The BTEC 'problem': Retention, attainment and progression.

Statement of problem and context:

Over the past few years, there has been an increase in BTEC students attending Higher Education Institutions (HEI). With approximately 100,000 BTEC students applying for a place each year (UUK, 2017). However, while there has been an increase, these students are less likely to achieve a 'good' degree (Gartland *et al*., 2018, p. 638). It is not only in attainment levels there is a difference, but BTEC students also drop out of a degree course in greater numbers than any other group (Kelly, 2017). This appears to suggest that having a BTEC's impacts a student's success in Higher Education, as such, it is a problem that needs further investigation and addressing.

Context

The need for effective student support has been a key consideration within the University of Northampton (UoN), with UoN introducing embedded key skills across all undergraduate courses in 2018/19. As such, Learning Development now delivers workshops to all courses in both level 4 and level 5 subjects. It is the role of a Learning Development (LD) to support all students with their academic work. As a LD tutor I work with students in a number of different ways; delivering embedded workshops, drop ins and in booked one to one tutorials. Research on LD one to one tutorials has shown that these helped with retention and attainment (Loddick and Coulson, 2019). Alongside this UON identified courses with a high number of BTEC students were LD could offer more support to the students. The decision was made for this support to be in the form of group tutorials, as a LD tutor I was asked to deliver some of these tutorials.

While HEI in the U.K do have academic support services, the embedded nature of UoN skills support, across all academic courses, is believed to

be a first. As the introduction of the additional support is new, this paper will therefore be based on my delivery of a BTEC group tutorial session within a level four course. It will begin by considering the key factors around the issue of attainment, retention and progression associated with BTEC students. It will then discuss and evaluate the intervention before making recommendations.

Literature Review:

To get a clear understanding of all the issues surrounding the 'BTEC problem' it is important to begin with briefly examining the students journey to University. Imperial College London is the only University in Britain who does not officially recognise them as an entry level qualification for their degrees (Imperial College London, 2018). However, while all other Universities say they take BTEC students, there is a clear discrepancy between the institutions. In 2012/13 only, two percent of Russell group students came with a BTEC qualification, students who take 'non-traditional' subjects are more likely to attend a post 92 intuition. However, even these institutions still only accept '49 BTEC students for every 100 A' level students' (UCAS,2014, p.6). Baker (2019) argues that institutions are still targeting schools over Further Education establishments. Students who chose to vocational qualifications are not always aware of their options for degrees (Leathwood and Hutchings 2003, p.142) if support is not there this also means that even at application stage they are left to navigate the process themselves. Arguably the way BTEC's are valued within Higher Education itself is limiting the students chose and therefore creating a barrier.

Once at University there is a significant discrepancy in completion of degrees, under 60% of BTEC students who attend a Russell group university complete their degree (Kelly, 2017, p.21). It is important to analyse the makeup of students taking BTEC'S, as examining just, the qualification in isolation appears too simplistic and ignores other key factors that have a known impact on the student's chances of success. Students who take BTEC's are more likely to be from lower socioeconomic groups, being the first in their family to continue in to Higher Education (Rouncefield- Swales, 2014; Baker, 2017). Also, proportionally BTEC's have more Black, Asian and Minority students on the course than A' levels, finally, BTEC students are more likely to be young men (Kelly, 2017).

Shield and Masardo (2018, p.163) argue that while these are the characteristics of a BTEC student, the relationship between the entry qualification and the outcome of the degree classification, appears more important. Their research shows that the degree classification achieved is still lower, independently of the other factors, this is based on the outcome of cohorts across all course, generating an average. By analysing results across all courses rather than the subject areas then there is a danger of creating generalisations of outcomes. They do acknowledge the potential of significant variations between courses (Shield and Masardo, 2018, p.163). While there is clearly evidence that entry qualifications do play a part in attainment levels, one area that needs to be considered is retention which Shield and Masardo (2018) do not examine.

To understand retention and progression Katartzi and Hayward, (2019) argue that research needs to go beyond the current surface level. they need to look at the individual courses and consider these students more individually. Students coming from non-traditional courses struggle to decode the academic structure and language they find themselves in. Which leads them to question the worth of their previous knowledge,

creating a sense of not belonging in University. Katartzi and Hayward, (2019, p.7) believe that the primary friction in progression is the student not recognising their worth.

