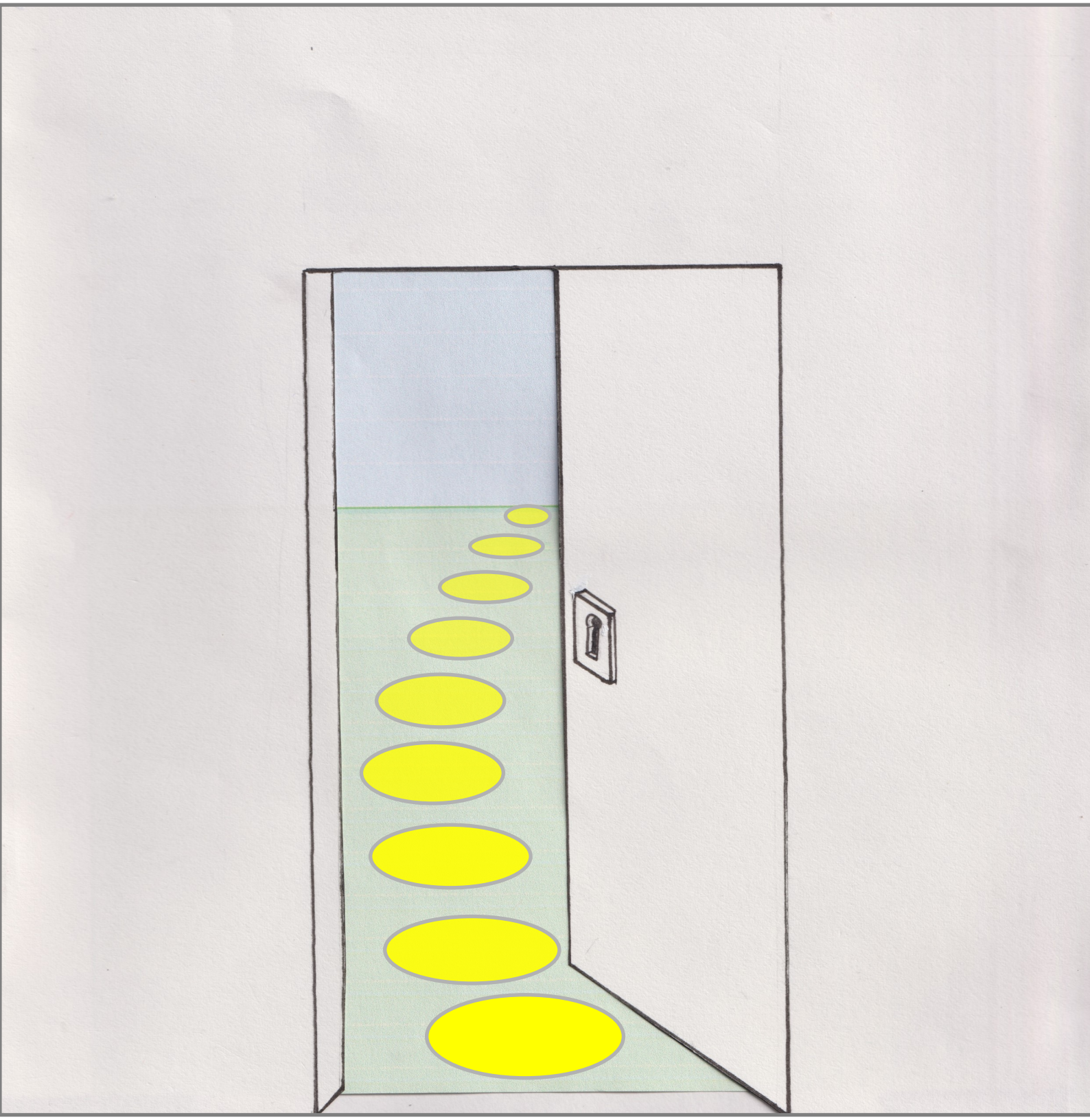
Up2Uni...

Opening doors, building futures?

A life histories approach to exploring the impact of BTEC

Susan McGrath and Maia Madhvani



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Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the invaluable contribution of the participants who volunteered to tell us about their BTEC journeys and the impact of the qualification on their adult lives. Their participation went beyond simply taking part in an interview. They had reflected over a period of time that covered up to four decades, often checking dates and facts in advance. We offer them our sincere thanks.

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*(*an earlier digital version of this report had the subtitle: Reflections on the BTEC National Diploma, its value, and its possible demise.)*

ABOUT UP2UNI

UP2UNI is an independent organisation focussed on research that enables young people to make informed decisions about their education or training, and to develop successful transitions that help them achieve their career goals. Registered with Companies House as a Community Interest Company, we operate on a non-profit basis, with the Directors donating their time.

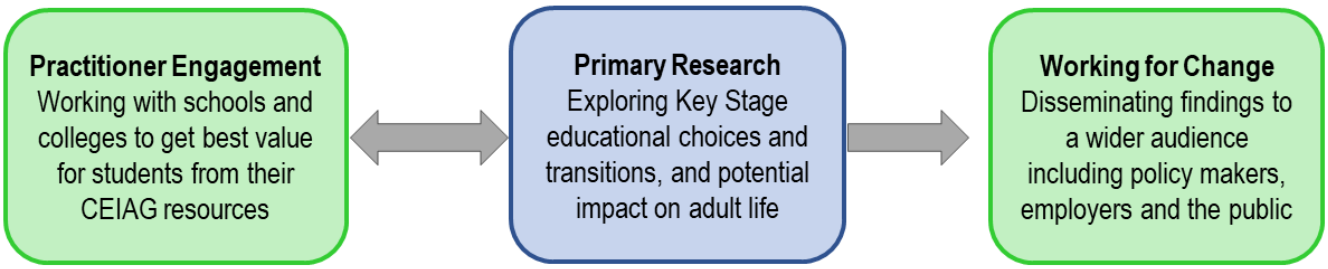
We created UP2UNI in response to a practitioner research project we ran in Greater Manchester schools during 2002/2003. One finding was that teachers and tutors were a principal source of advice for students making decisions about university, but they rarely had any training for that role, an issue amply demonstrated when a conference to disseminate the findings attracted hundreds of delegates, but very few teachers could get time out to attend. UP2UNI was therefore designed to take support to the front line, reaching hundreds of staff in workplaces across the northwest with training tailored to the needs of the school or college, and so embedding good practice that benefited thousands of students.

Funding from the LSDA, the northwest LSCs, and Aimhigher supported UP2UNI activities until 2011 when a national restructure of careers and guidance services ended our income streams. The demand for our work, however, had not diminished, so we established UP2UNI as a non-profit company.

The initial purpose of UP2UNI was to help sixth forms and colleges better understand how to support first-generation university applicants. Twenty years on, the costs of university have risen, graduate opportunities have diminished, and the scope of UP2UNI now includes employment-based career paths. Our research now spans the 14-21 age range, in recognition that students' 14-16 choices can broaden or narrow their later options, and that many young people do not make career decisions whilst at school.

UP2UNI does not offer career guidance nor do we promote any particular progression routes; our focus is on the decision-making process itself, the underlying factors that determine the choices a young person will have, and what can be done to support successful transitions that lead to fulfilling careers.

Our work focusses on three key activities:



The research in this report was motivated by three things: 1) our personal involvement with BTEC from the 1980s onwards, as teachers, managers, franchisers, assessors, selectors and evaluators, in schools, FE and HE; 2) our three-year evaluation of the outcomes of BTEC programmes at Ark schools, which was published in October 2021; and 3) the coinciding of that report with the government's Review of Level 3 Qualifications, and subsequent announcement of plans to defund BTEC courses.

As concerns about the possible demise of BTEC spread from practitioners and researchers to the popular media and the general public, we felt there was a gap in the debate: the voice of adults who could reflect on the impact of BTEC on their education, employment and career trajectories over their entire working lifespan. This project is our response to that gap.

Susan McGrath and Peter Millen

Co-Directors, UP2UNI

1. Executive Summary

The BTEC level 3 Diploma, a fulltime two-year course equivalent to three A levels, has occupied its distinctive position as a consistently successful vocational alternative to A levels for almost 40 years. Designed in response to a genuine need as identified by employers, BTEC required students to typically spend 20% of their time in a relevant work placement, allowing knowledge to be assessed by performance in the job role. This was supported by job-related coursework and a portfolio of evidence, which included systematic self-assessment and reflection that was internally assessed and externally moderated. The qualification rapidly grew in popularity and esteem, and employers with direct experience of BTECs commented positively on their broad base and insight into the real world. By the early 2000s, several universities were accepting the BTEC Diploma as an alternative to A levels, and the qualification fuelled the success of New Labour's widening participation agenda. In response to criticisms that the qualification lacked rigour, stricter rules for internal assessment were introduced in 2014, and a major reform of BTECs from 2016 introduced externally assessed examinations accounting for at least 33% of the final grade. Alongside this, the work placement has been reduced or removed.

Currently, almost one quarter of the 18-year-olds entering university have BTEC as either the entirety, or a significant part, of their entry qualifications (UCAS, 2022). However, a government Review of Level 3 Qualifications has concluded that the BTEC is neither a technical qualification, nor a good preparation for university, and BTECs are being defunded as the new T levels (2-year technical courses based on the same standards as apprenticeships) are launched. Objections to this proposal have been made by schools, colleges, employers, universities and senior politicians of all parties, making this ironically one of the most unifying political actions ever taken in the education sector.

The research presented in this report was motivated by our desire to fill an apparent gap in the debate by giving voice to those able to speak with authenticity on the value of BTEC: adults who could reflect on the lifelong impact of the BTEC courses they experienced in their youth.*

Methodology

A life history approach was used, in which in-depth interviews with ten former BTEC students explored how their BTEC studies had prepared them for adult life, including the BTEC experience itself, and their post-BTEC education, training, qualifications, employment and career trajectories.

The participants had taken a wide range of common BTEC subjects, including Business & Finance, Early Years, Engineering, Fashion, Fine Art, Health & Social Care, Hospitality, Leisure & Tourism, Multi-media, and Sport. The life histories spanned a period of almost 40 years, with participants taking their BTEC course between the 1980s and the 2010s. All participants had studied at a post-16 college, with locations including London, the Southeast, the Southwest, the Northwest, and the Midlands, offering a mix of urban and rural locations.

Findings

1. Reflections on the BTEC experience were overwhelmingly positive, and there were many examples of the continuing value of BTECs decades after the qualification had been completed.
2. All of the participants had progressed to work within the industry sector of their BTEC qualification. Those who did this via university sometimes reflected that BTEC had been more valuable than their degree. Non-graduates had taken further vocational qualifications alongside employment, updating their skills or knowledge and boosting career prospects.
3. The BTEC experience had changed many participants' perceptions of education and was often said to have fostered a lifelong love of learning. Several had later worked in educational roles, within their industry sector or more broadly, including teaching, training, guidance, and qualifications design.

*(*Our participants had all taken BTEC, by far the most common A level alternative, and we use the term BTEC throughout this report. However, all applied general qualifications (AGQs) are affected by the Level 3 qualifications review.)*

4. The clear structure of the BTEC emerged as the defining feature that had acted as a game-changer for some participants, who felt that it allowed them to understand for the first time what they were learning and why, how they would be assessed, and what they needed to do to improve.

5. The BTEC teaching and learning style was praised for its emphasis on continuous assessment that enabled learning, while the wide range of assessment styles was frequently compared to the reality of working life, where employees are assessed by their ability to do a job, not their ability to write a final exam paper.

6. Those participants who had achieved their BTEC Diploma by progressing through levels 1 and 2 demonstrated the success of BTEC in allowing and enabling young people to progress from "failure" at school and to demonstrate their full potential, their later success suggesting a failure of the system, not the pupil.

7. The BTEC mix of classroom and work placements had played an important role in participants' access to career advice and guidance, enabling them to assess and modify their career aims as their knowledge and understanding of the industry developed.

8. The flexibility inherent in the two-year Diploma had enabled some of the participants to switch specialism for year two after they discovered their own strengths and interests by engaging with the first year work.

Conclusions

Our findings showed how the BTEC experience could have a positive and lasting impact on education, training, employment and careers. Our participants had all taken different BTEC subjects, yet there were unifying themes across these industry sectors. The spontaneous references to the *structure* of a BTEC course and the understanding it conveyed, combined with the description of assessment techniques that had *enabled* rather than merely *assessed* learning, were felt to be crucial factors in BTEC's success. None of our participants directly used the word 'curriculum', but they were describing a cross-disciplinary approach in which there were frequent opportunities to use examples from one module to support another. This was described as being very different to school, and a much more effective way of learning. The interview transcripts provided consistent descriptions throughout of an educational *concept* that had allowed our participants to flourish and had set them on the route to a career. Many were certain that an academic, exam-based A level route would not have suited them, neither would it have conveyed the same opportunities.

Our participants were deeply concerned by the loss of an approach to teaching, learning and assessment that had enabled them to demonstrate their capability and fulfil their potential. They were passionate about BTECs because the course had been transformative - but they were not simply protective of the distinctive BTEC *brand*: the many practical examples of a teaching and learning environment that could successfully span ten different industry sectors gave a clear sense of an *educational concept* rather just a brand. They were calling for the retention of an approach that was very different to their experience of school, that had allowed them to succeed, prepared them for employment - and represented an opportunity they felt should not be denied to young people in the future.

Distillation of the observations and experience expressed by our participants leads us to the following conclusions concerning the future of the BTEC qualification:

1. Removing the established BTEC in order to facilitate a new T level qualification is difficult to justify: T levels (and the Transition Year) need to have their effectiveness established before they can be fairly considered a replacement for BTEC - or other popular AGQs.

2. A growing movement in England is arguing for assessment to be fairer, broader and more equitable than the exam-assessed curriculum that leaves many 16 year olds with nothing to show what they *have* achieved. Defunding BTEC will remove the pathway from levels 1 to 3 that enables such young people to gain recognised qualifications that lead to employment, university and professional roles.

