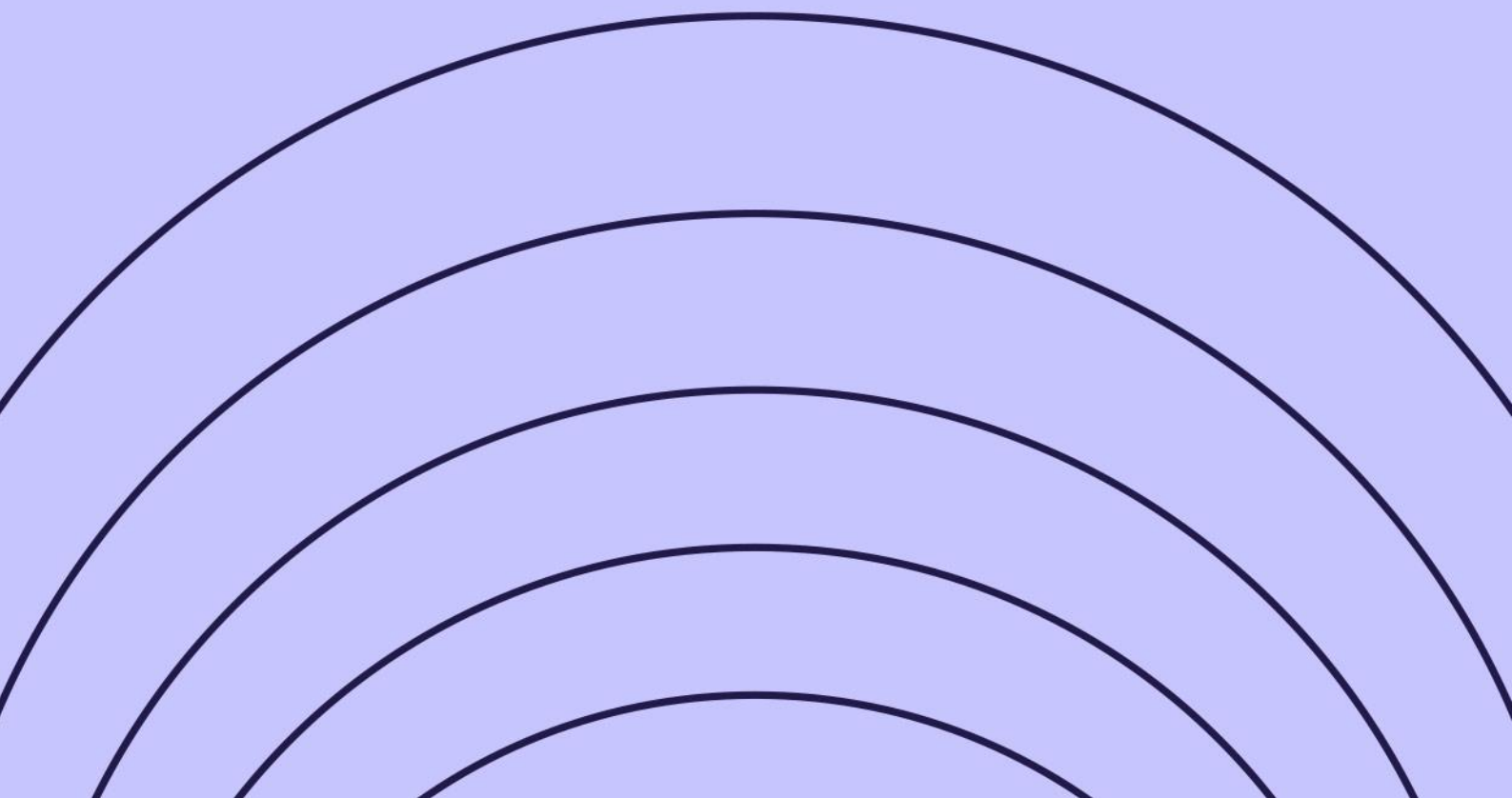




# Exploring Higher Education Continuation Rates for Level 3 BTEC National Learners

Kevin Mason, Blake Ashworth and Ria Bhatta

2025



# Contents

<b>Summary</b>	<b>3</b>
Headline findings	3
<b>Context and aims for this research</b>	<b>4</b>
The research approach	6
The cohorts	7
Data definitions	7
<b>Findings</b>	<b>9</b>
1. Is there a high non-continuation rate for students entering higher education with a BTEC?	9
2. Is there a difference in the continuation rate between the QCF and RQF BTECs?	11
3. Do BTECs provide a route for widening participation in higher education?	12
<b>Limitations</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>16</b>

