



Fulfilling the potential
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of BTEC learners:
.....
the Ark Professional
.....
Pathways programme
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Final report

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October 2021



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We would also like to thank the students and alumni who volunteered to participate in interviews, focus groups and surveys that underpin this report, and the staff in Ark schools who facilitated the research.

Finally, thank you to the Ark central staff who worked alongside the lead researcher to make this project possible, and came up with such innovative and effective ways to embed the findings into the Professional Pathways programme, the broader sixth form curriculum and the Ark Alumni Network.

About the researcher: Dr Susan McGrath is a Co-Director of UP2UNI, a nonprofit organisation focussed on enabling young people to make informed decisions and successful transitions. She is also an Honorary Research Fellow of the Centre for Post-14 Education and Work, UCL Institute of Education.

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Foreword

CET is delighted to have contributed to this important piece of work. We believe that education at all levels should have as one of its objectives preparing people for work – whether that be employment, self-employment or starting a business – and we saw the Professional Pathways initiative as a significant contribution to this. We also believe that proper evaluation is the cornerstone of success in new initiatives – not, as still all too common, something tacked on as an afterthought, but planned from the outset and integrated into the process throughout.

This evaluation has been a model in that respect, and its process is one we hope to see replicated in other initiatives. Not only has it provided incontrovertible evidence of the success of Professional Pathways, but regular contact between the researcher and Ark colleagues has meant that the programme has been continuously improved during the life of the project. This is well documented in this report, but it is worth noting that the evaluation not only resulted in changes to content but also to reconsideration of the objectives of Professional Pathways and the realisation that top universities with a traditional approach to learning, although perfectly attainable by BTEC students are not always the destinations best suited to them.

There are many lessons in this evaluation that have implications for educationalists more widely and we hope that its dissemination will enable many other students to benefit from programmes better suited to their needs and to the world of work in the 21st century.

In the meantime, we offer our thanks and congratulations to Ark and to Susan for a major contribution to education development.

John Hillier, Senior Adviser and Honorary Fellow, Commercial Education Trust

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1. Executive Summary

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 from the programme 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, being 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 and other 'top third' 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 those of 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 level.
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.



2. Introduction and context

2.1 Background: BTECs, a route to higher education or employment?

Amongst vocational qualifications for sixth form students, the BTEC Diploma occupies a distinctive position as a consistently successful alternative to A levels (Wolf, 2011). Introduced in 1984 as a post-16 qualification directly linked to employment (Raine, 1984), it has enjoyed decades of popularity with students seeking a vocationally-oriented course with continuous assessment. Whilst A levels remain the most common post-16 choice, the inclusion of BTEC qualifications into the UCAS tariff points framework raised their profile and universities began incorporating them into published entry requirements, sending a message that BTEC was now a route to university as well as the workplace. As a consequence, the proportion of 18 year olds entering university with BTEC steadily increased (UCAS, 2015) and the qualification began to be recognised as ‘different but equivalent’ (e.g. Reidy 2015). However, the evident success of BTEC in widening participation for students from non-traditional backgrounds has also been presented by the media as an outcome associated with ‘failure’ at some universities (Henry, 2014).

Research with students taking BTEC has found they are overwhelmingly proud of their course and the skills it enabled them to develop, but feel that Level 3 BTEC is often seen as ‘second best’ and does not have parity with A levels (Mime and UCL, 2020). This perception of BTEC is often linked with it having lower entry requirements than A level courses, but Richards (2016) noted both a rapid increase in the number of students choosing a BTEC qualification, and an increase in the number of BTEC entrants who had achieved 5 A*-C grades at GCSE.

Support for this perceived lack of parity is evident in information for university applicants: the UCAS website acknowledges that some universities are more ‘BTEC-friendly’ than others (UCAS, 2020). A BTEC Diploma, even with the highest possible grades, can limit higher education options to prestigious universities, which may require applicants to have taken certain subjects at A level in addition to their BTEC qualification (Russell Group, 2020).

National datasets have consistently shown that students who enter university with a BTEC qualification are more likely than A level students to leave during their first year (HESA, 2019), and attention has been drawn to a significant issue for the small number of BTEC students who enter ‘prestigious’ universities, which have the lowest BTEC completion rates of all (Kelly, 2017). Interpretation of this data has suggested that BTEC students may require both better advice at school and more support at university if their degree completion levels are to be raised to those of A level entrants with equivalent tariff points (Holford, 2017). Masardo and Shields (2015) found that students with vocational qualifications possessed confidence, interpersonal skills and a sense of agency that could help them succeed, but suggested that universities might better support them.

Debates around the increasing use of BTECs as a university entry route and concerns about ongoing ‘academicisation’ have raised questions about their future role (Kelly, 2017). A recent government review of Level 3 qualifications has announced the removal of funding for Applied General Qualifications (including BTEC) in favour of a binary choice between A levels and the new Technical levels, specialised courses that will require an early commitment to a career (Department for Education, 2020). This raises concerns that a young person whose potential will not be fulfilled by the linear exams-based structure of A levels, but is seeking a broadly-based degree leading to a range of career options, will no longer have a route to higher education.

Adapting Kelly’s terminology, the Ark Professional Pathways programme is to some extent a ‘vocationalisation’ of the current BTEC curriculum, adding high quality employer engagement activities and knowledge of employment-based post-18 routes to the academic content of the course. Research has confirmed that even a relatively small amount of employer engagement can have a beneficial effect on educational outcomes (Kashefpakdel, et al. 2019). Professional Pathways offers two years of engagement opportunities combined with work readiness skills, information about apprenticeships and support for the applications process. However,

creating an appetite for an apprenticeship can only produce results if there are sufficient places on offer. Currently, the competition for a high-level apprenticeship is greater than the competition for a place in some of the UK’s top universities, demonstrating the importance for schools of both promoting apprenticeships and fostering links with employers able to provide them (Kashefpakdel and Rehill, 2017).

2.2 Context: the Professional Pathways programme

In 2016, Professional Pathways was introduced with small cohorts in three Ark schools as a unique approach to delivering vocational and technical qualifications. The programme is now delivered in each of Ark’s 13 sixth forms and is supported by a central Professional Pathways team. The programme aims to develop outstanding teaching, learning and assessment practices across the Ark network, ensuring the academic attainment of students on taking BTEC qualifications (currently in Applied Science, Business, Sport and Exercise Science or Information Technology). This is supported by a wrap around curriculum that enables students to gain the skills and experience they need to make informed choices about their next steps. This includes developing the habits, skills and mindsets essential to success at school and beyond, and giving access and exposure to universities, apprenticeships and careers, with opportunities to network with industry professionals. These enabling factors sit at the heart of the Professional Pathways programme (see Figure 1).

The wrap around curriculum follows a scheme of work devised by the Professional Pathways Team, who also produce the staff/student resources that underpin delivery in each participating Ark school. Content is framed around a series of questions that encourage each student to explore their skills (using the Skills Builder framework, see section 3.5), abilities and motivation, providing information that can help them to make good decisions and, ultimately, preparing them for a successful transition to university or employment. Awareness and understanding of current labour market information brings an element of realism to career planning.

Each term begins with self-assessment of the skills focus for that term and the bespoke workbook reminds students that the point of mastering these skills is that they help ensure success at sixth form, university or apprenticeship level, and in building a career. The termly workbooks are supported by direct links to additional sources of information, (e.g. the Careers Pilot or Rate my Apprenticeship sites) and, crucially, the workbook explains how to *use* external sites to gain maximum benefit and inform decision making. Lessons, which are designed to be delivered weekly, are supported by participation in four Student Conferences (see Table 1).

Figure 1: Enabling factors in the Professional Pathways programme

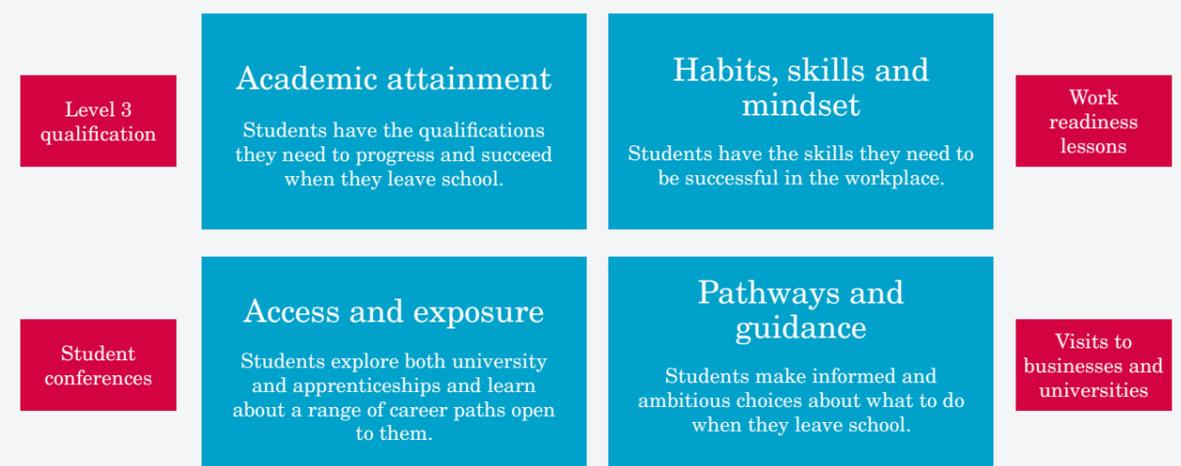


Table 1: Overview of the two-year wrap around curriculum

| | | Autumn Year 12 | Spring Year 12 | Summer Year 12 | Autumn Year 13 | Spring Year 13 | Summer Year 13 |
|--|----------------------------|---|---|---|--|--------------------------------|--|
| | | Who am I? | Where am I going? | | How do I get there? | | How do I succeed when I get there? |
| Weekly work readiness lessons | Question and Topics | As an individual, in a team, as a leader? Self-management and motivation. Work-place behaviour. | Labour market information and careers. Post sixth form options. | Selecting and securing post sixth form destinations. | Making your applications stand out. Recruitment processes. | Financial literacy. | Preparing for results day and transitions. |
| | Skills focus | Staying Positive & Aiming High. Leadership & Teamwork. | Speaking & Listening. Problem Solving & Creativity. | Problem Solving & Creativity. | Speaking & Listening. Leadership & Teamwork. | Problem Solving & Aiming High. | Staying Positive. |
| Staff and resources: wrap around curriculum created by Professional Pathways Team, who also produce staff resources (e.g. ppt slides), student resources (e.g. termly workbooks) and deliver staff training. Weekly lessons are delivered by a nominated teacher in each school. | | | | | | | |
| Student Conferences delivered by PP Team. | | Conference 1 Content aligned with Who am I? and Autumn term skills focus. | Conference 2 Content aligned with Where am I going? and Spring term skills focus. | Conference 3 Content aligned with How do I get there? and Autumn term skills focus. | Conference 4 Content aligned with How do I succeed when I get there? Summer term focus on transition skills. | | |

In identifying roles and responsibilities, it is important to note the extensive cross-over between schools and the Professional Pathways central team. For example, the work readiness lessons are delivered by schools but the termly workbooks that structure the lessons are written by the central team and contain frequent links that encourage students to make use of the additional knowledge and resources that central staff can provide. Some student activities are returned directly to the central team for comment or evaluation, and some are associated with incentives (e.g. bookshop vouchers) for participation. Employer engagement activities benefit from direct contact with the Ark Education Partnership Manager.

Support for staff teaching on the programme includes:

- termly Ark Network training days arranged around relevant themes
- subject lead networks that link staff delivering the same BTEC pathway in different Ark schools
- seminars for teachers delivering the wrap around curriculum, supported by a Microsoft Teams group that provides a forum for feedback and enables sharing of best practice.

Table 2: Staff roles in delivering the Professional Pathways programme

| Programme area | Activity | Role of school | Role of Ark central staff |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|--|
| BTEC National Extended Diploma | Delivery of the BTEC qualification. | Planning, timetabling, teaching, marking. | Professional Pathways central team run the online network and coordinate network activities. |
| | Online teacher support network. | Used by subject and Professional Pathways teachers. | Central team involved in delivery, plus BTEC qualification provider: Pearson. |
| | Training events for teachers and other staff. | Subject network leads involved in delivery. | |
| Wrap around curriculum | Work readiness lessons. | Deliver the lessons. | Produce scheme of work, teacher and student resources. |
| | Student conferences. | Arrange student/staff attendance at event. | Content, delivery and hosting of the conferences. |
| Employer engagement | Regular interactions via school and workplace visits. | School coordinates and manages visit arrangements. | Curated by Ark Partnership Manager. |
| | Support for a specific BTEC module. | School makes request via central team. | Central team finds an appropriate match. |

The wrap around curriculum is additional to the careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) that is available to all Ark students. Structured by the Gatsby Benchmarks, CEIAG is delivered by a Careers Lead in each school, with support from a central Head of Careers. Comparison of the Ark entitlement for all year 13 students with the additional provision offered to Professional Pathways students shows the benefits of the programme, particularly for those students who may be interested in an employment-based route post-18 (see Table 3).

Table 3: Ark CEIAG entitlement and the additionality offered by Professional Pathways**Entitlement for all Ark students by Year 13**

Every Ark sixth form student:

- is supported to visit their intended place of study for post 18 options
- has had a second opportunity to practise interview skills with a suitable individual and received feedback
- is given on results day the opportunity for a 1:1 interview to discuss options and those who missed grades are given specialist advice and guidance about potential options
- has experienced curriculum learning that highlights the relevance of their subject to future career pathways
- has participated in at least one meaningful encounter with an employer every year, from age 11
- has a minimum of two meaningful opportunities to learn from employers including a talk from a relatable role model
- has had one further experience of the workplace
- has had at least two interviews with a qualified careers adviser
- can access a varied programme of extra-curricular enrichment that covers sport, music, culture, the arts and social action
- can access a varied programme of super-curricular enrichment to extend curriculum learning through ‘real-world’ application of skills
- takes part in at least one extra-curricular programme during the week at school.