3. In order to prevent this huge bloc of young people being excluded from success, a new curriculum will have to be invented – at what cost? – to cater for them. And yet BTEC already does.

In summary, we conclude (in line with views expressed by educators, professional bodies, politicians and researchers, currently being aired everywhere from academic literature to the popular press): there is currently no case for defunding BTEC. On the contrary, it should be retained alongside T levels for the foreseeable future.

Recommendations

Based on the key findings, the following recommendations are made:

Maintain a post-16 option that keeps doors open. Participants emphasised the importance of BTECs offering sufficient breadth to explore options and allow truly informed career planning. They expressed serious reservations about the proposed binary T level/A level choice that would require a vocational/ academic choice at such a young age.

Maintain a post-16 route that offers a "second chance". BTEC courses enable progression, including success in English and mathematics, for those who do not achieve this at school. Two of our participants had begun their BTEC journeys with level 1, progressing through levels 2 and 3 and into their careers; one of them now has a first-class degree and was completing a master's course at the time of the interview.

Learn from BTEC's success in fulfilling potential. T levels, as with A levels and GCSEs, have been designed with a heavy reliance on formal written examinations. Some of our participants said they had underperformed at GCSE, but that the more practical learning style and ongoing feedback of the BTEC had allowed them to develop their knowledge, skills and understanding, while the range of assessment techniques allowed them to demonstrate their achievements.

Address the geographical restraints on T level delivery. Some participants spoke of the geographical restrictions they had faced as students; in addition, those whose work was linked to education expressed serious concerns regarding the availability of a range of T levels in their local area. They spoke of limited choice, insufficient placements, and lack of access to employers that could mean that this purported replacement for BTEC will not be universally available in a wide range of subjects.

Acknowledge the role of BTECs in social mobility. One of our participants used the term "levelling up" in relation to BTECs, and the Imagined Futures section of this report amply demonstrates the value of BTECs as an alternative route to both higher level qualifications and a rewarding career.

BTECs should not be summarily withdrawn. T levels will be a good choice for those young people who have had sufficient experience of vocational options to make an informed decision, and those who are strong performers under exam conditions. There are, however, hundreds of thousands of young people who are not ready to choose a career or who will find the exam-based structure of T levels does not play to their strengths. For these students, alternative provision will have to be found and paid for, yet it already exists in the form of extant BTEC courses.

Finally, there is a need to rethink assessment. When our participants made a plea for the retention of BTEC, they were really calling for the continued availability of a course that had enabled them to demonstrate their capability and fulfil their potential through a wide range of learning styles and assessment techniques. This report adds their voice to a growing movement making the argument for change so that assessment can be fairer, broader and more equitable.

2. Context: the demise of BTEC?

Amongst vocational qualifications, the BTEC Diploma has occupied a distinctive position as a consistently successful alternative to A levels (Wolf, 2011) enjoying decades of popularity with students seeking a vocationally-oriented course that offers a route to employment or further study. Since the New Labour widening participation agenda of the 2000s, BTEC qualifications have also provided an increasing number of applicants with access to university places, with BTECs currently contributing to the entry qualifications of 23% of the younger undergraduate population (UCAS, 2022). Recognised for their differing approach and focus to A levels, they have provided hundreds of thousands of people with a means of advancement more suited to their needs, skills, and career plans than the academically-based approach of GCSEs and A levels.

The Review of Level 3 Qualifications begun in 2019 was driven by a seemingly persuasive aim: to slim down a framework that has 4000 approved qualifications at level 3 alone (DfE, 2021a). However, this figure is misleading, since the number of fulltime qualifications that can be taken by 16-19 year olds is very much lower. There are just 134 Level 3 applied general qualifications in around 40 subjects, and most schools and colleges offer only a fraction of these (Protect Student Choice, 2023). A levels are excluded from the Review and will form the core of a new academic pathway. BTECs will be withdrawn as the new T levels (2-year technical courses based on the same standards as apprenticeships) are launched. However, T levels are not a replacement for BTEC, and those 16 year olds who want neither A levels nor an industry-specific course may be left with no suitable 16-19 study option.

As news of the possible demise of BTECs spread, current providers began to express concerns and some asked whether UP2UNI planned to conduct any further research into the issues involved. We then began to ask a simple question of those adults we knew had taken a BTEC after school: “If the BTEC didn’t exist, would you be where you are now?” The answer in every case was a resounding “No!”. A literature review suggested a gap in the research: the voice of those who could reflect on the influence and value of BTECs over the course of their adult lives. This project was thus created to explore their lived experience, with two key questions always in mind: “What have BTECs achieved?” and “What might we lose if they disappear?”

2.1 Academic stability/vocational uncertainty: the dominance of A levels

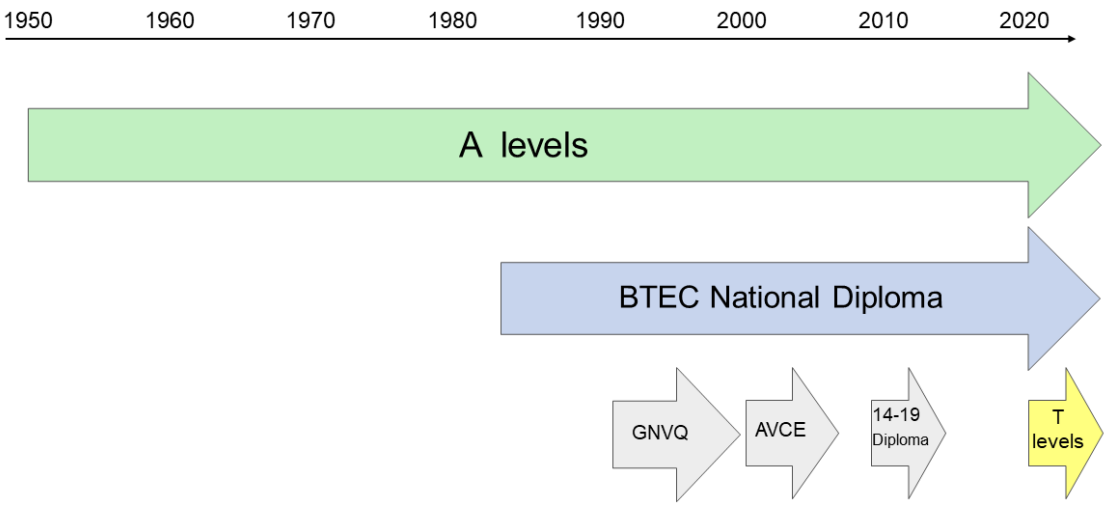
Vocational qualifications in England can be traced back to an Apprenticeship Act of 1497 but the recent past is a history of reviews, and short-lived initiatives, none of which have created a stable vocational sector or an effective system of employer engagement in education and training (see *A short history of employer engagement*, Huddleston, 2020, for an informed and highly readable consideration of this topic). Vocational qualifications for 16-19 year olds have been introduced, withdrawn and replaced in a way that suggests very little learning from the past. Stability is represented by the academic route (i.e. A levels, largely unchanged since 1951). Vocational routes in which a qualification may be withdrawn before it has even been fully introduced (e.g. the 14-19 Diploma) are associated with uncertainty. The reality is that most 16 year olds in England face a stark choice between an academic or vocational route, a binary division attributable to a wide range of factors including parental advice, school curriculum design, teacher advice and societal norms (Gicheva and Petrie, 2018).

Pleas for breadth in the curriculum have been presented consistently over decades, with no real effect. In 1990, a proposal was made for a British ‘Baccalauréat’ (Finegold et al.,1990) that would have ended the division between education and training, offering a unified framework with an emphasis on modularity and innovative forms of assessment. The Tomlinson Review (2004) again proposed the introduction of a single qualification for the 16-19 cohort that would provide greater breadth; however, this was only partially implemented in the short-lived 14-19 Diplomas. A proposal for a 14-19 Baccalaureate (Baker, 2016) noted that “England is in a minority of European countries in making young people make such far-reaching choices at 16, and in expecting young people to narrow their curriculum quite so dramatically”, advocating a mix of technical and academic programmes at 14-19. Most recently, the National Baccalaureate Trust (2022) argued the case for a new type of school leavers’ award that acknowledged all achievements, both academic and technical, as well as participation in the arts, sport

and civic activity. The EBacc, introduced in 2010, is not a baccalaureate curriculum in the proper sense, being instead an accountability measure that pressures schools to offer academic subjects at the expense of vocational ones (Rogers and Spours, 2020). Robinson and Bunting (2021) analysed curriculum breadth and employment outcomes, concluding that: "The government must act to ensure that England's already uniquely narrow 16-19 provision is not squeezed further still" (2021, p9). The current high-stakes testing system has also been criticised, even by the UK parliament, for narrowing the school curriculum and fostering teaching to the test (Education Committee, 2017).

Any discussion of curriculum change is overshadowed by the A level, which has dominated the 16-19 qualifications landscape for 70+ years. A levels are available in a wide range of subjects, but students typically choose just three of these, so any individual curriculum formed of A levels can offer only limited breadth and, depending on what is chosen, may be very narrow indeed. Often referred to as the "gold standard", the A level's impact on vocational alternatives has been profound. Alongside this image of 70 years of stability in the academic pathway, the range and diversity of vocational options for 16-19 year olds emerges as a picture of confusion and instability (Figure 1).

Figure 1. 16-19 Qualifications in England: academic stability vs vocational uncertainty



The BTEC Diploma, a fulltime two-year course offered as an alternative to A levels, emerged from the newly formed Business and Technician Education Council (Raine, 1984). They were never part of any government policy initiative, but developed in response to employer needs. Students on these early courses typically spent 20% of their time in a relevant work placement where knowledge was assessed by performance in the job role. This was supported by job-related coursework. A portfolio of evidence, that included systematic self-assessment and reflection, was also internally assessed and externally moderated. The BTEC model proved to be suitable for a very wide range of industry sectors and the number of qualifications increased to meet demand. At the outset, colleges had considerable autonomy in the mode of assessment, which resulted in variability in standards (Hillier, 2022, personal communication). However, this was subject to a process of standardisation and external control over the ensuing 40 years. Recent changes have included stricter rules for internal assessment (2014) and the introduction of externally assessed examinations accounting for at least 33% of the final grade (2016). As part of this 'academic drift', however, the work placement has been reduced in importance, with specifications requiring 'meaningful employer engagement' in certain units but not necessarily work placement (Pearson, 2017).

The qualification rapidly grew in popularity and esteem and employers commented positively on the broad knowledge base and insight into the real world of those who competed it successfully (Fisher,1998). By the early 2000s, a growing number of universities were accepting BTEC Diplomas as entry qualifications, which fuelled the New Labour widening participation agenda as 98% of BTEC students came from the FE sector, and these students were commonly living in low participation

neighbourhoods (HEFCE, 2007). A distinctive feature of BTECs that has contributed to their success in widening participation is that young people who are not successful in their GCSE examinations can then still take BTEC qualifications at Level 1 or 2, which enables later progression to Level 3 and then potentially opens up employment opportunities or university entry.

The GNVQ (General National Vocational Qualification) was a government initiative launched in 1992 that covered Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced levels across a final total of 15 subjects, though Art & Design, Business, Health & Social Care and Leisure & Tourism, dominated enrolments throughout. GNVQ offered frameworks defined by outcomes, rather than a fixed syllabus, thus generating a more flexible and active mode of learning through projects, assignments and portfolio building that accumulated evidence of skills development that could be shown to potential employers. It was launched with four expectations: to offer a broad preparation for employment; to become an accepted route into higher education; to be of equal standing with level 3 academic qualifications; and to be clearly related to existing occupationally specific NVQs. Longitudinal evaluation (FEDA, Nuffield Foundation, Institute of Education, 1998) found that GNVQs offered progression and were successful as a route to further study including university, or as a route to employment. However, the qualification did not achieve parity with A levels. Originally offered in colleges, a growing number of schools later began to deliver GNVQs, generating considerable variability between centres. Concerns were also expressed about low take-up, poor completion rates and claims that schools were using the qualification to boost their positions in GCSE performance tables (Smithers, 2003). The Advanced level GNVQ was withdrawn in 2000, while the final Intermediate level awards were made in 2007.

The AVCE (Advanced Vocational Certificate in Education) was essentially a remodelled Advanced GNVQ launched as part of "Curriculum 2000", which also included a new AS/A level programme that modularised content to offer a stepped approach in which year one AS exams supported progression to advanced level in year two. The AVCE offered continuous assessment by coursework, producing a portfolio of evidence, though final examinations were also held for some modules. Hodgson and Spours (2005) found that AVCE learners felt a greater sense of control over their learning than their peers taking AS/A levels and although the demands of AVCE coursework meant they described their course as "constant work", they did not express the sense of panic conveyed by those taking AS/A levels who faced exams during the first year of their course. However, AVCE learners were less satisfied by their outcomes, often receiving relatively poor grades that may be attributable to the fact that AVCE was set at an advanced level throughout, rather than being stepped as seen in the AS/A level format. The AVCE was withdrawn in 2004 with the final awards made in 2006.

14-19 Diplomas were introduced in 2008 as the government's response to the Tomlinson Review (2004). However, the government rejected Tomlinson's radical proposal for a single qualification that would unite existing general and vocational routes, opting instead to keep GCSEs and A levels alongside fourteen Diploma routes at Foundation, Higher and Advanced levels (DfE, 2005). The Diplomas used both internal assessment (e.g. project work) and examinations, with a range of options for Specialist or Additional Learning. Even before they were introduced, however, the vocational element was being downplayed, with the introduction of three Diploma lines in general subjects confirming an academic drift that resulted in confusion about the role and purpose of the awards (Hodgson and Spours, 2010). Complexity of structure, challenging assessments, and the requirement for students to pass Functional Skills contributed to poor uptake and completion rates (Isaacs, 2013). The full range of Diplomas was never introduced, and the qualification was removed in 2013.