The idea of worth based on the student's academic experience at University can be linked in with research on student expectations. Roberts (2011) interviewed non-traditional students and found that teaching experience was widely different to what they had expected before they came. It appears that these feeling could be applied to all areas of teaching, from delivery, content and contact hours, interestingly it identified negative feeling against themselves when it came to their own understanding academic work. While Roberts (2011, p. 190) did not unpick this it supports Katartzi and Hayward, (2019, p.7) findings on worth. The fact that these students are internalising the responsibility of academic issues needs to be addressed by both Learning Development and the course lecturers.

These students are gaining places therefore as Tinto (2008 cited in Mountford-Zimdars *et al*., 2017, p.101) argues 'access without support is not an opportunity'. It is the responsibility of the University to support all students. For there to be effective support Mountford-Zimdars *et al*. (2017, p.105) suggests that Universities need to first understand their students. As well as understanding who the students are it is important that students have a voice. Forbes et al., (2006, p.5) suggests that students feel unheard, especially when it comes to the planning of retention strategies. This two-way communication allows for better understanding from both sides as research support (Mountford-Zimdars *et al*., 2017, p.105) identified that not all students have a clear understanding of who studies there or how they can access the support offered. Learning Development tutors clearly have a role in ensuring both staff and students understand there is support on offer.

As well as offering appropriate academic support it is important that how this support it delivered is considered. Research has clearly shown that embedding support within a course is more successful than additional support as a bolt on (Mountford-Zimdars *et al*.,2017; Wingate *et al*., 2011). White (2014) suggests that as well as embedding the skills support it is important to consider the content, He argues that time needs to be spent on explaining the assessment, decoding the criteria and ensuring an engaging experience. This approach puts the student at the centre of learning.

Adapting a student centred approach and developing the expert as a facilitator to the student can help the student have a deeper understanding of the topic (Tangey, 2014). This approach also allows the student to take ownership, developing not only their independent study skills but also academic skills such as critical thinking. Embedding and careful consideration of the content of student centred approach would help address some of the students issues around understanding and hopefully increase the students sense of worth and identity. This approach has now been introduced by the University, with the creation of the ILS, which embeds the skills session in with the course. As it is newly created research is yet to be carried out if students have a clearer understanding of these skills

Increasing a student's understanding, demystifying the academic world should hopefully increase the students sense of belonging within a University. The sense of belonging to both a course and the university has been seen to increase the chances of a student graduating as well as improving their levels of engagement (Thomas, 2012). Masika and Jones (2016,p.147) believe that both the teaching and the curriculum need to find ways so show the diverse body that they belong to the university. Their research also shows that group work, within a course, can assist

first year students in feeling that they belong. Thompson (2017, p.187) argues that however an individual self identifies it is the institutional culture that creates the sense of belonging.

While the research clearly identifies belonging as a key factor in retention, Cotton *et al.* (2016, p.467) suggests that research is lacking in comparing students experience and University environment on the degree outcome. He believes that this needs to be considered especially when researching BAME and gender. Regardless of ethnicity there is a gap between men and women degree classifications. Women achieve better degree classifications in comparison to men, except in first class awards, where there is no difference (HEFCE,2014). Interesting the findings of Cotton *et al*. (2016) show that males spend more time in university activities, such as sports, which does not have a positive impact on results if a white male. This suggests that belonging and being part of the wider University experience, while helps retention may not be as beneficial for attainment levels.

Arguably if students spent more time on activities, they have less time to study, Cotton *et al*. (2016, p.482) research identifies this as one key reasons for the difference in attainment levels between genders. They found that males are also reluctant to admit to studying due to the negative associations with it among peers. The research found that when lecturers are asked to describe a good student they use characteristic associated with females. This introduces the idea of potential unconscious bias.

