

Summary of undertaken Workshops on Supporting Vocational and A-level Students through their studies

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Overview

This interim report presents the outcomes from staff voices from a conference session on 'Supporting Vocational and BTEC students through their studies' from the recent 21ST Annual Admissions & HE Guidance Conference for Teachers and Careers Advisers, held at Aston University on 7th January 2016. Following requests from some of the delegates who attended the conference, staff from Aston University (authors of this report) designed and delivered similar sessions for staff and students (A-level and Vocational/ B-Tech). Thus, the report also captures the perceptions of staff and students on problems/ barriers that the students face in Higher Education study, and the proposed solutions to the identified problems.

Figure 1 shows an illustration of the number of staff and students who participated in the conference and tailored school sessions, and the dates the sessions were delivered.

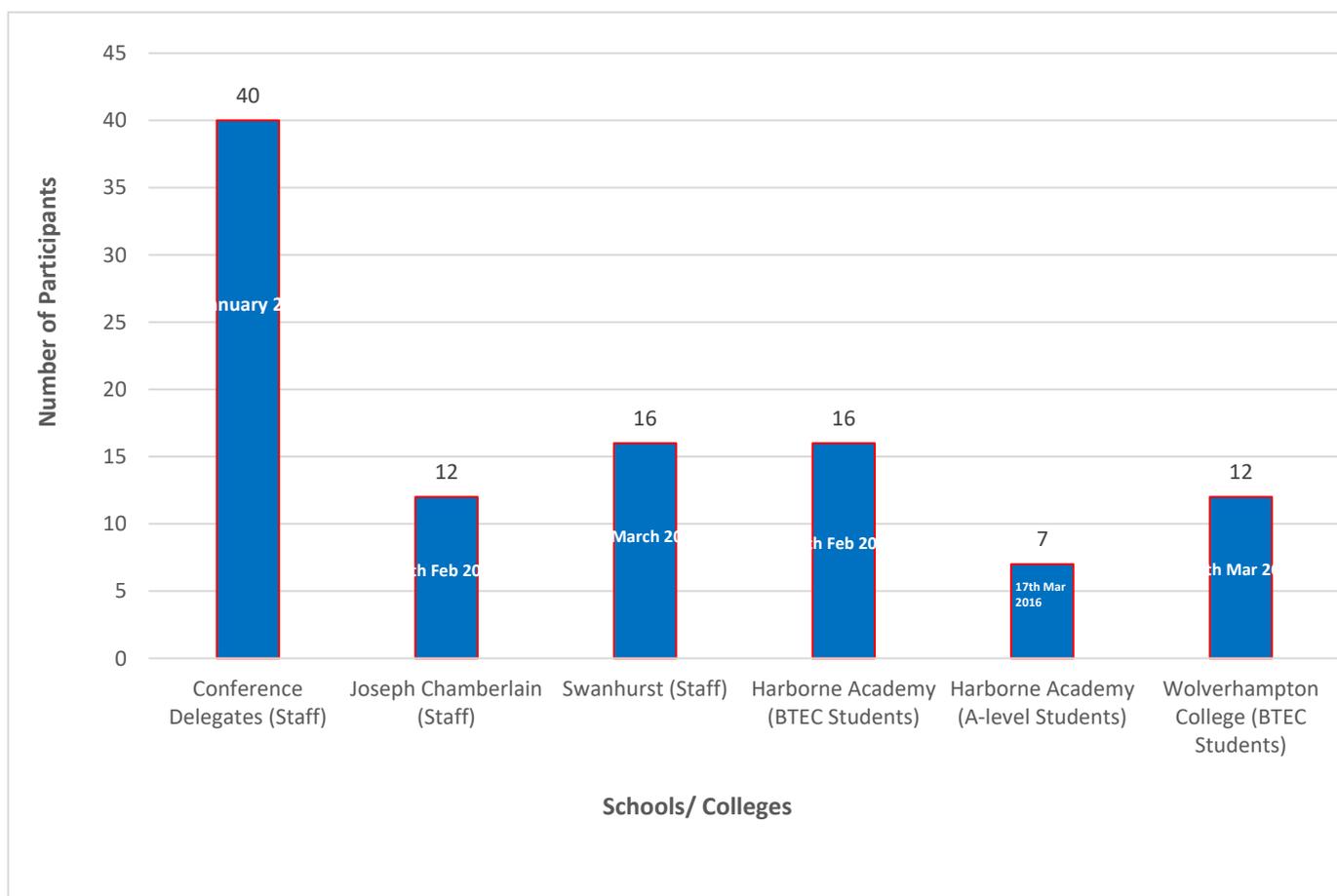


Figure 1: Session Participants

Workshop Session Design and Delivery

The workshop sessions were originally designed to focus around supporting vocational and BTEC students, however, the report authors organised and delivered a similar workshop session for A-level Students (Harborne Academy). This was as a result of a request from Harborne Academy's staff following the positive impact of an early workshop session delivered to the Academy's BTEC students.