This report presents research focussed solely on the BTEC Level 3 Diploma. It is acknowledged that there are other **applied general qualifications** that offer vocational alternatives to A level (e.g. Cambridge Technical Certificates) and whilst many of these alternatives mirror the key features of BTEC, none of these later introductions to the qualifications landscape have displayed the reach or longevity of BTECs, which are still taken by hundreds of thousands of students each year.

2.2 How can BTEC's longevity be explained?

BTEC's success can be attributed to a range of external factors, three of which seem particularly relevant. The first is that the GNVQ, AVCE and 14-19 Diplomas were all affected from the outset by comparison with A levels, in which the vocational alternative is 'measured' by its ability to provide progression routes to university (Nuffield, 2007), where the A level already has an unassailable position. In contrast, the BTEC qualification was already established as a successful route to employment when the former polytechnics became 'post-92 universities' (Further and Higher Education Act, 1992) and the strong industry links in the post-92s fostered BTEC-friendly admissions criteria that underpinned the widening participation agenda without being the subject of major debate. One in four university entrants now hold some form of BTEC qualification (UCAS, 2022).

The second factor is that comparison with A levels fuels a tendency for qualifications to drift from vocational to academic even during course development (Kelly, 2017), which then detracts from such qualifications' purpose as a route to employment. Indeed, the new T levels were not intended to become an HE progression route. However, when the BTEC was launched, entry-level jobs were available to school leavers in sectors that have since moved towards graduate-only entry. A vocational qualification at 16-18 has thus become a less attractive proposition, based on there being fewer job opportunities on completion. Nevertheless, BTECs retain the advantage of being established as a route to employment *before* the shift towards graduate-entry careers began.

In relation to both of these factors, the GNVQ, AVCE and 14-19 Diplomas, which can be classed as 'middle track qualifications' (Hodgson and Spours, 2010), had to compete not only with A levels but also with the established success of the BTEC as a route to employment or university.

A third factor in the longevity of BTEC may simply be that whilst GNVQ, AVCE and 14-19 Diplomas were policy-driven initiatives, introduced by and withdrawn by government, BTEC was never the direct subject of such policy decisions – until the current Review of Level 3 Qualifications (DfE, 2019, 2020, 2021a).

BTEC's enduring success may also have been supported by its capacity to flex and adapt to workplace practice across a wide range of employers and industry sectors, ensuring its continued relevance and currency as a vocational qualification.

2.3 Do we need a stronger role for employers?

BTEC emerged from employer need and could lead directly to employment; many vocational qualifications do not. The Wolf Review (2011) found that too many young people were taking vocational qualifications of little value that did not enable them to progress into secure employment or higher-level education or training. It therefore called for vocational education to be simplified dramatically and for young people to have access to honest information about which courses would most benefit them, whether immediately or in the future. The government then announced its intention to take forward all 27 of the Wolf Review recommendations, ten of which referenced employers/employment, and these recommendations informed the Post-16 Skills Plan which stated that "employers will sit at the heart of the system and take the lead in setting the standards" (DBIS and DfE, 2016b, p7). However, there was little reference to how technical courses might be delivered to achieve this.

T levels, emerging from the post-16 Skills Plan, have certainly been presented as qualifications with 'employers at the heart of the system'. However, the relationship between education providers, employers and new qualifications in the UK lacks clarity, and this has not been addressed. Education providers can be easily steered towards policy-driven changes to qualification frameworks by the provision or removal of funding, but employer engagement in education is largely a voluntary activity. Those employers who do engage voluntarily are expected to work with awarding bodies, apprenticeship panels, employer boards, and with schools and colleges, all of which results in employer fatigue and means their continued involvement cannot be assured. Huddleston and Branch-Haddow (2022) argue

that FE colleges can effectively bring together local partners. However, “policy prescriptions should focus on what is reasonable, manageable and meaningful, and how this might be achieved” (p 9).

When employers do engage, they may be disappointed by the response. Huddleston and Laczik (2018) considered the role of employers in the design and development of two recent qualification reforms: 14-19 Diplomas and 16-19 Study Programmes. They concluded that whilst employer engagement continues to be encouraged, lessons must be learned from experience in order to secure that employer engagement in the delivery of post-16 Skills Plans. The 14-19 Diplomas, after considerable investment by some employers, were abandoned before they had even been fully implemented. Huddleston and Laczik question whether the argument that input from employers is “valued and crucial to the development of well regarded vocational qualifications” (p 272) can be sustained.
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It should also be noted that employers are not a homogenous group and finding a representative sample may not always be possible. Young and Hordern (2022) noted that no government in England has yet found ways of encouraging greater involvement in vocational education by small employers. Hillier (2022) identified a need for more realistic expectations on both sides, including getting employers in general (whether by persuasion or levy) to invest much more in education and training, but acknowledged this is not without difficulty. “There is no such thing as a representative group of employers – for any group you assemble there will be at least one other group with different views and an even larger group who will say whatever is offered doesn’t meet their needs. Most people in any group will speak for themselves not their employer, and SMEs, where there might be more linkage, will never be represented” (Hillier, 2022, personal communication).

Additional complications arise from the uncertainty over who – amongst government, employers and educators – is responsible for skilling the workforce. At a systems level, the UK does not appear to have the mechanisms in place to allow effective relationships between employers and educators. Keep (2012) observed that the unresolved issue of roles and responsibilities for education providers and employers can lead to a *deficit model* whereby providers are criticised for not doing what employers need, when the under-utilisation of skills by employers may be at least as important in the skills debate. Grugulis (2003) observed that vocational qualifications in Germany are “designed by employers’ associations, regional governments, trade unions and educationalists, and this system owes its success to the expertise of all” (p 471). Attempts to increase employer investment into the design of education and training provision and certification (e.g. Employer Ownership, Keep, 2015) have not yet created a system that places the UK on a par with other countries.

T level panels, which are responsible for developing the outline content for the new qualifications, are made up of employers, professional bodies and providers. This degree of employer involvement has the potential to create highly relevant qualifications, though the concerns articulated by Keep and Huddleston remain: employer engagement is not yet part of any regulatory framework, few employers will have expertise in qualification design, and some may feel that their contribution is not valued. The membership lists for the first eleven panels also suggest that some may be dominated by large employers.

2.4 The T level: a vocational solution?

Launched in 2020, T levels are intended to simplify the vocational offer, and address a need to improve performance on professional and technical intermediate skills amongst young people (DBIS and DfE, 2016a). In comparison with other countries, the UK has a high (and increasing) proportion of the population qualified to higher level, but a lower proportion qualified to intermediate level. The relationship between skills levels and productivity indicates that we need to reduce the proportion of people with low skills and increase the proportion with intermediate skills (Bosworth and Leach, 2015). Both T levels and BTECs are intermediate qualifications, so it is not the skills level that is the issue, but the specificity of the skills gained. T levels will offer “clear routes leading to skilled employment which requires technical knowledge and practical skills valued by industry” (DBIS and DfE, 2016a, p22). There are four key differences when comparing T levels with BTECs (see Figure 2, *overleaf):*

Figure 2. Four key differences when comparing T Levels with BTECs

	T levels	BTEC Diploma
Student Profile	Students will have a clear idea of the industry sector and type of job role they would like to pursue. Age 16-19.	Students want a range of vocationally-relevant optional units, alongside skills valued by universities. Age 16+
Prior learning	Students most likely to succeed if they have 5 GCSEs at grade 4 or above including English and maths.	Students should normally have a range of achievement at Level 2, including English and maths.
Course structure	100% external assessment. Core component: examinations and employer set project Specialist component: synoptic assessment	33% external assessment 66% internal assessment (e.g. reports • projects • practical assessments • performance • reflective journals • presentations/assessor questioning).
Industry links	315-hour industry placement related to the occupational specialism	Meaningful employer engagement should contribute to some units

Whilst T levels may offer long term solutions in terms of raising skill levels, there is widespread concern that each of these four factors may create immediate staff shortages in some sectors. For example, a strong case is being argued by more than 100 NHS organisations across England, who have called upon the government to pause their decision to remove funding for the BTEC in Health and Social Care, and to conduct an in-depth impact assessment of the effect of this policy on the NHS and social care workforce supply, together with resultant patient safety. BTEC facilitates direct entry into NHS support worker roles and provides a foundation for higher education for those seeking to train as registered nurses, midwives, radiographers or occupational therapists. The latest available data for student registrations shows that on the nurse degree training programme, more students entered with a BTEC in Health and Social Care than with A Levels. They argue that T levels do not yet offer a comparable alternative: they are open only to 16-19 year olds and have higher entry requirements; further, their work placement capacity requirements could not be met even with additional funding, as many clinical settings cannot provide placements for those under 18 (NHS Employers, 2022). Similar issues have been raised by other sectors, and further concerns about T levels are considered below.

The work placement requirement appears to be a major concern that reaches well beyond the NHS. A T level must include an industry placement of at least 45 days (315 hours), creating an 80% classroom / 20% workplace model of delivery (the opposite split to apprenticeships). The T level was launched in 2020 in three specialisms, while more than 20 specialisms are planned, with the intention being to provide a national system of technical qualifications that has credibility with employers and can remain stable over time. These aims are admirable, but if all 16 year olds are required to make a binary choice between A levels or T levels, the number of placements required to support the planned full roll-out of T levels could be immense, and there are concerns around whether employers can or will meet this demand (Foster and Powell, 2019). Such concerns are also expressed in relation to education providers, with the NFER reporting concerns that 'schools, or those with less experience and limited infrastructure, would find delivering the placement offer very difficult' (Straw et al., 2019, p21).

Employer engagement may be insufficient. Groups of employers have taken part in defining the skills and requirements for each T level by participating in T level panels. However, far greater levels of involvement are needed for T levels to be delivered successfully. Foster and Powell (2019) whilst acknowledging the piloting of industry placements and the capacity delivery funding, noted that many employers doubted whether they could offer work placements. In a recent poll of 300 business leaders (Institute of Directors, 2022), only 14% indicated they were either already offering T level placements or intended to do so. The DfE's Employer Pulse Survey (Winterbotham et al., 2022) similarly found that only 30% of employers were interested in providing work placements to T Level students and just 6% were "very interested". After being told that the government had offered a £1,000 cash incentive to employers, the number interested rose only a little, from 30% to 34% and 64% of employers thought that offering placements would be difficult compared to just 30% who thought it would be easy (Winterbotham et al., 2022, p9). A further concern in relation to work placements is the uneven distribution of some industries across the country: schools and colleges may be unable to provide

certain subjects due to a lack of relevant placements, creating a postcode lottery where people cannot take some T levels solely because of their location (City & Guilds, 2021). Interrogation of the government 'Find a T level' service shows that in some areas a distance of 20+ miles with a daily commute of 5+ hours would be required to access some popular subjects (e.g. digital) within the next two years (HM Government, 2022).

The high GCSE grades needed to gain a place on a T level form another widespread concern. A joint consultation response from four national science institutes (ASE, IOP, RSB, and RSC, 2022) warned that the 25,000 young people who study applied science (mostly BTEC students) may have GCSE results lower than those of their A level peers, but they are still good GCSEs. They note that applied qualifications provide a progression route for those who are motivated to study science, many of whom are from disadvantaged backgrounds, a factor known to correlate with lower GCSE results. The Royal Society (2022) goes further, suggesting that to put blind faith in the currently unproven T levels is "profoundly risky and could potentially damage the future career prospects of thousands of young people as well as the STEM pipeline, putting the government's economic ambitions at risk" (Royal Society, 2022, p1).

The heavy reliance on examinations in the T level has also raised concerns. The suitability of any assessment method has much to do with the type of content being measured, and good practice in qualification design is to develop the content and then decide on the best ways to assess it (Turner, 2022). Written exams may well not be the best way to test skills, and AGQs typically use a range of assessment techniques including written and practical exams, assignments, projects, presentations, and portfolios, that mirrors the range of assessment modes now used in many universities (University Alliance, 2021). Young people who choose a vocational route may have self-identified that they under-perform in written exams, and may be actively seeking a post-16 route that offers them a range of assessment techniques better able to measure and record their achievements (McGrath, 2021, p16).

The requirement to pass all components makes the qualification very different to A levels. As a composite qualification, if a student passes all elements they are awarded a T level. Otherwise they receive only a statement of achievement showing the elements they have completed (DfE, 2022b). In contrast, lack of success in one A level has no impact at all on the outcome of any other subjects taken.

