



Fulfilling the potential
.....
of BTEC learners:
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the Ark Professional
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Pathways programme
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Executive Summary

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Introduction

Professional Pathways was introduced into Ark schools in 2016 as a unique approach to delivering vocational qualifications. The programme was designed to meet the needs of those students whose potential was not being realised through a traditional, purely academic, linearly assessed curriculum.

Students take a BTEC National Extended Diploma (equivalent to three A levels), choosing one of four subject areas: Applied Science, Business, Sport and Exercise Science or Information Technology. Alongside this, students follow a bespoke wrap around curriculum that develops work readiness, emphasises essential skills, and supports informed and aspirational post-18 choices .

The aim is to ensure that Professional Pathways students are equipped to make ambitious and successful applications to 'top third' universities and top 100 apprenticeships and have the necessary skills to sustain those destinations, thus eliminating any 'gaps' in preparation that are sometimes perceived in comparisons between BTEC and A level learners. The report describes the findings of a research project that evaluated Ark's success in achieving this aim.

Aims

The overall aim of this research was to evaluate how effectively Professional Pathways prepares students for longer-term success, including their ability to achieve and sustain ambitious destinations. Specific objectives were to understand:

- how students research and choose the five universities for their UCAS application
- student experience of the transition to university
- what motivates some students to find and apply for apprenticeships
- the experience of employment-based learners
- the role of essential skills in achieving and sustaining post-18 options.

A secondary aim was to investigate how the evaluation process itself could be structured so as to maximise the impact of the research by embedding the findings into the Professional Pathways curriculum and practice.

Methodology

The research employed a mixed methods approach in which Professional Pathways and A level students and alumni from 13 Ark schools took part in surveys, interviews and focus groups over a three-year period.

Five surveys were conducted with Ark year 13 leavers and recent alumni (507 responses). In-depth interviews were conducted with 19 year 13 students and 26 alumni by telephone, Skype or face-to-face. Some alumni were interviewed just once, others several times over the timeline of the study, bringing the total number of interviews to 95. Alumni focus groups took place in London and Birmingham, involving 33 attendees at 7 events. The research was also informed by workshops with 65 year 12 and 43 year 13 Professional Pathways students, and by conversations with staff from four Ark partner organisations.

The research methodology was designed to facilitate an ongoing iterative dialogue that could feed into curriculum developments whilst the research was taking place, enabling evidence-based innovations to be embedded into the programme and thereby contributing to the ongoing evaluation and research process.



Key findings

1. Professional Pathways students made aspirational post-18 applications, including to Russell Group universities and top apprenticeship providers. Their choices were often aligned with ambitious career aims and decisions were often informed by employer engagement. They rated their understanding of higher education and employment more highly than did A level students. These outcomes do not reflect the stereotypical view of BTEC as 'second-best'.
2. Both A level and Professional Pathways students praised the careers support they had at school, but despite a generally high level of knowledge and understanding of post-18 options, students had not always understood the need to fully research all five UCAS choices. Alumni sometimes reflected that with more research they might have chosen different courses or universities.
3. Both A level and Professional Pathways alumni now at university described transition challenges, both academic and pastoral. Students who encountered difficulties sometimes felt their university provided insufficient information about course and progression regulations. The university experience was often very different to sixth form, and this applied most strongly if a Professional Pathways student entered a course with a traditional approach to teaching and assessment, far removed from the incremental, formative assessment of a BTEC classroom.
4. Professional Pathways had given students high-level employer engagement, knowledge and understanding of the workplace, and preparation for entry to an apprenticeship. Some expressed a strong preference for an apprenticeship but recognised the fierce competition for places, applying to university as a reserve option. A level alumni often said they would have liked more information about apprenticeships in sixth form.
5. Alumni in employment, including apprenticeships, year in industry and gap years, gave very positive accounts of the workplace as a learning environment. Apprentices articulated clear links between work, education and training, but even those who described their gap year as 'just a job' said they were developing a wide range of skills.
6. Professional Pathways is underpinned by 13 essential and professional skills, and school leavers rated their skills preparation higher than those who had taken A levels. Alumni interviews suggested that Professional Pathways students in their first year at university may become less confident, but this could reflect a more nuanced understanding of skills than their A level peers, and a tendency to give cautious self-assessments that left 'room for improvement', downplaying their actual performance.
7. The research methodology has been shown to be highly successful, described by the Commercial Education Trust as 'a model of how this sort of evaluation should be conducted, embedding continuous improvement as a management process and allowing it to spread to other aspects of the organisation's work'.
8. Interviews with Ark alumni who left sixth form in 2018 or 2019 show that Professional Pathways students continue to feel that their choice of sixth form programme gave them a strong preparation for university or employment. They described outcomes that were comparable to those who took A levels, including good degrees from Russell Group universities. All of the alumni had been negatively impacted by Covid-19; they showed remarkable degrees of resilience and fortitude.

Conclusions

Professional Pathways is meeting the objectives with which it was launched. Professional Pathways students made ambitious and sustainable applications, including to prestigious universities and employers. They showed similarities in behaviour to Ark A level students, and statistically significant differences when compared to university applicants taking BTEC qualifications in other sixth forms. Professional Pathways appears to remove any major differences between A level and BTEC students in their approach to choosing universities and courses. This was reflected in the criteria they use, the attention they give to 'top third' universities and the tools they use to compare courses and universities against personal criteria. Conversely, Professional Pathways appeared to create differences between A level and BTEC students in relation to knowledge and understanding of employment-based post-18 options, and enthusiasm for taking this route to a career; with respect to this, it was the A level experience that was lacking. Professional Pathways alumni described outcomes comparable to their A level peers, and not reflective of the stereotypical view of BTEC as 'second-best'.

Professional Pathways students made ambitious and sustainable applications, including to prestigious universities and employers



Recommendations and wider implications

Drawing on the findings of the research, a range of recommendations are proposed for schools, universities, employers and government:

1. Schools and colleges should aim to monitor the decision-making process of individual students to check that post-18 options have been sufficiently researched to underpin informed, sustainable choices that are aligned with career aims.
2. Schools and colleges should provide CEIAG for employment-based post-18 routes, including apprenticeships and non-graduate routes to a profession, that achieves parity with the UCAS provision already offered in most schools and colleges.
3. Schools and colleges could support transition to university by strengthening links with alumni and drawing on their experience to align elements of sixth form study more closely with the expectations of universities.
4. Universities should make information about course content, delivery, assessment, and progression regulations as current and accessible as possible for applicants and ensure that all students understand how to access support if they encounter difficulties in the first year.
5. Employers should consider whether the application process for apprenticeships could be made more consistent; a predictable timetable would allow applications to be scheduled alongside sixth form study and reduce uncertainty.
6. Employers and government should explore all possible ways of increasing the number of high-quality apprenticeships and other forms of employment-based learning available to school leavers, with an emphasis on progression that can lead to a graduate-equivalent professional role.
7. Government needs to ensure that routes to a wide range of university courses are maintained for students who have the ability to succeed in higher education but may not show their full potential in linear exam-based courses such as GCSE or A levels.
8. Government should take all possible steps to assist young people who have missed crucial, career-building opportunities due to the pandemic. This includes the negative effects of Covid on three consecutive years of university study, as well as the significant impact on those young people unable to access an employment-based route to a career.

Read the full report [here](#).



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