The sessions involved exploring the staff and students' perceptions on the challenges or concerns the students may have progressing into Higher Education study. Subsequently, the participants' views on solutions for the purpose of addressing their identified concerns were collated.

Findings and Preliminary Analysis

To further explore the nature of the students concerns to facing Higher Education study and proposed solutions, the staff and student perceptions (tables 1 and 2) are currently being grouped into five main categories including Guidance-related, Academic-related, Personal and Social-related, Professional development-related, and Finance-related factors:

- The Guidance-related focus around provision of advice or direction in making an informed decision.
- The Academic-related focus around the development or enhancement of academic skills that are required in Higher Education Institutions and beyond. These factors (in view of the proposed solutions from staff and student perspectives) indicate where the academic institutions (FE and HE) have a responsibility to get the right academic structure in place for the purpose of preparing the students for Higher Education study.
- The Personal and Social-related focus around peculiar, individualised requirements.
- The Professional development-related are similar to the Academic-related, however are more focussed on 'practicality'
- The Financial-related focus around financial and money matters.

Table 1: Problems/ Barriers that Vocational and A-Level Students face in Higher Education

Tutor Perspective (in view of Vocational or BTEC Students)			Student Perspective (BTEC Students)		Student Perspective (A-level Students)
Conference Delegates	Joseph Chamberlain College	Swanshurst 6 th Form College	Harborne Academy	Wolverhampton College	Harborne Academy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low entry levels • High expectation rates from HE, FE, Students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The role of the accepting university ○ Type of institution FE/ 6th form • Balance between aspirations and educational background • Level of independence (Independence Learning) • Lack of basic course requirements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Lack of subject background knowledge ○ Single, double, triple awards... different skills/ knowledge/ experience • Insufficient career advisors/ academic guidance • Lack of academic, research & study skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor self-esteem • Lack of Self-motivation – no reassurance or not being spoon-fed at university <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Different student/ teacher relationship, not being chased up • Writing/ communication skills: lack of experience to develop such skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Essay writing: the difference between writing one at college and in University e.g. 3000 word essay ○ Lack of Verbal communication/ presentations in front of peers • Literacy and numeracy standards • Independent note-taking skills • Unawareness of more resources for research such as databases, journals; using the web for majority of research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At school, we spoon feed students (too much help with assessments) so students are not Independent learners and not used to independent study e.g. using the library • Lack of research skills: lack of skills in literature review • Lack of social study skills • Do not do enough wider reading • Not used to note-taking and what to do with the notes • Not used to travelling independently • Change in structure of exams • Lack of self-motivation • Time management • Taking responsibility for what they do or don't do • No socialising outside peer groups; some are only good at socialising with 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Laid back' attitude – "Deadlines" and time management • No experience of the university environment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ I wouldn't know specifically how to prepare ○ What exactly would happen? ○ What textbooks do I need? ○ How do I organise myself? ○ How do I access the support I need? • Different lifestyle • Alternative facilities • Not all disciplines have industrial placements • Work load • Juggling work and fun • Money <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ It's costly ○ What would I do with my student loan? • Travelling • Scared to be Independent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examinations • Not all universities accept BTEC students • Foreign students don't have the required qualifications to go to university • BTEC students feel that others think they need more student support that other students since A-level students do more independent study than BTEC students • Having bigger groups in universities • Family pressures • Academic achievements in view of grades for BTEC course • Ability to cope with workload (support if mental health is affecting deadlines or attendance) • Living cost 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to tutors • Being independent • Having fail/ pass on own accord • Managing money • Living alone