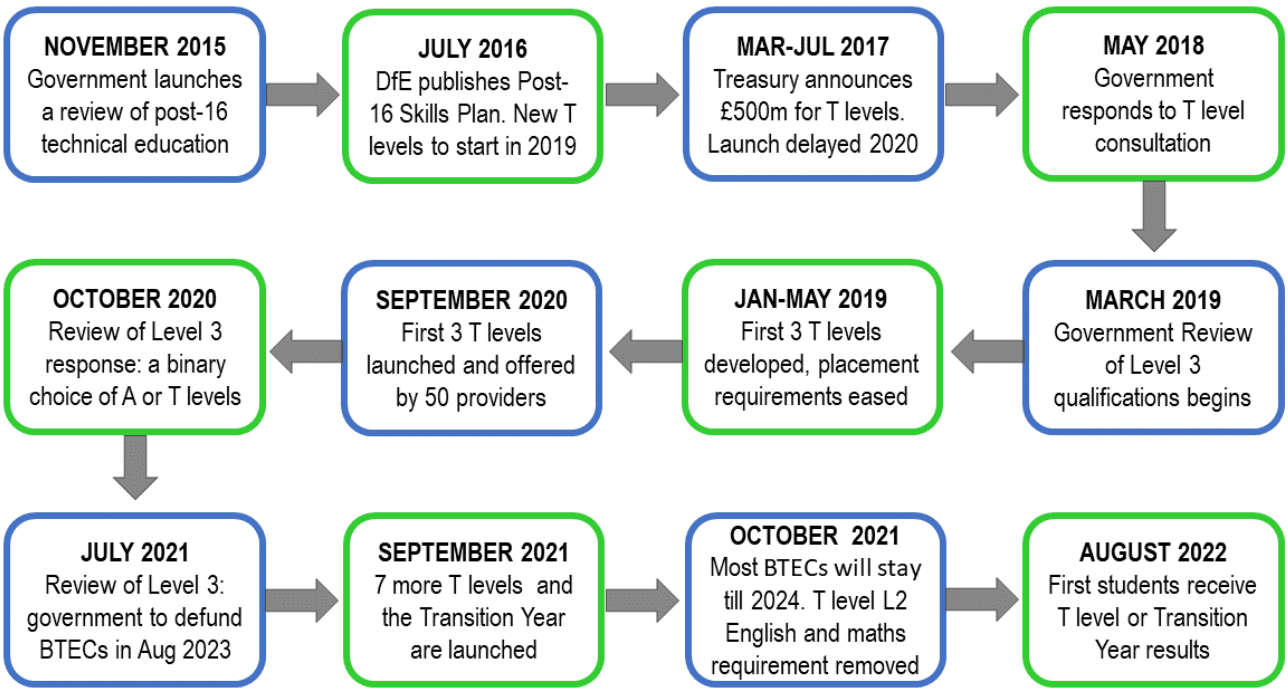
The relative narrowness of the T level curricula in comparison with other vocational qualifications and the possible enforcement of a binary divide have also raised concerns. The University Alliance (2021) in its response to the Review of Level 3 qualifications expressed support for T levels as a progression route into university. However, it also pointed out that dividing post-16 education into strict "academic" and "technical" routes and limiting the flexibility for students to adopt a blended approach will limit choice and create an artificial divide that often does not exist in post-18 education or employment. Even amongst those 16 year olds interested in a vocational route, many will not be ready to commit to a specific industry and a lengthy work placement, and an under-informed choice of specialist pathway could lead to substantial dropout and inappropriate learning for future work and education (Ark, 2022).

Variability across sectors has also been raised as an issue, based on claims that T levels do not fully recognise the extent to which employer needs vary across sectors. As an example, hospitality and catering entry level jobs often require only level 2 qualifications: a young person who has completed a T level may then be placed on a level 2 apprenticeship on entering the workforce, which could be seen as a retrograde step (City & Guilds, 2021). Within the hospitality and catering college sector, there are thus concerns that in the development of T levels, colleges do not appear to have had a place at the table (Capital City College Group, 2021).

The T level Transition Year has been developed for those young people who feel ready to make a commitment to a technical pathway but do not meet T level entry requirements. It give providers considerable flexibility, including the freedom to deliver the course without a qualification, in order to best meet the needs of their students. However, unlike BTEC it does not offer a direct route from levels 1 to 3, a progression route that can be transformative for a 16 year old who has not achieved at GCSE.

These concerns notwithstanding, much of the controversy around T levels is fuelled by a timeline that *simultaneously* defunds BTECs and other AGQs before T levels have had time to become established.

Figure 3. Post-16 timeline: launch of T levels, removal of BTECs



As the timeline shows, there has been some softening of the initial proposals. Following concerns that the timetable was too rapid, the government decided to delay the defunding process until 2024, with some BTECs likely to continue to play an important role in 16-19 education (DfE, November 2021b). The requirement for students to attain Level 2 qualifications in English and mathematics before a T level qualification could be awarded was perceived as a significant barrier to the take-up of T levels, and has been removed, though such students must still continue studying English and maths (DfE, November 2021b). Concerns about the work placement requirements continue, particularly in sectors where office-based work is not the typical mode of employment. Placement requirements were temporarily relaxed during the pandemic and, at the time of writing, the government has announced some softening of the rules in the latest placement guidance notes (DfE, January, 2023a). This increased flexibility (for example, students can spend up to one-third of their placement hours in an employer skills hub or training centre) appears to be welcomed by employers (e.g. NHS Employers, January 2023).

2.5 Is there a case for removing BTECs?

As a vocational route to higher education, the BTEC has been very successful. In the 2022 university applications cycle, 200,860 18-year-olds were accepted into university on the basis of A level or BTEC results. Of these, 77% had taken A levels,12% took the BTEC Diploma, and 11% had a mix of A level and BTEC qualifications (UCAS, 2022).

However, the value of BTEC as a university entry qualification can also be questioned based on examining the national datasets. For example, former BTEC students are more likely to drop out during their first year of university (HESA, 2019), particularly where they enter the most prestigious universities (Kelly, 2017). Whilst the available data continues to show that former BTEC students are more likely to drop out of university, to repeat a year, or graduate with a degree below a 2.1 than those entering from A levels, the overwhelming majority of BTEC entrants do not drop out or repeat, and the majority of those graduating do so with at least a 2.1. Dilnot, MacMillan and Wyness (2022) noted that “These are considerable successes for these students, who without the availability of BTEC might not have had the opportunity to attend university at all” (p4). It is also worth noting that the introduction of new BTEC specifications in 2016 to include externally assessed examinations alongside other forms of assessment

may provide a better preparation for some university courses; the full impact of these changes on the performance and outcomes of BTEC students progressing to university is not yet known, however. Research has also suggested that better advice at school and better support at university may raise the completion levels of BTEC students to those of A level entrants with equivalent tariff points (Holford, 2017; Massardo and Shields, 2015; McGrath, 2021).

BTEC is often seen as 'second best', a qualification that does not have parity with A levels (Mime and UCL, 2020). The perception that it is an easier qualification was fuelled by a steady rise in the proportion gaining top grades when compared to A level outcomes: by 2015, it was 38% of BTEC students vs 16% of A level students (HEFCE, 2015). A major difference, however, is that BTEC students are assessed on their ability throughout the year, rather than relying on end of course assessment of the ability to retain information (Gicheva and Petrie, 2018). BTECs assess many qualities that A levels do not, and one could argue that students who complete a course with continuous assessment of knowledge and skills would be *expected* to achieve more top grades than those tested by a norm-referenced final examination.

Not all BTEC students progress to university, as BTECs can also offer a direct route into employment. A Labour Force Survey (McIntosh and Morris, 2016) using data from the period 1997 to 2015 found that BTEC qualifications were consistently associated with higher financial returns than were other vocational qualifications comparable to A levels. They suggested the longer duration and more general college-based approach of BTECs might offer a model for high-quality vocational provision. There is also support for the value of BTEC and other vocational courses in developing work skills: an Ofqual-commissioned survey of vocational or technical qualifications found that 91% of employers value such qualifications, 83% believe they are good preparation for the workplace, and 82% believe they equip learners with relevant technical skills (Pye Tait Consulting, 2018). A literature review of studies on vocational qualifications (Pember, et al., 2019) also found a positive correlation with both subsequent wage returns and increased participation in higher education, especially for those from disadvantaged or underrepresented areas, as well as noting that the mental health of young people moving to a post-16 vocational environment improved as compared to those staying on at school.

In addition, the BTEC Level 3 Diploma is underpinned by BTEC courses offered at Levels 1 and 2, thus offering an accessible route forward for the 30% of 16 year olds whose GCSE results do not qualify them to progress directly to Level 3 (Hupkau, et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, despite BTEC's achievements, the Post-16 Skills Plan had warned that "Applied general qualifications…are not designed to be part of the technical option. We plan to review the contribution of these qualifications to preparing students for success in higher education" (DBIS and DfE, 2016b, p20, 2.18). Kelly (2017) had questioned BTEC's future if it is increasingly seen as an inferior route to university rather than as training for skilled employment. The government response to the Review of Level 3 qualifications consultation (DfE, 2020) confirms Kelly's doubts about the future of most BTECs.

2.6 Reactions to the loss of BTEC: the end-user's voice

The Review of Level 3 Qualifications encountered strong opposition throughout the consultation process (DfE, 2019, 2020, 2021a). Despite this, in October 2021, the government announced plans to defund those technical qualifications that overlap with the new T levels. The first tranche of courses to lose funding was announced in May (DfE, 2022) and, on the current timeline, it seems likely that as T levels are rolled out, most BTEC Diplomas and many of the smaller BTEC and other vocational courses that can currently be combined with A levels will be defunded. One effect of this decision will therefore be to wipe out the qualification routes taken by 24% of those 18-year-olds who entered university in 2021.

Objections to these proposals have come not only from schools and colleges, but also from employers, the university sector, and senior politicians of all parties. Ironically, this defunding has therefore become perhaps one of the most unifying political actions ever taken in the education sector, uniting two former Education Secretaries from both Conservative (Kenneth Baker) and Labour (David Blunkett) backgrounds, each of whom is now in the House of Lords. Their joint article published under the

headline “The UK government’s skills bill is a disaster for young people” pointed out that T levels are untested, 75% academic, and require high GCSE grades, as well as the solemn fact that the government’s own document admits that black, Asian, minority, free school meal, and disabled students will be negatively impacted by the policy (Baker and Blunkett, The Guardian,13 October 2021).

In defining the purpose of this research project, we found ourselves returning to the government’s consultation response to the Implementation of T Level Programmes, in which they said: “We will withdraw funding for qualifications that are not truly necessary in the new simplified system, not of good quality, lack a distinct purpose and do not equip young people to take the next step into employment or further study” (DfE, 2018, p5).

Our data is derived from ‘life history’ interviews with ten adults who took Level 3 BTECs after their GCSE or O level qualifications, and who could therefore reflect on the role that the BTEC qualification had played in their education, training, employment and career trajectory. Borrowing from the government’s own words, the next section of this report thus gives a voice to people who can comment with some authenticity on whether BTECs “are not truly necessary…not of good quality…lack a distinct purpose and do not equip young people to take the next step.”

The Research: what we did and what we discovered

3. Methodology

The current debate on the value of, and need for, applied general qualifications such as BTEC is often informed, or even driven, by evidence from large scale datasets in which there is no place for the voices of individual learners. A motivating factor in the current research was thus to provide a platform for the "voice of experience", drawing on the lifetime experience of people whose careers had begun with BTECs, the aim being to provide rich data to help fill the gap in the current literature.

Aims

The main aim of the project was to investigate how BTECs had prepared learners for adult life, including their post-BTEC education, training and qualifications, employment trajectories, and career plans

More specifically, the main objectives supporting this aim were to develop understanding of:

1. Why participants chose BTEC, and their transition experience from O levels, CSE or GCSEs.
2. What subsequent further study or training participants had completed and their transition experience from BTEC studies.
3. Participants' employment histories, career plans and aspirations.
4. The BTEC study experience, including skills and knowledge developed by the course.

The secondary aim was to explore the "Imagined Futures" of our participants: exploring how they felt their lives might have been affected if their chosen BTEC qualification had not been available to them.

3.2 The research tools

A life history approach was chosen based on its power to elicit a detailed narrative that could embed the BTEC experience in the context of the individual's life, showing both the immediate and the longer-term impact of the qualification. This research tool enables participants to talk freely about their education and career paths, providing rich data that often incorporates topics they are not specifically asked about, thus providing unique insights into their lived experience. It is particularly suited to research that evaluates educational impact: "Life histories favour reflection about whole lives and the [educational] program within the context of one's life trajectory" (Richardson et al., 2018, p8). Users of the life history approach conclude that the method "provides a more rounded and fuller explanation of decisions and approaches to success" (Stuart et al., 2011, p493). This further supported the suitability of the method as a means of exploring the lived experience of former BTEC students.

A script of relevant prompt questions was developed for each of the five objectives. However, we anticipated encountering a broad range of experience, much of which may not have been included in the script, and thus intentionally conducted the interviews in a way that enabled each participant to "dictate the direction of the interview and explore their own reasoning for choices and learning practice, enabling them to lead the interview with few prompts" (Stuart et al., 2011, p492).

3.3 Data collection

The interviews were all conducted by the lead researcher, either by telephone or on Teams according to participant preference. Each interview lasted between 45 and 65 minutes, and all interviews were audio recorded with the prior agreement of the participants. All participants received a project information sheet before agreeing to take part, and all gave informed consent.

3.4 Analysis

The audio recordings were transcribed immediately on completion of the interviews. Drawing on Saldana (2016) each transcript was coded manually by identifying patterns of phrases or sentences related to the research objectives, using a cyclical technique in which transcripts were re-coded as the salient features of the data emerged with greater clarity. Initial codes were then split as patterns emerged or meanings were identified. As an example, the coding of "skills and knowledge" was divided into "technical" and "generic", and then further divided into specific skills such as "presentation" or "groupwork". The first three main themes (*post-16 options and choosing BTEC; post-BTEC education and training; employment and career trajectory)* could be described as explicit and these could have been anticipated from the research objectives, though the coding technique identified a number of sub-themes within these (see Figure 4). The fourth main theme *(the BTEC experience)* also related directly to a research objective. However, in this case coding produced sub-themes that were more tacit and "data driven", resulting from clear patterns in the data that emerged despite there being no interview prompts that specifically asked about the topic (see Figure 5).

All transcripts were checked for internal consistency to ensure that no part of any narrative contradicted another part of the same narrative, a key measure of quality in the life histories approach.

3.5 Participants

A request for participants was shared via existing networks and by word of mouth. A project information sheet was sent to all those who expressed an interest. Everyone who was interested in the project expressed concerns about the proposed loss of BTECs and it must thus be acknowledged that the participants already held favourable views of BTECs prior to participation.

After receiving the project information sheet, ten former BTEC students volunteered to take part, a typical number for a life histories approach. The ten participants had completed a wide range of BTEC courses between them, including: Business & Finance, Early Years, Engineering, Fashion, Fine Art, Health & Social Care, Hospitality, Leisure & Tourism, Multi-media, and Sport. These BTEC courses had been taken over the period of about 35 years, from the inception of BTECs in the 1980s through to the 2010s. All participants had studied at post-16 colleges, with areas including London, the Southeast, the Southwest, the Northwest, and the Midlands, offering a mix of urban and rural locations.