Additional provision included in the Professional Pathways programme

Every Professional Pathways student:

- follows a six-term curriculum (one hour per week) that supports their academic study and their CEIAG entitlement
- is supported in Year 12 to answer the questions *Who am I?* and *Where am I going?*
- Is supported in Year 13 to answer the questions, *How do I get there?* and *How do I succeed when I get there?*
- participates in four Student Conferences
- uses the Skills Builder framework to enhance their understanding of how essential skills can support their studies and make them work-ready
- completes termly skills self-assessment exercises
- completes detailed workbooks aligned to the curriculum that encourage informed decision making for careers and post-18 options
- interacts with employers and alumni via actual and virtual panels
- takes part in employer and university visits
- has access to a range of employer engagement activities including mentoring and work experience
- has applications support for both UCAS and apprenticeships
- understands how to access labour market information and can identify top employers and high-status universities.

In combination, the Ark student entitlement and the Professional Pathways additionality provide an impressive CEIAG programme that more than meets the Gatsby Benchmarks. A Professional Pathways student in a central London school, who takes up every opportunity they are offered, will have a range of employer interactions that far exceeds the Gatsby Benchmarks and probably matches that available in many independent schools. However, it is acknowledged that this

will not be the experience of every Professional Pathways student, and there are two potentially constraining factors. Firstly, students will inevitably vary in the use they make of the CEIAG provision in their school, with some engaging more fully than others. Secondly, schools will vary in the provision they can offer (e.g. those based in central London have much greater access to top employers than other schools).

3. Methodology

3.1 Aims and objectives of the evaluation

The overall aim was to evaluate the effectiveness of Professional Pathways in preparing young people for successful outcomes at sixth form and beyond, including their ability to achieve and sustain ambitious post-18 destinations.

The research objectives aimed to understand:

- how students research and choose the five universities for their UCAS application
- what motivates some students to find and apply for apprenticeships
- student experience of the transition to university
- the experience of employment-based learners
- the role of essential skills in achieving and sustaining post-18 options
- any similarities or differences between Professional Pathways and A level students at any stage of the research.

A secondary aim of the project was to investigate how the evaluation process itself could be structured so that emerging research findings could be shared, the implications discussed, and evidence-based innovations developed for the programme as the project progressed

3.2 Data collection

Data collection took place over a three-year period using a mixed methods approach in which data relevant to each of the research questions was gathered using more than one technique, building a triangulated evidence base that added strength to the overall findings. Data collection techniques included online surveys, focus groups and interviews. All of the research was structured around the 13 essential and professional skills that underpin the Professional Pathways programme (see section 3.5).

Because the research methodology was designed to facilitate an ongoing iterative dialogue that could feed into curriculum developments whilst the research was taking place, subsequent data collection could provide feedback on the value of innovation already embedded.

Surveys

A total of five surveys (507 responses) were administered during the research: Oct 2018 survey of Ark alumni to establish baseline data; Jun-Jul 2019 surveys of Ark school leavers and Ark alumni; May-Jul 2020 surveys of Ark school leavers and Ark alumni. This sequential use of surveys had two advantages: 1) it enabled direct comparisons between surveys by asking the same question on two occasions, and 2) it allowed for amendment of survey questions to explore issues that were emerging from the interviews. The number of A level respondents was inevitably higher in every survey since Ark schools have more A level students, but although the number of Professional Pathways respondents was sometimes low, this was offset by the use of a triangulated evidence base in which data from in-depth interviews provided additional evidence to support survey findings. Overall, Professional Pathways students were under-represented in the survey data.

Interviews

In-depth interviews took place throughout the research: Nov 2018 with Ark alumni now at university or employment; Jul 2019-Sept 2020 with Ark alumni in their first year at university; Jan-Mar 2020 with year 13 students; Apr 2020 with Ark alumni in apprenticeships; Sept 2021 with graduates, final year university students and employees. There were three formats: a

one-hour, face-to-face meeting at locations including London, Manchester and Birmingham; a 45 minute telephone interview; a series of interviews (between 5 and 8) conducted by telephone or Skype. Interviews incorporated the completion of rating scales or card-sorting tasks using 13 essential skill statements (see section 3.5), thereby producing quantitative data that enabled direct comparison of survey and interview data. Qualitative data provided insight and understanding. A total of 45 students/alumni (24 Professional Pathways, 21 A level) completed 95 interviews (54 Professional Pathways, 41 A levels). Professional Pathways students were therefore over-represented in the interviews.

Focus groups

Focus groups with Ark alumni took place in Jul-Aug 2019 and Nov-Dec 2019. Group size was typically four to six and the sessions lasted between 60 and 70 minutes. Group discussion was structured by an initial task in which participants selected two things they had found challenging and two things they had found easy, from twenty statements comprised of the 13 essential skills and seven additional 'lifestyle' issues (e.g. living in halls). This ensured the discussion would include topics relevant to the aims of the research. A second topic was introduced for the final 15 minutes of the session: how can the Ark alumni team support students as they transition to university or employment? A total of 33 alumni volunteers participated in 7 focus groups, with A level alumni over-represented in 5 of the groups.

3.3 Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed to produce descriptive statistics and, where relevant, inferential statistics to determine the significance of apparent differences or similarities between groups. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis in which interview transcripts were coded, refined and recoded to identify categories that could then be grouped into themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A sample of transcripts was independently coded by a second researcher to establish consistency of approach.

3.4 Ethical considerations

Ethical issues were considered at every stage of the conception and design of the project, a prime consideration being that no participant would feel their behaviour had fallen short of expectations in any way. The research adhered to the British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2018) and complied with the Ark Safeguarding Policy. Interview and focus group participants received information about the research, a consent form and the opportunity to ask questions before agreeing to take part. The online surveys began with information about the research and data protection and stated that by completing the questionnaire participants were giving consent. All participants were volunteers and all were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the research at any stage.

In this report, any information that could identify a participating student has been anonymised, meaning that student names, gender, schools, universities, employers, and other details that might point to an individual student have been removed. Where students are quoted directly, the initials 'PP' (Professional Pathways) or 'AL' (A level) are used to aid understanding whilst maintaining confidentiality.

3.5 Defining the skill statements that underpin this research

At the start of this research project, the Professional Pathways programme was already using the sequential stage statements in the Skills Builder assessment tool to encourage both skills development and self-assessment. A small pilot study for this research suggested that the simple, overarching definitions of eight essential skills used in the Skills Builder framework (Millard, et al., 2017, p15.) would provide an effective way to maintain consistency over a three-year research project using surveys, focus groups and interviews. These formed the first eight skills statements used throughout this project:

1. My ability to listen and understand information.
2. My ability to present to others in order to share ideas.
3. My ability to approach challenges and situations where the answer is not immediately clear.
4. My capacity to think creatively and develop new ideas.
5. My confidence and effectiveness working as part of a team.
6. My ability to lead others.
7. Having high aspirations for myself and being able to work towards achieving those.
8. My resilience and ability to overcome setbacks.

Five additional skill statements, developed to measure elements of the Professional Pathways wrap around curriculum, completed the list of 13 skills used throughout this research project:

9. My ability to interact confidently with professionals such as lecturers and employers.
10. My ability to use digital tools such as email, Microsoft Word, Excel and online job applications.
11. My ability to manage my own time.
12. My ability to manage my finances including budgeting, setting up a bank account and applying for loans or mortgages.
13. My understanding and interest in wider world issues such as politics and the environment.

To gain a broader picture of what the skill definitions mean to Professional Pathways students, and how relevant they are to their day-to-day experience, a series of workshops with year 13 students (43 students from four schools) confirmed that the definitions were well understood, and that there was a shared understanding of meaning within each group. When students were asked to select five or six skill statements for which they felt able to give a strong example, every skill was chosen by at least seven students, showing that all 13 statements were relevant to students' experience on the programme. The skills most frequently chosen as examples were: ability to manage own time, use of digital tools, confident interaction with professionals and effective teamwork. The skills least often chosen were: understanding of world issues, ability to approach challenges and situations where the answer is not immediately clear, and ability to manage finances.

The consistent use of these 13 statements proved valuable throughout the project, providing a framework for collecting, analysing and interpreting data, and enabling comparison of Professional Pathways students with A level students and with Ark alumni who had taken the standard BTEC route before Professional Pathways was introduced.

4. Choosing options at 16 and 18: academic or vocational?

4.1 GCSEs and post-16 options

None of the research strands specifically asked students about their GCSEs or sixth form choices, but during the in-depth interviews participants often made spontaneous comments about their post-16 options. A level students spoke about choosing their subjects, but none of them explained why they chose to study A levels. In contrast, Professional Pathways students often provided justifications for taking a BTEC qualification, confirming the general finding that students see this as the non-standard route. These explanations fell into two categories. Some students acknowledged that underperformance at GCSE prevented them from taking A levels:

Until Year 10 I was doing well at school and my teachers would have expected me to go on to A levels, but then I became more involved in out of school activities and stopped focusing on my work. In the January of Year 11 I started working hard but that was too late to correct the time I'd wasted. I didn't get all of my GCSEs and that's why I did BTEC. I'm very pleased now that I did the BTEC. I don't regret it at all. (PP)

Others had made a deliberate, positive choice that A levels would not suit them because of the emphasis on exams:

I'd always thought I would do these subjects in sixth form but knew in year 10 that I didn't want to do A levels. I chose BTEC because of the assignments and not many exams, which suits me better. I really like the BTEC style of learning. The assignments can be stressful, but the BTEC course was the right way for me to get the qualifications for university. (PP)

BTEC students as a cohort typically have lower GCSE points than A level students, but this does not apply to every student, and one interviewee who could have done A levels chose to join an Ark sixth form in order to take a BTEC:

My sister felt pressured to do A levels because she thought that was the only option, but later met people who got into really good universities with BTEC. My Mum told me to do whichever I thought would suit me best, so I chose BTEC and I got the highest possible grades. It hasn't stunted me, not at all. A few universities did say they were not accepting BTEC, but I have a place at one of the top universities for my course. (PP)

BTEC cohorts may have lower average GCSE points than their A level peers, but it is important to recognise that BTEC students may have greater academic potential than their entry grades might suggest.

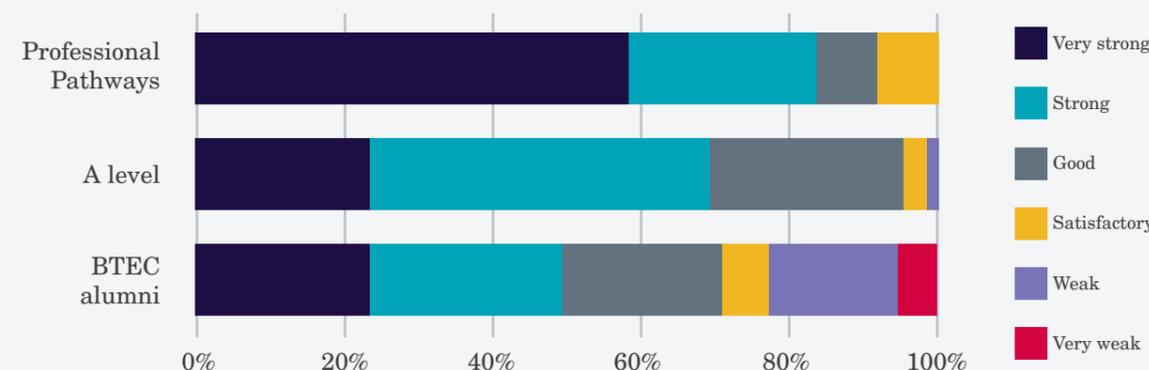
4.2 Post-18 choices: understanding of higher education and employment

Encouraging all students to apply for university is a key part of the Ark ethos and is made explicit to all students from year 7 onwards. Ark schools ensure their students are aware that universities are perceived to vary in status, and they know how to use league tables and other sources of information to compare universities and subjects. Schools use an annual list of 'top third' universities (drawn from the Complete University Guide) to help identify ambitious destinations, and students are also encouraged to select universities that have at least a silver rating in the TEF (Teaching Excellence Framework). The guidance for university applicants therefore encourages them to aim high and enables them to use comparative data when selecting universities. High levels of knowledge and understanding of higher education would therefore be expected.

Survey data from Ark year 13 leavers showed that Professional Pathways respondents rated their knowledge and understanding of higher education options higher than did A level students (83% said very strong/strong compared to 72% for A level students). For purposes of comparison, very strong/strong ratings by alumni who had taken a standard BTEC course before Professional Pathways was introduced were just 50%, indicating the positive impact of the additionality provided by the wrap around curriculum (see Figure 2).

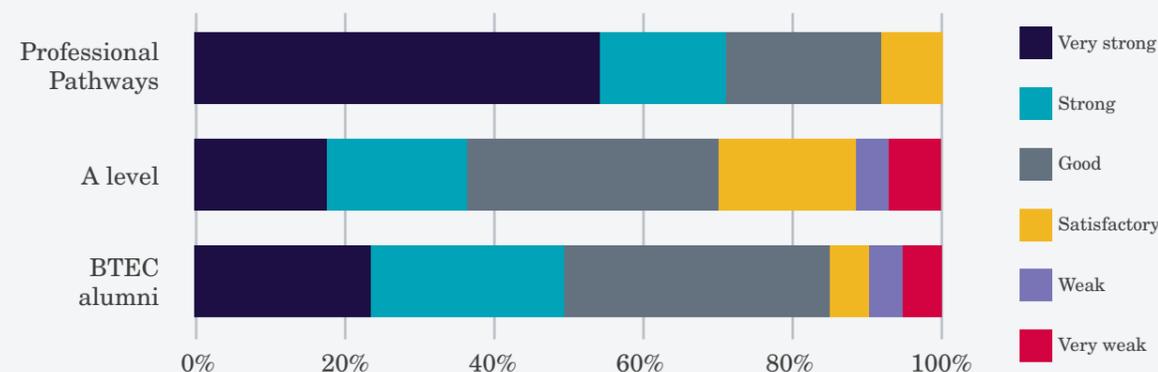
When knowledge and understanding of employment-based routes after school was questioned, the survey data showed that 73% of Professional Pathways students rated their knowledge as very strong/strong compared to 36% for A level students and 50% for alumni who took BTEC before the introduction of Professional Pathways, suggesting the wrap around curriculum has a positive impact (see Figure 3).

