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Entry to University at a Time of COVID-19: How Using a Pre-arrival Academic Questionnaire Informed Support for New First-year Students at Leeds Beckett University.

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Abstract

In the summer of 2020, academic and professional service managers at Leeds Beckett University (LBU), were mindful that the upcoming academic year was going to be challenging in terms of teaching and tailored support delivery, as a result of the uncertainty created by COVID-19. We knew that many of our incoming students had experienced disruption in their learning at school or college, and we wanted to support and maximise their potential for success at university in these uncertain times. Through previous work relating to the need to support student transitions, we already understood the importance of pre-arrival academic experience data in helping to create a seamless bridging of the gap between secondary and tertiary education. We knew it would become even more critical in Autumn 2020, due to the impact of the pandemic on student learning in schools and colleges. We were aware that the prior learning experience and challenges of our diverse incoming student body would need to shape our response, strategy, and policy in 2020/21 and beyond.

As a result, we decided to pilot a pre-arrival academic questionnaire across a small number of courses that included questions on the impact of COVID-19 on our incoming students' prior learning. It offers broad headline findings from the data on two key questions:

- How can we understand incoming students' levels of anxiety after studying at school or college in lockdown?
- Are students experienced in learning digitally at school or college before they come to university, and did COVID-19 affect this?
- This case study explores our institutional response to COVID-19 and how we used the PAQ to inform our action.

Keywords: COVID-19; First-year; Induction; Pre-arrival; Student transitions; Survey.

1. Introduction.

In the summer of 2020, academic and professional service managers at Leeds Beckett University (LBU), were mindful that the upcoming academic year was going to be challenging in terms of teaching and tailored support delivery, due to the grave uncertainty created by COVID-19. We knew that many of our incoming students had experienced disruption in their learning at school or college, and we wanted to support and maximise their potential for success at university in these uncertain times. The HE environment was, like schools and colleges, similarly disrupted with teaching being suddenly and severely affected by the onset of COVID-19, resulting in HEIs in England being instructed to close from 20th March 2020. The traditional face to face and blended learning approaches used at LBU disappeared, as we were advised, where appropriate, to teach wholly online. Unplanned, the move to online learning from a traditional on-campus approach can cause disruption, upset, and poor experiences for staff and students despite the recognition that staff are doing their best (Pokornym, Holley, & Kane, 2020). The prospect of future lockdowns and even more online learning were the only certainties as students were still, quite rightly, not encouraged to come onto the physical campus.

At LBU, we believe that the way a student studies (their learning pathway) is as important as what they study. Our strategic focus is on ensuring each student's learning pathway is supported through a high-quality curriculum, learning activities, and learning environment. Pickford's (2018) '*Blueprint for Teaching Excellence*' frames LBU's approach to inclusively supporting and empowering students to succeed. This innovative, research-informed, and practical model holistically integrates the factors that underpin strategic approaches to maximising a student's success. "*Student success*" is a multifactorial definition and evaluated through our students' satisfaction with their learning and teaching experience. (National Student Survey: Satisfaction with Teaching), our students' progression through their course and, lastly, our students' employment upon graduation (through the Destinations of Leavers in Higher Education Survey). Our LBU model identifies six transition-related areas upon which course teams need to focus – students' practical and course orientation, personal and social integration, and academic and disciplinary preparation. Institutionally, we have focused our learning and teaching related research on developing expertise in these six areas and have developed a range of resources aligned with these six requirements. It was in the context of this robust research-informed approach to supporting new students to transition into higher education that we approached the

challenges of students beginning their studies with us in 2020.

We were conscious that we needed a greater, more precise, understanding of the prior learning experiences of our incoming students, especially those school or college students in study in 2019/20 who were affected by the March 2020 lockdown. Through previous work relating to the need to support student transitions, presented at our LBU annual Learning & Teaching Conference in June 2020 (Morgan, 2020a) we already understood the importance of this pre-arrival data in helping to create a seamless bridging of the gap between secondary and tertiary education. We knew it would become even more critical in Autumn 2020, due to the impact of the pandemic on student learning in schools and colleges. We were aware that the prior learning experience and challenges of our diverse incoming student body would need to shape our response, strategy, and policy in 2020/21 and beyond. As a result, we decided to pilot a pre-arrival academic questionnaire (PAQ hereafter) across a small number of courses that included consideration of the impact of COVID-19 on our incoming students' prior learning (Morgan, 2020b). The PAQ at undergraduate level had evolved from the original and innovative work funded by the £3m Higher Education Funding Council for England, 11 university Postgraduate Experience Project (Morgan and Direito, 2016).