3.6 Ethical considerations

The research adhered to the British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2018). All participants were volunteers, and each potential participant was sent an information sheet and a copy of the consent form before agreeing to take part. Prior to the interview they were invited to ask any questions they required to make an informed decision about taking part in the research. All participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the research at any stage and were given the contact details of the lead researcher.

For this report, any information that could potentially identify a participant has been pseudonymised, meaning that names, gender, schools, universities, employers and other details pertinent to a given individual have been removed.

4. The BTEC experience and lifetime impact

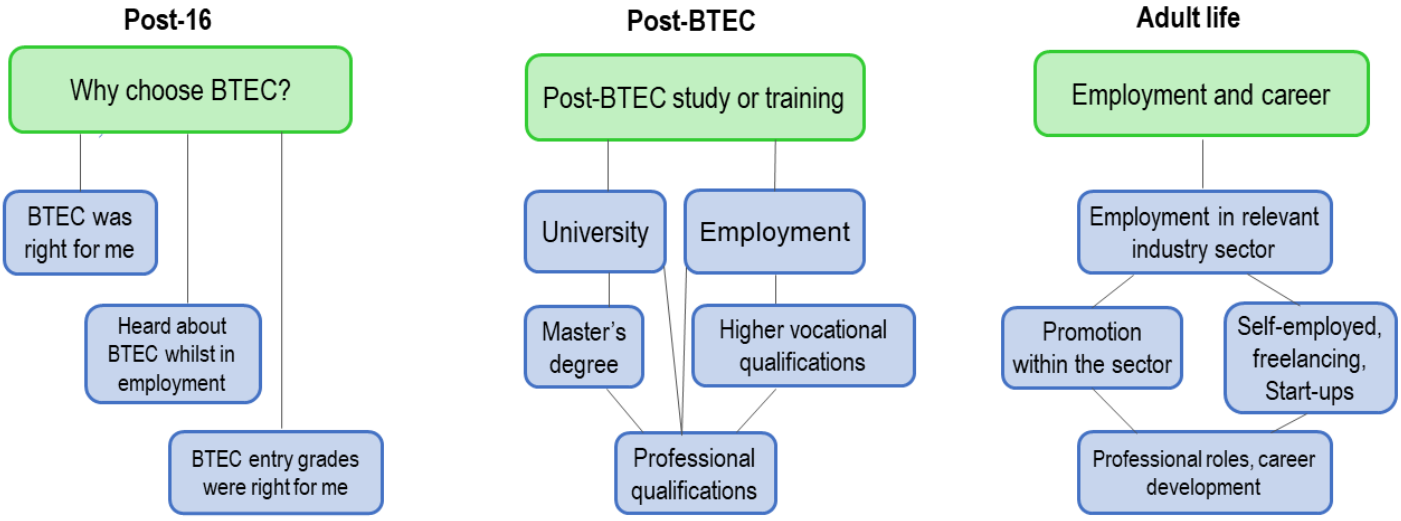
Introduction

In this section we present the experiences of our participants. These are grouped to reflect the four main themes that emerged from analysis of the interview transcripts. The first three themes mirror objectives 1 to 3, and effectively provided the chronology of participants' education, training and employment histories over three time periods:

Theme 1. Post-16 options and choosing BTEC courses.
Theme 2. Post-BTEC education and training.
Theme 3. Employment and career trajectory in adult life.

Analysis of the interview data identified a number of sub-themes for each theme, and these were used to structure this section of our report (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Education, training, employment, and careers: main and sub-themes.



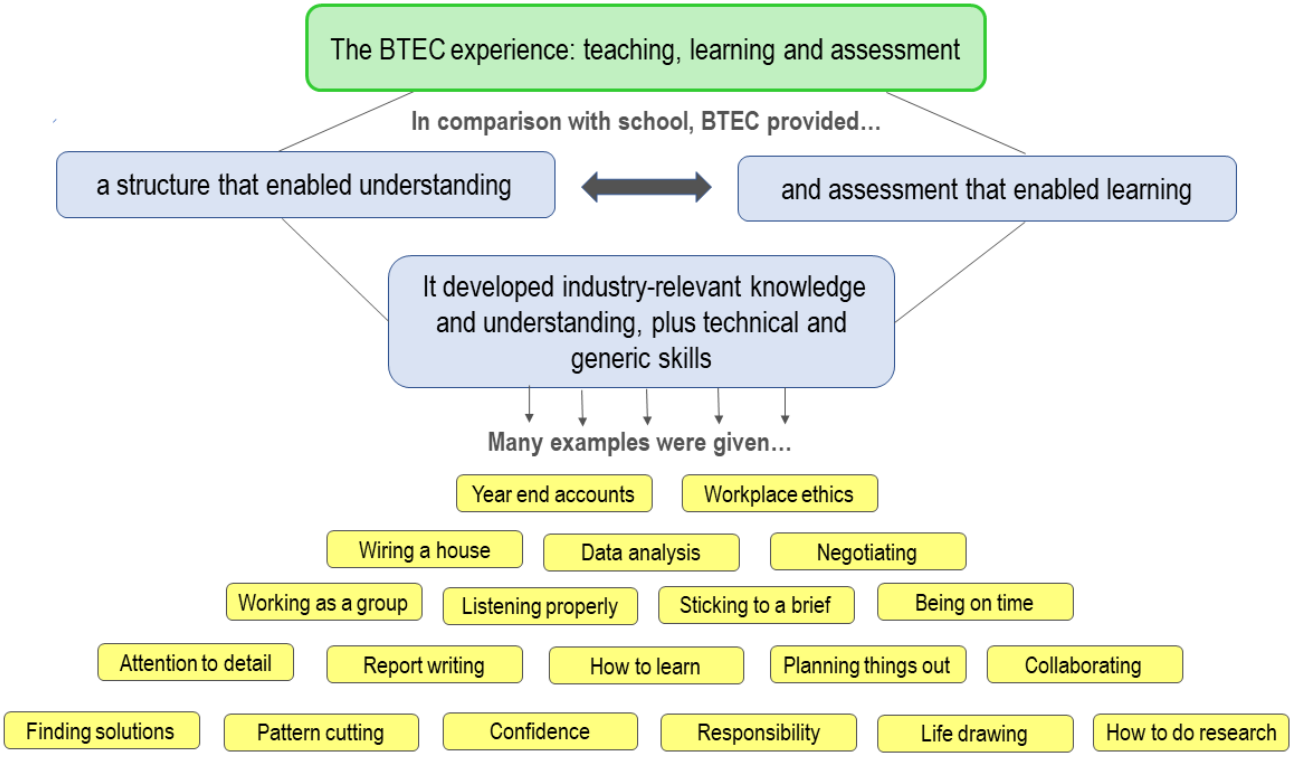
Most participants described these first three themes in chronological order during their interviews, beginning by talking about their choices and decisions when they reached school leaving age (16 at that time) and continuing throughout their lives up to the current day. Our fourth objective, however, related to the specific two-year time period in each participant's life during which they undertook their BTEC course:

Theme 4. The BTEC experience.

Rather than being presented as one continuous flow of comments, aspects of the BTEC experience tended to be addressed throughout each interview, emerging as participants reflected in an organic way on their BTEC courses and the roles these had played over their lifetimes. Participants often returned to a topic they had already spoken about, as their reflections produced memories of additional examples that illustrated what they saw as key story points.

Analysis of the data relevant to Theme 4 produced a large number of sub-themes that merit individual consideration: these are represented throughout this section of the report in the many participant quotes used to illustrate our findings. One of the most striking emergent findings from analysis of the data relating to Theme 4 was the importance of "structure" in describing BTEC courses. Nothing in our interview scripts asked about structure, yet every participant described this as an important feature that provided stability and a clear understanding of what was expected. Alongside this was universal praise for a mode of assessment that gave timely feedback in a way that had enabled learning. Together, these developed industry-relevant knowledge and understanding, and both technical and generic skills. Many examples were described (see Figure 5, *overleaf*):

Figure 5. The BTEC experience, delivering understanding, enabling learning



4.1 Theme 1: Why choose BTEC?

We began our conversations with former BTEC students by asking them to describe the circumstances or motivation that led to them taking a BTEC course. Their responses fell into three broad categories:

A. they had made an active choice to leave school in favour of taking a BTEC course at college
B. they had "discovered" BTECs after spending time in employment
C. they had not met the entry requirements for their school's sixth form or for the relevant A levels

A) An active choice to take a BTEC course

Five of our participants had made an active choice to take BTECs, although their initial knowledge of BTEC courses varied. Some said that their schools appeared unaware of vocational options, and some had encountered negative or disparaging views:

I remember people saying things like, "well you probably could be a hairdresser… you're not going to be able to do some of the harder things in life, you'll have to do something vocational".

The college was only five miles away but when I told my tutor I was going there they'd never heard of it.

My school never mentioned BTEC. My friends were at school doing A levels and I think they were bemused by what I was doing - but they saw I was loving it.

Personal connections with people who had taken BTEC previously were sometimes an important source of information, and visitors to schools also offered a new perspective in some cases:

I did get a little bit of guidance [at school] but I knew I wanted to do a BTEC anyway, I knew other people who'd already done it.

A guy came to my school and talked about media studies. He told me I could take it as a GCSE, so I did. And then while doing my GCSE they got us to explore what options there might be afterwards and I found this multi-media BTEC.

A search for possible routes into a desired career could also lead a pupil towards a BTEC course:

I didn't think I'd enjoy A levels, [but] I needed a Level 3 qualification to go on to nursing,…the BTEC Diploma was the obvious choice.

The most informed were those younger participants who had taken a Level 2 BTEC alongside their GCSE subjects. This gave them direct experience of BTECs as well as understanding of how they might differ from A levels:

I looked at both A levels and BTEC. One of the things I'd really enjoyed at school was a BTEC unit in IT, so I knew that BTECs offered more vocational subjects, and also that the National Diploma was equivalent to 3 A levels.

One comment about teachers' knowledge and background raised an interesting point:

I don't think many teachers have done a BTEC so why would they tell pupils about that? Teachers talk about what they know.

This may well be true of teachers in mainstream schools. However, it is probably not reflective of college staff. Indeed, several of our participants later took qualifications and employment related to education, including teaching.

B) Discovering BTECs whilst in employment

Two participants had left school at a time when university entrants were still very much a minority and many career paths were open to school leavers. Both said they would have met the entry requirements for sixth form, but that they (or their parents) didn't see any benefit to taking that path at the time:

In a working-class family, there was an expectation you'd leave school and go to work. [So, four years later] it was really tricky saying I was giving up a well-paid job to go and become a student.

I could have done A levels because my results were good [but it] would have been two bus rides to a college or sixth form. I went to work as a hairdresser and took City & Guilds qualifications, then did a book-keeping course in the evening.

Both of the participants quoted above appeared to have found out about BTECs as the result of happenstance rather than any formal guidance, discovering that BTEC courses could offer both a return to study and the prospect of career progression:

Everybody [at work] was offered the chance to do a BTEC as a day release course if they wanted to, with all costs covered. The BTEC had to relate to what you were doing at work. It was very focussed… [and] very important for my career.

After four years I was well paid but there was no progression, I was really bored, so I started evening classes. The tutor said 'You've got something there…you could go and do a BTEC'.

C) Not meeting the entry requirements for sixth form or for A levels

The final 3 participants all said that entry requirements were a factor in choosing BTEC. One of these had received unexpectedly poor results in some GCSE subjects:

We'd never really done exams before, but I'd always done OK in most things, so I just thought I'd be alright. I got the shock of my life when I did badly in three [GCSE] subjects. So, when I was deciding what I wanted to do, it was more about what course I could get into.

Another participant described a school environment that had not met their needs, resulting in a GCSE profile that would require a fresh start at college beginning with Level 1, something BTECs are designed to offer:

I'm not very academic and I'm also dyslexic, so I didn't really have GCSEs. I knew other people who'd already done BTEC. I started with the Level 1, [which] gave me an understanding which meant I could progress through to level 3. I also did maths and English around it.

The third participant without prior qualifications had never had an opportunity to attend school until arriving in England as a teenager:

Growing up in a country that was at war throughout my childhood I had never stepped foot in a school. Coming here at the age of 18 I went to four colleges before I got a place. It was a pre-level 1 BTEC [but] that put me on a route that led to me having a first-class degree.

All three of these participants praised their college BTEC courses for the "second chance" they provided when other routes were closed to them.

It is worth noting that the participants who would not have met the entry requirements for their school sixth form or for A level courses were all successful students at BTEC level and beyond, with their achievements including first class undergraduate degrees and master's degrees, in addition to the fulfilment of their initial career ambitions.

4.2 Theme 2. Post-BTEC study or training

All of the participants had progressed into education, training or employment that was directly related to the subject of their BTEC courses. Six had gone straight to university from their BTEC studies, all had completed degree courses that were a direct progression from their BTEC subject and five had then gone on to do a Master's degree. Another student was prevented from taking up a university place because of a serious accident, but as an adult was following an employment-based route towards an equivalent qualification in the same sector, alongside taking an Open University degree in a related subject. One further student had progressed to university directly from the BTEC but left without completing their degree course (largely attributable to a very traditional learning style that lacked support) and was now taking vocational qualifications alongside employment in the career that their BTEC studies had opened up.

There were just two participants who had not followed a degree route at all. One had taken a logical succession of vocational qualifications that supported their career progression, including Level 6 courses (equivalent to degree level). The remaining participant was the youngest; they were aware of the university options followed by friends with BTEC qualifications but had succeeded in accessing a desired career route built on voluntary work whilst completing their BTEC course.