Figure 2: Knowledge and understanding of higher education on leaving school



(Respondents to this question = 93, of which 12 PP, 63 AL, 18 BTEC prior to Professional Pathways)

Figure 3: Knowledge and understanding of employment-based routes on leaving school



(Respondents to this question = 92, of which 11 PP, 63 AL, 18 BTEC prior to Professional Pathways)

Interview data showed that the increased knowledge of employment-based routes conveyed by Professional Pathways did have an impact on post-18 decision making, with 42% of these students applying for apprenticeships in addition to university. Some expressed a very strong preference for an apprenticeship, with their university place regarded as a 'reserve' option that they might not take up:

I don't really want to go to university, I've done it and got five offers but it's not what I want to do. I've done a lot of temporary work starting from as soon as I was old enough, and through school I've had lots of work experience with top companies. An apprenticeship is the best route for me because it opens doors and I'd prefer to be working. (PP)

One of the effects of greater knowledge and understanding was that Professional Pathways students had learned that getting an apprenticeship, far from being 'second best', can be highly competitive. The knowledge that an apprenticeship might not be a realistic option could push students towards university even when it was not their preferred option:

I'd rather do an apprenticeship and I have applied for some but haven't got anywhere. I know they do keep coming up but if I wait and still don't get one, I'll have wasted a year. I don't like the uncertainty, so now I'm thinking that it's best just to take my place at university. (PP)

It is true that, in comparison with the relative ease of getting a university place, there is an element of uncertainty around apprenticeships, where the number of places and timing of applications is dependent on each employer's requirements and competition can be fierce. As the research progressed, it became clear that some Professional Pathways students had taken up a university place as a default option having been unsuccessful with apprenticeship applications. In contrast, whilst A level students sometimes expressed doubts about *which* university to accept, none of them ever said they were considering *not* going to university. This difference between cohorts took on a greater significance as the research progressed: Professional Pathways students who had been unsure about university continued to express doubts during their first year.

5. Progression to university: five choices, thousands of options

The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) is a complex and highly centralised system in which an applicant must choose just five university courses from thousands of options. A fully rational choice, in which all options are considered to reach an optimum result, would be beyond the capacity of human decision making. Every applicant must find ways to simplify the choice process, and the strategy they use is highly dependent on the knowledge they have of the university sector. A student with a good understanding of the hierarchy amongst UK universities might simplify by using league tables; a student with limited understanding might simplify by relying on 'word-of-mouth' (McGrath and Rogers, 2021).

Careers entitlement for Ark students is aligned with the Gatsby Benchmarks and students are supported to make informed decisions. The Ark 'top third' list ensures that students begin the UCAS cycle aware that universities vary in status and understand the concept of 'aiming high'. Professional Pathways students also benefit from the wrap around curriculum and teachers who are trained to offer additional guidance and support for the application process. However, individual students will vary in the use they make of advice and guidance and there is no guarantee that all students will make a fully informed decision.

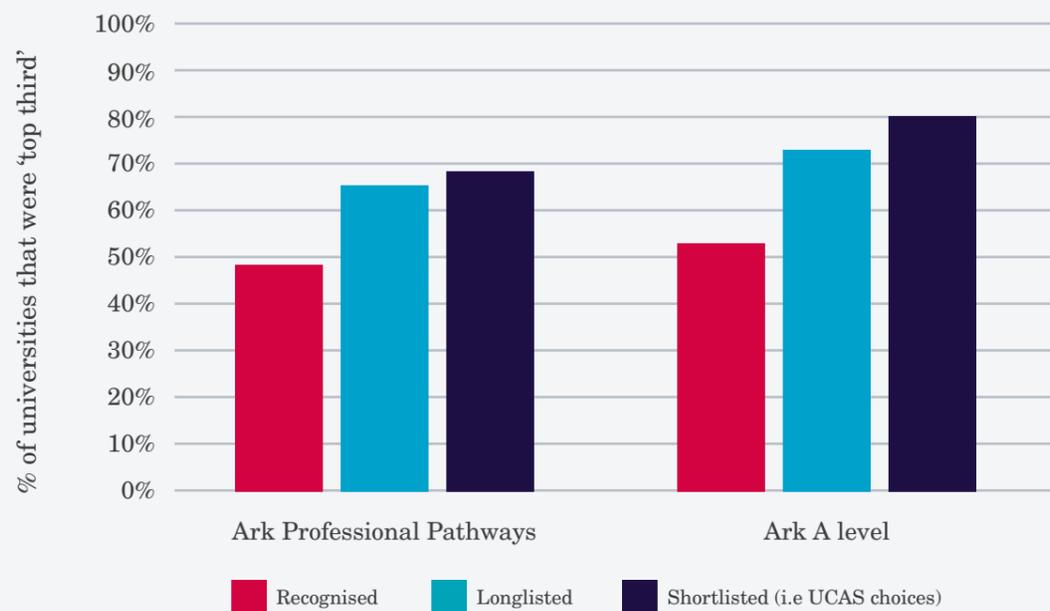
To explore this in more detail, in-depth research with a group of 19 Ark Year 13 volunteer students (12 Professional Pathways, 7 A level) was designed to unpick the decision-making process that led to the choice of five courses. Using card sort tasks in an interview format, students described how they had researched and chosen their five universities, providing detailed information showing which universities had been longlisted and shortlisted, and identifying key factors in the decision-making process.

In the sections that follow, Ark Professional Pathways students are compared with Ark A level students and, where relevant, data is shown for two other comparable BTEC cohorts: *Greenfields* and *Newtown* (McGrath, 2018). These two comparison cohorts were state-educated students in two institutions that, like Ark, offer students a choice of BTEC or A level for their Level 3 qualification. Students at *Greenfields* and *Newtown* had taken part in structured interviews using the same card sort tasks, meaning that valid comparisons could be made with Ark data. These comparisons provided an opportunity to explore any differences in behaviour that might result from the additionality provided by the Professional Pathways programme.

5.1 Recognition, longlisting and shortlisting of prestigious universities

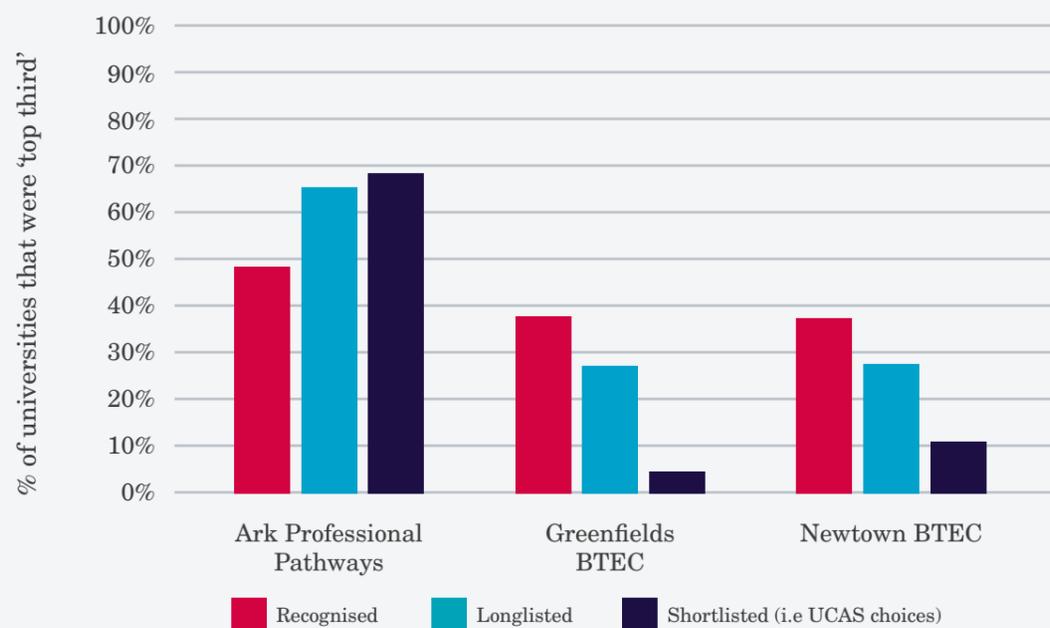
In card sort Task 1, students sorted a set of cards bearing the names of UK universities into four categories that identified the institutions they recognised, had longlisted, shortlisted or never heard of. Analysis of the data distinguished between 'top third' choices (drawn from the Complete University Guide) and 'other universities'. Comparing Professional Pathways students with Ark A level students, there was very little difference in behaviour. Both cohorts selected a high percentage of 'top third' university name cards at all three stages of the process, indicating that Ark's use of this identifier was encouraging students to aim high. Both cohorts showed increasing interest in 'top third' universities as they moved from recognised to shortlisted. The Professional Pathways cohort were slightly less likely to consider 'top third' institutions but testing the data statistically for an association between qualification taken and type of universities chosen did not produce any significant results. It appears that Professional Pathways students have the same high aspirations as their A level peers (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: 'Top third' universities recognised, longlisted and shortlisted by Ark year 13 interviewees



Comparing Ark data with the two comparison cohorts (*Greenfields* and *Newtown*), the outcome was very different. Firstly, the percentage of universities recognised, longlisted and shortlisted that were 'top third' was much lower at *Greenfields* and *Newtown*. Secondly, whilst the Professional Pathways students became more interested in prestigious universities as they progressed through the UCAS process, both comparison cohorts became less interested (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: 'Top third' universities recognised, longlisted and shortlisted by Ark and comparison cohorts



Testing this data for an association between cohort and type of universities chosen, produced statistically significant results at all three stages of the decision making process (Recognition: $\chi^2 = 12.60$, with $df = 2$, $p < 0.01$; Longlisting: $\chi^2 = 41.38$, with $df = 2$, $p < 0.001$; Shortlisting: $\chi^2 = 50.88$, with $df = 2$, $p < 0.001$). Interpreting these results, the data indicated that Professional Pathways students made university choices that would be far more typical of A level students than of other BTEC students. The distinctive behaviour of Professional Pathways students seems likely to be an effect of the additional guidance for post-18 choices, particularly the concept of 'top third' universities, which introduces the notion of a hierarchy rather than equivalence within the higher education sector. At *Greenfields* and *Newtown* there was no such list, and some students had insufficient knowledge or understanding to make status-based distinctions when choosing universities, leading to a heavy reliance on word-of-mouth to identify 'good' choices. It appears that Professional Pathways does equip students with knowledge that BTEC students may not typically have.

5.2 Which universities did Professional Pathways students longlist?

Because the card sort task used named UK universities, the numerical data in the section above could be translated into lists of the actual universities selected by Professional Pathways students as they made their UCAS choices. In total, there were 55 different universities included in the longlists of these students. Of these, 31 universities (i.e. 55%) were included in the Ark 'top third' list (see Table 4).

Scanning the longlists, the importance of geographical location was obvious: many students considered only those universities they regarded as close to home, which resulted in a concentration on London or the West Midlands. Where a distant university had been considered it was usually a well-known, top third institution (e.g. Manchester, Nottingham) or a place already known to the student because family members lived there (e.g. Portsmouth, Bradford).

Table 4: Universities longlisted by Professional Pathways students

| Universities longlisted | Times listed |
|--|--------------|
| Birmingham* and Queen Mary* | 7 |
| Aston* and Reading*. | 6 |
| Coventry, De Montfort, Kings* and Warwick*. | 5 |
| Bath*, Birmingham City, Bristol*, Brunel, East Anglia* Imperial*, Leicester*, London South Bank, Loughborough* LSE*, Manchester*, Nottingham*, Surrey*, UCL*, Westminster and Wolverhampton. | 4 |
| Greenwich, Royal Holloway*, SOAS*, Sussex*, University College Birmingham and West London. | 3 |
| Brighton, Cambridge*, City University*, Durham*, East London, Essex, Exeter*, Goldsmiths*, Lancaster*, Manchester Metropolitan, Roehampton, Sheffield*, Southampton* and York*. | 2 |
| Bradford, Keele, Kingston, Leeds*, Liverpool*, London Metropolitan, Middlesex, Newcastle*, Newman, Oxford* and Portsmouth. | 1 |

(* indicates a 'top third' university)

The importance of location was particularly evident when longlisted universities that were not ‘top third’ were considered: these were almost always considered accessible to the student by daily travel (e.g. Coventry, De Montfort, London South Bank, Westminster.). This pattern of choosing universities that were top third, or close to home, was continued into the shortlisting stage (see Table 5).

Table 5: Universities shortlisted by Professional Pathways students

| Universities shortlisted | Times listed |
|--|--------------|
| Birmingham* | 6 |
| Birmingham City and Reading* | 4 |
| Coventry, Queen Mary* and Surrey*. | 3 |
| Aston*, Bath*, De Montfort, Goldsmiths*, Greenwich, LSE*, Manchester*, Nottingham*, Royal Holloway*, UCL*, Westminster and Wolverhampton | 2 |
| Bristol*, Brunel, Durham*, East Anglia*, Exeter*, Leeds*, Sheffield*, SOAS*, West London and York*. | 1 |

(* indicates a ‘top third’ university)

Of the 28 universities shortlisted, 19 (i.e. 68%) were ‘top third’, showing that status had now become even more important. However, many top third universities that were too distant for daily travel had been dropped. The shortlists still included nine universities that would have required the student to leave home, but interview comments suggested only two of these (Manchester and Nottingham) were seriously being considered as possible destinations.

