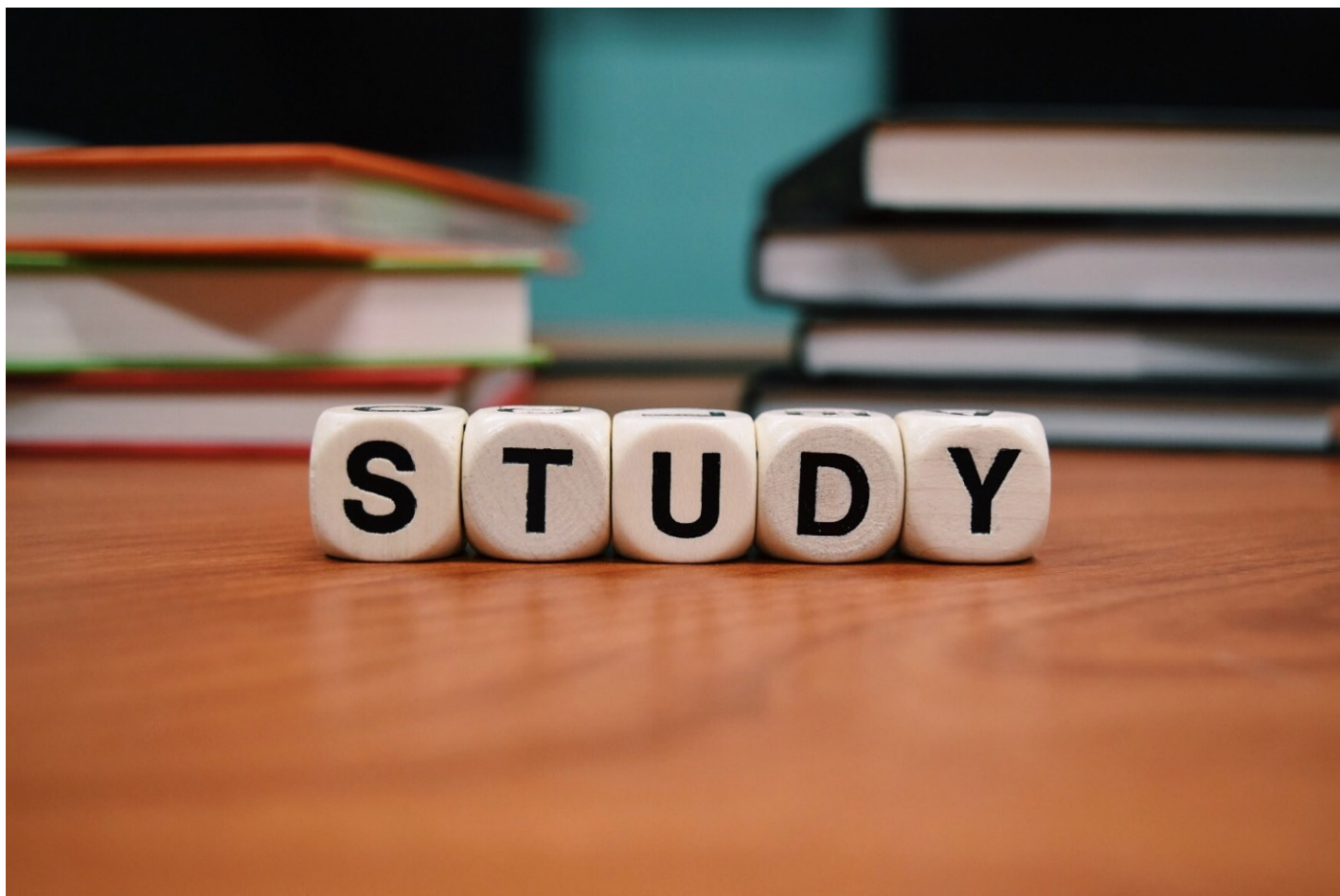




Prior learning experience, study expectations of A-Level and BTEC students on entry to university and the impact of Covid19

Findings from the undergraduate Pre-Arrival Academic Questionnaire 2019 and 2021

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Foreword

As leaders, we have a responsibility to shape the future of higher education, innovation, and enterprise, and have a socially just education system that is transformational and lifechanging for students and graduates.

To achieve this, we need to lead the way in breaking down barriers to enable diverse participation and unlock opportunities for people from all areas of our global community through every stage of the learning journey.

A critical stage in achieving this is through understanding the prior learning experience of our students, their concerns, expectations on entry, and how their backgrounds may impact on an effective transition into university. Having this knowledge and understanding enables us to effectively bridge the learning divide between secondary and tertiary education.

This report from the Office for Institutional Equity at the University of East London provides valuable insights into 'Prior learning experience, study expectations of A-Level and BTEC students on entry to university and the impact of Covid19' across three universities between 2019 and 2021. It highlights the disadvantages on entry many of our students face.

Collecting the right data using the student voice enables and empowers the university community to shape a more equitable and inclusive higher education environment. Furthermore, if we bridge the transition into university more effectively, we are better able to achieve the outcomes by which universities are measured.

The report will be of value to institutions, policy and strategy think tanks nationally and globally. We hope you enjoy reading it.

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Foreword

Covid-19 disrupted all aspects of society, and student transitions to higher education were not protected from this impact. The pandemic extended health, economic, social, and educational inequalities across the UK, and we experienced considerable impact across the learning eco-system. As we aim to support all learners into, through and beyond the university experience, it is essential to look at applicants' intentions to study through this contextual lens, and to consider the impact of the pandemic and the cost of living crisis alongside other key learning and life experiences.

The leap in learning and personal development between school, college and higher education can be enormously rewarding, but is also a transition beset with a variety of challenges. We know that early experiences of higher education can be somewhat uneven, and that this can be impacted by level and mode of prior study and a range of personal and contextual factors. More than ever, if we are to keep students (prospective and current) engaged in their learning, improve and support their experience, it is essential that we understand prior learning experiences, student study expectations and financial, emotional or personal concerns.

At this particular moment in time, it is important to identify the disruption and ongoing impact to learning, teaching and assessment caused by the pandemic in school and college, and classify any specific gaps resultant from students following different learning pathways as they enter university study. In addition, in light of Level 3 qualification reforms in the UK (that will result in the defunding of some BTECs from 2025), it is important to develop a thorough understanding of the needs of learners with different entry qualifications; this level of contextual understanding will help us to meet the needs of today's learners whilst identifying any longer term impact of the impending reforms.

This report investigates and compares the prior learning experiences, impact of Covid19 and expectations of A-Level and BTEC students on entry to university across two surveys undertaken between 2019 and 2021. The participating UK-based institutions were the Universities of Bournemouth (2019), Leeds Beckett and East London (2021). Data was collected via the pre-arrival academic questionnaire.

The report highlights the consistency of experience by qualification across both surveys. The report also identifies learning differences experienced by students during the pandemic and compares the learning experience of those who had completed their studies prior to it.

It suggests actions for consideration by institutions seeking to address the challenges and the pressures that students and staff are likely to face during the learning journey. The report is arranged in themed sections to enable easy identification of areas of individual interest. I am sure that colleagues will find this report an exceptionally useful reference point, with the potential to inform institutional and national policy.

Professor Ian Pickup
Pro Vice Chancellor (Students)
The Open University

Executive summary

The findings in this report provides:

- Data that underpins university student aspirations, progression, retention and achievement.
- A deep dive into aspects of data that impact on particular higher education institutions demographic and contextual issues.
- A guide for staff for within those HEIs to help inform policy and strategic interventions that can support and engage students.
- Commentaries by leaders and experts in the field providing suggestions and advice on the way forward for the sector.

There are a number of key observations arising from this report that have practical, strategic and policy implications. There is consistency in many of the findings across the surveys undertaken in 2019 and 2021 between those respondents holding only A-Levels and only BTEC as their highest entry qualification. The differences highlighted below will affect the level of engagement, sense of belonging, retention and success, and will further be exacerbated by the current cost of living crisis.

Moving forward, it is critical that further sector wide research is undertaken to fully explore the impact of the diverse student characteristics across different university mission groups and regions in the UK so it can contribute to effective change that benefits the student, the institution and society. The type of institution attracts different levels of students holding only A-Level, only BTEC or a combination of both qualifications as the three post 1992 institutions participating in the research highlights. This needs to be taken into account when examining continuation and completion rates of different universities, as well as longitudinal outcomes. The headline findings starting on page 29 provides a quick overview. The notable key findings that impact on the study journey are highlighted below.

Living and travel

- BTEC respondents were more likely to stay at home and undertake study than their A-Level counterparts.
- This impacts on the maintenance loan level available, the distance and time taken to travel to campus, the ability to participate in extra curricular campus activities and potential attendance issues with the teaching timetable and other metrics used to 'measure' engagement.

Financial

- A-Level respondents were substantially more likely to get financial support from parents and guardians than their BTEC counterparts.
- Second generation A-Level and BTEC compared to first generation were more likely to get financial support from parents and guardians.
- The most disadvantaged in terms of not receiving parental and guardian financial support were BTEC female first generation respondents.
- First generation respondents were more likely to use financial services than second generation respondents.

Prior learning experience of accessing materials

- BTEC respondents had a more diverse learning experience in accessing materials whether pre, during or post Covid19 than their A-Level counterparts.
- For both entry qualifications, learning was adapted for online study, but post pandemic, learning generally reverted back to the general mode pre-Covid19 for each qualification.
- Accessing books and materials in a school or college library was low for both qualification groups.

Prior digital learning experience

- Post pandemic, there was a greater use of email and use of VLEs in accessing learning information, submitting work and receiving feedback.
- Reverting back to pre-Covid19 traditional study methods raises a number of issues about the breadth and depth of students digital learning experience on entry.
- Assumptions are often made that incoming undergraduate entrants know how to engage in university learning via this mode as a result of the pandemic, and that because they are socially digitally experienced they will be learning digitally experienced. The findings highlight this is not the case.

Prior feedback experience

- The prior feedback experience was notably different between A-Level and BTEC respondents.
- A-Level respondents mostly received written feedback, which is common at university, whereas for BTEC it was face to face.
- The preference for both was face to face although for BTEC it was higher than for their A-Level counterparts.

Level of concern on entry

- Across A-Level and BTEC respondents, males expressed lower levels of concern across all areas than their female counterparts, with BTEC males being the least concerned.
- There were also generational status differences. First generation were less concerned than second who were more likely to have an understanding of potential issues through parents/guardians who had attended university.

Perceived skill ability on entry

- Males across both qualifications had a stronger perception of their skill ability than females with BTEC males being the most confident.

Expectations of use of services

- A-Level and BTEC males were the least likely to say they would use key university support services such as health and wellbeing, academic, finance and careers and employment advice, all of which help students succeed. This may be due to perceived skill ability.

Discussion of all the findings can be found in Part 5. Commentaries provided by expert student experience policy makers and practitioners can be found in Part 6 and suggested next steps in Part 7.

***The right to learn throughout life
is a human right***

Professor Sir David Watson
1949–2015

For Dad and Mum

December 1938-May 2022
March 1941-July 2022

Diagrams, figures and tables

All diagrams, figures and tables are by entry qualification. The heading title will relate to the student characteristics used in the analysis.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

Below are the common abbreviations and acronyms used in this report.

Academic feedback: Comments, advice and guidance given to students for their assessed and non-assessed academic work.

Aggregate sample: Total number of respondents of a survey under analysis. The aggregate sample creates a dataset.

A-Levels: Advanced level qualifications (known as A-Levels) are subject-based qualifications that can lead to university, further study, training, or work. Normally, three or more A-Levels over two years can be studied. They are usually assessed by a series of examinations.

Assessment (assessed and non-assessed work): Assessment refers to the wide variety of methods that educators use to evaluate, measure, and document the academic readiness, learning progress, and skill acquisition of students.

BTEC: BTEC stands for the Business and Technology Education Council. BTECs are specialist work-related qualifications. They combine practical learning with subject and theory content. There are just under 1,000 BTEC qualifications across 16 sectors – they are available from entry level through to professional qualifications at Level 7 (equivalent to postgraduate study).

Chi square tests: A test that explores the relationship between categorical variables (e.g. gender, discipline) by comparing the frequencies observed in certain categories to the frequencies expected to get in those categories by chance.

Contact hours/independent study hours: Contact hours are the hours where students have some form of contact with staff in the learning process. Independent hours are hours where students are expected to study by themselves or with other students outside of the contact hour learning process.

Dataset: A collection of related sets of information that is composed of separate elements and that can be manipulated as a unit by a computer. In this report, the different datasets correspond to different surveys.

Generational status: A student whose parent/s (or guardians) have not been to university is described as a first generation student and those that have had one or both parents attend are known as second generation.

HE: The abbreviation for used to denote higher education.

FE: The abbreviation for used to denote further education.

Post-1992: Former polytechnics, central institutions or colleges of higher education that were given university status in 1992 through the Further and Higher Education Act 1992.

Pre-arrival Academic Questionnaire (PAQ): The survey that new incoming students into the academic year 2019/20 and 2021 were invited to complete as a course academic activity. It contains questions about their previous learning experiences, their PGT expectations and expected outcomes.

QCF: Abbreviation for the BTEC Qualification and Credit Framework.

Qualitative: Qualitative methods are ways of collecting data that are concerned with describing meaning, rather than with drawing statistical inferences. They provide a more in-depth and rich description than statistical data.

Quantitative: The term quantitative data is used to describe a type of information that can be counted or expressed numerically. This type of data can be manipulated and statistically analysed, and is represented visually in graphs, histograms, tables and charts.

SPSS: SPSS is the acronym of Statistical Package for the Social Science. SPSS is one of the most popular statistical packages that can perform highly complex data manipulation and analysis with simple instructions.

SurveyMonkey: SurveyMonkey is a web-based survey tool that provides free, online and customisable surveys, as well as a suite of paid back-end programs that include data analysis, sample selection, bias elimination, and data representation tools. <https://www.surveymonkey.com>

Variables: A variable is defined as anything that has a quantity or quality that varies. The dependent variable is the variable a researcher is interested in and an independent variable is a variable believed to affect the dependent variable.

Information about the universities who have undertaken the PAQ

Bournemouth University

Bournemouth University is a public university in Bournemouth, Dorset. It has two campuses. The university obtained university status in 1992. Prior to that it achieved polytechnic status in 1990. It has approximately 18,000 students made up of 78% undergraduates and 22% postgraduates. Their student body is comprised of around 85% UK domicile, 4% EU and 11% International. Approximately 88% of its courses are full-time and 12% part-time.

Leeds Beckett University

Leeds Beckett University (LBU) was formerly known as Leeds Metropolitan University (LMU) and before that as Leeds Polytechnic. It is a public university in Leeds, West Yorkshire. It gained university status in 1992. It has two campuses. It has approximately 24,000 students made up of 76% undergraduates and 24% postgraduates. Their student body is comprised of around 91% UK domicile, 2% EU and 8% International. Approximately 84% of its courses are full-time and 16% part-time.

University of East London

University of East London (UEL) is a public university located in the London Borough of Newham in Greater London. It has three campuses: two in Stratford and one in Docklands. The University of East London began as the West Ham Technical Institute. It gained university status in 1992. It has approximately 19,500 students made up of 59% undergraduates and 41% postgraduates. The student body is comprised of around 66% UK domicile, 2% EU and 33% International. Approximately 89% of its courses are full-time and 11% part-time.

Part 1 Overview of A-Level and BTEC Qualifications

What is an A-Level?

An 'advanced level' or A-Level is a qualification offered across a range of subjects to (usually aged 16-18 years old), graded A*-E.

A-Levels are studied across two years. They are sometimes described as 'linear' because final A-Level grades are determined by final exam results at the end of Year 13. To take A-Levels, at least five GCSEs at grades 9 to 4/A* to C and at least grade 6 in the specific subject(s) studied are needed. AS-Levels have been decoupled from A-Levels so very few students today undertake this qualification.

What is a BTEC?

A BTEC is a vocational qualification studied at school or college. They tend to be work-related and are ideal for any student who prefers more practical-based learning. BTEC qualifications enable continuation into further study at university or the workforce. There are three types of BTEC levels.

Level 1	BTEC Introductory – equivalent to GCSEs.
Level 2	BTEC First – equivalent to GCSEs.
Level 3	BTEC National – equivalent to A-Levels.
Level 4	BTEC Higher National Certificate (HNC) hold the same status of achievement as completing the first year of an undergraduate degree.
Level 5	BTEC Higher National Diploma (HND) hold the same status of achievement as completing the second year of an undergraduate degree.

How are A-Level's and BTECs assessed?

There are differences in the way BTECs and A-Levels are assessed. A-Levels mainly involve two years of study with assessments at the end of the course. The pre-2016 BTECs were assessed through coursework and practical projects. The post-2016 BTECs usually contain 30-40% of external assessment.

How are A-Levels and BTECs graded?

A-Levels are graded from A* to E. BTECs are graded on a scale from Starred Distinction (D*) to Pass (P). The grading scales for both are listed below along with the UCAS point equivalent. For note: The BTEC table relates to the Extended Certificate size (one A-Level equivalent size). There are actually five sizes of BTEC at Level 3, ranging from an AS to 3 A-Level equivalent in size, with the two and three A-Level equivalents grading featuring double and triple grading scales respectively, e.g. D*D*, D*D*D*.

<i>A-Level</i>	<i>BTEC</i>
A*=56	Starred Distinction/Distinction Star (D*) = 56
A=48	Distinction (D) = 48
B=40	
C=32	Merit (M) = 32
D=24	
E=16	Pass (P) = 16

In terms of UCAS points, a Distinction* (D*) in BTEC is worth the same UCAS points as an A*, and a BTEC Merit is the same UCAS points as a C. Some universities make offers in terms of grades rather than UCAS points. In some cases, universities might require higher BTEC grades than their typical A-Level offer and the equivalent UCAS points.

Source: [What is a BTEC? Is it as valuable as an A-level? \(whatuni.com\)](#) [Calculating Ucas points based on predicted grades - The Uni Guide](#)

Domiciled and gender characteristics of those undertaking A-Level and BTEC qualifications

Since 2012, 18 year old UK domicile applications to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) for study in higher education (HE) have increased across all qualification groups (see Table 1). Between 2012 and 2021, applications of those with A-Level only have increased by 6.7%, those who hold BTECs only by 34.8% and those holding A-Levels and BTEC by 124.0%. Those holding Other qualifications has increased by 60.0%. It is important to note that BTEC students are more likely to be 19 years old at the point of application so a significant proportion will not be represented in the UCAS statistics.

All UCAS applications

Of all applications in 2012, the proportion of those holding A-Levels only accounted for 65.1%, BTEC only was 9.0%, A-Level and BTEC 4.5% and Other was 13.2%. In 2021, the proportion of all applications holding A-Levels only reduced in number and accounted for 57.3%, BTEC only increased slightly to 10.0%, A-Level and BTEC increased to 8.3% and Other increased to 17.4%.

Table 1 All UK 18 year old UCAS applications by qualification held

Qualification Group	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
A-level only	169,655	168,125	165,640	170,055	169,710	170,165	165,085	163,095	168,085	181,080
BTEC only	23,610	25,935	29,705	31,630	30,245	30,335	26,980	25,715	28,200	31,830
A-Level and BTEC	11,805	13,915	16,590	18,890	20,525	21,550	19,365	20,350	22,905	26,445
SQA only	18,385	187,400	18,705	18,855	18,670	18,180	17,580	17,075	16,660	18,880
IB only	2,390	2,170	2,330	2,330	2,370	2,470	2,340	2,495	2,505	2,715
Other	34,510	34,305	35,785	37,605	39,520	39,680	46,185	52,355	51,150	55,250
Total	260,360	262,850	268,760	279,365	281,035	282,380	277,530	281,080	289,510	316,200

(SQA= Scottish Qualifications Authority; IB= International Baccalaureate; Other= any mix of qualifications listed)

Source: [UCAS Undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2021 | Undergraduate | UCAS](#)

In 2021, the domicile status of applicants undertaking BTEC only accounted for 10.9% in England, 9.5% in Wales, 7.0% in Northern Ireland and 0.02% in Scotland.

When examined by gender, there has been a similar increase across all qualifications between 2012 and 2021. The applications from those who identified as male and female holding A-Levels only were similar with 7.4% and 6.2% respectively. However, the notable differences were the proportion of males who held BTEC only qualifications which increased by 39.4%, and those who held both A-Levels and BTEC that increased by 110.0% for males and 135.1% for females.

Accepted applications

In 2012, A-Levels only accounted for 69.9% of all accepted applications, BTEC only was 8.7%, A-Level and BTEC 3.9% and Other by 10.1% (see Table 2). By 2021, A-Levels only acceptances reduced to 58.6% as other qualifications increased. BTEC only increased slightly to 9.7%, A-Level and BTEC increased to 8.4% and Other qualifications increased to 17.4%. The acceptances by qualification and gender were similar.

Table 2 All UK 18 year old UCAS acceptances by qualification held

Qualification Group	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
A-level only	145,520	147,075	144,840	149,760	150,305	151,240	146,810	145,155	152,495	161,355
BTEC only	18,220	20,685	24,060	25,965	25,100	25,170	22,825	21,895	24,665	26,830
A-Level and BTEC	9,830	11,795	14,285	16,295	17,830	18,755	16,870	17,855	20,520	23,245
SQA only	13,615	13,705	13,780	13,850	14,045	13,985	14,075	13,545	14,230	15,890
IB only	2,045	1,835	2,030	2,020	2,060	2,160	2,050	2,200	2,250	2,385
Other	22,880	24,225	25,560	27,470	29,595	30,275	35,745	40,865	43,730	45,535
Total	212,105	219,320	224,555	235,355	238,940	241,585	238,380	241,515	257,895	275,235

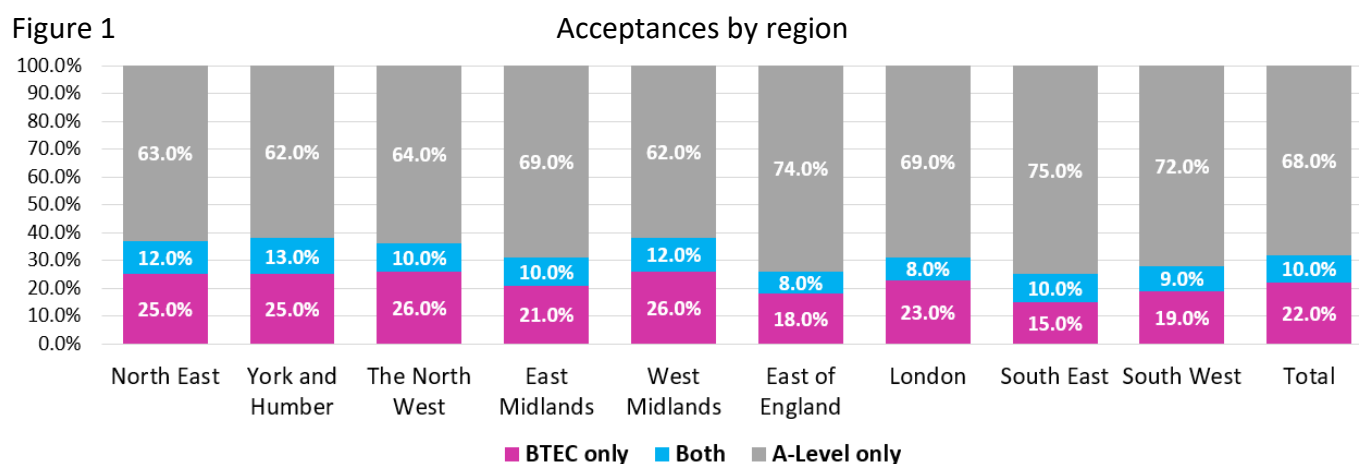
(SQA= Scottish Qualifications Authority; IB= International Baccalaureate; Other= any mix of qualifications listed)

Source: [UCAS Undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2021 | Undergraduate | UCAS](#)

Acceptances by region

The national average of students accepted into university having only studied BTECs in 2016 was 22.0% (Gicheva and Petrie, 2018). When acceptances were examined by region, students with a BTEC only qualification are less likely to be accepted by universities in the East and South East of England (Gicheva and Petrie, 2018). In the northern regions (the North East, Yorkshire and the Humber, the North West) and the West Midlands, the largest proportion of students were accepted to university with a BTEC with a quarter holding BTEC only qualifications.

Figure 1



Source: SMF analysis of UCAS End of Cycle 2016 data cited in Gicheva and Petrie (2018) (p14)

Ethnic, parental occupational background and polar quintile characteristics of those undertaking A-Level and BTEC qualifications

Ethnic characteristics

In 2020, over 45,000 18-year-old students entered higher education with BTECs only or A-Levels and BTECs (Atherton, 2021). Of the 18-year-old black students, 33.0% entered higher education with either BTECs or A-Levels and BTECs (see Table 3). For 18 year old Asian students, it was 24.0% compared to 21.0% of white students. The proportion of black students entering higher education with BTECs only was nearly twice that of white students (Atherton, 2021). This finding has also been found in other studies (e.g. Hayward and Hoelscher, 2011).

Table 3 %of students entering higher education in 2020 by ethnic group and qualification

Qualification	Black	Asian	White
A-Level	67.0%	76.0%	79.0%
BTEC	21.0%	14.0%	11.0%
A-Level and BTEC	12.0%	10.0%	10.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

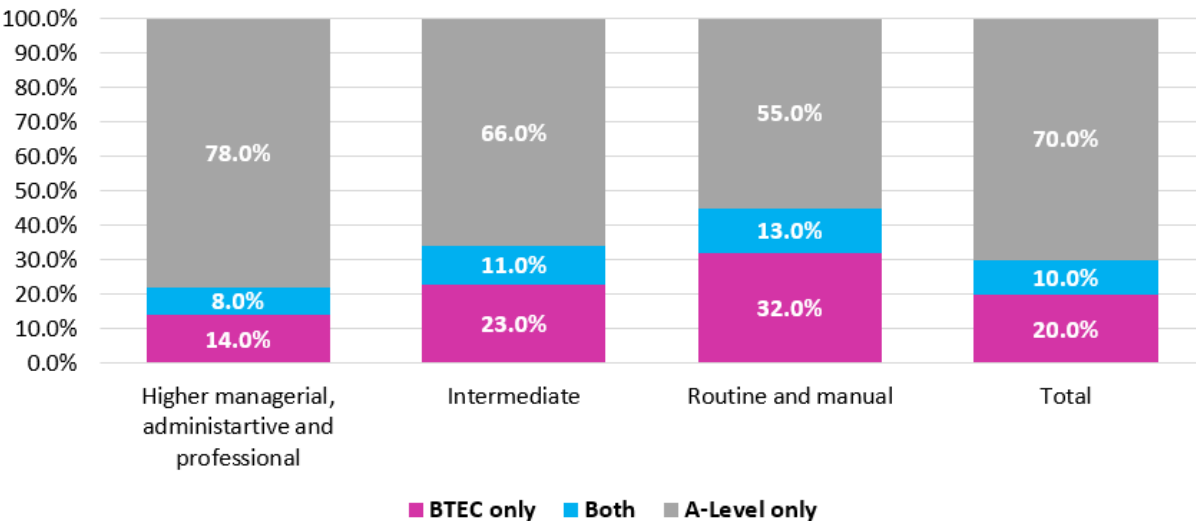
Source: Atherton, 2021 (p8)

Parental occupational background characteristics

Ongoing research highlights that *‘socio-economic disadvantage continues to be the most significant driver of inequality in terms of access to and outcomes from higher education’* (Social Mobility Advisory Group, 2016 cited in Gicheva and Petrie, 2018). Gicheva and Petrie state that defining what ‘working class’ comprises is difficult due to the data available, and that the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC occupational) categories do not cover all groupings (Gicheva and Petrie, 2018). For the purpose of Figure 2, the categories 5-7 (Lower Supervisory and Technical Occupations, Semi-routine Occupations, Routine Occupations) have been merged to create the ‘Routine and Manual’ group.

Figure 2 highlights that the more manual the parental occupation, the more likely applicants are to go to university holding BTEC only qualifications. Applicants from a routine and manual background are most likely to hold both an A-Level and BTEC.

Figure 2 Acceptances by occupational background of the student’s parent



Source: SMF analysis of UCAS End of Cycle 2016 data cited in Gicheva and Petrie (2018) (p15)

Research by Myhill looking at HESA data identifies that students holding BTEC qualifications are less likely to study at Russell Group universities and more likely to attend institutions of low tariff providers (Myhill, 2020).

Polar quintile characteristics

The impact of socio-economic background on polar quintile measure is also pronounced. In 2020, of the 29,020 18-year-old students who entered higher education from the lowest participation neighbourhood quintile (PQ 1), 30.0% entered with either BTECs only or A-Levels and BTECs. The percentage of these students entering higher education with these qualifications has fluctuated between 25.0% and 30.0% since 2011 (Atherton, 2021). The research is based on the Qualification and Credit Framework (QCF) legacy BTECs and not the reformed 2016 ones.

Table 4 highlights that around a quarter of students entering HE in 2019 from the lower participation neighbourhoods entered with either BTECs only or A-Levels and BTECs. This proportion drops to less than 10.0% for those from the neighbourhoods where participation is the highest (Atherton, 2021). This finding has been reflected in previous research (e.g. Shields and Masardo, 2015).

Table 4 % of students entering HE with BTECs or A-Levels/BTECs by POLAR quintile 2020

Polar Quintile	% of BTEC only or A-Level and BTEC
1	30.0%
2	23.0%
3	21.0%
4	17.0%
5	10.0%

(Polar Quintile 1 = poorest quintile, Polar Quintile 5 – least poor quintile)

Source: Atherton, 2021 (p7)

Table 5 shows both the numbers of students entering HE from low participation neighbourhoods since 2011 and the percentage of these students who enter with BTECs, and A-Levels and BTECs (Atherton, 2021). It highlights that there has been steady but gradual progress in the numbers entering HE from the lowest participation neighbourhoods.

Table 5 Students from POLAR 1 quintile entering HE via BTEC or A-Level and BTEC

Year	Polar 1 Quintile	BTEC and or A-Level and BTEC	% of BTEC and or A-Level and BTEC
2012	20,230	4,915	24.0%
2013	20,845	5,495	26.0%
2014	23,225	6,830	29.0%
2015	24,730	7,430	30.0%
2016	24,980	7,445	29.0%
2017	25,800	7,545	29.0%
2018	25,310	6,800	27.0%
2019	26,445	6,660	26.0%
2020	28,885	7,400	26.0%

Source: Atherton, 2021 (p8)

Across all measures of disadvantage, BTEC qualifications are an important route enabling individuals to access higher education from low participation areas and low socio-economic backgrounds.

Continuation and completion rates of A-level and BTEC entrants in HE

The statistical data used in the research by Dilnot et al. (2021) reported in Table 6 is from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) along with seven universities who provided datasets of the entry qualifications and outcomes of their students (including results of modules). Although the data shows that those who entered university with BTECs only or combinations were more likely to drop out and graduate below a 2.1, the authors state that the overwhelming majority do not dropout or repeat, and do graduate with at least a 2.1. The research is based on the QCF BTEC legacy and not the post 2016 reformed qualification.

When examined by continuation and completion rates, Table 6 shows that around 8.0% of the sample of first years in 2021 dropped out before the start of their second year. This equates to just under 5.0% of those with A-Levels only, but nearly four times for those BTECs only with 17.8%. The rates of repetition of the first year by BTEC students are three times higher than for A-Levels. Among those graduating, just under 20.0% overall graduate below a 2:1. However, students who entered with BTECs only were two and a half times more likely to with 40.0% compared to A-Level entrants with 15.0%. Those with less suitable A-Levels were more likely to drop out or graduate below a 2.1, but this was not significant (Dilnot et al., 2021). This pattern has been reflected in previous research (e.g. HEFCE, 2013, Rouncefield-Swales, 2014).

Table 6 Outcomes, achievement, and social background by qualification

	All level 3 qualifications	A-level only	Mixed A-level and BTECs	BTECs only	Other academic	Access	Other L3 including other mixtures
First years							
N	743,900	518,710	54,530	115,850	8,355	1,685	43,260
Dropout %	7.6 ₁₁	4.6	9.9	17.8	3.9	19.4	13.6
Repeats %	4.3	2.8	5.5	9.6	2.7	13.5	6.9
GCSE points	427	470	360	304	445	261	329
Total L2 points	534	554	521	471	516	403	493
Mean SES quintile	3.2	3.5	2.7	2.5	4.2	2.4	2.6
Non White %	26.5	23.9	29.7	34.8	21.7	37.0	31.1
Female %	55.6	57.3	56.2	49.1	52.5	65.9	53.5
Graduates							
N	614,580	460,245	35,935	71,420	6,860	2,360	36,345
Graduating below 2:1 %	19.8	14.9	29.0	39.5	11.4	36.5	33.8
GCSE points	439	475	358	309	485	278	331
Total L2 points	542	558	535	476	541	374	494
Mean SES quintile	3.3	3.5	2.7	2.6	4.2	2.5	2.7
Non White %	23.5	21.9	27.6	29.6	19	27.4	27.6
Female %	56.6	57.5	56.8	52.2	52.6	67.7	54.4

Source: Dilnot et al., 2021 (p24)

Office for Students Dashboard launched November 2022

In November 2022, the Office for Students launched three new Dashboards of data. One was the Entry qualification and subject data dashboard. This dashboard shows sector-level outcomes information for UK-domiciled undergraduate students for qualifications on entry to higher education, and their subject of study. Diagrams 1 and 2 represent the continuation data of full time students between 2015/16 and 2019/20. They show the consistent pattern of continuation across the entry qualifications. BTEC only students are the least likely to progress in their studies year on year.

Diagram 1 Fulltime continuation in 2015/16 and 2017/18

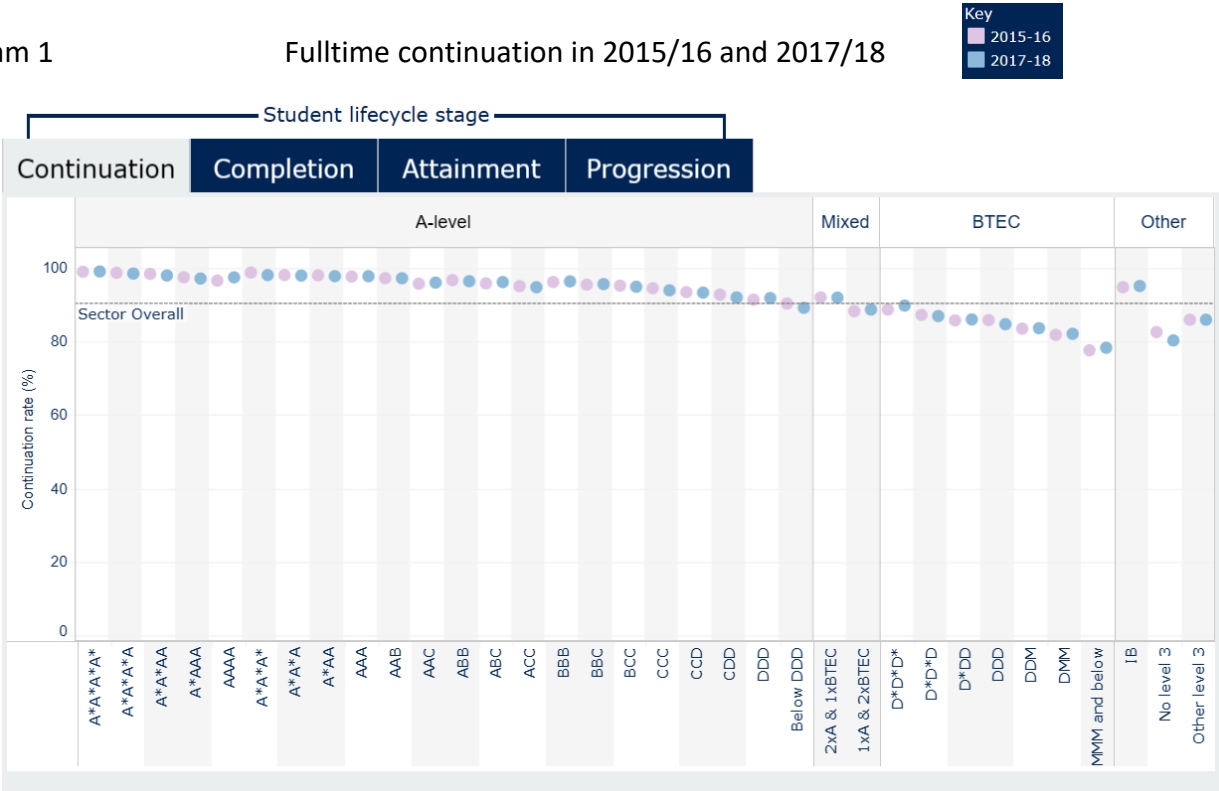
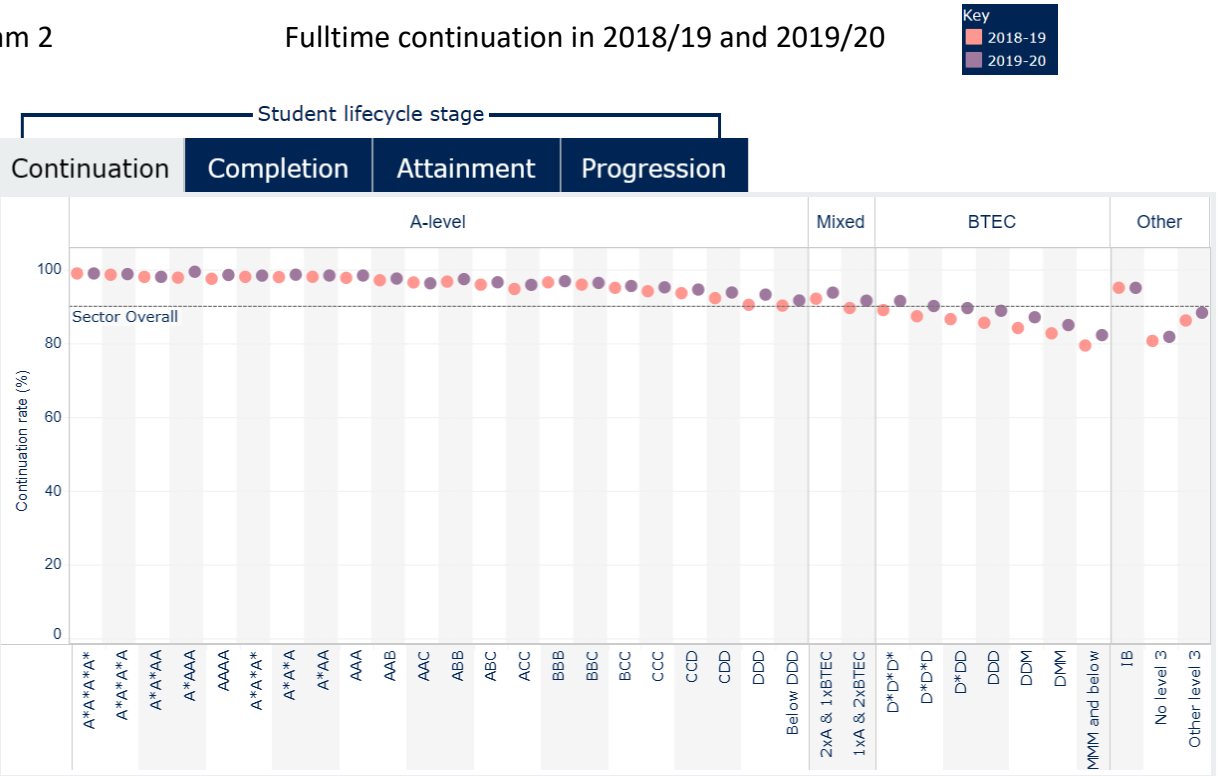


Diagram 2 Fulltime continuation in 2018/19 and 2019/20



Choice of related A-Level and BTEC subjects for ten popular degree courses generally not requiring the related entry subject

The ten popular degree subjects examined by Dilnot et al. (2021) in the research were accounting, business, computer science, law, media studies, psychology, sociology, sports science, nursing, drama. Dropout proportions varied considerably across subjects. For example, 6.6% in psychology to 13.4% in computing and 14.8% in sports science.

For A-Levels, the authors found:

- For all of these degree subjects, having the related A-Level rather than any other A-Level was beneficial in terms of lower associations with chances of dropping out, repeating or graduating below a 2:1. For example, three quarters of those first years studying psychology had psychology A-Level, but only 11% of those studying for an accounting degree had an A-Level in accounting.
- For dropout, having the related A-Level for computing, psychology, sociology and sports science degrees reduced the chances of an adverse university outcome by a multiple of between 0.6 and 0.8.
- For avoiding repetition, related A-Levels in computing, psychology and sports science, plus accounting and law, were beneficial. For graduating with a 2:1 or above, computing, psychology, sports science, and law A-Levels were found to be beneficial.

There were a few significant relationships between university outcomes and subject of BTEC entry qualification for the five degree subjects considered that had a related BTEC.

For BTECs, the authors found:

- Having a performing arts BTEC qualification for drama students was the only example among the degrees examined where having a related BTEC rather than any other BTEC subject was associated with a better outcome. It had a higher probability of graduating with a 2:1 or above.
- Holding a health and social care or health studies BTEC appeared to be a disadvantage for those studying nursing degrees, in terms of both dropout and graduating with below a 2:1, compared with someone with BTEC, or mixed BTEC and A-Level qualifications in a different subject.

The Office for Students new data dashboard highlights that of the discipline categories, business and management had the lowest continuation rates in 2019/20 with 86.8% (see Table 7) which reflects data from previous years. The other disciplines range from 90.1% for design, creative and performing arts to 93.7% for humanities and languages to the highest with 98.3% for medicine, dentistry and veterinary sciences. When attainment is examined, nursing, allied health and psychology had the lowest levels of attainment with medicine, dentistry and veterinary sciences having the highest.

Table 7 Continuation and Attainment Statistics from Office for students 2019/20

Subject	Continuation rate	Attainment of 2:1 or above
Business and Management	86.8%	80.4%
Design, Creative and Performing Arts	90.1%	82.6%
Education and Teaching	90.4%	78.6%
Engineering, Technology and Computing	90.4%	83.3%
Humanities and Languages	93.7%	89.8%
Law and Social Sciences	91.4%	81.4%
Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Sciences	98.3%	92.9%
Natural and Built Environment	92.6%	85.5%
Natural and Mathematical Sciences	92.5%	85.5%
Nursing, Allied Health and Psychology	93.1%	79.6%

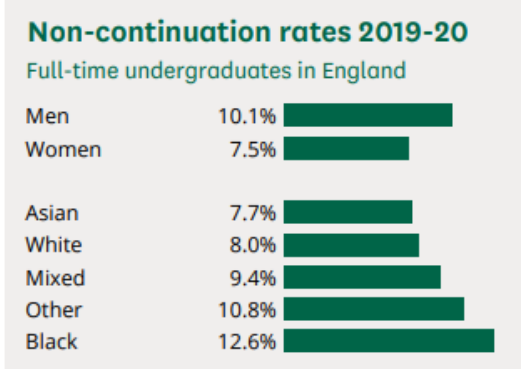
Source: Extracted from [Student characteristics data: Entry qualification and subject data dashboard - Office for Students](#)

Student characteristics and continuation

When continuation figures for a range of student characteristics are examined, male underachievement is not only seen in the figures for entry as highlighted previously but also in non-continuation (drop-out) rates and degree performance statistics (Hillman and Robinson, 2016; Hillman 2021). As Curnock- Cook, former Chief Executive of UCAS highlights, males are not just performing worse than females in higher education, but across primary, secondary education and apprenticeships.

The Equality of Access and Outcomes in Higher Education in England Research Briefing Report by Bolton and Lewis (2023) highlight those students with the highest non-continuation rates (see Diagram 3). Non-continuation is defined as full-time first year students who are not continuing their studies 12 months later (24 months for part-time students). The average non-continuation rate across all groups was 9.9%.

Diagram 3



Source: Bolton and Lewis, 2023 (p15)

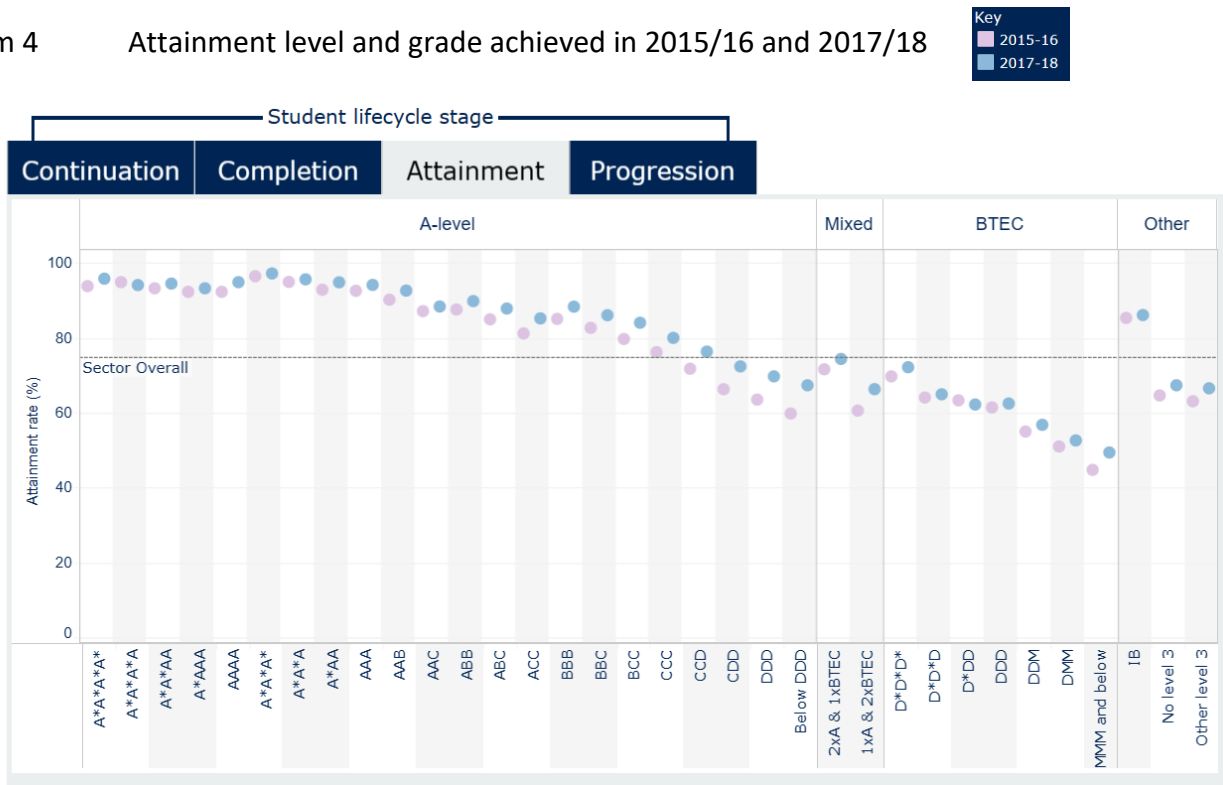
The groups of students with the highest non-continuation rates were:

- Men (10.1%)
- Mature (13.9%)
- Black (12.6%)
- From the lowest IMD groups (10.4-11.9%)
- Other ethnic group (10.8%)

It is important to note that the main categories of Black, White and Asian are quite broad, and within each category there are differences in trends between sub-categories such as Chinese and Indian.

When attainment is examined by entry qualification since 2015/16 through to 2021/22, there is a consistent pattern by entry qualification and grade in terms of achieving an Upper Second or First Class degree (see Diagrams 4-6). Regardless of year, students who entered with BTEC only qualifications are the least likely to attain this level of qualification.

Diagram 4 Attainment level and grade achieved in 2015/16 and 2017/18



Source: OfS, 2022a [Student characteristics data: Entry qualification and subject data dashboard - Office for Students](#)

Diagram 5 Attainment level and grade achieved in 2018/19 and 2019/20

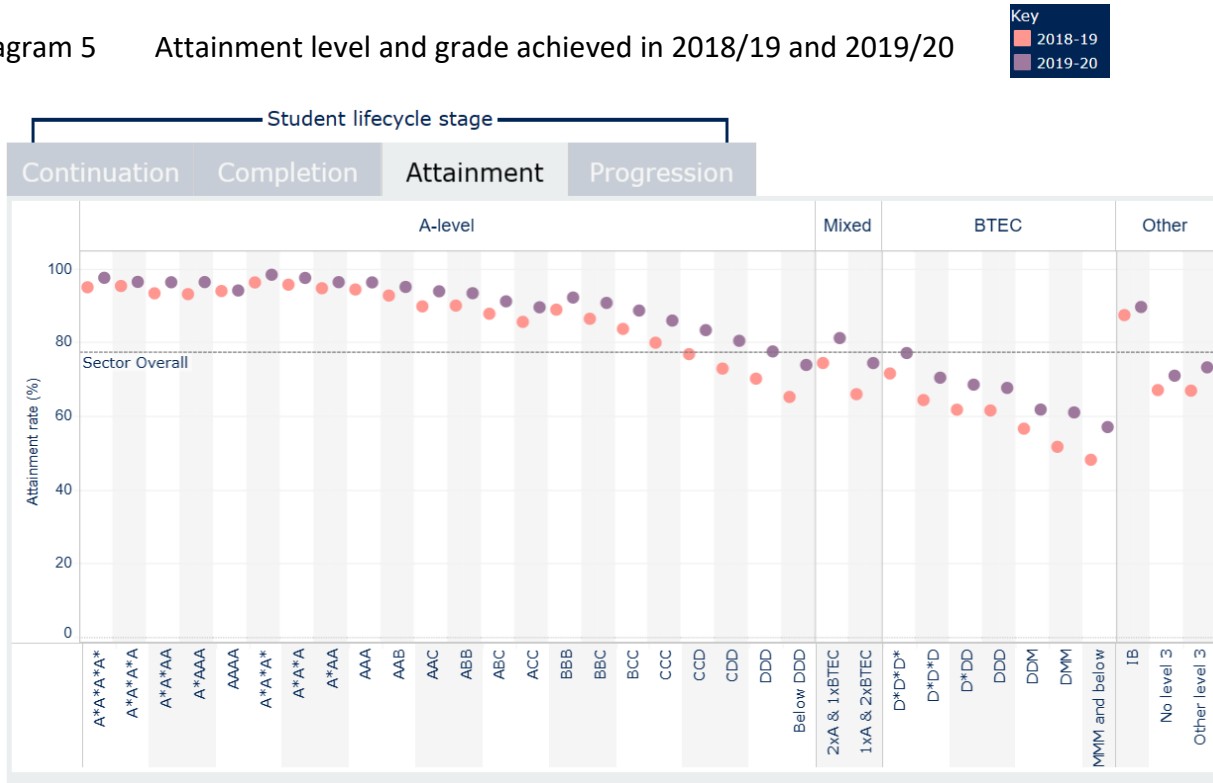
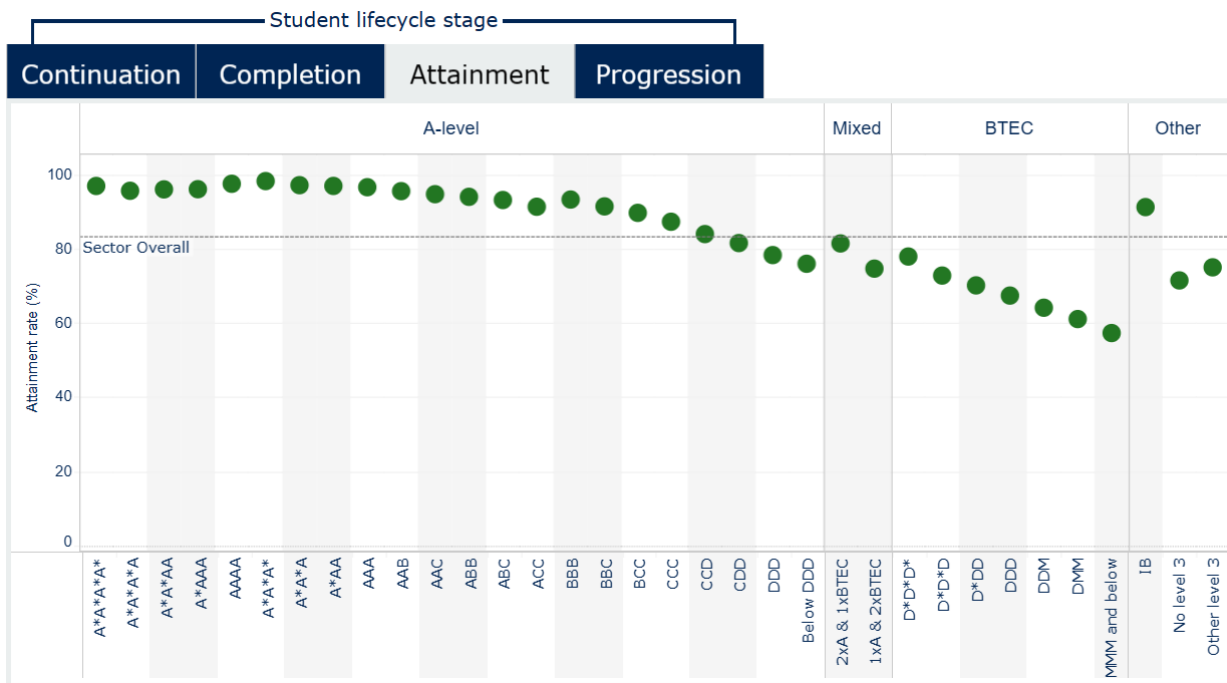


Diagram 6 Attainment level by entry qualification and grade achieved in 2020/21



Source: [Student characteristics data: Entry qualification and subject data dashboard - Office for Students](#)

The of entry qualification on employments outcomes post degree award

Research by Patrignani et al. found that the average salary measured at age 28 of first degree graduates who enter university via the A-Level route earn substantially more compared to those on the BTEC route. The gap in average annual salary was £11,000 for men (£35,000 versus £23,800 per annum) and £9,000 for women (£28,200 versus £19,100 per annum) (Patrignani et al., 2019).

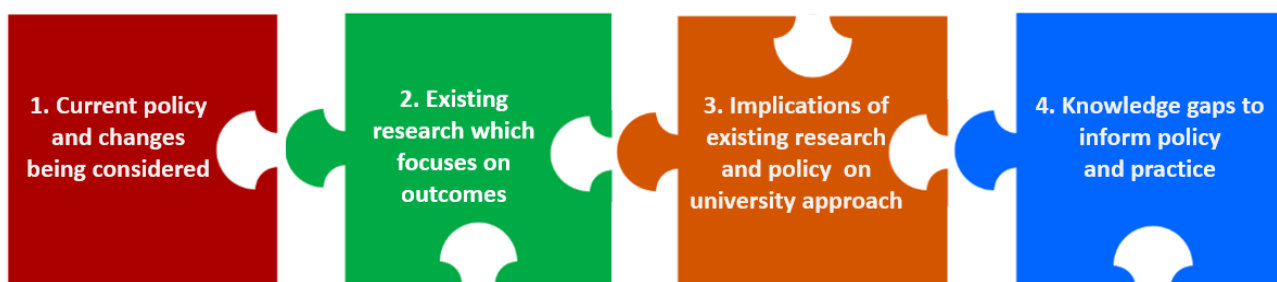
Amongst median salaries, the gap was lower but still notable with £8,300 per annum for men and £7,800 per annum for women. The figures for those who held both BTECs and A-Levels on entry were only marginally higher than the figures reported for the BTEC category. They also found subject-variation in the salary-gaps. The largest gaps were for social studies, law, languages, history and philosophy and business and administration' (for both genders). However, the smallest wage gaps were for architecture, arts and design' and subjects allied to medicine (females only). They also identified a substantial gender-gap for all subjects except arts and design' (Patrignani et al., 2019). Additionally, Hewitt argues that the labour market females enter still has a long way to go in terms of equality, even when looking at universities own labour force (Hewitt, 2020).