4.2 (i) Choosing and applying to university

The period of time over which our participants had attended university spanned almost thirty years. Those who applied during the 1980s and '90s usually spoke of restricted opportunities and strong competition for a university place. Societal attitudes and expectations in relation to education and employment were very different in the 1980s and '90s, with some participants saying that their parents did not expect them to enter sixth form, let alone university:

Both my sisters were older and had left school at 15…and growing up on a council estate in the 80s it was difficult for me, nobody [went to university],. Me giving up everything to be an art student was… 'WHAT?'

Two of these older participants attributed their university entry to their college, where lecturers or tutors had suggested something that the young person themselves had never expected. Both recognised that entry to university was not an automatic progression and felt they had been "lucky" to get a place:

So, they [tutors] started to talk to me about university and I was like "No I don't think so!" But they said "You should, it would be good for you", so I went on some visits, and I ended up applying. I totally winged it through the interview, four interviewers, me with my huge portfolio, and I don't know how, but I got accepted.

The college said, "go and do further study", and I fell hook, line, and sinker for that because I'd never, ever thought I'd do that. The fact that someone dangled that in front of me, I thought "that sounds really exciting". I was lucky, I got enough merits – as it was in those days – to enable me to go and do a degree in hospitality, so that's what I did.

A third participant who went to university in that period spoke of the influence of the peer group:

I was part of a peer group where we all had ideas and dreams of where we wanted to be - and a feeling we'd got to get to London. At that time fashion HNDs and degrees were a nightmare to get into. They were so popular, there was a lot of competition. I got a place on a four year sandwich course at one of the London polytechnics, with my placement year in the East End.

It was interesting to note that the HND course was clearly regarded by these older participants as a different, but acceptable route to a career for those who had a vocational focus:

When I was going round doing [university] interviews and things, I was also applying to do HNDs which I suppose in my mind was the big brother of BTEC.

Younger participants made no mention of HND, and the participant quoted above also commented on the shift away from HND in favour of the degree route as an unfortunate outcome, driven to some extent by employer bias:

If I'd done HND I probably would have stayed in the industry operations-wise, but because I went and did a degree, I suppose that did open different doors. Unfortunately, I think employers see a degree as the minimum standard and I don't think I learned any particularly useful skills from it whatsoever.

Those who had taken BTEC during the 2000s and 2010s were applying to university when the New Labour widening participation agenda was driving the massification of higher education and university places were becoming more accessible to those families with no history of higher education. The expansion of the number of university places and the development of 'results day' Clearing schemes at most universities offered these individuals an accessible route to taking a degree. These younger participants, in contrast to their older counterparts, did not attribute their university progression to individual lecturers or tutors but spoke as though it was a foregone conclusion that they would follow up their BTEC course with a degree. They were more likely to talk about choice of course and institution than whether they would go at all:

I chose a degree with a broad focus - multimedia, cultural studies, and film. It was less hands-on than a BTEC but still had the variety I'd valued in that it wasn't just one subject.

I ended up applying through Clearing to go to university. They still wanted GCSE maths, but when I called up, they said that I could retake it, which I did.

One participant was currently undertaking a degree through part time study, and had also begun an apprenticeship that would qualify them for their chosen career. Although the degree was not necessary for their employment, it was in a related subject, and they fully intended to complete it.

4.2 (ii) The transition from BTEC studies to university

Our previous research with BTEC alumni (McGrath, 2021) showed that delivery style and mode of assessment at university could be key factors influencing successful transition. Former BTEC students who progressed to a course with large lectures, exam-based assessment, and few opportunities for staff feedback, could experience difficulties and some even talked of dropping out (pp 29-34). Those who had deliberately chosen a degree with a practical, hands-on delivery style were, however, more settled and more confident (p 50).

One of our participants entered a post-92 university that appeared to welcome those progressing from BTECs, but found that the course used a traditional lecture/exam-based delivery style that was very different to the BTEC experience and did not provide a comparable learning environment:

The formal classroom delivery was all theory. The lectures were 70 odd students, and the seminars were 20 to 25, so with those numbers I don't think the staff really could have supported anyone who was having trouble even if they'd realised. By year three I decided to leave even though I hadn't finished my degree. I suppose you could say that the BTEC didn't prepare me for that kind of learning style.

The final sentence of the comment above offers a very rare example of a participant finding something to say about BTECs that was not entirely positive. It is a reminder of existing research indicating that

BTEC students may require more guidance when making university choices (Holford, 2017) and can be highly successful when their UCAS search criteria included teaching and learning styles and modes of assessment that played to their strengths (McGrath, 2021).

It was more common for participants to describe a smooth transition, with their BTEC having provided a good preparation for higher education, particularly where the course had strong practical elements:

In the first year of the degree the only thing that A level students were perhaps better at was illustration and life drawing. Whereas those who'd done BTEC already knew things, and the lecturers would often say "you'll be fine because you've done a BTEC".

As a testament to what BTEC could do for you, the degree was a sandwich course and the first two years to be honest were a waste of time because I'd already covered it. All I had to learn was how to write essays – completely pointless as I've never done one since.

Some had also made a smooth transition to postgraduate study, taking a master's course that could further increase their career development:.

For my master's project I built up an online community, and that allowed me to have the business I run now.

Several of our participants said that the BTEC course had been more valuable as preparation for a career in their chosen industry than time spent at university, though it was evident that getting a good degree was seen as an important milestone:

I found at university it was back to a lot more essays and lectures and not as much practical work until we got to the placement, which was all practical. I loved my placement year.

My degree was a thing that I needed to do to show that I could, but actually I didn't get a huge amount out of going to university.

4.2 (iii) Further vocational education or training

Some participants described an employment history and career trajectory that did not include university, but nonetheless had resulted in degree level qualifications. Having taken their BTEC as a day release course alongside full-time employment, they had continued with part-time study whilst developing a career path. Their qualifications had served two main purposes: updating skills and knowledge as the nature of their work was changed due to external factors, and building a personal qualifications profile that led to the achievement of degree-equivalent qualifications:

After the BTEC I did a Level 3 NVQ, then Level 4. Then I did a Level 3 management qualification. I then went on to take a Level 6 professional qualification and since then I've qualified as an assessor of competence in the work environment for Levels 3, 4 and 6.

Another participant had intended to progress from BTEC studies to a nursing studies degree but had to give up their place at university after being involved in a serious accident. Their commitment to their original career plan remained, however, and they described how this had eventually become possible due to the return of a vocational, non-degree route into the nursing profession:

I'm now working as a Trainee Nursing Associate, an apprenticeship with one day a week at the university. The classes are specific to my training programme and it's designed to fit with our work. At the end of two years, I can do a top up course that will lead to me being a fully qualified registered nurse. It's rather like going back to the old idea of there being enrolled and registered nurses.

A participant who had left university before completing their degree said that their BTEC experience had steered them in the direction of a new career path that could be achieved by taking vocational qualifications whilst in employment:

My career goal is directly related to CAD being included in my BTEC. I'm working though the technician level qualifications with the Institute of Chartered Engineers and my next step is to become qualified as an engineer.

One participant had progressed so successfully through Levels 1 to 3 of the BTEC that they were offered employment supporting other BTEC students. Although working in education was not their long-term career aim, this role was a direct progression from their BTEC course; it included ongoing training that was further developing skills they had gained as a student and would be useful in the industry sector they were aiming for:

After BTEC, I went straight into work at the college. I guide students through the first couple of weeks, then my role changes into enrichment. My first week, they gave me training in how to relate with them, engage with them.

The BTEC experience was often described as having transformed attitudes to learning. For one participant this eventually led to a professional role in training and qualifications development:

[BTEC] was an amazing two years, I was learning about something I was passionate about, and I got the learning bug. [Some years later] I found that developing training programmes interested me far more than writing management reports and now I do lots of work in qualification design.

4.3 Theme 3. Employment history and career trajectory

All of our participants were working in sectors related to the subject of their BTEC courses. Their first moves had always been into paid employment, but their life stories contained many examples of flexible approaches to employment, willingness to move between roles, and an element of entrepreneurship. Self-employment, free-lancing, and business start-ups were referenced by several participants:

I quickly realized that to make the change I want to see in the industry I would need to concentrate on developing my business plans full-time. After four years I took the risk and left my job.

After my degree I got work but the job market in fashion was not good. Redundancies were happening, so I did a training course in London and then taught there for two years. Then I went back to a fashion job as a design assistant…and then back to teaching. I'm also working freelance creating bespoke patterns for clients, which is very rewarding.

I've set up a social enterprise funded by corporate businesses. We work via our e-learning platform with young people interested in the tech industry. We hope [some of them] will join our community as an adult and become a role model for the next generation.

After graduating I worked for a yacht charter company. And then I worked for the industry training board and in qualifications design. I've contributed my experience to reviews and committees. I also set up a charity that delivers apprenticeships.

In all of our conversations there was a strong sense of focus and "can-do" attitude, with examples of actions and behaviours that made things happen. One of our participants was climbing a career ladder that had begun with a BTEC six-week work placement, at the end of which they had been asked to continue as a volunteer:

I was still doing my volunteering with [a national charity] every Friday. I finished my degree, came out with a first class, and was able to get a full-time job with them. After three years I started a full time master's in management, working part time at the charity.

Another participant had used volunteering to break into a field where there are currently few fulltime posts on offer:

During my BTEC, I started volunteering at the club and when I was 18, they employed me [part-time] as head of analysis. It's a real niche market to be in…my aim is to get a full time job.

Those participants who had already worked before taking BTEC had moved on from their prior job roles and were now on different tracks. They spoke of new opportunities and career progression:

After the BTEC, I changed my job to employment adviser. After a career break, I took a hybrid role, working closely with young people but also with schools. Then I moved into a supervisory role and took a Level 6 [degree equivalent] qualification, and also qualified as an assessor.

Participants often referred to a “love of learning” that had been generated by the BTEC, and had a lasting impact:

BTEC showed me that learning could be fun, accessible, and that had never been my experience before. It gave me a lifelong passion for learning.

Of the seven participants who had progressed to university, five made spontaneous comments to the effect that their BTEC courses had been a greater influence on their employment and career trajectory than their university degree:

Since my BTEC, I’ve done a degree and a master’s, but the BTEC was just the best in terms of getting me to where I am now. I think it’s given me a better education than people who did A levels.

4.4 Theme 4. The BTEC experience

Moving from school to college seemed to have been a very positive experience. Some participants said that the education delivered by BTECs was far better than anything they had experienced at school. The school curriculum was sometimes felt to be irrelevant, with a teaching style that had not helped them to learn:

School wasn’t really designed for me in terms of the learning styles they were using. From the age of 13,14 onwards I might as well not have been at school really. I knew what I wanted to do when I left school so I felt “Why can’t I do it now?”

The BTEC really suited me. I learn better if I can see and talk about what I’m supposed to be doing, not just have figures and things shouted at me by someone at the front of the class.

BTEC staff were often praised for their knowledge and practical approaches, and there were many references to the professional and industrial experience of the teaching teams:

The BTEC staff all had experience, they’d all worked in industry and some of them still did. Some were very specialised - one of the staff specialised in fibre optics.

The teachers were brilliant. We had a young team, [and] they were very proud of their careers. They said “we are still hospitality professionals even though we are working in teaching”. They weren’t like teachers we’d had in the past, and we looked at them as role models.

4.4 (i) A structure that enabled understanding

It was to be expected that our participants would describe the teachers and learning style at college as being different to those at school. However, one strong theme that emerged from the conversations was surprising in that there were many references to the *structure* of BTEC programmes and the additional degree of understanding that this supported as compared with other qualifications:

My experience of doing the BTEC was that it was very structured, so I knew what I was doing. You had a different person teaching you for each section, then you did your project, then you did your [assessment]…”now we are going on to this next section”.

The BTEC was structured by units that we worked through within a [given] time period. Every unit was completed and passed…and then we moved onto another section…and also, talking about A levels, and my own children, the work just seems to pile up without that structure.

[Unlike school] You’re not sat in a classroom not really understanding what’s going on. With BTEC, you get a brief, and you have to answer it. The coursework is simple if you read the brief.

Another important element of structure appeared to be an integrated approach that encouraged students to make connections between the different modules they studied, a form of synoptic assessment long before the Post-16 skills plan made that a requirement.

For each unit there’d be two main pieces of work, and because [the BTEC] was all around the same theme, we could pull out ideas from other units that we were doing.

The interview script did not contain the word *structure*, so the spontaneous use of the term by many of our participants to describe one of the most positive aspects of their BTEC courses is an important finding that may merit further specific investigation.

4.4 (ii) Assessment that enabled learning

All of our participants had taken their BTEC before the recent introduction of examinations into the assessment schedule and some had self-identified as under-performing in their GCSE exams. It was therefore unsurprising that some were very critical of end-of-course, exam-based assessment. However, even participants who felt confident about exams often made the point that they rarely feature in 'real life':

GCSEs always revolve around an exam where you might not be at your best…you've had a whole year when you might have been able to answer every question…you get to that hour and a half, and everything's gone because you're sat in that hall.

[School] was a conveyor belt, you'll sit this exam, write the answers we want, and that's it. It doesn't make any sense really. You get to the real world, and you don't actually do an exam.

The BTEC qualification is sometimes described as a transformative tool that increases achievement because of its emphasis on formative assessment. Our participants often supported this view. The ongoing feedback that identified any gaps between performance and expected outcomes, combined with clear guidance on what each student needed to do in order to improve, was credited with taking a key role in delivering knowledge and understanding:

The form of assessment taught me to work things out for myself. Each piece of coursework would have clear criteria that were related to the grades, so I knew what I had to achieve to get a Merit or Distinction – that was really useful. At the start of a project, I could see exactly what I needed to show to get each grade.

At work, in a studio you would never be judged by a test or exam, and the BTEC prepared us for being assessed by what we could actually do. Continuous assessment is so much more supportive, and it's how you learn. That's a huge benefit of BTEC.