*This work was undertaken using data from the HESA Student Records 2019/20 and 2020/21. This does not imply Jisc's acceptance of the validity of the methods used to obtain these figures, or of any analysis of the results.*

# Summary

This paper seeks to understand what impact, if any, one of the recent set of qualification reforms had on the university outcomes of students on BTEC Level 3 National (RQF) qualifications, introduced from September 2016 onwards, which also largely introduced a minimum of 40% external assessment.

This is the first set of data available for the reformed qualifications. Previous studies have used data from legacy BTEC Level 3 National (QCF) qualifications, which have since been largely phased out.

## Headline findings

- 1. BTEC learners have a high continuation rate – much higher than international and national benchmarks.** The **vast majority** of students entering higher education (HE) with BTECs complete their degrees, experiencing a continuation rate that is:
  - 2.** higher than the rates seen in many jurisdictions internationally, including the USA and Australia;
  - 3.** significantly higher than the Office for Students' 80% regulatory threshold for higher education institutions.
- 4. BTEC RQF learners have a higher continuation rate than BTEC QCF learners (91% vs 87%).** Students on the newer, post-2016 BTEC (BTEC RQF) were more likely to continue their studies into their second year than students entering HE with older, internally-assessed BTEC QCF qualifications, suggesting that the newer qualifications are an even better preparation for higher education. **This is the first published evidence to date on outcomes for students on RQF BTECs.**
- 5. BTECs play a crucial role in supporting increased participation by traditionally under-represented groups** in higher education. Students from areas with historically low levels of participation in HE are over twice as likely to enter HE with a BTEC as those from areas with higher levels of participation. BTEC students are more likely to have a characteristic from under-represented students, including ethnicity and socio-economic background.

# Context and aims for this research

At Pearson it is incredibly important to us to understand the efficacy of our qualifications, and the impact they have on student outcomes. We regularly evaluate the effectiveness of our provision through different means.

The past ten years have seen extensive reform to vocational qualifications in England, with further reform being proposed by the government at the time of writing this report. This academic year marks the first teach date of the updated BTEC Level 3 Nationals in England, featuring a minimum of 40% of externally-marked assessment (i.e. public exams) and developed in line with the DfE's Alternative Academic Qualification (AAQ) criteria. Qualifications within this category have a primary purpose of supporting progression into higher education.

This paper seeks to understand what impact, if any, the previous set of qualification reforms had on the university outcomes of students on BTEC Level 3 National (RQF) qualifications, introduced from September 2016 onwards, which also largely featured a minimum of 40% external assessment (developed in line with the DfE's Applied General and Tech Level criteria).

BTEC Level 3 Nationals have been taught since 1984, and for decades were known for being assessed entirely internally, via tasks set and marked within schools and colleges and subject to Pearson's external verification and quality assurance processes. The last iteration of this design was the QCF suite, introduced in 2010 on what was known as the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF). 2016 marked a key milestone in the qualification's history, with the introduction of external assessment (i.e. exams and tasks set and marked by Pearson) across the different subject areas, on the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF).

External assessment had already been introduced at Levels 1 and 2 in the BTEC First suite, introduced from 2012, and piloted at Level 3 with the children's play, learning and development sector. During the redevelopment of the BTEC Level 3 Nationals on the RQF, the overwhelming feedback from HE was that an element of external assessment would better prepare students for the transition to HE. From 2016, the DfE also required that publicly funded qualifications on performance tables feature a minimum of 30-40% external assessment, depending on their purpose and whether they were designed

primarily to aid entry into employment (Tech Levels) or HE (Applied Generals). Most of the reformed BTECs sit within the Applied General category.

BTEC qualifications have historically had a strong track record for aiding progression to HE, as the second most common qualification route into HE after A levels. Approximately 100,000 students enter HE with a BTEC qualification each year (Curnock Cook, 2022).

We wanted to understand what impact, if any, the introduction of external assessment and exams had on student readiness for HE. We specifically examined the impact on the HE continuation rate, one of the most widely available metrics used to measure success at HE.