The gaps in knowledge and recommendations

The current policy and the changes being considered by the Department of Education regarding BTEC qualifications are based on limited existing research and only outcome metrics as highlighted above. These impact on university strategic and policy approaches. For any future policy changes to be effective, it is essential that knowledge gaps are first filled to inform policy and practice effectively (see Diagram 7).

Diagram 7

Steps to effectively inform policy and practice



Source: Morgan (2023)

The findings reported by Atherton (2021) and Dilnot et al. (2021) and other publications (e.g. Morgan, 2020a; 2020b; Swinton, 2020) have made a number of recommendations to understand why there are poor progression and outcome differences for those holding BTEC only or a combination of A-Level and BTEC qualifications.

Recommendations for policy makers include:

- More targeted research to understand why there are patterns of lower success among BTEC students.
- Work with all stakeholders to develop an understanding across all levels of study.

Recommendations for universities:

- Work more closely with schools and colleges of further education.
- Monitor the outcomes of students with different entry qualifications, in particular taking account of differences in performance by assessment type.
- Consider the alignment of assessment methods with students' previous experience throughout the course of students to understand where issues occur.
- Obtain a greater understanding by universities of the prior learning experience of students so effective support can be provided to enable students to succeed.

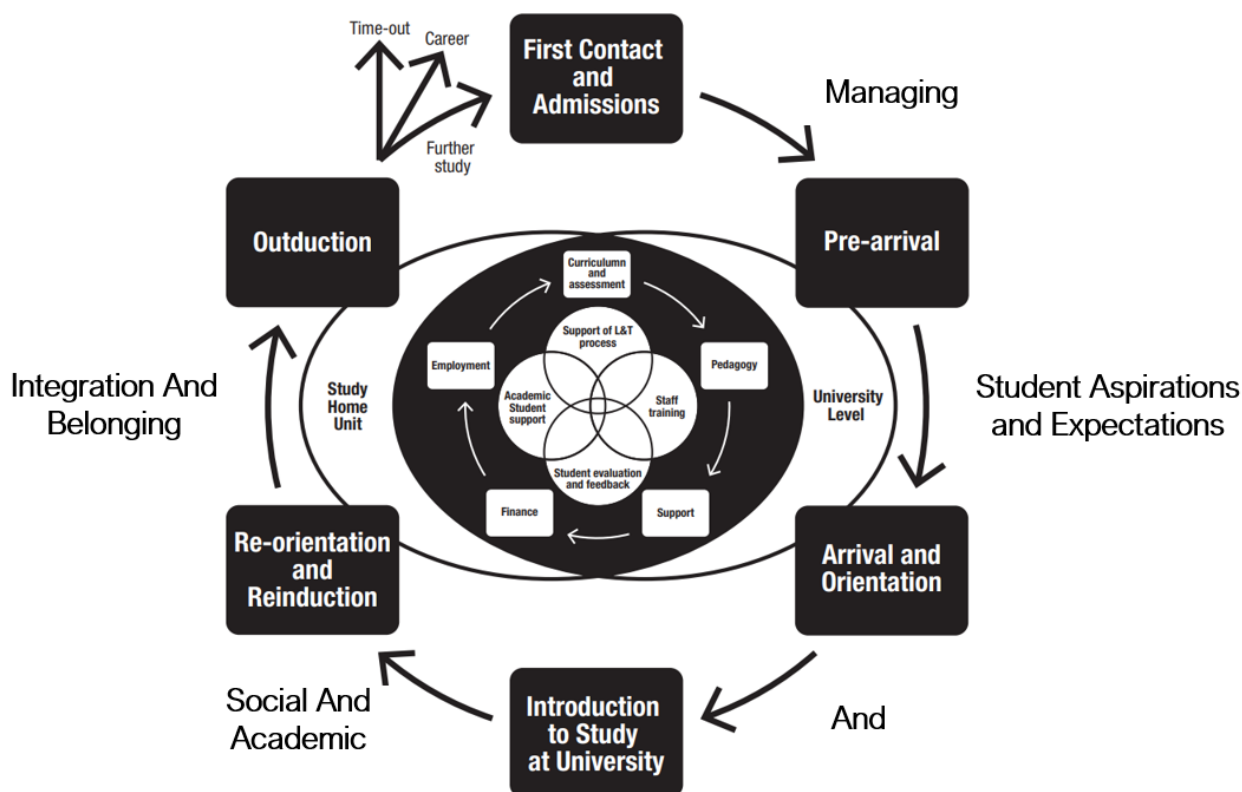
The purpose of this report

It is the last two recommendations that this report addresses. Government policy in recent years has led to a strategic and policy focus on outcomes. However, if institutions and Government want to improve the outcome metrics, then we need to go back to the start of the study journey and understand the prior experiences of new students entering higher education to help inform the key learning and support areas.

If a university does not understand their students previous experience and expectations, they will not effectively be able to support their students through the study lifecycle (Engle and Tinto, 2008; Morgan, 2011: 2013; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015; 2017) nor provide them with a voice that makes them feel recognised and gives them a sense of belonging (Thomas, 2012a,b; Thomas et al., 2017; Thomas and Jones, 2017; Morgan, 2018; Blake et al., 2022). Diagrams 8 and 9 provide an overview of how this can be achieved.

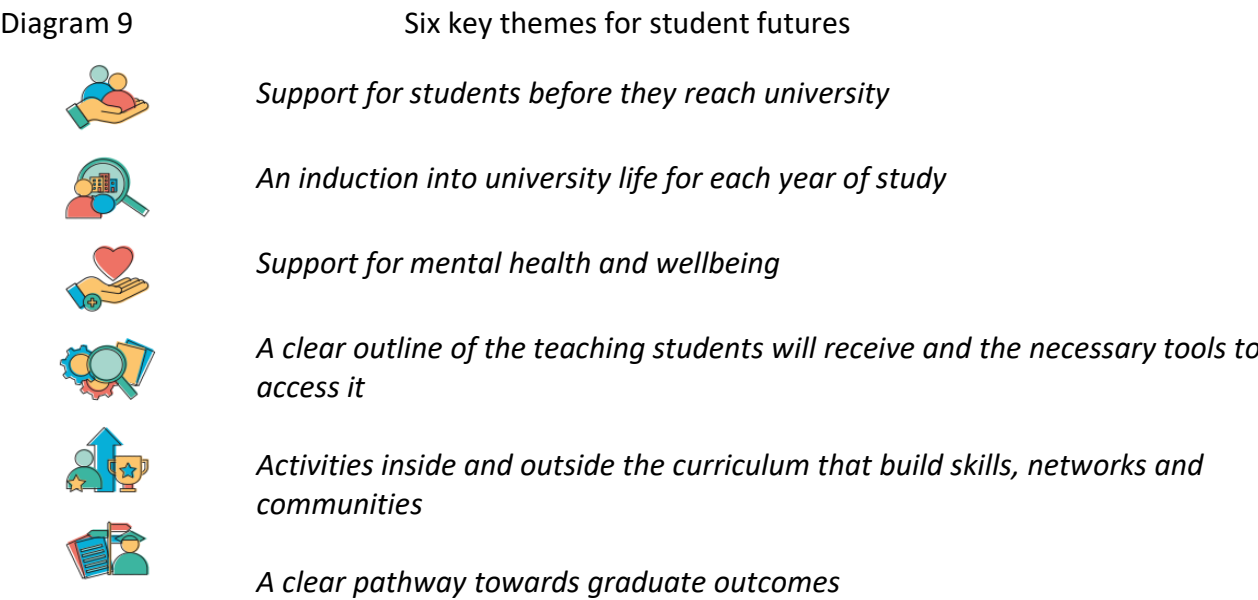
The Student Experience Transitions Model in Diagram 8 provides a framework for institutions to organise and map out the different types of support needed for students at particular times throughout their journey at university or college. It also provides a framework of what to consider and who to involve when developing initiatives to support students in their study journey. All students must undergo every stage regardless of the level at which they enter. More information can be found by going to: <https://www.improvingthestudentexperience.com/student-practitioner-model/>

Diagram 8 The Student Experience Transitions Model



Source: Morgan, 2013 and [Improving the Student Experience by Michelle Morgan - Official Website](https://www.improvingthestudentexperience.com/student-practitioner-model/)

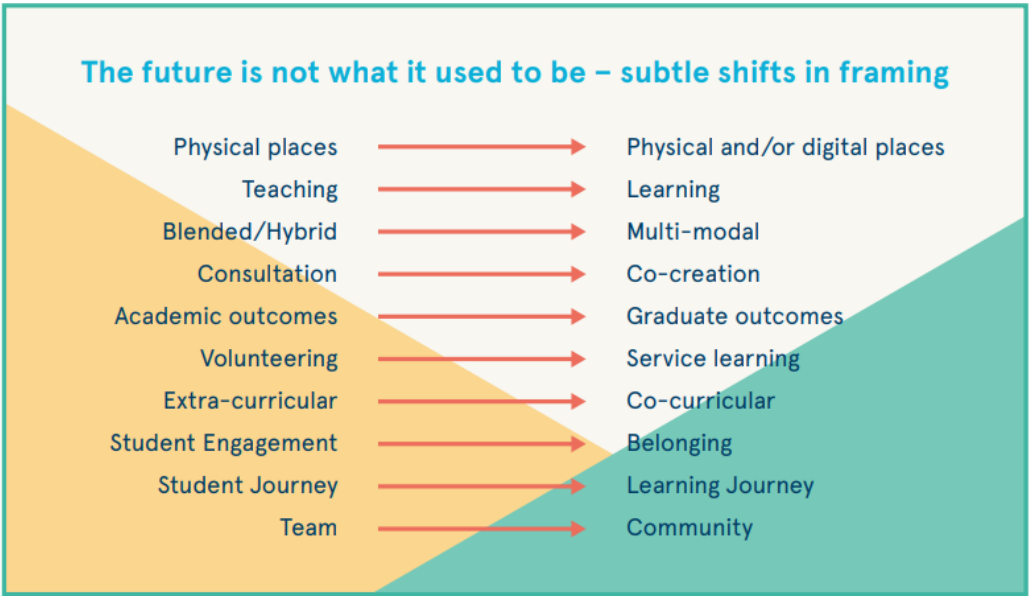
Diagram 9 highlights the six key themes that UPP Student Futures Manifesto suggests that Universities should clearly address in supporting new and returning students.



Source: [A Student Futures-Manifesto-Final-Report-of-the-Student-Futures-Commission.pdf upp-foundation.org](#) (p8)

Having this understanding has never been more important especially post pandemic and with the cost of living crisis because as the UPP Student Futures Manifesto highlights, there have been numerous shifts taking place over the last few years in higher education (see Diagram 10).

Diagram 10 Shifts in higher education



Source: [A-Student-Futures-Manifesto-Final-Report-of-the-Student-Futures-Commission.pdf upp-foundation.org](#) (p9)

The content of this report

This report provides findings from the undergraduate pre-arrival academic questionnaire undertaken in 2019 across one Post 1992 university prior to the pandemic, and across two Post 1992 institutions in 2021 at the height of Covid19. It focuses on the prior learning experience of students prior to, during and post Covid19 as well as concerns on entry and expectations of university study of students entering with A-Level only and BTEC only qualifications. The rationale for the survey is explained in Part 2.

Part 2 Introduction to the Pre-arrival Academic Questionnaire

Rationale for the Pre-Arrival Academic Questionnaire (PAQ)

There are three broad aims behind the Pre-Arrival Academic Questionnaire (referred to as PAQ hereafter). Firstly, it is to assist in the evaluation of the prior learning experiences and future study expectations of students on entry to tertiary level study. If we understand these on entry, we are better placed to manage all stakeholders' expectations and provide targeted support in, through and out of the study journey (Morgan, 2013).

Secondly, the PAQ is designed to take entrants through a reflective learning journey to get them to start thinking about their upcoming studies. It is delivered at course level, and provides a meaningful pre-arrival activity and a parity of initial academic experience for all students across courses.

Thirdly, it is to provide staff across academic and professional support spheres with vital information that will assist them in developing and evolving their provision in real time in order to bridge the perceived and actual skill and knowledge gaps of students (Morgan, 2020a; 2020b). The PAQ was formalised via the 11 University HEFCE funded £2.7m Postgraduate Experience Project (PEP) which was part of the Postgraduate Support Scheme Phase one designed to reenergise the UK postgraduate market (Morgan and Direito, 2016). In the development of the PAQ at undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate taught (PGT) level over the years, student representatives have been involved in refining and enhancing the content, structure and order of questions.

Structure of the questionnaire

The questionnaire comprises open and closed questions. It collects pertinent biographical data to check the representation of the sample and to provide detailed analysis of the questions by different student characteristics such as gender, domiciled status, generational status and entry route to study. It contains seven sections that are designed to obtain as much information from respondents about their learning prior experiences and their expectations and aspirations for their upcoming study. Some of the questions are different depending on the level of study and they have been adapted to encompass current issues such as Covid19 and the Cost of Living Crisis. The sections are as follows:

- Previous study qualifications
- Previous study experience
- Motivations and expected challenges of study being undertaken
- Student expectations
- Current learning expectations
- Attitudes towards the level of study being undertaken
- Biographical details

The sections of the questionnaire are designed to make completion easy and to take respondents systematically through a logical set of questions that will be of benefit to them as well as their academic home unit (e.g. department/course). The questionnaire consists of a maximum 51 questions depending on the responses provided (inclusive of 11 biographical questions) thus providing an extensive amount of information. The survey is executed using Survey Monkey.

Collection of Data

Ethical approval was granted for the survey at each institution. Pre-arrival completion at both UG and PGT level as a course academic activity is the preference as it does generate a substantially higher rate of completion. In this survey, questions relating to disability and social economic class were not included in the survey. However, age, generational status, ethnicity, gender and domiciled status were collected. The questionnaire is anonymous at the point of completion so identification of an individual is not possible. This approach was adopted to encourage engagement and honest answers by the respondents especially when providing the qualitative comments. Once downloaded and stored securely on a password protected laptop, the data is deleted off Survey Monkey.

Completions of the questionnaire by each university for the undergraduate PAQ in 2019 and 2021

Only fully completed pre-arrival academic questionnaires have been used in the analysis. The full completions for all entry qualifications for Bournemouth University (BU hereafter) in September 2019 was 1104. For Leeds Beckett University (LBU hereafter) in September 2021, which was in its second year of implementation, it was 888. For the University of East London (UEL hereafter) in September 2021 which was its first year, it was 484.

For the purpose of this report, only data of respondents holding A-Levels only or BTEC only as their entry qualification has been used in the analysis. Findings for BU are reported separately. The overall sample is referred to as '2019' and the qualifications as 'A-Level 2019' and 'BTEC 2019'. LBU and UEL data has been combined to provide a larger data set for 2021 and is referred to as '2021'. The qualifications are referred to as 'A-Level 2021' and 'BTEC 2021'. The two datasets provide a useful comparison of responses by entry qualification 'pre' and 'during' the pandemic.

Quantitative, qualitative and comparative analyses of 2019 and 2021 surveys

The majority of the data collected was nominal which consists of items/values/responses assigned to well-defined classes or labels (e.g. gender: female and male). They are presented as a proportion or percentage of the total. Descriptive statistics plus a range of appropriate statistic tests were undertaken (mainly frequencies and Chi Square tests) using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to compare the difference in percentage between groups.

The findings report different nominal variables such as route into study, generational status, age and gender. Due to small sample sizes, no analysis was undertaken by ethnicity or domiciled status. Gender analysis was only undertaken with those who identified as female or male which comprised around 98.0% of the institutional samples.

Where possible, comparison has been undertaken between the two datasets. The pre-arrival academic questionnaire undertaken during Covid 19 contained new questions and developed others by providing additional options to explore the impact of the pandemic. Where questions cannot be compared or additional options were included, this is highlighted in the findings.

The basic respondent characteristics for A-Level and BTEC respondents in 2019 and 2021

The basic respondent characteristics by entry qualification are reported below in Table 8 ('n' denotes the sample size).

Table 8 Basic respondent characteristics by entry qualification

Characteristic		2019 A-Level n=640	2019 BTEC n=200	2021 A-Level n=459	2021 BTEC n=287
<i>Domiciled status</i>					
	UK	98.6%	100.0%	97.6%	99.0%
	EU	0.9%	0.0%	0.7%	0.3%
	OS	0.5%	0.0%	1.7%	0.7%
<i>Gender identity</i>					
	Female	59.7%	49.5%	58.4%	55.4%
	Male	39.1%	50.0%	39.9%	42.9%
	Non-binary	0.5%	0.5%	0.4%	0.3%
	Transgender	0.6%	0.0%	0.7%	0.7%
	Prefer not to say	0.2%	0.0%	0.7%	0.7%
<i>Ethnicity</i>					
	Asian	5.6%	3.5%	12.9%	14.3%
	Black	4.3%	6.5%	6.5%	11.8%
	Mixed	4.7%	6.5%	5.9%	7.6%
	White	86.9%	82.5%	72.8%	64.4%
	Other	0.8%	1.0%	1.9%	2.8%
<i>Generational status</i>					
	First (1 st)	54.8%	66.0%	53.8%	62.0%
	Second (2 nd)	42.4%	31.0%	42.1%	31.0%
	Unsure	2.8%	3.0%	4.1%	7.0%
<i>Age group</i>					
	Under 18	0.3%	0.0%	0.4%	1.4%
	18	63.1%	39.5%	63.8%	45.3%
	19	24.7%	34.5%	17.4%	20.6%
	20	6.4%	8.0%	8.3%	9.8%
	21	2.5%	5.5%	2.6%	4.5%
	22-25	1.9%	6.0%	3.1%	8.7%
	26-30	0.6%	3.5%	1.7%	4.9%
	31-40	0.3%	1.0%	1.3%	2.1%
	41-50	0.0%	0.5%	0.9%	1.7%
	51-60	0.2%	1.5%	0.4%	1.0%

Characteristic	2019 A-Level n=640	2019 BTEC n=200	2021 A-Level n=459	2021 BTEC n=287
<i>Accommodation</i>				
Staying at home and attending University	13.0%	19.0%	34.4%	47.4%
Staying local but moving into university accommodation	9.5%	8.0%	6.8%	3.1%
Staying local and moving into private rented accommodation	1.9%	1.0%	2.4%	5.9%
Moving into the area and into university accommodation	70.3%	63.5%	42.3%	33.4%
Moving to the area and into private rented accommodation	5.2%	7.5%	12.9%	9.1%
Other	0.2%	1.0%	1.3%	1.0%
<i>Living status</i>				
Living by myself	2.8%	6.0%	4.1%	9.4%
Living with other students	81.6%	74.5%	59.0%	40.8%
Living with friends	1.9%	1.5%	1.7%	4.5%
Living with my parents/guardians	12.0%	13.0%	29.4%	36.2%
Living with my partner/spouse	1.6%	2.5%	3.1%	4.9%
Living with a partner/spouse and children	0.2%	2.5%	2.6%	4.2%
<i>Distance travelled from living to university</i>				
Under 5 miles	57.5%	61.50%	63.6%	49.8%
5-10 miles	15.5%	17.5%	17.9%	22.3%
11-15 miles	4.1%	2.5%	6.8%	10.1%
16-20 miles	1.1%	2.0%	2.2%	4.2%
21-25 miles	1.1%	0.5%	2.4%	5.9%
26-50 miles	5.2%	4.5%	3.7%	4.9%
Over 50 miles	15.6%	11.5%	3.5%	2.8%
<i>Entry through clearing</i>				
Yes, I did not get my first choice	18.3%	12.5%	13.1%	2.1%
Yes, as I hadn't applied before	Not asked	Not asked	5.7%	12.9%
No	81.7%	87.5%	81.3%	85.0%
<i>English as a first language</i>				
Yes	94.4%	94.2%	93.0%	98.6%
No	5.6%	5.8%	7.0%	1.4%
<i>Languages cited as a first language</i>	23	6	19	18
<i>English fluency</i>				
Yes	99.5%	100.0%	99.6%	98.6%
No	0.5%	0.0%	0.4%	1.4%
<i>Year of highest entry qualification</i>				
2020/21	-	-	70.8%	63.8%
2019/20	-	-	17.6%	13.9%
2018/19	72.8%	70.0%	4.4%	6.6%
2017/18	19.8%	18.0%	2.0%	3.5%
2016/17	4.1%	6.5%	0.4%	1.0%
2015/16	1.4%	1.5%	1.1%	3.8%
2014/15	0.5%	0.0%	0.4%	0.7%
2013/14	0.6%	1.5%	0.4%	0.7%
2012/13	0.3%	0.0%	0.4%	1.4%
2011/12	0.3%	1.0%	0.7%	0.7%
2000/10	0.4%	0.0%	0.9%	3.0%
1990/99	0.4%	0.5%	0.8%	0.6%

Part 3 **Headline findings**

The headline findings are provided below for respondents holding A-Level ‘only’ and BTEC ‘only’ qualifications on entry. Hereafter they are referred to A-Level and BTEC.

Section 1 Entry qualifications, funding and choice of university

Generational status (p35)

For both A-Level and BTEC respondents, 1st generation status (no parent had gone to university) was the dominant status across all participating institutions, but it was higher for those who held BTEC qualifications.

Year of attainment of highest entry qualification (p36)

Across both surveys, the majority of respondents stated they had obtained their highest qualification in the previous two years. There was little difference in year of attainment between the qualifications and institutions.

Pre-entry status in year immediately prior to study (p36)

For the majority of both A-Level and BTEC respondents, *study or training* prior to starting their undergraduate study had been their main activity.

Reasons for undertaking university study (p37)

The top three reasons cited across both surveys and qualifications were *I was interested in the subject* followed by *I wanted to continue studying* then to *improve my employment prospects*. There were differences in responses by gender.

Fees and funding (p37)

The *Student Loan Scheme* was the primary method of funding for both A-Level and BTEC respondents followed by *financial support of parents/guardians* then *savings*. However, across both surveys, A-Level respondents were substantially more likely to obtain funding from parents/guardians compared to their BTEC counterparts. There were notable differences in responses by gender and qualification.

Route into university (p37)

Across both surveys, as expected ‘Home status’ was dominant for these qualifications. A higher percentage of A-Level respondents reported that they had obtained their place through clearing compared to BTEC. In 2021, after expanding the question to understand why this was the case, over twice as many BTEC respondents compared to A-level had *applied through clearing as they had not applied for any course previously*. They had not lost their place through confirmation.

Intention to undertake paid work during study (p40)

There were similar intentions across both surveys and qualifications to undertake paid work during their studies but there were also high levels of uncertainty.

Impact of the pandemic on the decision making process in 2021 (p40)

A similar number of A-Level and BTEC respondents stated that the pandemic had made no difference to their university decision making process. When examined by gender, BTEC male respondents were notably more likely to state it had *made no difference to their plans*. There were no major generational differences by qualification.

Type of accommodation whilst studying in the first year (p41)

A much higher number of BTEC respondents intended staying at home and undertaking university study compared to their A-Level counterparts. There was little difference between female and male A-Level respondents, but there was between BTEC females and males, with females notably more likely to stay at home.

Distance travelled to university (p42)

The majority of respondents across both surveys and qualification groups expected to travel 0-15 miles (24km) to their university to study in-person. A substantial number of respondents expected to travel in excess of 16 miles plus (25km). There was a correlation between age and distance, and as the distance travelled increased so did the age of the respondents.

Section 2 Prior learning experiences- accessing material and submission of work

Accessing learning materials at school/college up to 2018/19 & 2019/20 prior to March 2020 lockdown (p43)

For the majority of A-Level and BTEC respondents, *handwritten notes* and a *course text book* were the most common methods of accessing learning materials up to 2018/19 and for those in study in 2019/20 prior to the March 2020 lockdown. For BTEC respondents, reliance on these two sources was notably lower than those undertaking A-Levels. BTEC respondents reported using a much wider source of materials.

Accessing learning materials at school/college in 2020/21 Pre- lockdown- 2021 PAQ only (p44)

Up to December 2020 (before the January lockdown), for A-Level respondents the top three sources were *handwritten notes from classes*, a *course text book* then *handouts of book chapters and information*. For BTEC respondents, *handwritten notes* was first but much lower in usage than their A-Level counterparts followed by *accessing information on the school/college VLE* then *accessing information from electronic sources outside a VLE*. For both groups *accessing books via a school /college library* was low.

Accessing learning materials at school/college in 2020/21 During and post lockdown- 2021 PAQ only (p45)

During the lockdown period of January to March, *accessing information on the school/college VLE* was the most cited by both A-Level and BTEC respondents. On return to school/college in April, A-Level and BTEC respondents pattern of accessing information generally reverted to that up to December 2020. The notable difference for both qualification groups was the increase in use of *accessing information from electronic sources outside a VLE* after the return to study in April 2021.

Submission of coursework at school/college up to and including 2019/20 (p45)

For A-Level respondents in study up to and including 2019, submission of *course work hard copy* (with and without a cover sheet) was the primary method. For BTEC respondents, the most cited method was *via a school/college VLE*. *Via Email* was the cited in second place by A-Level respondents and third by BTEC.

Submission of coursework at school/college in 2020/21 - PAQ 2021 only (p46)

Up to December 2020, A-Level respondents most common submission methods were *hard copy (with or without a cover sheet)* followed by *via email*. For BTEC it was *via school/college VLE* then *via email*. For both during the lockdown, *via email* and the *school/college VLE* were the top two.

After the return to study in April 2021, the methods reverted back to a similar submission pattern prior to the January to March lockdown with the exception of an increase in the use of submission *via the school/college VLE*.

Section 3 Feedback

Understanding what is meant by feedback (p47)

When respondents across both surveys were asked what the term ‘feedback’ meant to them in relation to their prior studies, the qualitative comments provided demonstrated that there was a general understanding by both A-Level and BTEC respondents.

Feedback method at school/college up to 2018/19- PAQ 2019 only (p47)

For A-Level respondents *written feedback (hardcopy)* followed by *face to face with the teacher/tutor in-person (Individually)* were the top two cited whereas for BTEC, it was the reverse. For BTEC respondents, feedback was delivered in a more diverse way with greater use of email and the school/college virtual learning environment.

Feedback method at school/college up to 2019/20- PAQ 2021 only (p48)

The top three responses for both A-Level and BTEC respondents for how feedback was commonly given were *written feedback (hard copy)*, *face to face in-person (individually)* and *written feedback via email* reflecting the findings from the PAQ in 2019.

Feedback method at school/college in 2020/21- 2021 PAQ only (p48)

Up to December 2020, A-Level respondents mainly received feedback via *written hard copy* then *face to face in-person (individually)* followed by *written feedback via email*. For BTEC, it was *face to face in-person (individually)* then *via the school/college VLE* followed by *written feedback (hard copy)*. During the January to March lockdown, for both groups it was *via email* and the *school/college VLE*. When teaching resumed in-person in April, a similar delivery of feedback pattern to that up to December 2020 for those groups resumed.

Feedback method preference at school/college up to 2018/19 (p49)

For both A-Level and BTEC respondents, *face to face in-person feedback* was their main preference although notably higher for BTEC. *Written feedback (hard copy)* was second for both groups but lower for BTEC respondents.

Feedback method preference at school/college up to 2020/21 prior to March 2019 lockdown (p50)

For both A-Level and BTEC respondents in study up to 2019/20 and in study in 2020/21, the preferred method for receiving feedback was *face to face (individually) with the tutor* reflecting previous findings.

Using feedback to help in future assignments at school/college (p50)

Almost all of the respondents stated they had used the feedback to help with future assignments. Of the respondents who stated that they had not read the feedback, explanations included *too generic*, *not personal* and it was *too late to help another assignment*.

Reading feedback and approaching a teacher/tutor to discuss a mark at school/college (p51)

For both groups, the objective for approaching a teacher/tutor was to get *more feedback on how to improve the mark*. There were no notable differences by gender and generational status between the two highest entry qualification groups.

Reasons for not approaching a teacher/tutor (p52)

For A-Level respondents across both surveys, the main reason for not approaching a teacher/tutor was *I understood the written feedback* followed by *I got the grade I expected/I was happy with my grade*. For BTEC respondents, it was the reverse. A higher number of A-Level respondents stated that they *did not feel comfortable about asking for feedback* and they *had never thought about asking for feedback* compared to their BTEC counterparts. *Discussing academic issues with fellow students* was not a preferred option for either qualification group.

Revision undertaken in prior study (p53)

Across both surveys and qualifications, the most cited revision method was a *mix of revision methods*. However, for a third of A-Level and BTEC respondents, *mainly independent study at home* was the primary activity.

Section 4 Study issues due to Covid19- PAQ 2021 only

Study issues experienced in 2019/20 due to Covid 19 (p54)

For A-Level and BTEC respondents in study in 2019/20, the top three concerns were the same but in a slightly different order. They were *loss of a structured learning environment*, *worry about lost learning and knowledge gaps*, and *loss of social engagement with friends at school/college*.

Study issues experienced in 2020/21 due to Covid 19 (p54)

In 2020/21, the top four concerns for both groups were the same but again in a slightly different order. They were all related to the impact of Covid19- *worry about lost learning and knowledge gaps*, *loss of a structured learning environment*, and *loss of social engagement with friends at school/college and online fatigue*.

IT issues experienced in 2020/21 due to Covid 19 (p55)

The top two issues for both groups were *poor internet connection* followed by *no appropriate quiet study space*.

Section 5 Concerns and confidence levels in starting university

Concerns about starting the course at university (p56)

In 2019, the order of concerns for A-Level and BTEC respondents was almost identical with a similar level of response. In the 2021 survey, the top four study concerns were similar although in a slightly different order. They were *coping with level of study*, *mental health and wellbeing* (added in 2021), *lack of information about how to study at university* and *fitting in with class mates*. There were gender differences across both surveys with A-Level and BTEC females citing higher levels of concern than males in every listed 'study related' concern. A-Level females cited greater concern than their BTEC counterparts.

Anxiety levels relating to their concerns- PAQ 2021 only (p64)

There were similar levels of being *very anxious* by highest entry qualification regarding *mental health and wellbeing*, *lack of confidence about ability* and *concerns about knowledge gaps*. The majority of A-Level and BTEC respondents stated they were *anxious* in relation to their concerns. When examined by gender and highest entry qualification, females were more likely to say they were *very anxious* compared to their male counterparts, especially BTEC females, who were the most *very anxious* across five of the areas.

Confidence levels on starting university- PAQ 2021 only (p66)

The majority of A-Level and BTEC respondents expressed similar levels of *confidence* across all areas. Of those who expressed feeling *very confident*, BTEC respondents accounted for the majority in seven of the eight areas, but this was mainly due to males responses. A-Level and BTEC females were noticeably more likely to state they were *not confident* across most of the areas than their male counterparts.

Section 6 University study expectations

Expected contact and independent study hours (p68)

Across both qualifications and surveys, there was a notable level of uncertainty about the expected 'contact hours' per week for their course. For both qualification groups across both surveys, approximately one third expected the contact hours to range between 5-10 hours. This was closely followed by 11-20 hours for both. For independent study hours, 11-20 hours a week was the most cited for A-Level and BTEC respondents across both surveys.

Study style preference at university (p68)

The majority of A-Level and BTEC respondents across both surveys stated they would like to study both *individually and in a group*. However, around a fifth from both groups stated that they would prefer to *study independently*.

Study assessment preference (p68)

The study preference of both A-Level respondents across both surveys was a *mix of exams and individual/group assessments* and *individual assessments* whereas for BTEC it was *undertaking individual assessments*.

Most useful feedback -PAQ 2021 only (p69)

A-Level and BTEC respondents cited the most important type of feedback was *academic feedback telling me what I did not do well and how to improve* followed by *receiving academic feedback that is encouraging and raises my confidence* then *academic feedback telling me what I did correctly*.

Perceived study strengths and weaknesses- PAQ 2021 only (p70)

For A-Level and BTEC respondents, the majority of responses fall into the 'strong' or 'adequate' categories. A-Level respondents who stated they had 'strong' skills were higher than their BTEC counterparts in four of the six study areas. BTEC respondents were notably more likely to perceive their study skills as being 'adequate' across five for the six areas and more 'weak' in literacy and numerical skills than A-Level. There were notable gender differences between females and males across both qualifications and within each gender.

Expected use of university services (p71)

A-Level respondents across both surveys were notably more likely to state that they expected to use *health and wellbeing, academic support* and *careers and employment services* than BTEC. In the 2021 survey, BTEC were more likely to use *IT/Tech support* than their A-Level counterparts. A notably higher number of female respondents across both qualifications expected to use *health and wellbeing, academic support* and *financial* compared to their male counterparts. A-Level and BTEC females were nearly twice as likely to use *health and wellbeing* compared to A-Level and BTEC males whereas males were more than twice as likely to use *sport facilities* than females. There were generational differences by qualification group.

Course appeal (p72)

For both groups across both surveys, the top five most cited course appeal responses are similar but in a different order. In 2021, BTEC respondents cited *employment prospects* whereas for A-Level it was the *course modules*. BTEC respondents were more likely to cite *course links with industry* than their A-Level counterparts. For both groups, the *university's league table position*, *unconditional offer based on predicted grades* and *contact hours* were three of the least cited reasons.

Expected use of technology -PAQ 2021 only (p73)

There was similarity between the two highest entry qualification groups with their *current laptop /desktop computer* being their main source of technology.

Perception of how employers view an undergraduate qualification (p73)

The majority of respondents felt that employers' valued an undergraduate qualification more than pre-university qualifications, but there was a notable amount of uncertainty especially amongst BTEC respondents across both surveys.

Part 4 Detailed findings

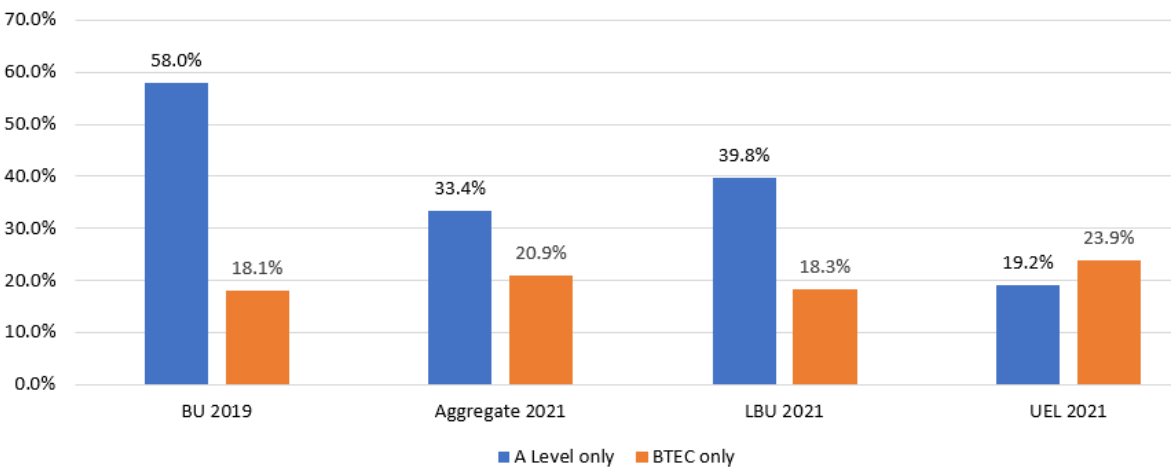
Notable findings in the tables in all the sections are in bold in black and red.

Section 1 Entry qualifications, funding and choice of university

Highest entry qualification

Across both surveys, A-Levels were the most frequently cited as the highest qualification on entry followed by BTEC (see Figure 3). However, when examined by institution, A-Levels only at BU and LBU were cited as the main qualification with 58.0% and 39.8% respectively whereas at UEL it was BTEC only with 23.9%. For note: at LBU, respondents who stated that their highest qualification was an Access, Foundation Year or Level 3 Diploma accounted for 8.6% whereas at UEL they accounted for 19.6%. Respondents who held both A-Levels and BTEC accounted for 9.8% at LBU and 5.8% at UEL. This highlights the differences in diversity of highest entry qualification at different universities.

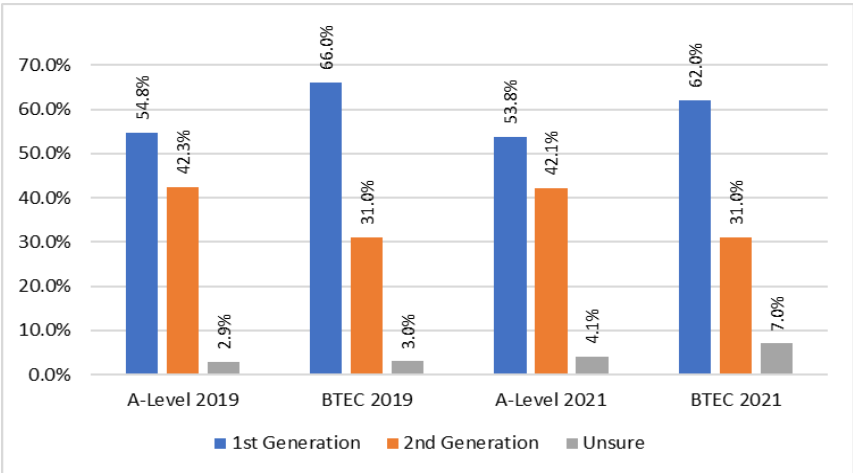
Figure 3 Highest qualification held prior to entry by institution



Generational status

When analysed by generational status, 1st generation status (no parent had gone to university) was the dominant status for respondents for both entry qualifications across all institutions, but it was higher for BTEC (see Figure 4). Across all institutions, A-Level respondents were notably more likely to have had both parents go to university (2nd generation) compared to BTEC. Unsure responses could have been due to care leavers or estranged respondents not knowing. This information was not collected.

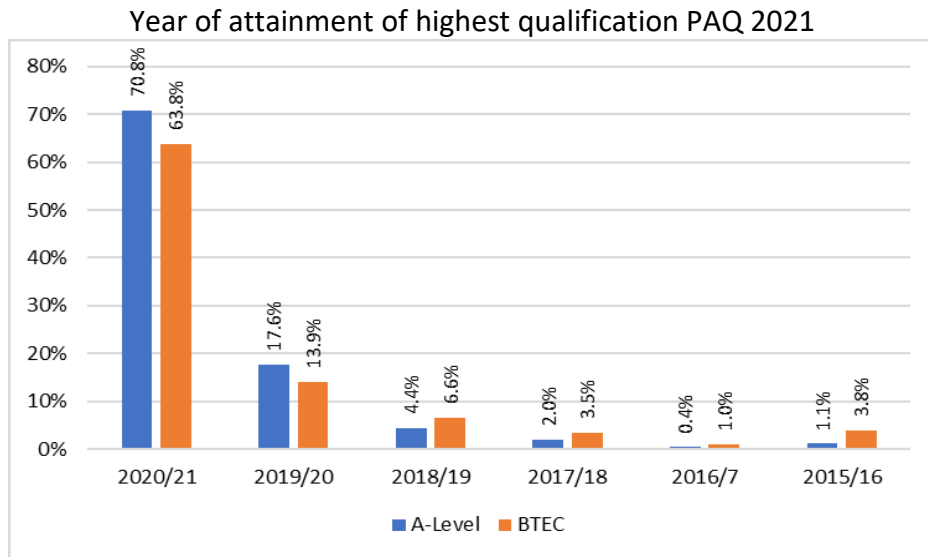
Figure 4 Generational status by highest entry qualification



Year of attainment of highest entry qualification

Across all institutions, the majority of respondents stated they had obtained their highest qualification in the previous two years. Figure 5 highlights the highest year of attainment for respondents in the 2021 PAQ. There was little difference in year of attainment between the qualifications and institutions (for more information see ‘Basic Respondent Characteristics’ on page 25).

Figure 5

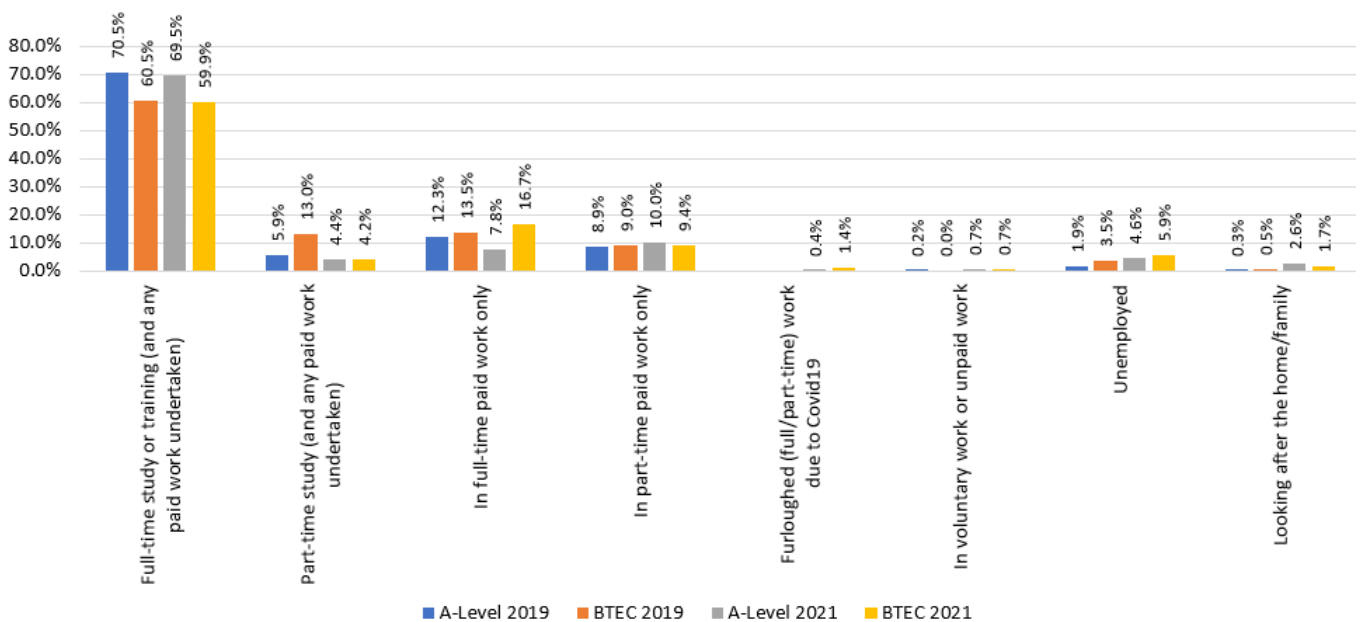


Pre-entry status in year immediately prior to study

Respondents were asked to describe what the main activity was that they had been undertaking in the 12 months immediately before starting their undergraduate course. For the majority of both A-Level and BTEC respondents, it was in *study or training* prior to starting their undergraduate study (see Figure 6). In the September 2021 questionnaire, the option of being in furloughed work was added as a result of Covid19 but it was not a commonly selected pre-entry status.

Figure 6

Pre-entry status immediately prior to study



Reasons for undertaking university study

When the respondents were asked to select all their reasons for undertaking undergraduate study, the top five responses provided are similar (see Table 9). The primary reason cited was *interested in the subject*. The second most cited reason was *I wanted to continue studying*. In the 2021 PAQ, both A-Level and BTEC respondents cited *to improve my employment prospects* lower than those in 2019. It is unknown if this response was impacted on due to the employment circumstances surrounding Covid19.

A notable difference between A-Level and BTEC respondents in 2021 was 21.6% of BTEC respondents stated that the *pandemic had made me think about my future* compared to 15.7% of A-Level. This may explain the finding in relation to Figure 7 below where a higher percentage of BTEC respondents applied through clearing as they had not applied before.

Table 9 Reasons for undertaking university study

Reason	A-Level 2019	BTEC 2019	A-Level 2021	BTEC 2021
I was interested in the subject	93.0%	90.0%	89.3%	84.3%
I wanted to continue studying	58.3%	62.5%	54.5%	45.6%
To improve my employment prospects	53.3%	60.0%	35.7%	39.7%
The pandemic made me think about my future	NA	NA	15.7%	21.6%
To prove I was capable of university study	17.0%	16.5%	15.7%	15.6%
To was encouraged by a former teacher/tutor	19.2%	25.0%	16.1	13.6%

NA= Not asked

When examined by gender and entry qualification, both A-Level and BTEC female respondents in 2021 cited higher than males being *interested in the subject* (see Table 10). Across both surveys, a higher number of A-Level and BTEC males cited undertaking university study to *improve their employment prospects* than females. In 2021, male and female BTEC respondents were more likely to cite that the *pandemic made me think about my future* compared to their A-Level counterparts.

Table 10 Reasons for undertaking university study by gender

Reason	A-Level Female 2019	A-Level Male 2019	BTEC Female 2019	BTEC Male 2019	A-Level Female 2021	A-Level Male 2021	BTEC Female 2021	BTEC Male 2021
I was interested in the subject	91.6%	91.2%	91.4%	91.9%	91.0%	86.8%	86.8%	80.4%
I wanted to continue studying	63.8%	48.0%	62.1%	60.6%	55.2%	54.1%	49.0%	40.6%
To improve my employment prospects	52.8%	53.2%	56.4%	64.5%	27.3%	48.1%	34.5%	47.1%
The pandemic made me think about my future	NA	NA	NA	NA	16.4%	14.8%	23.2%	18.7%
To prove I was capable of university study	13.0%	22.8%	13.6%	11.1%	15.2%	15.3%	14.4%	17.0%

NA= Not asked

Fees, funding and route into university

In 2021, the EU status fee option was removed due to the UK no longer being in the European Union. Across both surveys 'Home status' was predominant as expected for these qualifications (see Table 11).

Table 11 Fee status

Fee status	A-Level 2019	BTEC 2019	A-Level 2021	BTEC 2021
Home	99.4%	100.0%	96.7%	98.6%
International	0.6%	0.0%	3.3%	1.4%

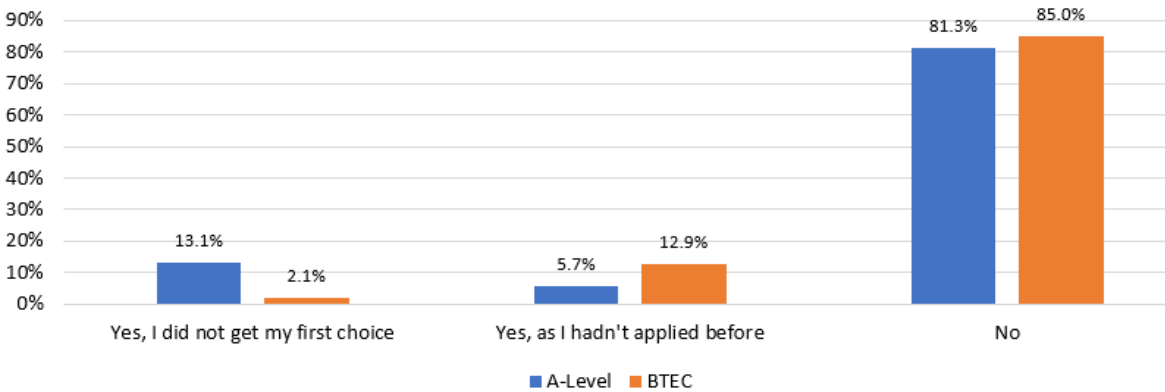
Respondents were asked whether they had obtained their place through the clearing process. A-Level respondents reported a higher percentage of obtaining their place through clearing compared to BTEC (see Table 12).

Table 12 Entry route to study

Entry route	A-Level 2019	BTEC 2019	A-Level 2021	BTEC 2021
Yes	18.3%	12.5%	18.7%	15.0%
No	81.7%	87.5%	81.3%	85.0%

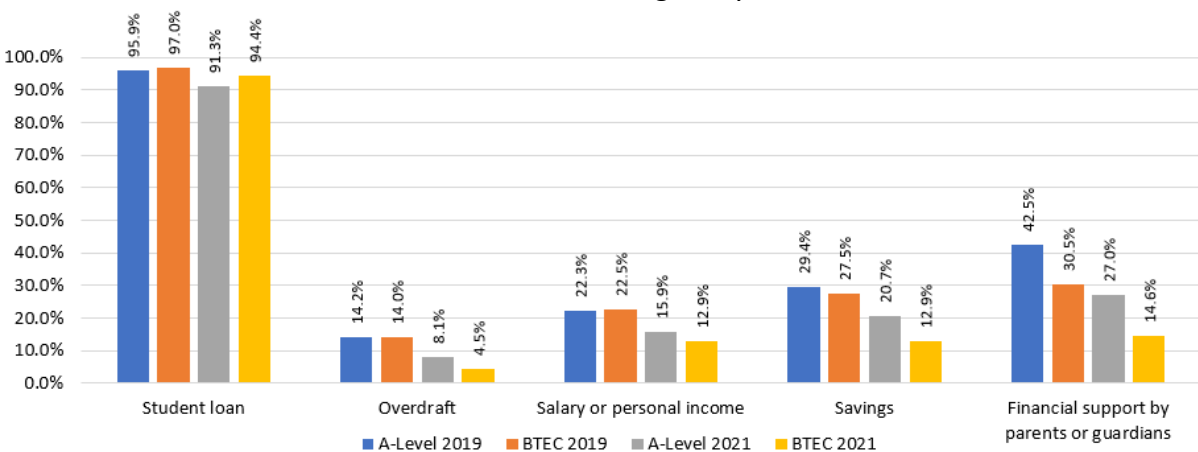
In 2021, this question was developed to explore why this was the case. Of the respondents, 81.3% of A-Level and 85.0% of BTEC had been accepted at the university of their choice and had not obtained a place through clearing (see Figure 7). Over twice as many BTEC respondents compared to A-Level had *applied through clearing as they had not applied for any course previously*. For 13.1% of A-Level respondents, application was made through clearing as they *did not get their first choice of university* whereas this figure was only 2.1% for BTEC respondents.

Figure 7 Obtaining university place through clearing PAQ 2021



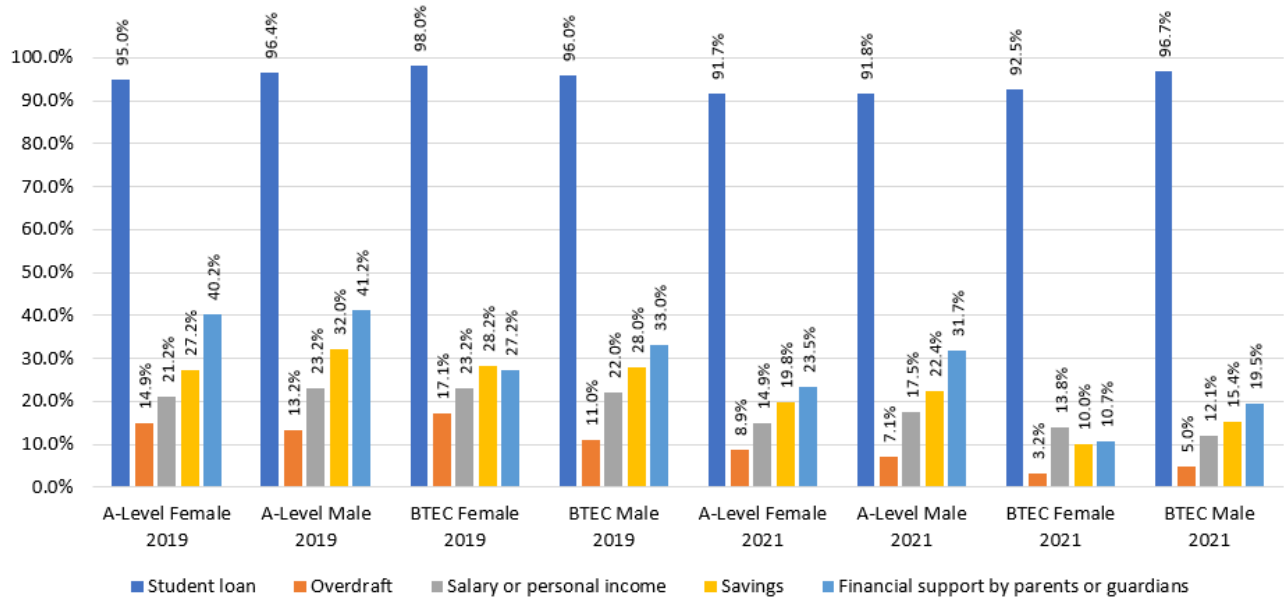
In terms of funding the course, the *Student Loan Scheme* was the primary method of funding for both A-Level and BTEC respondents followed by *financial support of parents/guardians* then *savings* (see Figure 8). However, across both surveys, A-Level respondents were substantially more likely to get funding from *parents/guardians* compared to their BTEC counterparts.

Figure 8 Sources of funding study



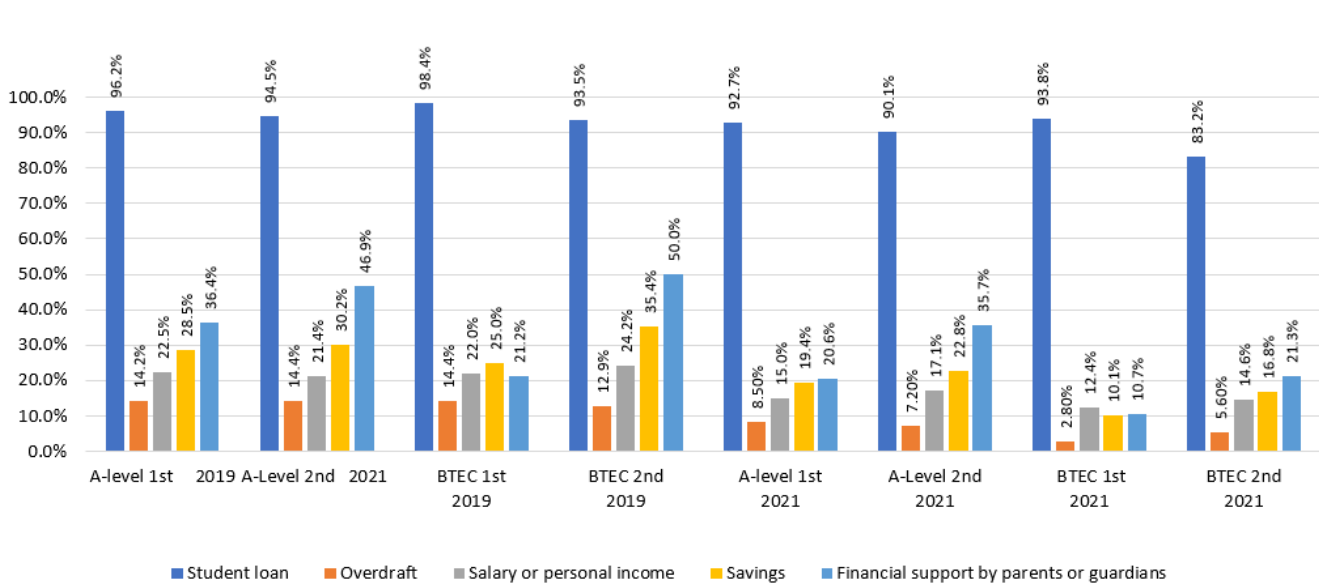
When examined by gender across both surveys, A-Level and BTEC female respondents were less likely to receive support from parents compared to their male counterparts (see Figure 9).