This case study paper explores our response to COVID-19 and how we used the PAQ to inform our action in the university. It offers broad headline findings from the data on two key questions:

1. How can we understand incoming students' levels of anxiety after studying at school or college in lockdown?
2. Are students experienced in learning digitally at school or college before they come to university, and did COVID-19 affect this?

We outline the use of Morgan's (2020b) pre-arrival questionnaire, how the courses and university responded to the findings, and our ongoing approach in 2021-22.

UK Level 3ⁱ qualifications (Department for Education, 2013) such as Advanced Levels (A Levels), Business and Technology and Education Council diplomas (BTEC) and Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) equivalents are the gateway qualifications for entry into Higher Education and we specifically highlight some of the differences between the A-Level and BTEC/Level 3 respondents (See Table 1). At LBU, 23.7% of our intake are BTEC /Level 3 students and we are aware that their prior learning experience and background is different to that of traditional

'A'-Level entry students (Kelly, 2017), and that their retention, progression, and attainment levels are significantly lower. In addition, their resilience and continuation appear to be dependent on the support provided to them by their institution (e.g., Pokornym, Holley, & Kane, 2016; Kelly, 2017).

Table 1: Qualifications on entry to study at LBU.

	2021-22 FT UG Entrants	Hold A Levels or SQA	Hold BTECs	Hold only A levels	Hold only BTECs	Hold both A levels and BTECs
Number	5,180	2,974	1,964	2,236	1,226	738
%	100.0%	57.4%	37.9%	43.2%	23.7%	14.2%

2. Methodology.

The Centre for Learning and Teaching (CLT) at LBU helped develop and coordinate the implementation of an established PAQ with Dr Morgan in mid-July 2020, as a pilot project to collect a range of information from all incoming first-year students in September 2020. This included seeking information on their prior learning experiences before and after the March 2020 lockdown, their concerns on entry to university and their future study expectations.

The PAQ was regarded as a service evaluation and anonymous at the point of completion and respondents could not be individually identified. Participants were informed that all data collected would be kept strictly in accordance with the UK's General Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA) via the communications sent inviting them to participate. Ethical approval was obtained to publish 2020 headline data from the University's ethics committee, in July 2021.

The PAQ was piloted with incoming students from nine LBU courses which spanned a range of disciplines where Course Director colleagues had expressed interest. The survey was open for a period of 2.5 weeks at the end of August 2020 before the new first-year students were due to arrive. The incoming students were asked to complete it as part of their own course academic pre-arrival activity packages. Although the PAQ was not compulsory, this approach encouraged good levels of engagement, resulting in a 54.63% completion rate. For analysis, BTEC, Access and other Level 3 qualification responses were combined and are referred to as BTEC/Level 3

hereafter.

The overall findings by individual course were distributed to the Course Directors within three days of the survey closing. This was a responsive, informative approach for each Course Director to start understanding the issues facing our incoming cohort and catalysed them to think about the students upcoming needs from the academic and professional service support spheres.

Response rate: The survey was completed in full by 342 respondents and accounted for 59% of students enrolled on those 9 courses. The domiciled status of the respondents comprised 334 UK, 6 EU and 2 Overseas students. Of the respondents, 65.8% stated their highest qualification was A-Levels followed by 26.4% with BTEC/Level 3 qualifications. Of the sample, 54.9% identified as female, 44.7% male and 0.4% non-binary.

Of the 342 respondents, 79.5% had achieved their highest qualification in 2019/20. Although the sample size is relatively small, the findings of the respondents' learning experiences prior to the March lockdown reflect those found in a much larger study undertaken at Bournemouth University (a similar post 1992 institution) in 2019/20, that had 1104 respondents complete the PAQ in full (Morgan, 2020b). However, the LBU version of the PAQ offered us a distinct lens and unique insight into the experiences of students in study in 2019/20 who were at school or college *after* the March lockdown due to COVID-19.

3. Findings.

3.1 Key question 1.

How could we understand incoming students' levels of anxiety after studying at school or college in lockdown?

Of our sample who stated they were in study in 2019/20, 23.5% stated they studied the same as before the closure and attended school/college, 22.0% studied differently even though I (they) still 'attended' school/college (online) and 54.5% were not required to do any study by the school/college (see Table 2). This meant that over half of those in study at school or college had not been engaged in structured learning for over six months before starting their university

studies. When we looked at their highest qualification, significantly more A-Level respondents (62.3%) had not been required to undertake any study compared to BTEC/Level 3 respondents (39.2%). For A-Level respondents, this could be explained by A-Level exams being cancelled, which since 2016 has been the main form of assessment for most A-Levels. For BTEC/Level 3 qualifications, assessment comprises exams and coursework throughout the course. In 2020, the decision to cancel BTEC assessments after the March lockdown was taken much later than A-Levels.