There have been numerous published studies on this topic, the latest being the Nuffield and Oxford Brookes study (Dilnot, Macmillan & Wyness, 2022). However, all studies to date examined the impact of legacy qualifications, which were 100% internally assessed (i.e. coursework-based) and have since been largely retired.

This is the first study to look at outcomes associated with the reformed BTEC Level 3 Nationals containing external assessment. We are excited to contribute to and move the discussion forward by sharing our findings.

## The research approach

The present study revisits this research using two sets of data from the Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) for university entrants in academic years 2019/20 and 2020/21. These two cohorts represent some of the first university entrants with the revised BTEC qualifications and contain students with both RQF and QCF BTECs, allowing the study to address three research questions:

### **1. Is there a high non-continuation rate for students entering higher education with a BTEC?**

This will explore the data from HESA to see what the non-continuation rates are for two cohorts of students entering HE. The study will then try to understand whether this represents a 'high' non-continuation rate, with reference to national and international benchmarks.

### **2. Is there a difference in the continuation rate between the QCF and RQF BTECs?**

We look at these outcomes from HESA to explore whether the reformed qualifications are associated with differences in non-continuation rates, relative to their QCF predecessors.

### **3. Do BTECs provide a route for widening participation in higher education?**

Widening participation in HE has been a policy aim for successive governments and previous research has found that BTECs were a major contributor to success in this aim in the 2010s. We investigate whether there is evidence in our data that students from low participation groups continue to use BTECs disproportionately as a route to entry for HE.

## The cohorts

This research tracks the outcomes of **two cohorts** entering HE in 2019/20 and 2020/21. In the 2019/20 dataset there were 302,050 students entering HE with A levels, BTEC RQF, BTEC QCF or a combination of the three. In the 2020/21 dataset, this grew to 311,100.

**Table 1: Proportion of students in our data entering HE with different Level 3 qualifications.**

	2019/20	2020/21
A level only	71.1%	71.0%
BTEC QCF only	12.9%	12.5%
BTEC RQF only	4.5%	5.2%
Mixed A level/BTEC QCF	5.6%	5.0%
Mixed A level/BTEC RQF	4.9%	5.5%
Mixed BTEC QCF/RQF	0.6%	0.5%
Mixed A level/BTEC QCF & RQF	0.4%	0.3%

Table 1 shows that the cohort entering HE with A levels only are dominant, with around 71% of new students going through this route in both years.

## Data definitions

The following data was included in the HESA data. When applicable, more specific definitions are given in relevant sections of this report.

**Table 2: Data fields contained in the HESA data.**

Term	Definition	Use in analysis
Qualification type	This is the qualification(s) taken at Level 3.	The data was filtered to include only students who had taken A levels or BTECs, including in any combination with each other.
Gender	Flagged as male/female	

Term	Definition	Use in analysis
<b>Continuation flag</b>	Whether or not the student had continued into their second year of study	
<b>Age on entry</b>	The age of the students when they entered HE	Grouped into 18/19 and 'older'
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Recorded in 12 categories	
<b>POLAR4 quintile</b>	POLAR (Participation of Local Areas) is a measure of disadvantage according to the proportion of young people in the area who participate in higher education. POLAR4 was calculated using data of students who began their studies between 2009/10 and 2013/14.	Divided into five quintiles. Quintile 1 shows the lowest rate of participation; Quintile 5 shows the highest rate.
<b>State school flag</b>	Whether the student had attended state school	
<b>Parental education</b>	Whether the student's parents had been to HE	
<b>Parental occupation</b>	Grouped into nine categories	
<b>Region</b>	Where the student lived before starting HE	
<b>Disability flag</b>	Whether the student had a known disability	
<b>HE subject</b>	In 27 categories	
<b>Reason for non-continuation</b>	This was gathered by higher education institutions.	This data was not used, as the majority of recorded reasons were "Unknown" or "Other".



# Findings

The findings are broken down by research question.

## 1. Is there a high non-continuation rate for students entering higher education with a BTEC?

The continuation rates for each group are presented in Table 3. It seems to show that BTEC students have slightly lower rates of continuation in both cohorts than those taking A levels only, but that BTEC RQF students are more likely to continue than those on the older BTEC QCF qualifications. Students taking a mixed diet of BTECs and A levels continue their studies at a rate somewhere in between.