Figure 9 Expected funding of the course by gender



When highest entry qualification was examined by generational status, 2nd generation respondents for both A-Level and BTEC were noticeably more likely to receive parental/guardian funding (see Figure 10). In the 2021 survey, A-Level 2nd generation respondents were more likely to cite this as a source of funding compared to their BTEC 2nd generation counterparts. The type of course does not appear to be a factor in this finding (e.g. nursing related courses that obtain funding). So, being female and 1st generation appears to be a disadvantage in receiving parental/guardian financial support.

Figure 10 Expected funding of the course by generational status



Intention to undertake paid work during study by entry qualification

There was not much difference between respondents when asked if they intended undertaking paid work during their studies (see Figure 11) but there was a high level of uncertainty. This may be due to concerns about managing the workload and the expectation of undertaking a placement (see Figure 12).

Figure 11 Intention to work

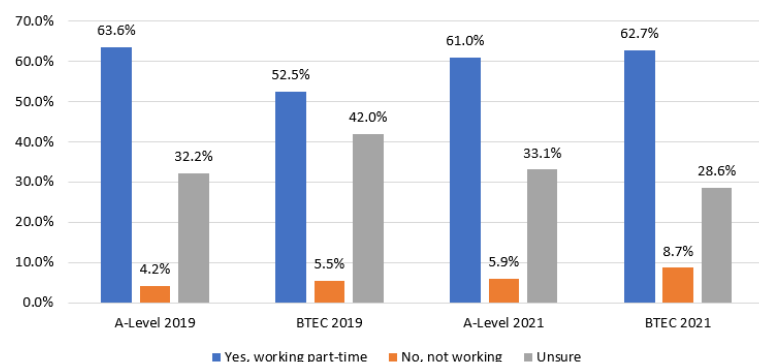
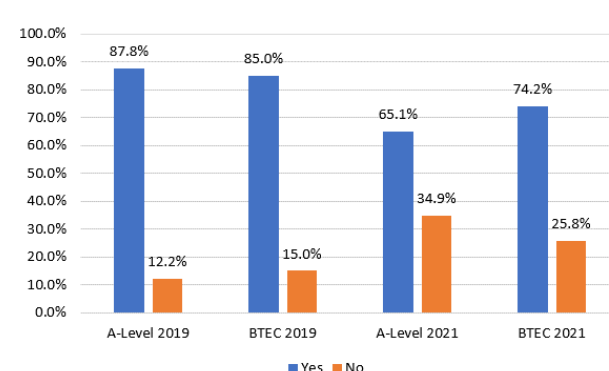
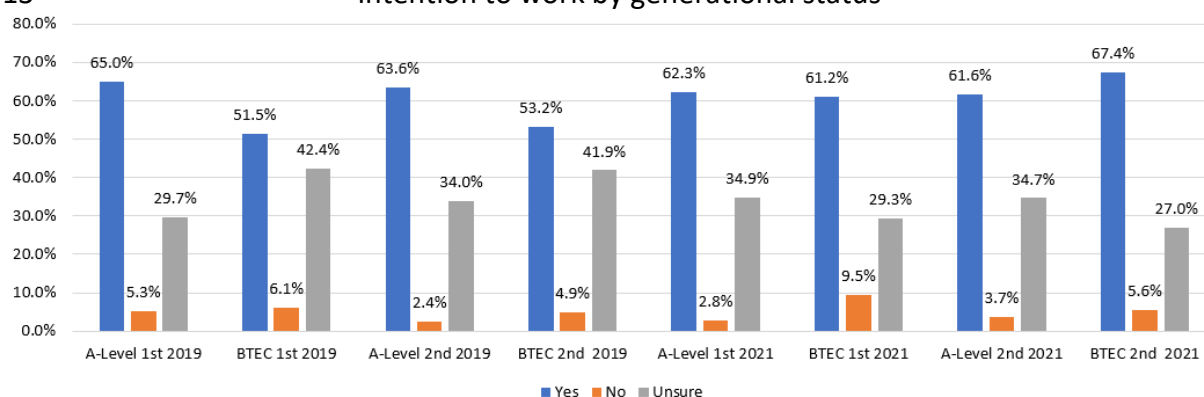


Figure 12 Intention to undertake a placement



Across the surveys, there were similar levels of response between A-Level and BTEC 1st and 2nd generations respondents who intended working (see Figure 13). There was a high degree of uncertainty across both qualification and generational status.

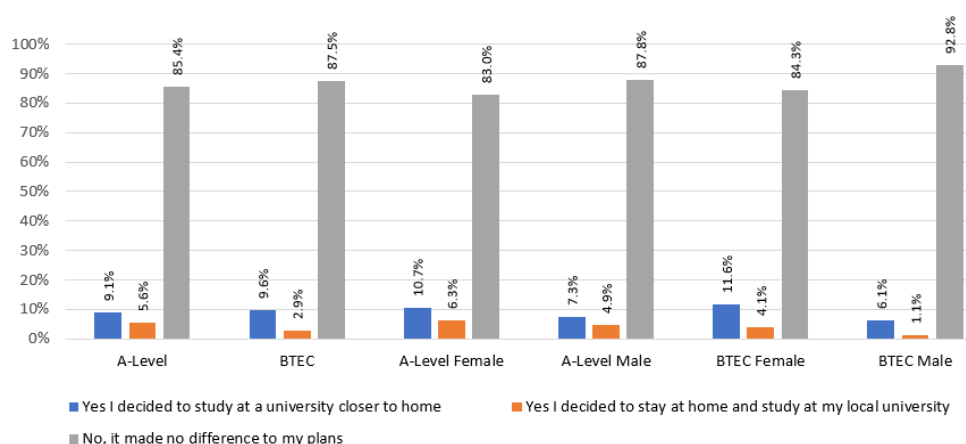
Figure 13 Intention to work by generational status



Impact of the pandemic on the decision making process

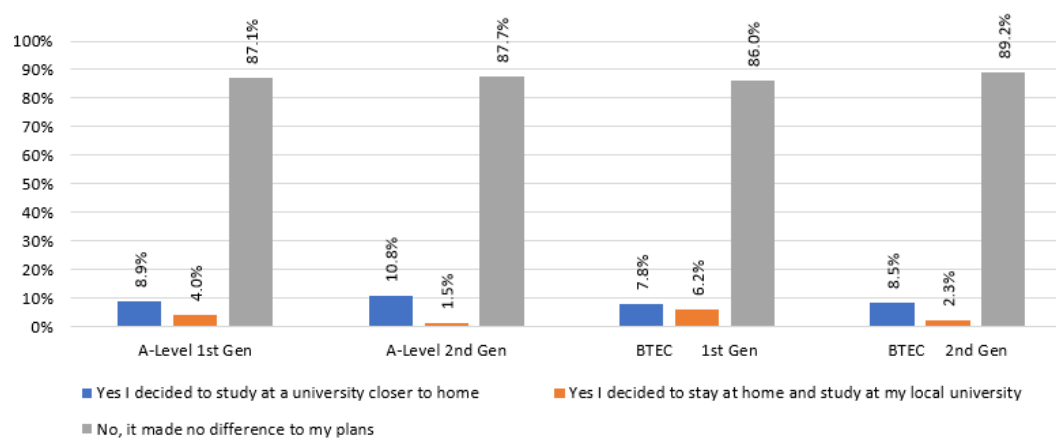
Respondents completing the 2021 survey were asked whether the pandemic had impacted on their decision making process. A similar number of A-Level and BTEC respondents stated that it had not (see Figure 14). When examined by gender, BTEC male respondents were the most likely to state it had *made no difference to their plans* with 92.8%.

Figure 14 Impact of the pandemic on the decision making process 2021



When examined by highest entry qualification and generational status, there were no notable differences regarding the decision where to study as a result of the pandemic (see Figure 15).

Figure 15 Impact of the pandemic on the decision making process by generational status



Type of accommodation whilst studying in the first year

When looking at accommodation choices, a much higher number of BTEC respondents intended staying at home and undertaking university study compared to their A-Level counterparts (see Table 13). In 2021, the survey was undertaken at two institutions that are city based which may explain the difference in responses. Although the pandemic may not have impacted on the decision making process for the majority of respondents, it is unclear what role Covid19 played in the initial decision process.

Table 13 Accommodation whilst studying

Type of accommodation	A-Level 2019	BTEC 2019	A-Level 2021	BTEC 2021
Staying at home and attending university	13.0%	19.0%	34.4%	47.4%
Staying local but moving into university accommodation	9.5%	8.0%	6.8%	3.1%
Staying local but moving into private rented accommodation	1.9%	1.0%	2.4%	5.9%
Moving to the area and moving into university accommodation	70.3%	63.5%	42.3%	33.4%
Moving to the area and moving into private rented accommodation	5.2%	7.5%	12.9%	9.1%
Other	0.2%	1.0%	1.2%	1.3%

When the accommodation intention of *staying at home and attending university* is examined by gender, there was little difference between female and male A-Level respondents across both surveys (see Table 14). However, there was between BTEC females and males. The responses across both surveys were obtained from across the disciplines so this was not a factor in the findings.

Table 14 Accommodation in the first year by gender

Type of accommodation	A-Level Female 2019	A-Level Male 2019	BTEC Female 2019	BTEC Male 2019	A-Level Female 2021	A-Level Male 2021	BTEC Female 2021	BTEC Male 2021
Staying at home and attending University	14.7%	10.0%	28.0%	10.0%	37.3%	31.7%	52.8%	42.2%
Staying local but moving into university accommodation	7.6%	12.8%	5.3%	11.0%	6.0%	8.2%	3.1%	3.3%
Staying local and moving into private rented accommodation	1.3%	2.6%	0.0%	2.0%	2.6%	2.2%	6.3%	4.9%
Moving into the area and into university accommodation	70.1%	69.0%	58.5%	68.0%	41.8%	41.0%	27.0%	39.8%

Moving to the area and into private rented accommodation	4.2%	5.6%	7.1%	8.0%	11.2%	15.3%	10.1%	8.1%
Other	2.1%	0.0%	1.0%	1.0%	1.1%	1.6%	0.6%	1.6%

When examined by generational status, there was a notable difference with 1st generation respondents across both highest entry qualification groups more likely to say they intended *staying at home and studying*. For A-Level respondents this accounted for 40.9% of 1st generation and 24.8% of 2nd generation. For BTEC, both figures were higher with 51.7% of 1st generation and 41.5% for 2nd generation. This pattern was found in the 2019 survey, but the figures were much lower. For A-Level 1st generation it was 15.0% and for 2nd 10.6%. For BTEC, it was 23.4% and 8.0% respectively.

Distance travelled to university

When the distance travelled to university is examined, the majority of respondents in both surveys across both groups expected to travel 0-15 miles (24km) to their university. However, a substantial number of respondents expected to travel in excess of 16 miles (25km). In the 2019 survey, the mileage travelled between the two qualifications was similar. In 2021, a higher number of BTEC respondents intended travelling in excess of 11 miles compared to their A-Level counterparts. This in part could be due to a higher number of BTEC respondents deciding to *stay at home and study* (Table 15).

Table 15 Distance travelled to university

Distance	A-Level 2019	BTEC 2019	A-Level 2021	BTEC 2021
Under 5 miles (under 8km)	56.9%	59.0%	63.6%	49.8%
5-10 miles (8-16km)	15.1%	17.3%	17.9%	22.3%
11-15 miles (17-24 km)	4.4%	2.2%	6.8%	10.1%
16-20 miles (25-32 km)	1.4%	2.2%	2.2%	4.2%
21-25 miles (33-40 km)	1.0%	0.0%	2.4%	5.9%
26-50 miles (41-80 km)	4.8%	6.5%	3.7%	4.9%
Over 50 miles (over 82 km)	16.4%	12.9%	3.5%	2.8%

As one might expect, there was a correlation between age and distance (see Table 16). As the distance travelled increased so did the number of older respondents. Although the vast majority of respondents were travelling less than 10 miles a day, a commuter student cannot just be defined by distance travelled. The time it takes to travel the distance also needs to be considered.

Table 16 Distance travelled by age -PAQ 2021 only

Age	Under 5 miles		5-10 miles		11-15 miles		16-20 miles	
	A-Level	BTEC	A-Level	BTEC	A-Level	BTEC	A-Level	BTEC
18	67.6%	51.5%	16.0%	20.8%	3.8%	6.9%	1.7%	4.6%
19	61.3%	54.2%	20.0%	18.6%	2.5%	13.6%	1.3%	5.1%
20	73.7%	39.3%	13.2%	17.9%	5.3%	17.9%	0.0%	3.6%
21	33.3%	53.8%	16.7%	23.1%	16.7%	15.4%	16.7%	4.0
22-25	35.7%	40.0%	14.3%	32.0%	21.4%	8.0%	14.3%	7.1%
26-30	50.0%	50.0%	37.5%	28.6%	12.5%	14.3%	0.0%	0.0%
31+	33.3%	35.7%	47.2%	45.5%	8.3%	7.1%	0.0%	0.0%

Section 2 Prior learning experiences

Accessing material and submission of work

Accessing learning materials at school/college up to 2018/19 and 2019/20 prior to March 2020 lockdown

Respondents were asked to select all the ways in which they had accessed learning materials in their previous study at school or college. Table 17 shows the findings from both surveys of those that had completed their studies up to 2018/19 and of those who were in study in 2019/20 prior to the March 2020 lockdown.

For the majority of A-Level and BTEC respondents, *handwritten notes* and a *course text book* were the most common methods of accessing learning materials up to 2018/19 and for those in study in 2019/20 prior to the March 2020 lockdown. However, for BTEC respondents, reliance on these two sources was notably lower than those undertaking A-Levels. BTEC respondents reported using a much wider source of materials especially *use of information on a school/college VLE* (Virtual Learning Environment).

This is not a surprising finding as the majority of BTECs are taught in colleges where VLE's are commonly used, albeit maybe less sophisticated than those used in universities. *Accessing books/materials in the school/college library* for both A-Level and BTEC respondents in study in 2019/20 it was lower than in 2018/19.

Table 17 Accessing learning materials- All sources for those in study up to 2018/19 and 2019/20 but prior to the March lockdown 2020

Type of material	A-Level Up to 2018/19 2019	BTEC Up to 2018/19 2019	A-Level Up to 2018/19 2021	BTEC Up to 2018/19 2021	A-Level 2019/20 only Up to March 2020 2021	BTEC 2019/20 Only Up to March 2020 2021
Handwritten notes from classes	89.8%	68.7%	92.4%	64.0%	93.8%	87.5%
A course text book	91.3%	52.9%	92.4%	59.3%	83.9%	65.0%
Accessing information from electronic sources outside a VLE	57.7%	54.4%	41.5%	50.0%	44.4%	47.5%
Information on the school/college VLE	49.2%	64.5%	28.3%	40.6%	33.3%	45.0%
Handout of book chapters and information	63.4%	38.2%	64.1%	40.6%	71.6%	42.5%
Books/materials in the school/college library	35.3%	38.6%	49.0%	48.4%	35.8%	25.0%

When respondents were asked what they considered their main source of information to be, the top two for A-Level respondents for those in study up to 2018/19 and those only in study up to March 2019 were similar with a *course text book* and *handwritten notes from class* (See Table 18). For BTEC respondents across both entry year groups, again there was more diversity across the sources especially using *information on the school/college VLE* and *accessing information from electronic sources outside a VLE*.

Table 18 Access to learning materials -Main source for those in study up to 2018/19 and 2019/20 but prior to the March lockdown 2020

Type of material	A-Level Up to 2018/19 2019	BTEC Up to 2018/19 2019	A-Level Up to 2018/19 2021	BTEC Up to 2018/19 2021	A-Level 2019/20 only Up to March 2020 2021	BTEC 2019/20 Only Up to March 2020 2021
Handwritten notes from classes	26.7%	17.4%	30.2%	15.7%	34.1%	36.6%
A course text book	51.2%	23.9%	50.9%	31.5%	46.3%	14.6%
Accessing information from electronic sources outside a VLE	8.1%	23.9%	1.9%	17.9%	6.1%	26.8%
Information on the school/college VLE	8.0%	20.8%	3.8%	19.2%	8.5%	14.6%
Handout of book chapters and information	5.2%	3.9%	9.4%	8.7%	2.4%	7.3%
Books/materials in the school/college library	0.8%	8.1%	3.8%	7.0%	2.4%	0.0%

Accessing learning materials at school/college in 2020/21 (pre, during, post lockdown)- 2021 PAQ only

Respondents who had been in study in 2020/21 were asked to select all the sources they had used during the academic year (see Table 19). Up to December 2020 (before the January lockdown), for A-Level respondents, the top three sources were *handwritten notes from classes* then a *course text book* followed closely by *handout of book chapters and information*. For BTEC respondents, *handwritten notes* was first but much lower in usage than their A-Level counterparts followed by *accessing information on the school/college VLE* then *accessing information from electronic sources outside a VLE*. For both groups *accessing books/information via a school/college library* was low.

During the lockdown period of January to March, unsurprisingly *accessing information on the school/college VLE* was the most cited by both A-Level and BTEC respondents. For A-Level, the second and third most cited was *accessing information from electronic sources outside a VLE* then a *course text book*. For BTEC respondents, the second and third sources were *accessing information from electronic sources outside a VLE* and then *handwritten notes from classes*. Use of *handwritten notes from classes* and a *course text book* for BTEC respondents was much lower than for A-Level. During the lockdown period, *accessing books/information via a school/college library* was negligible. Understandably, library use during the lockdown period was low due to books being considered a potential Covid19 spread hazard.

When respondents returned to school/college in April, A-Level and BTEC respondents pattern of accessing information generally reverted to that 'Up to December 2020'. However, the notable difference for both was the increased use of *accessing information from electronic sources outside a VLE* after the return to study in April 2021. Although *accessing books/information via a school/college library* increased in use, it did not reach the pre-lockdown level.

Table 19 Access to learning materials -All sources for those in study in 2020/21-2021 PAQ only

Type of material	Up to December 2020		Between January and March 2021		After April and return to school/college 2021	
	A-Level	BTEC	A-Level	BTEC	A-Level	BTEC
Handwritten notes from classes	85.2%	67.2%	65.2%	45.3%	83.3%	60.1%
A course text book	78.1%	45.9%	64.9%	35.3%	74.1%	43.7%
Accessing information from electronic sources outside a VLE	54.4%	53.0%	66.7%	67.2%	62.1%	63.9%
Handout of book chapters and information	60.0%	40.9%	33.8%	18.0%	57.2%	30.1%
Information on the school/college VLE	58.4%	65.0%	79.0%	73.2%	62.4%	70.5%
Books in the school/college library	24.9%	20.2%	7.7%	3.1%	22.7%	14.2%

When respondents were asked what they considered their main source of information during the lockdown period to be, it was *information on the school/college VLE* (see Table 20). Pre and post lockdown, for A-Level respondents it was *a course text book* then *handwritten notes from classes*, but for BTEC, it was *accessing information on the school/college VLE* then *accessing information from electronic sources outside a VLE* followed closely by *handwritten notes from classes*.

Table 20 Access to learning materials -Main source for those in study in 2020/21-PAQ 2021 only

Type of material	Up to December 2020		Between January and March 2021		After April and return to school/college 2021	
	A-Level	BTEC	A-Level	BTEC	A-Level	BTEC
Handwritten notes from classes	33.5%	30.2%	13.4%	13.2%	30.9%	21.3%
A course text book	34.5%	15.9%	25.3%	8.8%	30.9%	10.9%
Accessing information from electronic sources outside a VLE	5.6%	14.8%	10.9%	26.4%	6.9%	21.9%
Handout of book chapters and information	9.3%	7.7%	4.1%	4.4%	9.4%	7.7%
Information on the school/college VLE	16.5%	30.8%	46.3%	46.7%	20.9%	38.3%
Books in the school/college library	0.6%	0.5%	0.0%	0.5%	0.9%	0.0%

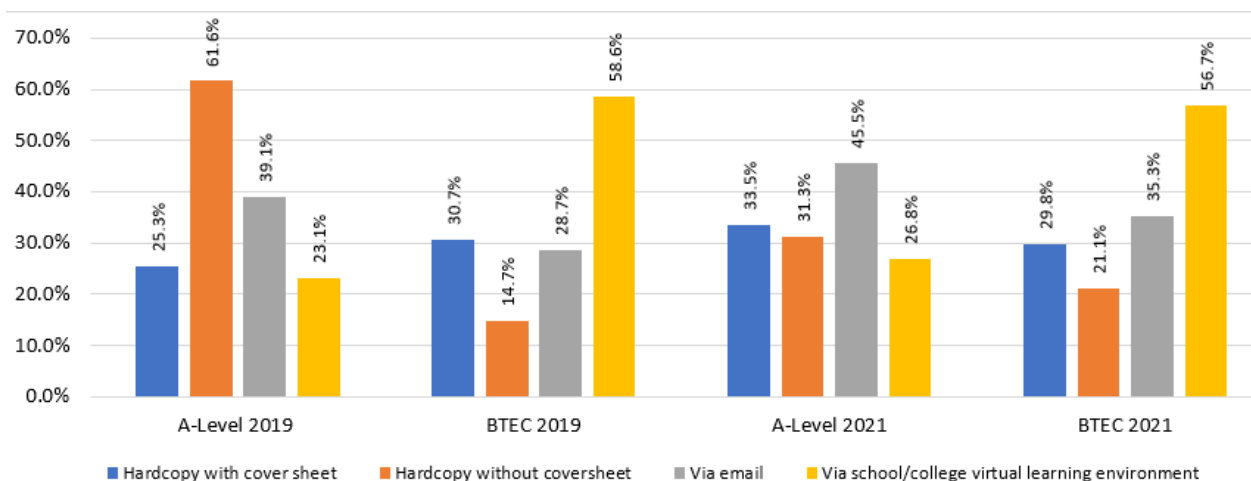
Submission of coursework at school/college up to and including 2019/20

Respondents were asked to select all the methods by which they submitted their coursework, up to and including 2019/20, prior to the March 2020 lockdown.

For 86.9% of A-Level respondents in study up to 2019/20, submission of *course work hard copy* (25.3% with and 61.6% without a cover sheet) was the primary method whereas as for BTEC it was second with 45.4% (30.7% and 14.7% respectively) (see Figure 16). For BTEC respondents, the most cited method was *via a school/college VLE* with 58.6% whereas for A-Level it was 23.1%. *Via email* was cited in second place by A-Level respondents and third by BTEC.

The responses in the 2021 survey are similar (see Figure 16). Again, *hardcopy submission (with or without a cover sheet)* for 64.8% of A-level respondents was first with *email* in second place with 45.5%. For BTEC, it was *via a school/college VLE* with 56.7% then *hardcopy submission (with or without a cover sheet)* with 50.9%. For both A-Level and BTEC respondents, the use of email increased on the 2019 responses. Up until March 2020, submission of coursework was consistent across the different qualifications.

Figure 16 All methods of submission for those in study up to and including 2019/20 prior to the March lockdown



Submission of coursework at school/college in 2020/21 – PAQ 2021 only

When submission of coursework for those in study during 2020/21 is examined by highest entry qualification up to December 2020, A-Level respondents most common submission methods were *hard copy (with or with a cover sheet)* with 62.7% followed by *via email* with 50.1% (see Table 21). For BTEC, it was *via school/college VLE* with 69.9% then *via email* with 34.4%.

For both during the lockdown, *via email* and the *school/college VLE* were the top two.

After the return to study in April 2021, the methods for A-Level respondents and BTEC reverted back to a similar submission pattern prior to the January to March lockdown with the exception of an increased use of submission *via the school/college VLE*.

Table 21 All methods of submission for those in study in 2020/21-PAQ 2021 only

Type of material	Up to December 2020		Between January and March 2021		After April and return to school/college 2021	
	A-Level	BTEC	A-Level	BTEC	A-Level	BTEC
Hard copy with cover sheet	22.4%	20.2%	3.7%	3.2%	20.9%	10.9%
Hard copy without cover sheet	40.3%	9.8%	5.8%	1.6%	26.7%	6.5%
Via email	50.1%	34.4%	63.7%	42.6%	56.0%	38.2%
Via the school/college VLE	41.2%	69.9%	65.2%	74.8%	58.4%	77.0%
Not required to submit work	5.5%	0.0%	3.7%	1.6%	5.2%	1.1%
Other	0.6%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%	0.0%

Section 3 Feedback

Understanding what is meant by feedback

When respondents across both surveys were asked what the term feedback meant to them in relation to their prior studies, the qualitative comments provided demonstrated that there was a general understanding by both A-Level and BTEC respondents that it was to raise their awareness of strengths and areas for improvement, and identify actions to be taken to improve performance.

A-Level

Acknowledging you on what you have done well and giving you constructive criticism on where you can improve and how to get there in order to succeed.

Feedback is advice on what I have missed out on in an answer and how I might restructure an answer for more marks as a way to learn for future questions alongside help on punctuation and grammar.

Correct answers to incorrectly answered questions and general advice to improve grade in future.

Criticism and praise about your work.

BTEC

Letting you know how you have progressed on a particular task or topic. Points you may have misunderstood or left out. Tasks you have successfully achieved. Reflecting on your overall performance. Reassurance that you are successfully on the right track.

A dissection of my written work explaining the right and wrongs, as well as elaboration with what to add and correct.

A teachers reaction and advice towards work I submitted about what was good and what could be improved.

Feedback is a tool used for teachers to help students to further develop their work or in some cases praise them for the work done. Feedback usually tends to be given when there is an opportunity for the work to be even better.

Feedback method at school/college up to 2018/19- PAQ 2019 only

Respondents who were completing the PAQ in 2019 prior to the pandemic were asked to select all the methods for how they had typically received feedback (for either non-assessed or assessed work) in their studies up to 2018/19. The options provided reflected the main methods at the time. For A-Level respondents *written feedback (hardcopy)* followed by *face to face with the teacher/tutor in-person (Individually)* were the top two cited, whereas for BTEC, it was the reverse (see Table 22). However, for BTEC respondents, feedback was delivered in a more diverse way with greater use of *email* and via the *school/college virtual learning environment*.

Table 22 All feedback methods for those in study up to and including 2018/19- PAQ 2019 only

Feedback method	A-Level Up to 2018/19	BTEC Up to 2018/19
Written feedback (hard copy)	91.3%	52.5%
Written feedback via email	33.1%	40.5%
Audio (verbally recorded)	3.4%	5.5%
Face to Face with the teacher/tutor in-person (Individually)	75.9%	83.0%
Face to Face with the teacher/tutor in person (as a group)	39.7%	21.0%
Via the school/college virtual learning environment	1.9%	13.0%

Feedback method at school/college up to 2019/20- PAQ 2021 only

The findings shown below for how respondents typically received feedback are only for those in study 'up to and including 2019/20' (prior to the March lockdown) from the 2021 PAQ. They reflect the findings from the 2019 PAQ. Additional methods were added to reflect the changes adopted during the pandemic.

The top three responses for both A-Level and BTEC respondents for how feedback was commonly given were *written feedback (hard copy)*, *face to face in-person (individually)* and *written feedback via email* (see Table 23).

The notable differences between the entry qualifications were:

- 34.3% A-Level respondents were more likely to get *face to face in-person feedback as a group* compared to 19.2% of BTEC.
- 36.5% of BTEC respondents were more likely to receive their feedback *via the school/college VLE* compared to 14.9% of A-Level counterparts.
- 79.8% of A-Level respondents were more likely to receive *written feedback (hardcopy)* compared to 46.1% of BTEC.

It is important to note that for those in study up to and including 2019/20 prior to the March lockdown, use of webinars were not commonly used. They became more prevalent the following year as the pandemic continued. Furthermore, for A-Level students, learning stopped at the end of March when schools closed and it was decided to assess by coursework. The decision for BTECs was made much later.

Table 23 All feedback methods for those in study up to and including 2019/20-PAQ 2021 only

Feedback method	A-Level Up to 2019/20	BTEC Up to 2019/20
Written feedback (hard copy)	79.8%	46.1%
Written feedback via email	39.5%	31.7%
Audio (verbally recorded)	2.2%	2.8%
Face to Face with the teacher/tutor in-person (Individually)	61.9%	49.0%
Face to Face with the teacher/tutor in person (as a group)	34.3%	19.2%
Via the school/college virtual learning environment	14.9%	36.5%
Face to Face with the teacher/tutor via webinar (Individually)	5.2%	1.9%
Face to Face with the teacher/tutor via webinar (as a group)	1.5%	0.9%
I received no feedback as I submitted no work	0.0%	1.9%

Feedback method at school/college in 2020/21- 2021 PAQ only

When examined by entry qualification of those in study in 2020/21 (see Table 24), up to December 2020, A-Level respondents mainly received feedback via *written (hard copy)* then *face to face in-person (individually)* followed by *written feedback via email*. These findings reflect those from 2019. For BTEC, it was *face to face in-person (individually)* then *via the school/college VLE* then *written feedback (hardcopy)* which was much lower for BTEC respondents than for their A-Level counterparts.

During the January to March lockdown, for both groups, feedback was *via email* and *via the school/college VLE*. However, when teaching resumed in-person in April, a similar delivery of feedback pattern to that ‘up to December 2020’ for those groups resumed. For A-Level respondents, *feedback via email* which increased during lockdown, was retained.

Table 24 All feedback methods for those in study in 2020/21 -PAQ 2021 only

Type of material	Up to December 2020		Between January and March 2021		After April and the return to school/college 2021	
	A-Level	BTEC	A-Level	BTEC	A-Level	BTEC
Written feedback (hard copy)	62.4%	28.9%	8.3%	5.6%	48.0%	14.2%
Written feedback via email	49.8%	21.8%	73.5%	44.9%	62.4%	44.2%
Audio (verbally recorded)	12.6%	8.7%	24.0%	11.4%	12.6%	8.2%
Face to Face with the teacher/tutor in-person (Individually)	55.3%	50.8%	6.7%	15.1%	46.4%	46.9%
Face to Face with the teacher/tutor in person (as a group)	38.4%	22.4%	4.9%	4.9%	32.0%	20.2%
Via the school/college virtual learning environment	29.2%	50.3%	48.9%	54.6%	38.4%	53.0%
Face to Face with the teacher/tutor via webinar (Indiv)	8.3%	12.0%	24.0%	24.0%	11.4%	12.0%
Face to Face with the teacher/tutor via webinar (by group)	4.0%	6.0%	21.5%	12.5%	8.0%	6.0%
I received no feedback as I submitted no work	1.8%	0.5%	2.4%	2.2%	2.4%	1.1%

Feedback method preference at school/college up to 2018/19

For both A-Level and BTEC respondents in study up to 2018/19, *face to face in-person* was the main preference although notably higher for BTEC (see Table 25). *Written feedback (hard copy)* was second for both although lower for BTEC respondents.

Table 25 Feedback method preference for those in study up to and including 2018/19-PAQ 2019 only

Feedback method	A-Level Up to 2018/19	BTEC Up to 2018/19
Written feedback (hard copy)	29.7%	17.5%
Written feedback via email	10.3%	12.5%
Audio (verbally recorded)	0.5%	0.5%
Face to Face with the teacher/tutor in-person (Individually)	56.3%	63.5%
Face to Face with the teacher/tutor in person (as a group)	3.0%	1.0%
Via the school/college virtual learning environment	0.3%	5.0%

Feedback method preference at school/college up to 2020/21 prior to March 2020 lockdown

For both A-Level and BTEC respondents in study up to 2019/20 and in study in 2020/21, their preferred method for receiving feedback, which reflected previous findings, was *face to face (individually) with the tutor* (see Table 26). Again, for A-Level respondents *written feedback (hard copy)* was next followed by *via email*. However, for BTEC, the findings slightly varied from those previously with *via email* next then *via the school/college VLE*.

Table 26 Feedback method preference -PAQ 2021 only

Feedback method	A-Level Up to 2019/20	BTEC Up to 2019/20	A-Level 2020/21 only	BTEC 2020/21 only
Written feedback (hard copy)	19.0%	10.7%	20.2%	12.6%
Written feedback via email	18.2%	22.3%	18.3%	20.6%
Audio (verbally recorded)	1.5%	0.0%	2.2%	1.1%
Face to Face with the teacher/tutor in-person (Individually)	54.7%	50.0%	47.2%	47.4%
Face to Face with the teacher/tutor in person (as a group)	2.2%	1.8%	3.4%	1.1%
Via the school/college virtual learning environment	3.6%	14.3%	5.3%	13.1%
Face to Face with the teacher/tutor via webinar (Individually)	0.7%	0.9%	1.2%	4.0%
Face to Face with the teacher/tutor via webinar (as a group)	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%	0.0%

Using feedback to help in future assignments at school/college

When respondents were asked if they had read their feedback, 99% of respondents stated they had and they had used it to help with future assignments. Of the respondents who stated that they had not read the feedback, explanations included too generic, not personal and it was too late to help another assignment.

A-level

I don't always like seeing my feedback as I see it as not having done enough therefore I lack in confidence.

It was too hard to access.

Sometimes I do take my time to read them but mostly only when I know I have presented a high-quality piece of work. I know that I'm not the only one that does this .

By the end of the learning through lockdown I was fed up and didn't want to work.

Volume of work, amount of feedback given and sometimes unclear written feedback.

Often long and wordy and seemed like it was a copy and paste not personal.

Sometimes it was unnecessary after the work had been given in.

Volume of work, amount of feedback given and sometimes unclear written feedback.

BTEC

Most of the time my feedback was given by in person one to one talks with my teachers and tutors, also virtual video calls plus general feedback to the whole class in person/virtually.

Reading feedback and approaching a teacher/tutor to discuss a mark at school/college

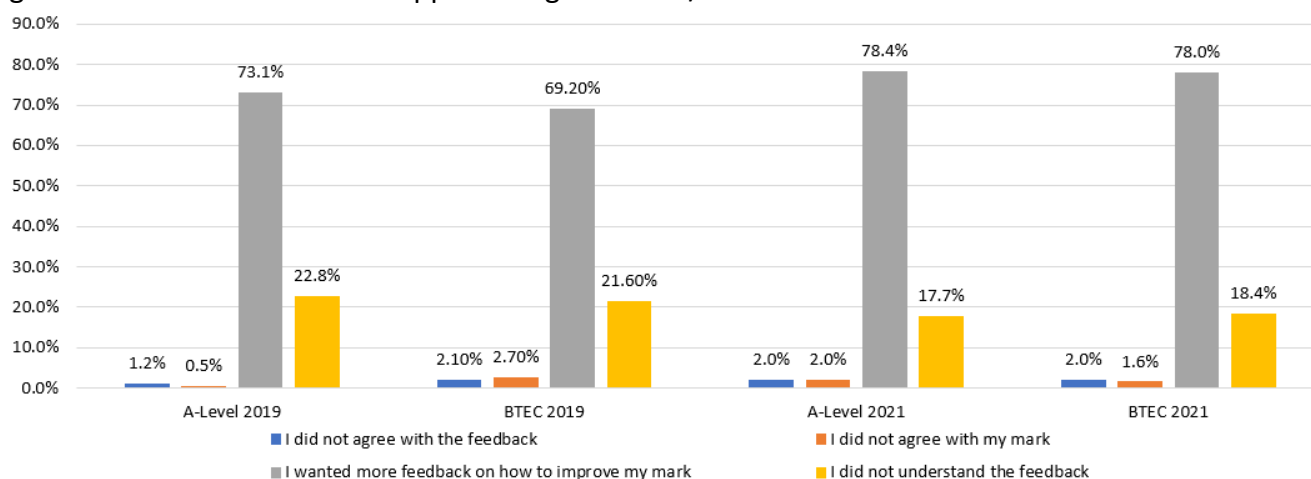
When the respondents were asked if they had approached a teacher to discuss a mark that accompanied the feedback, there was similarity in the responses provided although there was a slightly higher percentage of BTEC respondents in 2019 (see Table 27). There were no notable differences by gender and generational status between the two qualification groups.

Table 27 Approaching a teacher/tutor to discuss a mark at school/college

	A-Level 2019	BTEC 2019	A-Level 2021	BTEC 2021
Yes	89.1%	92.5%	87.4%	86.8%
No	10.9%	7.5%	12.6%	13.2%

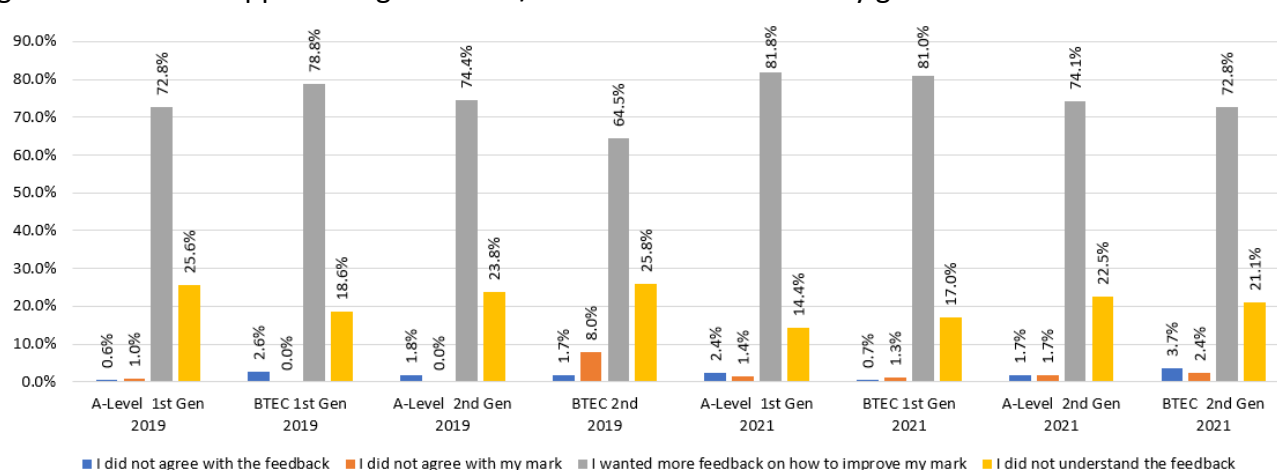
When asked for the reason for approaching a teacher/tutor, again there were no notable differences between A-Level and BTEC respondents (see Figure 17). For both groups, the objective for approaching a teacher/tutor was to get *more feedback on how to improve the mark*.

Figure 17 Approaching a teacher/tutor to discuss a mark



There were no major differences by gender across both samples. When examined by generational status, A-Level and BTEC 1st generation respondents were more likely to say that they had approached the teacher/tutor to get *more feedback on how to improve the mark*. Second generation A-Level and BTEC respondents were more likely to do this because *they did not understand the feedback* (see Figure 18).

Figure 18 Approaching a teacher/tutor to discuss a mark by generational status

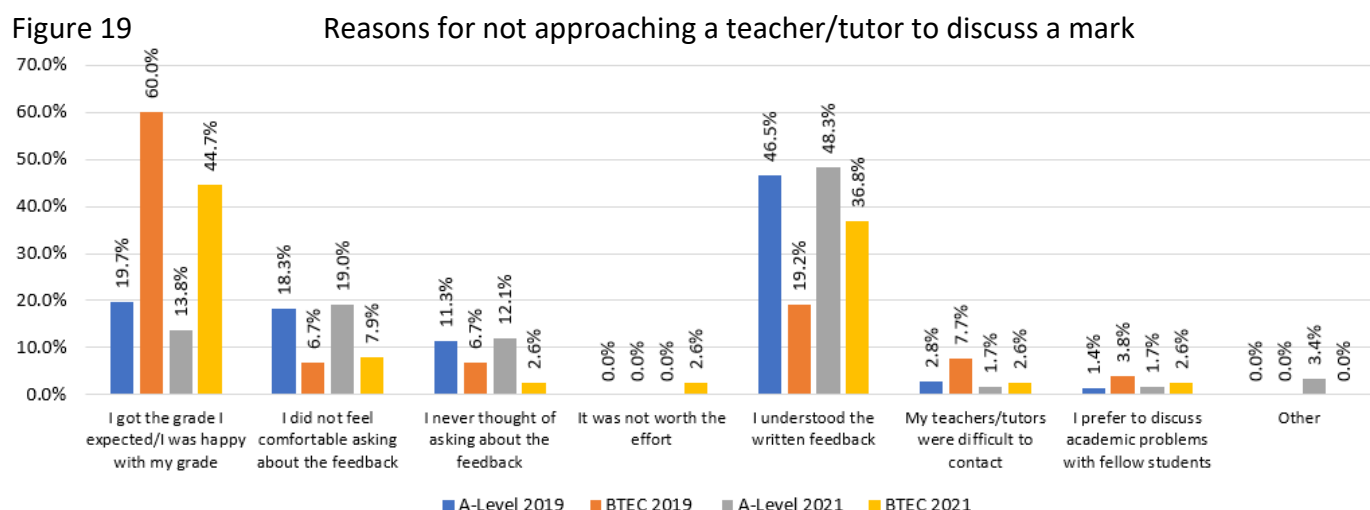


Reasons for not approaching a teacher/tutor

Respondents *not approaching a teacher/tutor* only accounted for 10.9% of A-Level and 7.5% of BTEC in 2019, and 12.6% A-Level and 13.2% of BTEC in 2021.

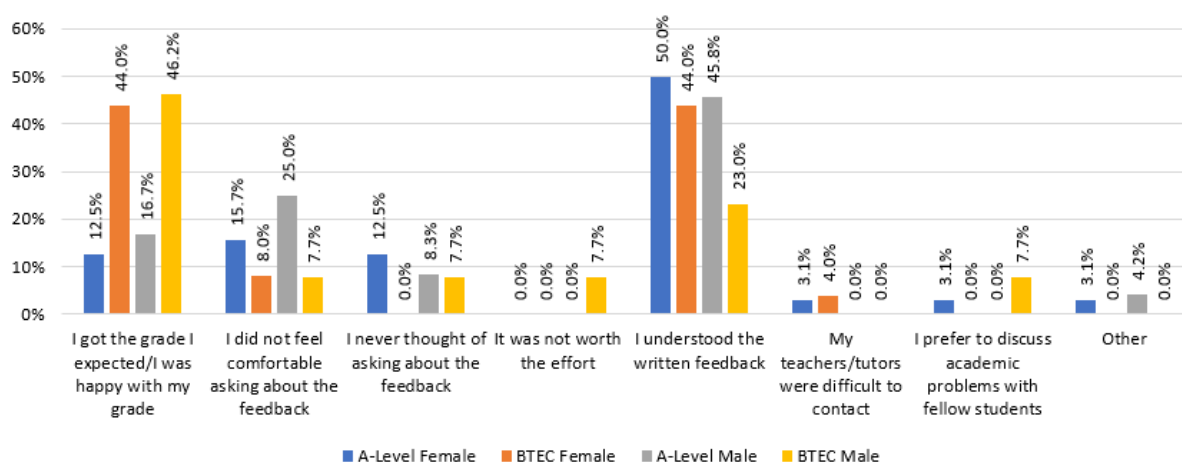
Respondents were asked to select one reason for *not approaching a teacher/tutor* (see Figure 19). For A-Level respondents across both surveys, the main reason was *I understood the written feedback* followed by *I got the grade I expected/I was happy with my grade*. These were also the top two cited by BTEC respondents but in reverse order.

However, a higher number of A-Level respondents across both surveys stated that they *did not feel comfortable about asking for feedback* and they *had never thought about asking for feedback* compared to their BTEC counterparts. *Discussing academic issues with fellow students* was not a preferable option for either qualification group.



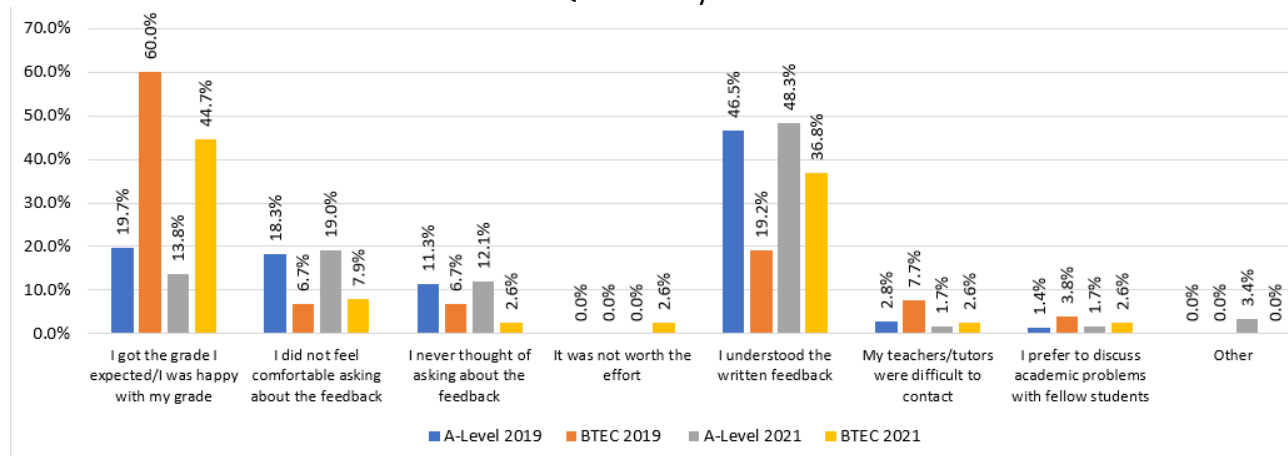
When examined by gender in the 2021 survey, female and male A-Level respondents (15.7% and 25.0% respectively) were more likely than BTEC (8.0% and 7.7% respectively) to say they felt *uncomfortable asking for feedback* (see Figure 20). Both female and male A-Level respondents were also more likely to say that they had *never thought about asking for it* (12.5% and 8.3%) compared to BTEC (0.0% and 8.3% respectively).

Figure 20 Reasons for not approaching a teacher/tutor to discuss a mark by gender- PAQ 2021 only



When examined by generational status (see Figure 21), A-Level 1st and 2nd generation were notably less *comfortable about asking for feedback* (18.4% and 21.3% respectively) than their BTEC counterparts (8.0% and 0.0%) and more likely to *never have thought about asking for feedback* (13.2% and 10.5%) than BTEC respondents (4.0% and 0.0%).

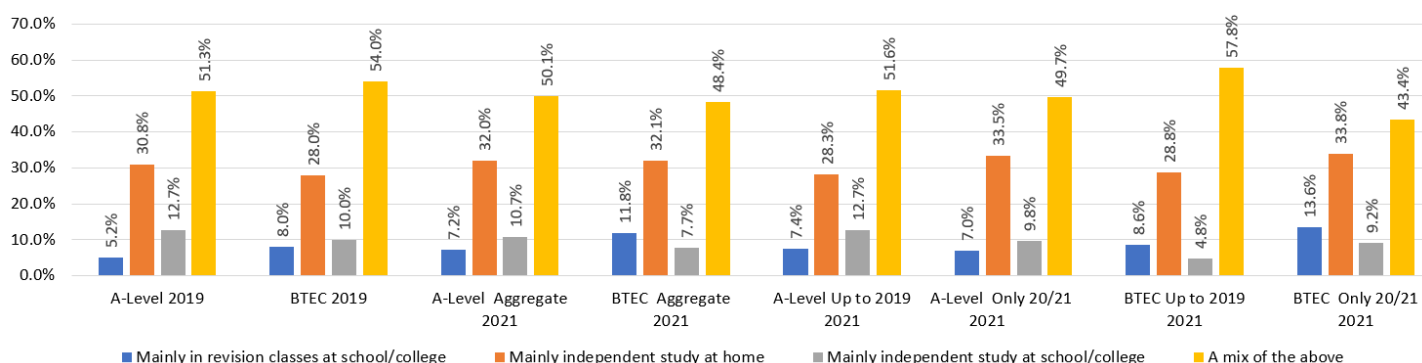
Figure 21 Reasons for not approaching a teacher/tutor to discuss a mark by generational status
-PAQ 2021 only



Revision undertaken in prior study

Across both surveys and qualifications, the most cited revision method was a mix of revision methods. However, for a third of A-Level and BTEC respondents, *mainly independent study at home* was the primary activity (see Figure 22).

Figure 22 Revision method up to 2019 and during 2020/21



Section 4 Study issues due to Covid19-PAQ 2021 only

The findings in this section only report those from the 2021 Pre-arrival Academic Questionnaire as they refer to the Covid19 pandemic.

Respondents who were in study in 2019/20 and 2020/21 were asked if they had experienced any study issues as a result of Covid19 (see Figure 23). They were asked to select all that applied to them.

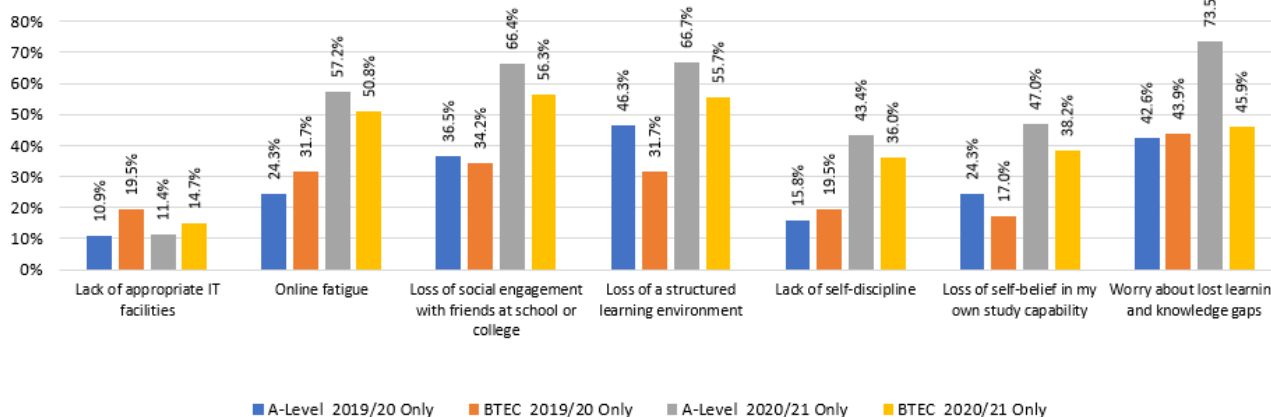
Study issues experienced in 2019/20 due to Covid 19

For A-Level and BTEC respondents in study in 2019/20, which was in the first phase of the pandemic, the top three study issues were the same but in a slightly different order. For A-Level, they were *loss of a structured learning environment* followed by *worry about lost learning and knowledge gaps* then *loss of social engagement with friends at school/college*. For BTEC, it was *worry about lost learning and knowledge gaps* followed by *loss of social engagement with friends at school/college* then *loss of a structured learning environment*.

Study issues experienced in 2020/21 due to Covid 19

For respondents in study in 2020/21 during the second phase of the pandemic, all the concerns were higher than those reported by those in study in 2019/20 apart from *lack of appropriate IT resources*, which was one area identified as a major weakness at the start of the pandemic, and that received funding to support learning. For those in study in 2019/20, twice as many BTEC respondents compared to their A-Level counterparts had cited IT resources as a study issue. It is important to remember that the decision to halt learning for BTEC students occurred much later than for A-Level after the March 2020 lockdown.

Figure 23 All study issues experienced by those in study in 2019/20 and 2020/21-PAQ 2021 only



In 2020/21, the top four concerns for both groups were the same but again in a slightly different order.

A-Level

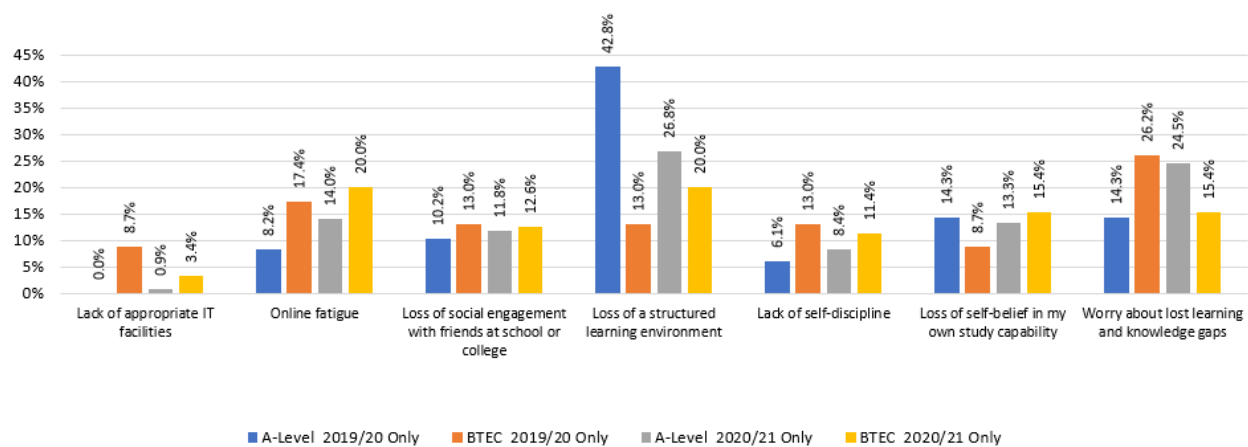
- 1). *Worry about lost learning and knowledge gaps*
- 2). *Loss of a structured learning environment*
- 3). *Loss of social engagement with friends at school/college*
- 4). *Online fatigue*

BTEC

- 1). *Loss of social engagement with friends at school/college*
- 2). *Loss of a structured learning environment*
- 3). *Online fatigue*
- 4). *Worry about lost learning and knowledge gaps*

Respondents in study in 2019/20 and in 2020/21 were asked what they considered to be their main study issue (see Figure 24). For those in study in 2019/20, A-Level respondents clearly stated it was *loss of a structured learning environment* with 42.8%. For BTEC, there was no one main concern but the most cited was *worry about lost learning and knowledge gaps* with 26.2%. For both groups of respondents in study in 2020/21, there was no notable main concern. The most cited for both were *loss of a structured learning environment* and *worry about lost learning and knowledge gaps*.