Table 2: Study requirement after lockdown in March 2020 (from Survey 1 in August 2020).

	Aggregate Sample n=342	A-Level n=183	BTEC/Level 3 n=79
Studied the same as before the closure and attended school/college	23.5%	20.2%	30.4%
Studied differently even though I still 'attended' school/college	22.0%	17.5%	30.4%
Not required to do any study by the school/college	54.5%	62.3%	39.2%

We had hypothesised that our new university students could be worried about a number of things, including coping with the level of study at university (see Table 3). The PAQ findings showed that ***coping with the level of study*** was a concern for 37.1% of respondents and ***confidence about ability to study*** for 30.4%. The concern about ***coping with the level of study*** was slightly higher amongst those in study in 2019/20 with 39.0% as was ***confidence about ability to study*** with 31.2%.

There were no notable differences between A-Level and BTEC/Level 3 respondents regarding these two concerns but there was by gender as highlighted in Table 3. In particular, twice as many females (38.8%) expressed concern about their confidence about their ability to study compared to 19.6% of males.

Table 3: Concerns about starting university (from Survey 1 in August 2020).

Concern	Aggregate n=342	2019/20 only n=253	Female n=188	Male n=153
Coping with the level of study	37.1%	39.0%	42.0%	30.7%
Confidence about ability to study	30.4%	31.2%	38.8%	19.6%

When the level of anxiety was explored with those respondents who had expressed a concern about coping with level of study (37.1%), 73.2% of these respondents and 74.7% of those in school/college study in 2019/20 stated they were very anxious or anxious. There were also similar levels of anxiety between A-Level and BTEC/Level 3 respondents, and female and males (see Table 4).

When the level of anxiety was explored of those respondents who had expressed concern about confidence about ability to study at university (30.4%), 75.0% of these respondents and 75.9% of those in study in 2019/20 stated they were very anxious or anxious. For A-Level respondents, it was 71.2% and for BTEC/Level 3, it was slightly higher with 81.8%. Again, there were similar levels of anxiety between females and males with 76.6% and 73.9% respectively (see Table 4).

Table 4: Level of anxiety of respondents who expressed concern - 'Very anxious or anxious' (from survey 1 in August 2021).

Level of anxiety	Aggregate	2019/20 only	Female	Male	A-Level	BTEC/ Level 3
Coping with the level of study	73.2%	74.7%	74.6%	70.2%	73.8%	77.4%
Confidence about ability to study	75.0%	75.9%	73.9%	76.6%	71.2%	81.8%

Universities provide an extensive range of academic study support, and we were interested, for planning, support, and signposting purposes in which of our services the respondents anticipated they might use the most in their first year. There were 12 options and the top six most selected in order of popularity were careers and employment (49.1%), sports facilities (43.6%), academic support (41.8%), health and wellbeing (30.4%), financial (26.6%) and IT

(17.8%) (see Table 5).

Expected use of services by A-Level and BTEC/Level 3 respondents were similar apart from the use of academic support and careers and employment where incoming students with A levels anticipated a very slightly greater usage of both careers and academic support (about 3.5-4%). However, there were notable differences by gender where females were almost twice as likely to use health and wellbeing support compared to males, and males were twice more likely to use sport facilities compared to females (see Table 5).

Table 5: Expected use of university services (from Survey 1 in August 2020).

University service	Aggregate	Female	Male	A-Level	BTEC /Level 3
Careers and employment	49.1%	52.1%	45.1%	49.3%	45.8%
Sports facilities	43.6%	30.8%	59.4%	43.5%	42.7%
Academic support	41.8%	44.7%	38.6%	41.7%	38.5%
Health and wellbeing	30.4%	39.4%	19.6%	29.1%	30.2%
Financial support	26.6%	25.0%	28.7%	26.0%	28.1%
Information technology	17.8%	19.1%	16.3%	15.7%	18.8%

The concerns of students and the low anticipated use of support facilities whilst at university was not unexpected, as students are not always aware that being proactive in seeking support for their studies is part of being an independent learner. However, it raised our awareness that we needed strategies in place to try, not only to prepare these support services better for incoming students' queries but, to reduce their anxiety, support them effectively on arrival and regularly signpost them to the specific targeted support available.