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ E.g. Referencing, note-making skills • Poor maths/ numerical skills • Lack of family role models • ‘Student attitude’ • Poor (& difficult) links with industry • Unfamiliar with HE Teaching delivery methods • Lack of awareness of HE deadline procedures • Transparency of HE units that have exam components – revision & exams techniques • Confidence – they feel like second-class students • BTEC access to other (wider) courses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of confidence in mixing different walks of life • Dealing with long days <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ New environment -> concentration levels (3 hour lectures) • Fear of the unknown/ anxiety • Lack of commitment to university environment • Unfamiliar with different types of exams and coursework assessments • Home juggling responsibilities/ pressures from family • BTEC submissions • Lack of or no preparation for university entry requirements/ interviews • Meeting targets/ time management & organisation • Sense of independence: moving away, accommodation, traveling to university, social pressures/ moving away from friends • Financial barriers (grants/ loans): money management, budgeting, 	<p>same sex; not used to different backgrounds</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No real understanding of pressures in university environment, university expectations, course requirements and deadlines • Cultural reasons: tend to stay at home so limited course options • Finding quiet place to study, mixing with other people, joining clubs and societies • Cost/ financial issues: e.g. pupil premium, money management • Issue of extended writing and referencing • Making the right choice: do they know all the options? • Failure: and can be asked to leave • No persistence to keep going when challenged • Size of establishment – fending for themselves outside the family • Not broadminded to accept new ideas/ people though some are prepared chronologically + emotionally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What would I do with my independent time? • Living alone/ responsibility • Not enough time with lecturers • How can I socialise with people <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Different personalities ○ Fitting in • BTEC is not the same as A-Level • More knowledge in A-level than BTEC • Nervous about the support in university (I’m a very shy person) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support with personal issues (losing someone, mental health issues) • Choosing the right course • Fear of getting a job at the end • Note-taking: Struggling to understand and hear lecturers • Support with learning difficulties 	
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Reflection on Findings

Outcomes from the workshop sessions show an overlap on the barriers that vocational and BTEC student face in Higher Education study from the staff perspective of the three different scenarios (FE Conference Delegates, Joseph Chamberlain 6th Form College, and Swanshurst 6th Form School). However, the barriers highlighted at the two 6th Form Colleges were more related to 'Personal' and 'Academic' issues, example 'lack of self-motivation, 'lack of research and study skills', while the delegates from the conference highlighted more 'Guidance-related' factors, example 'insufficient career/ academic advisors' and 'unfamiliar with HE teaching delivery methods'.

From the student perspective, the BTEC/ vocational students from Harborne Academy recorded personal-related problems as barriers they will face the most in Higher Education study; examples of such personal and social problems, as shown in table 1 include 'adapting to the different lifestyle', 'juggling work and fun', 'how to socialise with people'. BTEC students from Wolverhampton City College recorded more diversified problems they will face in Higher Education Study with reference to guidance-related, academic-related and personal-related problems. Unlike the BTEC students, the A-level students (from Harborne Academy) did not express any particular barriers to their transiting to Higher Education study shown by their comments:

- I'm excited for the change
- I've seen all my friends going to university and I feel like it's taken me ages
- Already made the jump from GCSE to A-level
- I know what to expect
- I'm good at managing workload
- I'm organised
- I have received advice from teachers, friends and family
- The universities provide all the information

It is not surprising that A-level students feel academically equipped and confident to face Higher Education study. A few concerns expressed by the A-level students were mainly Guidance and Personal-related barriers; these include:

- Access to tutors
- Being independent
- Having fail/ pass on own accord
- Managing money
- Living alone

Table 2: Solutions to Problems/ Barriers that Vocational and A-Level Students face in Higher Education