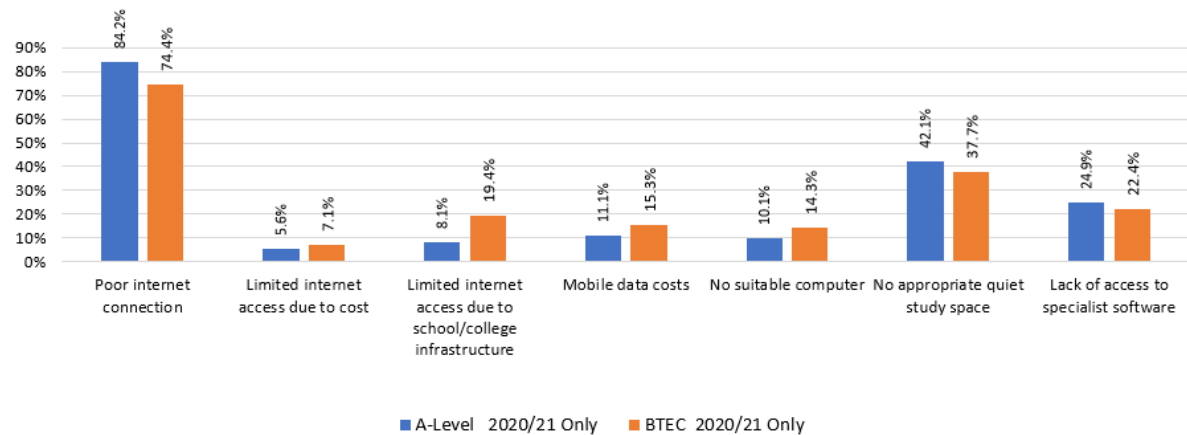
Figure 24 Main study issue experienced by those in study in 2019/20 and 2020/21-PAQ 2021 only



IT issues experienced in 2020/21 due to Covid 19

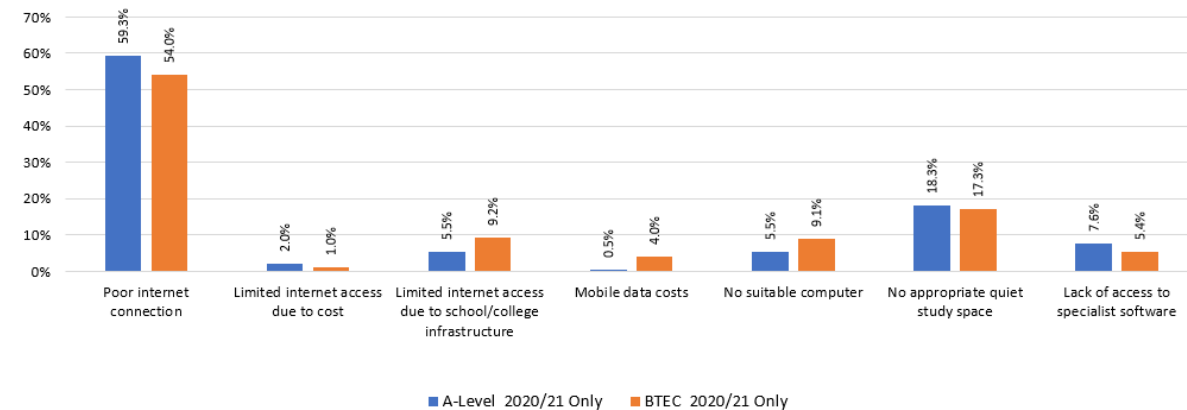
Those in study in 2020/21 were asked if they had experienced any IT issues. Of the A-Level respondents, 60.7% said they had and for BTEC it was 53.6%. When asked about the issues they had experienced, the top two notable ones for both groups were *poor internet connection* followed by *no appropriate quiet study space* (see Figure 25).

Figure 25 All IT issues experienced by those in study in 2020/21- PAQ 2021 only



When asked what the main IT issue was, both stated *poor internet connection* (see Figure 26).

Figure 26 Main IT issue experienced by those in study in 2020/21- PAQ 2021 only



Section 5 Concerns and confidence levels in starting university

Concerns about starting the course at university

There were 27 options relating to concerns about starting university study. Questions relating to Covid19 that were added to the 2021 survey are in red italics in Table 28. Respondents were asked to select any that applied to them. Across both surveys and qualifications, similar concerns arose which are highlighted below with *coping with the level of study* being the main concern. In 2019, the order of concerns for A-Level and BTEC respondents was almost identical with a similar level of response. For A-Level respondents, *getting used to moving away from home* was a greater concern than for BTEC but a higher percentage of BTEC respondents intended studying whilst staying at home. In the 2021 survey, mental health and wellbeing and Covid19 related questions were added which will be reported on separately. The top four concerns were similar although in a slightly different order. *Mental health and well being* was a concern for both but higher for A-Level respondents. Again, *getting used to moving away from home* was a greater concern for A-Level than BTEC as were Covid19 related concerns. Note: that in the 2021 survey at both institutions, the number of respondents by entry qualification deciding to stay at home and study increased especially for BTEC.

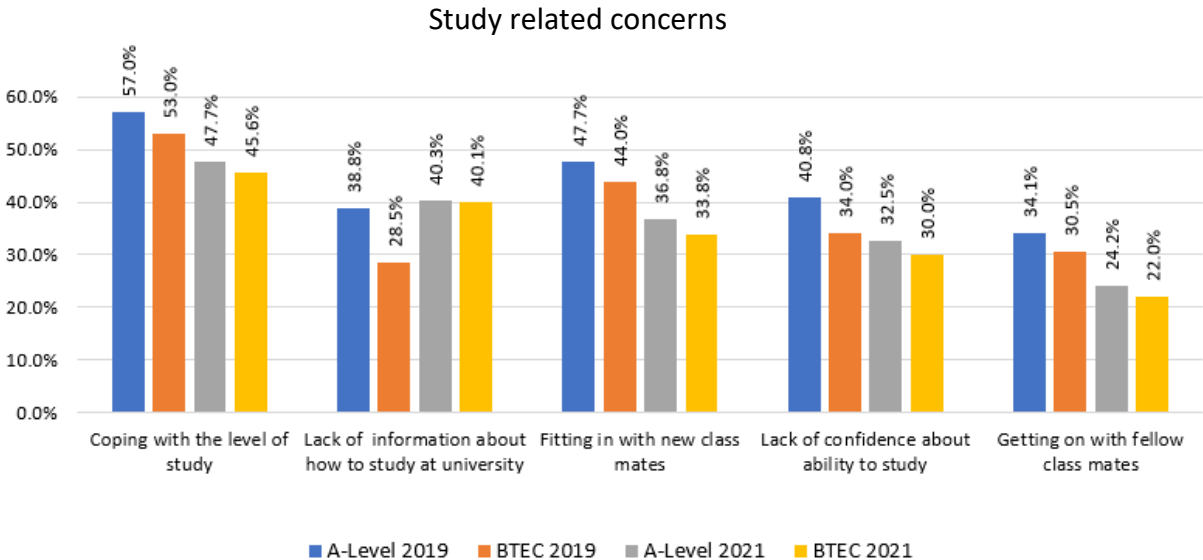
Table 28 Top concerns on entry

A-Level 2019	BTEC 2019	A-Level 2021	BTEC 2021
Copying with level of study 57.0%	Copying with level of study 53.0%	Copying with level of study 47.7%	Copying with level of study 45.6%
Fitting in with class mates 47.7%	Fitting in with class mates 44.0%	<i>Mental health & wellbeing 40.7%</i>	Lack of information about how to study at uni 40.1%
Getting used to moving away from home 44.8%	Getting used to moving away from home 37.0%	Lack of information about how to study at uni 40.3%	Fitting in with class mates 33.8%
Lack of confidence about ability to study 40.8%	Lack of confidence about ability to study 34.0%	Fitting in with class mates 36.8%	<i>Mental health & wellbeing 30.0%</i>
Lack of information about how to study at uni 38.8%	Getting on with fellow class mates 30.5%	<i>Potentially starting online 32.5%</i>	Lack of confidence about ability to study 30.0%
Getting on with fellow class mates 34.1%	Lack of information about how to study at uni 28.5%	Lack of confidence about ability to study 32.5%	<i>Knowledge gaps due to prior learning experience 22.6%</i>
Concerns about getting into debt 30.8%	Concerns about getting into debt 24.5%	Getting used to moving away from home 31.6%	Getting on with fellow class mates 22.0%
Having sufficient funding 22.5%	Having sufficient funding 24.0%	<i>Knowledge gaps due to prior learning experience 29.4%</i>	<i>Concerns about Covid19 and potential lockdowns 21.3%</i>
		<i>Concerns about Covid19 and potential lockdowns 27.9%</i>	<i>Potentially starting online 19.9%</i>
		Getting on with fellow class mates 24.2%	Getting used to moving away from home 17.8%
		Concerns about getting into debt 22.2%	Concerns about getting into debt 15.7%
		Having sufficient funding 18.3%	Having sufficient funding 15.0%

Due to the number of concerns, for ease of comparison by student characteristic, they are reported in three themes below. These are ‘study related’ and ‘finance and settlement’ concerns for both surveys then ‘Covid19 related’ for the 2021 survey only.

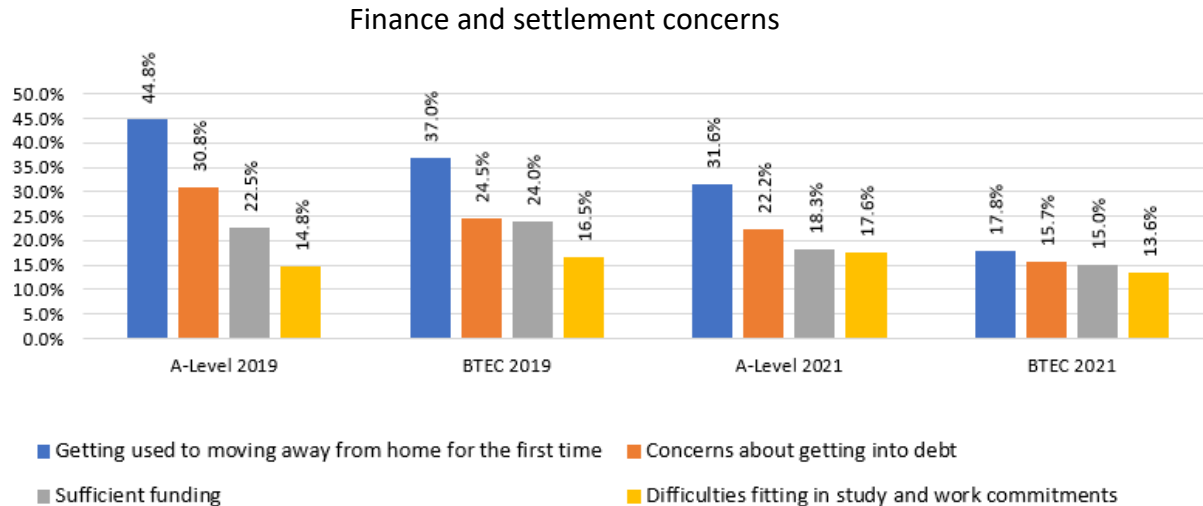
In terms of study related concerns, Figure 27 highlights a similar level of concern by qualification and by survey. In 2019, the notable differences between A-Level and BTEC respondents were regarding *lack of information about how to study at university* with 38.8% and 28.5% respectively and *lack of confidence about ability to study* with 40.8% and 34.0% respectively. In 2021, the responses for both qualification groups were almost the same.

Figure 27



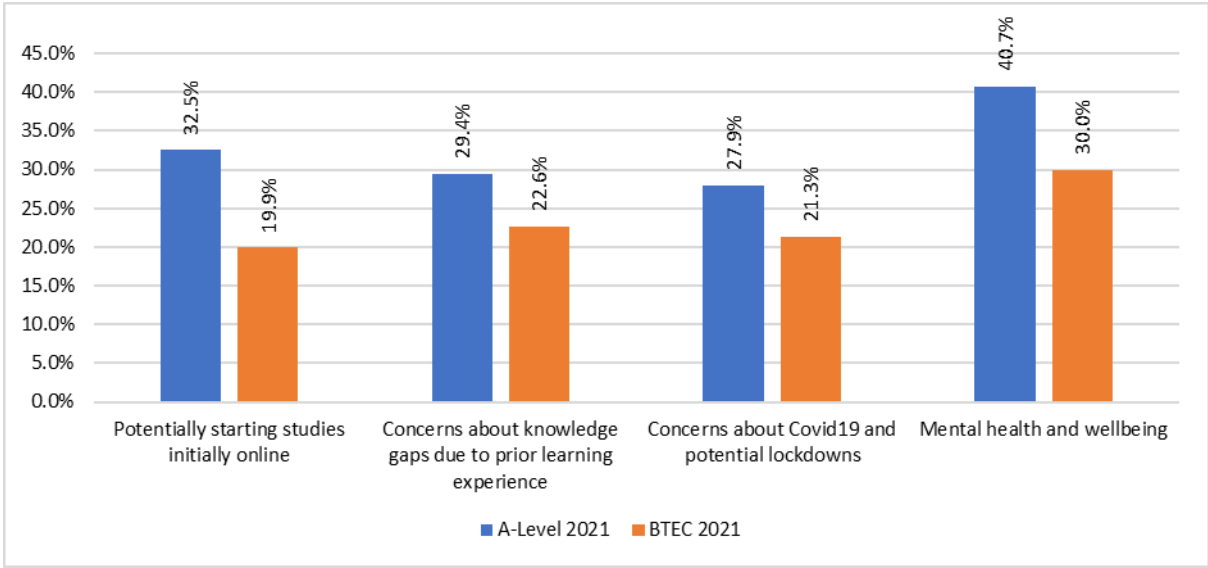
When looking at finance and settlement concerns, the main differences across both surveys were A-Level respondents were more concerned about *moving away from home* and *getting into debt* than their BTEC counterparts (see Figure 28).

Figure 28



When examining Covid19 related concerns, A-Level respondents expressed greater concern than BTEC especially with *potentially starting studies initially online* (See Figure 29). This finding could have been impacted on by prior learning experiences. BTEC respondents had greater diversity in accessing information at college.

Figure 29 Covid related concerns -PAQ 2021 only



Study related concerns by gender

When study related concerns are examined by gender across both surveys, a similar pattern occurs. A-Level and BTEC females cited higher levels of concern than their male counterparts in every listed study related concern. A-Level females cited greater concern than their BTEC counterparts (see Figures 30-34).

BTEC males across both surveys cited higher levels of concern with *coping with the level of study* compared to their A-Level counterparts (see Figure 30).

A-Level and BTEC females across both surveys cited more concern with *lack of confidence about ability to study* than A-Level and BTEC males (see Figure 31).

Figure 30 By gender

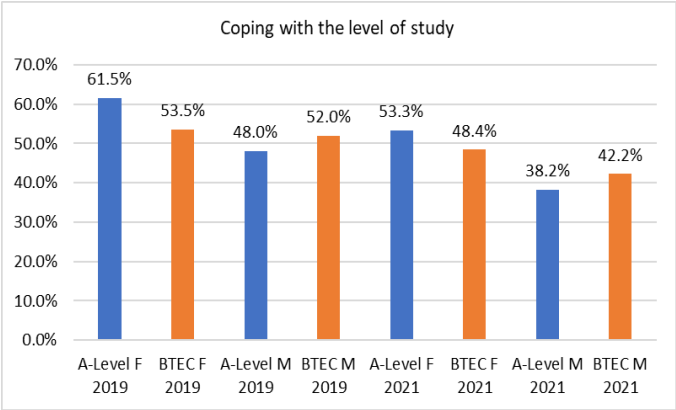
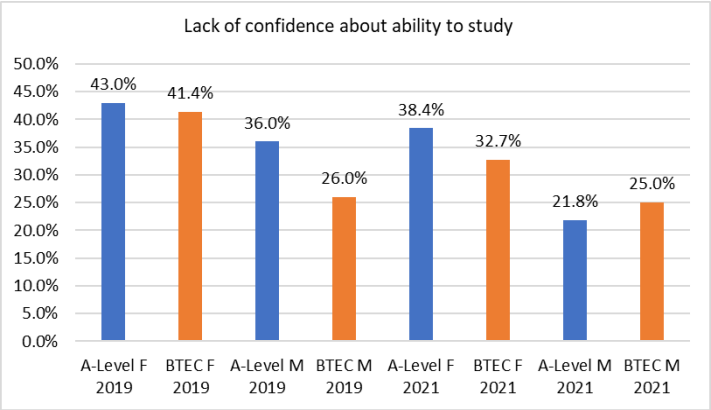
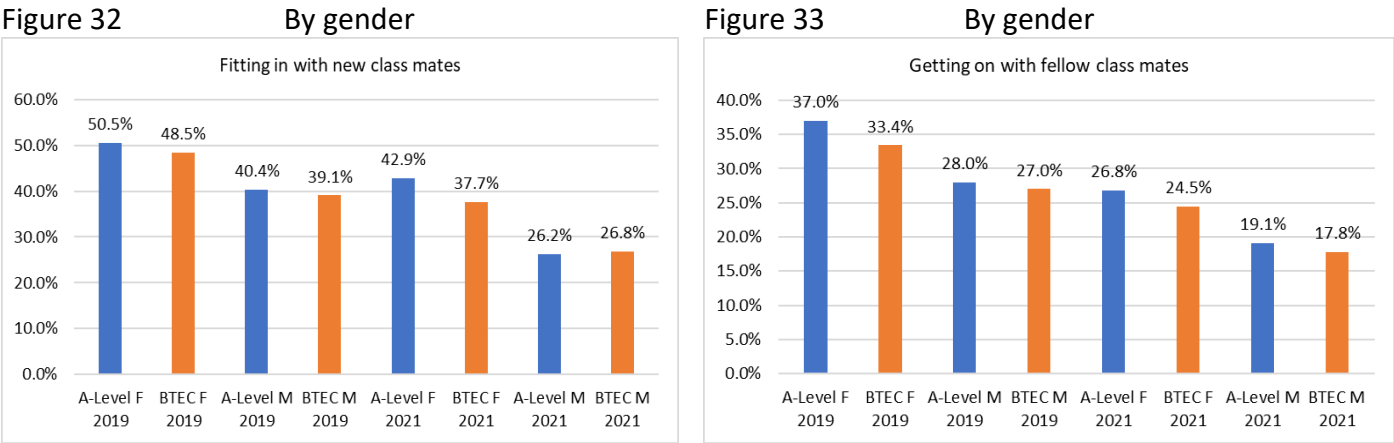


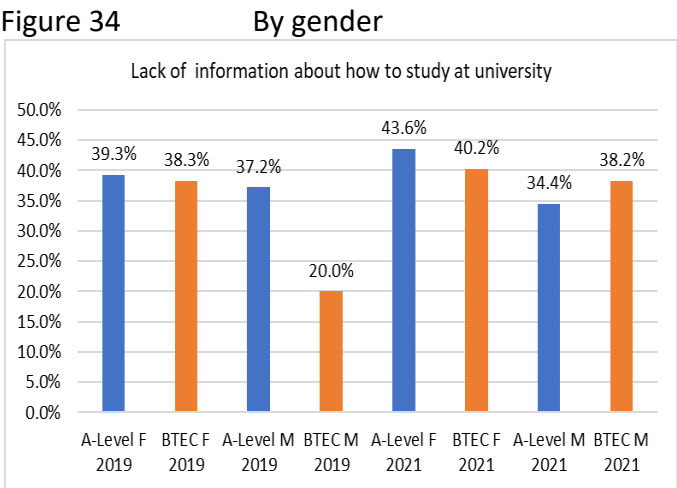
Figure 31 By gender



Females within each qualification and across both surveys cited higher levels of concern with *fitting in with new class mates* (see Figure 32) and *getting on with fellow class mates* (see Figure 33) than their male counterparts. A-Level females were slightly more concerned than BTEC Females.



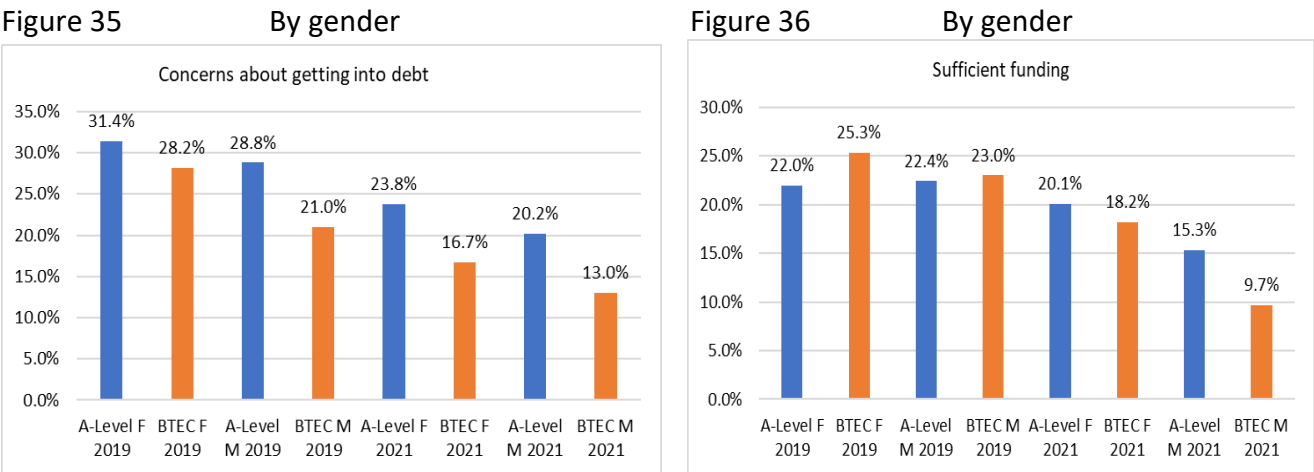
In the 2019 survey, BTEC males were least concerned about *lack of information about how to study at university*. However, in 2021, this was the case for A-Level males (see Figure 34).



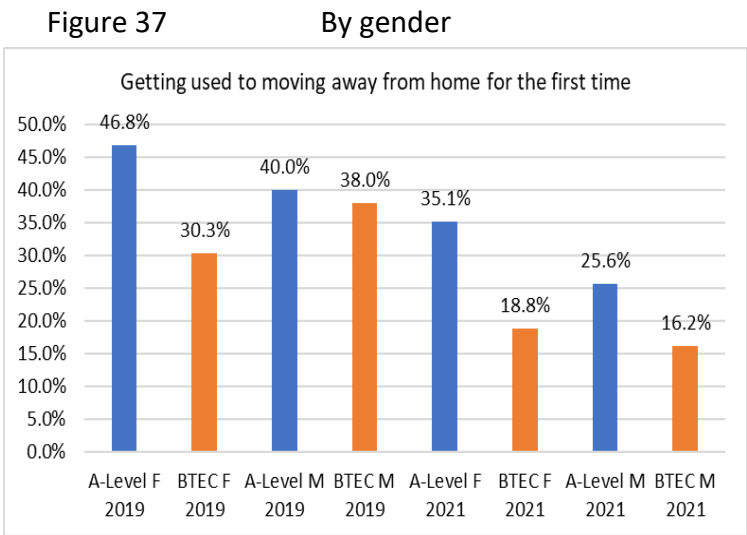
Finance and settlement concerns by gender

A-Level females and males across both surveys cited higher levels of concern with *getting into debt* than their BTEC counterparts (see Figure 35).

In 2019, there were similar levels of concern regarding having *sufficient funding* but in 2021, males were notably less concerned than females (see Figure 36).



Across both surveys, female and male A-Level respondents expressed greater concern than their BTEC counterparts in *getting used to moving away from home for the first time* (see Figure 37). It is important to note that a greater number of BTEC respondents across both surveys intended staying at home or staying local than their A-Level counterparts (refer to Table 5).

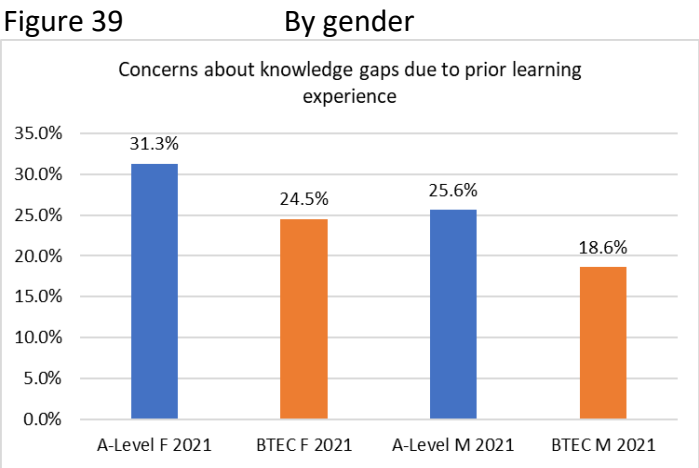
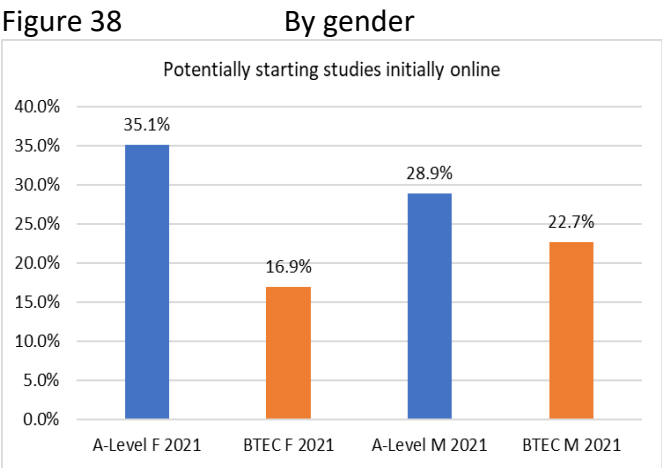


Covid19 related concerns by gender -PAQ 2021 only

When examining the Covid19 related concerns by gender, A-Level female and male respondents expressed highest concern across all areas compared to their BTEC counterparts (see Figures 38-41).

BTEC females and males cited lower levels of concern with *potentially starting online* compared to their A-Level counterparts (see Figure 38). This finding may be influenced by BTEC respondents having a more diverse prior learning experience of using technology (see Section 2).

BTEC males were the least concerned about *knowledge gaps due to their prior learning experience* as a result of Covid19 (see Figure 39).



Both A-Level and BTEC females expressed a much greater concern regarding their *mental health and wellbeing* than their male equivalents (see Figure 40). A-Level female and males were more concerned than their BTEC counterparts with BTEC males being the least concerned.

Both A-Level females and males expressed greater concern regarding *Covid19 and potential lockdowns* than their BTEC counterpart (see Figure 41). Within each qualification, females expressed greater concern.

Figure 40 By gender

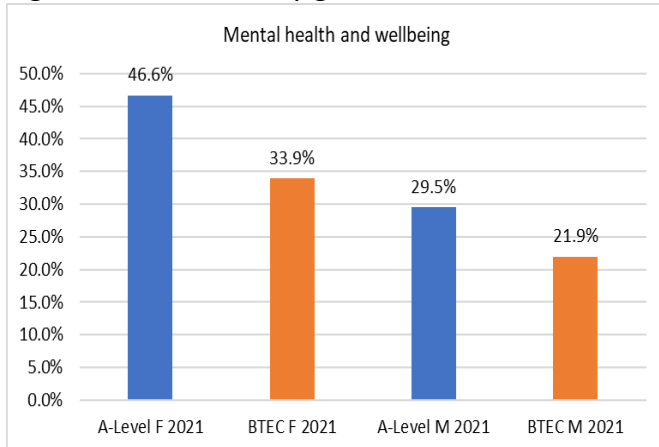
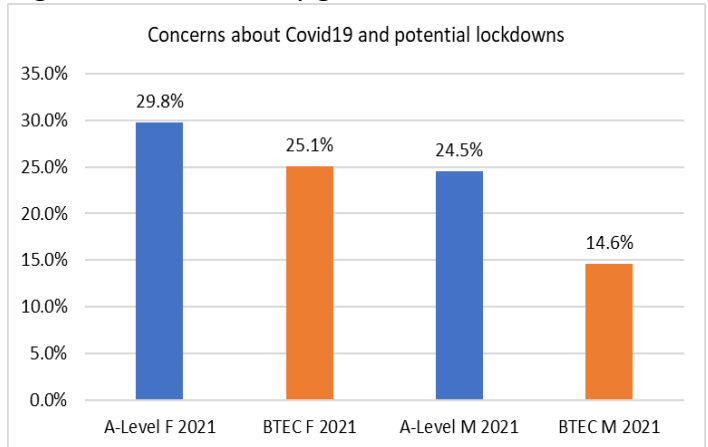


Figure 41 By gender



Study related concerns by generational status

When examined by generational status across both surveys and qualifications, respondents in 2021 were generally less concerned than those in 2019. Covid19 could have been factor due to the way learning and assessment was undertaken during the pandemic. Across both surveys, there was similar levels of concern by qualification and generational status in terms of *coping with the level of study* (see Figure 42).

Across both surveys, A-Level 1st and 2nd generation expressed higher levels of concern regarding *confidence about their ability to study* than their BTEC counterparts (see Figure 43). BTEC 2nd generation had the least concern.

Figure 42 By generational status

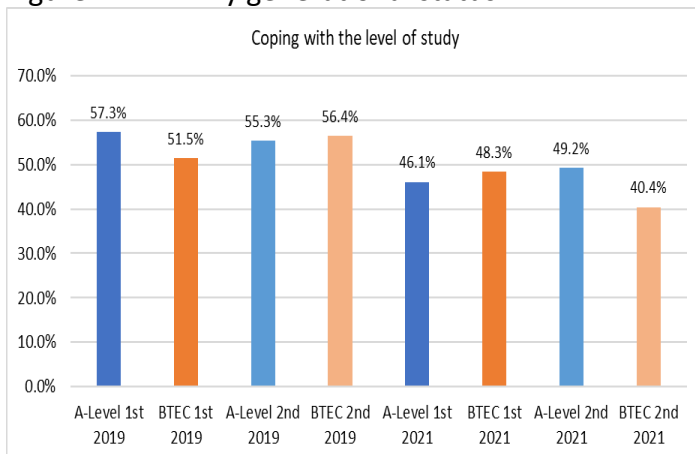
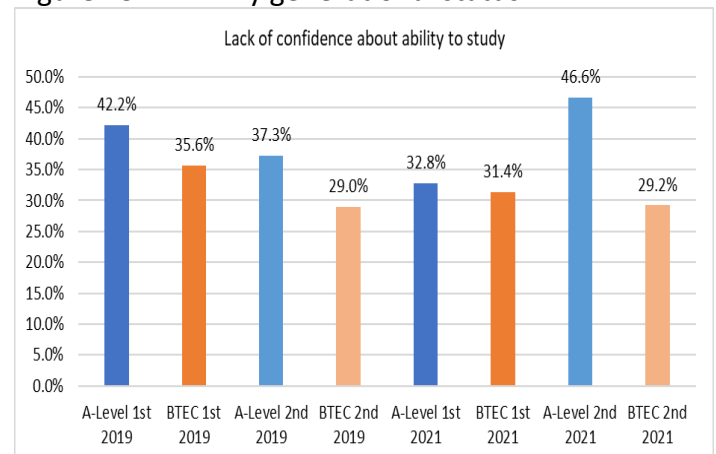


Figure 43 By generational status



Across both surveys, there was similar concern across the two qualifications and generational status regarding *fitting in with new class mates* and *getting on with fellow students*. However, the percentage for both was lower in 2021, which may have been as a result of the hybrid learning approach (see Figures 44 to 46).

Figure 44 By generational status

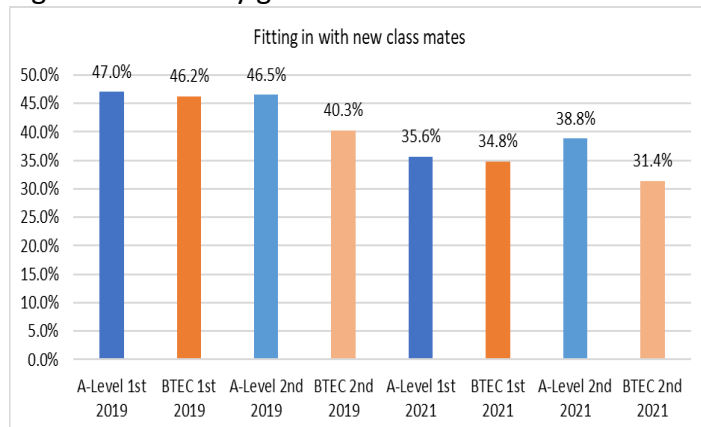


Figure 45 By generational status

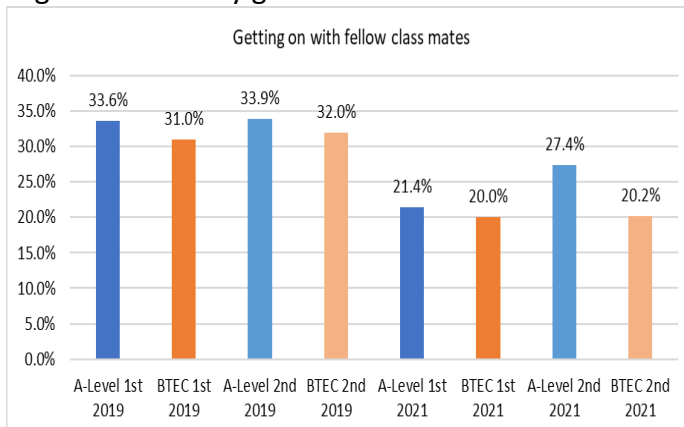
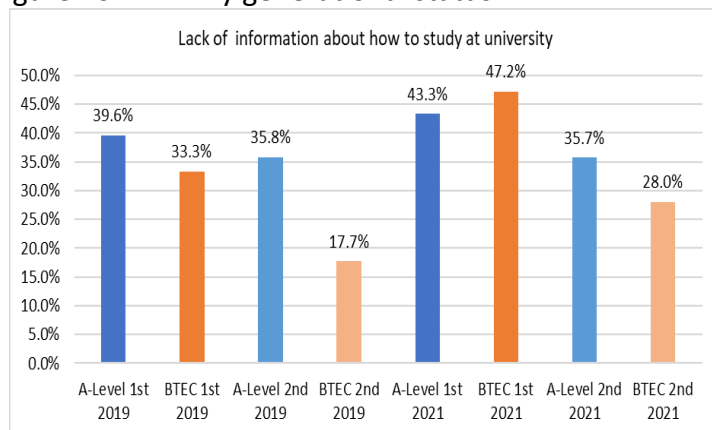


Figure 46 By generational status



In both the 2019 and 2021 surveys, BTEC 2nd generation were least concerned about *lack of information about how to study at university* (see Figure 46).

In 2019, A-Level 1st and 2nd generation respondents were the most concerned. However, in 2021, A-Level and BTEC 1st generation cited greater concern than their 2nd generation counterparts regarding *lack of information about how to study at university*.

Finance and settlement concerns by generational status

Across both surveys, A-Level 1st and 2nd generation respondents had slightly higher concerns about *getting into debt* although it was higher across both qualifications in 2019 than 2021 (see Figure 47). In relation to having *sufficient funding*, BTEC 1st and 2nd generation respondents were slightly more concerned than their A-Level counterparts (see Figure 48). It is important to note that both A-Level 1st and 2nd generation respondents were notably more likely to receive financial support from their parents/guardians (refer to Figure 9).

Figure 47 By generational status

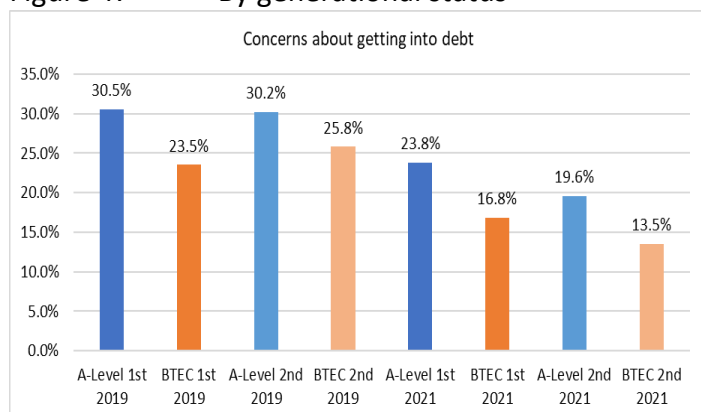
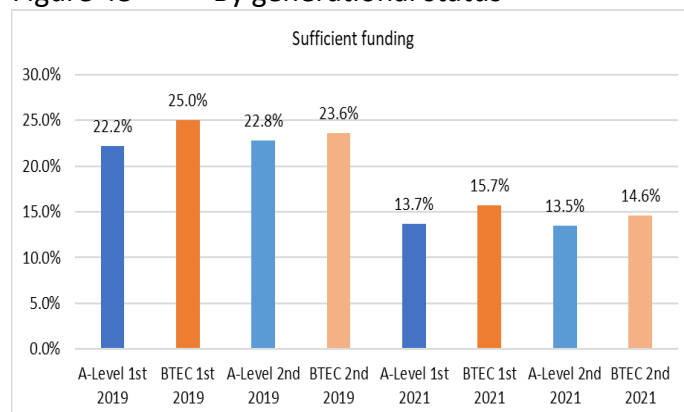
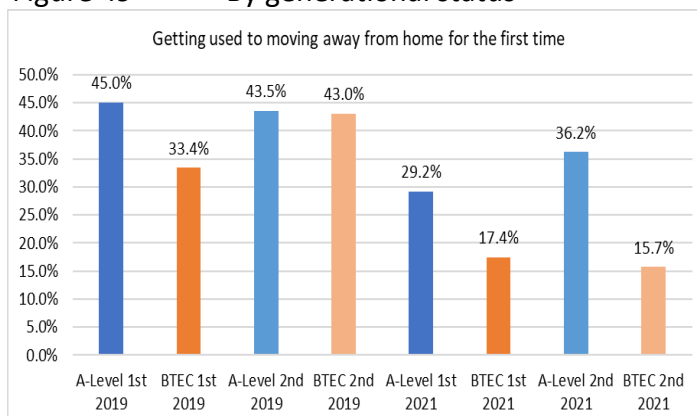


Figure 48 By generational status



When concerns relating to *getting used to moving away from home for the first time*, BTEC 1st generation respondents were least concerned than their A-Level counterparts (see Figure 49). Again, this is likely due to a higher number of BTEC respondents deciding to stay at home whilst studying (refer to Table 12).

Figure 49 By generational status



Covid related concerns by generational status-2021 PAQ only

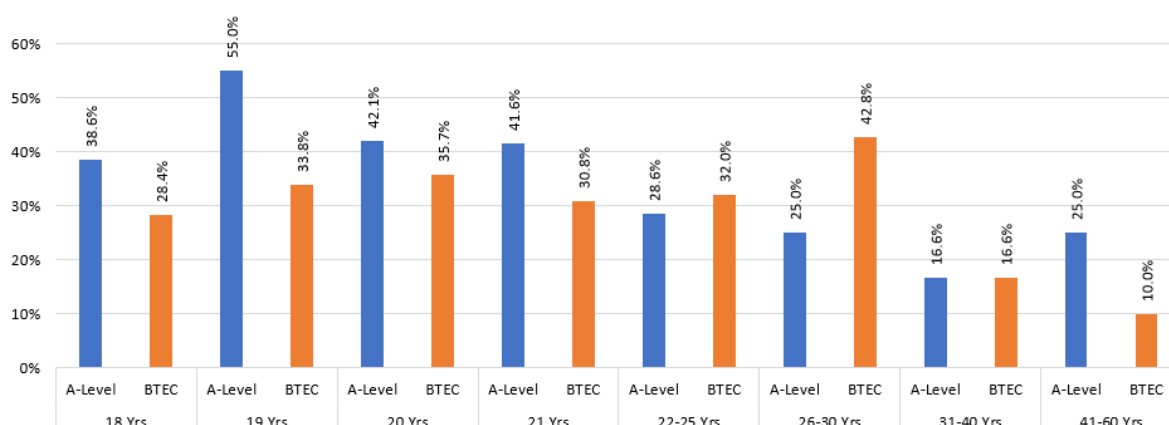
In the 2021 PAQ, A-Level 1st generation respondents cited greater concern across three of the four concerns compared to the other respondents (see Table 29). BTEC 1st and 2nd generation expressed similar levels of concern although those who were 1st generation expressed slightly higher levels across all concerns.

Table 29 Covid19 related concerns by generational status

Covid19 concern	A-Level 1st 2021	BTEC 1st 2021	A-Level 2nd 2021	BTEC 2nd 2021
Potentially starting studies initially online	30.3%	21.3%	35.7%	20.2%
Concerns about knowledge gaps due to prior learning experience	32.8%	24.1%	24.8%	21.3%
Concerns about Covid19 and potential lockdowns	29.9%	21.9%	25.3%	19.1%
Mental health and wellbeing	41.2%	30.3%	38.8%	29.3%

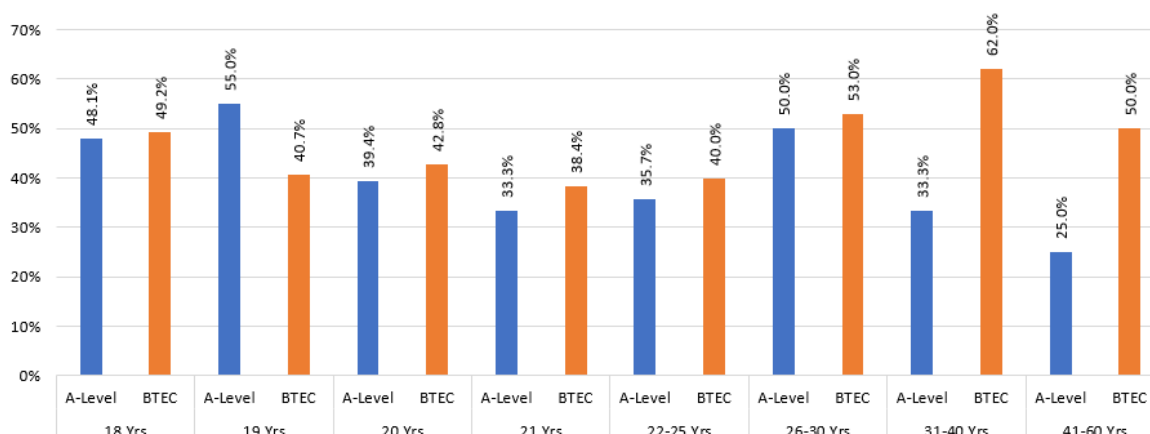
When examined by age, there were many shared concerns across the age groups. In terms of practical concerns, *mental health and wellbeing* was a notable concern across all age groups and type of study (see Figure 50). The level of concern started to reduce for those respondents over 31 years of age. Amongst the age groups up to 21 years, A-Level respondents expressed greater concern than BTEC.

Figure 50 Mental health and wellbeing concern by age group- PAQ 2021 only



When examining academic related concerns from the 2021 PAQ, *coping with the level of study* after the age of 20 was higher amongst BTEC than A-Level respondents (see Figure 51).

Figure 51 Copying with the level of study by age group-PAQ 2021 only

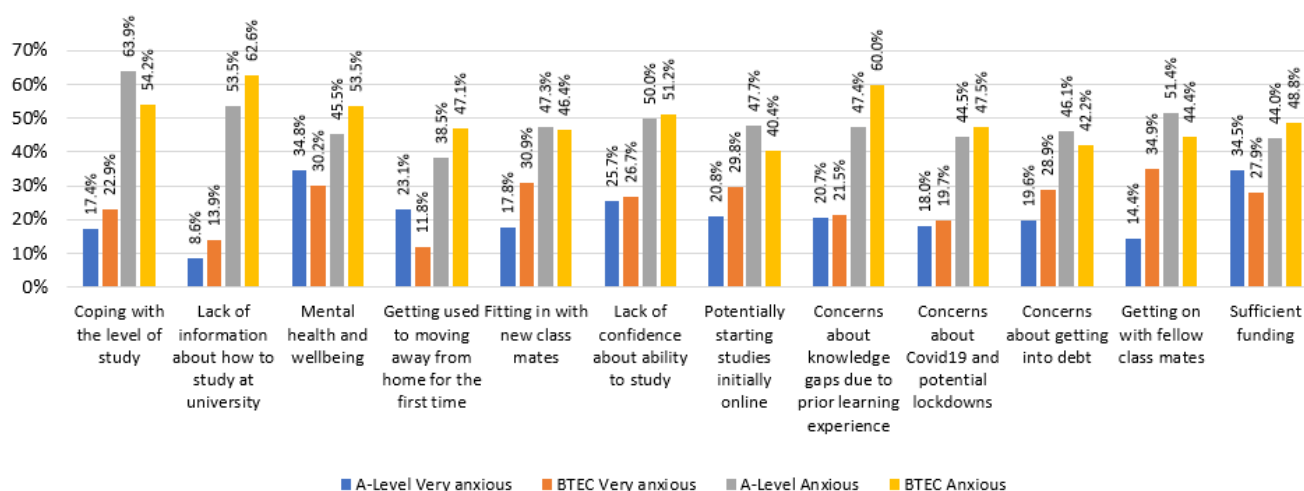


Anxiety levels relating to their concerns-PAQ 2021 only

Respondents were asked to rate their level of anxiety for their concerns. The questionnaire was designed so that each respondent only saw the specific concerns they had ticked in the previous question. The option of 'unsure' was not included in this question as the aim was to get respondents thinking carefully about how they felt. For reporting purposes, the findings below show the anxiety levels for the top 12 concerns of respondents (see Figure 52). However, it must be noted when looking at anxiety levels, although some concerns had a small number of respondents, anxiety levels could still be high. For example, affordable childcare was a concern for a small number of respondents, but being *very anxious/anxious* was high especially amongst females respondents.

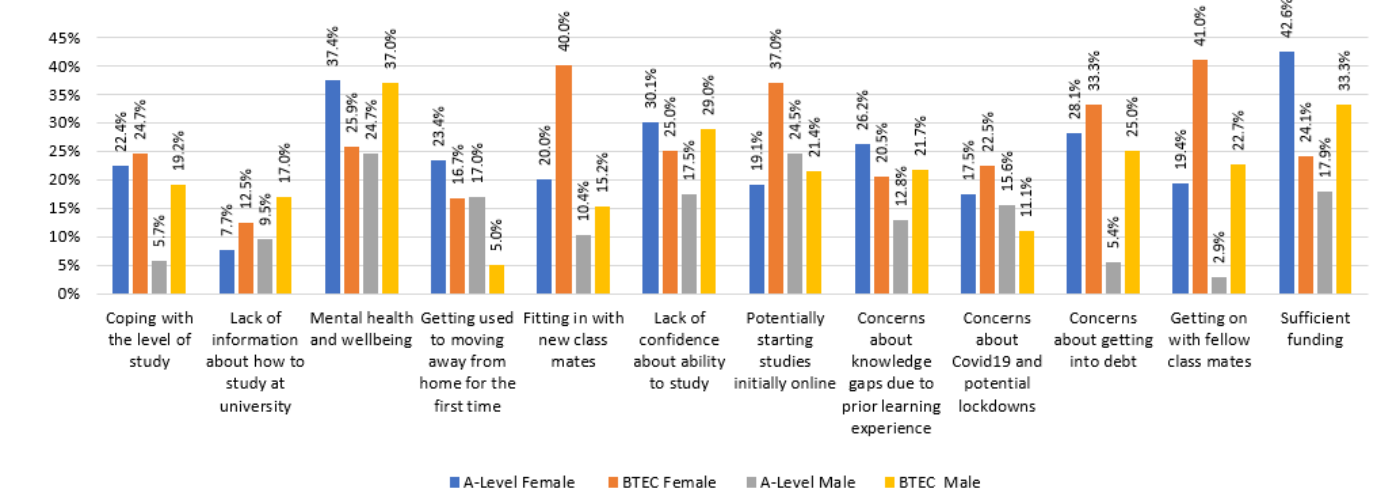
Figure 52 shows that there was a relatively high level of anxiety amongst respondents with the majority of A-Level and BTEC stating they were *anxious* across the top concerns. There were similar levels of being *very anxious* by highest entry qualification regarding *mental health and wellbeing*, *lack of confidence about ability* and *concerns about knowledge gaps*. Of those who expressed being *very anxious*, BTEC respondents were more likely to state that this was the case in *coping with the level of study*, *lack of information about how to study at university*, *fitting in with new class mates*, *getting on with new class mates* and *potentially starting online*. A-Level respondents expressed being *very anxious* more than their BTEC counterparts regarding *getting used to moving away from home for the first time* and *having sufficient funding*.

Figure 52 Level of anxiety by concern 'Very anxious' and 'Anxious'-PAQ 2021 only



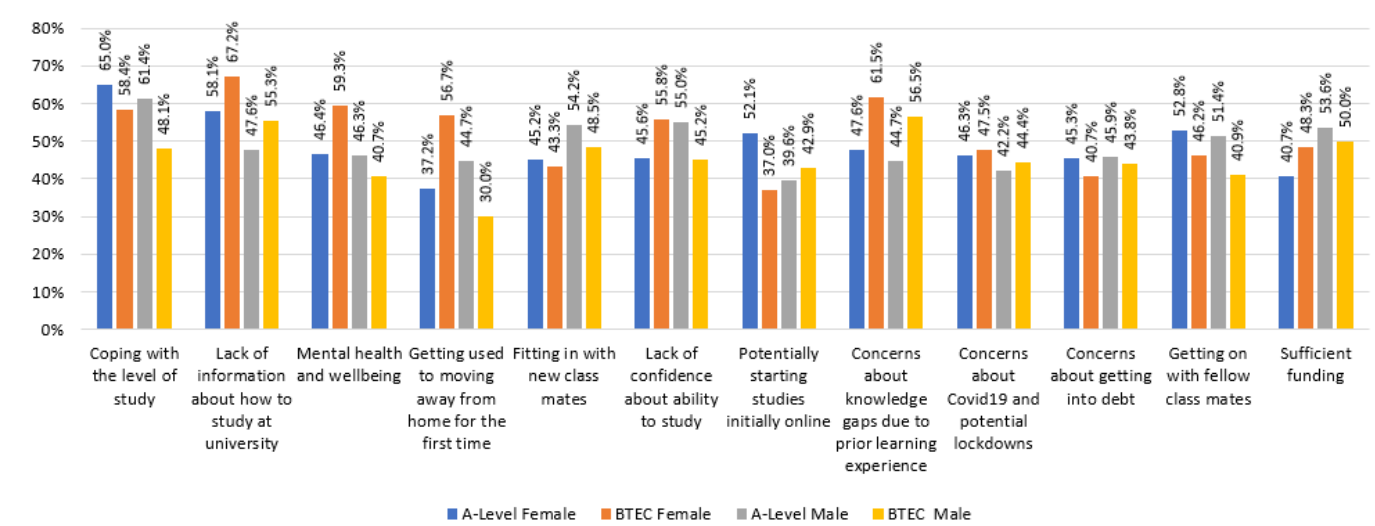
When examined by gender (see Figure 53), females were more likely to say they were *very anxious* compared to their male counterparts especially BTEC who were the most *very anxious* across five of the 12 areas. A-Level male respondents were least *very anxious* across eight areas. A-Level females and BTEC males were similarly *very anxious* regarding *mental health and wellbeing* and having *sufficient funding*.

Figure 53 Level of anxiety by concern ‘Very anxious’ by gender-PAQ 2021 only



Being *anxious* was the most cited level of anxiety across highest entry qualification and gender (see Figure 54). A-Level and BTEC females were more likely to say they were *anxious* than their male counterparts. A-Level females express the highest level of being *anxious* across four of the 12 areas and BTEC females across six. A-Level males was across two.

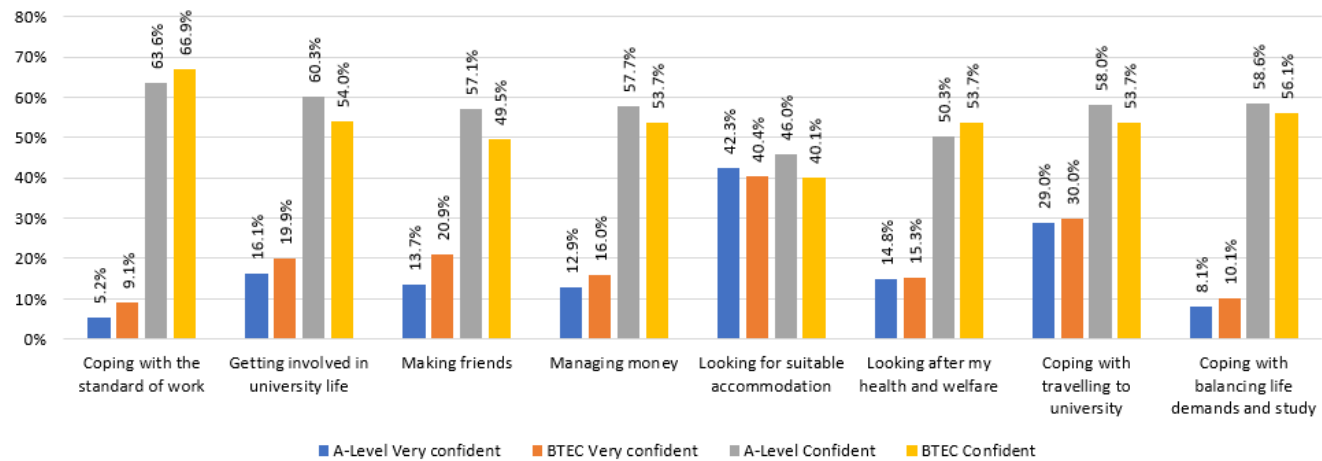
Figure 54 Level of anxiety by concern ‘Anxious’ by gender- PAQ 2021 only



Confidence levels on starting university- PAQ 2021 only

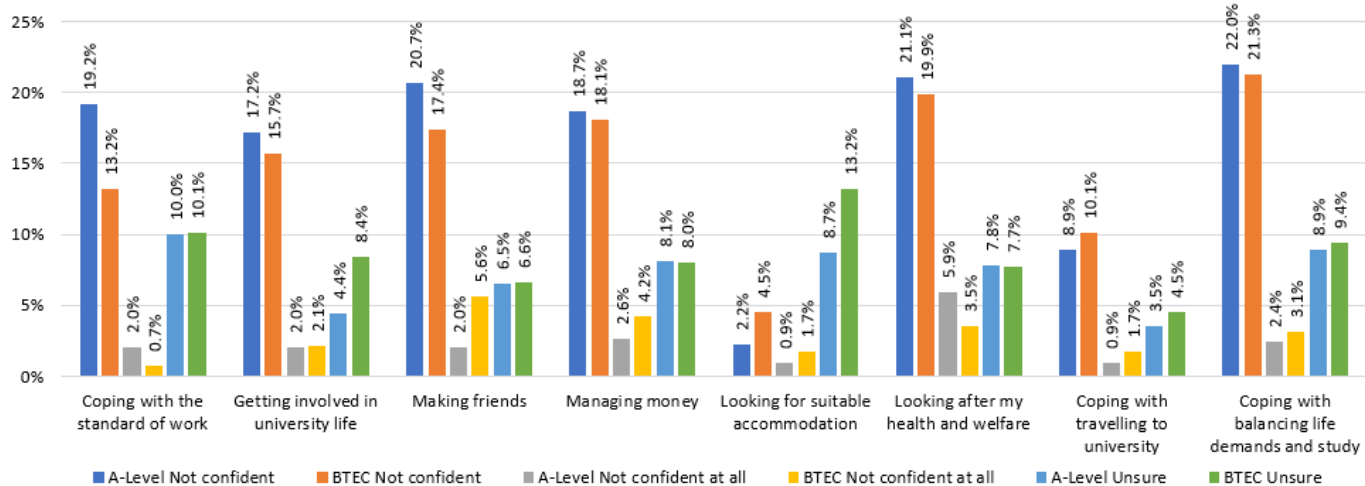
Respondents were asked to think about how they felt about different aspects of starting their undergraduate course (see Figure 55). The majority of A-Level and BTEC respondents expressed a similar feeling of being *confident* across all areas. When looking at those who expressed feeling *very confident*, BTEC respondents accounted for the majority across seven of the eight areas.