We also took on board the valuable qualitative comments provided by respondents on what types of support would help them. For example, more front-loaded online academic advising meetings with a named academic on their course (individual and group meetings) and pre-arrival online course networks using social media

LBU has a pre-arrival online module and library colleagues who lead this provision promoted this "*Study Ready*" module pre-arrival as it specifically focuses on the step-up to, HE-level study from school/college learning. It encourages reflection on skills gained during previous learning experiences, clarifies course and skills expectations at HE-level, and includes explanations of

independent learning, time-management, and a glossary of HE terms. This is part of an academic skills “*pathway*” as we also have a “*Study Smart*” module that is promoted by colleagues once the student has registered and offers tailored activities to support of study skills.

3.2 Key question 2.

Are students experienced in learning digitally at school or college before they come to university, and did COVID-19 affect this?

Students seem to find it natural and easy to use digital platforms and skills for social media activities, but are these transferable to their learning environment? Do students in school or college commonly use digital platforms to access learning material and submit their work? If they don't, how might the university streamline, clarify and smooth access to the VLE learning materials, assessment submission and the new learning platforms (Microsoft Teams, Blackboard Collaborate and Skype for Business).

Respondents were asked to state all the ways they had accessed learning materials at school or college, and for those in school/college study in 2019/20, specifically how they had studied before the March 2020 pandemic lockdown. For the majority of respondents, “*traditional*” handwritten notes and a course textbook were the most common methods of accessing learning materials (see Table 6). A school/college VLE and other electronic sources outside a VLE were also extensively used. However, only 27.8% stated that they had used books/materials in the school/college library.

Table 6: Accessing learning materials at school/college (from Survey 1 in August 2020).

Type of material	Aggregate sample
Handwritten notes from classes	74.3%
A course textbook	65.5%
Accessing information from electronic sources outside a VLE	54.7%
Information on the school/college VLE	46.2%
Handout of book chapters and information	45.3%
Books/materials in the school/college library	27.8%

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For A-Level respondents, the most common methods in accessing learning materials were via handwritten notes in class, a course textbook and handout of book chapters and information. For BTEC/Level 3 respondents, it was more diverse. Handwritten notes, accessing information from electronic sources outside a VLE and using information on the school/college VLE were the top three sources. BTEC/Level 3 are commonly taught in college, and they generally have a VLE (although it may not be as sophisticated as those used in higher education).

For both qualification groups, using books in the school/college library only accounts for just over one quarter of the respondents. These findings mirrored a similar study at Bournemouth University (Morgan, 2020) indicating that a substantial number of students enter university without experience of using E-books, online resources and core scholarly texts which are usual, typical, and integral to university study.

We wanted to know whether the sudden '*move*' to online learning in schools and colleges after the March lockdown, which had been '*reported*' in the press, had actually happened for our respondents.

For those who were in study at school/college in 2019/20 (272) and continued to do so in some form after the March lockdown (124), there was much more reliance on accessing school/college VLE and electronic sources outside of the VLE as the main source (including using meeting applications such as Zoom). This in part could be explained by a larger percentage of BTEC/Level 3 respondents being in study, compared to their A-Level counterparts. However, it is important to note that these are still small sample sizes. Table 7 below, compares the main source of information pre-lockdown of all respondents, and those in study in 2019/20, with those in study post lockdown.

As a result of their prior learning experience at school or college it was not a surprise to see that, before arrival at university, 52.9% of *all respondents* were concerned about starting their studies online, and for those who had been in study in 2019/20, it was slightly higher with 59.2%. Those respondents who were in study in 2019/20, who were not required to undertake study, were more very anxious or anxious (65.2%) compared to those who had been required to undertake study of some kind in person or online (60%).

Table 7: Main source of learning material pre and post lockdown in March of those continuing to study at school or college (from Survey 1 in August 2020).

Type of material	Main source Pre-lockdown All respondents n=342	Main source Pre-lockdown 2019/20 study respondents only n=272	Main source Post-lockdown 2019/20 study respondents n=124
Handwritten notes from classes	27.6%	29.6%	20.3%
A course textbook	27.6%	29.3%	16.5%
Accessing information from electronic sources outside a VLE	18.7%	15.2%	24.5%
Handout of book chapters and information	5.0%	4.8%	4.9%
Information on the school/college VLE	18.5%	19.3%	32.6%
Books in the school/college library	2.6%	1.8%	1.2%

For both A-Level and BTEC/Level 3 respondents, those who had not been required to undertake any study had higher levels of anxiety than those who had, but BTEC/Level 3 were much more anxious (73.6%) compared to their A-Level counterparts (63.0%).