In meetings with the tutor they would look at your essays and other work that you'd done and say, "well I think you are sitting about here, and you need to be doing this and this in order to get there". It was individual and you were not being compared to anyone else.

It was evident that a wide range of assessment techniques had been used in this process:

We did presentations, we did essays, and things like interviews where we'd learn about something and then they'd ask questions, "if I want to do this, how would I go about it?" And group work, projects, to create something that people looked at [and assessed].

Every participant talked about learning through projects, and these had required integration across modules with a strong real world focus:

One of the first projects we ever did [was] "you've got X amount of money and you're going to set up a new bar". Obviously, pre-internet, so [the research] was all magazines and journals and just looking around. It [was] very creative but also practical - how much would it cost?

My final project was to come up with a concept for a new airline. A name, a logo, what the seats and interior would look like on the plane, so it was much more than graphic design - you were thinking about starting businesses. And then you had to get lots of feedback on your design.

4.4 (iii) Development of technical and practical skills

BTEC was created as a post-16 qualification that could lead to employment, using a practical, hands-on approach intended to deliver technical skills and industry knowledge. Our participants gave many examples of specific skills they had gained as a direct result of their BTEC studies. These covered a diverse range of activities and industries, such as producing end-of-year accounts, life drawing, cutting

bespoke patterns, creating new business models, and designing sports analysis tools. They often highlighted how much they valued and continued to use the technical and practical skills they had gained from that experience:

It gave us so many skills, a lot of which were actual, useful things. For example, my course included a term in year 1 where we had one lesson a week on automotive engineering [where] we got our hands grubby on cars. We also learned enough about electrics in a practical, in-depth way that - if I had to - I could wire a house.

The technical aspects of the BTEC were phenomenal. We learned sculpting fabrics, slashing and spreading, the importance of absolute accuracy and paying attention to details, for example [knowing] if the texture of a fabric will be right. The BTEC gave me those skills, it was a brilliant foundation.

The things I learned the most were definitely the creative skills, but also how to use them in real life. For example, we drew a lot in graphic design, but how do you then apply that to an advertisement in business, or a website for a client, how do you do that?

Those of our participants who had taken their BTECs at a time when a substantial work placement was an integral part of the syllabus often spoke at length, without any prompting, about the importance of the placement for developing skills, and its value as an alternative means of learning, as well as about how enjoyable the experience had been:

One placement was in a travel agents, and it wasn't all online in those days. They're [customers] trusting you to book the flight, the hotel, with their money. I was really well organised and did very well. In doing you learn so much more. This was the kind of learning I could do.

And then we had our first placement. This was a live-in placement for eight weeks, with a report from the hotel operators sent back to my tutors. I was working as a chef in the hotel kitchen and for a 16 year old that was really cool.

My first placement was in a leather company as a design assistant, working on patterns but also a variety of other things. I think the BTEC opens your eyes to what the industry is actually like and what it means to work in it.

Unsurprisingly, the term 'real life' was often used when talking about placements, but it was also used in descriptions of the classroom experience, sometimes to create a contrast with alternative approaches such as those used in A levels:

The BTEC often covered the same theory as A level, but it was taught in different ways – it was a real life experience, and I loved it. The staff planned the lessons using more practical ways, applying the theory rather than just talking or telling us what to read.

4.4 (iv) Development of generic or "soft" skills

All of the participants spoke about a range of generic or "soft skills" they had gained from their BTECs. These were often described as a good preparation for the workplace and were generally felt to have lifelong value and currency:

The BTEC was a really good grounding for the workplace. On the placement days we had the same responsibilities as other employees. The BTEC really helped with the transition to adulthood, that grounding was so valuable.

All of the participants spoke of presentations as a routine part of assessment on their BTEC courses, but they had learned that presenting required far more than just a set of transparencies for the overhead projector (or PowerPoint, depending on their age). Such experiences were often linked to speaking and listening in a broader context, including collaborating, negotiating, and a need to be tactful:

We used to do critiques, so you'd do a piece of work and then it'd be "go in that room with ten other students and tell them why you did that, explain it to them and then people will ask you questions". I can now deliver online or face to face sessions for 60 people, and it's because of that BTEC preparation.

When we had to do a presentation, that's really relatable to my job now. I have to talk with staff members in different departments, see what facilities I can have, what support they can give me. You have to try and connect with different people that all have the same outcome and the same goal. Sometimes negotiating is a lot of it.

You need peer feedback for things like "will it sell on the high street?". You can't work in a silo. It was a bit like a mini factory. In a studio there's a lot of collaborating and communicating. We also learned how to listen properly and how to temper our language to suit the situation. There can be a lot of tact needed in the fashion industry.

Given that our participants sometimes expressed negative reflections of their GCSE experiences and their dependence on writing, it was perhaps surprising that we often encountered positive reflections about writing in relation to BTECs. However, such work was seen as writing with a purpose, and experienced as something very different to writing in a formal examination:

Writing BTEC projects [was done] in a way that made us clearly describe what we wanted to do, the key components, in a way that was realistic, I look back on that and it's a very useful skill. Given that my work now is writing proposals [and] reports, the BTEC gave me a really useful skillset.

The BTEC gave me essay writing skills. This was different [to school], I could write what I wanted…and it got me into researching. [This was] before computers were around so it was [about] buying all of these books - which we've still got now - with my maintenance allowance.

There were many references to group work, and participants often gave examples that appeared to be highly collaborative:

The BTEC did have independent studies, but it was very collaborative, we worked in groups a lot, supporting one another. In film especially you have to work well as a group because otherwise the film couldn't get made.

I think one of the main skills I learned was how to work with lots of different types of people. I'm good now at recognizing people's strengths, what they can do better than me, and allocating tasks, because we did a lot [of that] on the BTEC.

The structure of BTECs, with their ongoing coursework, projects and deadlines, helped these students to develop time management skills that were effective, which in turn tended to have a positive impact on performance and outcome.

It helped that [the coursework] has got to be in by this time, or otherwise there are consequences. If it's late you don't get the full mark. It's the same with a job, if you are late you are going to get disciplined.

The tutor feedback meant that instead of spending time on the things you could already do quite well, it was encouraging you to spend your time on the things you found quite difficult, and I think that's a really good thing.

The skill of time management had gone far beyond simply meeting deadlines or sticking to a timetable. The BTEC was credited with learning how to plan, organise and deliver a project, including taking responsibility and ownership. There were several direct references to the relevance of such skills for participants' current employment:

It wasn't just about the knowledge, the BTEC gave us lots of broader skills. Organising was definitely one. With any project, it started with sitting down and planning it out, all the steps," if you do this you will get from this point to that point", and so on, to the end.

There was a coaching unit where you're taking responsibility, doing risk assessments, it's relatable to every job, I think. You have to take control and own what you are doing, which is exactly the same as in my job now.

The role of BTEC in building confidence was often mentioned. This is perhaps better described as an attribute than a skill, but it was generally suggested that it was the acquisition of knowledge and skills, leading to positive, demonstrable outcomes that had underpinned this growth in confidence:

I'd had a big knock in confidence. I could have gone into myself and thought "I don't want to put myself out there because I might fail again". But I did very well in the BTEC and that repaired the damage of failing some GCSEs.

The life histories approach encouraged participants to tell their stories, and it was clear that some of the participants were able to build resilience from the very start of their BTEC courses:

The first essay I did at college, she said to me "why are you writing like a text message?" That made me determined to do really well, and in my next essay I did. I always think "I will prove the lecturer wrong, I will show them".

Overall, there was a clear impression that many skills had been gained, and that these BTEC skills had been of lifelong value, underpinning career success and often being described as more valuable than university courses, even at master's level.

5. Views on the replacement of BTEC by T levels

Although our interview scripts did not include any questions about T levels, our participants had some basic knowledge of them. This was often derived from newspapers and other media reporting, so did not necessarily include any detailed specifications. Three common concerns were: a) that the new course would require the choice of a specialism straight after GCSEs, b) that entry requirements and assessment methods would limit access to T levels, and c) there would be insufficient placement opportunities.

5.1 T levels may be too narrow for most 16 year olds

In our interviews we had found strong support for the value of a genuine choice at 16 between A levels and vocationally-oriented BTECs that are sufficiently broad to keep students' options open. Most participants had identified a vocational field they thought would interest them, yet few identified themselves as ready to make firm career choices at the age of 16. BTECs were thus often praised for their breadth and relevance to industry, having sometimes introduced specialisms that may not otherwise have been evident to 16 year olds, their teachers or their parents:

[BTEC] gave us an overview of the field and knowledge to identify areas I might want to move into. I very nearly went down the route of working in debt recovery. I would never have known about that as a possible job without the BTEC.

We were taught that fashion doesn't exist in a vacuum, we learned about sculpture, buildings, nature... [and] things like costing – could your design be created for a budget that was for high street prices?

We had done some CAD in year 1 of the BTEC. I really enjoyed it, so when I found out that I could join a night class at the college for free to get a City and Guilds in CAD, that was perfect for me.

There was also appreciation of the inherent flexibility of BTECs, which facilitate choice *within* the two-year course, in contrast with A levels which require a fresh start in order to change subject. This had the potential for significant positive impact on outcomes, both with respect to their BTEC studies themselves and in terms of future qualifications:

I thought it was going to be graphics, and they gave me a two-week placement at a [top] advertising agency - and it was just boring! My tutors said, "you should go for painting". So that's what I did, and I got a distinction...and a degree in Fine Art.

Although our participants had all made some career decisions by the age of 16, their mature reflections were often that, without access to BTECs they would not have known enough about their specialisms and options to make the right choices:

A narrowed vision is not right, at 16 most people benefit from trying out related topics to find out what they really want.

5.2 Access to T levels: entry requirements and assessment methods

The T level specifications have an assessment pattern that is very different to that of BTECs. The core component is externally marked and typically assessed by means of a written examination (67%) and a project (33%). The specialist component is typically assessed by means of a project that is externally set and marked. Early indications are also that GCSE entry grades for T level courses will be at least as high as those required for A level.

One participant was concerned that both high entry grades and exam-based assessment techniques would work against the widening participation agenda formerly driven by BTECs:

As an adviser I work with adults and the number of people who say "I didn't do well at school…". The government is screaming about levelling up, but then they are taking away something like the BTEC, that truly enables people to level up.

The T level does offer a one-year transition course for students not yet ready for level 3 study. However, two of our participants had followed a route that began with a Level 1 BTEC, and neither would thus have met the entry requirements for a T level transition course. Furthermore, even if such access had been possible, the transition course leads to a T level that is a composite qualification requiring success at all elements of the course, with assessment that is heavily dependent on exams. One participant felt certain that, for them personally, the Transition course/T level route would result in three years of post-16 study with no qualification at the end of it.

5.3 Concerns about the availability of work placements

Two of our participants could draw on personal experience of working in education at the time of earlier qualification changes. Both participants expressed particular concerns that the volume of placements required, combined with geographical inequalities, would make it impossible to offer T levels across a wide range of subjects:

I couldn't at the moment recommend [T levels] to most young people because a lot of emphasis is on the employer and I can't see them being able to offer all of the places that are needed. In a rural area we just don't have the employers. We already struggle to get employers to take year 11s for 2 weeks [of] work experience.

The [problem with] 14-19 Diplomas came down to the same issue we have now with T levels. How do you make sure that someone can have that amount of placement time? How are they going to get them to and from [placements]? I was in an area with a fair bit of food manufacturing, but they [students] don't have access to a motorbike or a car to get to these places in the middle of nowhere.

Even if suitable employers could be found, concern remained that the sheer volume of placements needed for T levels would mean that high quality placements could not always be guaranteed:

I'm concerned that [some] employers won't be able to keep the students motivated. I've also got concerns about safeguarding with T levels. I have contacts with some excellent staff in colleges, but they may have to take short cuts to get all of the employer places set up.

5.4. Can T levels and BTECs co-exist?

There was a strong feeling among the participants that removing BTEC would be a mistake. The most important concern was the degree of specialism inherent in the proposed replacement: many participants reflected that for them and their peers, although they had broad career aims in mind at 16, BTEC had given them time to explore, refine, or even revise career decisions. They felt that a more specialised course, particularly one involving commitment to an industry-aligned programme of study and assessment, would be wrong for most 16 year olds, whereas BTEC already met their needs.

BTEC has an incredibly good currency value, people know what it means, they understand what it is, so why are they undermining that? The mainstream education system reflects the preferred learning methods of [some] of the population - what are the rest of us meant to do?

6. Imagined futures…

The final prompt question in our interview script was "If the BTEC qualification did not exist, what route do you think you would have taken instead?". We have acknowledged that those adults who volunteered to take part in this research already held favourable views of BTECs, the qualification that had underpinned their employment choices and helped them to realise their career aspirations. They were also aware that future students would not have the same opportunities, which might have heightened their emotions. Nevertheless, there must be people who feel that taking a BTEC did not serve them well, though none came forward for this project. The publication of this report may encourage some people to produce such alternative experiences; the following quotes, however, are the answers our participants gave to that final question:

I couldn't have done this at all. I probably wouldn't have done much with education, but I would have gone and done something productive… [I] would have been a labourer or bricklayer, something that way.

There's no way I would have had this career without BTEC. I'm not academic, although I do read a lot, but I would not have done A levels. Looking back, all the [careers] I might have considered apart from fashion would have needed a BTEC.

If there hadn't been a BTEC I would probably have had to do A levels, but that would all have been classroom based, there would have been no real-life experience at all, nothing that prepared me for the workplace.

I couldn't have done A levels. Not only would my parents never have allowed it, I just wasn't prepared for that kind of thing. And even if I had done the BTEC and not gone to university it would still have been valuable.

Without a shadow of doubt the foundations of my career were built on my BTEC. I did the City and Guilds course alongside my BTEC, so that would have taken me to the practical route of being a chef, but it wouldn't have led me to a degree.