Figure 55 Confidence levels on starting university ‘Very confident and confident’ -PAQ 2021 only



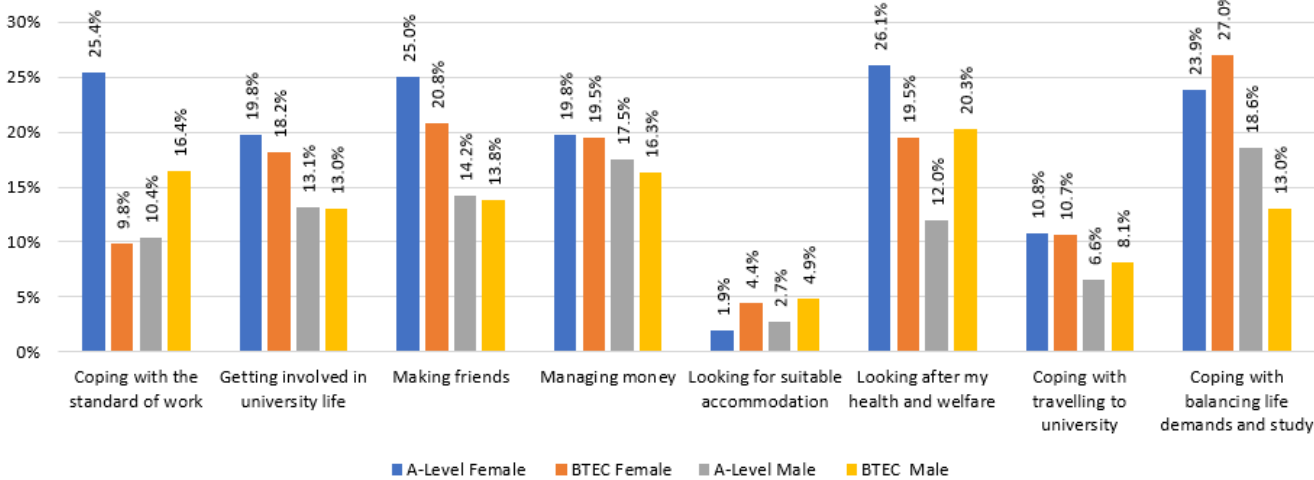
When looking at those who cited *not being confident at all*, they only accounted for a small number of the A-Level and BTEC responses (see Figure 56). Approximately one fifth of A-Level and BTEC respondents stated they were *not confident* across all of the areas. There were many similarities in terms of levels of low confidence. The notable differences between the two qualifications was that more A-Level (19.2%) respondents than BTEC (13.2%) were *not confident* about coping with the standard of work.

Figure 56 Confidence levels on starting university ‘Not confident and not confident at all’ -PAQ 2021 only



When examined by gender, A-Level and BTEC females were noticeably more likely to state they were *not confident* across most of the areas than their male counterparts (see Figure 57). A-Level female respondents were notably *not confident* compared to other respondents in *coping with the standard of work, making friends* and *looking after my health and welfare*. All respondents were similarly *not confident* about *managing money*.

Figure 57 Confidence levels on starting university in 2021 ‘Not confident’ by gender-PAQ 2021 only



Section 6 University study expectations

Expected contact and independent study hours

Respondents expressed diverse expectations regarding contact hours. Across both qualifications and surveys, there was a notable level of uncertainty about the expected 'contact hours' per week for their course (see Table 30). For A-Level and BTEC respondents in 2019 and 2021, approximately one third expected the contact hours to range between 5-10 hours. This was closely followed by 11-20 hours for both, although A-Level was higher than BTEC across both surveys. When independent study hours were examined, 11-20 hours a week for A-Level and BTEC respondents across both surveys was the highest, but around a tenth of respondents expected to undertake over 20 hours a week. The discipline area is likely to have influenced responses.

Table 30 Contact and independent study hours

	A-Level Contact 2019	BTEC Contact 2019	A-Level Contact 2021	BTEC Contact 2021	A-Level Indep 2019	BTEC Indep 2019	A-Level Indep 2021	BTEC Indep 2021
1-4 hours	5.8%	5.0%	6.3%	10.8%	1.6%	3.0%	3.9%	4.9%
5-10 hours	33.9%	35.5%	33.1%	30.3%	28.0%	22.5%	30.1%	39.4%
11-20 hours	30.8%	28.5%	25.1%	20.2%	42.8%	40.5%	35.5%	26.5%
Over 20 hours	1.7%	1.0%	3.3%	6.6%	10.0%	11.5%	10.5%	7.0%
Unsure	27.8%	30.0%	32.2%	32.1%	17.7%	22.5%	20.0%	22.3%

Study style preference at university

Respondents were asked to select one method of how they would prefer to study on their university course. The majority of A-Level and BTEC respondents across both surveys stated they would like to study both *individually and in a group*. However, around a fifth from both groups stated that they would prefer to *study independently* (see Table 31).

Table 31 Study preferences

	A-Level 2019	BTEC 2019	A-Level 2021	BTEC 2021
I prefer to study independently	22.2%	23.0%	23.3%	20.9%
I prefer to study in a group	7.3%	6.5%	7.6%	9.1%
I like to do both	70.5%	70.5%	69.1%	70.0%

Study assessment preference

The study preference of both A-Level respondents across both surveys was a *mix of exams and individual/group assessments* and *individual assessments* (see Table 32). However, for BTEC it was the reverse. *Exams* were the least preferred form of study assessment by both.

Table 32 Study assessment preferences

	A-Level 2019	BTEC 2019	A-Level 2021	BTEC 2021
I prefer undertaking group based assessments	12.0	12.9%	8.7%	11.5%
I prefer undertaking individual assessments	32.2%	44.6%	34.4%	38.3%
I prefer exams	3.9%	0.7%	3.7%	1.7%
I prefer a mix of exams and individual/group assessments	45.4%	38.1%	43.1%	37.3%
Unsure	6.6%	3.6%	10.0%	11.1%

A sample of respondents' qualitative comments are provided below by study assessment preference for individual and a mix. No responses were provided for exam preference.

Those that prefer to undertake individual assessments

Anxiety when working in a group tends to distract me from focussing on studying.

Individual assessments stop me being distracted and it provides me with flexibility.

I can become anxious around others and not talk then they think I am stupid.

Those that prefer a mix of exams and individual/group assessments.

Working independently allows me to be more comfortable with my own work/ creative space. But gaining more information/knowledge from my classmates helps me learn new things I may have not known.

Collaboration creates ideas, motives and more immersed answers allowing all members to excel in work. But at the same time independent work is more relaxed. And doesn't require peer assessment but your own thoughts.

Depends on my mood and the subject I am studying.

I am easily distracted so work better independently but also having other people there to motivate me also helps me along so a mix of both to keep me engaged is good.

Most useful feedback-PAQ 2021 only

Respondents were asked to rank in importance the most useful type of feedback they expect to receive at university (where 1= most important and 6 = least important) (see Table 33). The findings are only for the 2021 PAQ. For both highest entry qualification groups, the findings are similar.

A-Level and BTEC respondents cited the most important type of feedback was *academic feedback telling me what I did not do well and how to improve* followed by *receiving academic feedback that is encouraging and raises my confidence*. *Academic feedback telling me what I did correctly* was ranked highly in the top three.

Of the responses, *generic feedback pointing to common mistakes across the cohort*, *informal discussions with students outside of class* and *discussing academic feedback with students in class* were considered the least important for both groups.

Table 33 Most useful types of feedback -PAQ 2021 only

Type of feedback	1 A-Level	1 BTEC	2 A-Level	2 BTEC	6 A-Level	6 BTEC
Generic feedback pointing to common mistakes across the cohort	8.7%	9.1%	12.9%	17.1%	21.1%	18.1%
Discussing academic feedback with fellow students in class	4.4%	5.6%	12.4%	8.0%	15.3%	17.4%
Informal discussions with fellow students outside of class	1.5%	4.9%	7.0%	5.2%	42.7%	36.9%
Academic feedback telling what I did not do well and how to improve	60.8%	50.9%	19.0%	25.4%	2.2%	2.8%
Academic feedback telling me what I did correctly	6.8%	7.3%	30.7%	25.4%	7.8%	13.6%
Receiving academic feedback that is encouraging and raises my confidence	17.9%	22.3%	18.1%	18.8%	10.9%	11.1%

Perceived study strengths and weaknesses- PAQ 2021 only

When A-Level and BTEC respondent's perception of study strengths and weaknesses are examined, the majority of responses fall into the *strong* or *adequate* categories (see Table 34).

A-Level respondents stated they had *strong* skills that were higher than their BTEC counterparts in four of the six study areas. BTEC respondents were notably more likely to perceive their study skills as *adequate* across five for the six areas and more *weak* in literacy and numerical skills than A-Level.

Table 34 Perception of skill strength-PAQ 2021 only

Study	Very strong		Strong		Adequate		Weak		Very weak		Unsure	
	A-level	BTEC	A-level	BTEC	A-level	BTEC	A-level	BTEC	A-level	BTEC	A-level	BTEC
Quick assimilation of ideas	5.2%	4.9%	40.3%	38.0%	45.8%	49.8%	3.9%	3.8%	1.5%	0.7%	3.3%	2.8%
Ability to organise study independently	14.8%	13.2%	41.4%	44.9%	35.1%	35.2%	6.5%	4.5%	1.5%	1.7%	0.7%	0.3%
Study skills	6.5%	6.3%	46.0%	37.3%	39.9%	49.1%	6.1%	5.6%	0.4%	1.0%	1.1%	0.7%
Knowledge of the subject	9.8%	7.0%	43.1%	43.2%	38.3%	41.5%	6.3%	4.9%	0.4%	1.4%	2.0%	2.1%
Literacy skills	21.1%	14.3%	50.5%	43.2%	25.1%	34.5%	1.7%	5.9%	1.1%	1.4%	0.4%	0.7%
Numerical skills	17.6%	9.4%	39.2%	30.3%	31.4%	44.3%	8.1%	12.9%	3.3%	2.8%	0.4%	0.3%

However, when examined by gender, differences in perceived study strengths and weaknesses emerge (see Table 35). A higher number of A-Level and BTEC females perceived their *study* and *literacy* skills to be *very strong* compared to their male counterparts, and notably their *ability to organise study independently*. A higher number of A-Level and BTEC males perceived their *numerical skills* to be *very strong* or *strong* than their female counterparts. A-Level females felt their skills were *adequate* in five of the six categories compared to A-Level males and for BTEC females this accounted for four of the six compared to BTEC males.

Table 35 Perceived study strengths by gender-PAQ 2021 only

Study	Very strong A-Level		Very Strong BTEC		Strong A-Level		Strong BTEC		Adequate A-Level		Adequate BTEC	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
Quick assimilation of ideas	5.2%	5.5%	5.0%	3.3%	32.8%	50.8%	33.4%	43.9%	51.0%	39.3%	54.1%	45.5%
Ability to organise study independently	19.8%	7.7%	18.9%	5.7%	46.3%	33.9%	44.7%	42.3%	42.6%	30.6%	34.0%	41.4%
Study skills	8.6%	2.7%	6.9%	4.9%	42.5%	50.8%	35.8%	38.2%	42.5%	36.6%	50.3%	48.8%
Knowledge of the subject	7.1%	14.2%	8.2%	4.9%	39.9%	48.1%	39.0%	48.8%	44.8%	27.9%	45.3%	36.6%
Literacy skills	22.0%	19.1%	17.6%	8.9%	51.5%	50.3%	41.5%	46.3%	23.5%	27.3%	8.2%	3.3%
Numerical skills	11.6%	26.8%	5.7%	13.8%	37.7%	41.0%	23.3%	40.7%	34.7%	27.3%	49.1%	38.2%

When perceptions of weakness is examined, male A-Level and BTEC respondents were more likely to say they had *weak* or *very weak ability to organise study independently* (see Table 36). Female A-Level and BTEC respondents were more likely to cite *weak* or *very weak numerical skills* compared to their male counterparts.

Table 36 Perceived study weaknesses by gender-PAQ 2021 only

Study	Weak A-Level		Weak BTEC		Very weak A-Level		Very weak BTEC		Unsure A-Level		Unsure BTEC	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
Quick assimilation of ideas	4.1%	2.2%	3.8%	4.1%	2.2%	0.5%	0.6%	0.8%	4.5%	1.6%	3.1%	2.4%
Ability to organise study independently	2.6%	12.0%	1.9%	7.3%	0.7%	2.7%	0.6%	2.4%	0.0%	1.1%	0.0%	0.0%
Study skills	4.9%	8.2%	6.3%	4.9%	0.4%	0.5%	0.0%	2.4%	1.1%	1.1%	0.6%	0.8%
Knowledge of the subject	5.6%	7.7%	5.7%	4.1%	0.7%	0.0%	0.6%	2.4%	1.9%	2.2%	1.3%	3.3%
Literacy skills	1.1%	2.2%	8.2%	3.3%	1.1%	1.1%	0.0%	3.3%	0.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.7%
Numerical skills	11.2%	3.3%	18.2%	4.9%	4.1%	1.6%	3.8%	1.6%	0.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.8%

Expected use of university services

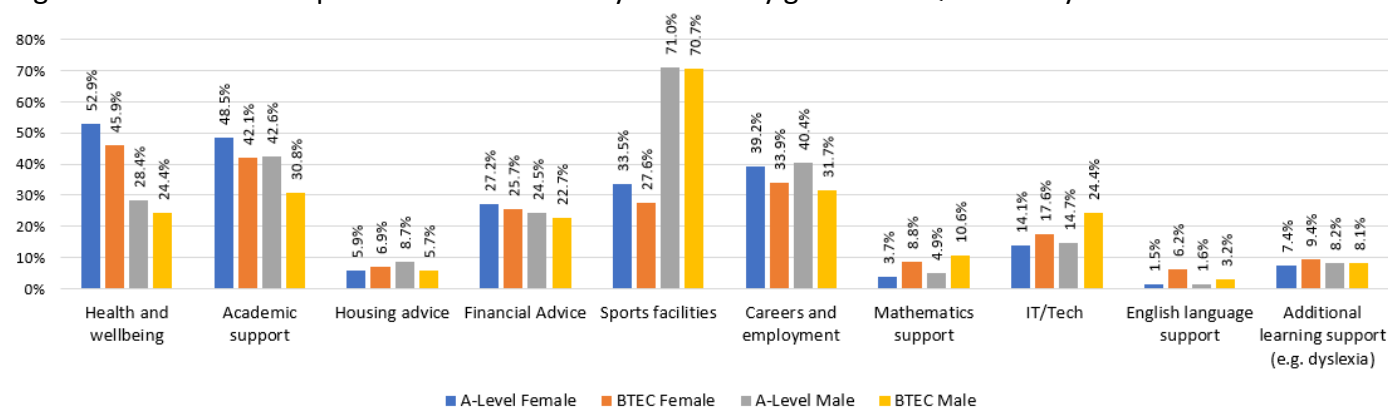
When examined by highest qualification, A-Level respondents were notably more likely to state that they expected to use *health and wellbeing*, *academic support* and *careers and employment services* than their BTEC counterparts (see Table 37) whereas BTEC were more likely to use *IT/Tech support*.

Table 37 Expected use of university services

University service	A-Level 2019	BTEC 2019	A-Level 2021	BTEC 2021
Health and wellbeing	45.4%	41.5%	43.6%	37.3%
Academic support	50.0%	44.4%	46.2%	38.0%
Housing advice	13.9%	8.6%	7.2%	6.3%
Financial Advice	26.8%	32.2%	25.7%	25.1%
Sports facilities	47.9%	43.5%	48.6%	46.0%
Careers and employment	50.8%	44.2%	39.2%	32.8%
Mathematics support	7.5%	7.9%	4.1%	9.4%
IT/Tech	Not an option in 2019	Not an option in 2019	14.4%	20.9%
English language support	1.5%	2.5%	1.5%	5.2%
Additional learning support (e.g. dyslexia)	8.3%	12.7%	7.8%	9.8%

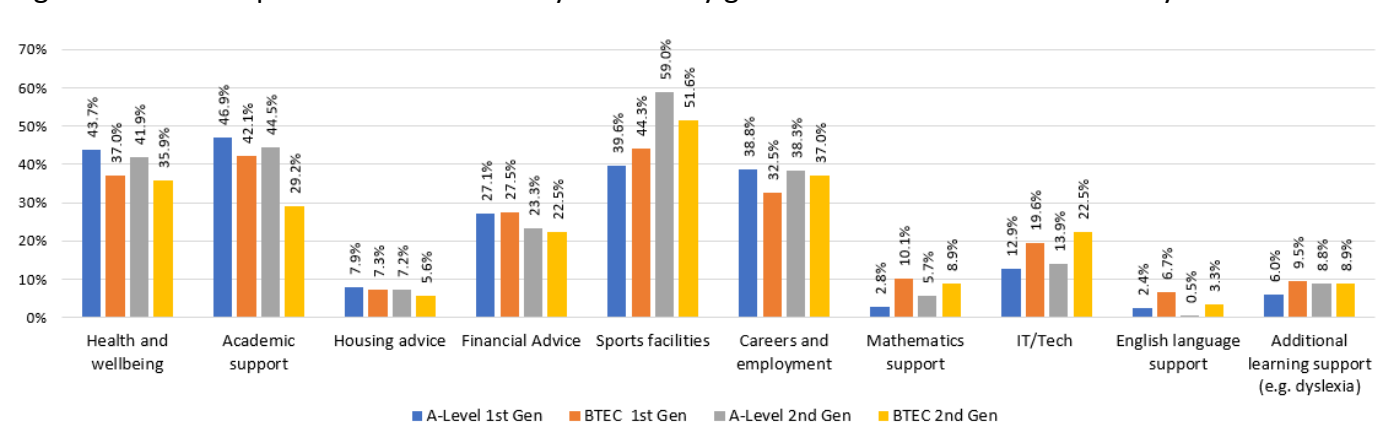
When examined by gender and qualification, females expected to use three of the services more compared to males (*health and wellbeing*, *academic support* and *financial*) (see Figure 58). Both A-Level and BTEC males were more than twice as likely to use *sport facilities* compared to females. Both A-Level and BTEC females were almost twice as likely to use *health and wellbeing* compared to their male counterparts. BTEC males expected to use *IT/Tech support* more than the other groups. These findings were also found in the 2019 survey. BTEC males were the least likely to use *health and wellbeing*, *academic support*, *financial* and *careers and employment* services.

Figure 58 Expected use of university services by gender-PAQ 2021 only



When examined by highest entry qualification and generational status, A-Level 1st and 2nd generation respondents were more likely to cite the expected use of *health and wellbeing*, *academic support*, *careers and employment* services than BTEC 1st and 2nd (see Figure 59). Both BTEC 1st and 2nd generation respondents were more likely to use *IT/Tech services*. First generation respondents for both groups cited the use of *financial services* more likely than 2nd generation. Again, this pattern of use is reflected in the 2019 findings.

Figure 59 Expected use of university services by generational status-PAQ 2021 only



Course appeal

Respondents were asked to select up to five reasons about what they had found appealing about their chosen course. The most cited course appeal factors are listed in rank order by qualification and year of survey in Table 38. For both groups, the top five are similar but in a different order. For A-Level respondents in 2019 and 2021, *course modules* were cited first.

For BTEC respondents in 2021, *employment prospects* was cited first. BTEC respondents were more likely to cite *course links with industry* than their A-Level counterparts. For both groups, the *university's league table position*, *unconditional offer based on predicted grades* and *contact hours* were three of the least cited reasons.

Table 38

Course appeal

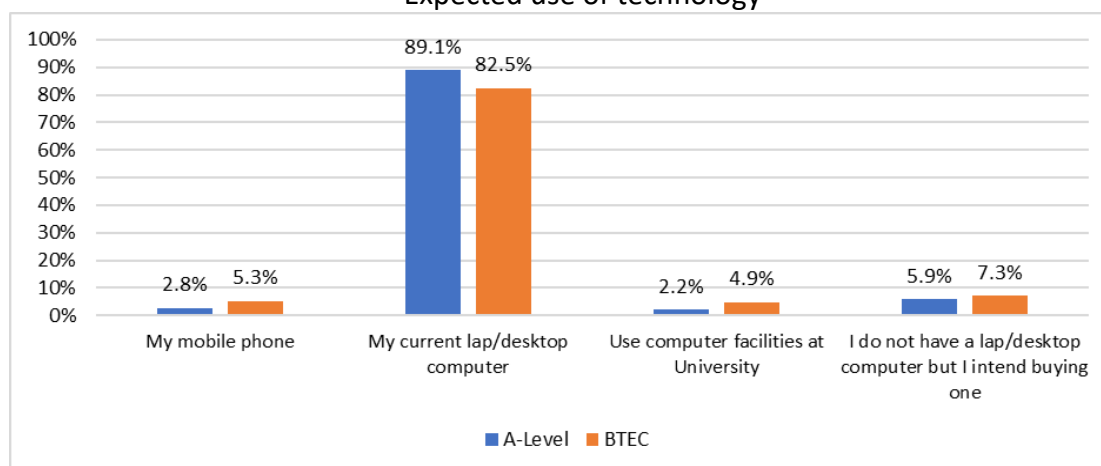
A-Level 2019	BTEC 2019	A-Level 2021	BTEC 2021
Course modules 51.7%	Course links with industry 56.6%	Course modules 57.1%	Employment prospects 51.9%
Employment prospects 50.8%	Course modules 51.8%	Employment prospects 47.1%	Course modules 47.7%
Placement opportunity 48.8%	Employment prospects 50.8%	Course specific facilities 41.2%	Course specific facilities 47.4%
Course links with industry 43.8%	Placement opportunity 48.6%	Course links with industry 34.4%	Course links with industry 42.2%
Course specific facilities 37.3%	Course specific facilities 49.2%	Placement opportunity 31.2%	Placement opportunity 33.1%

Expected use of technology-PAQ 2021 only

Respondents were asked what to select the main source of technology they expected to use when accessing learning materials at university when they start their studies (see Figure 60). There was similarity between the two highest entry qualification groups with their *current laptop/desktop computer* being their main source of technology.

Figure 60

Expected use of technology

**Perception of how employers view an undergraduate qualification**

Respondents were asked how they thought employers viewed an undergraduate qualification. Whilst the majority of respondents felt that employers' do value an undergraduate qualification more than pre-university qualifications, there was a notable amount of uncertainty especially amongst BTEC respondents across both surveys (see Table 39).

Table 39

Perception of how employers view an undergraduate degree

Course appeal	A-Level 2019	BTEC 2019	A-Level 2021	BTEC 2021
Employers value an undergraduate qualification more than pre-university qualifications	71.6%	66.0%	66.7%	49.5%
Employers value an undergraduate qualification in the same was as pre-university qualifications	6.1%	7.3%	7.4%	12.9%
Employers value an undergraduate qualification less than pre-university qualifications	0.5%	0.4%	0.9%	1.4%
I am unsure how employers value an undergraduate qualification	21.9%	26.3%	25.1%	36.2%

When the qualitative comments are examined explaining the respondent's selection, clear reasons were provided across both qualification groups. The key themes are listed below for those who feel employers do value an undergraduate degree over pre-university qualifications and those who are unsure.

Employers do value an undergraduate degree over pre-university qualifications

The responses in 2021 fell into three broad categories.

- Demonstrates higher skills and knowledge.
- Individual ability.
- Required for a chosen profession/career in general.

Unsure whether employers do undergraduate degree over pre-university qualifications

For respondents who were unsure about whether employers valued an undergraduate qualification more than pre-university qualifications, the comments fell into three broad categories.

- Uncertainty as had not thought about it before.
- Uncertainty through limited experience.
- Depends on the subject and career to be pursued.

Section 7 Suggested support by A-Level and BTEC respondents

Below are the free text responses by A-Level and BTEC respondents on what support universities could provide and their own advice to themselves regarding the main areas of concern for them. It is important to note that each university provided much of the supported suggested which respondents may not have been aware of when completing the pre-arrival academic questionnaire.

Lack of information about how to study at university

- A basic guide to balancing university life with social life.
- A leaflet of useful tips and tricks.
- A good induction to the course and how to study.
- A large feeling of welcoming when I arrive.
- Advice and help on how to study well at university through emails, talks, videos.
- Previous students or course directors giving advice on ways to study/materials which were helpful.
- Advice and experience from current students about being at university.
- Explanations of how independent study is expected to be carried out.
- Having dedicated lectures or seminars on how to study e.g. how to reference and how to structure essays and create presentations.
- Providing time to get used to university life and my course.
- Online resources highlighting the differences between college and university.
- Providing some information about how to study and the differences between university study and previous studies.
- Online resources in how to adjust to new type of study.

Having a long commute to attend my studies

- Being able to access a mix of online and in-person learning for the course so do not have to commute everyday.
- Bursary for travelling.
- Advice on planning my travel journey.

Difficulties in fitting my study around my part-time work commitments

- Have a clear balanced schedule that allows fair time for both.
- Ask advice from people who have studied and did a part time job on the side.
- Discuss with my employer near my home if they can relocate me to a store close to the university, with a contract fitted around my timetable.
- Discuss my part-time working hours with my employer once I get my timetable.
- Having a timetable that is consolidated over a few of days so I can balance university and work life.
- Getting my timetable earlier enough so I can forward plan.

Coping with the level of study at university

- Allocating days where I focus on study work.
- Attend all classes and ask questions.
- Asking for support from module leaders and academic support and fellow students.
- Being aware of where I can access assistance with my education.
- Clear guidance about the differences between school and college between A-Levels and university assessment and feedback.
- Develop a structured routine so that I do not fall behind.
- Information about well-being services and revision advice.
- Regular checks on progress and wider reading undertaken.
- Tutors talking to us about how to handle stress.
- Reasonable expectations by the university and myself as a result of the pandemic, and guidance when struggling with work.

Mental health and wellbeing

- Understand that a day off may be needed when I am fairing particularly badly or I may require extra explanations or extended deadlines for independent work/assessment.
- Advice on how to eat well on a small budget and what helps all round wellbeing.
- Clear and accessible information and advice on places and websites you can contact if you are worried about your mental health or those of fellow students. Also advice and information given out on what you can do if you worried about your own mental health and wellbeing.
- Support to feel confident about talking about mental health issues that can crop up.

Sufficient funding and getting into debt

- Budgeting advice and information on how to reduce debt and make money go further.
- Help students really struggling with grants and bursaries that aren't only available to the very lowest income households.
- Being advised about what grants or bursaries are available.
- I will have to work 10-15 hours a week at some point to pay for university but have never been professionally employed so advice on obtaining a job would be helpful.
- Opportunities for paid work related to the course or at university.

Getting used to moving away from home for the first time

- Calling my friends and family in my free time.
- Taking things from home that make me happy for my room.
- Not isolating myself and keep in touch with family.
- Help with how to live with people who live very differently to you and how to cope with challenging flat mates.
- Make friends with my flat mates and establish a support group where we can talk about our concerns.
- Talk to current students to see how they got used to living.
- Understand that its normal to be nervous and ring home when I need but also go out with my new friends and flat mates.

Lack of confidence about my ability to study

- A supportive learning resources team.
- Try to develop a positive approach to my own learning.
- Learning to be kind to myself and understand that it might take some time to get used to studying again.
- Do not compare myself to others as we all are different.
- Regular feedback from tutors and the ability to ask questions and receive a response as quickly as possible.
- Tutors giving more short tests and quizzes to help students keep up with academic work.
- Have the courage and be encouraged to ask if I do not understand something.

Knowledge gaps due to prior learning experience

- Assess where the knowledge gaps are and work on them so I do not fall behind.
- Lecturers to be more understanding that some people may take longer to get back into education and offer feedback on how to improve.
- Communicate any gaps I think I have with tutors.
- Fill knowledge gaps by looking over missed lessons due to covid-19.
- Give extended deadlines to students who have missed gaps in knowledge.
- The university to remember that there will be people struggling to make the transition.

Getting on with fellow students and fitting in with class mates

- Being confident and reaching out to others in the same position.
- Build in frequent class discussions/group activities and ice breaking sessions.
- Being put into different groups within studies wherever possible so that interaction is possible with different students.
- Don't rush into forced social situations.
- Attend events where I can meet other students.
- Be open minded.
- University to try to provide a friendly environment that will help relax people so they will be friendly to one another.
- Just be nice and don't be mean and cruel like social media can be.
- Perhaps group work and opportunities to meet each other and become familiar on the first day.
- Ways to contact and meet people I will be around before turning up.
- Offer a chance to introduce everyone to each other.

Part 5 Considerations moving forward

This report highlights the prior learning experiences, concerns and expectations on entry of A-Level and BTEC respondents which are two of the most common entry qualifications into higher education by UK domiciled students. Although the survey sample sizes are small, they highlight the consistent findings repeated within and between the two qualifications. It also highlights the challenges for educators, and provides a clear rationale for why it is essential to address the differences in prior learning experiences on entry.

It reinforces and provides greater detail of the known factors that continue to create barriers preventing greater equality in higher education for students from different backgrounds. These have recently been recognised in the House of Commons Library Research Briefing by Bolton and Lewis (January 2023) that highlights four key primary areas which are:

- The prior attainment of students.
- Insufficient advice and support both before and during university.
- Financial concerns that deter young people from applying and can have a detrimental impact on experiences of higher education.
- The prevalence of sexual and racial harassment on campus.

Impact of student characteristics

Although analysis in this report did not include findings by certain characteristics due to sample size such as ethnicity, it is well established through existing research that student characteristics, including those that are 'protected' and type of entry qualification, impact on retention, progression and success. Many of these are in the Office for Students report on *UK domiciled Student characteristics data: Student outcomes* which are listed below (November 2022). Students have multiple characteristics that can impact positively and negatively on their progression and success.

Care experience

Full and part-time students who have experienced being in care had lower continuation, completion, attainment and progression rates than students who have not experienced being in care.

Disability

Students who self-reported as disabled tended to have lower continuation, completion, attainment and progression rates than students who did not report a disability. However, this varied with domicile, as disabled, non-UK domiciled, full-time first degree qualifiers had a higher attainment rate than those who did not report a disability.

Estrangement

Full and part-time students who were estranged from their parents had lower continuation, completion, attainment and progression rates than students who were not estranged.

Ethnic minorities

The attainment rate of qualifiers from a minority ethnic background in 2020/21 was 9.6% lower than for white students (76.1% compared with 85.7%).

Free meals

Students who were recorded as eligible to receive free school meals (FSM) at any point in the six years up to key stage 4 (usually GCSE year) had lower continuation, completion, attainment and progression rates than students who were not eligible, across all modes and levels of undergraduate study.

Generational status

Students who reported that their parent(s) did not hold a higher education qualification had lower continuation, completion, attainment and progression rates than students whose parent(s) held a higher education qualification.

Mode of study

Full and part-time students who have experienced being in care had lower continuation, completion, attainment and progression rates than students who have not experienced being in care.

Polar and Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD)

Young students from POLAR4 quintile 1 areas (the areas with the lowest rates of participation in higher education among 18 and 19 year olds) had lower continuation, completion, attainment and progression rates than students from quintiles 2 and above.

Students from Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) quintile 1 areas (the most deprived areas) had lower continuation, completion, attainment and progression rates than students from quintiles 2 and above.

Sex

In general, male students had lower continuation, completion and attainment rates across all levels of study than female students. However, male students had a higher progression rate at most levels of study.

Sexual orientation

Students who identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual had lower continuation, completion and progression rates than students who identified as heterosexual. Conversely, lesbian, gay or bisexual students had higher attainment rates, with an attainment rate of 86.3% for qualifiers in 2020-21 compared with 82.8% for heterosexual students.

Socio-economic background

Students whose parents worked in higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations had continuation, completion, attainment and progression rates which were higher than for students whose parents had never worked or were long-term unemployed.

TUNDRA

Across all four TUNDRA measures, students from TUNDRA quintile 5 areas (areas with the highest participation of young people in higher education) had the highest continuation, completion, attainment and progression rates.

The impact of disadvantage

The recent Sutton Trust report entitled *Social Mobility: The Next generation Lost potential at 16* (Holt-White and Cullinane, 2023) reinforces the impact of the student characteristics highlighted above in primary and secondary school of disadvantaged high attainers. Some of the key findings include:

- Disadvantaged high attainers are less likely to be White (62.0%), than average (75.0%) and other high attainers (79.0%). Among them, the number of Black African and Bangladeshi pupils is more than double their proportion in the population.
- They are also concentrated in London, with 25.0% attending school in the capital, compared to 14% of other high attainers.
- 16.0% of disadvantaged high attainers are a young carer – 11 percentage points more likely than other high attainers (5.0%). They are less than half as likely to have a parent with a degree, and four times more likely to live in a single-parent household compared to other high attainers.
- Disadvantaged high attainers tend to be eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) for less of their school time than other FSM students, highlighting the impact of persistent disadvantage on grades.
- Within the disadvantaged high attainer group, those most likely to fall behind at GCSE included boys, White and Black Caribbean pupils, those with Special Educational Needs, and pupils in the North East.
- Despite their high grades, 21.0% of disadvantaged high attainers agreed with the statement People 'like me don't have much of a chance in life', more than double the figure of other high attainers saying the same (10.0%).
- In Year 12, disadvantaged high attainers were nearly twice as likely to be at a Further Education college (12.0%) compared to other high attainers (7.0%).

In further education college, they are more likely to undertake BTEC and other Level 3 qualifications. When asked about what they are most likely to be doing in two years' time, disadvantaged high attainers were less likely to report that they think they will be studying compared to other high attainers, at 65.0% and 75.0% respectively. Additionally, a higher percentage of non-disadvantage high attainers obtained 7 to 9 GCSEs (see Figure 61).

Figure 61 Grade attainment by non-disadvantage and disadvantage high attainers



Source: Holt-White and Cullinane, 2023 (p6)

The impact of Covid19 and the cost of living

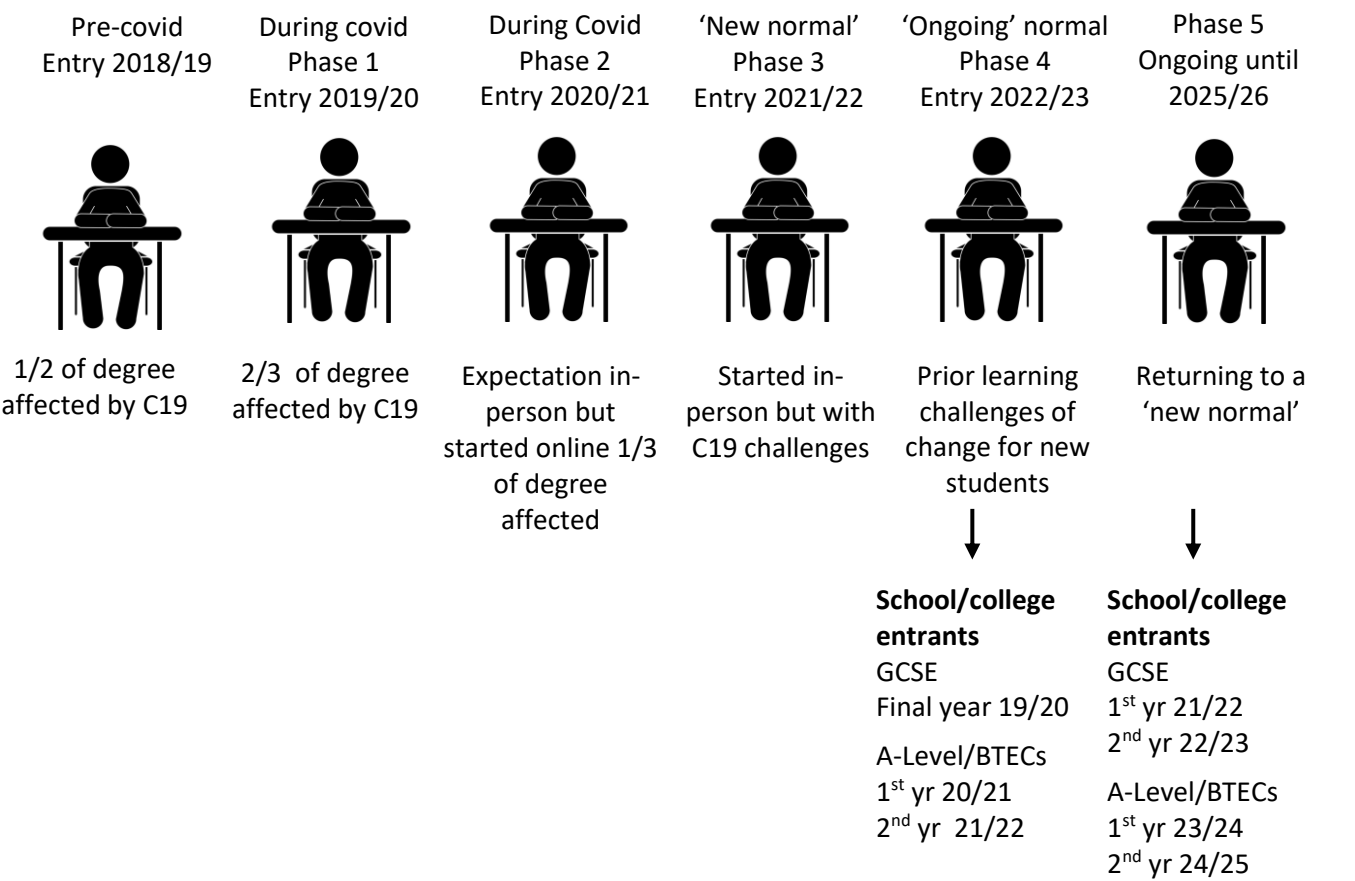
In addition to understanding the impact of student characteristics, it is also important to consider and factor in external circumstances that can exacerbate these differences such as Covid19 and the current cost of living crisis which has and is, affecting all students. However, those with greater disadvantage are more likely to suffer.

The impact of the Covid19 legacy on new university students

When assessing the success of students who entered higher education at the start of the pandemic and progressed through, it will be essential to factor in the challenges experienced by new and returning students through the duration of their course which could be exacerbated for those with disadvantage. These include: challenges of Covid19 Lockdown (isolation, mental health, financial challenges) and engagement with the rapid changes in delivery of teaching, pedagogy and assessment. For new students who entered higher education in the academic year 2022/23 who came straight from school or college, there needs to be recognition of the disruption that occurred throughout the key secondary education years, so knowledge, skills and experience may differ from previous years. We also have to recognise the ongoing impact of Covid as students progress through secondary education and ensure we are aware of their experiences in order to bridge any gaps. This is likely to continue through until 2025/26.

The Sutton report on social mobility found 37.0% of disadvantaged high attainers felt they had fallen behind their classmates as a result of the pandemic’s disruption, compared to 22.0% of other high attainers (Holt-White and Cullinane, 2023).

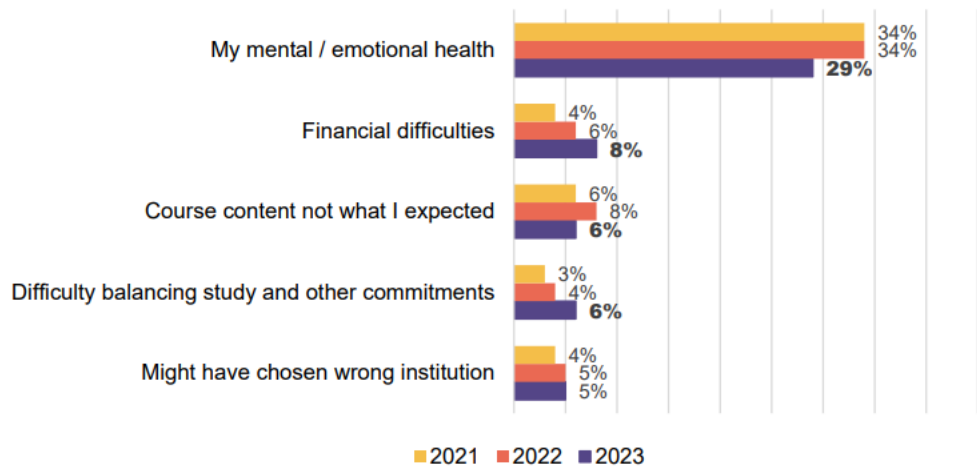
Diagram 11 Impact of the pandemic on new students entering university



(Source: Morgan, 2022b)

The AdvanceHE and HEPI Student Academic Experience Survey since 2021 has asked respondents whether they had considered withdrawing from or leaving university. The responses were similar with 29.0% in 2021, 30.0% in 2022 and 28.0% in 2023 (Neves and Stephenson, 2023). When asked the reason, the main one provided was mental and wellbeing (see Figure 62).

Figure 62 Reasons considered for leaving study

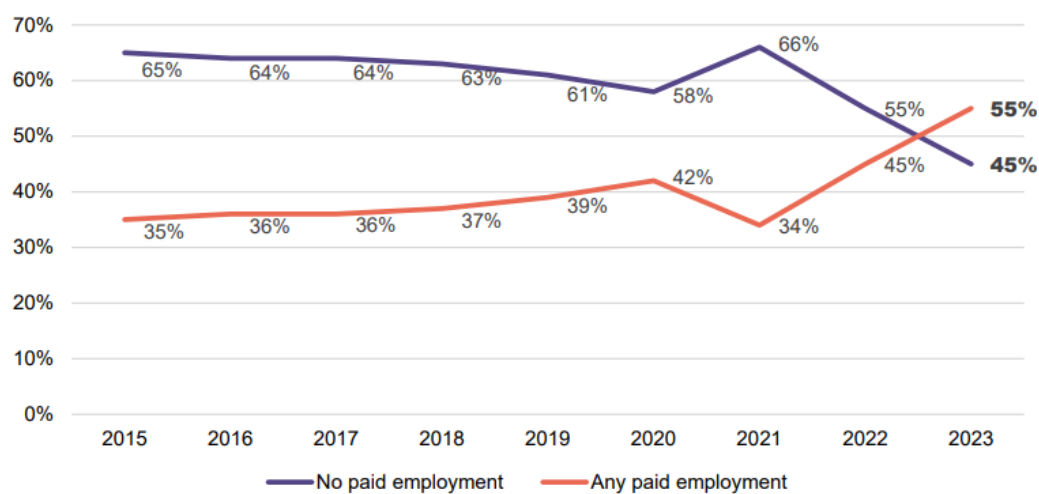


Source: Student Academic Experience Survey, Neves and Stephenson, 2023 (p27)

The impact of the cost of living crisis

The challenges facing all students in higher education is very pronounced. For English domiciled students, the English maintenance loan has only risen by 2.0% which is the lowest compared to the other UK countries. The Student Academic Experience Surveys found an increasing number of respondents since 2015 have undertaken paid work but this notably increased in 2022 and 2023 (see Figure 63).

Figure 63 Students in paid employment



Source: Student Academic Experience Survey, Neves and Stephenson, 2023 (p35)

The Student Academic Experience Survey in 2023 found that the higher the hours of paid work per week was undertaken, the more likely students had considered withdrawing from their studies.

- No paid employment = 24% considered withdrawing.
- Working 1-9 hours of paid employment = 29.0% had considered withdrawing.
- Working in excess of 10 hours = 31.0% had considered withdrawing.

The report found a rise in the number of students relying on income from employment to cover most of their living costs at 14.0% of all students, a rise from 9.0% of all students in 2022 and 8.0% of all students in 2021.

Cutting back on necessities

The National Union of Students commissioned a survey in May 2021 showed that 60.0% of students responding to their survey had seen their income impacted by the pandemic, and 70.0% of students were worried about their ability to manage financially (NUS, 2021). It found:

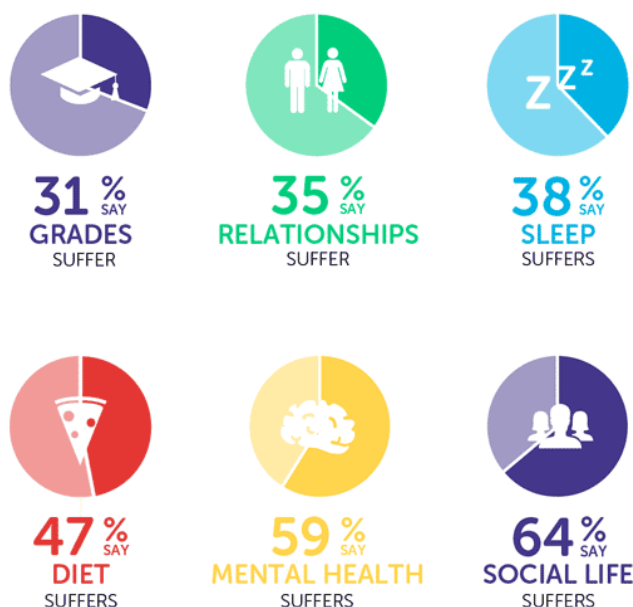
- 1 in 3 students had cut back on food for lack of money.
- 1 in 10 students had turned to food banks.
- 2 in 3 students had found their loans did not cover their living costs.

In the National Union of Students Cost of Living report in September 2022 (NUS, 2022), student respondents reported cutting back on a range of essential areas such as food (52.0%), heating (42.0%) and transport (42.0%) which all impact on their ability to engage effectively with their studies. Similar findings were found in Blackbullion's Student Money and Wellbeing Survey 2023 where student respondents reported cutting back on basic needs with 39.0% not turning the heating on, 16.0% cutting back on personal hygiene and 34.0% going hungry/eating less than their usual number of meals a day (Blackbullion, 2023).

Similarly, the Save the Student Money Survey 2022 found that student respondents suffered across a range of areas (see Diagram 12) (Brown, 2022).

Diagram 12

Areas affected by cost of living crisis



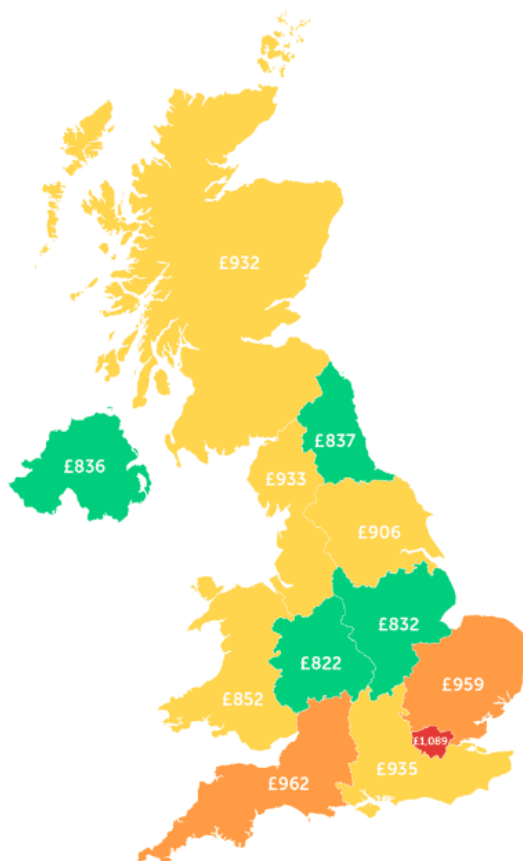
Source: [Student Money Survey 2022 – Results - Save the Student](#)

In addition to this, they reported in their [2021 survey](#), that 10 of the 12 regions had average student living costs of £800 per month or less. Figure 64 highlights that the two most expensive regions in the survey were the South West of England (£866 per month) and London (£896 per month). However, in their 2022 survey, they found each region's average was above £800.

The cheapest region for students was the West Midlands, with average monthly living costs of £822 (see Figure 64). The South West of England and London remain the most expensive parts of the UK for students, but these have risen to £962 and £1,089 per month respectively. Compared to 2021, the average amount students spend on household bills and transport has increased in each region of the UK.

Figure 64

Map of cost of living



Source: [Student Money Survey 2022 – Results - Save the Student](#)

The 2023 report from the National Union of Students that focuses on student travel highlights a number of challenges (NUS, 2023). They found that the majority of students were spending between £11-£30 per week on travel, with 9.0% spending more than £50 per week. This financial burden is more pronounced for those from low-income backgrounds especially commuter students. It reinforced previous findings of the consequences of high transportation costs on students' lives outside of education. Students have had to forego socializing with friends (60.0%), participating in sports, clubs or societies (35.0%), visiting family (35.0%), and even affording meals (32.0%) due to the high cost of travel.

They found the experiences of travel for students, were although the majority of students felt safe while travelling, concerns about night-time travel, encounters with strangers, and the risk of harassment were prominent.

Impact on mental health and wellbeing

The National Union of Students 2022 Cost of Living Report (NUS, 2022) also highlighted that the crisis had impacted on students health and wellbeing with 65.0% stating the impact had been major or moderate. Within this area, the crisis had added to anxiety and depression as well as leading to a lack of sleep and proper eating. The survey found that the impact was more keenly felt among those above 23 years of age, those living in rented accommodation, women, nonbinary, disabled persons, and parents and carers.

Similarly, Blackbullion found 58.0% of student respondents in their survey said worry about money was negatively impacting on their mental health, with 94.0% saying it triggered stress, and 77.0% had feelings of hopelessness. The Save the Student Money Survey (Brown, 2022) asked about the effects of accommodation costs on health in general. They found 62.0% said their health had suffered due to worry with 53% stating that those who paid rent struggled to keep up with it. As was highlighted in this report, Blackbullion found that males were less worried than female student respondents who tended to be more cautious and planned for the 'worst-case scenario'.

Impact on educational attainment

As well as health and wellbeing, it is already being reported that the cost of living is having an impact on educational attainment. Blackbullion found that not only were 76.0% of student respondents worried that the rising cost of living would have a negative impact on their final degree result, but they also reported a demonstrable effect on their academic attainment. Sixty percent of those surveyed stated they had received a lower grade than expected on an exam or assignment in the last 12 months because of job commitments. The same proportion, 60.0%, stated they had received a lower grade than expected because they were too cold to study as a result of avoiding turning the heating on. Of the respondents, 55.0% stated they were performing less well because they felt too hungry to study or concentrate (Blackbullion, 2023).

As well as impact on health and wellbeing and educational attainment, research is highlighting that the cost of living is impacting on students considering whether to drop out of their studies. The Opinion Survey showed 7 out of 10 student respondents had considered dropping out of higher education since starting their degree. Nearly two-fifths of those gave rising living costs as the main reason (Hanna, 2023)

The MillionPlus Briefing looking at the Student Academic Experience Survey results found similar reasons amongst different groups of students respondents considering withdrawing from their studies (Jones, 2022).

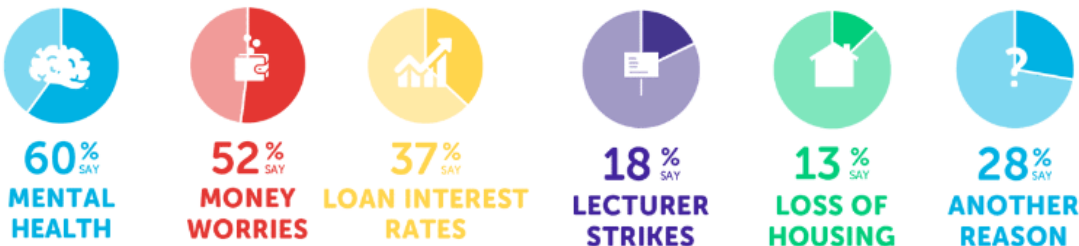
- Problems with mental or emotional health were cited as the main reason student respondents had considered quitting with one-third of those polled.
- Twice the proportion of students aged over-25 had considered quitting due to finances than those under-21.
- Students living alone who tend to face greater financial outgoings than those in shared or university-owned accommodation were almost three-times more likely to cite financial issues as their main/most recent reason for thinking about quitting their studies.
- First generation students and students from lower participating areas were also more likely to have thought about leaving due to their finances
- Students in their first year of study were significantly more likely to report finances as their main reason for quitting.

The MillionPlus Briefing Report found that just as the same way that at-risk students are not distributed evenly across the student population, at-risk students are also more likely to study at modern universities. While modern universities educate around 46.0% of all undergraduates, a disproportionate number of the at-risk groups identified above study at such universities (Jones, 2022).

HEPI's Student Academic Experience Survey (Neves and Brown, 2022) found that while 4.0% of students who considered dropping out of university due to financial reasons in the Student Cost of Living Report survey's 2021 equivalent, this number had risen to 6.0 % by 2022.

The Save the Student Money Survey (Brown, 2022) found that 82.0% had considered dropping out at some point (see Diagram 12). Reasons provided include:

Diagram 13 Reasons for thinking about dropping out

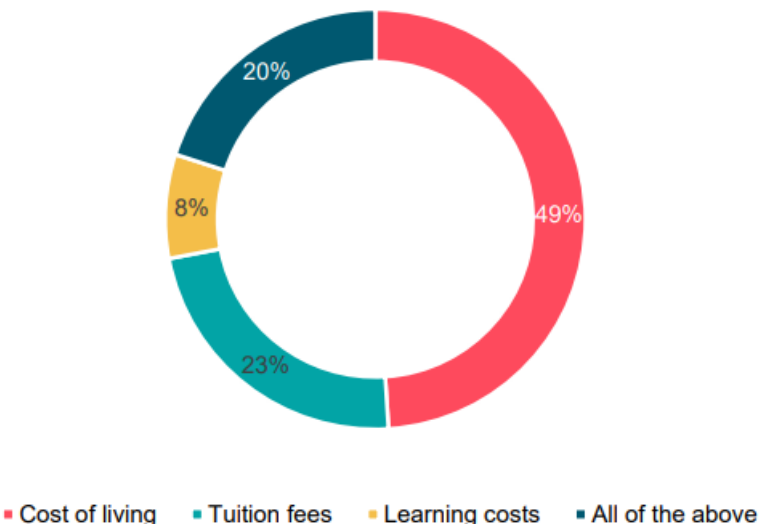


Source: [Student Money Survey 2022 – Results - Save the Student](#)

Impact on financial concern on entry

The Student Academic Experience Survey in 2023 found financial concerns for respondents on entry to university around cost of living was still a major concern between the 2023 and 2022 surveys but it was down from 52.0% to 49.0%. There was a similar increase in respondents stating that their main concern was now 'all of the financial concerns', which went from 17.0% in 2022 to 20.0% in 2023.

Figure 65 Main financial concerns when applying to university



Source: Student Academic Experience Survey, Neves and Stephenson, 2023 (p70)

Entrenchment of inequality due to the cost of living crisis

The National Union of Students survey found that inequality was being entrenched due to the cost of living crisis citing *'Within the student population there are demographics who suffer enhanced disadvantages that compound the detriment to them. The groups of students most adversely affected are those which have often had the most difficult route into further or higher education – and/or people from groups that continue to be disproportionately under represented in further and higher education'* (NUS, 2022; p15).

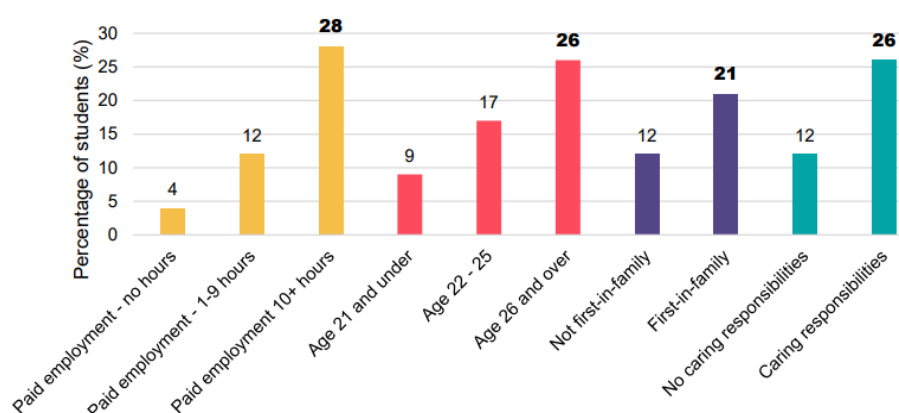
In particular, they found:

- Trans and non-binary students, as well as students of colour are more likely to have less than £500 a month in income.
- Parents and carers are more likely to report extreme concern about their ability to get by financially than other students.
- Food bank usage is more likely among mature students, those in further education, disabled students, and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
- Parents and carers are more likely to have sought assistance from a number of sources including credit schemes and credit cards.

Similarly, the Student Experience Academic Survey in 2023 found reinforcement amongst disadvantage groups of students as a result of the cost of living crisis and the need to work (see Figure 64). Those who stated that they used income from employment to cover most of their living costs included:

- 28.0% of students working +10 hours of paid employment.
- 26.0% of students above 26 years of age.
- 21.0% of first-in-family students.
- 26.0% of students with caring responsibilities.