We know from existing sector research that the background of BTEC/Level 3 students can impact on their confidence levels entering university and whilst there (NEON, 2020; Hurrell, Shawcross & Keeling, 2019; Richards, 2016; Rouncefield-Swales, 2014), and this in part contributes to them being three times more likely to withdraw than A-Level students (HESA, 2019). It is important that we think of imaginative ways to retain our first-years.

At university, submission of coursework is commonly undertaken via a VLE. Our PAQ survey data showed most (68%) school/college students, pre-lockdown in March 2020, submitted their work via hard copy. This changed during the pandemic to email hand-in (53.7%). However, submission via a VLE was higher amongst BTEC/Level 3 students, with 47.6% compared to 33.3% of A-Level students. Submission by email was higher amongst A-Level respondents 58.5% compared to BTEC/Level 3 with 47.6%. This raised awareness at LBU that we needed

clear, supportive, tailored instructions, induction and clarity around assessment submission platforms, regulations, and processes.

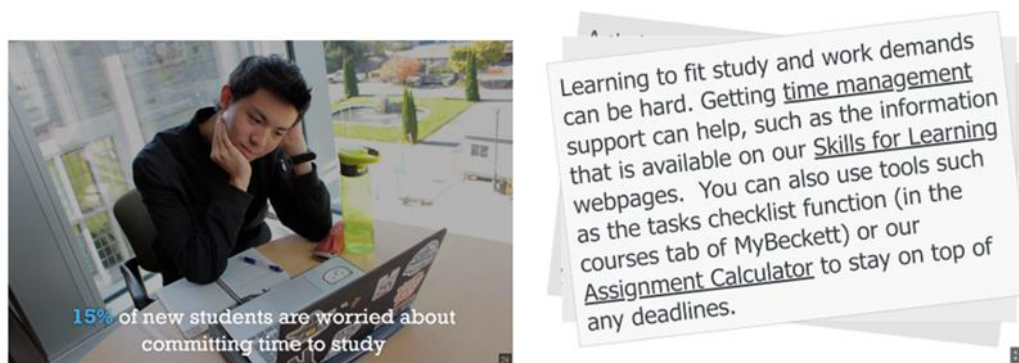
4. Immediate response to the findings.

Like many institutions across the sector, we were facing a perfect storm of challenges. These included digital poverty, COVID-19 related physical and mental challenges for students and learning skill gaps.

The biggest concern of all respondents on arrival at university, and beyond September 2020 with 53.5%, was about COVID-19 and the impact of any potential future lockdowns on their learning experience. Aside from our responsive institutional digital equipment provision and hardship funds, we focus below on some other key work that supported student expectations of learning designed to allay some of the anxiety about HE study, as revealed in the survey.

One initiative that was highly effective in helping to support students and address their concerns immediately, because of the PAQ findings, was to work in partnership with a recent student to develop a Microsoft SWAY to present advice, and signpost to guidance in the form of a stack of virtual note cards which students could click/swipe through (see Figure 1). We used an image, a statistic, and a stack of useful tips, many of which linked to further guidance within the university website, and that covered many of the areas highlighted in the findings. The result was a visually appealing and interactive tool, with Microsoft accessibility built-in, which was designed to not be daunting for students.

Figure 1: Sample of Microsoft Sway with swipe cards giving advice and links to supporting information.