**Table 3: Continuation rates for each group of students by Level 3 qualifications taken.**

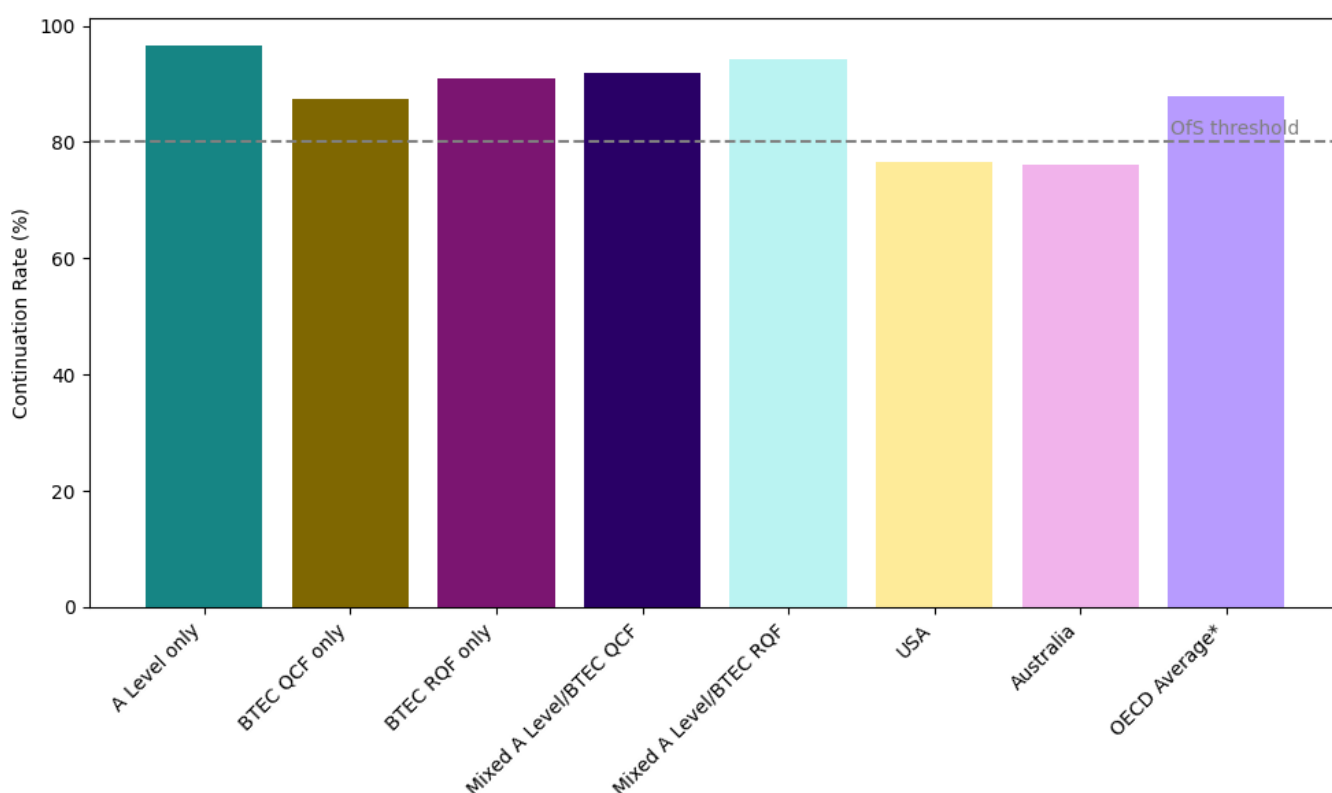
	2019/20	2020/21
<b>A level only</b>	96.5%	95.1%
<b>BTEC QCF only</b>	87.5%	85.0%
<b>BTEC RQF only</b>	90.9%	87.4%
<b>Mixed A level/BTEC QCF</b>	92.0%	91.3%
<b>Mixed A level/BTEC RQF</b>	94.3%	92.5%
<b>Mixed BTEC QCF/RQF</b>	96.5%	95.1%
<b>Mixed A level/BTEC QCF &amp; RQF</b>	87.5%	85.0%

Table 3 shows that continuation rates increased for all qualification routes from 2019/20 to 2020/21. This is likely to have been an impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact of the pandemic on continuation rates is a complex mix of factors, but for the present study, and in the absence of any other evidence, it is assumed to have had an equal effect for students from all educational routes. For both years, it shows that BTEC RQF students continued into their second year at a higher rate than BTEC QCF students, and that students taking a mixed diet of qualifications at Level 3 continued at a rate somewhere in between their homogenous peers.