My [later] qualifications could have been done without the BTEC, but it was very important for my career because it gave me an overview of a broad field and a good understanding that helped me to identify which areas I wanted to move into.

I don't think I would have got the jobs and career I've had if it wasn't for the BTEC. And I don't think I would have enjoyed the jobs I might have done if there'd never been the BTEC. I do not want them to be defunded, I'm very passionate about that.

If there hadn't been a BTEC I would have had to do A levels and might not have done well. I probably would have gone into work, not university. BTEC repaired the damage of failing some GCSEs, [without that] I would never have gone to university so would never have got my degree.

I would not have done A levels. Because of college I knew that City and Guilds also did some courses in CAD, but BTEC is the route to university and a career.

If this country didn't have BTEC there's no way, no way, that I could ever have done any of this. I tried four colleges before I even got started on a [level 1] course. I did all of the things that were open to me but without the BTEC level 3 there's no way I could ever have got to university.

7. Where are we now?

At the time of writing, the government's most recent update on the Level 3 Qualifications Landscape (DfE, January 2023b) reiterates the value of T levels, designed to create 'a world class technical education offer', but then confirms that 'to allow T levels to flourish, Phase 2 will remove 16-19 funding from qualifications that overlap with T levels' (DfE, 2023b, p3). In time, T levels may indeed prove to be 'world class', but the current limited engagement of universities and employers suggests that is not yet the case, and the stated need to remove popular and successful BTECs so that T levels may 'flourish' suggests that students and parents are not yet convinced. This update confirms the removal of most BTEC qualifications, leaving students with a choice of A levels or T levels. The document claims that the reforms 'do not constitute a binary choice between A levels and T levels' (2023b, p4) thanks to the creation of some small Alternative Academic Qualifications (AAQs), particularly in STEM or subjects that support the NHS (e.g. health and social care). However, whilst an AAQ may be taken alongside A levels in what the government describes as a 'mixed study programme', AAQs are classed as *academic* so there is no bridging of the 'clear distinction between technical and academic qualifications' (Pearson, 2023, p2) in the new qualifications landscape. 16 year olds will still face a binary choice of academic or technical pathway. Furthermore, in relation to assessment they will have no choice, both pathways being heavily reliant on examinations.

From the outset, A level courses were not included in the Review of Level 3 qualifications. This latest update does, however, contain one very short sentence that concerns us: 'We have already reformed A levels' (DfE, January 2023b, p3). Given that applied general qualifications have also been reformed, and more recently than A levels, we feel this sentence is misleading. The revised BTEC specifications and introduction of examinations have not yet had time to make a measurable impact on the longer term outcomes for BTEC students, or on whether the increased external assessment will address gaps in outcomes of A level and BTEC university entrants (Dilnot, Macmillan and Wyness, 2022).

The political debate continues, with a joint letter from Lord Baker, Lord Blunkett and other former education ministers to the current Secretary of State, expressing their deep concerns that despite a government assurance to Peers in April 2022 that most BTECs would remain, the majority are now scheduled for defunding. The letter stresses the disastrous impact on social mobility, economic growth and public services that will result from the removal of these courses, offering as an example the damaging impact on the NHS of the loss of BTEC Health and Social Care (Camden, 2023).

The campaign group *Protect Student Choice,* backed by over 30 organisations, has reported that of the 134 applied general qualifications currently available to young people, 75 will not be funded from 2025 as they have been deemed ineligible for the new qualification approval process. Modelling of the impact of this decision on the sixth form college sector has indicated that 62% of applied general students are currently taking qualifications that will have been scrapped before the new approval process even begins (Protect Student Choice, 19 January 2023).

The results of the first roll-out of T levels are now available. 1029 learners received T level results, with an overall pass rate of 92%, and 35% receiving a Distinction or a D*; around one-fifth of the initial intake are thought to have dropped out without completing the course; 76 students (7%) received a 'statement of achievement' but did not qualify for a T level certificate; 71% of those who applied to university were offered a place (Camden, 2022b). The UCAS acceptance rate is lower than would be expected for either BTEC or A levels. However, it would be misleading to draw any firm conclusions on the basis of one small cohort, that was negatively impacted by Covid, and in a higher education environment where some universities have not yet accepted T levels.

Outcome data from the first Transition Year cohort has raised concerns, since of those who completed the course, only 14% progressed to a full T level (Camden, 2022a). However, research by the NFER (for the DfE) noted the negative impact of the Covid pandemic on this first cohort, and that transition year students progressed to a range of options, including other level 3 courses (particularly those that did not require exams, or GCSE English and maths) and apprenticeships (DfE, 2022b).

The first Ofsted report to review the quality of T levels has now been published (Ofsted, October 2022). Inspectors visited a sample of 24 providers delivering T levels from the first four subjects to be launched (education and childcare; health and science; construction and the built environment; digital). They assessed the main strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum, how well industry placements were being implemented, and how well providers were meeting the needs of learners. Overall, the research showed that providers were committed to making T levels a success, though some serious weaknesses were identified. Recruitment and retention of staff with sufficient knowledge and experience, providing staff with comprehensive training, and ensuring staff had time to develop and teach the T level curriculum alongside other commitments were all noted as challenges. Some institutions could not provide a realistic working environment to help learners develop their theoretical knowledge, and an acknowledged lack of resources such as textbooks and practice exam papers meant that some teachers were unsure of the breadth and depth of content they should cover in modules. Employer collaborations were not always effective: in the weakest examples their was a disconnect between the industry placement and theory sessions, and some employers did not know what the learners were studying in the classroom so could not routinely give the opportunity to put theory into practice. From a learner perspective, some had found the course more challenging than they expected, some did not have a clear idea of what a T level contained, and there were concerns that the route from T levels to university was unclear. The report advised that learners need clear information if T levels are to be successful, and recommended the provision of 'initial advice and guidance to learners before they start a T level course, such as summer schools and projects, to help them decide on which pathway to study' (Ofsted, 2022, p20).

A technical education learner survey (NatCen Social Research and NFER, 2022) found that 70% of T level students had heard about the course from the school or college providing it and 41% had initially intended it to be a route to university with 27% planning to enter a paid job. The main reason for choosing a T level was that it fitted the occupational area they wanted to work in, but only 62% were 'quite sure' or 'certain' about that occupation. Overall, satisfaction levels with delivery of the course were high (79%), though some learners said that lack of reliable IT or online access, or lack of study materials or specialist equipment had been a barrier to learning. Most learners were satisfied with their industry placement (88%), though only 58% agreed it had come at the right place in the course. Overall, 59% of learners were satisfied with the level of employer engagement in their course. When asked about their next steps, most intended to go on to further study (either university or an apprenticeship) with around a quarter saying their next step would be a paid job.

Overall, the answer to 'Where are we now?' appears to be 'Where we started'. The concerns raised by providers, employer bodies, professional organisations and politicians do not appear to have been satisfactorily addressed.

Comparing these recent reports and updates to our data, many of our participants' concerns are reflected. For example, the recommendation by Ofsted that 16 year olds will need additional information, advice and guidance at the point of choosing a T level (although the cost of providing summer schools across the country would likely be prohibitive). Those of our participants who had experience of qualifications design or guidance services had expressed concerns that employer engagement may not be sufficient for all T levels to be successfully launched nationally, and both Ofsted and the learner survey indicate challenges with employer engagement.

T levels are still very new; the first cohort of learners to complete them did so during the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions, and it is too early to draw conclusions about the eventual structure and content of these qualifications - they may yet be modified on the basis of future reviews. Might such modifications bring the qualification closer to the existing BTECs? Based on our findings, at least two key factors make this appear unlikely. Firstly, T level assessment is heavily reliant on formal examinations, not the formative assessment that our participants said had enabled them to succeed and demonstrate their achievements. Secondly, T levels are designed to develop technical skills for a particular industry, requiring a career decision that none of our participants would have felt able to make as 16 year olds.

8. Reflections, conclusions and recommendations

This research gathered data from ten participants, a number typical for life history research but low in comparison with other more popular research tools such as surveys. However, this relatively small number of participants is offset by the detail and richness of the data gathered by this type of research, and the opportunity it affords to explore *why and how such data emerges*. Whilst reflective (and thus retrospective) data can be subject to unconscious bias over time, high levels of internal consistency in interview transcripts, and reaffirmation (not contradiction) when interviewees return to a point are clear indications that bias has been minimised or avoided. Both are clear features in the testimonies of each of the ten participants. Previous users of the approach have concluded that "the life history method provides a more rounded and fuller explanation of decisions and approaches to success" (Stuart et al. 2011, p493). This was evident in our data.

The views on BTEC expressed in this report are overwhelmingly positive, yet all participants were directly asked whether they could think of anything at all about their BTEC experience that was *not* positive, and all of them struggled to do so. And whilst it must be acknowledged that volunteer participants in a study of this type might be expected to praise BTECs, even those who expressed an interest in the research but decided not to take part were resoundingly positive about the qualification. Future research with participants who do not take an initially positive view may offer an alternative perspective and we would seek to replicate this research, if a suitable sample can be identified.

Our findings showed how the BTEC experience could have a positive and lasting impact on education, training, employment and careers. Our participants had all taken different BTEC subjects, yet there were unifying themes across these industry sectors. The spontaneous references to the *structure* of a BTEC course and the understanding it conveyed, combined with the description of assessment techniques that had *enabled* rather than merely *assessed* learning, were felt to be crucial factors in BTEC's success. None of our participants directly used the word 'curriculum', but they were describing a cross-disciplinary approach in which there were frequent opportunities to use examples from one module to support another. This was described as being very different to school, and a much more effective way of learning. The interview transcripts provided consistent descriptions throughout of an educational *concept* that had allowed our participants to flourish and had set them on the route to a career. Many were certain that an academic, exam-based A level route would not have suited them, neither would it have conveyed the same opportunities.

Our participants were deeply concerned by the loss of an approach to teaching, learning and assessment that had enabled them to demonstrate their capability and fulfil their potential. They were passionate about BTECs because the course had been transformative - but they were not simply protective of the distinctive BTEC *brand*: the detail in the interview transcripts and the many practical examples of a teaching and learning environment that could successfully span ten different industry sectors gave a clear sense of an *educational concept* rather just a brand. They were calling for the retention of an approach to learning and assessment that was very different to their experience of school, that had allowed them to succeed, prepared them for employment - and represented an opportunity they felt should not be denied to young people in the future.

Distillation of the observations and experience expressed by our participants leads us to the following conclusions concerning the future of the BTEC qualification:

1. Removing the established BTEC in order to facilitate a new T level qualification is difficult to justify: T levels (and the Transition Year) need to have their effectiveness established before they can be fairly considered a replacement for BTEC - or other popular AGQs.

2. A growing movement in England is arguing for assessment to be fairer, broader and more equitable than the exam-assessed curriculum that leaves many 16 year olds with nothing to show what they *have* achieved. Defunding BTEC will remove the pathway from levels 1 to 3 that enables such young people to gain recognised qualifications that lead to employment, university and professional roles.

3. In order to prevent this huge bloc of young people being excluded from success, a new curriculum will have to be invented – at what cost? – to cater for them. And yet BTEC already does.

In summary, we conclude (in line with views expressed by educators, professional bodies, politicians and researchers, currently being aired everywhere from academic literature to the popular press): there is currently no case for defunding BTEC. On the contrary, it should be retained alongside T levels for the foreseeable future.

8.1 Recommendations

Research reports usually end with specific recommendations for different stakeholders, however, the retention of BTECs (and other popular AGQs) has already been advocated by representatives of practitioners, providers, professional and employer bodies, and politicians (pp12-13). The proposals from this research are therefore all directed towards those with the power to shape our education policy:

Maintain a post-16 option that keeps doors open. The participants emphasised the importance of BTECs offering sufficient breadth to explore options and allow truly informed career planning. They expressed serious reservations about the proposed binary T level/A level choice that would steer 16 year olds into life-defining decisions at a single early point in time.

Maintain a post-16 route that offers a "second chance". BTEC courses enable progression, including success in English and mathematics, for those who do not achieve this within the exam-based GCSE route. Two of our participants had begun their BTEC journeys with level 1, progressing through levels 2 and 3 and into their chosen careers.

Learn from BTEC's success in fulfilling potential. T levels, as with A levels and GCSEs, have been designed with a heavy reliance on formal written examinations. Some of our participants said they had underperformed at GCSE, but that the more practical learning style and ongoing feedback of the BTEC curriculum had allowed them to develop their knowledge, skills and understanding, while the range of assessment techniques allowed them to demonstrate their achievements.

Address the geographical restraints on T level delivery. Our participants spoke of the geographical restrictions they had faced as students; in addition, those whose work was linked to education expressed serious concerns regarding the availability of a range of T levels in their local area. They spoke of limited choice, insufficient placements, and lack of access to employers that could mean that this purported replacement for BTEC will not be universally available in a wide range of subjects.

Acknowledge the role of BTECs in social mobility. One of our participants used the term "levelling up" in relation to BTECs, and the Imagined Futures section of this report amply demonstrates the value of BTECs as an alternative route to both higher level qualifications and a rewarding career.

BTECs should not be summarily withdrawn. T levels will be a good choice for those young people who have had sufficient experience of vocational options to make an informed decision, and those who are strong performers under exam conditions. There are, however, hundreds of thousands of young people who are not ready at 16 to choose a career or who will find the exam-based structure of T levels does not play to their strengths. For these students, alternative provision will have to be found and paid for, yet it already exists in the form of BTEC courses.

Finally, there is a need to rethink assessment. When our participants made a plea for the retention of BTEC they were calling for the continued availability of a course that had enabled them to demonstrate their capability and fulfil their potential through a wide range of learning styles and assessment techniques. This report adds their voice to a growing movement making the argument for change so that assessment can be fairer, broader and more equitable.

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