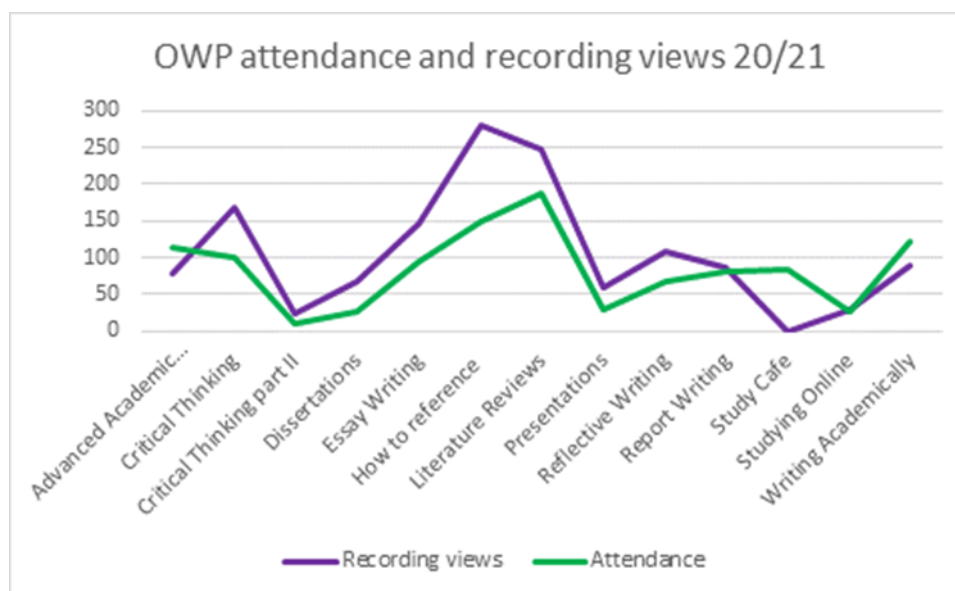


A second major initiative was to adapt our existing library-led '*Study Ready*' (pre-arrival online module) and develop and promote our '*Study Smart*' (extended induction for first-years) modules – which new students were encouraged to engage with to help manage their expectations and start bridging their learning gaps. This was done through a range of written and video content with embedded interactive elements designed to familiarise the students with university language, systems, support and the kind of teaching and assessment approaches they may experience. "*Study Ready*" explored this broadly before the students enrolled with LBU, with "*Study Smart*", delivered as part of in-curriculum support in Schools, providing a more in-depth introduction once they had enrolled. In 2020/21 so far, 2,255 students chose to enrol with the new Study Smart online module with a 99% participation rate.

We recognised the need for our new students to be brought up to speed in a calm, accessible way that would endeavour to minimise already high anxiety levels. Our in-curriculum academic skills provision offered by our library was also reworked into more bite-sized, chunking which was embedded into the VLE. Students have commented positively on this approach to in-curriculum learning, explaining that "*breaking down the [academic skills content] videos then applying it to the worksheet worked really well*". The library Open Workshop Programme for all students was revised rapidly for online delivery and included new sessions on '*Studying Online*' and virtual '*Study Cafes*'. In 2019/20 up until the end of February, 561 students attended. After the online content was refreshed, for the same period in 2020/21, 1,229 students attended and engaged which was over a 100% increase. The recordings of the virtual sessions are shared with all students who sign up, meaning that more students can access the content at a time that best suits them (see Figure 2). The new Study Café in the Open Workshop Programme, has been well received, with students commenting "*working with colleagues/peers is better than doing it alone*"; it was "*comforting to do it [study] with other people*", and that sessions provided "*good study time*" in a way that was "*interactive*" and provided "*clear explanation of the [Pomodoro] method*". Similarly, student feedback on the new pre-arrival Study Ready module demonstrated its relevance, with 3.46 out of 4 the average student feedback score. Study Ready has achieved its aim of introducing HE-level study, one student fed back that "*I have learnt various information in terms of studying [at University] and what to expect so I gained a real insight*". Qualitative student feedback for the online synchronous workshops and asynchronous materials, resources and tutorials have been excellent, and attendance and participation rates

continue to stay high.

Figure 2: Statistics from the Skills for Learning Open Workshop Programme 2020/2021
(recordings not made available for Study Café sessions).



5. Ongoing work to support our future incoming students.

Our PAQ sample specifically revealed higher levels of '*pre-HE study*' anxiety post lockdown (especially for BTEC/Level 3 respondents), lack of experience of accessing information online and submitting work through a VLE (especially for A-Level respondents), and a pandemic learning experience that left them feeling ill-prepared and concerned about starting higher education study.

5.1 Inclusive practice.

At LBU, applicants from lower socio-economic groups (IMD Q1/2) are slightly more likely to accept their offer of a place at Leeds Beckett, and to enrol, than students from mid and high socio-economic groups (LBU transparency information, 2021). Our BTEC/Level 3 students are more likely to be from lower socioeconomic (SE) groups and are generally more likely to drop

out at the end of the first year (NEON, 2020).

We are mindful of the issues facing current final year A-Level and other Level 3 students due to COVID-19, such as digital poverty and hardship, uncertainty about assessment due to the cancellation of exams, challenging home learning environments and learning gaps, and the impact it will have on existing award gaps and pre-existing minority and disadvantaged groups.

We have now reviewed and updated our course design principles and inclusive assessment guidance to promote increased course integrity and identity, and strengthened courses with even more varied, authentic, and applied assessment modes, reduced over-assessment and encouraged more applied activities. This is supported by staff development workshops and the pedagogic resource bank on our '*TeachLearn*' website for staff. There remains an emphasis on life and employability skills and this is now reinforced in our new Education Strategy, informed by the career and employability outcomes from the PAQ. We are in addition looking to extend the embedding of the interactive Career EDGE+tool for students to help manage their current and future careers. This has been piloted with positive feedback in co-curricular activities with academic advisors. In addition, at LBU we have supported a range of robust, supportive academic advising models within a student support framework frontloaded to first-year and hardship funding for those in specific need. Inclusive practice is also amplified through our Education Strategy and Access & Participation Plan (APP). Consistent inclusive practice debate and ideas thread through our resources, educational development programme and our through our well-used reflective Inclusive Course Design Tool (Smith, Pickford, Priestley, & Sellers, 2021), which is used by all courses and embedded into the annual quality monitoring and enhancement process.