Internationally, continuation rates range between 75% and 88%. For example, in the United States, first-time full-time undergraduates have a first-year continuation rate of 76.7% (Hanson, 2024). This is a similar rate to that seen in Australia, where 76.1% of students who started their undergraduate degree in 2017 continued or completed by 2022 (McKee, 2024). Across the OECD, an average of 88% of bachelor's degree students continue in the tertiary education system by the beginning of the second year (OECD, 2019), although this is a figure that should be treated with caution due to differences in the ways in which data is collected and interpreted between OECD members (European Commission, 2015, p. 8). Within the EU, reporting of completion rates has been patchy; in 2015, only 12 out of 35 European countries regularly reported a national indicator of completion rates (European Commission, 2015).

In England, non-continuation rates are monitored by the Office for Students (OfS), which is the regulator for higher education in England. In September 2022, they brought in minimum expectations for the proportion of students on higher education courses who continue their course. This threshold was set at 80% of students who must continue their studies (Office for Students, 2022). Figure 1 makes these comparisons graphically. It is a reasonable conclusion that the continuation rate for these qualifications is not low in absolute terms.

**Figure 1: Continuation rates in Year 1 of HE in 2019/20 for different routes through Level 3 education and international jurisdictions.**



## 2. Is there a difference in the continuation rate between the QCF and RQF BTECs?

From both Table 3 and Figure 1, we can see that the continuation rate for the newer BTEC RQF qualifications is higher than their older BTEC QCF equivalents for students entering HE in the same year. The reform and the inclusion of external assessment have therefore arguably better prepared students for the world of HE, as they were intended to do.

The non-continuation rates for students taking a mixed curriculum, e.g. a BTEC Level 3 National Extended Certificate (one A level equivalent) alongside A levels, or a BTEC Level 3 National Diploma (two A level equivalent) alongside an A level, are even lower, and there is again a positive difference between those with a BTEC RQF alongside their A levels and those with a BTEC QCF.

### 3. Do BTECs provide a route for widening participation in higher education?

Increasing participation in HE has been the policy of successive governments in England (Connell-Smith & Hubble, 2018), and one of the most commonly used indicators for targeting widening access measures is the POLAR4 measure. POLAR4 (Participation of Local Areas) quintiles are a classification system used in the UK higher education sector to measure and categorise different geographical areas based on young people's participation in higher education, where Quintile 1 includes areas where there is the lowest.