Conscious and Unconscious bias within higher education has been identified not only in terms of ethnicity but within terms of socioeconomic groups and perceived student abilities (Hinton and Higson, 2017). Hinton and Higson (2017, p.3) suggest that in part this is the similarity effect, which can account for up to 62% of difference in assessment grades. Part

of the issue of bias can be addressed by anonymous marking. However, this would not address the issue of bias within a face to face session. If we are aware that certain groups under achieve there is the possibility that unconscious accept this as a reason rather than trying to truly address it. Therefore, it is the role of the learning development tutor and the lecturer, working together, to find effective ways to address this.

Intervention

As mentioned earlier a course with a high number of BTEC students had already been allocated and additional group tutorials were to be offered by me. I decided that the group tutorials would be the best situation to deliver the planned intervention. It is important to note that the students themselves were not aware of the additional support introduced and that within the course there was no difference in offering between the BTEC students and the others. The group tutorials were offered to all regardless of their entry level qualification. The first thing that I felt important to consider was the key difference with the individual support offered by LD and the group tutorials which is that the individual one to ones are self-selecting, whereas I was going into a course session and booking in the group tutorials. While the option was there for students not to book I am aware this is not truly self-selecting and that by taking the bookings to them they may feel pressured to book and therefore potentially not engage.

Therefore, I needed to consider the best way to group the tutorials to maximise the benefit and hopefully ensure engagement. As shown in the literature, students must be clear on the benefits to their individual work to be willing to access and engage with support services (Mountford-Zimdars, 2017). The course was a mix of genders, in arranging the bookings of the tutorials, I was thought carefully about the language used

as aware of the gender association with studying (Cotton *et al*. 2016). All groups within the session booked a time slot that best suited them, if any of the group were not in the seminar, the decision was made by the majority as to what would work. All students were then sent confirmation emails with the allocated time slot for them to attend.

Once the practicalities on delivery were arranged, the next step was to plan the most effective intervention. The core skill had already been identified by the group presentation assignment. I decided that as there were up to five students in the group it would be best to create a clear plan for the session. During the booking stage I discovered that the groups did not know everyone they were presenting with, I needed to take this into consideration when planning the intervention. Thus, time needed to be spent on introductions to make not only the intervention but the end presentation successful. This was especially important as the literature clearly identified the sense of belonging with in a course as important to retention and attainment (Thomas, 2012; Masika and Jones 2016). As the tutorials were only thirty minutes, quick, effective introductions needed to be the first part of the session.

The intervention was then designed to ensure that all members of group left the tutorials with a clear understanding of what makes a good presentation within a level four. This would then ensure that the criteria and academic language used by the academics had been decoded. Enabling students to feel confident that they had understood what was expected of them (White, 2014). The session was planned so that they would then create clear plan for the next step of their presentation.

To ensure effective learning and for the students to begin to collaborate as a group I felt that my role was should more as a facilitator (Rowley *et al*., 2018). To enable this style, I had picked an open space area, where the students would be able to sit comfortably in an informal circle.

Hopefully this layout and environment would make the students feel more secure in themselves and open to learning.

I also felt it important to consider and address some points raised within the reading circle for module EDU 127 as well as the literature. A particular point that played on my mind was the idea of lecturers making assumptions based on the student's qualifications. I made the conscious effort not to have any assumed expectations of the students and their abilities. The questions designed for the tutorial would hopefully bring out knowledge and identify gaps to address without the student feeling self - conscious.

Peer observation

Before the intervention I met with the peer observer to discuss the key areas that I would like to be observed (Byrne *et al.,* 2010). As the session had been planned with me as a facilitator I felt it was important for the engagement of the students to be observed, both as individuals and as a group overall. Alongside this I asked the observer to consider the use of environment and layout. Had it been as conducive as I had thought it would be to the session. As one of the core objectives was for the students to leave with a clear plan of the next step for the group to work on, I wanted to know whether it was felt this was achieved. The observer was also given the lesson plan to refer to if required during the observation.

At the time of the tutorial was meant to start the group was waiting for one student to arrive, due to the time allocated for the session, I waited for a couple of minutes and then felt it was important to start. The student arrived ten minutes late, I did stop the conversation, so she could take a seat. The peer observer did identify this as interrupting the flow of the session.