At the completion of the card sort task, students were asked if they could name the universities where they intended to accept a place through UCAS (two choices are allowed, a firm place and an insurance place). For those who had made this decision, the emphasis on accessibility from home became very evident, with Nottingham the only university that was beyond daily travel distance (and this student indicated that a local university was a more likely destination (see Table 6).

Table 6: Universities where Professional Pathways students had accepted a place

| | Times listed |
|--|--------------|
| Birmingham* | 4 |
| Birmingham City | 3 |
| De Montfort, Royal Holloway* | 2 |
| Aston*, Bath*, Nottingham*, Reading*, Surrey* and Westminster. | 1 |

(* indicates a ‘top third’ university)

A preference for universities that can be reached by daily travel reflects the national pattern for less-advantaged and first generation entrants to stay at home, and was not restricted to Professional Pathways: there were only three A level students who were considering leaving home and all three said they were more likely to accept an offer from a local university. The remaining fifteen students all said that location had been a key factor in choosing universities and that anything more than a short train or bus journey was too far:

I found about ten courses but some of them were too far away, and I realise now that this one (pointing to a university name card) is also too far away, so I’m not really putting all my effort into that. (PP)

I dropped some courses because the travel was too far, though two of the ones I kept have turned out to be unsuitable because the train journey is a negative for daily travel. (AL)

For students in London schools it was usually possible to find a local university offering a desired course, but those outside of London sometimes found that the course they wanted (or needed) to fulfil their career aspirations was not available within daily travelling distance. One student found that a longstanding career aim required a professionally accredited degree that could only be accessed by leaving home, and therefore had to rethink career plans:

I’ve wanted to be a (job title) since childhood but now I know there is only one possible course and even that is too long a journey, so I realised I would have to apply for other things. I’ve chosen a course that leads to another career, but some aspects of that job really don’t appeal to me. (PP)

This demonstrates the impact of local opportunities on career plans, and shows that some students (and perhaps their parents) may need information about their options even before they start secondary school.

5.3 Sources of information used to find out about universities

In card sort Task 2 the students selected cards listing sources of information (university websites, league tables, teachers, UCAS, etc.) they had used to find out about each of the universities they applied to, building a profile of how each student had gathered information to underpin their decision making. Overall, A level students used slightly more sources, selecting on average seven cards per university whilst Professional Pathways students selected an average of six. However, whilst A level students averaged between six and nine cards per university, there was considerable variation in the behaviour of Professional Pathways students, some of whom selected ten or eleven cards per university whilst others selected as few as three. A low number of cards was usually associated with an apprenticeship being the first-choice destination and the UCAS application only a ‘reserve’ option. Calculating an overall ‘usage’ figure for each source of information (i.e. the number of times a source had been used as a percentage of the total number of universities applied to) provided a useful way of comparing the behaviour of Professional Pathways and A level students. This section uses both the card sort data and the interview narratives to explore several themes that emerged from the analysis: status and league tables; course content; teaching style and modes of assessment; open days and visits; personal suggestions.

5.3 (i) The importance of status, reputation and league tables

Overall, league tables were used to check almost half of the shortlisted universities: Professional Pathways 49% usage, A level 44%. Figures for the two BTEC comparison cohorts were very much lower (*Greenfields* = 19%; *Newtown* = 17%) showing that the behaviour of Professional Pathways students was more similar to that of A level students than to other BTEC cohorts.

Looking at individual behaviour, however, there was considerable variation. Six students (four Professional Pathways, two A level) chose the league table source of information card for every one of their UCAS choices, and comments often indicated that these students had checked both the overall ranking and the subject ranking:

Of my five, this one (pointing to a Russell Group university name card) is higher status and a better course. I know this because I checked out my courses in the subject league tables, as it happens mine are similar positions for the university and the subject, but that’s not always the case. (PP)

A further six students (three Professional Pathways, three A level) said they had not checked any of their UCAS choices in league tables, but interview comments usually demonstrated accurate knowledge of relative status:

I haven’t used the league tables, but I know that (university A) is higher than (university B). And I know that (university C) is not a very good one, poorer facilities and a poorer learning experience. (PP)

Despite the high number of top third universities considered, none of the students seemed to feel that reputation alone was the most important factor. One student who was very clear about this had chosen universities with rankings that ranged from 3rd to 75th:

(University A) is the top university for my subject but that doesn’t really matter to me, and the course there is not so good. I don’t mind the status of the university. If anything, I want an interesting course that gives me the knowledge I’ll need to build my career, opens my eyes to things. So, (university B) is my first choice because of their course and (university C) would be my second choice, the course is good and it’s a very nice university. (AL)

Some students acknowledged that ‘top’ universities might have entry requirements they could not meet, and understood that the highest-ranking universities were not a realistic option, but this did not prevent them being aspirational:

My first choice is the highest university in the subject rankings that I have the grades for. I would have loved to get into a really good university, perhaps by doing a foundation year, but they don't offer them. (AL)

To get my five the first thing I did was to look at the grades they needed. I would have loved to apply to some of these (gesturing to the longlist university name cards on the table) but they were too high. (PP)

Overall, there appeared to be a realistic balance between status and other factors, and no obvious differences between Professional Pathways and A level students.

5.3 (ii) Importance given to courses: researching content, teaching styles and assessment modes

There were three source cards that related to information about the course. Course content (Professional Pathways 63% / A levels 63%), teaching styles (Professional Pathways 56% / A levels 38%), mode of assessment (Professional Pathways 26% / A levels 53%).

Course content was the card most frequently used during this task, and interview comments often referred to the relative content of courses at different universities. Most students identified one or more personal criteria that had formed part of their decision-making process when comparing courses:

My first-choice university offers the chance to have two six-month placements rather than just a year, and at my second choice it's a general course but offers the choice of a lot of international modules. (PP)

Two universities have made me unconditional offers but both courses focus on just one subject and I'm more interested in doing a broader

course, with more choice of modules. I really like the course at (university name). It has a diverse range of modules, including international relations and politics. (AL)

Whilst many students were choosing a degree that seemed a natural progression from their programme of study in the sixth-form, others realised that there was no single route to the career they envisaged:

The first thing for me was finding the right course. I think I'd like to be a (job title) but you can do that with a degree in lots of different subjects, so I was jumping about looking at different universities. (AL)

Several students had found that having to choose universities and courses at the start of Year 13 in order to meet the UCAS deadline had been too early for the stage of decision making they had reached. Some had responded by applying for two different types of course in order to delay the point at which they had to make a choice, and one student had made use of the UCAS system to change a course after applying:

After I applied for general courses, I got the idea of a possible career for which there is a specific degree, so at that university I've changed my option. (PP)

Students applying for a professionally accredited course (such as nursing or the professional law course LLB) did not usually comment on the content of the course, and one student did explain that content was not a basis for comparison:

Because I'm applying for a course where the content is always pretty much the same, that's not a useful way to compare universities, so at open days I always ask, what can you offer on top of my degree? (AL)

The style of teaching or mode of assessment was an important factor for some students, particularly if they had strong views about the type of assessment that suited them:

At my first choice the assessment is almost all coursework, I hate exams. The BTEC has four and I think that is four too many. (PP)

The content and teaching styles were important, but also how the course was assessed. I think exams are best for me because I'm used to that at A level. (AL)

Overall, whilst every student had checked content, teaching or assessment for some of their universities, only one student had done this consistently for all five universities. This was partly explained by some of the UCAS choice universities being mere ‘line fillers’ that the student did not regard as a serious destination, but this does raise concerns because students will not always be accepted into their first choice university. Interviews with alumni at university suggested that some students could have benefitted by selecting assessment methods that better suited their personal strengths.

Overall, interest in degrees that would lead to a specific career was extremely high. Amongst the Professional Pathways students, there were three who had chosen courses including a year in industry, and four who had applied for courses with significant time spent in placements. Amongst the A level students, four had applied for degrees that would be followed by a postgraduate year to achieve professional qualifications. When these figures are added to those who were seeking an apprenticeship as their first choice, vocational routes had been chosen by 92% of the Professional Pathways students and 57% of the A level students.

5.3 (iii) The role of open days and visits to universities

The card sort task showed that of the 89 UCAS applications made, only 34 of the universities had ever been visited by the student (Professional Pathways usage 33%, A level 47%). There were three students who had not visited any of the five universities they applied to, a further ten who had only visited one or two of their choices, and just one student who had visited all five universities. This was an unexpected result, because Ark sixth formers, particularly Professional Pathways students, take part in many university visits and often commented on the value of this experience:

Visiting a university really helps, you can see what it's really like. I've been to (universities A, B, C, D and E) with school - but they don't have my course. I've visited one of the five universities that I've applied to. (PP)*

**all Russell Group*

A possible explanation for failure to visit some UCAS choice universities is the acknowledged existence of ‘fillers’ on the application form;

a second explanation is that the student was hoping for an apprenticeship so had not seriously researched any universities. Both of these explanations applied to the student quoted above.

There is a widely-held belief that university applicants begin the process by longlisting possible universities, attend open days to help them narrow down their choice, and then shortlist against a number of personal criteria to select the most suitable five courses/universities. Some students had done this:

I would say that open days are one of the most useful things, I'd say to people 100% to go to them. I went to about six or seven altogether. Ask them questions, see what the atmosphere is like, find out about societies, can you see yourself fitting in there? (AL)

However, a more common pattern amongst the interviewees was to begin the UCAS process with one or two universities already in mind, only changing if they did not receive an offer at one of these universities. Attending an open day was therefore mainly to confirm knowledge they already had:

I already knew two of the universities because we'd had visits there with school for different activities. I knew before I started UCAS that it would probably be those two, so I didn't bother going to any of the other open days. (PP)

For some students, the opportunity to visit a university before applying did not seem to be viewed as a necessary part of the decision-making process, particularly if it was listed as ‘top third’ or had been suggested by a teacher. However, those who did visit sometimes found out things that would not have been apparent from websites or prospectuses, demonstrating the real value of such events:

When I went to (university name) I only saw two black people all day, so when I got back I went online and looked for some statistics and I found out that the university is 75% Caucasian, and some ethnic groups are almost nil. I would not find students there who shared my background. (PP)

This degree of research was unusually thorough. The student had uncovered something that resonates with some of the findings of the alumni interviews, in which two of the Professional Pathways alumni described a sense of not ‘fitting in’ with their peers who, they felt, came from very different backgrounds.

5.3 (iv) The role of personal suggestions: family, teachers and friends

Suggestions from teachers, relatives or friends were included in the card sort task and every student selected some of these cards, though Professional Pathways students chose more overall (Professional Pathways: teachers 53%, family 22%, friends 8%; A level: teachers 27%, family 12%, friends 8%). If students had familial experience of higher education (usually siblings or cousins), this could be a major influence on their choice of universities. Many of the students described parents who were very supportive of higher education but, since they had no personal experience, felt the choice of course and university was best left to the student and the school:

When I was coming up with a list of places to consider one of the things that influenced me was, 'Do I have family there? Can they give me advice?' The way my uncle spoke about his university, he said it was really good, and others in the family were saying that would be the best option for me. My second choice, I also know people who have gone there and done well. (PP)

I've got relatives at university, so I'd heard some things from them. My parents want me to stay in education but apart from that they say it's my choice what I do, they've left the choice entirely up to me. They can't really advise me because they haven't done it themselves. (PP)

Subject teachers were most often referenced by A level students and had provided valuable support when a student wanted to continue their subject at university or planned a career in teaching:

When I started A levels, I realised that my preferred subject was my weakest, so I discussed options with my teachers and decided to focus on my best subject instead. I felt the best person to go to for advice about university and careers was that teacher, who then gave me some good advice about places that would suit me. (AL)

I had been going to apply for a degree in education but then my teacher explained that was not the best route for me. She advised me to take a degree in the subject first then do a PGCE or Teach First to get my teaching qualification. (AL)

Professional Pathways students often spoke of support from teachers with aspects of the UCAS application, and suggestions for universities that would suit their grade profiles. No students referred directly to the Professional Pathways workbooks, but some of the comments did seem to relate closely to the advice given in the wrap around curriculum on making informed university choices:

I knew that I wanted business, so I started with the league tables to make my longlist. I researched them all and got the list down to ten, then I used the websites and social media to find out what it's really like from people studying there. I looked at the modules, placement opportunities, and financial support. My first choice is not the highest in the league tables but has all the things I am looking for. (PP)

Many students made very positive comments about careers staff, and some had clearly understood and made use of the breadth of experience they could provide, describing a range of underpinning activities that had often begun before sixth form, and could offer a wider perspective on what might be possible after school:

The careers teacher here goes above and beyond and has let me know about everything that is happening. For example, the university residential I did and all of my different work experience opportunities and placements came through Careers. (AL)

Most students said they had discussed their choices with friends, but that this had not influenced them. However, the strong tendency to stay close to home meant that most students would have family, friends or peers at the university they chose.

6. Transition to university: 'settling in' or 'dropping out'?

This section draws on content from a total of 65 interviews conducted with 20 Ark alumni now at university and is organised by key themes that emerged from the research. The students included both Professional Pathways (9 students, 36 interviews) and A level (11 students and 29 interviews). Students included first, second and third years. Higher education institutions attended included Russell Group and post-92 universities, including main sites and satellite campuses. Subjects studied included science, engineering, technology, business, humanities and medicine/health sciences. Courses included 3-year and 4-year degree programmes, sometimes including a year in industry or a series of placements. Two of the students had taken a gap year in which they worked in career-relevant jobs. The group included students living at home and students in university accommodation. Focus groups with 33 alumni at university covered very similar topics and raised the same issues, supporting the view that these key themes are widely experienced.