**Figure 2: Proportion of students from POLAR4 quintile by Level 3 route entering HE in 2020/21.**

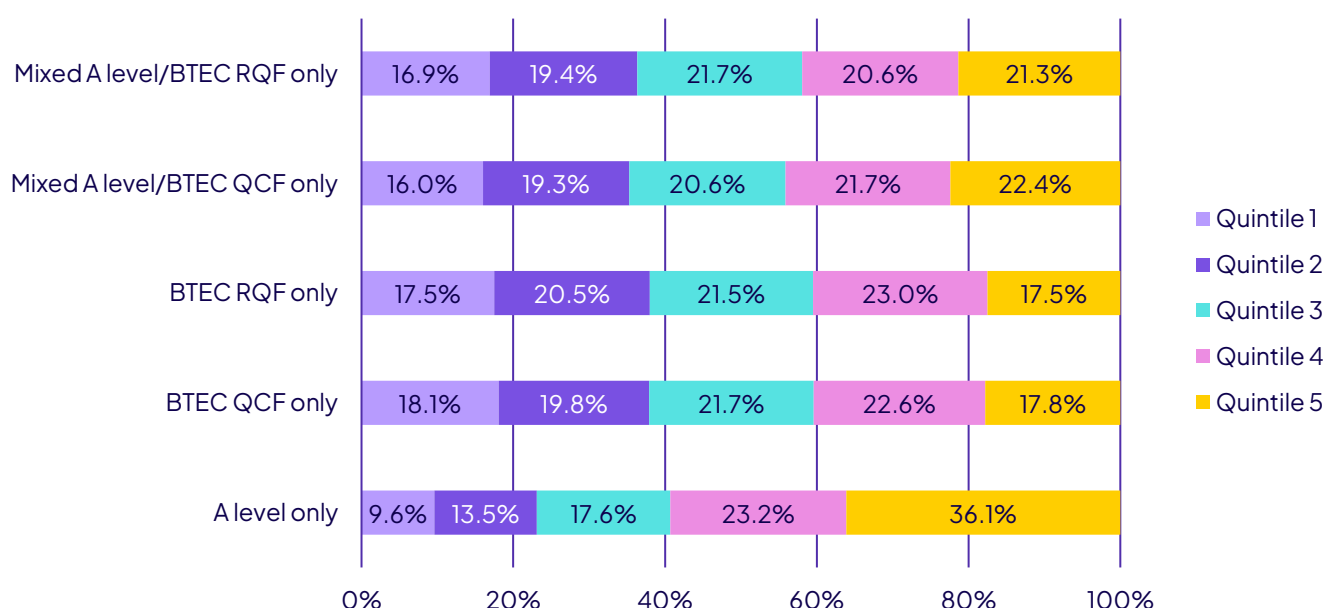


Figure 2 shows that students entering HE having done only A levels in Level 3 are four times as likely to come from POLAR4 Quintile 5 than from Quintile 1. In contrast, there is a much more even distribution of quintiles where students enter HE with a BTEC, and students who only did BTECs at Level 3 are twice as likely to have come from Quintile 1 than students who only did A levels.

This is a pattern that is repeated in other widening participation characteristics. Students were more likely to enter HE in 2020/21 with a BTEC RQF when they are black (15.46% with BTEC RQF vs 5.92% of those with A levels only); when they are older (22.6% with BTEC RQF vs 11.96% with A level only); or when they have additional needs (16.62% with BTEC RQF vs 16.51% with A level only).

As the Nuffield report says, these are students who ‘without the availability of BTECs might not have had the opportunity to attend university at all’ (Dilnot, Macmillan & Wyness, 2022, p. 4).

## Limitations

Due to the years in which this data was collected, there is likely to have been some impact, as on the rest of society, of the COVID-19 pandemic, with lockdowns in early 2020 and 2021 affecting both cohorts. The COVID-19 pandemic saw a concomitant drop in the continuation rate (HESA, 2022; Kernohan, 2022), whilst the pandemic and/or the conditions associated with it (e.g. limited employment and travel opportunities) may have also acted to increase continuation rates among our sample. However, it is assumed that the effects of the pandemic affected students from all qualifications homogenously, rather than disproportionately causing either A level or BTEC students not to continue their HE studies. There are reasons why this might not be true – the pandemic had greater effects in areas of greater disadvantage, such as those in lower POLAR4 quintiles, but all of the impacts are complex, with unpredictable outcomes. Without evidence to the contrary relating to this, this study has not included these in the conclusions.

One variable that was not available in this research was Key Stage 4 performance data for these students. This was found to be highly significant in the Nuffield study, and to have a greater impact on continuation rates than many of the socio-economic factors.

Although the reasons for dropouts are included in HESA data, we were not able to test this hypothesis, as the categories are often vague and the majority of dropouts are registered by universities as being due to “unknown” reasons. Better reporting in this area might help identify whether the reasons for the dropout were related to Level 3 qualification (for example, high numbers of dropouts due to poor academic performance), or for reasons related to background (such as “health” or “left due to employment” if a student felt they could no longer afford to attend their HE course). However, we appreciate the challenges in collecting this information, given there could be multiple contributory reasons for leaving a course (health and financial concerns could simultaneously affect academic performance, for example) and students may not disclose the real reason to their institution.

# Conclusions

This is the first piece of quantitative evidence that RQF reformed BTEC Level 3 Nationals with external assessment are supporting better outcomes for students: the HE non-continuation rate is lower than for students who took the legacy QCF qualifications entering HE that same year. The reform and principally the introduction of external assessment have therefore arguably better prepared students for the world of HE, as they were intended to do.

The non-continuation rates for students taking a mixed curriculum, e.g. a BTEC Level 3 National Extended Certificate (one A level equivalent) alongside A levels, or a BTEC Level 3 National Diploma (two A level equivalent) alongside an A level, are even lower, and there is again a positive difference between those with an RQF BTEC alongside their A levels and those with a QCF BTEC.