Overall the peer observer felt that over all students were engaged with session and all seemed to enjoy it, they did however raise the environment as an issue. The session was delivered in an area with some background noise, which at times did cause students to be distracted and had to be refocused. I agree with this as at times even I had to concentrate to hear.

They noted that the group was able to identify what they needed to do as both individuals and as a group to create a good presentation. Also, that students did leave the session with a clear plan as to their next individual steps and a clear plan for the group. The peer observer identified this as an important part of the session, she commented that the students seemed more confident in themselves when this had been done. However, they identified that this felt rushed and they suggested I think about where I consider introducing this, possibly earlier in the session.

Evaluation

 On reflection while there was a need to have identified a clear objective for the group tutorial, having a structured lesson plan felt like I had introduced restrictions. As a facilitator to the session, it was not necessary to have such a formulaic plan. Alongside this I realised early in the session that I had planned far too much and needed to just let the session develop naturally with the boundaries of the overall objective.

Identifying and planning, as individuals, what they needed to do and as a group appeared to increase their confidence, developing confidence is an invaluable skill at University (Chemers *et al*., 2006). Therefore, this part of the tutorial has had a positive impact on the group, I am keen to develop this further. For the next group tutorial, I would introduce this earlier in the session, potentially starting with it and then introduce how to develop this into a good presentation. Narrowing the session down to these two areas would be enough for half an hour. Which would remove the sense of rushing that had been identified as an issue.

A harder issue to resolve is the issue of a student arriving late to the session is one that is faced regularly in sessions and this interruption does affect the group. It is difficult to identify the best course of action to ensure less impact on the group. Everyone is aware of a student arriving late and sitting down especially in such a small group and therefore continuing instead of stopping would have potentially caused the same interruption to the session.

While it was clear that students engaged, and the seating arrangement helped make them feel relaxed, the noise levels of the surrounding area did have an impact. Therefore, a different location needs to be considered, somewhere more private. Considering the location is important as a classroom layout while private would not offer the same informal setting. Potentially using a booth for a group tutorial maybe worth considering.

The hardest part of the evaluation is assessing whether the intervention within the group tutorial will have an impact on the overall issue of retention, progression and attainment. The results of the assignment are not yet known and as this is the students first marked piece of group work it is impossible to benchmark before and after. However, two of the five have booked in for a further one to one tutorial which arguably shows that there was a positive impact.

I believe that going in with no expectations and preconceived ideas of the students' abilities also helped me. Making a conscious effort to ignore the 'BTEC' issue was important to the session working. By not making any assumptions I was able to work with the students at the level required. Making them aware of the academic requirements of level 4 and importantly letting them see it was achievable. Students deserve us to see them as the individual in front of us, not as a collective problem group.

Recommendations

From the evaluation of the intervention and the literature review the following recommendations are suggested to address the issues of retention, progression and attainment for BTEC students in higher education. The first recommendation is to establish a specific focus group made up of students from this group. Students should be taken from each year, it would also be useful to hear from recent graduates about their experiences. The literature review shows that while Universities have an idea of the issues, they do not always have a true understanding of their students, hearing from these students will give a much clearer picture.

The second recommendation is linked to the intervention, the introduction of a second tutorial. This tutorial would be to firstly establish whether the students implemented their plans. Secondly, as a check in to ensure their understanding of the assignment criteria was not just surface level. For next tutorial I would have identified a quieter space, that while still informal would not have the noise distractions. The intervention also reinforced the importance of effectively dealing with the issue of lateness. As a tutor creating a consistent message when it comes to lateness, both in tutorials and in sessions, it should not be normal. While this will assist the tutor it will also develop the students professionalism and help in employment.

Another change to consider to the intervention is the length, while the evaluation identified the need to reduce the number of learning outcomes it also might be worth extending the group tutorial. If the tutorial was extended by just fifteen minutes this might reduce the sense in rushing by the facilitator. Possibly, if the session was extended it would allow for a more natural finish with more time for individual questions.