6.1 First steps: Freshers' Week, clubs and societies

For most Students' Unions, a major focus of Freshers' Week is the Clubs and Societies Fair, which is a key opportunity for engaging with a wide range of extra-curricular activities on offer at most universities. Research has shown that extra-curricular activity can help to meet employer expectations for students to display capacities beyond those of simply achieving a degree. Involvement develops social networks that can have both short- and long-term effects on employability. However, students from working class backgrounds may be less engaged in extra-curricular activities, sometimes stating financial reasons (Stevenson and Clegg, 2011; Bathmaker et al., 2013; Clark et al., 2015).

Three of the alumni interviewees said they had been encouraged to engage with clubs and societies from the start. They spoke with real enthusiasm about their involvement, and two of them suggested on more than one occasion that sixth forms could benefit from similar opportunities:

In sixth form I had a mentor who was a student here, so that's how I knew about societies. I joined ISoc right at the start and got involved in meetings, events, taking on responsibilities. A lot of the skills I have now, things like leadership and teamwork, they come from the societies. I wonder if my school could have them? It would put leadership in the hands of the students. (AL)

I've joined the animation society and I've got onto the committee of the programming society. I'm also doing martial arts, and I've realised it's much cheaper to do that as a university thing, which is pretty cool. My tutor has told us to engage as much as we can with things that can build our CV. (PP)

We had team exercises which helped us to meet people on the course and societies help enormously to socialise. I've joined Photography Soc, Kayaking Soc and Scuba Diving Soc. I tried to join Paramedic Soc, but it was full of Med students. It would be very beneficial if something like this could be done at A level. (AL)

However, most of the alumni interviewees had little involvement in Freshers' Week. Sometimes practical difficulties were an obstacle, but some students found that there was little on offer:

For me, with managing my course, my placements, and a part time job, I don't really have time to get involved in the broader university. Maybe once I get really settled in and feel I can manage everything I might look to join a club or something...preferably a sports club, possibly netball as I did that at school. (PP)

I didn't bother with Freshers' Week that much because I'm not living in, so I didn't get to make any new friends. I do mean to join some Societies but haven't done that yet. Next term I'll have two days with no classes, so I think I've got a better chance to get involved in something. (AL)

There didn't seem to be much happening in Freshers' Week. I don't think there are any societies on this site, we've been here 3 weeks and nobody's told us about anything like that. Everything seems to happen at the main campus. (PP)

Students who joined things during Freshers' Week always spoke about clubs and societies at any subsequent interview and, whilst they often referred to the CV building potential of their activities, these students also spoke of having a good circle of friends:

I'd say definitely join societies. A lot of people think it's very academic, or that with things like sports clubs you always have to compete, but it really isn't. Societies here take loads of different people and it really improves the experience of university. You make a close group of friends. (AL)

Those who had not joined anything in Freshers' Week usually made no mention of clubs or societies in subsequent interviews unless they were specifically asked about it, and it seemed that joining a society *after* Freshers' Week could be difficult:

I did join the film society, but I joined a bit late and didn't go to the first two meetings, so then I felt like everyone knew each other and I felt a bit out of it - so I didn't go again. (PP)

I've noticed that if someone comes along to join late, they don't always get a good welcome. That's something I'd like to change next year now that I've been elected into committee positions. (AL)

Students who did not join anything often said at the end of term one that they had made no friends. Conversations with Ark partner universities have confirmed the importance of friendships, with some Students' Unions running sessions on how to make new friendship groups, spelling out the advantages of having a social network.

University prospectuses and websites usually emphasise the availability of clubs and societies, regarding them as an important 'selling point'. What is less obvious is the extent to which societies vary between universities. In reality, one of the advantages conveyed by the most prestigious universities is the strong connection between their societies and top employers. A Professional Pathways student, whose own choice of university had been guided by a search for 'industry standard' facilities and content (based on knowledge gained through employer engagement) discovered through involvement in societies that some universities have links to top employers that may not be immediately evident:

I was able to attend an event at another university where the societies handle thousands of pounds, because there are large companies who sponsor them. At my own university, we have a £90 budget for the year. And that comparison, the scale of things...it's become very apparent to me now that there's a real difference between the universities. (PP)

Focus groups with Ark alumni have also suggested that whilst some students use Freshers' Week to kick-start their social life and generate possible friendships, others do not. The focus groups often echoed the comments of interviewees who asked whether Ark sixth forms could introduce societies to help encourage involvement at university. A broader picture of in-school and out-of-school extracurricular activities has been gained via the year 13 leavers survey. Data shows that for both Professional Pathways and A level students there were high levels of sixth form participation in employer engagement (e.g. networking, mock interviews) but relatively low involvement in sport, music, drama or art. Out of school, A level students more often reported a hobby, interest or socialising. Professional Pathways students had paid work or supported family more often than A level students (see Table 7).

Overall, it seems possible that many of the clubs, societies and other activities promoted to students during Freshers' Week may appear to lack continuity with school experience or out of school activity, which may contribute to low levels of involvement in university life.

One further extra-curricular activity was referred to by just two students: the election of student representatives. One student had been elected as course representative and, in future interviews, displayed how this could develop a greater understanding of how the department worked and how students could influence outcomes. The other student was aware of the election of student representatives but felt this might take up time that should be used for study.

Table 7: Involvement in extracurricular activities in school and out of school

| Activity | Professional Pathways | | A levels | |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------|-----------|---------------|
| | In school | Out of school | In school | Out of school |
| Employer engagement | 89% | | 94% | |
| Part-time paid employment | | 52% | | 38% |
| Volunteering | 71% | 40% | 50% | 37% |
| Having a mentor | 24% | | 18% | |
| Being a mentor | 41% | | 20% | |
| Supporting family members | | 27% | | 15% |
| Sport | 24% | 33% | 19% | 55% |
| Music/drama/art | 16% | 11% | 21% | 14% |
| Hobby or interest | | 53% | | 74% |
| Socialising with friends | | 59% | | 82% |
| Any group, club or association | | 18% | | 27% |

(Respondents to this question = 111, of which 19 PP, 92 AL)

6.2 Beginning the course: initial experiences of the teaching environment

In conversations with Ark partner universities, the transition process has been identified as potentially more challenging for BTEC students than for A level students. One university partner described an extended induction programme offered to BTEC entrants, to provide a 'softer' introduction to university life, academic expectations and what to do if things go wrong. Part of the thinking behind this is that BTEC students follow a highly structured course, in small classes, where work is given and completed in quick succession. Then, suddenly, at university find themselves in huge groups, with distant lecturers and deadlines weeks or months away.

However, in the alumni interviews and the focus groups, both Professional Pathways and A level students said they had experienced challenges in moving from sixth form to the very different teaching environment of a university. How the student reacted to these challenges was partly influenced by the facilities or support available to them, and this varied considerably between different universities. Those students who had an academic induction week that gave clear guidance from the start, particularly if they also had accessible lecturers or tutors, usually felt comfortable with the demands of their course quite quickly:

The teaching is structured around a lecture followed by reading to be done for discussion in a seminar. The course handbook has the marking criteria, advice on how to approach the question, how to lay work out, do footnotes, etc. They demand seriously different things than A level. Every idea you have isn't really your own, so you have to reference it. (AL)

The lectures are very fast paced but they are all recorded so that we can watch them again later. We've also been told we can talk to the lecturer in their office hours. There's a big jump in the tasks from sixth form to university. There is so much reading, at first I was overwhelmed by it all but this is my third week and I'm feeling happier now. (AL)

Other students were finding it harder to settle, particularly if information about styles of teaching found on university websites or given at open days now turned out to have been misleading. For some students there was real concern that this would impact on their academic progress:

We were told lectures would be recorded, which would be good as I can't write fast, but it's only been done by one lecturer. I'd have brought my own recorder if I'd known and I'll be emailing the university about this. I feel it shouldn't have been promised. It's made harder by the lecturers using high level language, assuming we know the technical terminology. (AL)

We have Blackboard here and I understood that every lecture would be recorded, but it turns out that most of mine are not, so I'm trying to write everything down as they are speaking but you miss things. The topics are similar to my BTEC modules, but really the difference is in the words, the language is more sophisticated and there's more detail than at sixth form. (PP)

Another problem that could have a negative impact was the discovery that course content did not appear to match the information available on websites and at open days when universities were being chosen:

Before I chose this course, I looked at the modules and compared them with the BTEC units that I liked. There was project management and lots of other things that fitted with my strengths and what I enjoy. But now that I'm here the modules are not all what I expected. I checked and some of them seem to have changed. (PP)

The first lecture, I thought maybe I was in the wrong place. The lecturer seemed to be talking directly to some students at the front about a different course. One of my BTEC teachers had told me always to ask if you don't understand, so I went up and spoke to the lecturer. She told me we are joining lectures in another subject first before we start the modules that are just for our degree. (PP)

Discovering that a compulsory first-year module was on a topic the student had not expected was not an isolated incident. For the student quoted above, the change was significant: in a later interview it emerged that their examination result in that subject had missed a pass mark by just one point, impacting on confidence about completing the course. In a final interview at the end of year one, this student expressed a concern that university departments may sometimes choose module titles that obscure those elements of the content that are perceived by prospective students as being 'difficult'.

Another problem with course content concerned prerequisites, i.e. modules that are 'entry requirements' for later modules. Failure to take a prerequisite module can have a serious impact in later years of the course, but this terminology was rarely understood. Some of the interviewees had found that poor understanding of the relationship between content and regulations had a negative impact that did not become apparent until the second or third year of their course. For some the issue was course content, but lack of a prerequisite could also have potentially serious consequences for a student's mode of assessment:

I've realised that there was a decision even before I started here that has an impact on future choices, because some modules are only available to those who chose higher level maths in the first term. There was a chance to change group during the first two weeks, but I don't think it was made sufficiently clear that this could have important consequences. (AL)

This year had the option of a final project, but only if you had already taken certain modules, which I hadn't, so my modules this year will all have exams. (PP)

There were two students whose description of their teaching experience was very different to the norm, as they had deliberately chosen a course that was structured to be learner-friendly:

I came here because the course had been restructured to make it a much better experience for students. We've started with practical classes at the university in a realistic setting, it feels like being at work but offers much more support for the first few weeks. It's a good approach and I feel I've had a smooth transition. (PP)

The entire course is on a mobile app right here on my phone...you see? The titles of every module... then details of content... then learning resources... things about assessment. It's easy to plan my time and to see exactly what activities I need to do in preparation for every class. We have an online forum so we can share information and learn from each other. (AL)

This description of a very structured learning environment in many ways reflected the comments made by Professional Pathways alumni when they reflected on their experience of taking BTEC and contrasted this with their current university experience. Those who had progressed to Russell Group universities were the most likely to say that they were now experiencing a very different academic environment in which they often felt unsupported.

6.3 Living at home, moving away

In the year 13 study there was a strong bias towards living at home, but the alumni interviews included eight students who were living in university accommodation, and six of these had moved to a different part of the country. Seven of these students had an Ark bursary that made a significant contribution to their living costs. Most seemed to be happy with their room and their flatmates, though problems did crop up, some relatively trivial, others more serious:

We share a kitchen, and it's a mess 24/7. I would clean it and then 10 minutes later it was a mess again. One girl went home for Christmas and left cheese that grew mould and was all hairy and smelling the kitchen out. Now we are going to have a flat meeting so everyone can talk about what we are going to do. (PP)

I'm satisfied with my flat's location, but my flatmates are not like the friends I had back at home. I find myself quite apart from them. I spend all my time alone in my room, the others have a very different lifestyle. Here there seems to be a lot of just socialising which is not really for me. (PP)

Living away from home is often cited as a good way to make friends and settle in at university, but students who were unhappy with their accommodation often made frequent home visits and sometimes said they were thinking of dropping out or changing universities.

Being away from my friends is hard, so I go back quite often at weekends. I can be myself there, am accepted, can hang out with them, play football. There is nothing like that here. If I'm still unhappy next term I will start looking to change universities. (PP)

Conversations with Ark partner universities have identified that when students choose a local university and continue to live at home, many of them will simply attend for classes then go straight home, making it difficult to help them understand how the wider opportunities offered by a university can enable them to develop in ways that stretch far beyond the academic. In the interviews it did not necessarily follow that living away from home would be linked to taking up the wider opportunities because only two of the eight who were living in university halls had become involved in clubs or societies. Those students who chose to stay at home raised issues that focussed on two themes: how to make friends, and problems with daily transport:

When I first came here it was really hard and there were times when I was very unhappy. I felt like socially I would probably have had an easier time settling in somewhere with more students who live at home. But now I've got to know people on my course, and I do use an hour or so most days just to socialise. (AL)

A big problem right now is the journey. It's very long and busy, the travel conditions aren't the same at different times of day, and roadworks are unpredictable. I was recently stuck on London Bridge for so long that I missed the start of something. (PP)

Those who described difficult journeys to their university were not necessarily living at home; some students were placed in halls of residence a considerable distance from their university, a possibility that had not been appreciated at the time of applying. For those talking a course with work placements, there were additional factors to be considered, including unsocial hours and high costs:

I'm looking to start my first placement in January. I know where it will be, and the travelling is tricky because it's not on a good bus route. Based on the placement times, I will have to book taxis to get there in time each morning but should be able to come home on the bus. This is partly why I'm also doing part-time work and saving to get a car. (PP)

6.4 'Not settling': what makes students drop out of university?