It is encouraging to see these emerging trends, as it would suggest that the reformed qualifications are better preparation for HE, as intended, and this is an area we shall be monitoring in future years.

Whilst the non-continuation rate for BTEC students is still slightly higher than those following an A level-only curriculum, as observed in the Nuffield study, this may be explained by differences in Key Stage 4 prior attainment, which is not accounted for in this study and had a very significant role to play in the Nuffield study, or other factors not available within the data. It is already clear from the data that the student cohort taking BTECs is quite different to those going down the A level-only route.

The non-continuation rate for BTEC students taking either the QCF and RQF qualifications is low by absolute standards, as we can see through comparison with both international standards and the OfS threshold for UK HEIs. The majority of BTEC students progressing to HE successfully complete their degree. Given that a disproportionate volume of the BTEC cohort come from a disadvantaged and widening participation background, this is not an insignificant achievement. The qualifications support social mobility and help widen access to HE.

We are very excited to see these emerging trends and evidence of the strengthened route into and through HE that the BTEC qualifications support.

# References

- Connell-Smith, A., & Hubble, S. (2018). *Widening Participation Strategy in Higher Education in England*. London: House of Commons Library. Retrieved from <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8204/CBP-8204.pdf>
- Curnock Cook, M. (2022). Reviewing the evidence for the BTEC Level 3 Nationals. In HEPI, *Holding Talent Back? What is next for the future of Level 3?* (pp. 15-22). HEPI.
- Dilnot, C., Macmillan, L., & Wyness, G. (2022). *Educational Choices at 16-19 and University Outcomes*. Nuffield Foundation. Retrieved from [https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Qualifications\\_and\\_university\\_outcomes\\_final.pdf](https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Qualifications_and_university_outcomes_final.pdf)
- European Commission. (2015). *Dropout and Completion in Higher Education in Europe: Main Report*. Publications Office of the European Union. doi:10.2766/826962
- Hanson, M. (2024, August 16). *College Dropout Rates*. Retrieved February 21, 2025, from Education Data Initiative: <https://educationdata.org/college-dropout-rates/>
- HESA. (2022, March 17). *HESA*. Retrieved May 2, 2025, from Non-continuation: UK Performance Indicators: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/performance-indicators/non-continuation>
- Kernohan, D. (2022, March 18). *HESA Spring: Non-Continuation UKPI*. Retrieved May 2, 2025, from WONKHE: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/hesa-spring-non-continuation-ukpi/>
- McKee, B. (2024). *Fees for No Degrees*. Melbourne: IPA. Retrieved from <https://ipa.org.au/publications-ipa/research-papers/fees-for-no-degrees>
- OECD. (2019). *Education at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators*. Paris: OECD Publishing. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1787/f8d7880d-en>

Office for Students. (2022, September 30). *OfS sets new expectations for student outcomes*. Retrieved February 21, 2025, from Office for Students: [https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/ofs-sets-new-expectations-for-student-outcomes/#:~:text=For%20full-time%20students%20studying%20for%20a%20first%20degree%2C,Susan%20Lapworth%2C%20chief%20executive%20of%20the%20OfS%](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/ofs-sets-new-expectations-for-student-outcomes/#:~:text=For%20full-time%20students%20studying%20for%20a%20first%20degree%2C,Susan%20Lapworth%2C%20chief%20executive%20of%20the%20OfS%20)

Rouncefield-Swales, A. (2014). *Vocational Progression to Selecting Universities: Comparisons and Trends 2010–13*. Western Vocational Progression Consortium.

Wolf, A. (2011). *Review of Vocational Education – The Wolf Report*. Department for Education. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-vocational-education-the-wolf-report>

## Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the important and detailed contribution to this research by Noni Csogor from the Sixth Form Colleges Association, in particular her detailed and insightful feedback to early drafts.

We would like to express our appreciation for Ed Robinson and his crucial and thorough proof-reading support.

This research was made possible by Jisc/HESA for making their data available to us under licence.

We would also like to thank Mary Curnock Cook for her support and very helpful comments.

Furthermore we would like to thank internal colleagues from Pearson, including:

Sian Owen (Director of Stakeholder and Portfolio Management) and Hayley Dalton (Head of Vocational and Assessment Research) for their support and guidance.

Thank you too for the valuable input from David Russell (UK Government Relations), Barbara Donahue (Assessment Insights) and Hannah Hawkins (Corporate Communications).