This module and the case study has helped me understand in much more detail the complex make up of BTEC students and the issues they faced. I still feel that I have just reached the surface, I therefore want to take this

research further. The next step is to examine the further the relationship of belonging and understanding the academic world from the BTEC perspective. This would also explore the idea of bias and labelling as this needs much more research to unpick.

APPENDIX A

Title: Group presentations

Aims:

Introduce what makes a good presentations

Objectives:

Introduce students to:
- Identifying a good presentation
- Identify clear structure
- Develop plan
- Academic requirements

Equipment Required:

Spare paper and room

Activities:

Juveniles should be treated as adults in the court system.

	Activity	
5 mins	Introduce myself and group – what stage are they at in presentations	
5 min	Ask group thoughts on presenting	
5 min	what they think makes a good presentation	
5 min	Link their responses to academic presentations	
5min	Group plans their next steps	
	Q and A	

Reference list

Byrne, J., Brown, H. & Challen, D. (2010) Peer development as an alternative to peer observation: A tool to enhance professional development. *International Journal for Academic Development*, **15**(3) pp.215–228.

Chemers, M. M., Hu, L.-t., & Garcia, B. F. (2001). Academic self-efficacy and first year college student performance and adjustment. *Journal of Educational Psychology,* **93**(1) pp. 55–6.

Cotton, D.R.E, Joyner, M., George, R., & Cotton, P.A. (2016)"Understanding the Gender and Ethnicity Attainment Gap in UK Higher Education." *Innovations in Education and Teaching International,* **53**.(5) pp. 475-86.

Gartland, C.E. & Smith, C., (2018). Supporting progression to HE: the role of colleges and vocational courses. *Education Training*, **60**(6), pp.637–650.

HEFCE (2014) *Differences in degree outcomes: key findings* . London: HEFCE.

Hinton, D., & Higson, H. (2017). A large-scale examination of the effectiveness of anonymous marking in reducing group performance differences in higher education assessment. *PLoS ONE,* **12**(8) pp 1 -16

Katartzi, E., & Hayward, G. (2019). Transitions to higher education: The case of students with vocational background. *Studies in Higher Education,* pp.1-11.

Masika, R., & Jones, J. (2016). Building student belonging and engagement: Insights into higher education students' experiences of participating and learning together. *Teaching in Higher Education,* **21**(2), 138-150.

Mountford-Zimdars, A., Sanders, J., Moore, J., Sabri, D., Jones, S., & Higham, L. (2017). What Can Universities Do to Support All Their Students to Progress Successfully throughout Their Time at University? *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education,* **21**(2-3), pp.101-110.

Roberts, S. (2011). Traditional practice for non-traditional students? Examining the role of pedagogy in higher education retention. *Journal of Further and Higher Education,* **35**(2), pp. 183-199

Rowley, C., Fook, J. & Glazzard. J. (2018) "Adopting a Student-led Pedagogic Approach within Higher Education: The Reflections of an Early Career Academic." *Reflective Practice* **19**.(1) pp. 35-45.

Shelton, R., (2017). NQF BTEC or A Level? *Teaching Business & Economics*, **21**(3), pp.10–11.

Shields, R. & Masardo, A., (2018). False Equivalence? Differences in the Post-16 Qualifications Market and Outcomes in Higher Education. *Educational Review*, **70**(2), pp.149–166.

Tangney, S. (2014). Student-Centred learning: A humanist perspective. *Teaching in Higher Education,* **19**, pp. 266–275.

Thomas, L. (2012) *Building Student Engagement and Belonging in Higher Education at a Time of Change*. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

Thompson, D. (2019). Widening participation research and practice in the United Kingdom on the twentieth anniversary of the Dearing report, reflections on a changing landscape. *Educational Review,* **71**(2), pp.182-197.

White, S. (2014). *Transitioning from vocational education and training to university: strengthening information literacy through collaboration*. Canberra: National Centre for Vocational Education Research.

Wickens, E., A. Forbes, & Tribe, J. (2006). Listening, understanding and responding to leisure and tourism undergraduates. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education,* **5**, (2) pp. 4–13.

Wingate, U., Andon, N., & Cogo, A. (2011). Embedding academic writing instruction into subject teaching: A case study. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, **12**(1), pp. 69–81.