There were six interviewees who said they had thought about leaving their course. One of them did leave after successfully completing year one, having discovered that a non-graduate career route was available. Another had to withdraw from university to take resits before entering the next year of the course. None of the Professional Pathways alumni left their course during the research, but four of them spoke of possibly dropping out of university in at least one of their interviews. Conversations with these four students often revealed a complex mix of positive and negative feelings as they considered alternatives and weighed up their situations. Thoughts and emotions could change dramatically from one interview to the next, as circumstances changed and new information became available:

(Term 1) I've got my test result and it's one mark below passing. That's completely shocked me and I'm thinking university isn't for me. I'm worried that I'll fail the year so maybe it's best to drop out now, maybe I just need to be working. (Term 2) I told you last time that I was contemplating dropping out, but then I contacted the lecturer who said 'You just need to do some extra work and you'll pass it' so I realised I was maybe putting myself down a bit. (PP)

This student did pass all of the first year assessments and entered year two of the course feeling confident and making career plans, but academic issues were a common factor for most of those students who had, at some point, thought of dropping out.

6.5 Academic progress: modes of assessment and feedback

The year 13 study had shown that students did not always research the modes of assessment used in the courses they applied for. Professional Pathways students often said that the ongoing assessment of BTEC had suited them better than final examinations, but some alumni were now taking university courses with a significant weight of examinations, and were concerned about the impact on their module results:

I want to take a resit of one exam where I already have the module mark and it is only a 2.2, because that's not good enough. I want to improve that to a 2.1. (PP)

The module where I failed the exam also had groupwork which was fine, so I'm feeling more confident about things now, but I have to resit the exam. Once I pass, I won't have to think about that subject ever again. (PP)

However, assessment by assignment was not without problems, despite the BTEC emphasis on this. Professional Pathways students often said that sixth form teachers would check on assignment progress, issue reminders about expectations and deadlines, and might have the flexibility to negotiate deadline extensions in response to reasonable requests. In contrast, university lecturers may hand out assignment titles at the start of term and never refer to them again; work may have to be submitted by deadline to a central office with no involvement of the lecturer; and there may be fixed penalties for non-compliance. These are significant differences that may not have been fully absorbed by former BTEC students until they encountered a problem:

I had a lot of things happening and gave in one of my assignments after the deadline. When I got the mark there was a 20% penalty for being 2 days late, which was upsetting because the actual mark would have been a first and now I have nothing to show how well I did in that module. (PP)

I needed extra time for a piece of work and thought that would be straightforward to negotiate, but now the Student Centre keep asking for more information, evidence. I'm worried about how it's going to turn out. In the worst-case scenario, I might have failed that module. (PP)

Despite the worry and upset, both of the students quoted above also had at least one module for which they had received a first-class mark, and both had a good final grade profile at the end of the year.

When students spoke about the feedback they had received on their assignments or examination performance, it appeared there was often no commonly understood format, even from lecturers within the same department. Lack of feedback was particularly important when a student might have to re-take an assessment, and the contrast with BTEC was often striking:

Feedback is kind of lacking right now. With the test I didn't pass, we just got the results, your grades were up there and that was it. We didn't get the actual paper to see where we failed. We don't get the answers back to the questions, or the questions up on the site, we don't get anything like that. At school, the teacher goes back over exam questions so that you can learn for next time but with this, I just don't know what questions I got wrong or what I really need to focus on. (PP)

Another student reported choosing second year modules entirely on the basis of which lecturer would take the course, having decided that a sympathetic teacher who was prepared to answer questions about the assessment was more important than the topic of study. This student described an early experience of being made to feel like 'a cheat' when asking a question about an assignment. There often seemed to be a tension between assessment for learning and assessment of learning.

6.6 Choosing the wrong course or the wrong university

The year 13 study had shown that at the point of choosing, students believed they had done enough research to make informed UCAS choices. However, those alumni who were unhappy with either their university experience or their course frequently said that with hindsight they had not done enough to find out what a university was really like:

I know now that going to an open day or school visit has a completely different atmosphere than if you just randomly walked in. I quickly found that my university was nothing like the open day impression. It had a social atmosphere, not a studious one, and I felt that staying would be a waste of three years, so I left. (AL)

I made a late decision to change my course because this is in the top ten for my subject, and it's near home. But I've realised now that our lecturers also teach at other universities, and they all have different approaches and styles of teaching. Some are hard to understand, and one just seems to push his own book. (PP)

Both of these students made positive statements about the careers staff at their school. They had listened to advice, attended open days and checked course content, but this had not been sufficient to make a fully-informed decision in a complex system that presents thousands of options. The student who made a late decision had chosen a 'satellite' campus; the university concerned did not appear to have conveyed realistic information about the limited opportunities this would offer.

6.7 The role of essential skills: time management, finances and resilience to overcome setbacks

In the first year of this project, alumni interviews had shown that a key factor in thoughts of dropping out could be self-assessed weakness in three skills: time management, financial management and resilience to overcome setbacks. These continued to be referenced throughout the study. Students who self-identified as having issues with **time management** often referred to organisational difficulties that had been recognised by the student long before they began university:

Even at school my time management was very weak. At sixth form they tried to instil good time management by having a full timetable with detentions for being late, but I didn't really see the value of that, I was just avoiding punishment. When I started at university, I realised that time management at school had no lasting effect on my behaviour. (PP)

I've always been easily distracted. If I made a list of things to improve, I would put time management right at the top. Once I got to university my problems with this snowballed and I couldn't catch up enough to pass everything. My plan now is to have a year out and then start the whole year again. (BTEC student prior to Professional Pathways)

Most of the alumni interviewees seemed to be satisfied with their **financial management**, but two students who rated this skill as very weak were amongst those who talked of dropping out. Neither said that *lack of money* was the major factor, the problem was managing it:

We did have something on finance at school, but at the time it didn't really mean anything to me, I didn't understand why I'd need to budget. Coming to university was the first time I'd ever had money that meant I could look at something and just buy it. Some people seem to be good at managing money but I'm not. (PP)

Support for financial literacy was the first outcome to be embedded in the Professional Pathways programme, and this was followed by an online course for Ark Bursary recipients. Both of these innovations were positively referenced in the interviews:

There was nothing on finance when I was in sixth form but I've heard from a relative who is there now that the BTEC course has changed and there is some finance information included. That might have helped me a lot. (BTEC student prior to Professional Pathways)

When I got the Ark bursary there's a module you have to do online with a quiz and things and that was all about managing your own money so that really helped, it was interesting. Ark should do that for every student. (PP)

Weak self-assessment of **resilience to overcome setbacks** was a significant factor for a student planning to repeat a year of study, who ended the interview by reflecting on the sixth form experience:

Thinking back to how things were at school, there were setbacks but help to get around them. My BTEC teacher kind of rewired me, taught me to trust myself and build a really good work ethic. I went to university with high aspirations, but quickly realised I wasn't good at working towards achieving them. I was failing but didn't know what actions to take. A big thing the school could do is to prepare students for the possibility of failure. (BTEC student prior to Professional Pathways)

Overall, the interviews suggested that rating even one of these three skills as very weak could be a sign of problems to come. Rating two or more as weak was always associated with thoughts of dropping out, and these students acknowledged that the weakness had existed as far back as GCSE, sometimes saying they felt it was an aspect of their personality that had proved resistant to change.

6.8 A wasted year? Some end of year reflections

Students who spoke of perhaps dropping out did not usually explore any serious alternatives, but one did leave at the end of year one and another was researching the option of transferring to a different university. However, both felt their experience had been beneficial in some way:

I do see myself graduating, however I do it. Whatever happens after this first year, whether I leave here or stay, it hasn't been a waste of time. I will have the qualifications I got here to prove myself if I apply somewhere else, and I have learned so much about life and about myself. Leaving home and living with other people has shown me different ways of life. (PP)

I don't see the year at university as a mistake. If I'd stayed for two more years that would have been a waste of time and money but the year that I spent there shows that I can achieve at degree level and helped me to work out what I want to do with my life. I don't regret it. (AL)

During the final set of alumni interviews there were several students who reflected on their transition to university in a way that was more open than the views they expressed at that time. A theme that emerged was that mental health and well-being are a serious issue for university students, who face a number of pressures that did not affect previous generations of students and graduates:

I worked my socks off for two years to get to university but you're sitting in front of a laptop for most hours of the day and it can get quite lonely. Even in a lecture, you've got people around you but it's people you don't know. A lot of the time I've felt sad, anxious. I know people who've done everything we were told to do, go to school, progress your education, get a degree, but now they are struggling to get a job. Really, it's about 'How do you enter the world of work?' (AL)

Comments about well-being were made throughout the research in both interviews and focus groups, and students often knew someone who had experienced mental health issues, but these became much more common from March 2020 when the impact of Covid-19 generated additional concerns about immediate problems and graduate prospects.

7. Employment-based routes to a career

This first part of this section begins by exploring the process of applying for an apprenticeship from a student perspective using the experience of eight applicants (6 Professional Pathways, 2 A level) three of whom had successfully entered an apprenticeship. The section then moves on to describe the experiences of seven Ark alumni (2 Professional Pathways, 5 A level) who were in employment at the time of their interview, supported by contextual information from conversations with Ark employer partners. An additional perspective is provided by data from surveys and focus groups.

7.1 Choosing and researching apprenticeships

Unlike the highly centralised UCAS system, the process of applying for an apprenticeship sits with the individual employer and there is a corresponding diversity of approaches. There are several websites that list apprenticeship opportunities, and some offer a registration service that can be accessed by employers, but in comparison with universities, there is a greater emphasis on applicants reaching out to companies directly. The number of available degree apprenticeships at any one time is very low in comparison with the many thousands of courses on offer through UCAS, and the competition to gain a place can be intense; resilience and perseverance are required for success. During the interviews with year 13 students, a question about interest in following an employment-based post-18 route identified five Professional Pathways students who said that an apprenticeship was their preferred option after school. These students were then asked to complete two further card sort tasks:

Task 3 was similar to Task 1 (section 5.1 p19) but instead of sorting university name cards, the student sorted a set of cards bearing the names of employers (drawn from the Rate My Apprenticeship list) into four categories: 1. *I have applied / plan to apply to this employer*; 2. *I am considering applying to this employer*; 3. *I have heard of this employer but do not plan to apply there*; 4. *I have not heard of this employer before*.

The cards placed in category 1 identified the student's shortlist and these, together with the category 2 cards, formed the student's longlist.

Task 4 was similar to Task 2 (section 5.3 p23) but now the student selected from a tray of 'source of information' cards to show how they had researched the employers they shortlisted.

Task 3 provided data that could be compared with the Rate My Apprenticeship's Top 100 employers list to explore how an understanding of the relative status of employers influenced students' interest and intentions (see Table 8).

Table 8: the employers longlisted by those seeking an apprenticeship

| Employers longlisted | Times listed |
|--|--------------|
| Transport for London* | 4 |
| Accenture*, Barclays*, BBC*, BT*, Capgemini*, Deloitte*, EY*, HSBC*, KPMG*, Lloyds*, PwC* and Sky*. | 3 |
| Atkins*, BMW*, Google*, ITV*, Jaguar Land Rover*, Mercedes*, Morgan Sindall, Nestlé*, Rolls Royce*, Santander* and Unilever*. | 2 |
| Arqiva*, Arup*, Babcock*, Balfour Beatty*, Bam Nuttall, Colliers International, EDF Energy*, Emirates, Enterprise*, Estée Lauder, Grant Thornton*, GSK*, Harrods*, Hilton Worldwide*, IBM*, L'Oréal, Mace, Microsoft*, National Grid*, Network Rail*, RBS*, Royal Mail*, Royal Navy*, Savills, Siemens* and Virgin Media*. | 1 |

(* Rate My Apprenticeship's Top 100 employers)

Of the 50 employers included in the longlists, 86% were on the list of Top 100 apprenticeship providers. There were seven employers for which additional name cards had to be written by students because the company concerned was not included in the list. This contrasted with the data from Task 1, where the option to write an additional *university* name card was never used. When the longlists were reduced to show just those which the students had shortlisted, the proportion of student choices that were hand-written cards (i.e. not included in the Top 100 list) became much higher (see Table 9).

Table 9: the employers shortlisted by apprenticeship applicants at the time of the interviews

| Employers shortlisted | Times listed |
|---|--------------|
| BT* and EY*. | 2 |
| Atkins*, Accenture*, Bam Nuttall, BBC*, Colliers International, Emirates, Estée Lauder, Harrods*, L'Oréal, Mace, Savills and Transport for London*. | 1 |

(* Rate My Apprenticeship's Top 100 employers)

The shortlists were expected to grow as more vacancies were advertised. Of the fourteen employers listed, 50% were not included in the Top 100 list. This was a very different pattern to the choice of universities, where most of those chosen were 'top third'. Interview comments often provided an explanation for this: some of the students already had a connection with a non-listed company they were applying to, usually through work experience or mentoring, and it was clear that personal experience of a work environment gave a degree of confidence about the quality of an apprenticeship there.

Another contrast with university applications is the need to decide on level of study, from Level 3 (equivalent to BTEC) to Level 6 (equivalent to a degree). Some Ark students do enter at Level 3 but, at the time of the interviews, most were focussed on degree apprenticeships:

I wouldn't want a Level 3 or 4 apprenticeship. I'm capable of getting the grades for university and I wouldn't want to settle for less. (PP)

Task 4, in which students selected from the 'source of information' cards, showed an emphasis on personal contacts, including careers fairs, school visits and teacher suggestions as ways of finding employers. Other items selected were: checking salaries, league table position, and finding out how an apprenticeship would be delivered and assessed. However, whilst the comparable task for universities had shown that every university applied to had been researched using at least two or three 'sources of information', seven of the fourteen employers did not appear to have been researched using any of the sources of information identified on the cards. At face value, this might suggest that employers were less well researched than universities, but the interview comments often added considerable detail and demonstrated a much higher level of knowledge than the card sort alone would suggest. For example:

I would love an apprenticeship at (employer name) if one came up. I had work experience there in year 12. We were with a different team every day, and they helped us to progress with a project to design a product to a client's brief. Monday was a focus on mechanical aspects, Tuesday electrical, and so on. We were told our client was not bothered about money, we had to come up with something that would stand out. The staff have a meeting and presentation every week to show what they have achieved, and that's what we had to do. I felt it gave me a real insight into how a day of work goes there, how they manage their work and meet their deadlines, how they understand what the client is asking for. (PP)

This student did not select any of the source of information cards for this employer, but evidently felt well-informed, explaining that knowledge about that company already gained from the work experience made many of the source of information cards redundant.