Figure 66 Student living costs funded by employment by student characteristics



Source: Student Academic Experience Survey, Neves and Stephenson, 2023 (p68)

Respondents in the survey who were care-experienced students were less likely to state their maintenance loan or grants covered most of their living costs with 23.0% compared to other students with 44.0%. The difference was made up through scholarships (18.0% of care-experienced students, compared to 7.0% of other students), income from employment (19% of care-experienced students compared to 14.0% of others) and, concerningly, bank loans (7.0% of care-experienced students, compared to 3.0% of others) (Neves and Stephenson, 2023).

Part 6 Commentators contributions on the findings of the report

Introduction to the commentaries

Professor Sir Les Ebdon

This authoritative report should be required reading for senior managers in higher education. Understanding the prior learning of our students, their perceptions and expectations on entry is key to providing the student-centred learning experience we all wish to provide. While some themes are consistent across all students, the differences between those who enter via the two main entry routes (A-Level and BTEC) are marked and help explain differential achievement between these groups. There is a pressing need for greater attention to be paid to the transition into higher education for BTEC entrants with their more diverse learning experience accentuated by COVID 19 lockdown events. The commentaries provided below by leaders and practitioners in the field, provide valuable advice, thoughts and suggestions.

A Schools Perspective

Sue Williamson, Chief Executive, SSAT

Schools are very different now post pandemic. Student behaviour has become more challenging, and there are now more issues associated with mental health. Schools are struggling to recruit specialist staff, and there is also a shortage in school leaders. The impact of Michael Gove's changes to the national curriculum are now clearly being seen, and both teachers and students are critical of the narrowing of the curriculum, focus on rote learning, and on passing of examinations rather than deep learning or learning that is useful for life. To prepare young people for the next step in their education journey, the school system should be adopting Albert Einstein's philosophy of education "*Education is not the learning of facts but the training of the mind to think*".

This report addresses two recommendations for universities:

- Considering the alignment of assessment methods with students' previous experience throughout the course of students to understand where issues occur.
- Obtaining a greater understanding by universities of the prior learning experience of students so effective support can be provided to enable students to succeed.

Morgan correctly identifies that *"if a university does not understand their students previous experience and expectations, they will not effectively be able to support their students through the study lifecycle"*.

In November 2022, Izzy Garbutt, Member of the Youth Parliament gave the following speech:

"I'm Izzy, a youth MP from Wigan and Leigh and I can recite the quadratic formula. A flashcard with the formula was stuck on my wall for three months leading to my GCSEs. Ingrained into my memory ready to recall and apply to a question which may or may not come up on my maths paper 2. Funnily enough it did come up on my paper and I was prepared to answer it.

However, there are a whole host of things that I have never been taught, things which will never be on an exam, and that no amount of revision notes blue tacked on my wall will prepare me for. The education system is supposedly created for young people so listen please when we say it is failing us. We are picked up, put down and strapped into a never-ending conveyor belt of academic testing. For years, we have been calling for a curriculum for life, a curriculum which will see us leaving school with a greater understanding of the world around us.

We are pleading for more emphasis on employability, communication skills and personal well-being. Isn't the foundation of education creating well rounded, well informed young people ready for the future? So why do I after spending 14 years in countless classrooms, feel so unsure about what's to come? Young people are more than just letters or numbers on a piece of paper in mid-August. We are not a percentage of A-Cs, we are not evidence in an Ofsted report, and we are not a pass or a fail.*

The pressure students to under-perform is excessive with the 2015 reforms in particular seeing an increase in content and more emphasis on examinations. Memorising has become a synonym for learning and mental health as suffered as a consequence. Well-being must become a priority and nurturing the development of young people as individuals should be the aim of education, not exam results.

So no, I don't know how to maintain a good mental health, I don't understand how to pay tax and I have no idea what I want to be when I grow up. But go on Madam Deputy Speaker ask me and I'll tell you all about the quadratic formula."

Schools have become examination factories, and students are taught how to pass examinations rather than learning how to think. Vocational qualifications along with creative and performing arts subjects have been squeezed out of the curriculum. Many examinations are not fit for purpose e.g., how can drama be assessed on theory alone?

Schools are worried about deviating from Government policy, as this may well result in a failed Ofsted visit. Tragic events such as the death of Ruth Perry have shown the pressure felt by school leaders.

Covid has made the situation much worse. The lockdown meant that children and young people lost the structure and support of school. For many children the loss of structure was devastating. For some the loss of freedom was constraining – how many teenagers want to be with their parents 24 hours a day? Many children felt loss – the loss of the normal rites of passage of school – examinations, leaving proms, transition arrangements, friendship groups. From loss emanates three dynamics that impact on the mental health of students – anxiety, trauma, and bereavement. This has affected the mental health of children and young people and one in four young people at age 17 are experiencing issues with mental health. This figure was one in ten pre-pandemic. We know that disadvantaged children suffered more than non-disadvantaged students. The Government's recovery programme with its focus on tutoring has not addressed these issues, and schools are struggling to return to pre-pandemic standards and operations.

The report highlights the importance of universities understanding their students previous experience. For a variety of reasons – curriculum, missed learning through Covid, mental health issues – young people arriving at university are not confident learners and need more nurturing. Section 7 gives considerable detail on the support students are asking for. Many universities already provide this support but may well find that the demand is greater than before.

It is how individual institutions and teachers respond to these demands that will determine the success of individuals. There needs to be a national debate on the purpose of education and a drive to recruit and retain teachers in the school system. Without specialist teachers, students will be less prepared for higher education. We need a fresh approach that enables students to successfully transition to higher education – it is a journey that needs to be shared by all stakeholders. The future of the nation depends on us getting this right.

An institutional perspective

Approach after undertaking the undergraduate pre-arrival academic questionnaire

Professor Sue Smith, Deputy Director, Centre for Learning and Teaching, Leeds Beckett University

This report is an interesting reflection on the world- according -to -university students. It appears all students (whether entering University with A-Levels or BTEC qualifications) in all our universities are having to deal with similar difficult issues. This is all compounded by the cost-of-living crisis, the fallout from the pandemic, the shift to more online learning impacting on their sense of belonging and wider wellbeing pressures.

At Leeds Beckett University (LBU), we have attempted to address some elements of this “perfect storm” of issues, and indeed, many of our actions were published in our paper [Entry to University at a Time of COVID-19: How Using a Pre-arrival Academic Questionnaire Informed Support for New First-year Students at Leeds Beckett University. | All Ireland Journal of Higher Education \(aishe.org\)](#) This paper describes how we used Morgan’s PAQ to inform our practice as students enter university as first years.

It was clear that incoming student anxiety was high. Indeed, BTEC students and A-Level students at LBU had similarly high levels of anxiety after their covid-disrupted school/college education. The university put in place a clear learning pathway for pre-arrival study support with new online Study Smart and Study Ready modules. These were expertly designed by our Library colleagues. They clarify expectations of HE learning and encourage reflection of each student’s prior learning experiences (whatever stage or level that is). The modules have received excellent feedback and are much appreciated. So much so, that these modules are now being developed and expanded by our library for level- specific transition and for the postgraduate and international students. This is also supported by new student Study Cafes and their extended open workshop programme focusing on study skills. There is much more detail in the paper, should you be interested.

From our PAQ survey data, the BTEC students were more anxious than A-Level students about online learning. This made us think about the language and clarity of instruction we used for our learning platforms, our written and video guidance and our online student workshops. To a certain extent this has now resolved, but we still have students who have found engagement with learning difficult in an online environment. We have, particularly in our Centre for Learning and Teaching and our Digital Learning Service, focused hard on working with academic and professional service staff to develop their understanding of pedagogies for online design that really focus on enhancing student engagement. Interactive activities, apps, group work and breakout rooms are all used more extensively to enhance participation. Academic staff have been actively supported to innovate in this area through internal Teaching Excellence Project funding. In addition, a workstream focusing on inclusive curricula, learning and assessment dovetails with this.

A wider issue is the impact more online learning has had on all new students’ sense of belonging. We now have fewer students living in the residences and the cost of travel means more students are learning from home. More BTEC students learn from home than others with different entry qualifications. The nature of the “traditional “university social life may therefore feel different for those students. This may impact on some students’ wellbeing. We knew that our BTEC students have a greater chance of dropping out, so our Schools focus on designing strategies that enhance student continuation, progression and completion. We also have tailored monitoring of these students. Our Education Plan required Schools to implement schemes which support, and excellent first-year experience e.g. care with assessment timings, personalised academic advising, mentoring and a curriculum that focuses tightly on inclusive practice which appeals to all.

Following the PAQ completion students were sent guidance, in the form of a Microsoft Sway, which was targeted to address the concerns their course peers had highlighted in the survey responses.

At LBU we have put into place strategies for all students (whatever their pre-entry qualification) to engage, thrive and feel supported. If students feel happier, they learn better and then they stay at university to complete their qualifications. Students' wellbeing could decline in light of the cost-of-living crisis and LBU has been at the forefront of our University Executive Team's minds. Notably our augmented support to ease students through the current winter has been praised nationally and is mentioned in a Wonkhe blog entitled [How should universities act to alleviate the cost of living crisis?](#)

An institutional support perspective - Embedding support

Kate Swinton, University of Northampton

This report highlights the importance of a pre-arrival questionnaire in understanding new students prior learning experiences and expectations on entry, which can help institutions to better assist in addressing the attainment and retention gap. It can be used to inform and adapt practices, especially when considering BTEC students.

Most notably for me was the observation of the benefits and preference BTEC students had for individual face to face feedback. The benefits of this type of feedback are undisputed. Arguably, the students most comfortable approaching lecturers are already receiving this informally in discussions with lecturers and for the failed student, face to face happens when receiving a tutorial with more detailed feedback. Including more face to face feedback as part of the process does not have to be more time consuming but just become part of the process for all.

Another key observation is to ensure students are aware of services to support their 'learning journey'. It is essential that not only do they know about the support, but that it is not seen as separate which creates barriers. Support and activities such as employability, learning development and academic librarians should be embedded across all courses, which is something that the University of Northampton has implemented. Every year, throughout their studies, students get embedded sessions as part of their programme. This allows the students to see the support teams as part of their course team. Embedding the support removes some of the barriers to accessing support for the student.

The report has got me thinking about all the different areas which could be explored further in depth. One area in particular that would be interesting to unpick further is the differing confidence levels and knowledge gap between different student characteristics including entry qualification. For example, does the student who lacks confidence believe their knowledge gap is wider? Being able to identify gaps in knowledge is crucial but from experience, students are not always the best identifiers. Do students who lack confidence believe they have a wider gap than they actually do or others who are overconfident in their knowledge?

Addressing these issues goes alongside managing expectations and bridging the gaps when transitioning to Higher Education. Institutions that have some form of generic access to skills support on entry, which are not undertaken as part of the course but an addition, can be counterproductive as students do not view it in the context of their course. Furthermore, it does not enable the effective targeting of skill gaps by different entry qualifications that the report highlighted.

Therefore there is a need for more evaluation to ensure these skills being taught are truly having a positive impact on the work produced by our diverse student body. One thing that stays in my mind when reading the report and thinking about the need for the questionnaire, which can inform practice, is a student who said to me 'I don't need to hear students like me don't do well because of x and y..... I just need to be supported in order to achieve.'

An educational futures perspective: Providing some information about how to study and the differences between university study and previous studies

Professor Debbie Holley, Professor of Learning Innovation, Bournemouth University

This report illustrates the tensions students expect to face in that they are expecting differences in the move to University, and not similarities, and this excellent report starts to highlight areas of concern and offers a lens through which University teams can seek to improve their practice. Yet in educational terms, some aspects of their experiences of school/college and transition to University study are remarkably similar. The dearth of the digital is appalling and stunning in equal measure: surely as a sector we do more to raise student aspirations as to how their new life can be enhanced, enlivened and possibilities communicated in places where the students are starting from? The ways in which our students access materials is changing, the [OFCOM Online Nation Report](#) (2022) points to increasing online access via smartphones with young adult (90%); and younger adults are also more likely to only use a smartphone to go online, with a third of 25-34s reporting this as the only way they go online.

Evidence shows that students rate themselves as digital experts – but upon drilling down, it became obvious they were social media experts – not academic learning experts. The promises of technology that underpin a digital future of work through technological skills developed at Universities are portrayed through images of smiling students, attending hybrid and innovative courses designed by well qualified and digitally savvy staff.

The reality can be seen through the lens of the [Educause Horizon Report™](#) (2022) which highlights the impact of Learning Analytics and Big Data, the post-Covid return to the classroom and challenges of hybrid and online delivery with the debate framed in the wider context of the digital economy of work. Students desire access to engaging, well designed materials; yet 43% of those surveyed report low quality materials being supplied, and despite many (68%) agreeing that online learning was convenient, it was the lack of community that (41%) was the key issue for many. Students report turning to each other for support with digital skills, and under half (47%) approached their tutors.

The educational positives from Covid, drawn from the [Morley and Holley](#) (2023) analysis of the Covid-19 Higher Education Literature Database ([CHELD](#)) clearly demonstrated Universities nationally and internationally racing to adapt their teaching to distance and blended learning enabling students to continue their studies. The work identified five key areas of activity: institutional impact; the redesign of whole programmes of study; the development of selective pedagogies; the reworking of assessment and feedback and significantly, strategies to support student wellbeing. However, moves toward visions of emancipatory practice through hybrid learning, with the blurring of boundaries beyond the physical and social are not evidenced ([Gil et al., 2022](#)). The seamless shift between rich and complex technology-mediated modalities of learning, formal, informal and non-formal; individual and collaborative; face-to-face and online, with benefits for students and lifelong learners alike are yet to be fulfilled.

Yet as we emerge from the pandemic we already know the digital divide has impacted upon the students surveyed in this report. A horrific figure from the [Office for Students](#) (OfS) (2021) report was 104,000 students in England with no access at all to the internet. Faculty share stories of students (and staff) sitting on the top of their staircases with their mobile phones, and trying to gain access to meetings, workshops and classes. 52% of students surveyed by the OfS report their learning impacted by slow or unreliable internet connections; 71% reported lack of quiet study space, with 22% severely impacted; and 18% impacted by lack of access to computer, laptop or tablet. Digital health and wellbeing have come to the fore, and the Students Minds Charity, in their '[University Mental Health: Life in a pandemic study](#)' (2021), highlight narratives of loneliness and isolation, with the burden falls across particular groups, with the Citizens Advice '[Life through the lockdown](#)' Report (2021) identifying those individuals from low-income households, ethnic minorities as well as those with disabilities being disproportionately impacted, through inability to pay for their internet.

This transitions report is an insightful study; and in the responses we can reflect the challenges faced by students more widely, both pre-and post pandemic. Both the A-Level and BTEC groups both desire useful and meaningful feedback, and this seems no more forthcoming in their previous studies than in their University experiences, if the 'Assessment and feedback' question analysis of the annual [National Student Survey](#) run by the Office for Students in the United Kingdom are drawn upon as an evidence base. Across the sector, we are not meeting student expectations for assessment and feedback, and degree classifications at exit continue to reflect social disadvantage – surely we can do better than offer 'written feedback' and meetings that only those with the advantage of social capital will attend?

The digital is only one of the challenges all 'transition' stakeholders in Higher Education need to consider and step up to. The recent UNESCO '[Reimagining Education](#)' (2022) policy paper calls for a reorganisation of curricula, pedagogies and learning assessments towards whole brain, learner centric, socially inclusive education; to replace credentialism and meritocracy with potentiality on investing in self and evaluation of self growth evaluation over time; to redistribute education funding to ensure equitable and inclusive learner centric education; and to re-organise research funding to enable multidisciplinary, large-scale and global research programmes. Our learners deserve vision, value and values as they transition, and this excellent report highlights ways forward, but also the challenges that remain to enable true equality, and equity, in their ongoing education.

A Personal Tutoring/Advising Perspective

Dr Emily McIntosh, Director of Student Success, University of the West of Scotland (UWS)

PAQs and Early Intervention Systems

This report demonstrates the pivotal importance of Pre-Arrival Questionnaires (PAQs) to determining student support needs on or before arrival at university. This is especially the case in what continues to be a time of huge volatility and disruption in UK Higher Education: the Covid19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis have both placed huge pressure on students and on universities, disrupting learning for the long term. Without understanding, at the earliest stage, the impact of students' circumstances on their learning, we are not able to provide the best level of support, information, advice and guidance. PAQs are essential to providing a model of Early Intervention & Transitional Support (EI) for students (McIntosh, 2019) and should provide the foundation for personal tutoring/academic advising interventions.

As Morgan's report demonstrates, data from PAQs offer a huge amount of insight into both students' circumstances and their expectations of the student journey. These insights provide a much richer picture of our student cohorts, beyond the data that is traditionally collected via enrolment. This

information allows us to anticipate needs and provide responsive and proactive support and, importantly, gives us an opportunity for early dialogue with students about how we can offer support. The PAQ process therefore allows us to actively involve students in promoting the importance of help seeking behaviours, putting students and their wellbeing at the heart of our student support systems. Its centrality to the welcome and induction experience must therefore not be underestimated.

What You Ask Equally Important As Asking in the First Place

The report has also outlined that the information we collect as part of the PAQ exercise is just as important as the exercise itself. For example, without understanding our students' paid working patterns, we cannot understand the impact of external pressures on their decision-making. A recent report from the Sutton Trust (as summarised in Wonkhe, 2023) outlined the impact of students' working habits on their learning – where 23% of respondents reported missing a lecture or a deadline because of prioritising paid work. The impact of this on student transition and retention is potentially huge, with cumulative impacts on their ability to keep up with their learning, to make friends with their course mates.

The Wonkhe report on Building Belonging in Higher Education (2022) emphasised the critical importance of making connections at university, and therefore accentuating the *cumulative impact* of external circumstances on students' ability to focus on their programme and make the best start at university. This insight prompts us to act to bring cohorts together, to do some essential social engineering and to recommend and signpost to wider university support (such as the hardship funds, where often those most in need still do not apply). At a time when the pandemic has also disrupted prior learning experiences – another issue highlighted in this report – early anticipation of academic support needs, particularly around academic skills and learning development – can help us to mitigate the impact of gaps in learning, way ahead of the first assessment point.

Without this information, those in both academic advising/personal tutoring roles and those in wider student support roles, will struggle to gain contextual information which might be useful to them in building rapport with students, both individuals and groups. The PAQ is therefore part of system of relational pedagogy, where the quality of dialogue and student support for learning is fundamental to the delivery of modern and agile academic programmes. When considered from this perspective, the PAQ adds real value in safeguarding student retention, progression and satisfaction, helping us to get as close as possible to a personalised student experience.

PAQs as Part of An Integrated System of Support

PAQs should not sit in isolation, but part of a wider and integrated ecosystem of student support. When you combine the insight from the PAQ with engagement data and proxies, a richer picture of student engagement emerges, but must always be met with person-centred support systems. Thomas's What Works Reports (1&2) in 2012 and 2017 highlighted the importance of programme-centred student support, where students identify with their programme rather than the university. The reports also advocated for mainstreamed models of student support. Common setbacks around learning, such as assessments, group work, academic writing, can be normalised and mitigated when proactively delivered as part of the curricular learning experience. These actionable insights, enabled by the PAQ, allow us to build an environment which is built around support and success. Data can be used to put into place appropriate progression milestones and way-markers which help to underpin the student journey, and help universities to understand how best to deliver the systems of support they have on offer. Academic support and peer learning then continue to be a formidable partnership for student progression. Being interested in our students, understanding their circumstances, and showing willingness to recognise their whole learning experience will help to systematically build student support systems better able to withstand the challenges presented post-Covid.

A Personal Tutoring Perspective

**Dr David Grey, Chief Executive and Hugh Mannerings, Business Development Manager
UK Advising and Tutoring Association (UKAT)**

This informative report offers invaluable insights into our incoming students and their concerns, challenges, and experiences. It should be required reading for personal tutors and those who coordinate personal tutoring as it illustrates, as McIntosh eloquently observes, the vital importance of contextual information about our students. It also suggests how the systematic use of pre-arrival questionnaires can provide data to help institutions routinely adapt their personal tutoring provisions to the needs of incoming students. Pre-Arrival Questionnaires (PAQs) offer valuable insights into the prior experiences, challenges, and concerns of our incoming students. The power of the PAQs lies in their ability to offer information about the collective context of a cohort (e.g., programme, discipline), as well as the specific context of individual students.

Effective personal tutors need contextual information about individual students to be able to support and guide their educational and professional development in the best way. Without this data, personal tutors may rely on past experiences and potentially inaccurate assumptions about the prior experiences and needs of their students. As Curnock Cook observes, this report highlights the similarities between BTEC and A-level students more than the differences and may challenge (historical) preconceptions of some educators about preparedness and ability to study due to prior educational experience. Moss also notes that the aggregate data we often consider in HE does not tell us about the needs of the individual student. The beauty of the PAQs used here by Morgan is that they do provide meaningful information about individuals. The challenge is how we use this data effectively for the benefit of our students.

Enhancing Student Outcomes Through Personal Tutoring

All the available evidence recognises the vital role that personal tutoring plays in achieving institutional and student outcomes. UKAT recommends that personal tutoring should be a structured, purposeful process which focuses on student growth and development, helping all students to develop agency and to enhance their outcomes within and beyond their time in higher education. Personal tutoring helps students to integrate into the higher education environment, to understand expectations, to address their concerns and challenges, and to set and achieve goals that align with their educational and future professional aspirations. But to be effective, good personal tutoring must be data-informed and tailored to meet the needs of both cohorts and individual students. Contextual information about cohorts enables personal tutoring coordinators to adapt structured personal tutoring programmes to the needs of the incoming cohort. Contextual information about individual students enables personal tutors to personalise the educational experience through individualised guidance and referrals which are relevant to the needs of the specific student.

Using Contextual Data in Personal Tutoring

If we are to exploit this data for maximum effect, it needs to be available as soon as possible, ideally before incoming students begin their studies. The ability to gather this information pre-arrival is critical to its value and, as Morgan notes, also enhances the response rate. Gathering the data is obviously not enough, it needs to be analysed at differing levels of granularity (e.g., institution, disciplines, individual courses). The results of that analysis need to be disseminated to personal tutoring coordinators in sufficient time to allow them to adjust personal tutoring provision to proactively address the needs of incoming students. This requires a level of automation and commitment of institutional resource. Disseminating summaries of individual contextual data to the personal tutor allocated to a student seems straightforward but is likely to be challenging for many institutions. Allocating students to tutors

and maintaining a central record of this seems simple, but in practice it is often perceived to be a complicated process which cannot be completed until students arrive, and sometimes several weeks after they arrive. Institutions need to ensure that student-tutor allocations are completed pre-arrival if the maximum value is to be leveraged from PAQ insights. The longer it takes to get the data into the hands of the tutor, the less opportunity there is for them to act on it. Approaches such as those taken at the University of Sunderland where applicants are automatically allocated to and informed who their personal tutor is when they accept their place at the institution are beneficial, but currently rare across the sector.

Personal tutors are the glue in an institution-wide system of holistic student support and the role is founded on an ongoing relationship between student and tutor in which the tutor can, proactively or responsively, remove barriers which prevent students engaging with the support available to them (Swinton). The findings in this report suggest ways in which the individual practice of personal tutors may need to change. For instance, the finding that male students are less likely to seek support from other support services and that BTEC students are less likely to perceive their study skills as 'strong', may encourage tutors to be proactive in engaging male students with support services, and particularly proactive in engaging BTEC male students with study support services. We need to recognise that not all tutors have the right level of data literacy to be able to interpret the data and identify the most appropriate actions or referral points for themselves. The challenge then is presenting the information to tutors in a way that makes it easy for them to digest and act effectively upon when they are in the moment with the student.

Enhancing Consistency of Personal Tutoring Practice and Experience

In working across the sector, we identify common themes and challenges across institutions and their personal tutoring provision. High in the list of challenges is a sense from many personal tutors of under-confidence and under-preparedness to perform the role, especially for dealing with more pastoral or wellbeing related issues. Recent media attention and recommendations from high-profile cases of failures of student support increase anxiety amongst personal tutors regarding what they are expected to do and a concern that they might not get it 'right', particularly in relation to issues such as mental health concerns. This anxiety manifests itself in varied ways. At one end of the spectrum are those who feel uncomfortable dealing with non-academic issues, which can lead to them treating students with a lack of empathy and compassion or even disengaging from performing the role leaving students potentially at risk. At the other end of the spectrum are those who far exceed the professional boundaries of the role in ways that can be unhelpful to the student and institution. Consistency of practice, and consistency of student experience, are important in personal tutoring.

Many personal tutors report a lack of regular, or even any, training to perform the role. Just as personal tutoring can normalise the higher education experience and set expectations for students, the insights from this report and from the routine adoption of PAQs can normalise the personal tutoring experience for staff, preparing them better to carry out their role. Regular institutional-specific data derived from PAQs will identify issues that students are likely to raise based on their self-declared concerns and prior educational experiences. Used systematically across the institution, these insights could be used to brief tutors on the issues they are likely to encounter with their students and the best way of handling them, in a way that boosts tutor confidence and enhances the consistency of personal tutoring. In practice, this may be difficult to achieve given the short window of opportunity between the data being available and the point at which personal tutors need to begin working with their students.

Metrics for change

Rosie Bryce, Business Analyst, Manchester Metropolitan University

With the introduction of 'educational gains' in the Teaching Excellence Framework (OfS, 2022c), and a focus on closing 'awarding/attainment gaps' within the Access and Participation Plan (OfS, 2022d), the way we measure student support and success has become deeply entangled with the regulation and performance of institutions. This entanglement dilutes the value of metrics designed to be student-centred-in comparing vastly different institutions against one another, we've ended up with an unhelpful oversimplification. And while these metrics might give us an understanding of the way different universities operate, and the different students they serve, they rarely succeed in measuring the thing they were designed to measure: authentic student outcomes and experiences.

Institutional success is not necessarily the same as student success. A student who realises university is not the correct life-choice for them at the moment may be better served by leaving their studies before being straddled with a multi-thousand-pound debt, even if their withdrawal is considered a negative outcome for their provider.

Sector-wide metrics have a profound effect on how we talk about equity and differential educational outcomes. They tacitly generate a philosophical model of 'equity', and when used for regulatory purposes, a drive is created that doesn't account for the tension between student and institutional goals. Any definition of equity and success that does not differentiate between the needs of students and institutions is going to be problematic.

So, what's the answer? Perhaps when we're considering how best to support a group of students, rather than using pre-existing theories of institutional success, the question we should be asking is, '*What would the data show when we provide different students with the support they need?*'. The results of Morgan's Pre-arrival Academic Questionnaire (PAQ) provide us with a perfect opportunity to understand students' support needs. With this questionnaire, instead of relying on demographic characteristics, we can look at the different experiences and expectations of students as they arrive at university. As other commentators have noted, the similarities between A-level and BTEC students' responses are just as striking as the differences: this tells us our *a priori* assumptions about BTEC and A-level students should be challenged.

The questionnaire allows us to understand how students are thinking and feeling when they enter university - which lets us support different students based on what *they've* told us. Using the results of this questionnaire, models of understanding student success can be created using 'student personas' based on trends. Below are three examples.

Over-confident early drop-out

According to the PAQ, this group consists primarily of male BTEC students who enter university feeling the highest levels of confidence, despite differential academic experience compared to their A-level counterparts. This may lead to unrealistic expectations about their attainment, putting these students at higher risk of withdrawal if their self-expectations do not meet reality. Support for these students could include early adjustments of those expectations with graded assessments and personalised feedback sessions. In terms of data, success for this group might look like an early *failure* in assessment marks. A success metric for this group might be the percentage of students who persevere at university despite an early setback in assessment marks.

Stability-seeker

These students have experienced the rough end of the pandemic, with cancelled lessons, loss of learning, strikes, and unprecedented instability in their educational experience. They crave a stable, predictable journey with no surprises. Support for these students might include the provision of detailed information, good organisation on the part of the university (e.g. fewer changes to timetables), and a follow-up on commitments made by the institution. For these students, success may look like a steady, slow progress with low volatility in engagement or attainment, and may even include the maintenance (as opposed to the widening) of awarding gaps. Here, a predictable and supportive environment may be more important to students' wellbeing than high attainment, therefore, they may never 'catch up' with their more advantaged course mates academically.

Resource-poor

These students have made a proportionally bigger financial investment in coming to university, and have taken a large financial risk. They may need to work a part-time job to afford university and may therefore have other constraints on their time. Support for these students includes bursaries, loans of equipment, and support with travel. It could also include blended/hyflex learning, allowing flexibility with commute and working hours. Success for this group may include lower in-person attendance and higher engagement with online resources. Withdrawal or suspension from study may also be a positive outcome for certain students in this category.

The above are just three illustrations of the types of students highlighted by this report, but hopefully the benefit of tailoring success metrics can be clearly seen. This goes beyond grouping students simply by demographic characteristics - as this report shows, BTEC students are not a homogenous group (and nor are 'BAME' students, or 'first generation' students) - and moves towards tailoring support to students' own stated motivations, needs, and expectations. This provides room for student outcomes to be measured independently of institutional outcomes.

The way we measure something changes the way we think about it. We design metrics to help us understand a pre-defined problem, but the very act of measuring affects our definition of the problem. When we focus on measurements of institutional quality or success that involve student outcomes, we create a model of equity based on that data, but we must not lose sight of the stories behind these numbers. Rather than repurposing a measure of the success of the *university*, the mantra should shift towards creating new models that first and foremost measure the success of the *student*.

It is essential that we continue to evolve our learning teaching and assessment practices to encompass the diversity we see both between and within BTEC and A-level students. It is likewise essential that we evolve our evaluation processes to track success based on the diversity of needs within these groups.

A policy perspective

What might these findings mean for 'levelling up' student outcomes in the reformed vocational qualifications landscape?

Dr Catherine Dilnot, Oxford Brookes University

This study helpfully examines differences in the prior learning experiences and expectations of university between students entering university with A-Levels, and those entering with BTECs, or a mixture of BTECs and A-Levels. Our recent [project for the Nuffield Foundation](#) examined how level 3 qualifications relate to three outcomes at university for three recent cohorts of English domiciled students: dropping out, repeating the first year, and graduating below a 2:1. For all three outcomes, even taking into account detailed measures of students' academic performance at age 16 before their qualification pathways diverge, those with BTECs are more likely to experience adverse outcomes. Those with a mixture of BTECs and A-Levels have outcomes slightly worse on average than similar students with A-Levels only, but better than those with only BTECs. This study sheds light on why these gaps in outcome might arise. It is particularly important to think about these reasons now, as we are in [mid-reform](#) of the types of vocational qualification that will be funded at Level 3. The broad thrust of the reforms (assuming they are not reversed by a future government) will be to remove almost all 'large' (the size of three A-Levels) BTECs, with [T levels gradually introduced](#) in a range of subject areas to replace them. 'Small' BTECs in many subjects will continue, but will be taken alongside A-Levels to make a full programme of study. T Levels, like BTECs, are intended to provide preparation for work, training or study, including at university.

We do not yet know how these changes will affect the qualifications with which young people enter university over the next few years, but we are likely to see:

- Increasing numbers of students entering university with a mixture of A-levels and a 'small' BTEC (rather than one 'large' BTEC).
- Much reduced numbers of students with just a 'large' BTEC as most will have funding removed.
- Students increasingly entering university with T levels.
- Perhaps a reduction in the numbers of young people from less privileged backgrounds entering university at all, who might formerly have used large BTECs as a route in (see the Government's [impact assessment](#)).

How might the findings of Morgan's report guide be used to reduce the gaps in outcome between students with and without traditional (A-Level) qualifications in this new regime? The emphasis of the report is on what universities can do to provide support for students. But to design appropriate support in a new qualifications landscape we need have a handle on whether the differences in outcomes we currently see are because of the qualifications themselves, or because of other differences between the young people entering with A-Levels and BTECs.

The Pre-Arrival Academic Questionnaires are valuable in covering both of these aspects – the educational experience of doing A-Levels or BTECs, and wider aspects of experience, attitudes, expectations and personal circumstances.

Prior educational experience

Perhaps one of the most striking things about the questionnaire responses is that in many areas the responses to questions on educational experiences are not very different between those entering with A-Levels and BTECs. One area of difference is preferred assessment, where those with A-Levels favour a mixture of coursework assessment and exams, whilst BTEC students strongly favour individual coursework assessment with no exams. Although BTECs since an earlier round of reforms in 2016 have to include an element of external assessment, it does not necessarily have to be by exam – so this is perhaps an area where additional support is required for those for whom it's some years since they sat an exam. But T levels will have exams as part of their assessment strategy, and those doing a mixture of A-Levels and BTECs will have recent exam experience so it may be that gaps caused by differences in recent exam practice will diminish. It may also be the case that post Covid universities may re-evaluate the balance of coursework and exam assessment.

Other significant areas of difference are in the sorts of feedback with which students are familiar, and in self-assessment of numeracy and literacy skills. It will be important to monitor these aspects for students entering university with T-Levels in the future, but in the meantime these are areas where personalised support, as described by Professor Smith in her description of actions at Leeds Beckett University, is clearly valuable, although challenging, given that BTEC students describe themselves as less likely to seek academic support than their peers with A-Levels.

Wider aspects of experience and personal circumstances

Responses to questions about funding, paid work, study resources, accommodation and travel to university together tell a story of BTEC students, on average, being at a disadvantage compared with their A-Level peers. The relative lack of financial support from parents alongside the increased intention or uncertainty about doing paid work (at least until Covid meant it was difficult for everyone to find work) suggests BTEC students who are likely to have to spend more of their time earning money than those doing A-Levels. They are more likely to live at home and on average travel further to university.

These circumstances mean not just that students have less time for study, but distance from university and work commitments make participating in academic support outside timetabled study days or other university activities harder. The examples of support requested by students show that they are aware of these problems even before they arrive. And these problems aren't going to go in the new landscape – these are issues relating to the circumstances of the student, rather than the qualifications themselves.

In conclusion, it may be the case that some of the differences in academic preparation and experience between BTEC and A-Level entrants reduce, once more students do a mixture of qualifications rather than just BTECs, under planned reforms. But this change may well prove to be at the expense of some students no longer accessing higher education as they do not feel confident to do any A-Levels, and we do not yet have evidence about the effectiveness of T levels for university study. And particular support will continue to be needed in any qualifications regime for those students whose financial circumstances make their university lives harder.

A university leadership perspective

Professor Sally Brown, Independent Consultant and former PVC

This report is both timely and highly relevant. Bringing together diverse data from her own research and statutory and non-statutory sources, the synergies Morgan finds between them illuminate for HEIs the key drivers that impact on student admissions, retention and successful progression. This is an invaluable treasure trove of rich data to be mined to help universities learn how to best support the students they have, rather than the ones they used to have or would prefer to have.

We need to investigate continuously the prior learning experiences of students entering higher education, and to use this data to help us build confidence and skills in students who manifest concerns and anxiety about their performance as HE students.

This report can be used in many ways to inform practice: on one level it provides a comprehensive overview of factors that impact on student success in meaningful and accessible formats. On another level it allows interested parties to do a deep dive into data to illuminate the outcomes for, say a Nursing faculty in a Post-92 university which has a high proportion of students from disadvantaged students in an under-resourced region of the UK. Her work demonstrates how important it is that changes to government policy are based on evidence rather than dogma: for example, high risk strategies like the abolition of BTEC qualifications can perversely impact on gubernational ambitions around 'levelling up' communities which have low participation rates in Higher Education.

What this report does is to provide clear justification for interventions aimed at supporting those entering higher education with demonstrable existing disadvantage, to prevent further damage being done to those students by a failure to support those at high risk of drop out or noncompletion. A clear implication of this work is that ongoing monitoring and review of data is essential to guide future government policy and university strategic plans: as always, ongoing funding for research and analysis is imperative.

An institutional perspective

Professor Antony C. Moss, Pro Vice Chancellor Education and Student Experience, London South Bank University Chair, London Uni Connect

This comprehensive and insightful report makes three important contributions of value to anyone with an interest in doing more to improve educational experiences and outcomes for students. First, it serves as a timely reminder that our students are not a homogeneous group. Second, it highlights the breadth of ways in which our students support and development needs can vary. Finally, it demonstrates that there are practical approaches which can be developed to generate insights into what our students need, and how to put support in place to meet these needs.

There are many ways to subdivide a large group of people. When examining attainment and awarding gaps in education, we tend to rely on protected demographic characteristics. The challenge with such comparisons is that they do not always actually tell us what a student might need in order to eliminate any observed educational inequality. A student coming to university from a low participation neighbourhood does not need an intervention to help them move out of that neighbourhood – but they might need financial support, or more support understanding and navigating higher education. Likewise, while we can make broad assumptions about the reasons why BTEC students generally achieve worse outcomes than A-Level students, but in order to address this inequity, we need to move beyond simply knowing what entry qualifications a student has on entry to higher education.

The Pre-Arrival Questionnaire (PAQ) is particularly useful, due to its focus on meaningful questions which relate to student needs. Morgan starts with a prior knowledge of inequalities of outcome for BTEC students, but then illustrates to us some of the practical barriers and realities which might actually sit behind this inequality. The national discourse around BTEC students in HE has tended to focus on the extent to which there is inadequate support for these students transitioning into HE. Perhaps we need to look at how the BTEC is taught and assessed in FE, or maybe it is for HE to change the way it teaches and assesses to support smoother transitions? There is value in these discussions, but from the data in this report, it also appears that BTEC students are more than twice as likely to remain living at home when they go to university.

Depending on an individual's circumstances, living at home can be a barrier or a facilitator to university study, but the important point is that we need to notice these things, and figure them into our discussions. If we assume that the problem is all to do with transitions between FE and HE for BTEC students, we might well miss some much bigger issues – such as more of them may be struggling to find somewhere suitable to study.

What might be easy to miss in this report, but is perhaps its most important contribution, is the fact that the data collected from the students who took part has helped their institutions to understand their individual needs – beyond assigning them to broad demographic categories. The PAQ shows that, while addressing outcome gaps in HE is complicated at an institutional level, at the level of an individual, the solutions are quite often straightforward. I strongly recommend this report to colleagues in the sector, and hope that it stimulates greater discussion and insight about how we can move forward on meeting the needs of our diverse student communities. More importantly, I think the report shows just how much insight on the nature of these solutions can be obtained from asking students meaningful questions about their life circumstances, motivations, attitudes and prior educational experiences.

A regional perspective

Dr Diana Beech, Chief Executive Officer, London Higher

When looking at the experiences and pre-arrival qualifications of entrants to higher education, London is always a good point to start, given the size of its student intake and the diversity of student population.

As a region, London is home to [over half a million students](#) enrolled across its [vast array of higher education institutions](#). It is also the UK region that is set to see [the highest growth in domestic demand for higher education until 2035](#). This is fuelled by a rapidly rising under-18 population, together with higher participation levels in higher education resulting in large part from the capital's [pre-16 attainment successes](#).

The [2021 Census](#) revealed London to be the most ethnically diverse region in England and Wales, with 46.2% of residents in the capital from non-white, or 'Global Majority', backgrounds. This translates into diverse student populations in many of London's higher education institutions, as London's universities and colleges take more students from their 'home' region than their counterparts elsewhere in the country. When coupled with projected population growth, this also means that the differences between student groups exposed by this report are going to be felt acutely in the capital.

[Analysis by London Higher's AccessHE division](#) shows that, if present rates of progress continue, students of non-white ethnic backgrounds will constitute almost three-quarters (74%) of students entering higher education in London by 2030 and over half (54%) of the students entering higher education in 2030 from London will be the first in their family to embark on higher education. The continuing increase in demand from students of a wide range of ethnicities therefore means that London is on track for a hyper-diverse student population by the end of the decade.

Alongside this hyper-diversity sits a diversity of routes into higher education, including a diversity of pre-18 qualifications, and a diversity of experiences while enrolled in higher education. As [2022 admissions data](#) show, a greater proportion of applicants are accepted onto higher education courses in London with BTECs than the national average. Within London, learners holding at least one BTEC (applying with either all BTECs or a mix of BTECs and A-Levels) made up around a fifth (17%) of accepted applicants to higher education in 2022.

This is likely linked to the capital's ethnically-diverse profile, with Black students [three times as more likely](#) than White students to hold only BTECs. London's large commuter student population also corroborates this report's finding that BTEC students are more likely to stay at home to undertake study.

With BTECs showing far more staying power in the capital, then, and paving the way for more diverse learning experiences, it is good news that higher education institutions in London already have good form in working with students with diverse pre-entry qualifications. [Findings](#) from the Institute for Fiscal Studies and The Sutton Trust reveal London's universities effect the highest levels of social mobility in the country, and many of these top-ranking institutions for social mobility are less selective universities which combine high access rates with good earnings outcomes. Similarly, HEPI's [2023 English Social Mobility Index](#) puts five London institutions in the top 10 and 10 in the top 20.

The Covid-19 pandemic has nevertheless prompted London's institutions to develop further interventions to ease students' transitions, both to university and out into the wider world. [Research by AccessHE into London's 'Covid cohort'](#) shows that, although these students remain motivated to progress to higher education, they all navigate the transition differently and have specific needs when it comes to academic achievement and job readiness, partly owing to lost learning and opportunities during successive lockdowns. As such, AccessHE has called for a pan-London conversation between students, providers, schools and colleges about the support needed to help students transition to higher education and identify possible shared approaches. It has also called for a standing 'young Londoner HE progression committee' which could serve as an interface between London's higher education institutions and prospective students and enable the co-creation of appropriate transition support and curricula.

Finally, as the cost-of-living crisis in the UK continues, which is being felt acutely in the capital, it is essential that all students – irrespective of pre-arrival qualifications – have the necessary information, advice and guidance about what to expect from embarking on higher education. London Higher's AccessHE division has produced a [Cost of Living Guide](#) to prepare entrants to higher education for the realities of how much it costs to be a student and signpost prospective students to sources of support, including bursaries and hardship grants. It is hoped this will go some way to easing preparation for 'first in family' students and offer some reassurance to those from socio-disadvantaged backgrounds.

A national perspective

Johnny Rich, Chief Executive of the Engineering Professors Council and Push

There is a common, if unpalatable, perception – among some policymakers, parents, students, employers and the wider public – that BTECs are a qualification for the less able, the less affluent and those from ethnic minorities. This view arises from deep-seated snobbery about vocational qualifications (mixed with a dash of classism and even idle racism), but to some extent, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Tautologically, BTECs are held in lower regard because they lack parity of esteem.

To say that BTECs exist ‘for’ certain groups – which is dismissive and wrong – is not the same as acknowledging that those groups are indeed overrepresented among BTEC students. As Part 1 of Morgan’s excellent report outlines, this is the case (largely as a result of that self-fulfilling prophecy).

It’s also worth noting that it is pejorative to regard those with lower prior attainment as “less able”. The intersections of those individuals with those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and with those from UK minority ethnic backgrounds suggests that attainment is bound tightly to the opportunities and barriers that students encounter.

When it comes to equality of opportunity, entering higher education has the potential to be a reset button. Students whose circumstances have denied them the best education have the chance to learn alongside those whose journey has been less challenging. Far from being a qualification consolation prize, BTECs are a valid and vital pathway to further learning and employment and to ensure that those students for whom a rigid academic approach does not work at 16 are not left behind. BTECs are also an important route to vocational and technical skills and, critically for this report, they represent an opportunity to mix vocational and academic qualifications (which, for the most part, is not possible with T levels as they are too time-consuming to study in combination).

One of the many key messages that I take from this report, is that it has helped us to understand how higher education institutions can push that opportunity reset button most effectively. Her research shows that, when compared with A-Level students, BTEC students are not lacking in ambition or potential. When they embark on higher education, however, they do still face many of the challenges that may have disadvantaged them in school: lack of financial support; housing problems if they were to move away from home; reliance on paid work and the time conflicts that entails; and so on. Achieving a reset means either removing those challenges or mitigating their effects.

This research does highlight patterns of difference between groups of students, the scale of difference paints a picture of diversity more than of segments. These groups are made up of individuals with individual learning needs and, if we meet those needs, any student can thrive.

Morgan’s work supports the idea that meeting those needs involves establishing genuine expectations (through open and honest pre-admission information and relationship-building); understanding the student’s needs even before they enrol; adapting as their needs change throughout their studies; and continuing to support them for as long as reasonably possible even after graduation.

All students will arrive at university with some deficits in their knowledge compared to their peers. For some, those deficits will be minimal in terms of the starting point of their course. For others, they will be wider. HE institutions and their academics need to appraise the student in front of them and give each one the individual support they need to have the opportunity to reach the same point as everyone else by the end of their course.

For some, that may mean additional educational support in certain areas. For others, as the report implies, it will mean adapting methods of feedback to suit each student's needs. And for others, it will involve providing holistic support for the student's wellbeing, their struggles with financial hardship and their logistical ability to learn well – even when they may not recognise for themselves the challenges they will face.

Students with the greatest deficits will travel the furthest distance, but their journey will be more transformative and more rewarding than that of their peers. That surely, is the purpose of higher education: to take each student as far as possible. The quality of education should be judged, not on an institution's ability to recruit the 'best' students and maintain their advantage, but on an institution's ability to make the greatest difference to its students' lives.

I am reminded of a recent report on social mobility by the Engineering Professors' Council (EPC, 2021) the results of which are entirely consistent with the findings of this report. In particular, it showed that, while there was still an earnings gap, the average salary boost for students who entered Engineering degrees with BTECs was even greater than it was for students with A-Levels alone.

There is nothing intrinsic about BTECs – or about vocational qualifications in general – that should necessarily mean they are of lower value in the marketplace of educational signifiers. Establishing an individualised and supportive pathway for all through higher education will ensure that the prize we all win for getting provision right is not just to raise the level of opportunity for all, but to equalise it. I applaud Dr Morgan for an evidence-led approach to help institutions and policymakers realise this ambition.

A national perspective

Mary Curnock Cook CBE

Like other commentators on this interesting report, I was struck less by the differences between students with BTECs and A-Levels, but more by the similarities. In many of the categories examined, there were relatively small differences between the two.

What the analysis brought home to me again was the differences between the education superhighway – that is, good GCSE results, followed by A-Levels and university – and the less well signposted but often more interesting route. This is where students get good enough GCSE results to go onto Level 3 qualifications but without the grades to meet the entry requirements for A-Levels that many schools set. Often, they progress instead to FE colleges and take BTECs or similar applied general qualifications, perhaps initially without an expectation that they might eventually progress to higher education. These students will frequently flourish in the more adult environment of a college, engage enthusiastically with what feels like a more relevant, less academic curriculum, and gain confidence in their ability and potential. As the prospect of gaining strong grades in their BTECs approaches, the aspiration to continue their studies at university grows. I thought it was interesting that a significant proportion of the BTEC respondents had applied for higher education direct through clearing, at twice the rate as for those with A-Levels. Are some of these students who had written themselves off before they saw their BTEC grades?

We also know that students in this category are more likely to be from less affluent households, and, because people of colour are more likely to suffer economic disadvantage, they too tend to be over-indexed in this category. This disproportionate economic disadvantage will also flow through to

accommodation and commuting choices, to the need to take part-time work and thence to the time and money to participate in extra-curricular activities that can so enhance a student's engagement, self-confidence and sense of belonging at university. So perhaps it is not BTECs per se that create the small differences we see in this data, but more the disproportionate presence of social and economic disadvantage in BTEC students.

There are, of course, important differences in curriculum and assessment approaches between the two qualification types and this will impact on students' approaches to study, assessment and engagement in university life. I would also suggest that it will impact on the course choices made. We know that a clutch of three A-Levels qualifies students to apply for a wide range of courses, while a single topic BTEC might provide a narrower set of HE study options. For future analysis of this type, it would be interesting to see more data about course choices and to understand the potentially different study and assessment modes for courses more likely to be chosen by A-Level students vs those chosen by BTEC students. I suspect this will have a bearing on preferences for feedback and study modes too.

The real value of this study for me is about the vital importance of the right kind of support throughout the student journey for all students, regardless of their entry qualifications. Morgan cites the work of the UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission which I was privileged to chair in the wake of the pandemic. Recently, I was fortunate to witness staff and students at Manchester Metropolitan University launching their Student Futures Manifesto. Their commitments, co-created with students, cover many of the vital areas that this report highlights (also see p24 of this report):

- Provide students with excellent teaching, innovative learning and assessment opportunities, and a dedicated personal tutor.
- Provide students with further study and career opportunities to prepare for life after university.
- Create an inclusive environment, with lots of extra-curricular opportunities and the chance to meet new people.
- Ensure students feel supported physically, emotionally and mentally with easily available support.
- Ensure students feel supported to start university, not just at the beginning of a course, but every semester, and that students have access to inclusive, accessible and easily available support and resources.
- Provide students with the opportunity to have their say to enhance their experiences and those of future students.

Giving students agency in their university experience is a key way to increase the sense of belonging that increases confidence, engagement and, ultimately, academic attainment. These are the things that help iron out social inequalities and make more impact on successful student outcomes than any differences in the style of qualification and study that they experienced prior to starting higher education.

An intersectional perspective requires a whole-provider approach

Professor Liz Thomas, University of York

The evidence presented in this report draws attention to the intersectional dimensions of disadvantage that impact on some students during their journey into and through higher education, and into the graduate workforce. It is striking that all the PAQ surveys from 2019 and 2021, from three universities, find that BTEC students are more likely to live at home and commute to study, and to be first generation entrants. We also know that UK commuter students are more likely to have a lower household income, be from lower-socio-economic groups, be mature students and to be from an ethnic minority group (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018; Smith 2018). Findings from the 2021 survey show that nearly half of all BTEC student respondents were living at home whilst studying, whether this is due to the institutional contexts or the COVID-19 pandemic is unclear, but the finding is stark. The survey also found that BTEC entrants are more reliant on student loans and part-time employment rather than parental support, compared to A-level entrants. Students opt to live at home and commute for a range of reasons including financial considerations, but they frequently find the travelling more expensive than expected, as well as being tiring and stressful (Thomas and Jones 2017).

While many commuter students view their decision to live at home positively (Fulford 2021; Miah 2018), the practicalities of being a commuter are challenging, and many make strategic choices about what to engage in when they remain living at home. Many commuter students prioritise academic engagement, as the expense of engagement in the wider student experience – including personal and professional development and social interaction with peers and staff (Thomas 2020). These choices unintentionally contribute to a weaker sense of belonging and poorer student outcomes (Thomas 2020). This is particularly poignant, as becoming a graduate and securing graduate employment is of high importance to many students who live-at-home, rather than ‘being a student’ (Thomas 2023). Being a live-at-home student, or a commuter, is correlated with lower rates of continuation, completion, attainment and progression to graduate employment. We need to be very careful in attributing lower outcomes achieved by students entering higher education with BTECs and vocational qualifications, to the pre-entry qualifications themselves. Rather we need to have greater understanding of the complexity of the lives that many of these students have, as they seek to juggle and balance studying, caring, working and commuting.

Higher education institutions should respond to the findings of this study through a ‘whole provider approach’ (Thomas 2017). This involves working across the student lifecycle, involving staff throughout the institution and engaging students in the process. It must be underpinned by a clear organisational commitment to diversity and success, emanating from the senior leadership team, resulting in a culture and structure that promotes inclusion and alignment with other institutional commitments and strategies. This requires higher education providers to develop the academic experience to be more inclusive, addressing organizational issues, curricular contents and design, and pedagogy and assessment (Thomas 2018). To date, many of the changes higher education providers have made, focus on helping live-at-home or commuter students to adapt to a traditional higher education model (for example by creating a ‘sticky campus’), rather than implementing fundamental changes to higher education itself. Intersectional challenges amplify and entrench disadvantages, making action both imperative and demanding, going above and beyond awareness raising, and requiring institutional transformation (Jones and Thomas 2005). This impressive report by Morgan is a call to action, urging universities, colleges, and policy makers to learn about their students and to provide an educational experience where all students can engage, belong and succeed.

A national policy perspective - Putting students at the heart of learning

Sunday Blake, Associate Editor, Wonkhe

The strength of this report lies in how it has revealed an often unexamined part of the student life cycle: pre-enrolment and arrival. Alongside this, Morgan's work has brought to the foreground an element of the student experience that even the most extensive demographic data harvesting via applications can leave invisible: how students are *feeling*.

We know that student mental health concerns students, university staff, policymakers, politicians, and parents of students. While we know that there are overarching concerns on a macro level that will impact students - such as the lasting impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the cost of living, and the climate crisis - but it can be challenging to pinpoint the smaller and more personal lived conditions which aggravate student anxiety. By going straight to the source and asking questions without agenda or assumption, the Pre-Arrival Academic Questionnaire shines a light on how best we can support students, implement what they teach us, and design policy and practice in a way that supports them to achieve their potential.

The answers which show negligible differences between groups allows us insight into the broader concerns of students and universal issues. In comparison, the differences in responses between students with different entrance qualifications, age and gender categories are also helpful in understanding the barriers these different demographics face. The latter answers can tell who our policy and practice best serves, how it can be adapted to serve all students better, and adjust our communication and outreach.

For example, it is pertinent to know that females in both A-Level and BTEC groups reported lower confidence and higher anxiety than their male counterparts and rated themselves as less likely to engage with university sports facilities is pertinent. In the recent Wonkhe and Pearson research, [Building Belonging in Higher Education](#), we found that engagement with university sports teams increased academic confidence. In considering these findings alongside the findings of the Pre-Arrival Academic Questionnaire, institutions could reasonably consider moves to encourage females into more team-building extracurricular or social activities as a way to build academic confidence.

The Pre-Arrival Academic Questionnaire also found a stark difference in other services and facilities different demographics intend to use. For example, BTEC students were less likely to seek academic support than their A-Level counterparts. We know from recent [research by Wonkhe and Solutionpath](#) that the reluctance to engage with or lack of awareness of, intradepartmental support services can contribute to significant gaps in student attainment and retention. The recommendations in [Building Belonging in Higher Education](#) advise moving away from a deficit model and towards support embedded within the core course content. As aforementioned by Kate Swinton, an institution-wide policy of support - which does not require prerequisite knowledge of, or the confidence to approach, different departments - removes the barriers that different demographics of students face when attempting to access support, creating a more equitable student experience.

Another striking finding from the report was the noticeable differences in the responses to preferred assessment formats and types of assessment feedback. While BTEC students expressed a preference for individual coursework with no exams, A-Level respondents expressed a preference for a mixture of coursework and exams.

This may be due to the format of previous qualification assessment. Another recommendation from the [Building Belonging in Higher Education](#) report is to give students flexibility and autonomy over the format of their assignments. This avoids a rigid structure which positions the strengths, learning styles, and prior educational experience of one set of students over another.

BTEC students also prefer individual face-to-face feedback at a notably higher rate than their A-Level counterparts. This is particularly interesting for the 2019/20 cohorts, who both received feedback on their prior educational experiences in the same ways. Interestingly, a higher number of A-Level respondents stated that they did not feel comfortable asking for feedback and that they had never thought about asking for feedback compared to their BTEC counterparts. Is the way BTEC students are taught before university encouraging a growth mindset more than their A-Level counterparts? The benefits of good quality academic feedback and confidence to discuss areas of improvement, which focuses on a growth mindset for students, came through strongly in the [Building Belonging in Higher Education](#) research, leading to increased academic confidence. There may be a further angle to investigate in teaching all students how to discuss areas of improvement with such a mindset.

