

**Title: Entry to university at a time of Covid19: How using a pre-arrival academic questionnaire) informed support for new Level 4 students at Leeds Beckett University**

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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 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 Leeds Beckett University (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. The 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 L&T research on developing expertise in these six areas and have developed 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 by Dr. Michelle Morgan, 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 across a small number of courses that included questions on the impact of Covid-19 on our incoming students' prior learning (Morgan, 2020b).

This short piece 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 Covid19 affect this?**

We will outline the use of Morgan's (2020b) pre-arrival questionnaire, how the courses and university responded to the findings, and our ongoing approach. We specifically highlight some of the differences between the A-Level and BTEC/Level 3 respondents. At LBU we have a large intake of BTEC/Level 3 students and are aware that their prior learning experience and background may be different to that of traditional 'A'-Level entry students (e.g. 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. Pokorny et al., 2016; Kelly, 2017).

## **Overview**

The Centre for Learning and Teaching (CLT) at LBU helped develop and coordinate the implementation of the pre-arrival academic questionnaire (PAQ hereafter), with Dr Morgan, as a pilot project to collect a range of information from all incoming Level 4 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 piloted with nine LBU courses, where the Course Director colleagues had expressed interest, and spanned a range of disciplines. The survey was open for a period of 2.5 weeks at the end of August 2020, before our new Level 4 students were due to arrive. The incoming students were asked to complete it as one of their package of pre-arrival activities. It was anonymous at the point of completion and it was not possible to identify a respondent individually. The overall findings by individual course were distributed to the Course Directors within three days of the survey closing. This was a quick and informative approach for each Course Director to start understanding the issues facing our incoming cohort and all them to think about the students upcoming needs from the academic and professional service support spheres.

The survey was completed in full by 342 respondents which 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 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, which had 1104 respondents (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.

### 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*. 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.

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. The PAQ findings showed that 37.1% of all respondents were worried about *coping with university study*. This was slightly higher amongst those in study in 2019/20 with 41.0%. When their **level of anxiety** was explored, 73.2.0% of all respondents and 74.1% of those in study in 2019/20 were *very anxious* or *anxious*.

When the incoming respondents concerns about *ability to study at university* was examined, 30.4% of all respondents and 32.4% of those in study in 2019/20 were worried with those who felt *very anxious* or *anxious* being 75.0% and 75.8% respectively.

Universities provide an extensive range of academic study support and we were interested in which services respondents anticipated they might use 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, financial (26.6%) and IT (17.8%).

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 onboard 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 social course networks.

We have a pre arrival online module and Library colleagues, who lead this provision, liaised with all Course Directors to direct their students to this "Study Ready" module pre – arrival as it specifically

focuses on the differences in studying at school /college and HE and encourages reflection on how they have learnt previously and how this is likely to be different at Leeds Beckett.

## 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 study in 2019/20, specifically how they had studied before the March lockdown. For the majority of respondents, "traditional" *handwritten notes* (74.3%) and a *course textbook* (65.3%) were the most common methods of accessing learning materials. A *school/college VLE* was used by 46.2%, *other electronic sources outside a VLE* by 54.7% and *books/materials in the school/college library* by 27.8%. For A-Level respondents, the most common methods in accessing learning materials were via *handwritten notes in class, a course text book 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, 2020b). This means 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 1 below, compares the main source of information pre-lockdown of all respondents, and those in study in 19/20, with those in study post lockdown.

**Table 1** Main source of learning material pre and post lockdown in March of those continuing to study at school or college

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 text book	27.6%	29.3%	16.5%
Accessing information from electronic sources outside a VLE	<b>18.7%</b>	<b>15.2%</b>	<b>24.5%</b>
Handout of book chapters and information	5.0%	4.8%	4.9%
Information on the school/college VLE	<b>18.5%</b>	<b>19.3%</b>	<b>32.6%</b>
Books in the school/college library	2.6%	1.8%	1.2%

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%). 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 et al (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

## **Immediate response**

Like many institutions across the sector, we were facing a perfect storm of challenges. These included digital poverty, Covid 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 our students and address their concerns immediately, because of the PAQ findings, was to use 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. 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 not daunting for students.

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 activities 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, 2255 students chose to enrol with the new Study Smart online module with a 99% participation rate.

Recognising the need for our new students to be brought up to speed in a calm, accessible way that would 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. 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 19-20 up until the end of February 561 students attended with a large increase for the refreshed online for the same period in 20-21 where 1229 students attended and engaged. 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.

## **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. This situation is likely to compound existing disadvantage and likely to be repeated for our September 2021 entry.

**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). Our BTEC/Level 3 students are more likely to be from lower SE groups and generally are more likely to drop out at the end of the first year (NEON, 2020). We are also mindful of the issues facing current final year A-Level and other Level 3 students this academic year 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. BTEC students in particular, which is generally such an effective pathway to future study, are still more likely to be from black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds (about 12-15% of our annual student intake have BAME backgrounds) and/or lower income groups and leave at the end of the first year (NEON, 2020). We have now usefully updated our course design principles and strengthened courses with even more varied, authentic and applied assessment diets, reduced over-assessment and encouraged more applied activities. There remains an emphasis on life and employability skills and this will be reinforced further in our new Education Strategy. In addition, at LBU we have supported a range of robust, supportive academic advising models within a student support framework frontloaded to Level 4 and hardship funding for those in specific need. We have also prioritised inclusive practice through our Education Strategy and Access & Participation Plan (APP). Inclusive practice debate and ideas thread through our



resources, academic staff development programme and our reflective Inclusive Course Design Tool (Smith et al, 2021), which has been embedded into annual quality monitoring and review process. We have a strong workstream focusing on decolonising the curriculum as part of the wider initiatives. This will make the 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 our current students, and especially those new this academic year.

**Induction planning:** The information outlined in this piece, along with the other detailed findings from the survey has been fed into the central induction working group. We are considering repeating the use of the PAQ on a larger sample in August 2021. This September 2021 entry cohort will have studied for a whole academic year in various stages of lockdown and it would be valuable to learn 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 are already thinking imaginatively about how we can best support the next cohort student's pre-arrival in the early stages of Level 4 in 2021/22, and how we can put their minds at rest regarding worries about feeling "not ready" and being low in 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 et al, 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 are no different, 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.

**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, 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. But we are thinking about how we can use our outgoing Level 4 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? Perhaps these incoming students have skills the cohorts of the past had no need to learn- reflective skills, adaptability, self-sufficiency for autonomous learning.

### **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 et al, 2020) but this covers many elements of lockdown and a more granular investigation of sixth formers and college students is required.

Future work will focus on developing more honed resources specifically tailored to orientation, preparation, and integration of these incoming students. There are already plans for the library to lead a collaborative effort to devise first year to second year (L4 to L5) online induction modules and one for new postgraduates in 21-22. In addition, there will be more reworking of the wider general academic study skills provision to make them more accessible and digestible for incoming students in the world we now find ourselves in. There is a 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.

There may also be a need to strengthen online pre-arrival and level 4 social networks with peer support and buddying for the first years to help our incomers and ease their strain.

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