Tutor Perspective (in view of Vocational or BTEC Students)			Student Perspective (BTEC Students)		Student Perspective (A-level Students)
Conference Delegates	Joseph Chamberlain College	Swanhurst 6 th Form College	Harborne Academy	Wolverhampton College	Harborne Academy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informed practice for the FE colleges of requirements of HE courses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Collaborative practice between HE and FE/ Colleges to pass on adequate/ streamlined information to the students ○ Keeping FE up-to-date/ visits of HE to FE • Early tailored talk sessions on HE requirements on the BTEC pathways, e.g. in Year 9 • Testimonials from past BTEC students: going back to the colleges to discuss their challenges and how they overcame • Building some level of independence in BTEC courses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowing who to go to for help: ‘buddy’/ tutor system • Parents’/ family’s expectations • Fresher’s fairs/ taster days • Tailored workshops on academic skills • Getting students from local universities to speak to current college students regarding the transition from college to university • More citizenship to improve skills • Mandatory presentation sessions to improve confidence, presentation skills and communication skills • Money management workshops • Researching workshops (workshops of searching & using resources) • Referencing workshops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bring in students from courses/ universities or x-students of colleges to talk to the pupils about HE life/ their experiences • Take the pupils from college for university visits • University prep activities • Attend induction days at HE institutes • Career Advisor to prepare pupils for university choices • Become harsher with deadlines/ resits and introduce double marking <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Stricter coursework sanctions ○ Have a submissions office ○ Have official extensions ○ Have interviews, talk to parents or examination officer, head of year • Become more like universities in our approach through having lean deadlines • Swap university lecturers come into schools to teach units and school teachers go to university to teach students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open up and get out there in dealing with the different lifestyles • Concentrate and ask questions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ask and associate with students/ people who have been in the university environment before you • Keep on top of your work (timetable, etc.) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Manage time better ○ Prioritise work • Enquire about bursaries <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Budgeting • Get into a college that is near <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Try university accommodation and see how it goes • Try and be more sociable • Have fun when you can • Have a personal revision timetable , study method(s) • Consult different educational resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accept BTEC students/ other qualifications • Support for personal issues – counselling, extra time for assignment, sensitivity to mental health • Support with workload, family issues, being homesick, getting jobs, learning difficulties • Help with changing course if in the wrong course • Having notes/ information available online to read • Adopting Smaller groups • Support to cope with part-time jobs + studying at the same time • Provision of resource help (books, borrow laptops to take home) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fresher’s week or inductions without alcohol • Information on joining societies • Induction days for the students after we get our results without our parents • Extra support from older students to help share their experience • Form study groups – look for ways to seek help • Go to Advisors

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External assessment • BTEC access to other (wider) courses • Tailor-made/ built-in study skills strategies/ schemes • Creating revision, study skills schedule • Universities delivering more BTEC specific support for schools, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ E.g. summer school ○ Having standard study skills/ research skills units for BTEC qualifications • Do we go for standalone or embedded units? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate study skills into courses (pick the right units) • Provide academic mentors • Keeping students informed, e.g. if UCAS were asking for attendance, we could tell the students that • Find out about which universities the students are going to and do some research about them • Vocational courses should reflect assessments at university (stating the individual subject responsibility) • Have a tutorial system/ program that enables universities come into the colleges • Create lecture environments/ university taster days • Prep for university focus groups • Organise mock lecturers • Have a Learning Development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Aston experience sleepover • Activity-based problems based on subjects studied at university • Reference and research workshops for subjects • Having more university lecturers come into the schools to show off subjects • Ditch the strict AS, A2 curriculum timetable imposed by Exam boards, government, school • Issue of time – where do you part on how to be a student • Induction/ tutorial comprehensive sessions on study skills/ use of library, referencing, literature review • Develop shorthand/ note-taking skills • Adopting mix-up groups: students are more used to being within their comfort zones • More student shadowing • Identify help available at university: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Staff ○ Tutors ○ Subject groups ○ Staff, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guidance on Essay structure??? • Self-motivation to build confidence • “when someone gives advice about uni, they just bombard you with info about uni as an overall thing but perhaps it is more useful to focus on uplifting someone rather than informing (specifically the advice based on the person receiving it)” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sessions for students to communicate with each other • More communication from the tutors to see if the student is doing well on the course • Sessions to teach how to cook healthy meals • University to help students to sort part-time jobs • Reassurance that after university that students can get the jobs that they want 	
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An overview of the solutions (Table 2) to the identified barriers that BTEC and vocational students face in Higher Education Study show that the proposed solutions from the staff from all three scenarios focussed most around 'Guidance-related' and 'Academic-related'.

There were variations from the student perspective: nearly all the proposed solutions from Harborne Academy BTEC students were Personal and Social-related solutions as shown in table 2. The BTEC students from Wolverhampton City College proposed more of Guidance-related solutions. Similarly, all the solutions to their identified barriers to HE study proposed by the Harborne Academy A-level students were Guidance-related.

Next Steps:

The next stage will be the setting up of a professional network with the institutions mentioned in this report and perhaps including Walsall College and St. Albans 6th Form Academy too.

The problems that students face in Higher Education and their associated proposed solutions from staff and student perspectives as demonstrated in tables 1 and 2 above are being categorised into 'Guidance-related', 'Academic-related', 'Professional development-related', 'Personal and Social-related', and 'Financial-related'.