The Pre-Arrival Academic Questionnaire report has added significant insight and new angles to knowledge and understanding around student belonging, support, and confidence by highlighting otherwise unexamined areas. The findings of this report must be understood and used by any institutions seeking to improve policy and practice in supporting all students from pre-enrolment and pre-arrival and throughout their entire student life cycle to fulfil their potential and their own success.

A national policy perspective- Sustaining a broad highway
Professor Chris Millward, University of Birmingham

Debates about higher education expansion in England often refer back to the principle established by the Robbins Report 60 years ago that higher education courses should be made ‘available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so’. It is less often noted that Lionel Robbins and his Committee expected ability and attainment to grow as successive generations nurture and pass on the benefits of higher education: ‘when more is taken for higher education in one generation more will tend to be available in the next’ (Mandler,2020).

Robbins was also sceptical that there could be parity of esteem between vocational and academic routes, ‘either with the public or the student population’. That was, he argued, a ‘fool’s paradise’, so the best way to advance vocational, technical and professional education would be to position it within a broad and expanding highway into and through universities. This has proved to be the case: as more people in England have continued studying for longer, growth has been achieved through courses, accreditation and institutions with roots outside universities becoming part of the sector, and by established universities diversifying into more vocational and technical provision in response to demand.

BTECs have played a central role in this for decades now. They have enabled learners from communities - and with characteristics – that are under-represented in higher education to bridge between school, college and university through flexible, work-related studies and qualifications, which are widely recognised across higher education and employment. This has enabled a broader pool of students to demonstrate the ability and attainment to benefit from higher education, empowering students by creating choices rather than channelling them along binary routes, which tend always to track social background.

A broader pool, coupled with the ever-changing character of students and learning, is yielding continual challenges for pedagogy and student support. Universities can expect legitimate scrutiny from government, students, employers and the wider public on this, so we need to analyse the particular characteristics and pathways of BTEC students, share evidence on them and promote our lessons from working with them. This has been given greater urgency by the government's proposal to remove funding from many BTEC qualifications, with the expectation that T-levels will fill the gap.

The stated intention is for T-levels to create more 'clearly defined academic and technical routes' so that 'the content meets the needs of industry and prepares students for entry into skilled employment, an apprenticeship or related technical study through further or higher education' (Department of Education, 2023). This assumes that knowledge and skills, cognitive and practical attributes, academic and technical education can clearly be separated within post-compulsory education, and indeed that this reflects the character of jobs in the 21st century.

T-levels require high levels of work-placement and academic content, which plays more clearly than BTECs to the pursuit of parity of esteem (James Relly, 2021). The ambition for academically rigorous qualifications with substantial work-placement is commendable. It also, though, yields real challenges for delivery and potentially success rates.

Many universities hope that T-levels become a well-recognised and populated pathway during the coming years, and they are doing everything they can to support the schools, colleges and employers involved in delivering them. This is, though, unlikely to succeed if they are positioned as one half of a binary system separating technical and academic routes. That would be, in Robbins' words, a fool's paradise, given demand from both students and employers for integration.

It would be better, instead, to embed T-levels within a broad and flexible highway through post-compulsory education, and to sustain funding for BTECs until it becomes clear that T-levels are equally capable of serving such a large and diverse group of learners. Let's all hope this is what is intended for the [Advanced British Standard](#), which the government now intends to develop during the coming decade.

A national policy perspective- Inclusive participation

Professor Debra Myhill , Professor Emerita of Language and Literacy Education and Dr Pallavi Banerjee, University of Exeter

Whilst it is evident that discourses of diversity and inclusion are prevalent in universities and at policy level, these run the risk of being little more than rhetoric if they do not lead to changed ways of thinking and acting. So for policymakers, professionals or parents concerned about trajectories of progress from school through into university and into employment, this study provides crucially important information, and should be used to effect on-the-ground change. In looking specifically at BTEC only and A-level only student groups in three metropolitan universities which tend to have a higher demographic of students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, it parallels our own study (Banerjee and Myhill, 2019) which investigated the transition experiences of BTEC and A-Level students into Russell Group universities.

What is immediately striking is the high similarity in the findings of these two studies, despite the different type of institutions involved, suggesting there may be a high degree of generalisability in the findings. Moreover, we know from previous research that those students with BTEC only entry qualifications are more likely to be first generation university students, to receive little financial

support from their parents, or to be from an ethnic minority group. Of course, this is not a consequence of a BTEC qualification itself, but a reflection that, for some reason, a disproportionate number of students with socially disadvantaged backgrounds choose to take a BTEC. This group of students is thus of particular significance to those seeking to widen participation in university education to be more inclusive of students from differing demographic backgrounds.

With the aims of an inclusive participation in university education in mind, this report signals the importance of students' prior learning experiences and, therefore, the need for universities to develop systematic approaches to gathering that information. Given the known barriers to equality in higher education are not just academic, but also economic and social, any pre-arrival data collection would be wise to address all three aspects, and to consider the different ways in which these three aspects are manifest in the journey through university.

Recognising that ways of learning prior to university can be different according to both qualification and type of qualification and learning institution is critical if we are to enable more equitable learning pathways through university. For example, this report flags that BTEC students tend to have had more varied teaching approaches and different feedback methods. Without understanding the experiences and expectations students bring with them to university, it is hard to imagine how universities can meet their diverse needs, particularly when they are very different from the experiences of many university staff. Universities do work very hard to provide effective support for students, but better information would enable support to be better aligned to the diverse individual needs of students.

One aspect of Morgan's study which seems especially salient relates to the idea of student engagement. The fact that BTEC students were more likely to be studying from home rather than moving into university or rented accommodation had an impact on non-academic issues, such as the travelling time needed to get to the campus, their reduced access to maintenance support, and more limited capacity to participate in wider university activities. The need to study in this way may well reduce their sense of belonging at the university. This was also a key finding in our own study, where students had very mixed experiences of 'fitting in' which were sometimes linked to studying at home. However, their sense of belonging was also affected by the way other students, and sometimes staff, treated them, and by the nature of the extra-curricular activities on offer. I was pleased to note that the recent UPP Student Futures Manifesto, cited earlier, has changed the concept of 'student engagement' to 'belonging': this invites re-thinking of what may have been a rather normative understanding of engagement to one focused more helpfully on students' feelings of being part of a learning community. If engagement is framed around standard patterns of studying such as living on or near campus, or student society membership, we may be missing the possibilities of alternative patterns of provision and participation.

Finally, this report draws out differences in the experiences, academic and emotional, between BTEC and A-Level students, but it also signals strongly the similarities between these two groups. Indeed, the report explicitly notes that 'Although the data shows that those who entered university with BTECs only or combinations were more likely to drop out and graduate below a 2.1, the authors state that the overwhelming majority do not dropout or repeat, and do graduate with at least a 2.1'. This is important. Given that most of the BTEC students do succeed, the key implication is how best to support the minority who do not, rather than to focus on the qualification itself. As this group is more strongly representative of many minority groups (for example, ethnic minority; economically disadvantaged; mature students; first generation university students), they are a critical group in terms of widening participation. However, it is equally critical to avoid generating a sense of homogeneity in how we think about any student groups.

The patterns identified in this report help to reveal different experiences, but many of these will cross student groups – for example, A-level students who are from an ethnic minority or who live at home may share the experiences of BTEC students. If we hope to create a more inclusive participation in higher education, changes in practice need to address particular academic, economic or social needs, not particular groups of students.

A national policy Think Tank perspective

Rose Stephenson, Director of Policy and Advocacy at the Higher Education Policy Institute

This report is a welcome contribution to the higher education data landscape. Focussing on the different expectations and experiences of students with A-level and BTEC qualifications is a timely intervention. The current Conservative Government are aiming to phase out most BTEC qualifications and replace them with similar-but-different vocational qualifications called T-levels. However, the Labour party have announced that, if in government, they would ‘ensure all students are able to complete their courses and will review the diversity of options at Level 3 before making further changes’.

Whichever way the national policy shakes out at Level 3, the data in this survey, and in the suggested national pilot survey, will be valuable to ensuring that all students are catered for. As the report states, ‘the rates of repetition of the first year by BTEC students are three times higher than for A-level (student)s’. Even if we consider this from a purely economic perspective, not tackling this is a huge failure to these students. These students may be looking at an additional year of study (£9,250 tuition fee loan, plus up to ~£10,000 maintenance loan outside of London) and a further year before they can embark upon graduate level earnings. With an average BTEC graduate salary of £23,800 for men and £19,100 for women – repeating a year of study could be costing these students upwards of £38,000. Allowing this inequity to continue is unacceptable.

As such, the rich data set in the report, and the recommendations from the students themselves, should be implemented, and evaluated, to determine which interventions lead to better outcomes for students – and particularly BTEC students. If a pilot national PAQ is established, analysing this qualitative data by previous qualification may highlight specific interventions that could be trialled to narrow the continuation, completion, and awarding gaps between former BTEC and A-level students.

Some of these interventions could be straightforward. Over 10% of former BTEC students do not have their own laptop and are not planning to buy one. Instead, they plan to rely on their mobile phone or university computer facilities. This is twice the proportion of former A-level students without a laptop. Many universities run laptop-hire schemes for those without these facilities. Ensuring that former BTEC students are aware of these facilities will immediately remove barriers to education access. More importantly, ensuring the maintenance loan system is adequate for all students to afford a basic laptop alongside their other living costs, would remove an aspect of disadvantage.

The section on the cost-of-living draws attention to the very real challenges being faced by students. The qualitative comments on how universities can support students echo findings in the HEPI and Advance HE Student Academic Experience Survey 2023, that most students are juggling study with paid work. Suggestions from students about opportunities for paid work on campus, for support to find paid work and timetabling that allows for work commitments should all be high on the agenda of university Student Experience teams this coming academic year.

Most importantly, providers need to understand what this data mean in their own institution and their own locality. I recommend that providers using this data, or carrying out their own PAQs, sit down with students to present and discuss the results. I can guarantee that this will give leaders a host of novel and relevant ideas to trial and evaluate, to improve the student experience, as well as student outcomes.

Reflections on BTEC pre-admission report

Hugh Jones, Higher Education Consultant

This is a report rich in insight, at macro- and micro-levels. Universities that wish to improve the student experience, student outcomes, and address inequalities should take note. Nobody in universities wants to do a bad job. But the evidence, including that in this report, is stark that there are inequalities in outcome associated with the protected characteristics which are not about students' ability or work. What can be done?

I think it is important to look at universities' capacity to address this. Three observations occur. Firstly, many universities operate a relatively static business model. Barring the vicissitudes of the market, and taken with a big pinch of 'normally', a common experience is that programmes admit similar numbers of students each year; similar types of assessments are used every year; and at the same sort of time as last year. Change occurs slowly. And with good reason: the content of disciplines does not change that rapidly, and the costs of more regular change, in staff time and distraction from other elements of a university's work, is high.

Secondly, universities are conservative (with a small c) places. David Willetts (in *A University Education*) notes the continued existence, in many university regulations, of the requirement for students to have passed two A levels to be admitted: a requirement which related originally to long superseded student funding regulations. And yet the requirement persists. My own research reveals another example: the persistence, in autonomous universities, of approaches to defining the standard required for a PhD degree which derive from the original validators – either the University of London or the CNA.

Thirdly, culture and habits come from individual experiences. We know from Becher and Trowler's *Academic Tribes and Territories* that discipline loyalties trump institutional loyalties; and that culture is passed down via doctoral supervisors. We know also that unless consciously checked, availability bias means we will equate others' experiences with our own. And as most university academics did traditional A-Level studies prior to their higher education, assumptions about what new entrants will have experienced will be based on those prior, more traditional, and dated, experiences.

Putting these observations together, we can see that the challenges associated with providing a good educational and student experiences to BTEC entrants will be hard to overcome. The learning and experiences they bring will often be assumed similar to those of A-Level entrants. The need to change teaching and assessment practices may not be recognised. And if it is, the time available to do this will be pressured.

This is of course a broad brush analysis. Each university faces unique circumstances. And so each will need to find a way to address the findings of this report. But if we grant that most staff do not fully understand the perspective of BTEC students, then any plans to address the issues flagged in the report would do well to include familiarisation with BTEC curricula and assessment styles, to better enable understanding of what students are bringing with them to university.

A national perspective - finance and mental health

Dr Dominique Thompson, UK student mental health expert and former university GP, clinical adviser to Student Minds

This perceptive and thorough paper provides us with significant insights in supporting students into, through and beyond higher education. Many of the factors observed and discussed are those which can adversely impact the mental health of students, such as their pre-university expectations, academic gaps, learning styles, and living arrangements, but perhaps one of the most important mental health challenges in the current climate is money and the Cost of Living crisis.

Financial concerns have probably never been more relevant for students, who are currently anxious and socially disconnected following a world-wide pandemic. Students have always worried about money of course, for example the costs of course or study equipment, travel to and from lectures or placements, living costs, tuition fees and long term debt, but recent studies have demonstrated how much more severe the impact of rising costs and inflation have been on those in higher education.

Financial stress and mental health issues tend to exist in a vicious cycle where the presence of one makes the other one worse. It may be that worry about money leads to deteriorating anxiety and depression, or that the elevated mood of bipolar disorder leads to excessive spending. Many mental health conditions require medications, and prescriptions are rarely free for students, or trips to clinics and therapists which incur travel costs.

Fear of debt may lead those with eating or body issues to reduce their spending on food, and this in turn makes their disordered eating worse. Addiction issues are rarely helped by debt or money worries and guilt can compound all of these problems too, of course. Money stress and mental ill health is a potentially toxic combination.

Into this context we read Morgan's insightful report and learn that whilst new students will generally rely on the Student Loan Scheme first line for money, and their parents or guardians second, it is concerning to read that some groups of students are much less likely to receive financial support from their families, with BTEC, female, first generation respondents being the worst off in this scenario.

Reading later that female students are more likely than their male counterparts to expect to use university financial support, as well as health and wellbeing support, may therefore make sense. Interestingly BTEC males are the least likely to expect to use these support services and also least likely to worry about getting into debt. Whether this is because of optimism, or another reason is unclear and likely complex. It may be relevant to note that male students are not only more likely to receive financial support from carers but also more likely to take risks to earn money, for example invest in stocks and shares, or buy cryptocurrency. Risk taking is therefore a potentially dangerous side effect when students have little money and need to pay their bills.

In fact, there are multiple risks for students who have little financial support or savings, especially to their mental health and physical wellbeing. Beyond the obvious direct impact on anxiety, poor sleep, poor diet (cheap food choices), and fatigue from working in a job as well as studying, we hear of 1 in 3 students missing meals (Blackbullion, 2023) or working many more hours per week in more than one job than is healthy or ideal for studying effectively. There are even shocking issues with period poverty, and if BTEC female students are least likely to receive financial support it might be interesting to see if they have been affected negatively to the point of period poverty *more than* A-Level female students.

Period poverty, poor diet, and lack of sleep will also impact on other areas of physical and mental health, all of which will negatively impact academic achievement. This is before we even consider that money worries are one of the leading causes for poor retention at university (mental health is the main cause, but may be associated with financial worries), and the fact that, as the report shows us, more young people are considering quitting studies this year than last year (especially if they are aged over 25). Those who live alone (higher bills) are also more likely to quit prematurely, as are first years, and first generation students. All these factors may also be connected to poor financial status, and thus poor mental health.

At the most extreme end of the mental health spectrum we must consider the risk of suicide for students who are most distressed or least able to seek support. It is a fact that financial worries play a part in 1 in 4 adult suicides in the UK (NCISH report 2023). Therefore addressing the financial concerns of students, alongside their academic worries, learning needs, issues with transition to university, and health needs is absolutely key if we are to provide a supportive and seamless path for them to move from whichever qualification they have studied at school or college and into higher education.

Universities can support their students by providing integrated financial education, including an understanding of risk taking and money, and rapid access to money advice and guidance, as well as hardship funding. Further research into the specific risks of financial stress on mental health for particular groups of new students is also recommended.

An institutional and national financial advice perspective

Vivi Friedgut, Founder and CEO, Blackbullion

Students are struggling with the same cost-of-living pressures as other households in the UK, and are struggling to keep up with rising bills and rent as the cost of living crisis and high inflationary period drags on. Countless surveys show that students are worried about rising costs, about the impact this will have on their studies, and attainment and on their mental health and well-being.

What is lesser known is the impact these are having on those students currently pursuing A-Level and BTEC qualifications. While Morgan's research reveals A-Level respondents were more concerned about getting into debt than their BTEC counterparts, it was thought provoking to see both statistics trended downward from 2019 to 2021. And worryingly, in both groups we see first time concerns over Mental health and wellbeing skyrocketing.

We know today's school leavers still bear the scars of the covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing ripple effect caused by a wide ranging social and societal influences are leading them to be more anxious, more concerned about the future and less optimistic in the short term. All this impacts, and is impacted by, financial confidence. As they transition from school to higher education or the workforce, developing financial wellbeing becomes crucial. Not just for its own sake - it's always been important - but particularly now for this generation.

Understanding how to manage money, budget and find balance between earning and learning

Even those students who might have historically relied on parents/guardians, they are finding that the bank of "Mum and Dad" has been strained by the pandemic and then squeezed from the cost of living crisis. There are less avenues of support for these students.

There are no quick fixes when the examining challenges as broad and complex as student attainment and academic success and the impact the current financial environment might have on them. There are no silver bullets but financial wellbeing comes as close as anything to being a singular lens through which we can address and influence change. There are three primary streams to supporting students with their finances whilst on campus.

- The first is to prepare them effectively before they arrive.
- The second is to address the inevitable financial shortfalls, especially during their student journey.
- The third is to consider the challenge holistically, recognising it touches on (and likely exacerbated by) other challenges students might be facing and in doing so destigmatise and demystify those elements of finance most impactful on students and on their mental health and wellbeing.

Pre arrival

The most important time to present timely and relevant advice and information is prior to arrival. Students are worried about many things at this time - as highlighted and analysed by Morgan in section 5. School leavers can be supported by ensuring lots of accurate information, delivered in the best possible way at exactly the right time and putting that information in context. Many universities present “cost of life on campus x” information but much of that information is out of date or presented in such broad banding so as to make the information unhelpful at best and misleading at worst.

Students, particularly those who are first in family to attend university, don’t always know the questions to ask and prior to their arrival on campus is the best time to explain, communicate and then communicate more.

- Introduce crucial financial concepts at the start of the journey - provide opportunities for developing financial understanding of maintenance loans (if applicable), the importance of budgeting and the cost of having fun and getting around. Historically it has been parents who are most engaged with the finance events on campus/online but having student led sessions where prospective students can ask questions via chat or during an Instagram live etc might encourage them to participate.
- The student budget is a tricky thing to pin down so sharing the real cost of living on your campus is really impactful and important; particular attention should be paid to advice on affordable accommodation options and food. Providing accurate cost of living information gives students, particularly first in family (and also international students!) the opportunity to put spending in context (the tube costs how much?!?) which empowers them to be better prepared.
- With accommodation availability increasingly a flash point for students it is critically important to support students to find appropriate accommodation as soon as practical.
- Pay particular heed to commuter students to build early relationships and connections to the university. These play a huge role in students’ success as Mary Curnock Cook CBE outlines in her response to the report. Institutions that are able might consider travel bursaries, agreements with local services to offer student discounts and of course providing advice about alternate travel options.

- It is important for universities to facilitate, and encourage, commuter students to find like minded people and friends at the beginning of the student lifecycle as this sets the tone for the entire university experience. This can be practically executed through providing spaces across the university where students can hang out and maybe have a cup of something warm and meet others!
- The new Blackbullion app, free to all students in the UK and developed in collaboration with students may help here too.

Pre-empt financial shortfalls

According to research by website [StuRents](#), about 30.0% of beds available in England are out of reach for a student on the average maintenance loan and in five big student cities rents outstrip maintenance. There is familial pressure too as the “bank of Mum and Dad” is increasingly squeezed. A 2022 [poll](#) by Law Firm Irwin Mitchell found that 53.0% of parents with children aged 18+ are concerned about making ends meet themselves. As such, providing guidance on how students can earn and access additional funding can be instrumental in a student’s decision and long term success.

- Provide comprehensive information on the grants, bursaries, and hardship funds available at your institution. When information is scattered or difficult to find - by centralising the funding information and providing clarity over how to be successful it becomes easier for students to discover and apply for additional financial support. This can make all the difference to their academic journey.
- Ensure all funds are accessible (!) so that all students, regardless of their background or circumstances, can easily understand and access financial support. options available to them. This inclusivity promotes equal opportunities and an easy-to-navigate system also helps streamline the application process, reducing stress for students and saving time and effort for staff.
- Inform students about university support services, such as money advisors and student support and encourage students to seek help if they need it (money mentors can be less intimidating).
- Offer guidance on finding suitable part-time job opportunities and balancing work commitments with academic requirements and be clear about the impact and expectation around such work. Most universities recommend students spend no more than 15 hours a week working. There are also tax implications and in the case of international students implications for visas etc to consider.
- If there are jobs to be done on campus that can be done by students make it easy for students to discover and apply for these. Work on campus can be a win-win as it is likely able to better fit around studies and also creates a connection between the student and the institution.

Consider finances holistically

Take a whole institution approach to financial wellbeing in order to equip students with essential financial literacy skills so they can make informed decisions about managing money throughout their academic life - also gaining the confidence they need to navigate the financial challenges post-graduation.

- The key to effective financial education is to scaffold learning so students can develop the right money skills at the right time and ensuring it feels natural and intuitive. Becoming proficient in

budgeting is critical in year one, while preparing to repay student debt is a worthy topic for the final year.

- Consider mentors specifically for first generation students, care leavers, estranged students and other students who may lack family guidance and support who might benefit from more personal attention. Consider tailoring financial literacy programs to their needs.
- Partner with external providers, and collaborate with other organisations like charities and discount sites to maximise value and buying power.
- Encourage students to share their experiences in order to demystify money and money conversations.
- Ensure money and mental health are addressed together since they are interdependent.

A National Perspective – Re-assurance to prospective students about the pace of accessing their financial support when joining university

Julie Walkling, Director of Academic Partnerships for the JS Group and over 27 years in university roles

This report is extremely important for all those who want to support a more effective transition to university life by those completing their pre-entry qualifications (in particular, A-Levels and BTECs). As the findings of Morgan's report shows, the pandemic of 2020-21 has massively dented the attitudes and confidence of those who would perhaps previously have felt more comfortable in taking on university as a natural next step. Those that come from low-income and first-in-family backgrounds have been particularly affected by the challenges of the last few years – and especially by the current cost-of-living crisis.

Supporting universities to support their students

At the JS Group, one area we have been developing with our network of 34 university partners, is in addressing how these particular students can access the funds that they very much need in order to support their transition into higher education and the long-term student journey. Our mission is to help universities to make more of their investment in supporting students through bursaries, scholarships, hardship funding and other sources that enable less advantaged students to thrive during one of the most potentially transformational periods in their lives.

With partners and NatWest, we created a process called Aspire Cash, that helps students to have much faster access to the funds that support their living and learning needs. A simple student-centric platform that allows payment in minutes rather than days or weeks as well as providing other resources. One university that we work with reports that this has reduced the bureaucracy by at least 80 per cent and really speeded up delivery to their students. This has given valuable sector data on how students are using their financial awards and we have launched the UK's first ever analysis on how students are spending this cash.

Insights from university partner schemes

Our "[Shining the light on student financial support](#)" report covers the latest full academic year (22/23) and draws on data from 53,049 students (across different universities) in receipt of a total of £19.1 million of cash. This first ever report has identified:

- The use of 134 types of specialist cash-based funding streams by UK universities (when it comes to investing in students who need particular additional funding support) – with an average of 12 streams being deployed by each individual university.
- An overall average of £360 being awarded to each student for the year.
- A total of 118,429 episodes of cash withdrawals – indicating that, across the year, each relevant student is drawing their cash entitlement in two instalments.
- That a collective 63% (c£11 million) of the specialist cash funding is being spent on “cost of living” needs – such as household bills (over £4 million or 25% of the total), food and other groceries (£3.7 million or 22%) and rent (£2.8 million or 16%). With further amounts covering: study-related resources (£1.9 million or 11%), transport to and from university (£1.5 million or 9%), and personal wellbeing/health support (£951,000 or 5%).
- Sizeable levels of cash are also being devoted to support students with their course placements (for example: nursing students attending hospitals) at a total amount of £788,000 – and also with their childcare costs (£435,000).

In addition, the report notes differences in cash use between students based at universities across six main regions:

- Those in South East England are allocated the highest level of cash (average of £744 per student) compared with West Midlands based students (average of £150 per student).
- Students at universities in North East England and South East England are devoting the highest levels of cash (average of 29% of their specialist funding budgets) to paying off household bills.
- Students in Wales have the highest proportion of cash being spent on rent (at 33% this is double the sector average).
- Those in the West Midlands are spending double the average amount (17% of their total funds) on transport.
- The “other” category of spending shows many further needs for students including care home fees for relatives, dentistry and other healthcare, additional disability support, and paying off overdrafts or other debts.

Supporting the student journey

The platform that students use to draw down their cash is our Student Engagement Portal. This very much tallies with the PAQ ‘Expected use of university services’ as it provides information, insight, and guidance on a whole range of student journey issues, in particular study skills, money matters, wellbeing and employability – as well as help with the confidence issues raised by PAQ 2021. We are constantly providing new and updated content from sector experts as well as blogs by students to share their experiences and advice with their peers. Our Portal is provided to compliment the resources of our partner universities and add value for them and their students.

Our findings, which we will now deliver every year and expand insights, will help universities to better understand the specific needs and concerns of their students and help better direct financial support to what students really need over their time at university as well as help retention, belonging, wellbeing and student success. Faster student financial provision and removing barriers to achieving a fulfilling and successful higher education experience are two ways that can help support those students whose views and opinions have been captured by this report.

Adjusting our frameworks to support success

Professor Shân Wareing, Deputy Vice Chancellor, University of Northampton

There are a lot of short hand phrases used about higher education students packed with assumptions. Good students, good universities still circulate in radio debates. Resentment of students who have a steeper learning journey, and therefore need more work on the part of the institution to fulfil their potential is coded into everyday language. The language of equality and fairness and meritocracy sits alongside assumptions that the status quo is inevitable, and the haves and the have nots are permanently segregated. High entry tariff is still a criterion in university league tables, including The Guardian, penalising in status, reputation and ability to recruit and generate income, the universities which do most to change the life chances of students who had fewer chances, less support before university.

The work of underpinning widening access and student success with evidence is essential as to the mission of higher education articulated in many university mission statements - “inspiring change, transforming lives” and all its variants across the sector. Challenging the assumptions which lead to the conversations with academic staff in every university I’ve worked in about how the university “takes the wrong students”, explained in terms of their prior success in learning.

I believe fundamentally in the capacity of people to learn, the power of education to change society, and our responsibility to use our abilities, our capital, our privilege to make society better and fairer. To put these beliefs into action, and to overcome the assumptions in the media, in our own staff, often in the minds of our students, we need data of the kind that appears in this report. This data allows us to see the material factors that impact students every day, the length of time and cost of journeys to the campus, the difference in previous study experiences which allow a smooth transition to higher education study or else a challenging one full of adjustments and risk.

As the report says, it highlights the prior learning experiences, concerns and expectations on entry of A-Level and BTEC respondents which are two of the most common entry qualifications into higher education by UK domiciled students. Although the sample sizes are small, they highlight the consistent findings repeated within and between the two qualifications. It also highlights the challenges for educators and provides a clear rationale for why it is essential to address the differences in prior learning experiences on entry.”

The jump from using pre-digested materials, textbooks, extracts, selected, curated, edited, purposed, to selecting and making sense of primary resources is immense, as this study reminds us, and impacts some students far more than others. Not as an indication in innate ability but as a consequence of prior learning experiences which are themselves an indicator of prosperity and stability in most cases.

Understanding the different format students are accustomed to receiving feedback in is an eye opener. Feedback, and key to reducing the awarding gap and one of the most significant drivers for improvement for all students, has been experienced profoundly differently by BTEC and A-Level students, with A-Level students more likely to receive face to face feedback and a hard copy document, and BTEC students more likely to only receive text in a virtual learning environment.

The impact of the pandemic reverberates and shows up in every survey and every data set relating to students’ achievements and wellbeing. Lockdown exacerbated all the social distinctions. The insight into causes of anxiety for BTEC and A-Level students is one of the potentially most impactful areas in terms of student communications, induction, accommodation, teaching and support.

Being able to recognise areas of likely anxiety and engage and where possible assuage them is vital to students' sense of belonging, wellbeing and success and this clear and succinct representation is vital core information for all higher education providers. Of course there are always more ways to sub-divide the data and questions to ask. What difference does neuro diversity make, or discipline variation in expectations of hours and group work or individual work expectations?

As the sample size is relatively small, the report doesn't undertake this further analysis but it does draw attention to correlations established in other research such as the likelihood reported by the NUS that:

- Trans and non-binary students, as well as students of colour are more likely to have less than £500 a month in income.
- Parents and carers are more likely to report extreme concern about their ability to get by financially than other students.

One of the valuable functions of this report is that in the framing of the questions, a spotlight is thrown onto important aspects of student life that may have been overlooked – that students have beliefs and expectations about the function and form of feedback that may not match what their teaching team believes and expects, which both sides may take for granted, enabling the mismatch to be explored and addressed. The report provides a taxonomy of areas for universities and teaching and support staff to consider and engage with, in areas such as students' perceptions of their skills.

To ensure teaching and support, and interventions to improve access, retention and success are effective, we need this data. We need to understand students' prior experiences and possible assumptions about study and their own abilities. We need to adjust our own frameworks to the reality of this generation of students. This is the only way we fulfil our mission of education, enabling individual to achieve their potential, enabling a society where a university education, and all the benefits it brings, are a possibility for anyone with the ability to benefit from it, regardless of background.

Addressing the transition to higher education for disabled students

Patrick Johnson, Pro Vice-Chancellor Diversity, Inclusion and Students, The University of Law

This illuminating report delves into a crucial topic of understanding the prior learning and study expectations of students. As a former Disabled Students' Commissioner, I am particularly interested in the experience of disabled students. I was therefore pleased to see the report reference the need for further sector wide research to be undertaken to more fully explore the impact of the diverse student characteristics across different university mission groups and regions in the UK. It highlights the importance of recognising the diverse needs of students and ensuring they have equal opportunities to excel in their educational journey.

It is essential to understand that choice of assessment plays a pivotal role in supporting diverse and disabled students. A one-size-fits-all approach, such as standardised exams, may not be suitable for everyone. Embracing a diversity of post-16 education options allows students to shine in ways that traditional exams might not facilitate. It is crucial to acknowledge that alternative learning methods can be just as effective, if not more so, for certain students.

My personal experience supports my strong belief that choice in modality of post 16 education is key. As an individual from a working class, ethnic minority background, I pursued BTEC qualifications, and found the opportunity to undertake learning with a vocational focus enticing. Not least because I could

see a link to future employment. BTEC qualifications enabled me to continue my education with a high level of motivation and without these options, I would likely not have pursued higher education and reached my current position. This underscores the concern that limiting educational choices may deny future generations access to higher education based on their preferred learning styles.

The report rightly points out that, if a university does not understand their students previous experience and expectations, they will not effectively be able to support their students through the study lifecycle. Pre-arrival questionnaires are invaluable tools for understanding students and their needs. They can help institutions anticipate the support required by disabled students. However, institutions should go further and establish anticipatory measures for disabled students, which also benefit all students. This is important because not all students declare or believe that they have a disability, but they would obviously still benefit from support. Institutions should therefore ensure where appropriate that support measures are available to all.

Collaborative research between UCAS and Pearson provides an insight into the experiences of disabled students in education. The "Next Steps: What is the Experience of Disabled Students in Education? – July 2022" report sheds light on various aspects.

Key findings include:

- Disabled applicants are more likely to defer entry to HE: before the pandemic, disabled students were 23% more likely to defer entry than non-disabled students, rising to 28% in 2021 – this disparity varies by impairment type.
- Students' decision making is influenced by the HE institution's support offer: 56% research an institution's support for disabled students before applying, with its reputation for equality, diversity and inclusion being of particular importance.
- Students are looking forward to the social aspects of university life: only 17% of respondents felt satisfied with access to inclusive extra-curricular activities at school or college, whereas 44% expect the social opportunities at university or college to be good or excellent.

The report also provides a comparative analysis of disabled and non-disabled applicants in the 2021 cycle:

- Disabled students are 11% less likely to hold only A-levels and 11% more likely to hold BTECs.
- Disabled applicants are more likely to be men, mature and care experienced.
- Disabled students are less likely to be placed at higher tariff providers and less likely to achieve top A-level grades.

A successful transition to higher education requires appropriate support and this is particularly critical for disabled students. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted education systems globally, affecting students at all levels. Disabled students faced unique challenges during this period, exacerbating existing disparities. The shift to remote learning posed accessibility issues for disabled students who often lacked adequate assistive technologies or adjustments. Support services provided by educational institutions, such as tutoring and note-taking assistance, were disrupted, further hindering disabled students' academic progress. The pandemic's impact on mental health affected all students with isolation and stress resulting from lockdowns and social distancing measures taking a toll on students' emotional well-being and potentially affecting their academic performance. As Morgan's report acknowledges, learning generally reverted to pre-Covid19 mode.

The Disabled Students' Commission (DSC) emphasised that to improve the disabled student experience, universities and colleges must undergo a significant shift in their approach. The current system is unsustainable and fails to adequately support many disabled students.

The DSC's 'Commitment' to improving the disabled student experience includes addressing four key principles that disabled students have said are important to them: Communication, Consistency, Certainty, and Choice. Several recommendations have emerged:

- Early experiences within the higher education community play a pivotal role in integration and inclusivity.
- Institutions should work to avoid repeatedly requesting information from disabled students, respecting their need for streamlined processes.
- Students must receive comprehensive information about their chosen course, available support, and potential challenges before beginning their studies.
- Bridging the gap in employment outcomes for disabled graduates is crucial.
- Institutions need to acknowledge that disabled students are not a homogeneous group and that outcomes vary considerably between disability types.
- Creating a culture where all students can excel is essential. Meeting the diverse requirements of disabled students fosters engagement and positive outcomes.

The transition to higher education for disabled students, including those pursuing A-Level and BTEC qualifications, is a complex journey influenced by various factors. The COVID-19 pandemic added unprecedented challenges, necessitating a renewed commitment to inclusivity and accessibility. Morgan's focus on understanding new students prior learning experiences and expectations on entry is crucial in helping institutions provide appropriate support. Ensuring that disabled students have diverse educational pathways, supported by appropriate adjustments and services, is crucial. The focus should be on choice, not restriction, to enable all students to thrive in their academic and career pursuits. Ultimately, the goal is to provide an equitable and enriching educational experience for disabled students in higher education.

A University mental health approach

Dr Gareth Hughes, Lead author of the University Mental Health Charter

This report again demonstrates the ongoing need and challenge for universities to adapt themselves to the students who are arriving with us now. The current cohort of students have obviously experienced significant disruption, but this has only exacerbated an existing challenge. Many students are now arriving with less academic, social and navigational capital than would once have been the case. While early efforts to respond to this challenge tended to focus on how we could better prepare students for how we teach, assess and socialise, more recent work and research, such as this report, are clarifying that it is universities who need to adapt to meet our students as they arrive.

Thankfully, through the University Mental Health Charter, we are seeing many excellent examples of universities doing this and doing it well. However, there is a clear need to continue to build on this work and to develop effective whole university approaches.

There are a number of threads in this report that are worth reflecting upon, not least the interconnectedness of many of the issues this report raises. Students concern about lack of academic preparation and understanding, clearly links into their levels of anxiety and confidence and their expected use of services. There are also warnings to be careful about our assumptions – such as the level of comfort students may have with VLEs or online learning generally, their previous development of academic skills and their comfort in access resources that exist to support them.

While this raises the need for further support to help students address these issues, we also need to be aware that internal and external pressures mean that often those students who need the most development support, are also those least able to access extracurricular activities. For that reason, it is imperative that the development of key academic skills, knowledge and understanding are explicitly at the heart of the curriculum. As Dr Morgan and others have argued for years, the curriculum is the vehicle and we need to consider the scaffolding students require to enable them to transition into university, flourish and succeed.

We may also need to consider the role of the curriculum and the academic programme in addressing another rising concern – the increase in loneliness and loss of belonging since the pandemic. While some excellent work is underway within universities to create more socially engaging campus and increased social opportunities, often these are extra-curricular. The pressure of work and a loss of social practice and skill, means we may instead need to consider how cohort identity is formed on academic programmes. It is also interesting that around 40.0% of respondents in this report already expect to access services for health and wellbeing. While the reasons for this will be multiple, this places extra emphasis on the need for universities to provide safe, effective, well governed and well-resourced services.

Finally, we should note that these challenges exist at a point when many university staff are raising concerns about their own capacity and wellbeing. Responding to these challenges is dependent on the talented and committed staff in our universities having the resource, energy and capacity to be able to respond and support their students. This cannot be done with tired, overwhelmed and demoralised colleagues, which is a challenge in itself.

Thankfully, we do now have a range of resources that can support us in this work. Alongside the excellent improvingthestudentexperience.com, we now have Advance HE's Education for Mental Health toolkit, the University Mental Health Charter Framework, Student Space and The Wellbeing Thesis for post-graduate research students. These works have been compiled drawing on the brilliance of staff and students in the sector and offer advice, guidance and reasons for hope.

A social justice perspective: The lens of ideal

Professor Billy Wong, University of Reading and Dr Tiffany Chiu, Imperial College London

Morgan's report offers a timely and thorough account of the diverse experiences of A-Level and BTEC students. Using pre-arrival questionnaires in 2019 and 2021, covering the pre-Covid timeframe and the aftermath of the pandemic, the report provides evidence of unequal student experiences, and the persistent hierarchy between qualification types and available support and its impact on learning. In particular, some of the emergency measures forced by the pandemic have continued, but without critical reflections of the different impacts stemming from wider social inequalities such as digital access and competency. It is important such disparities are appropriately addressed in order to create an inclusive and equitable higher education for all students.

From a social justice perspective, the impact of Covid-19 has further highlighted the systemic inequalities within our society from health to employment to education. Everyone was impacted, but in different ways and magnitude. It is imperative that we continue to monitor, review and understand the experiences of students and their understandings of higher education. Morgan's report answers this call by highlighting the prior learning experiences, concerns and expectations on entry of A-Level and BTEC students. In doing so, the challenges for educators are made clear.

In particular, the call for higher education providers to address the differences in prior learning experiences upon entry is consistent with our ideal student research ([Wong and Chiu, 2021](#)). The lens of the ideal student is essentially underpinned by the need for us to be explicit and transparent about what we expect and desire of students, through mutual and open conversations and discussions to reduce or mitigate mismatches in expectations. As Morgan's report notes, the educational experiences, structures and deliveries of A-Level and BTEC qualifications are different, and so it is important and even necessary for higher education providers to appreciate that existing approaches and models are, arguably, tailored to the more traditional A-Level pathway.

Morgan's study highlights particular preferences between the study practices of A-Level and BTEC students, such as engagement mode, assessment feedback and, as also found in our own research ([Wong and Chiu, 2019](#)), a reluctance to 'ask for help' due to fear or pride. Higher education providers need to be as clear as possible on what is expected of their students in their institutions, to further avoid inequalities caused by implicit assumptions and practices. Universities need to ensure that students from different educational entry routes and social backgrounds (such as gender and generation) are all sufficiently supported to develop as undergraduate students, beyond the basics or minimal requirements to enrol and progress, but through the lens of ideal where the focus is more ambitiously on what is desirable as well as realistic of students.

And most importantly, through transparency and open conversation between the views and perspectives of different stakeholders, including students from various entry routes into higher education. There will undoubtedly be new and unfolding challenges as the longer-term impact of the pandemic unpacks itself alongside anticipated and unanticipated changes in higher education. Morgan's report provides an important and unique point of reference to understand not only the impact of the pandemic for A-Level and BTEC students, but the systemic inequalities that result from different educational pathways and qualifications.

The changing face of university enrolments

Professor Ian Dunn

The students in our universities are amazing and brilliant and they represent a much more diverse population than ever before. We still have much to do to ensure full representation, but things are so different to even the time when I was a student some 40 years ago.

In 1973 Martin Trow, the prominent director of the Centre for Studies in Higher Education at the University of California at Berkeley commented in his paper 'Problems in the Transition from Elite to Mass Higher Education' about the changing dynamic as higher education moved from elite (5% participation) to mass (15% participation) and to universal (40% participation).

We have moved on a great deal since that time but we are still grappling with many of the challenges. One may even suggest that we cling to the last memories of a system that admitted a homogenously qualified cohort, all ready for their first class in the university and all with prior familial experience of HE. This is not the HE in which I work. This is not the HE in which my wonderful, diverse student body exists.

I wish to focus on just one modest feature of the student journey, the qualifications with which they are admitted to the institution. I would like to make a plea for the ability to differentiate between the 18-year-old student admitted with A Levels and another student admitted with a BTEC. These students may be sitting next to a 35-year-old who has just successfully completed their Access to HE qualification. Alongside them, I may have any number of international students qualified in their home systems. Because of all the other pressures on me, I deliver my lectures and tutorials much as I have always done. I know that the BTEC student may be a brilliant practical engineer but needs extra support for the more theoretical aspects of my course. The A-Level student may never have been into the workshop and the mature learner is probably brilliant but nervous about their capabilities. I know these things but what do I do about it?

Let us make space in that first year to transition, just as primary pupils do into secondary education. Creating the space in the first-year undergraduate curriculum for tutors to tailor the style and content of their material to the student. I am not asking to change learning outcomes, but simply to have some extra time for the presentation of material in different ways. This will clearly mean that more students are able to engage, and persist, in this truly mass HE system.

A national perspective- the importance of getting the right data
Natasha Plaister, Statistician at FFT Education Datalab

BTECs offer an important route into higher education as an alternative to the more traditional route via A-Levels. Yet, as this report highlights, students who studied BTECs have poorer outcomes in higher education: they are more likely to drop out of university, and less likely to achieve a 2.1 or above than their peers.

So why does this happen? It may be that universities need to do more to understand the support that BTEC students need to transition into HE study, and how this differs from students who have taken other qualifications. Or it may be that the differences in outcomes are linked to differences in the characteristics and circumstances of BTEC students, rather than directly to the qualifications. In practice, the answer is probably the usual one – a bit of both.

The findings from the Pre-Arrival Academic Questionnaires presented in this report offer insights into both areas. The picture they paint of student characteristics and circumstances reveals some striking differences between students who took BTECs and those who took A-Levels. The BTEC students in the sample included a higher proportion of male students, and a higher proportion of students from ethnic minority backgrounds, than the A-Level students. BTEC students were more likely than A-Level students to have been part of the first generation in their family to go to university, and more likely to have come from a disadvantaged background. They were also more likely to remain living in their family home while at university, which has all sorts of implications in terms of distance to travel to campus, access to extracurricular activities and so on.

These differences highlight once again the importance of supporting BTEC students; BTECs provide a route for some underrepresented groups to access higher education. But they also mean that it's not surprising that BTEC students have poorer outcomes, on average. It's well-known, for example, that male students, those from non-White backgrounds and disadvantaged students have higher drop out rates and are less likely to achieve higher class degrees than their peers.

Another important area of difference that is not touched on in-depth in the report is the choice of discipline. Some degree courses tend to have higher drop-out rates than others, or lower levels of attainment. If BTEC students are more or less likely than A-Level students to take these courses, that would make a difference to how we might expect their outcomes to compare.

All the differences that I've described so far are based on simple factual data – bread and butter to a statistician like myself. But the report goes further, delving into students' expectations, their motivations and confidence levels, and their experiences of prior study. And, if anything, I was surprised at how little difference there was between A-Level and BTEC students. This is encouraging in many ways, but the few areas of difference provide some food for thought for universities. The most notable for me were differences in preferred mode of feedback, and in self-assessment of ability in literacy and numeracy.

It will be important to continue to monitor the situation over the next few years as T-Levels begin to take over from BTECs, and in the face of continuing changes in the wake of the pandemic and cost of living crisis.

The report also presents some analysis of gender differences. Of particular interest to me were the findings on confidence levels. Male students – particularly male BTEC students – reported lower levels of concern and anxiety, and higher perceptions of their skill base, and were the least likely to say that they would use university support services. And yet male students are more likely to drop out of university than their female peers. This raises the question of whether reported confidence actually tallies with positive experience, and whether that differs for different groups of students.

Finally, putting aside the question of BTEC and A-Level students, this report shows how valuable Pre-Arrival Questionnaires can be for both universities and students. Understanding more about students' prior experiences and future expectations can only leave universities better equipped to support their students – no matter what their background.

A data and learning analytics perspective

Ed Foster, Nottingham Trent University

This report is important because it focuses on the outcomes of a significant number of our students. Students with BTECs or BTECs and other qualifications have consistently less good progression and attainment than their A-Level peers.

What then should we do about this issue?

Truthfully, the answer is the same as it has been since the sector went large in the 1990s. We need to understand who our students are and what they're capable of and teach and assess accordingly. Not all of our students are equally as confident or prepared to drink from the fonts of knowledge that we present to them.

We've known this for decades. Why is it so hard to meet them where they are? Partly it's resources. Let's not underplay the fact that delivering a highly personalised learning experience is costly and funding per student has fallen by around one third since the early 2010s.

But it's not just that. The problem is partly the fact that the causes of these disparities are deep-rooted and complex. BTEC students may struggle because the forces of socio-economic disadvantage encouraged them to consider BTECs in the first place, or possibly there's something about the gap between a degree programme and a BTEC. Of course, it's likely to be a bit of both with other factors to boot.

Big data ought to be able to help us understand these issues, but unfortunately we're at the phase of information technology, data literacy and management science that what we have are simply too many graphs showing differences. Datafication is the process capturing aspects of the human experience and turning it into interpretable data. Ostensibly, this provides actionable insights.

Sometimes it does, but all too often it's a tool for a politician, regulator or senior manager to say "see this gap, it's unacceptable, why haven't you fixed it yet?". There is a logic fallacy here: seeing the problem $\neq$ understanding it. And it certainly doesn't mean that you have the solution.

It hasn't been fixed because this is a proper wicked problem. Where do you start? Is the BTEC attainment gap about male attitudes to study, or is it about the way BTEC students used to experience feedback and are alienated by the feedback they receive at university?

Try this thought experiment. Tomorrow, you have a 10 am lecture. What action would you take from this report into your practice? And the same question for the 11 am and 2 pm seminars? There are recommendations in the next section to help you out.

We also need to be aware that as a community of scholars, our instincts don't always help. We are truth seekers, somewhere there has to be a definitive cause to this gap, if only we did the right analysis, or asked the right question. This is just not helpful. As far as we can, we need to move to trials and experiments in our every day learning, teaching and assessment. What makes a difference to induction, to seminars, to resource use for our BTEC students?

If big data offers a trap (datafication) it may also offer us a solution with the gradual implementation of learning analytics (LA). LA potentially provides us with richer and near live data on what students are doing in their learning. It will always be limited, analytics offer us proxies (VLE use, attendance data) into how students are engaging not what's actually happening in their thought processes, but it may be more useful than waiting for end of semester/ end of year results. We should always be sceptical of silicon valley sparkle, but we already possess myriad points of data about how our students are learning. Can we use it to support colleagues' innovations as we search for better ways to teach, inspire and support BTEC students? Ultimately if we are to learn from this report and other reports that follow, we need more focus on trialling solutions and perhaps big data can help us to do so.

Creating curricula that support students' learning: the role of data as facilitator
Annie Hughes, Kingston University

This insightful report is a timely reminder of the differences in the prior educational experiences of current participants in higher education. Crucially this report moves us from a position of simply knowing the changing configuration of prior qualifications to identifying how these intersect with a wide variety of other student characteristics and exposing how students feel as they enter higher education. Moreover, the report offers effective avenues through which higher education professionals can ensure that their curricula and academic practices are inclusive of these multiple experiences.

This is important as there is an increasing recognition that different student groups inhabit the same higher education curricula in very different ways with resultant differences in levels of satisfaction, belonging and outcomes. Shay and Peseta (2016) argue that University curricula must be designed for the diversity of students in higher education in a way that provides an equality of opportunity for all learners and overcomes the epistemic obstacles faced by some student groups.

In contemporary higher education where student cohorts are large it is more challenging to develop a deep understanding of the students in the classroom. Ensuring that data is available to educators on the characteristics of the students in their classrooms is an essential first step in supporting them to create more inclusive curricula. This report has flagged the importance of ensuring the availability of data on differential entry qualifications.

To be a truly effective enabler, data needs to be provided in an accessible format, in a timely fashion, at the correct unit of analysis and embedded in existing quality assurance and enhancement processes. Institutional data (and often faculty and school) is not always meaningful or relevant at discipline level where there are significant differences between the entry profiles in different subjects. Course and module level data is more nuanced and provides much more meaningful insights. Of course, it is not enough simply to know who is in the classroom, but also how they are doing relative to each other. Data which flags to module and course leaders where cohorts of students with particular characteristics are doing well or less well is a crucial facet of effective quality assurance and enhancement in higher education as well as addressing the institutional obligations required by the Office for Students (OfS) through their B3 conditions and Access and Participation targets. If educators are not supported to understand how different student groups are faring in their classrooms, then how can they be expected to ensure that their practice is effective in supporting all learners?

At Kingston University, data and metrics has been used as a key facilitator of curricula change for many years. For example, the value added (VA) metric, introduced ostensibly to support colleagues to understand the complexities of addressing the ethnicity degree awarding gap, has also been incredibly helpful in exploring other differentials in student outcomes based on various demographics. Adopting an intersectional approach to the VA has been a 'game changer' in challenging the student deficit model and providing evidence which refutes commonly held narratives that the ethnicity degree awarding.

Whilst the VA is effective at looking at differential attainment at institutional, school, department and course level (because it uses sector data for benchmarking), it is not available at module level. However, to facilitate effective curricula change which addresses equality of opportunity, academic educators need access to module level data and in a format which aligns with their responsibilities for the quality assurance and enhancement of their academic offer.

To address this challenge, an internal project at Kingston brought together the expertise of the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Centre, Planning and Data Insight and Quality Assurance and Enhancement to develop data hubs at both course and module levels which provide annually updated data on module cohorts based on their clearing status, ethnicity, age, gender, disability, religion and belief, IMD, POLAR, household income, commuter and first generation status as well as their prior entry qualifications.

This data enables our academic educators to explore differences in their cohorts and examine differentials in their continuation and attainment. Armed with this data, colleagues are supported to write SMART action plans which identify changes that can be made in their curricula and its delivery to better support all students.

A similar data hub is provided for courses in substantive review which takes course teams on a journey to examine:

- Who are their students?
- How are their cohorts changing?
- Which student groups are doing well? Which student groups are doing less well? (Continuation, completion, attainment and progression).
- Which student groups are engaging, and which are not? (Attendance data)
- What are their students saying and feeling? (Student voice metrics)

Staff are further encouraged to engage with the Inclusive Curriculum Consultant Programme which allows staff to partner with student consultants to develop their curricula or curricula-related activities to ensure its inclusivity. These consultants have also been trained to understand and use data to progress inclusivity with the course teams they work with. In this way, academic colleagues are able to use the voices and experiences of students as rich sources of knowledge to enhance their modules and programmes.

Notwithstanding the fact that the report highlights the many similarities between BTEC and A level entrants, it is an incredibly helpful resource in signposting changes that need to be considered to drive forward equality of opportunity and progress the enhancement of curricula which most effectively support BTEC learners. For example, the evidence in this report which points to BTEC students being less likely to seek academic support than their A-Level counterparts, suggests the need for embedded academic support. Similarly, the report flags a very interesting, and less considered point that A-Level respondents are more likely to have received written feedback “which is common at university”. Many educators have provided flexibility and choice in assessment types to ensure there are opportunities for students to play to their different strengths, but fewer have considered the need for diverse modes of feedback. These insights are invaluable to academic educators in their continuous journey to support all learners.

Supporting the increasing participation of commuter students to reduce disadvantage
Emma Maslin, ESRC-funded PhD Researcher in the School of Education at Durham University

This report provides useful insight into the pre-entry experiences of HE students within the wake of a global pandemic, the impact of which is ongoing. In particular, it highlights the continuing prevalence of commuter students in the contemporary UK HE sector, a group of students often overlooked in discussions around access and student experience.

Demographically speaking, commuter students are [more likely to be mature, have caring responsibilities, be from a minority ethnic background and/or from a low-income household](#).

Additionally, Morgan's findings state that BTEC students are more likely to plan for staying at home, with BTEC females also more likely to commute than BTEC males. Currently, there is no sector definition of what constitutes a commuter student, nor are universities required to collect and record the number of commuter students in their institution, therefore Morgan's findings add valuable insight into our understanding of the commuter population not previously articulated.

There are multiple reasons why students may choose to commute to university, including as a way to reduce costs. Commuter students often see travelling to university as a cheaper alternative to costly student accommodation, although in more recent times this has been further compounded with the [strains on student accommodation](#) in major cities such as Manchester, Glasgow and Bristol.

Whilst BTEC students indicate a preference for staying at home, the report articulates that they are also less likely to receive financial support from parents and guardians in comparison to A-Level students. [Recent research from Save the Student](#) highlighted that this is a wider national trend amongst younger students and as a result, students are needing to reduce their living costs to maintain access to university. Commuter students in particular will need to budget for their transport to and from university, resulting in less money that can be spent on food on campus, course materials and wider extra-curricular activities.

Participation in extra-curricular activities, along with opportunities for socialisation with peers, is key to [students' sense of belonging](#) at university, the lack of which puts commuter students at a distinct disadvantage.

Commuter students may need a part-time job to support with living costs, another factor likely to have a major impact on their attendance and university engagement. [Some universities across the sector](#) have responded to this by condensing academic timetables, concentrating classes over two or three days rather than five. This is not just beneficial for commuter students to reduce transport and associate travel costs, but all who need to financially support their studies through part-time work. Consequentially, universities across the sector may want to consider this approach in a response to both commuter students and the wider cost of living crisis.

Universities should be considering the support and facilities they can offer for commuters. The report helpfully provides suggestions from students themselves, including travel bursaries, advice on planning travel and blended online and in-person study packages to reduce travel costs. Whilst these suggestions are enlightening, they are not exhaustive and will vary between institutions. [All commuter students are different](#), and therefore it is likely that they will want different things. For instance, the report highlights a correlation between older students and a greater willingness to commute further distances to study. An older student who is travelling upwards of 10 miles to university, perhaps by car and as a result of childcare responsibilities, is therefore likely to have different ideas of how they could be supported in

comparison to a younger student living at home, commuting less than 5 miles on a public bus. Understanding the impact of [regional contexts](#) on commuter students' experiences of HE is also imperative. For example, students in London will be facing different distances and time spent commuting in comparison to those who are commuting from more rural and coastal locations.

In lieu of a sector definition of commuter students, institutions therefore need to consider their individual institutional context, as well as individual commuter heterogeneity in order to suitably support their commuter student body. This can start small, an induction event perhaps, some travel leaflets or simply an up-to-date webpage with useful links. Regardless, this report has highlighted that it is imperative we acknowledge and support these students' from the very beginning of their HE journey.

