

## The BTEC Success Rate Data issue

### The background

The 18 unit BTEC National Diploma is taught over two years, and at Level 3 it is the vocational alternative to a two year A Level programme. However, the BTEC success rates have always been significantly (e.g. 20 percentage points) lower than that for A Levels. This success rate gap has fundamentally got nothing to do with learner circumstance nor the teaching, it relates to the qualification structures. Whilst the BTEC Nat Dip is one qualification taught for two years, a two year A Level programme consists of as many as eight one year qualifications (AS and A2). When this modularised approach was introduced it was officially recognised by the government statisticians in the SFR as a reason for A Level success rates rising in 2002/03 (they remain classed by Ofsted as long level 3 qualifications). Here are some worked examples to highlight the point:

1. If an A Level learner left after the first year they could achieve three out of three AS levels (100% success), whilst the BTEC learner would have only partially achieved the 18 unit qualification (0% success).
2. If an A level learner achieved 3 AS levels in one year was only entered for 2 A2 Levels which were achieved in the second year this would be 100% success. To achieve the BTEC Nat Dip all 18 units must be passed.
3. If a learner passed 3 out of 3 AS levels and 2 out of 3 A2 levels that would be 100% success in the first year and 67% success in the second year. If the equivalent were to happen for a BTEC National Diploma (e.g. passed 17 out of 18 units) the college would get no recognition for success in the first year and 0% success in the second year.
4. If in one year one learners achieved 3 out of 3 AS levels and another achieved 2 out of 3 AS levels that would be five achievements out of six (83% success rate). However, if after two years one learner passed all 18 BTEC units and another learner passed 17 out of 18 units, that would be one achievement and one partial achievement (50% success rate).
5. Some colleges have begun to copy the approach taken in schools, and are only recording ('cashing-in') those learners who they actually put in for AS and A2 exams. This practice by colleges is not permitted, but it happens, and is a further reason why success rates are higher for A levels.

### Why it really became a problem

BTEC Nat Dip success rates really became a problem with the introduction of Minimum Levels of Performance (MLP). This, combined with a focus from Ofsted on long level 3 courses, led to significant pressure on colleges to find ways to raise the success rates on BTEC National Diploma programmes.

### The fully planned solution

Colleges can enrol learners on a BTEC National Award (6 units) and when this is achieved enrol them on the BTEC Certificate (12 units) or BTEC Diploma (18 units) using the LSC BTEC conversion learning aims (see Annex H of the ILR). In a QCF future (without conversion learning aims) colleges can use ILR field A51a to avoid double funding. One problem with this solution is that the BTEC National Award is classed by the LSC as developmental (non-priority) learning – something I have lobbied against for many years.

### The partially planned solution

Colleges can enrol learners on the two year BTEC Nat Dip, and then realise early on in the course that the learner will not achieve all 18 units. The tutor can then negotiate a change to the Individualised Learning Programme (ILP), leading to either a change of learning aim or to a transfer onto another course with a different end date. This is permitted by the LSC – but with massive grey areas in terms of how early it needs to be (until now they have never said before F01), with what evidence, onto what learning aim and whether it should be a change of learning aim on the existing enrolment or a transfer to a new enrolment.

### The retrospective solution

What colleges are increasingly doing is waiting until the end of the course to see how many units the learner has passed. They will then achieve them (changing the learning aim, or more often transferring to a different enrolment) at the level at which they passed. So many BTEC Dip learners who should be recorded as a partial achievement (0% success) are transferred to achieve BTEC certificates or awards. This practice is not permitted by the LSC, but colleges will say they are simply recording what the learner actually achieved. One major problem with this approach is that if a college does not record an achieved BTEC certificate, then the government cannot count this as a PSA target outcome. **So at the centre of the success rate data problem is confusion and/or exploitation of whether to record the planned or the actual achievement.**