they are and secondly to help them get comfortable in a university environment and for them to see they can belong in a university environment/area. Trying to get senior leadership and academics involved to meet BTEC students- get them to see they are some of the brightest students in the country.

Quick wins for every institution-adapting their events for BTEC students:

Certain things that BTEC students specifically struggle with academically such as exams, independent learning, academic writing, maths, referencing – many of these things, all students struggle with but if you can adapt them for BTEC students with problems that they resonate with, that will really help.

Already some really good practice with this- Brunel University- *HeadStart* programme.

So easy to miss out BTEC students, i.e., saying ‘year 12’ and not level 3 year 1 BTEC -make sure that these students are represented.

Three main things to take away to schools and colleges and your institutions:

Language, raising awareness and accessibility

Best practice from different institutions:

The University of Exeter: study skills support

The University of Bath and University of Sheffield: online resource

Supporting tutors and mentoring ambassadors- ‘Back to BTEC’- Previous BTEC learners going into schools and tutoring students within subjects they themselves have studied-e.g. Computer Science and Maths.

Online- A lot of institutions are already moving into doing this, using future learn for online modules.

**Supporting the Transition and Student Success of BTEC Students at University**

***Rebecca Sykes***

Since September 2018- we’ve really ramped up what we’ve been doing and we’re already made significant process.

By having access to a huge amount of data we’ve been able to see where the BTEC students are in Leeds and where they are struggling. We’ve also been able to identify their attainment rates and see which schools and faculties have the highest non-continuers which was evidently BTEC students that were dropping out of our courses.

Number crunching around which faculties they need to work with first- one of those is Engineering and another is Education –implementing various interventions and working with academics to make sure they are changing their processes to make sure students are retained and feel like they do have a sense of belonging.

They’ve identified a group of BTEC students who they’re using as a focus group, having open and frank conversations so they can move forward- talking about the pre-entry work that they were exposed to, the barriers they faced during that transition period and any issues they face whilst on course. It’s about narrowing down what you’ve got to do first and getting the buy in from academics and support staff.

Not quick fixes-implementing changes into the institution. It’s a culture change that we’ve got to implement-some think that BTEC students aren’t the right students for Leeds – so it’s about breaking down that barrier.

Another thing that we are doing is monitoring our at-risk students through a learner analytics system. This has enabled us to target some tailored interventions to help pick up those students early on and keep them on course.

How are they going to achieve this?

* Communications: the new prospectus has been updated to make sure it is transparent about which courses take BTEC and which don’t- this has been rolled across all our other publications and website, a significant achievement in short space of time.
* Outreach: make sure we are using the right language, reference FE colleges in presentations-all our communications and materials are inclusive
* Admissions: Our admissions team are really on board with this and we have regular communications with internal teams too to make sure we are all on the same page with what we’re trying to achieve. We have Student Success Forums, and a shared framework to see who is making progress across different faculties (creates an element of competitiveness and shares best practice)
* Using BTEC students to do BTEC specific outreach
* BTEC specific visits- campus visits and school visits
* Knowledge transfer workshops- internal across our admissions teams and academic departments involved too
* Had Pearson in to train our outreach and admissions team, highlighting any BTEC qualifications updates – differs massively to A level!
* Bringing in FE tutors and pairing them up with our academics (will happen later on this year)- will help academics to understand the BTEC qualification and what’s involved and will also help FE tutors understand that transition process and what is expected of BTEC students at university, so they can help to prepare them.
* Hosting a webinar so that FE tutors are more knowledgeable about that transition from college to Russell Group institutions-need to break down the barrier that BTEC students won’t fit in
* ‘Transition into Leeds’ summer school
* Appointment of 8 Student Success Officers- identify where the BTEC students are, how they’re doing and provide the right intervention to help them succeed.
* Business school (usually for A level route students)- built in BTEC entry requirements into several their programmes
* Changes to the curriculum and modules- Engineering -Pass for Progression module moved into year 2 – already had a massive impact in supporting those BTEC students in their first year. Small changes can have a massive difference!
* Student focus groups
* Identify our biggest feeders and see where our BTEC students go so we can best help them
* Survey on focused sense of belonging in the School of Education- recording the academic journey of BTEC students over the next three years.
* Signposting to the appropriate support- BTEC students not as confident to say, I need access to these things to help me.
* Regular meetings and student success forums-written into the Service Level Agreement – helped to get more buy in -by no means a quick process and will take some time.

**Understanding the needs of BTEC students through engagement and research**

***Chris Bayes***

Around two years ago, I was able to take part in a course for WP Practitioners to help us write our first piece of research. It encouraged us to think about our work in a slightly different way. Only five of us got our paper published-demonstrates the huge time commitment it can be.

It got me thinking about linking practice and research- there is a minority of people who will read research before planning a project. Since taking part in this course, I have tried to block out time in my week to read research papers-especially those with a WP focus as this is my area of work.

At Lancaster University we have an Educational Research Department and they publish a lot around social justice, WP etc. but they have very little interaction with the university central outreach team-why is that? This might not be in isolation, something I’ve seen in different institutions I’ve worked in. There seems to be a real issue of disconnect with policy, practice and research within the sector.

We’ve all talked about the need to engage academics. Reminded me of the work I did at Liverpool- academics partnered with teachers at Further Education Colleges – academics can have very pre-conceived ideas about BTEC students- i.e. BTEC students can’t do this, they find it difficult. It was only when we got them to sit down with fellow teachers and discuss this on a pedagogical level that they really saw how small changes can have big results. Good admission for Liverpool probably a result of the working group between the university and a key feeder college (City of Liverpool College).

Why is there this disconnect between research and practice?

Consultations with the Office for Students- Cohorts seem to be flavours of the month- this is annoying-doesn’t stand still for very long. Maybe if you focus on a series of cohorts and stick with them for a period of time-involve students from that cohort in the discussions- Edge Hill University are currently hosting a similar model for commuter students.

Further reading:

Transforms and Transitions Project-University of Exeter (very recent)

Pearson- Listening to Learners Voices

NCOP-East Anglia- Enhancing BTEC students’ transition

(see full list on slides 31-32)

Participants were asked to discuss what your university does to support BTEC students and when is this support taking place?

Some ideas which were discussed:

Referring students to use the UCAS calculator

UCAS presented this idea of a ‘blended student’. There is the new reformed BTEC but the old one hasn’t been withdrawn. It is a very confused picture- is there such a thing as a uniformed BTEC student? Chris helps students who have done BTECs who are now studying in a high intensive research university struggling with academic referencing, pace of workload etc and then another student who did a BTEC on top of five A levels! Emphasises that there is not one ‘typical’ BTEC student anymore.

A lot of information to take in- it’s positive to sit back and see what they’ve achieved under the NEON umbrella. Access the presentations and info through the NEON website. <https://www.educationopportunities.co.uk/>

Next quarterly meeting is at University of Leeds on 5th February 2020.