A data perspective

Andy Youell, Executive Director – Digital and Regulation, University College of Estate Management; former Director of Data Policy and Governance, Higher Education Statistics Agency

The pre-arrival survey work presented here builds on Morgan's research in this area over many years. This is significant and, in many ways, groundbreaking work. Some of the issues covered by the surveys are complex and nuanced: expectations, opinions and perceptions about the journey into higher education do not lend themselves to the simple, rigid classifications that drive statistical analysis. But Morgan uses her considerable knowledge of the domain and the broader data analysis to drive insightful observations and identify areas that warrant further exploration.

The report also presents a rich analysis of data from a range of sources across higher education. Morgan skilfully navigates a complex and often incoherent data landscape to present an analysis of student experience that is rich and meaningful and provides a solid foundation on which to move our understanding of these issues forward.

However, the value that can be derived from work like this is often constrained by differences in the way different data systems classify, group and analyse data about students. The siloed nature of the HE data landscape presents a huge and frustrating challenge to anybody attempting to gain genuine insights into student behaviours across the HE lifecycle. While much is said about the unnecessary burden that this incoherence drives into institutions when they engage with these different data systems, this work hits up against the incoherence of the landscape from the perspective of deriving intelligence and insights from the range of data sources available.

It is telling that so much government focus and resource goes into measuring the satisfaction of students as they head towards the completion of their studies (the National Student Survey) and the impact of higher education on subsequent careers and life-journeys (the Graduate Outcomes survey). Although HE providers can derive much value from these datasets, understanding the issues facing students as they enter higher education can help providers provide better support for students and prevent later problems and dissatisfaction occurring. This represents a shift from reactive mindset to a predictive and pre-emptive mindset; a shift that could have a profound effect on the success of thousands of students in today's higher education system.

The changing Level 3 landscape

Ben Jordan, Head of Policy and Research and Philippa Alway, UCAS

The 2022 entry cycle saw over 90,000 applicants holding a single BTEC qualification apply for HE via UCAS – around 15% of the total cohort, with 2/3 of these holding the Extended Diploma. This report extensively covers the profile of BTEC students. We know from UCAS data that BTEC students are more likely to be from disadvantaged backgrounds, more likely to be mature, and more likely to be from an ethnic minority background. Vocational and technical qualifications such as BTEC play an important role in supporting widening access.

We also know that undertaking an applied general qualification like a BTEC can influence the future options for students. The need to support BTEC students comes before they even become a BTEC student. The [2020 entry UCAS Undergraduate report – Where next? | Undergraduate](#) report looked at the ‘lightbulb’ moments for would-be undergraduate students, and in this we found that qualification selection can impact, and potentially narrow, the range of choice available to a student. For example, two in five English 18-year-olds with a Pearson BTEC Level 3 National Extended Diploma in Sport and Exercise Science are accepted to study sport and exercise science at degree level. These kinds of qualifications are focused solely on one subject area so naturally do not typically lead to any other subject at university or college, and the remaining pupils generally do not apply to HE. Such strong focus may result in a student’s HE options being narrower if they take certain vocational qualifications: 26% of BTEC students report being unable to study a subject that interested them at degree level because they did not have the relevant subject, compared to 18% of A level students.

The important point here is that students are aware of what doors open – and close – when making their Level 3 choices. Around 1 in 5 students inadvertently closed a door to a course of choice due to their Level 3 qualification and subject selection. Disadvantaged students are more likely to be in this bracket. The key here is that all students understand the consequences of choice, and don’t unknowingly close a door.

Reassuringly, BTEC students are happy with their choices and career focussed. 53% of students taking BTEC qualifications chose their degree subject to pursue a certain career, compared to 44% of students taking A levels. Additionally, we found little evidence to suggest students with vocational qualifications are less satisfied with the post-16 choices they made – with 26% of BTEC students reporting that, if given the opportunity, they would choose one or more post-16 options differently, compared to 32% of A level students.

Informed decision making is vital for all students, particularly for BTEC students when considering the cohorts that are more likely to study the qualifications. At UCAS, we deliver personalised content regarding the full range of post-secondary choices to students via the UCAS Hub, helping them understand the pathways available to them. Core to these are data driven resources – such as our Careers Quiz, which has been used millions of times by students since its inception in 2021. Furthermore, our soon to be launched Outreach Connection Service will better facilitate early engagement.

But this isn’t limited to undergraduate study – we know that over 400,000 students interested in higher education are also interested in apprenticeships, with vocational and technical routes offering a well-trodden pathway to this route. The development and enhancement of UCAS services – putting apprenticeships and undergraduate side by side – will deliver parity in how students assess their choices, and ensure choice remains understood.

Data plays a key role in continued student support. UCAS collects a wide range of information regarding the student and their background. Building on our already extensive understanding of students, in 2022 UCAS introduced seven new widening participation questions to the application. Over 74,000 have shared information regarding their individual circumstances via these new questions - equating to 23.2% of all UK 18-year-olds applicants. For the first time, 43,000 students receiving free school meals, 11,500 young adult carers, and 3,300 estranged individuals have all been able to share their circumstances within the application. This has transformed their visibility and the way we and the sector supports them. This data is known to a university at the point of application and could offer longer term value in supporting student success.

With the roll out of the outcomes from the review of post-16 qualifications at level 3 underway, there is much we can learn from previous experiences as we support T Level students. The 2023 entry cycle saw over 1,700 T Level students apply to HE, and almost all had at least one offer. Like other students taking vocational and technical qualifications, these students are more likely to be from a disadvantaged background – in 2022, nearly 1 in 4 T Level applicants were from a POLAR Q1 area, compared to 11% for A levels. Like those before them, we need to ensure we're delivering an end-to-end support offer – from initial choice and qualification selection, through to graduation, with data driven choice and support at its heart.

The future of the Level 3 qualifications landscape is changing and is set to transform further still in the coming decade. Providing insights on destinations, decision-making and the pathways available to students will remain at the heart of UCAS's work – informing the support we and the sector provide to every applicant.

Concluding commentary

Removing disadvantage on entry by bridging the secondary and tertiary divide

Dr Michelle Morgan, Dean of Students, University of East London

In universities, we tend to only think about incoming student's most recent learning qualification experience, and any learning disability that has been identified on entry. We also seem to disaggregate the learning process from the overall challenges new students must deal with in the first few weeks such as moving home or coping with a long commute, which are stressful and we know impact on attendance, learning and engagement. Ongoing research at UEL continues to reflect these findings.

But how would we adjust what we did:

If a course leader knew that for new undergraduate students entering university directly from school, a course textbook and handwritten notes had been the top two ways of accessing course learning materials (and this was true even during the pandemic) but in contrast, for those at college, it had been more diverse, how would the course leader adapt the first few weeks of teaching? Would one method be privileged over another?

How would the library adjust the sessions they provided on entry if they knew that only a third of new undergraduate students had experience of using a library at school or college?

And lastly, if a university knew that undergraduate males were three times more likely to use sports facilities compared to mental health services, how could mental health and wellbeing be promoted through sports?

If we are to help our students succeed in higher education, it is essential that we understand their prior learning journey and how their primary and secondary school experience has shaped them as a learner. It is also critical that we understand the impact of student characteristics that can disadvantage them as highlighted in the Office for Students UK domiciled Student Data: Student Outcomes report (OfS, 2022a). This knowledge will help identify and bridge learning knowledge and skill gaps, and effectively build in a period of adaptation to support the transition experience. As Johnny Rich states in his commentary, *'university is the chance to press the reset button'*. So what do we need to think about?

Not making assumptions

Covid19 taught us a lot about the disruption and impact on learning for 14–18-year-olds and their qualifications, which we need to keep considering for incoming students until at least 2025. It also highlighted assumptions made by universities that the pandemic increased 'digital learning' in schools. However, as the findings in this report highlight and in continuing PAQs undertaken in 2022 and 2023 at UEL, this is not the case. Teaching may have been delivered through online platforms, but students still learnt in the traditional manner of handwritten notes and a course textbook although for BTEC, it continued to be more diverse than A-Levels.

Another important finding is the limited use of accessing learning materials through a library, which is a key source at university, by respondents from school rather than college. This requires us to ensure that students learn this skill by embedding it into a course rather than it being a bolt on activity during the first couple of weeks of starting university. Opportunities to obtain library experience prior to university have been further exacerbated with the continuing loss of public libraries (800) throughout the UK since 2010 (Flood, 2019). Library 'life' has rules of engagement which incoming students will therefore not have experienced, and this is a skill that needs to be learnt.

Understanding the learning differences by entry qualification

It is essential to be able to clearly identify and communicate to students how their learning occurs throughout their primary and secondary education, their different entry qualifications, and how this links up with their tertiary journey. Study up to Level three is about memorizing information and repeating it through assessments and exams as Sue Williamson highlights in her commentary with the powerful inclusion of Izzy Garbutt's statement she delivered to the Youth Parliament. For the majority of A-Level and BTEC students, learning is achieved through coursework but for qualifications such as A-Levels, they are assessed by cliff edge exams, which does not always reflect the ability of a student. This can impact on the confidence of the student when it comes to assessment. It is not a surprise that examinations were the least preferred method of assessment by the respondents across all universities in this research. There needs to be a recognition by teaching staff that students enter with varying experiences thus should proactively design learning and teaching and assessment around these to help provide a more level playing field.

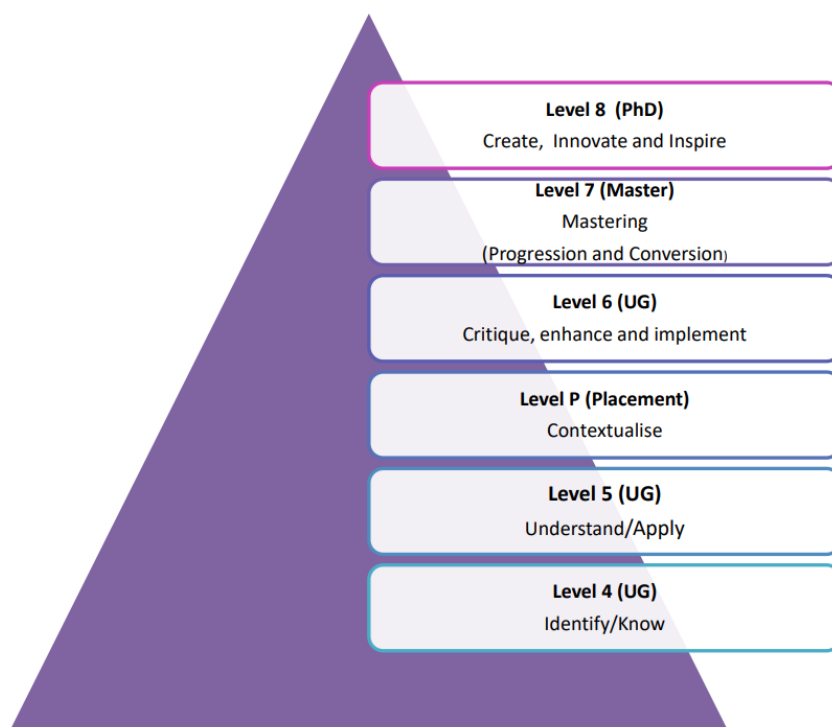
Students also need safe space and time to learn how to undertake the varied assessments at university and get the most out of the varied feedback processes. In schools and colleges, feedback is primarily written and face to face (individually). Leading educator, Phil Race has long argued that feedback needs to be dialogic and not a monologue from tutor to student (Race, 2005; 2020). He argues that when designing Level 3/4 assessment, there needs to be an awareness that students may not have adequate experience of sitting formal examinations, know how to undertake, structure, and produce coursework for assessment at this level, or have the confidence to ask for feedback which is routinely provided in schools and colleges. Hugh Jones and Ian Dunn in their commentaries argue that staff need to familiarize themselves fully with the different prior learning experiences of those holding different entry qualifications so they can bridge these gaps.

We need to be mindful of the assessment structure in the first year of study to ensure all students have the opportunity to learn different assessment techniques (Brown, 2005; Kift, 2009) and importantly, understand why they are being asked to undertake it and the benefits as Sally Brown highlights in her commentary.

Rosie Bryce also observes in her piece that bridging the learning divide is not just about speeding up the delivery for some as this will further compound the disadvantage students come in with, but through providing an equitable way for gaps to be closed. To help with a period of adaption, some universities have changed the delivery method by moving away from standard semesterised modularity and have adopted block teaching approach or a combination of year long and semesterised modules.

To help articulate to students the skills obtained at each level of study at university, colleagues and myself in the Faculty of Media and Communications at Bournemouth University developed the Student Experience and Employability pyramid. It comprises six levels (see Figure 1). We designed it to provide the basis for the employability and skills grids to act as a roadmap highlighting the skills, knowledge and attributes students obtain at each level, and how every level of study has advanced and varied learning techniques. It is also a useful guide for staff to not only articulate this to students but to use as a framework when creating and developing their curricula. The language intimacy of the QAA statement for degrees at these levels was purposely integrated into the grids along with values and issues around employability and transferability. Personal tutors play an important role in providing this advice to students in this area as Emily McIntosh, David Grey and Hugh Mannerings highlight in their commentary.

Figure 67 Student Experience and Employability Pyramid



Source: Faculty of Media and Communication Employability Working Group, Bournemouth University
Grids can be accessed by going to: [Employability_Skills_Grid_Levels_4567.pdf \(improvingthestudentexperience.com\)](#)

Transition challenges

For many students, starting university is a seminal moment in their life. For our young learners, they are moving from a 'child' space to an 'adult' space with all the legal ramifications associated with it. It may be an exciting phase, but the transition is also incredibly stressful due to many areas of their life being disrupted whether that be moving to a new area and sharing accommodation with people they do not know, or learning to be a commuter student alongside those who are not. For students who are care leavers or estranged from their family who have no or limited network of support, this is especially the case.

A common and increasing student characteristic is that of the commuter students which Emma Maslin highlights in her commentary. The term 'commuter' student is ill defined (Maguire and Morris, 2018), but research tells us that it is not just distance travelled but time taken to travel that has a direct impact on retention, progression, and success (e.g. Thomas and Jones, 2018). We know BTEC, mature and Ethnic Minority students are more often commuter students than their A-Level counterparts as they are more likely to stay at home. They are also more likely to withdraw. It is not hard to make the link between this characteristic and the pressure on students that could result in them not staying the course. With the cost-of-living crisis, there has been an increase in 18–21-year-olds are deciding to stay at home, and due to the housing crisis, students may be allocated 'university accommodation' but it is in a different city thus requiring them to travel (Shao, 2023).

The impact on the financial health and wellbeing of students can be immense and we are seeing the anxiety and challenges it is creating highlighted in recent research and the commentaries of Vivi Friedgut and Dominique Thompson. The creation of their student led advice is designed to provide students and universities with accessible key information.

With the growing need for students to undertake paid work on top of their studies near where they live, and maybe not having effective transport networks to their institution, we need to review and adapt our delivery. For example, Covid19 provided us with the opportunity to vary our teaching delivery with lectures, which is a knowledge gathering exercise, via online and on-catchup. It is the workshops, seminars and laboratories where student learning is most effective and where relationships between staff and students and students and students occur. How we deliver and engage students in learning will affect their personal sense of belonging. However, online and catch-up study is now actively discouraged by OfS and Government and a one size fits all approach becoming once again the common approach.

Differences in sense of belonging

Sense of belonging is an important concept in helping students stay the course as Liz Thomas and Sunday Blake highlight in their commentaries. We know if students engage in in-person study, this helps develop their sense of belonging with their institution. However, it is critical for us to recognise that sense of belonging will differ between students due to prior learning experiences and background. As Mary Curnock Cook highlights in her commentary, having this evidence and understanding will help increase the confidence, engagement and ultimately academic achievement of our students and help reduce social inequality.

We also need to prepare them for the emotional, psychological, and practical demands of university study and life that is a voluntary activity rather than a legal compulsory one. There is also less practical learning scaffolding which is the opposite in secondary education. For example, at school and college, students do not need to go through the vast application, financial and legal processes which they must when applying for university level study. Another example is an applicant who has lost their place

through confirmation due to not getting the required grades but has accommodation sorted and they have already started developing a sense of belonging with their first-choice university. Their sense of loss, stress and uncertainty in starting the process again, is highly likely to impact on how they settle into their second-choice university.

Although engagement data can tell us a lot especially the individual student dashboard showing the learner their personal activity as Ed Foster and Annie Hughes explain in their commentaries, it is important not to equate these blunt metrics directly with sense of belonging. For example, a mature student may create their sense of belonging through wearing their university sweatshirt at home rather than the library whilst doing their study work, whereas for a student living on campus, it may be joining a club or society.

For a commuter student or a student with a disability, they may not be able to engage in on-campus social or extracurricular activities due to time and accessibility, but their lanyard can provide them with a sense of belonging. Also for a student who is not used to engaging in social activities, whether due to the pandemic or personal background, this is a skill that needs to be learnt. And lastly, for an international undergraduate or postgraduate student, their motivations for wanting to study in the UK and their sense of belonging dynamics is likely to be different from home students.

Student characteristics

Recognising the long-term impact of disadvantage due to student characteristics needs to be given more consideration and as Billy Wong and Tiffany Chiu argue in their commentary, this is essential in creating social justice. As the Office for Students report on UK domiciled student characteristics data- student outcomes (November 2022) highlights, disadvantage is complex, and student protected characteristics are not always considered in the learning context as Patrick Johnson highlights in his commentary. For example, universities support disability and dyslexia, but do other factors get recognized and factored in when accessing learning such as being colourblind? Males are notably disadvantaged with 1 in 12 experiencing this whereas for females it is 1 in 200 (Colourblind Awareness, 2023). Do universities access the resources and implement advice on how to help students with this condition?

We also know that in early development, males develop their writing ability at a slower level than females (Adams and Simmons, 2018), and females generally write faster than males (Medwell and Wray, 2007). How has this impacted on the study skill confidence of males throughout their learning journey and has it impacted on progression through university study?

The finding in this survey that males have a higher perception of their skill base than females is not a new one (e.g. HERE Project, 2012; Woodfield et al., 2006) neither is that they are less likely to access certain support services such as health and wellbeing (McGiveney, 2004; Woodfield and Thomas, 2012; Mark et al., 2010). When looking at withdrawal rates across higher education, both A-Level and BTEC males have much higher withdrawal rates than females. Could the reasons cited above be contributory factors?

As Woodfield and Thomas state 'Men resist expressing emotion or needs, develop fewer social ties than women, and specifically fear revealing educational limitations' (Woodfield and Thomas, 2012; p4). We know from the House of Commons Library Policy Briefing that males constitute around three quarters of suicides in England and Wales (Baker, 2022) and this is reflected in higher education.

The findings in this report show that males were notably less likely to be concerned with mental health issues, more than twice as likely to use sport facilities than females, and half as likely to use health and wellbeing services. It is therefore essential that as a sector we explore ways to use the right language and environment to promote a positive perception of health and wellbeing services and use the knowledge such as the engagement of males in sport to make them aware of the benefits of mental health support. The cost of higher education to the individual is high that the characteristics of our diverse student body need to be taken into account and our provision adapted to reflect this. Gareth Hughes in his commentary talks about how the University Mental Health Charter can provide universities with a framework to identify and build in relevant support for their specific student body.

With such diversity, as Jim Dickinson Associate Editor of Wonkhe and who leads work with student unions throughout the UK argues, it is important not only for staff to understand the student body and the challenges students can face, but also fellow students if we are to create a supportive and tolerant community in higher education.

And when looking at student characteristics and prior learning experiences, it is essential for us to understand learned behaviour at secondary level that has become the norm for a student. For example, FFTeducation datalab found [pupils who live further away from their school are absent more often - FFT Education Datalab](#). If a disadvantage student succeeds under these conditions and goes to university, will they consider non-attendance an issue because they have already worked out a mechanism of how to deal with this?

Collecting and connecting the right data

Data is evidence and evidence leads to change but we need to ask the right questions to collect the right data that informs the metrics universities use to inform change as Tony Moss argues in his commentary. The PAQ is one key activity on entry to help do this because working with data from students who have left will not necessarily equate to the students who are entering. Covid19 is a perfect example. Another example as Catherine Dilnot highlights is the introduction of the new T-Level qualification for which there is little understanding of prior learning experiences of students or the pattern of progression in higher education.

The benefits of such an activity are highlighted in Sue Smith's commentary where she explains the informed changes Leeds Beckett were able to make to support their students during Covid19 because of the PAQ. Debbie Holley in her contribution talks about the PAQ being able to identify prior IT experiences thus enabling universities to help students go from digital social media experts to digital learning experts, which is key in enabling them to succeed our modern higher education environment. Also important is how the PAQ lays the foundation for further research and enquiry such as the correlation between confidence levels and knowledge gaps to provide effective support as Kate Swinton suggests in her commentary.

The data landscape across the higher education sector is complex with different owners. However, with the changing needs of students, information sharing would have many benefits. Connecting a wider range of data across the different levels of study from secondary (via UCAS data) through university (HESA returns and LEO data) and Student Loan Company data will provide a better understanding of those entering higher education, the support that is required and how we better measure impact. It also avoids students having to repeatedly keep providing the same information as Ben Jordan, Philippa Alway and Andy Youell clearly articulate in their commentaries.

National and institutional strategy and policy approaches

Targeted and meaningful student surveys can provide powerful evidence that Shan Waring, Debra Myhill and Pallavi Banerjee argue is critical in helping inform and evolve policy and strategy frameworks both institutionally and nationally to identify forgotten aspects of the student experience especially the prior learning experience. In addition to this, Rose Stephenson argues that it is important for individual institutions to understand what this data means for them and their locality, and how to use it to find local solutions.

For Johnny Rich, Natasha Plaister and Chris Millward, this type of survey helps support the argument that it is essential to maintain BTECs until it is clear that T-Levels are equally capable of serving such a large group of learners especially those from disadvantage backgrounds. They argue it is critical not to further the already disadvantage. And as Diana Beech says in her commentary, this report highlights that different students need different information and support to help them in their unique learning journey.

In everything we create and deliver, we need to consider three core things: meaningfulness, safety and Availability (Kahn, 1990; Morgan, 2018).

Meaningfulness

Every activity should deliver students and staff with clear and meaningful information that provides a clear understanding of what the level of study requires, addresses typical pressure points, and highlights its importance and relevance in terms of the study journey. This helps shape and guide the activity of all stakeholders. By addressing their concerns in an honest and transparent way helps them realise they are not alone.

Safety

By explaining what is required in each stage in the study journey, it sets and manages expectations which in turn provides students and staff with a sense of protection of knowing what to expect, and how to address any challenges they may face.

Availability

By explaining what is expected during each stage, it allows each stakeholder to determine what they need to do and when and plan accordingly. Information needs to be available and accessible both in terms of language and disability.

Final comment

There is so much that we need to think about as higher education expands. Ian Dunn at the Higher Education Institutional Research Conference at Kingston university in 2023 stated '*higher education needs to create personalized learning using technology in order to deliver an elite education to a mass population*' and he is absolutely right.

Part 7 Next steps

This part of the report looks at suggested next steps to help support our diverse student body and too ensure that this continues. It summarises the key suggestions from the commentators, and suggests two key activities to support all students in, though and out of the study journey. As Johnny Rich argues, *higher education is the opportunity press the reset button through providing targeted and appropriate support in real time*. It is also important to remember that each student will have their own unique learning journey and their ability to engage in extra curricula activities will vary as will their own sense of belonging.

Commentators suggested next steps

These suggested next steps have been extracted from the commentaries in Part 6 regarding what they feel Universities could do, if not already, in supporting our students, especially those who enter with non-traditional qualifications such as BTEC, Access and Other Level 3 qualifications

Health and wellbeing

- Develop strategies that help students feel safe and confident, and create awareness of and respect for the differences between students by both students and staff.
- Embed mental health and wellbeing into the course using the Advance Mental Health Toolkit to inform this.
- Adopt the University Mental Health Charter Framework to proactively interlink university wide initiatives, identify risk areas and improve services.
- Provide practical and accessible finance and mental health advice through utilising national resources.
- Continue to monitor the impact of cost of living on participation in higher education and provide support (e.g. bursaries, L&T support).
- Widen the disability categories to provide clarity on mental health conditions (e.g. type of condition and whether it is long-term or temporary).
- Use of the right language and promotion of a positive and safe environment to engage all students in using support services.

Knowledge and metrics

- Move away from a one size fits all approach in terms of understanding prior learning experiences.
- Obtain a better understanding of teaching in schools and colleges so the higher education curricula can bridge and encompass the differences between entry qualifications.
- Higher education institutions to have a greater awareness that just as the tertiary sector is measured for quality and outcomes so are schools and colleges, and that this impacts on teaching approaches.
- Understand and take into account student characteristics that impact on participation in extra curricula and social aspects of university life (e.g. time, cost, physical challenges).
- Take into account the changing landscape of Level 3 qualifications.

- Appropriate sharing of declared mental health, disability and other learning challenges information to key staff such as course leaders and personal tutors, and provide effective training to staff on how to interpret and use this information effectively and correctly.
- Be aware of the differences in concerns by student characteristics and provide support accordingly.
- Join up datasets from application through to graduation to avoid students having to keep providing basic information (e.g. disability, gender).
- Be more proactive in pre-empting upcoming issues by collecting the right data including use of PAQs.
- Collect and use engagement data in a more nuanced way to take into account student differences and link with sense of belonging data.

Learning and teaching

- Incorporate learning diversity needs into the training of all educators so it can be included into the curriculum, learning and teaching, assessment and support services.
- Adopt appropriate language and clarity of instruction for use of learning platforms and written and audio guidance.
- Support and provide scaffolding to enable a seamless shift between limited experience of technology and modalities of learning to rich and complex ones.
- Put in place effective early interventions and transitional support which provide effective foundations for personal tutors and academic advisers.
- Be aware of the ongoing impact of Covid19 on learning on future university entrants.
- Develop a criticality of understanding existing and future experiences such T-Levels to inform the development of higher education course and support.
- Move away from a deficit model and have support embedded within the core course content thus removing the need for pre-requisite knowledge and confidence levels (e.g. library support, use of IT in learning).

Strategy and policy

- Manage the expectations of all stakeholders in, through and out of the study lifecycle effectively.
- Provide advice based on 'real' models not 'marketing' role models with the provision of typical pressure point information that can occur through the academic year to help manage expectations and sense of achievement of students and staff.
- Move from focusing only on engagement and include sense of belonging. Create different ways to enable students to identify and create their own sense of belonging.
- Continue to collate good practice from across the sector.
- Undertake a longitudinal national level study to look at student characteristics and the progression through primary, secondary and tertiary level education to fully understand the challenges.

Obtain a greater understanding of learning differences and expectations by qualification on entry

Post study experience surveys completed by final year students such as the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) can feed into the development of initiatives for the next cohort, but the findings may not reflect the experience or needs of incoming cohorts. As this report highlights and as other research has found, there is often a disparity between groups of new students in terms of learning expectations and preparation (e.g. Thomas, 2012; Morgan and Direito, 2016; Hughes, 2016; Unite 2017; The Sutton Trust, 2021; The Bridge Group, 2022; Universities UK, 2022).

This report demonstrates the great value in being able to understand the prior learning differences by different student characteristics including entry qualifications. However, the institutional data used in this report is small thus analysis by key protected student characteristics we know can impact on prior learning experiences as well as expectations, has not been possible. These include disability and ethnicity.

Benefits of a national pilot

It is suggested that a national PAQ pilot be undertaken across UK universities and is funded by the Office for Students just as HEFCE funded Phase 1 and 2 of the Postgraduate Support Scheme to understand the challenges of postgraduate taught study. By understanding a range of issues on entry, it should enable universities to effectively manage expectations, provide scaffolded support across a diverse student body especially around typical pressure points, and improve engagement and sense of belonging. The benefits would be numerous.

- It will generate a substantive sample enabling analysis of student characteristics to be undertaken by a range of factors such as university mission group and region.
- Universities would have access to their own data set as soon as their institutional survey closes so they can analyse their student responses in real time in order to feed into the transition into university teaching and processes within the first few weeks.
- This activity will not only support the 'Levelling Up' agenda, aid the emerging collaboration between schools, colleges and higher education, shape and inform national policy and strategy, support the work of The Office for Students (OfS) with its new model to target risks to equality of opportunity, but will also inform B2, B3 and B4 of The Office for Student's Revised Conditions for Universities (OfS, 2022c).
- The student demographics collected as part of the survey that include highest entry qualification (e.g. A-Levels/BTEC/Level 3 qualifications) and type of school attended, could be triangulated with 'interruption' or 'withdrawal' data to provide an understanding of the impact of prior learning experience and concerns on entry. Evidence led research that informs the above should provide confidence across higher education.
- Enhancing the foundation of study should also lead to an improvement for a university in the overall student experience, retention, progression and attainment as well as national metrics such as NSS, PTES, Graduate Outcomes Survey and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).

Long-term approach

It is suggested that HESA/JISC could create and deliver the survey whilst HEPI and AdvanceHE analyse and produce the report and suggest policy outcomes. In the long term, the PAQ could be self-sustaining with providers paying an annual subscription to participate. Furthermore, national longitudinal research to track a cohort of students throughout their study journey would provide invaluable awareness and understanding of the challenges faced and the impact on retention, progression and success. It is suggested a pilot be undertaken for this activity to run alongside the pre-arrival pilot.

The data collected via the survey could be linked to UCAS applications with respondents using their UCAS ID number so they are not providing core data more than once. After completion, the ID can be removed to protect the identity of the respondent.

Monitor reasons for intermission and withdrawal by entry qualification by the Student Loan Company

In order to create effective strategies and policies, we need accurate data on the immediate impact of post-Covid19 and the cost of living crisis on the study journey of the individual student, for different groups of students, and also for institutions. This is not just to provide support to the students. This is also to ensure that any increase in withdrawals and intermissions at particular institutions, especially those that have a high number of disadvantage students, cannot be used to attack - or worse, dispose of - courses and providers they deem are of “poor value” as a direct result of the cost of living crisis. This will not support the levelling up agenda the government says it is keen to pursue.

Every institution collects and records reasons for intermission, change in study mode, and withdrawal in terms of detail differently, and although there are categories universities have to complete for their HESA returns, they are broad and quite basic as [Student 2021/22 - Reason for ending instance](#) highlights. As we know, a student’s decision to stop studying is often complex with no single cause.

It is also hard to accurately pinpoint when the student stopped attending because of varying methods of recording attendance and sickness and vacation periods, yet this is a key piece of information that the Student Loan Company (SLC) require in order to calculate what a student owes and to arrange repayments ([Student finance if you suspend or leave your course: Overview - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)). Covid 19 and cost of living issues has exacerbated this process. Establishing a consistent sector-wide detailed method of recording reasons for student intermission and withdrawal is critical so we have comparative data across all institutions and levels of study and student characteristics to effectively inform policy.

One approach, which could be quickly implemented and would be independent is for the Student Loan Company to undertake data-gathering activity on withdrawals so we can understand the impact in real time. This would involve a deeper dive into the reason/s for intermission or withdrawal. Although it will only collect data from students entitled to undergraduate and postgraduate loans, they are perfectly placed to collect this information as students need to engage with them to close their loan. Students are likely to be more honest with the SLC regarding the reasons than with the University they are taking a break from/leaving. This data would also support the incoming Lifelong Learning Entitlement policy especially in providing core information of students who did not complete their course, but wish to return to study utilising their LLE.

For this approach to be effective, it is critical that the questions to capture the reasons for intermission and withdrawal are developed by HE practitioners and not political policy makers in order to capture the right data.

Joining up data

In the recent Taskforce roundtables held by Professor Edward Peck, VC of Nottingham Trent University and the Government's appointed Student Support Champion, participants talked about the importance of joined up data in helping support student transitions in, through and out of the study lifecycle. In schools and colleges, student data is used to individualise student support but the disconnection of information when students move to higher education makes this activity more difficult by the lack of information sharing between schools/colleges and universities.

The data landscape across the higher education sector is complex with different owners, but with the changing needs of students, information sharing would have many benefits including helping to alleviate individual student pressure points as well as typical study ones. By having data that provides a good overview of a student and feeds into effective support, it can help create an environment where students and staff feel safe to be vulnerable, which in turn can help with mental health and wellbeing, progression and success.

Connecting a wider range of data across the different levels of study from secondary (via UCAS data) through university (HESA returns and LEO data) and Student Loan Company data will provide a better understanding of those entering higher education, the support that is required and how we better measure impact.

Conclusion

The focus of this report was the differences and similarities of students entering higher education with only A-Level or BTEC as their highest entry qualification. However, at the heart of the findings is the impact of disadvantage across a wide range of characteristics and the ability for individuals to succeed. With the continuing massification and diversification of higher education, we need to shape and influence how the sector is measured and we need to evolve what we do and deliver our provision that is fit for purpose.

Useful resources

AdvanceHE

<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk>

ALDinHE Association for Learning Development in Higher Education

<https://aldinhe.ac.uk>

AMOSSHE The Student Services Organisation

<https://www.amosshe.org.uk>

Association for Learning Technology

<https://www.alt.ac.uk/communityResources>

Blackbullion

<https://www.blackbullion.com>

Department of Education

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-education>

The Engineering Professors Council

<https://epc.ac.uk>

The FFT Education Data Lab

<https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk>

Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI)

<https://www.hepi.ac.uk>

Higher Education Statistics Agency

<https://www.hesa.ac.uk>

Growing a Grown Up

<https://www.growingagrownup.com>

JISC (HESA and JISC are now combined)

<https://www.jisc.ac.uk>

Improving the student Experience Website

<https://www.improvingthestudentexperience.com>

LILAC The Library Literacy Conference

<https://www.lilacconference.com/about-lilac>

London Higher

<https://londonhigher.ac.uk>

Million+

<http://www.millionplus.ac.uk>

National Education Opportunities Network
<https://www.educationopportunities.co.uk>

National Union of Students
<https://www.nus.org.uk>

Office for Student
<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk>

Pearsons
<https://qualifications.pearson.com>

Professor Sally Brown's website
<https://sally-brown.net>

Professor Phil Race's website
<https://phil-race.co.uk>

The QAA The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
<https://www.qaa.ac.uk>

Save the Student
<https://www.savethestudent.org>

The Schools, Students and Teachers Network (SSAT)
<https://www.ssatuk.co.uk>

SEDA The Staff and Educational Development Association
<https://www.seda.ac.uk>

Student Minds
<https://studentspace.org.uk>

<https://www.studentminds.org.uk/charter.htm>

SMaRteN
<https://www.smartn.org.uk>

Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO)
<https://taso.org.uk>

UCAS
<https://www.UCAS.com>

UKAT- The UK Academic and Tutoring Association
<https://www.ukat.uk>

UKCISA The UK Council for International Student Affairs
<https://ukcisa.org.uk>

Uni buddy

<https://unibuddy.com>

Universities UK

<https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk>

UPP Foundation

<https://upp-foundation.org>

Wonkhe

<https://wonkhe.com>

Information about the author and contributors

The Author

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Dr Michelle Morgan is a national and internationally recognised Student Experience Transitions Specialist across all levels of study and is extensively published in the area. She is currently Dean of Students at the University of East London. Michelle is a Principal Fellow of the HEA, Fellow of the AUA, an elected council member of UKCGE and Student Minds Mental Health Charter Assessor. During her varied career, Michelle has been a faculty manager, lecturer, researcher and academic manager. She describes herself as a 'Third Space Integrated Student Experience Practitioner' who develops initiatives based on pragmatic and practical research. Michelle has over 50 publications and has presented over 100 national and international conference papers (including 58 keynotes and 35 invited papers). She has developed a free portal for staff which provides a range of information and links for anyone interested in improving the student experience in higher education. <https://www.improvingthestudentexperience.com>

Michelle was creator and PI/Project Lead of an innovative, £2.7 million, 11 university collaborative HEFCE grant, looking at the study expectations and attitudes of postgraduate taught (PGT) students. The project report received praise from across the sector including UKCGE, OFFA, the HEA and the Engineering Professor's Council.

http://www.improvingthestudentexperience.com/library/PG_documents/Postgraduate_Experience_Report_Final.pdf

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Dr Diana Beech is Chief Executive Officer of London Higher, the representative body for almost 50 universities and higher education colleges across London. She has a strong background in higher education policy development and influence, and was the first Director of Policy and Advocacy at the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) and former Policy Adviser to three consecutive UK Universities Ministers. Diana has published extensively on issues around teaching excellence, free speech, widening participation, student experience and international education. She holds a PhD in German Studies from the University of Cambridge and is Vice-Chair of the Board at the University of Worcester.

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Sunday Blake is associate editor at Wonkhe. Sunday has previously worked for the University of Exeter in strategic development and delivery with a specific focus on belonging and inclusion. Previously, she was President of the University of Exeter Students' Guild, where she worked for two years after completing a postgraduate degree. She has carried out policy change work both locally and nationally in areas such as sexual misconduct, drug and alcohol use, student sex work, freedom of speech and no-detriment policies. She has also published research on belonging and inclusion in higher education, sexual misconduct, and student sex work. She is interested in widening participation, access and retention, and graduate outcomes.

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Professor Sally Brown is an Independent Consultant in Learning, Teaching and Assessment and Emerita Professor at Leeds Beckett University where she was, until 2010, Pro-Vice-Chancellor. She is also Visiting Professor at Edge Hill University. She holds Honorary Doctorates from the universities of Plymouth, Kingston, Bournemouth, Edinburgh Napier and Lincoln. She is a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, a Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) Senior Fellow and a National Teaching Fellow. She is widely published on learning, teaching and particularly assessment and enjoys working with institutions and teams on improving the student learning experience.

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Mary Curnock Cook is an independent education expert serving in a non-executive capacity on a number of Boards. From 2010-2017, Mary was Chief Executive of UCAS. Earlier in her career she held executive and non-executive positions in the education, hospitality, food and biotech sectors.

Mary is chair of Pearson Education, its UK arm, and also chairs the governing body of the Dyson Institute. She is a non-exec Director at the Student Loans Company, the London Interdisciplinary School, the Student Room and Education Cubed, and a Trustee at the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI). She has the role of Network Chair for Emerge Education, the leading edtech investor in Europe. In 2021, Mary took on the Chair of the UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission, set up to ensure successful student futures following the pandemic. She is a regular speaker and commentator on HE policy and practice and a recognised champion of the student interest. Mary has an MSc from London Business School and was awarded an OBE in 2000, and a CBE in 2020 for services to further and higher education. She is an honorary Fellow of Birkbeck and Goldsmiths and has an honorary doctorate from the University of Gloucestershire.

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Dr Catherine Dilnot is senior lecturer in the Oxford Brookes Business School, where she teaches research methods on undergraduate and postgraduate accounting and finance programmes. Her principal research interest is in inequality in access to universities and to leading professions, with a particular focus on the accounting profession. She has recently led a Nuffield Foundation-funded project investigating the relationship between adverse university outcomes and level 3 subjects and qualifications, with emphasis on investigating the gaps between students with BTECs and A-Levels and how these relate to their social background.

Ian Dunn

Professor Ian Dunn is Provost for Coventry University Group, He is proud to be described as a disruptor in UK Higher Education and led the development of Coventry University College in 2011 to provide lower cost, flexible model of higher education designed to support near open access to higher education specifically for more mature learners. More recently in 2017, he led the creation of Coventry University Online and the partnership with FutureLearn. Developing great online learning degree courses as well as micro-credentials turned out to be very useful as education moved into remote teaching in early 2020. In 2016 Ian was voted “Inspiring Leader of the Year” at the UK Guardian Higher Education Awards. Ian is very engaged in his local communities through schools, justice and charity.

Les Ebdon

After a distinguished career as an award-winning Professor of Analytical Chemistry and University Vice Chancellor, Les Ebdon was a highly successful Director of Fair Access to Higher Education. Consequently, he is recognised as a leading advocate of higher education and social mobility. He has taught at Universities in Uganda, Sheffield and Plymouth. He transformed the University of Bedfordshire as Vice Chancellor. In 2019, he was awarded a CBE and his knighthood in 2018. He is the Senior Independent Governor, designate, of the University of East London.

Ed Foster

Ed Foster is Head of Student Engagement and Analytics Centre for Student and Community Engagement at Nottingham Trent University. Ed manages the delivery of the NTU Student Dashboard, a learning analytics resource used by students and staff. He oversees the development work with technology partner Solutionpath and the research into the efficacy of using data to support student success, particularly for students from socially-disadvantaged backgrounds. He works with personal tutors and other support staff to improve the quality of student support and advice. Ed is part of the management team in the Centre for Student and Community Engagement (CenSCE) seeking to address the issues of

disparities of attainment between different groups of students in higher education. Ed is currently engaged in research about the interplay between learning analytics and student success in higher education. This includes the role of technology in retention, transition, widening participation and reducing disparities of attainment.

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Vivi Friedgut is a tech innovator and founder/CEO of Blackbullion, the financial wellbeing solution equipping young people with money skills for life. Blackbullion's award-winning platform can be accessed by over 1.2 million students at partner institutions worldwide. The Blackbullion ecosystem empowers students to develop financial knowledge and confidence, be guided by their goals towards better money management and habits using the Blackbullion app as well as access university funding and corporate scholarships through the nation's largest funding hub. Vivi is a former wealth manager, a regular speaker and author and was recently named FinTech Magazine's Top 100 Women.

David Grey

Dr David Grey is the Chief Executive of UK Advising and Tutoring (UKAT), a UK higher education membership association focused on ensuring that every HE student experiences effective personal tutoring which personalises their learning and enables them to flourish. David has over 25 years' experience as a Computer Science academic, personal tutor, and educational developer, with a leadership focus on learning and teaching, the student experience and personal tutoring. He is an HE consultant for UKAT and works regularly on institution-wide projects to revise and enhance personal tutoring provision.

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Debbie Holley is Professor of Learning Innovation at Bournemouth University. A National Teaching Fellow and a Principal Fellow of AdvanceHE, she is a passionate educator, with expertise in learning design and blending learning to motivate and engage a diverse student body. Her research interests focus on student engagement with technologies to promote authentic learning that bridges formal/ informal learning. She is on the ALT-SIG committee on Immersive Reality; recently contributed to the panel of the Delphi study underpinning the iLRN 'State of XR and Immersive Learning' Report. Her work on simulation, augmented reality and immersive worlds influence national policy through her published work, keynote addresses and policy articles. You can follow her on twitter @debbieholley1.

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Dr Annie Hughes is the Head of the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Centre at Kingston University where she has oversight of academic staff development, curriculum development and enhancement, technology enhanced learning and enterprise education. Her disciplinary background is in Geography where she continues to influence debates around the pedagogics of fieldwork and inclusive learning and teaching practice. She is committed to inclusivity and developed an award-winning Inclusive Curriculum Framework with Nona McDuff which won the Guardian Award for Teaching Excellence in 2017. Her recent work has been on Developing best practice in engaging students to enable and support inclusive cultural change, funded by Advance HE. She is a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education and a National Teaching Fellow.

Gareth Hughes

Dr Gareth Hughes is a psychotherapist, researcher and nationally recognised expert on university mental health and wellbeing. He was the lead author of the University Mental Health Charter, which is a national programme to support institutions to achieve a whole-university approach to mental health and wellbeing. The Charter was launched in December 2019 and has been endorsed by OfS, UUK, DfE and the British Psychological Society.

Gareth is also the lead author of The Wellbeing Thesis, an online resource for PGR students and am Clinical Lead for Student Minds and Student Space, an OfS funded project to support student mental health during the pandemic. Gareth is currently leading an OfS funded project to produce guidance, for academics, on developing curriculum that supports wellbeing and learning. The guidance is being hosted by Advance HE and was launched in February 2022. He was also responsible for developing psycho-education and interventions to address academic anxiety and transition, at the University of Derby, which have been nationally recognised as sector leading practice.

Patrick Johnson

Patrick is Pro Vice-Chancellor Diversity, Inclusion and Students at The University of Law. Previously, he spent 20 years working at the University of Manchester. He is a member of the University Executive Board and has specific responsibility for EDI, Wellbeing, Student Support Services, Widening Participation and the Students' Union. He has worked in EDI for the last 16 years and has been an active member of the HE community. He was up until March 2023 a Commissioner with the Disabled Students' Commission, an independent and strategic group that advises, informs and influences HE providers to improve support for disabled students. Patrick is currently a member of the Advance HE Race Equality Charter Governance Committee.

Hugh Jones

Since 2014 Hugh Jones has been an independent consultant supporting the higher education sector, working with over 50 universities and other sector bodies. This builds upon his long experience in university professional services, culminating in roles as Registrar and Secretary at Goldsmiths, University of London; and Chief Operating Officer at Cardiff University. Hugh is a Fellow of the Association of Higher Education Professionals (AHEP), Deputy-Chair of Governors at Birmingham City University, and programme lead on the AHEP/Nottingham Trent University PGCert in Higher Education Management, Leadership and Administration. Hugh writes the weekly Higher Education Postcard blog for Wonkhe.

Ben Jordan

Ben is Head of Policy and Research at UCAS. He has been at UCAS for over a decade and has been described as a 'leading figure of higher education admissions policy', with his knowledge in this area 'second to none'. During his time at UCAS, Ben has led the response and engagement around every major political event that could impact on student progression, including Brexit, admissions reform, qualification reform, Scottish independence, general elections, and most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic, which involved forming part of three separate ministerial taskforces. Ben has also overseen the transformation of UCAS' approach to thought leadership and research, delivering key policy outputs UCAS' landmark piece on student mental health and next steps and the Journey to a Million campaign.

Emma Maslin

Emma is an ESRC-funded PhD Researcher in the School of Education at Durham University. Her research focuses on understanding the university experiences of UK commuter students, specifically within a Yorkshire & NE context. Emma is passionate about equality of opportunity and access to Higher Education, having worked in the widening participation sector in both secondary and HE settings prior to her researcher role. @emaslin94

Hugh Mannerings

Hugh Mannerings is the Business Development Manager for UKAT, supporting members to enhance their provision, delivery and practice around personal and academic tutoring. Hugh has over 25 years' experience as an academic, personal tutor and academic lead for retention with a focus on enhancing the student experience. He is also an HE consultant working on EU projects supporting student success. Away from higher education he is secretary to the Yorkshire Squash and Racketball Association and a Level 3 Advanced Squash Coach.

Chris Millward

Chris Millward is Professor of Practice in Education Policy at the University of Birmingham where he works on tertiary education policy and practice. He is also a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences, a Marshall Scholarship Commissioner, a Trustee of the Society for Research into Higher Education, and Chair of the Advisory Group for the Centre for Global Higher Education. Prior to joining the University, Chris was Director for Fair Access and Participation at the Office for Students, Director of Policy at the Higher Education Funding Council for England and Head of Research at the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Emily McIntosh

Dr Emily McIntosh has held a variety of leadership role in learning, teaching and the student experience in several UK universities. She joined the University of the West of Scotland (UWS) as Director of Student Success in January 2023. Emily is a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and a National Teaching Fellow. She is an Executive Member & Trustee of the Heads of Educational Development (HEDG) group and an Independent Board Member of Trafford College Group (TCG). Emily has published widely on a variety of topics from academic advising, personal tutoring and peer learning to integrated practice.

Tony Moss

Professor Tony Moss is currently Associate Pro Vice Chancellor Education and Student Experience at London South Bank University and also Professor of Addictive Behaviour Science in the Centre for Addictive Behaviours Research. Professor Tony Moss is also Deputy Director for PHIRST South Bank, an NIHR-funded national research centre which supports Local Authorities across the UK to conduct evaluations of public health interventions. Professor Moss' research interests are primarily focused on the public health aspects of addiction. In August 2022 Professor Moss featured in Channel 4's documentary "Alcohol, Dad and Me" with reality TV star Vicky Pattison, where he was interviewed in the LSBU Bar Laboratory that is used to research factors which motivate people to drink. Professor Tony Moss is also the Chair of London Uni Connect, an OfS-funded partnership which works to support underrepresented students to access higher education across London.

Debra Myhill

Debra Myhill is Professor Emerita of Language and Literacy Education at the University of Exeter. In her role as Pro-Vice Chancellor for Social Science and International Studies, she was Project Director of the HEFCE-funded *study Transforming Transitions*, which involved four universities and their partner FE colleges. The study investigated the patterns of progression and the transition experiences of four cohorts of students, one from each university, as they moved from FE to HE.

Ian Pickup

Ian Pickup is Pro Vice Chancellor (Students) at The Open University, following earlier roles as PVC (Education & Experience) and COO at UEL, Deputy COO (Student and Academic Experience) at SOAS, Head of the Student Experience at University College Cork, Ireland and Director of Student Affairs at the University of Roehampton. Ian's career in higher education started as an hourly paid lecturer at the

University of Roehampton, where he progressed to become Principal Lecturer in the School of Education. He contributed to a diverse range of national and international initiatives in education, authoring key texts and journal articles. Ian gained a BA (with QTS) from the University of Warwick and holds a PhD in Education from the University of Roehampton. He is a National Teaching Fellow, Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and Professor of the Student Experience in Higher Education.

Natasha Plaister

Natasha Plaister is a statistician at FFT Education Datalab, having previously spent 10 years as a project manager at the Institute of Physics. She has recently published research on a range of topics, including attainment gaps during the pandemic, the deployment of science teachers, and the long-term outcomes associated with Key Stage 4 science options. As well as more formal pieces of research, she regularly writes for the Datalab blog, with her topic of choice being subject choice at Key Stage 5 and how this varies by prior attainment and pupil characteristics

Johnny Rich

Johnny Rich has a number of roles including Chief Executive of the award-winning outreach organisation [Push](#); Chief Executive of the [Engineering Professors' Council](#), the representative body of the UK's Engineering academics; Co-Chair of the Fair Access Coalition; a Commissioner for the Lifelong Education Commission; and a consultant in higher education policy and communications, working with leading think tanks, charities, media organisations and educational institutions. With a career spanning beyond the education sector into publishing, journalism, television and radio, Johnny appears regularly in the media and is a sought-after public speaker. He is widely regarded as an expert on student choice, employability and social justice through educational opportunity. He is the author of several books including the highly acclaimed novel [The Human Script](#). Johnnyrich.com @JohnnySRich @Pushtalks @EngProfCouncil

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Professor Susan Smith is Deputy Director of the Centre for Learning & Teaching at Leeds Beckett University. She has responsibility for pedagogic research development and cross-university teaching and learning related academic practice projects. She has published many peer reviewed papers relating to relational approaches to student feedback, the student award gap and inclusive course design.

Rose Stephenson

Rose Stephenson is Director of Policy and Advocacy at HEPI. Rose has worked in several aspects of education: online learning, outdoor education and as a teacher and Head of Science in secondary education before moving to the higher education sector. Rose held multiple roles at the University of Bath, overseeing policies and projects relating to the student experience. Rose's role at HEPI focusses on policy; research; analysis; and creating policy recommendations.

Kate Swinton

Kate Swinton is currently a Learning Development Tutor. She has worked in Learning Development for the past fifteen years in various roles. Her research interests are based around aiming to address the attainment and retention gap. Kate is working in collaboration on a Black Student working group, and has also carried out research on 'non-traditional' students in particular BTEC students. Her main research focus is part of funded research project that has created a skills workbook for students to use throughout their studies and evaluating its effectiveness in confidence building and attainment.

Liz Thomas

Liz Thomas is Professor of Higher Education at the University of York. Here she is Research Centre Leader for the Centre for Research on Education and Social Justice in the Department of Education, and Deputy Associate Dean in the Faculty of Social Sciences. Liz has been researching equity in higher education across the student journey for over 25 years. Her research has addressed student engagement and belonging, inclusive learning and teaching, institutional transformation and change, commuter students, and evaluation strategies. Liz has published 27 refereed journal articles, 15 book chapters, 11 books and numerous reports and practice guides, and widely cited (8,369 citations, h-index 34). Her research has informed national developments including Access and Participation Plans and the Teaching Excellence Framework.

Dominique Thompson

Dominique is a multi-award winning GP, young people's mental health expert, TEDx speaker, author and educator, with two decades of clinical experience. She is author of [*The Student Wellbeing Series*](#) (Trigger Press) for young people, and co-author of [*How to Grow a Grown Up*](#) (Penguin Random House) for parents. Dom has done two TEDx talks; '[What I learnt from 78000 GP consultations with university students](#)' and '[Understanding Why](#)'. Dom is a Clinical Advisor for NICE and Student Minds, and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (FRSA). Dom was lead clinical advisor for Aardman Animation's [What's Up with Everyone?](#) Campaign. Further information about Dom's Consulting and other work see www.buzzconsulting.co.uk and check out www.growingagrownup.com (for parenting support and free resources). Follow her on Twitter and Instagram @drdomthompson

Julie Walkling

Julie Walkling is the Director of Academic Partnerships at the JS Group as well as a Council Member at the University of Gloucestershire and Deputy Chair at Exeter Students' Guild. Starting at the University of North London as a Counsellor in 1995, she has held senior management and executive roles at London Met, Anglia Ruskin University, the Royal Agricultural University and the University of West Scotland. She has been an AMOSSHE member for many years, including nine on the Executive and two as Chair. She is passionate about the transformational power of HE and supporting the student experience.

Shân Wareing

Professor Shân Wareing is Deputy Vice Chancellor at the University of Northampton. She is also Chair of the Board of Trustees for Unite Foundation, Chair of AdvanceHE's Leadership and Management Advisory Group, a past Co-Chair of SEDA, the Staff and Educational Development Association, and a governor at Moulton FE College in Northamptonshire. She has worked in universities for her whole career, and is a National Teaching Fellow, and a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Shân went to a large comprehensive school in Swansea, Wales, and studied English Literature and Language at the University of Oxford, before taking a Masters in Linguistics and a PhD in Gender and Communication at the University of Strathclyde, and a postgraduate diploma in Higher Education Studies from the UCL Institute of Education.

Sue Williamson

Sue Williamson is Chief Executive of SSAT. She joined SSAT in 2002 and focused on leadership and innovation. Sue worked with Professor David Hargreaves on the personalising learning agenda, and developed SSAT's suite of leadership programmes. She was Headteacher of Monks' Dyke Technology College for eight years. She is trustee of two MATs and Chair of Governing Board at Melbourn Village College.

Billy Wong

Billy Wong is a Professor at the Institute of Education, University of Reading, where he is also the university's Director of Research and Evaluation (Access & Participation). His areas of research are educational identities and inequalities, especially in the context of higher education and STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education. He has published in sociology of education, higher education and science education journals. Billy is the author of *The Ideal Student: Deconstructing Expectations in Higher Education* (2021, Open University Press) and *Science Education, Career Aspirations and Minority Ethnic Students* (2016, Palgrave). @billybwong

Andy Youell

Andy Youell has worked at the leading edge of HE data developments for over three decades including spells at HEFCE and HESA. HE worked with data specialists across the sector as Director of the Higher Education Data & Information Improvement Programme (HEDIIP). Andy has worked as a freelance consultant advising HE institutions, software suppliers and governments across the world. He is a regular speaker and writer on data issues and in 2020 was appointed to the review of the exam grades controversy by the Welsh Government. Andy is currently working with the University College of Estate Management leading on data and systems issues across the business.

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The Office for Institutional Equity (OIE)

The Office for Institutional Equity (OIE) was established in 2019 to advocate for the advancement of an equitable, inclusive, respectful, and anti-racist community at UEL. It is responsible for governance and oversight of EDI matters and implementation of the REC, Athena SWAN, Disability Confidence and Stonewall Action Plans, organising various equality interventions for staff and students, and curating the voices of individuals with intersecting characteristics through staff networks and other interest groups. The Dean of the OIE (DOIE) attends and contributes to UMB, UEB, Deans/Provost, EEC, Academic Board, BOG and other institutional level committees. The DOIE also acts as the chair of the institutional EDI Committee which oversees all the Schools' and PS sub-EDI committees.

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