We also have a new thriving pan-University workstream focusing on decolonising the curriculum as part of the wider inclusive practice initiative in partnership with our Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion team. A range of resources, events and series of tailored workshops run from EDI and CLT focusing on inclusion and curriculum design. This will support staff to build a learning experience more relevant for all and aims to increase all students' sense of belonging from day one. It was this whole-university approach that contextualised our recent move to re-establish our first lockdown academic safety net again in 2020/21 to support all our students.

5.2 Induction planning.

The information outlined in this piece, along with the other detailed findings from the survey, have been fed into the central induction working group. We repeated the PAQ in August 2021 with a larger student sample from different courses. Survey 1, in August 2020, had 342 responses and Survey 2, Aug 2021 had 888. Results are actually broadly similar across the majority of the questions in both surveys. This includes certain student characteristics such as highest entry qualification, gender, and age. This September 2021 entry cohort studied for a whole academic year through various lockdowns, and it was valuable, through the emergent headline results, to see the extent to which they have been in school, being in self-isolation, what access they have had to online learning and whether they have had challenges of personal access to technology. We make three general observations relating to both our surveys.

5.3 Adaption and inline study.

First, the findings highlight how schools and colleges were able to quickly adapt their teaching and learning in 2020/21 during the January to March lockdown due to their experience of early stages of the pandemic. Interestingly, from the responses provided by those in study in 2020/21, it appears that pre and post the lockdown, particular aspects of teaching and learning such as accessing learning materials and submitting work, reverted back to '*traditional*' methods experienced by learners who had been in study prior to the pandemic. However, the use of VLEs and email has remained a significant source. Will this change in accessing information in schools/colleges remain? And if it does, will it impact, for the better, the experience of learners coming into higher education in the future?

5.4 BTEC.

Second, the findings highlight that respondents whose highest entry qualification were BTEC or other Level 3 qualifications, accessed materials and learnt in a more diverse way than respondents whose highest qualification were A-Levels. The prior learning experience of BTEC/Level 3 students, which is similar to that at university, should prepare them better than A-Level students, and yet BTEC/Level 3 students are still 2-3 times more likely to withdraw from university than their A-Level counterparts. Are external factors such as they are more likely to be commuter students and live at home high impact contributory reasons? Or is it the type of

learning at university that is the issue (i.e. vocational versus theoretical)? If so, how can this learning difference be effectively bridged?

5.5 Gender.

Third, respondents who identified as female significantly underestimated their skill ability compared to those identifying as male. This is not a new finding, but worryingly, this confidence gap is also found at postgraduate taught level as highlighted in the LBU pre-arrival academic questionnaire findings and the Postgraduate Experience Project 2016 undertaken across 11 universities (Morgan & Direito, 2016). Is the overestimated confidence of males a reason for their higher withdrawal rates? And how can expectations be managed better on entry to university study across all levels.

We are thinking imaginatively about how we can best support future cohorts of students who have pre arrival concerns and how we can put their minds at rest particularly in relation to feeling “*not ready*” and having low confidence in their study ability. We also need to clarify their expectations of HE learning whilst being mindful of research that shows BTEC students, in particular, come to university equipped with many transferable skills relevant to university study such as experience of working independently and practical work (Hurrell, Shawcross, & Keeling, 2019) and we need to acknowledge this and ensure these are embedded in our course design.

The academic standards expected levels of critical thinking, higher level problem solving, graduate outcomes and expectations at university have not changed, but the environment we find ourselves in now should (temporarily at least) trigger responsive changes in the way we deal with induction and engage students through online learning. We are mindful that we must follow the OfS (2020) guidance to protect vulnerable students and make all reasonable efforts to allow all students to complete their studies. Universities, colleges and others have adapted their teaching at pace to digital delivery during the pandemic.

5.6 Students supporting each other.

Perhaps now is the time to seek and consider more detailed experience feedback from current and incoming students. It is important that the responsibility for student support is provided by the university. However, well-structured peer mentoring schemes and student peer support for

first years have shown benefits for student wellbeing and sense of belonging (Egege & Kutieleh, 2015; Glaser, Hall, & Halperin, 2006) and authentic structured peer support by and from the students themselves can add an authentic layer to existing formal support. This would be happening anyway through their social media activity. We are thinking about how we can use our outgoing first-year students (i.e., those going into Level 5) who entered LBU in September 2020 after the first lockdown with similar disrupted assessment and learning experiences. What were their lessons learnt? How did they manage? What support worked well and where didn't it work? How can we use the existing diverse student voices to reassure and support our new "*disrupted*" students now and in years to come? Perhaps these incoming students have skills the cohorts of the past had no need to learn - reflective skills, adaptability, self-sufficiency for autonomous learning? Collaborative discussion with the student Union and Student Services will endeavour to explore these issues.

6. Future work and conclusions.

6.1 Future work.

There could usefully be, on top of these headline survey statistics, an opportunity for some detailed qualitative research to explore the student experience of post-16 learning in lockdown prior to going to university and the transition into university itself. Some useful exploration has already been done (Clayton & Potter, 2020) but this covers many elements of lockdown and a more granular investigation of sixth formers and college students' experiences is required.

We will also encourage Course Directors to consult their current enrolled first-year students for advice about tailored induction for the incoming cohorts, taking into account their personal experiences of lockdown learning in school, transition to university and areas they felt they needed more development in university induction and the early weeks of their university course. It is much more than just consultation though, and Healey's (2014) Students as Partners approach has been integral to designing successful first year induction programmes in some areas. Using this model, co-creation of the design of transition and induction programmes has been shown to be beneficial for strengthening independent learning expectations, social belonging, and engagement with and enjoyment of the programmes themselves (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felton, 2014; Ford & Neil, 2019). This would then create useful windows of opportunity

for students to take ownership and share the responsibility for decisions that might affect how or what they are learning. These opportunities not only benefit students but also benefit staff, since there is reciprocity and respect for new innovative ideas that benefit both as they learn from each other (Cook- Sather et al, 2014).

The PAQ repeated in August 2021 with a larger student sample from different courses has helped to verify the generalisability of the themes and offer an opportunity to use the PAQ as a tool to amplify the importance of well supported, informed transition for students. We aim to repeat shorter similar surveys in future years based on the original PAQ. This will be designed to be briefer, less time consuming to complete and to focus even more tightly on learning expectations so signposting can be more effective as part of our student support framework.

We can and will focus more on developing more resources in different forms to suit A level and BTEC students specifically tailored to orientation, preparation, and integration of these incoming students. The Library Academic Support Team have already worked collaboratively with Schools and Services to create Study Modules for students transitioning from first year to second year (L4 to L5) and Undergraduate to Postgraduate (L6 to L7/L8). Currently, members of the team are working with the School of Social Sciences on a diagnostic essay writing tool for students tackling their first essays. New projects in 2022 include a compulsory interactive pre-arrival module for International Students, updated clear Academic Integrity modules and a second year to third year (L5 to L6) Study Module. In addition, academic study skills provision is under constant review, led by the qualitative and quantitative feedback, to make resources more accessible and digestible for incoming students in the world we now find ourselves in. We plan to continue to work pan-institutionally, led by our digital learning services, to make sure our assessment submission platforms and digital tools instructions are clear and simple for all students. A more joined up focus on signposting of new first-year students (and those moving with transitions into other years) to other services such as mental health support, coaching and academic advising, careers and skill support will be a natural development of this and support student continuation and progression. There may also be a need to strengthen online pre-arrival and first-year social networks with peer support and buddying for the first years to help our incomers and ease their strain.

6.2 Conclusions.

The PAQ has been a useful tool for us particularly in terms of induction preparation, accelerating learning support at key transition points and catalysing projects to embed highlighted areas of concern and anxiety. The general consistency between both the first survey and the findings of the second survey has helped crystallise our thinking about our two key research questions which focuses specifically on pre-arrival anxiety about HE learning and learning resources. The surveys have catalysed action across the library, student support and learning services particularly in relation to i) the ease of students accessing diverse learning materials, ii) the BTEC learner experience and strategies to improve their retention, iii) tailored educational development for staff colleagues relating to inclusive practice, ii) building support for confidence and coping with HE learning and being specifically mindful of female anxiety around this. Increasing diverse ways to give feedback and support to suit individual student preferences and needs is key to this and training and discussion with academic advisors and support services is being strengthened around this We will continue to use the survey in a shorter, modified form to seek information from our incomers to prepare us better for signposting them and supporting individuals in a targeted and responsive way.

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ⁱ UK Level 3 qualifications are equivalent to Level 5 on the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (see [Recognition of foreign qualifications | Quality and Qualifications Ireland \(qqi.ie\)](#)).