7.2 Graduate-entry careers

Some of the year 13 students wanted jobs that have become graduate-entry professions (e.g. nursing) so cannot be achieved through a non-university route. The application process for courses that include a 'licence to practise' includes additional elements that resemble job applications (e.g. interview, work experience, demonstration of competencies) enabling admissions staff to assess suitability for the job. Some students would have preferred an employment-based route if suitable options had been available:

In applying for nursing I'm aware of wanting to go to university with a purpose. In five years from now I see myself as a graduate - throwing my hat in the air - and then working and making a career as a nurse. If there were apprenticeships in nursing that could get me to the same place, I would have looked at that. (PP)

There is no local university that offers my course, but one thing I have found out about is that a degree apprenticeship might be starting locally. They have put me on a list for information and say it may start in a year or two, and they will let me know. I have some hard decisions to make. If I did wait for the apprenticeship, I would take a gap year and work. (PP)

That Professional Pathways students do leave their course with a strong focus on employment can be seen in the university courses they choose: 92% of the year 13 students picked a course that included a year in industry or significant time in placements or a licence to practise.

7.3 Personal characteristics of applicants for apprenticeships

Overall, there were several characteristics that seemed to be common to all of those interested in apprenticeships: a desire for practical or hands-on learning, a strong focus on work experience, and established career aspirations. When talking about the application process, they emphasised its relevance to real jobs and working life, often contrasting it directly with their experience of the UCAS process. They all had university offers, but these were often regarded as a second-best option to be taken up only if they could not find a satisfactory employment-based route.

Given that Ark schools place a strong emphasis on aiming for a good university, those who choose instead to aim for an apprenticeship have to some extent self-identified as 'different' to their peers. The interviewees often acknowledged this and described their choice with some degree of self-awareness:

This is a good school and university is put into your head from year 7, but after GCSE you start searching for what you think is most appropriate for you, and I thought, I don't want to carry on with study and go to university. I want something more hands on, so I started to look for something that would give me experience of work. (PP)

I'm the only student in the year going for this, but it's really important to think about what you like, and I'm pleased I did that - and pleased that I also said what I don't like. (PP)

In conversations with employers that informed this research, a common theme was that to be successful, apprenticeship applicants must have thought about their own motivation, working out who they are, what are their values, what they want, and what they can offer. Some went further, advising that teachers could play a role in helping students check the culture of an organisation before applying:

Almost every big corporate has values. One of the things you could do with students is to work out where these are really true, and where are they just value-wash, and then help them to work out their own values and whether they would match the culture and values of an organisation. (Employer)

Another common theme amongst employers was that applicants should have the ability to 'tell a story' that could articulate their potential value to the company:

The first step is they need to be able to articulate what their skills are, but they need to go beyond that. It's all very well to put down 'I'm adaptable, I'm flexible, a quick learner', but the next step is how do you explain that and prove it to someone who knows nothing about you. For example, a student may have learned English in 9 months, but they need to be able to tell that story in a way that brings those skills to life for people who are not a part of their daily lives, and need to understand their experience. (Employer)

The Professional Pathways students pursuing an employment-based post-18 route did seem to have thought about this, and one apprentice used part of the interview for this research to 'tell my story' as a way of answering a question. This confirms the importance of employer engagement in the Professional Pathways programme and the valuable contribution employers can make by conveying knowledge and understanding that subject teachers could not realistically be expected to have. However, the interviews with intending apprentices demonstrated a disparity that is acknowledged by Professional Pathways staff: inner London schools, because of their physical location, have greater access to high-quality work experience and other employer links than do schools in other areas. This could be seen most clearly when students spoke about their work experience.

7.4 The influence of work experience and employer engagement on those seeking apprenticeships

The value of employer engagement and the preparation for this provided by Professional Pathways was evident when talking with employers:

My experience of Professional Pathways students is that they behave in line with the expectations you would have of young people visiting or interacting with businesses. I see a lot of curiosity, a lot of interest, and they are appreciative of the opportunities they are getting and know that other schools may not give them that. (Employer)

It was noticeable that students seeking an apprenticeship had far more to say about work experience than did students planning to attend university. This does not necessarily mean they had done more, but it does indicate the importance of employment in their life plans. Those who were London-based referred by name to around twenty companies that are global leaders in their field and their descriptions of employer engagement were very positive:

I had an amazing experience at (company name). I shadowed someone in the office for a few days and then was given some onsite responsibilities. This was in Year 12, for 1 week, but then they asked me to go back again at Easter for 2 weeks. (PP)

I took part in a one-week programme for work preparation including things like workshops, CV writing, presentations, and met people from a whole range of top employers. All of this kicked off the idea of apprenticeships. (PP)

I have an amazing mentor, definitely a role model, who will support me till I get an apprenticeship or go to university. We check in about every 3 weeks...am I sticking to the goals we agreed? Do I need help with anything? (PP)

I did work experience in Years 9, 10 and 12 and it helped me to understand what I want. Civil engineering turned out to be lots of desk work, computer assisted design, and I thought no, that's not for me, so they told me about onsite jobs that will suit me better. (PP)

This career was in my mind for a long time and I thought about a post-16 apprenticeship but came into sixth form to do BTEC. Then in Year 12 I had another work experience and now that's brought me right back to where I started. (PP)

I've done work experience or volunteering in Years 10, 11 and 12, all in very different sectors. I've had some very different ideas – marine biology, marketing, finance – there are so many doors you can go through that take you to different paths. (PP)

The breadth and depth of experience described was often remarkable, but when Professional Pathways students outside of London spoke about work experience, it was clear they did not have access to the same range of top employers or variety of sectors. This was not a reflection on schools or staff. It is simply that large companies with the resource to engage with schools are more likely to be based in central London than other parts of the country.

7.5 Student experience of the application process - many systems, multiple applications

At the time of the fieldwork every student had completed the UCAS process and received most of their university offers, but because the apprenticeship applications cycle starts later, none of the students had yet received an offer of a place. Students often compared the UCAS process, with its concentration on a single generic statement forwarded to all five universities, to apprenticeship selection processes that were employer specific and competency-based:

Nothing in real life compares to UCAS, you don't do one personal statement and send it for every job. I'm looking for degree apprenticeships and the applications need cover letters that are related to the business, and there could be an interview, an assessment centre. We've studied things like recruitment and selection on our course. (PP)

I've already applied for two apprenticeships. I had to do an application with tick boxes - do I suit the characteristics - and now I'm at the video interview stage, a series of questions using my phone on video, with 30 seconds to think about the question and then 2 minutes to answer it. (PP)

Ark alumni who were apprentices at the time of their interview emphasised the amount of independent effort, motivation and resilience that had been required to be successful in an application process that can be far more competitive than getting a place at university:

First, I passed an online application, then an English and maths test, then assessment centre activities: summarising a report, writing a report, an interview about our report, then a 'normal' interview. I think there were about 2000 applications and they said I'd passed and was on a waiting list, then I got an offer a couple of months later. (AL)

I applied for between 30 and 40 using the government website, which was easy. Once you'd made a CV it was just click apply and your CV was shared - but most of the employers you never hear back from. (AL)

One apprentice said that employer engagement and apprenticeship guidance in Professional Pathways had been an integral part of a successful application, and schools should stress the need to take up every possible opportunity if they wish to gain an apprenticeship:

I did everything possible to get experience, network, build up a portfolio of contacts, and went to every external event that we were told about through the whole two years of the course. If you have nothing to talk about other than your course you are not going to make it, and being told something is not going to make you good at it – you need to practise your skills. (PP)

Survey responses from alumni who have obtained an apprenticeship were predominantly from A level students. They confirmed that persistence and independent effort are required, and that A level students could lack apprenticeship support:

I looked at UCAS, unifrog, government websites, employers like KPMG, EY, PwC, the BBC, and educational providers. I had to work out how to pick the best options, how to know if you've got a good employer, the training they have. I had to do this on my own. (AL)

It was clear that persistence could lead to success, but unsuccessful students also spoke of having worked hard for an apprenticeship. Given the relatively low number of apprenticeships available it seems that even with persistence, many will be disappointed.

7.6 Parental views on apprenticeships

Ark schools deliver messages about the value and importance of university from year 7 onwards. It is therefore not surprising that parents expected school to be followed by university, not an apprenticeship. This could create problems for students who decided to follow this route:

This school is all about university, so when I told my parents about apprenticeships it was, Wow! Where did that come from? My parents were... Why? Because, well to say to them I want to work not study... Wow! (PP)

My parents grew up not knowing about apprenticeships so they were slightly sceptical but I've told them I will be working and getting paid as well as getting a degree, so they are OK with it now, and they say it's my choice. (PP)

Not all parents had been won over. One survey respondent had gained a Level 6 apprenticeship but still did not have full support:

Some people (including my parents) look at apprenticeships as being lower than university. But once you look at the pros and cons you see that an apprenticeship does get you ahead of the rat race. Being paid, learning from experienced professionals at the top of their respected fields. You don't get that at university. (PP)

There were very few interviewees who said that a parent had heard about apprenticeships, and when they had, their knowledge was limited:

My Dad was looking at a government website and he read about an apprenticeship starting up in the subject I had applied for at university. He said, 'You know what, this is a great opportunity if you can study at university and get your foot in with a really good employer early'. (AL)

7.7 Apprenticeship guidance for all students?

There were examples in focus groups and interviews of A level students who said they would have considered this as a post-18 route if they had known anything about it, and several asked if Ark schools could address this:

In sixth form there was an intense period of time when everyone was working on their UCAS form. There were queues to see the careers staff and tutors. If there had been the same amount of emphasis on apprenticeships and employment I would not have gone to university. (AL)

Some who did know about apprenticeships said they had gained this knowledge from friends at school who were taking the Professional Pathways programme.

8. Workplace learners: apprenticeships, gap years and year in industry

Currently, the number of Ark students who directly enter employment-based learning or training after sixth form is low, but there was evidence throughout the research that students were interested in employment and saw apprenticeships as a positive route to a career:

- in workshops with year 12 Professional Pathways students, it was evident that many already had part-time employment, enjoyed the experience and responsibilities, and were aiming for an apprenticeship, not university
- in the year 13 interviews, 26% of the students said they really wanted an apprenticeship, not university
- in interviews with alumni now at university, 25% of first years and 13% of second or third years said they should perhaps have persevered until they found an apprenticeship
- overall, 21% of the alumni interviewees said that if their professional qualification had been available via an apprenticeship, they might never have applied to university.

Seven of the alumni interviews were carried out when the young person was in full-time employment. There were many positive comments about employment; even those who described their current work as 'just a job' said they were developing new skills and gaining knowledge. However, the clearest examples of a strong relationship between day to day work experience and feedback on performance were usually provided by apprentices.

8.1 Apprenticeships: learning and training in the workplace

Although the number of apprentice interviewees was low, they worked in different sectors and provided a range of experiences:

On a day to day basis, my role is supporting the finance team with queries about any software that we control so it's essentially working with administrators, or new people who may need to be set up, or people who are leaving, we handle all of that. We also have loads of projects with updating software and testing new software. (AL)

My main work is report writing and analysis, so being able to summarise and write concisely is very important. My reports will be read by someone very senior who doesn't have much time so it's vital that I give the key facts in a way they can quickly absorb. (AL)

Right now, I'm working with a team where there are restrictions on what I'm allowed to do (with clients) because I don't have the experience yet, so the work can feel routine. I thought I would get out of the office more, but it turns out they often want me to just do administration, which is not what I expected. (PP)

An essential element that separates apprenticeships from other employment is the formal integration of learning and assessment into the programme. There can be considerable variation in how this might be achieved, depending on the sector, the level of the qualification and to some extent the company itself. Individual students could therefore have very different experiences:

The university part of the apprenticeships is 20% of the programme, so every single week we are given one day for that week's lectures and then we've got an additional 3 days per semester that we can take whenever we want - maybe just before an exam or to complete an assignment. (AL)

The company integrate my training within my normal workday. I have to study a set of different units and my evidence for these comes from the work I'm currently doing. I have to write up answer sheets that relate to the unit specifications, and I'm always aware that anything might happen in my day to day work that could also be part of my training and assessment. (AL)

It seemed that when the training was clearly specified from the start, with employer and apprentice sharing expectations of what should be learned and assessed, the day to day activity of the apprentice made sense. If this degree of integration appeared to be lacking, there could be some confusion about the role and uncertainty as to whether sufficient progress was being made:

I'm only a few months in, and I'm at a top company so I'm certainly not complaining, but it's not what I expected. I've had a meeting to discuss this and now I'm going to be moving around departments every 3 to 6 months so that I experience a different area of the business. (PP)

Being the youngest person in an office often meant recognising that there was a lot to learn; it also meant learning how to ask for help or having the confidence to do so:

As I'm so young compared to my colleagues it's important that I show that I'm mature, that I'm meeting deadlines and getting work done correctly. There's a lot of collaboration involved and it's important that I reach out to my teammates and ask for help. There are lots of things I still don't know and that I'm still learning. (AL)

When I first joined, I struggled with some things. I kind of wrote everything and I was told that's not what they want. An important thing is email writing, how do you write, how do you address different people. I didn't have much prior knowledge so that's just something I've learned by picking up from other people's emails. (AL)

I want to learn about the whole business. One thing I've done is to get the names of key people in other departments so that I can find out more about how they work. I've met with them all and said I'd like to work with them in the future. (PP)

Taking an apprenticeship appeared to change pre-existing views of the value of apprenticeships as a route to a career, particularly in relation to sub-degree apprenticeships. Year 13 students had often said they would not want to 'settle' for a Level 3 or 4 apprenticeship because they felt capable of getting a degree apprenticeship. Experience could show that a reluctance to take a sub-degree level apprenticeship was misplaced:

I had a place for a degree apprenticeship but didn't get the grades, so took a Level 3 instead. It has broadened my knowledge, developed new skills, built up my portfolio and I've had a lot of fun. Hopefully next year I'll apply for more degree apprenticeships. (AL)

Some people, and I'd count myself in this, say 'I need to be in line with my peers who are doing a degree'. But I've met people who started at Level 3 or 4 then were offered a degree apprenticeship, and the experience of Level 4 allows them to progress anyway. (AL)

Although it seemed that there could be a potential conflict between aiming high and being successful at gaining an apprenticeship, some Professional Pathways students do progress to Level 3 apprenticeships. One survey respondent, having balanced the competitive nature of apprenticeships against the experience they could offer (even at Level 3), had clearly taken a pragmatic approach:

I knew I wanted to go into the finance industry however there was no specific apprenticeship for the job that I actually wanted to do. Some of them seemed better for me than others, but they are too difficult to obtain for me to be picky. (PP)

Overall, the apprenticeship experience was described with enthusiasm and positivity, and negative comments were only ever made in response to a prompt question that directly asked if there was anything negative about the experience:

Everything about my experience is a positive. If I was looking for a negative, I suppose the workload is heavy so it can be quite hard to manage your time. But I know I can't procrastinate – so there are benefits you can get from the workload as well. (AL)

8.2 Employment and the development of essential skills and knowledge

It seemed that the structure of an apprenticeship, with its ongoing assessment, focussed attention on what had been learned. A similar focus was described by a year in industry student who had a workplace mentor and placement supervisor. However, even students doing relatively low-status work in a gap year job felt that valuable employability skills were being gained:

If you want to enter a non-graduate career, I'd say that experience is vital alongside qualifications. Being successful in any kind of fulltime employment shows you have a lot of skills an employer needs, things like reliability, responsibility. Most employers are looking for competences, being able to demonstrate you have the things they are looking for. (AL)

In conversation with employers, the importance and relevance of the Ark skill definitions that underpin Professional Pathways has been confirmed. For example, **time management** is often the first skill that employers comment on and is regarded as highly transferable.

There's an awful lot you can't control in life, but you can usually control whether or not you're on time. Turn up late to a job interview and you don't get the job, turn up late on day one and you're out of the door. As an employer, that's a transferable skill that really resonates. (Employer)

Alumni in employment often confirmed this:

My routine has had to change massively to compensate for the hour it takes travelling to work. Being on time every day affects how people see you in the office. (AL)

As soon as you join the working world you need good time management skills or employers will simply show you the door. (PP)

Employers have also suggested that the time management definition could usefully be expanded to include anticipating what might get in the way, **pre-empting challenges** and operationalising a project in a way that takes it into the workplace:

One thing I think is missing from the skills statements is how they'd go about making a plan, delivering a plan, managing a project, that element of taking ownership of something. Things like pre-empting challenges, making sure you're really clear what your own goal is and actually operationalising it, thinking how you would take it into the workplace. (Employer)

Students often cite their project work to demonstrate time management skills, but in doing so they may not identify key elements that an employer would be looking for. A gap year student working in a relevant vocational field showed how employment had given greater understanding of skills in the workplace:

My time management was already good because of BTEC, but now I'd say this includes more - leaving work at work and home at home, making a clear plan for every stage of a project and being prepared for things to get in the way. I'm in a situation where it happens quite often that there's an emergency, so you have to drop whatever you are doing to deal with that. (PP)

The student quoted above also spoke about **resilience**, a skill that had been rapidly strengthened by dealing with emergencies:

I realised quite quickly that sometimes there will be a bad outcome and there's nothing we could have done to change that. The first time, it threw the whole day, but I was told to ask for time to recover if I need it and there is a lot of support from colleagues. Now, I would describe myself as very resilient in difficult situations. (PP)

Employers have confirmed that resilience is an expectation in many work situations:

For me resilience is very important. Having a plan is great but things don't always turn out your way, and life sometimes gets in the way of a plan, so resilience is really key, being able to pick yourself up, brush yourself off and keep going, or just reassess your situation. (Employer)

Another valuable employer contribution was that the definition of **listening skills** used in Professional Pathways should include the word 'actively', because in a working environment being able to really listen can make a valuable contribution:

With the listening skill statement, I think there's a word missing and it's to actively listen. In the working environment, being able to truly listen to what people are saying, even to hear what people are not saying, is so important. You need to really listen and empathise, understand someone's aspiration or the challenges they're faced with, if you're trying to drive action. (Employer)

Students in employment rapidly realised this:

Listening is also a big, big thing. I find that sometimes clients tell me something they may not share with a more senior person, so I could be the only one who really understands their situation. (PP)

I've realised here that listening is a very important skill. At school we're told to be quiet and listen, but what IS that? Is it to give a response, or to understand what we've been told? In a work environment it's crucial to know why you are listening and how you need to respond. (AL)

For students, the skill of **presenting** is often associated with group tasks for which PowerPoint slides are produced, but in discussion with employers, the point was often made that the purpose is 'getting through to people' not just working through a set of slides:

The ability to present and to share ideas is great, but to elicit a reaction, to drive action, is a higher order of that. What we've done for Professional Pathways students is to say, 'Yes, tell us about your idea but convince us, make us feel something'. If you're presenting you need to make people believe you, so you not only inform but also persuade and drive action. (Employer)

Employers have also emphasised that in a work environment the definition of **presentation skills** should often be much wider and can potentially encompass a person's everyday words, actions and non-verbal signals. Students in employment seemed to be absorbing this broader definition of presenting, often linking it to **leadership skills** and the building of **effective teamwork**:

I'm the project manager for two projects right now. I have a lead role in driving the team, so the ability to interact with other people and get my ideas across is crucial and I'm improving on a daily basis. (AL)

We have a rota of being team leader for the day, so then I have to take a lead in presenting ideas and communicating them well and confidently to others. But everything in this job is about teamwork so there also has to be a lot of sharing of ideas, for example, how can we be more efficient or make better use of resources. (PP)

The job I'm doing is not the field I want to work in, but I've developed skills here... confidence, working in a team, taking on leadership roles. Something that's often overlooked is the importance of building good relationships...little things like giving a thumbs up to acknowledge good work. (AL)

Employer conversations have suggested that the Ark **digital skills** definition, which lists Email, Excel, etc., could perhaps be amended because the digital skills landscape is changing every day, and being adaptable to new methods of work is more important to an employer than highlighting skills that would be expected in any employee. Our survey data has shown that Professional Pathways students feel better equipped to use digital tools than do A level students ('digital tools are used frequently in my course': Professional Pathways 89%, A level students 47%; 'digital tools/school prepared me very well': Professional Pathways, 56% A level, 19%). An apprentice who had taken A levels provided an example of this:

One thing that's really important and I had no prior knowledge of is Excel. When I joined I was literally in the dark, I had no idea and everybody in my team was doing everything on Excel so I really had to learn and teach myself – there was just an assumption that I would know how to use it. Could Ark schools provide that – perhaps through tutorials or after hours? (AL)

One of the aims of Professional Pathways is to help students develop their **understanding of world issues**. Entering the world of work, however, took this to a different level:

I've met so many professionals and I'm learning from them all the time, and my understanding of world issues has broadened because of the job. I've always watched the news, kept up with politics, Brexit...but now I can see how these things are relevant to my work and career plans. (PP)

In a work environment there's much more exposure to world issues, especially the political climate. Life has twists and turns. Not a single person here seems to be doing what they originally expected in life. At school you can get the impression that your choices will mean you get locked into a path, but it's not like that. (AL)

None of the interviewees taking a **gap year** had originally planned to spend time in employment, but it was clear that the benefits went far beyond 'extended work experience'. Gaining a better understanding of the real world could underpin better informed decision making that resulted in a change of course or university, and provided a long-term framework for career development:

A gap year has given me insight, skills and made for a smooth transition to university. It has also given me understanding of specialisms within my field and shown me which areas I enjoy. I would say to anyone, do some relevant work before you decide on university, at least three months. (PP)

I postponed going to university for family reasons but having real world experience changed my ideas about the type of university I should go to. I turned down a university near the top of the league table for somewhere with a very different approach to the course, one that I think will suit me better. (PP)

Choosing a degree course that included a **year in industry** was a good indication that the student recognised the benefits of employment long before they left school, but the positive impact of employment on career prospects may not be obvious in sixth form. An alumni interview with a university student provided a good example of how this might only become apparent after starting university:

We had an alumni event and around 70% were saying they got their job because they did a year in industry. So I talked with my academic adviser and I've enrolled to do that extra year. I can really see how it might benefit me in the future. (AL)

For a student who was interviewed during the year in industry, the experience had already proved so positive that it raised questions about whether the student should even have applied to university:

I'm only nine weeks into my placement year, and I'm already certain it would have been very important if I had looked into apprenticeships when I was at school. I'd never met any until I started working here. The advice I'd give to the school now is to really push apprenticeships. (AL)

9. Developing and articulating skills

This section of the report draws together different strands of the research to build a picture of how Professional Pathways develops the 13 essential and professional skills that underpin the Professional Pathways programme (introduced in section 3.5), and how this compares with the experience of A level students.

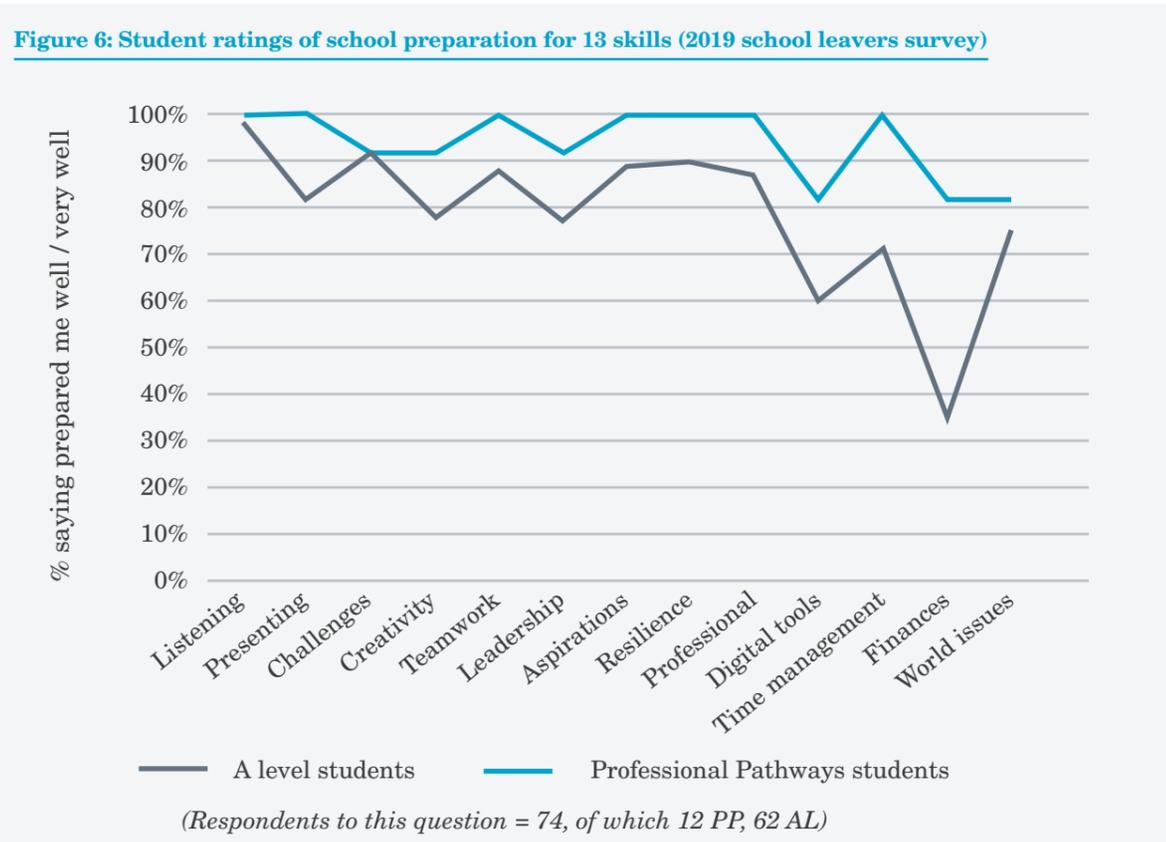
9.1 Skills preparation at school, and current self-assessments

In the first year of this project (Oct-Nov 2018) alumni who had left Ark sixth forms during the previous two years were asked to complete an online survey that included a question on the skills they had developed at school. Overall, the survey showed that when former BTEC students reflected on 'how well their school had prepared them' to use the 13 skills, they gave lower ratings than did

A level students. Nine alumni who volunteered to take part in follow-up interviews completed a self-assessment task in which they rated their current use of the 13 skills in their university study or their employment. Students who had taken BTEC again rated their skills lower than did those who took A levels. It seemed that A level alumni were more confident of their skills than alumni who had taken BTEC before the introduction of Professional Pathways.

In the second year of the project (Jun-Jul 2019) the 13 skills questions were included in the year 13 leavers survey, which meant that the ratings of A level students could now be compared with those of students who had taken their BTEC as part of the new Professional Pathways programme. The results of this survey showed that when Professional Pathways leavers rated 'how well their school had prepared them' for each of the 13 skills, the number who said they were 'prepared well', or 'prepared very well' was now higher on 12 of the 13 skills than the ratings given by their A level peers (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Student ratings of school preparation for 13 skills (2019 school leavers survey)



The survey data indicated that the additionality afforded by the new Professional Pathways programme had been effective in making students feel they had been well prepared for the skills they would need for the next stage of their education or training. Interview data often confirmed this view:

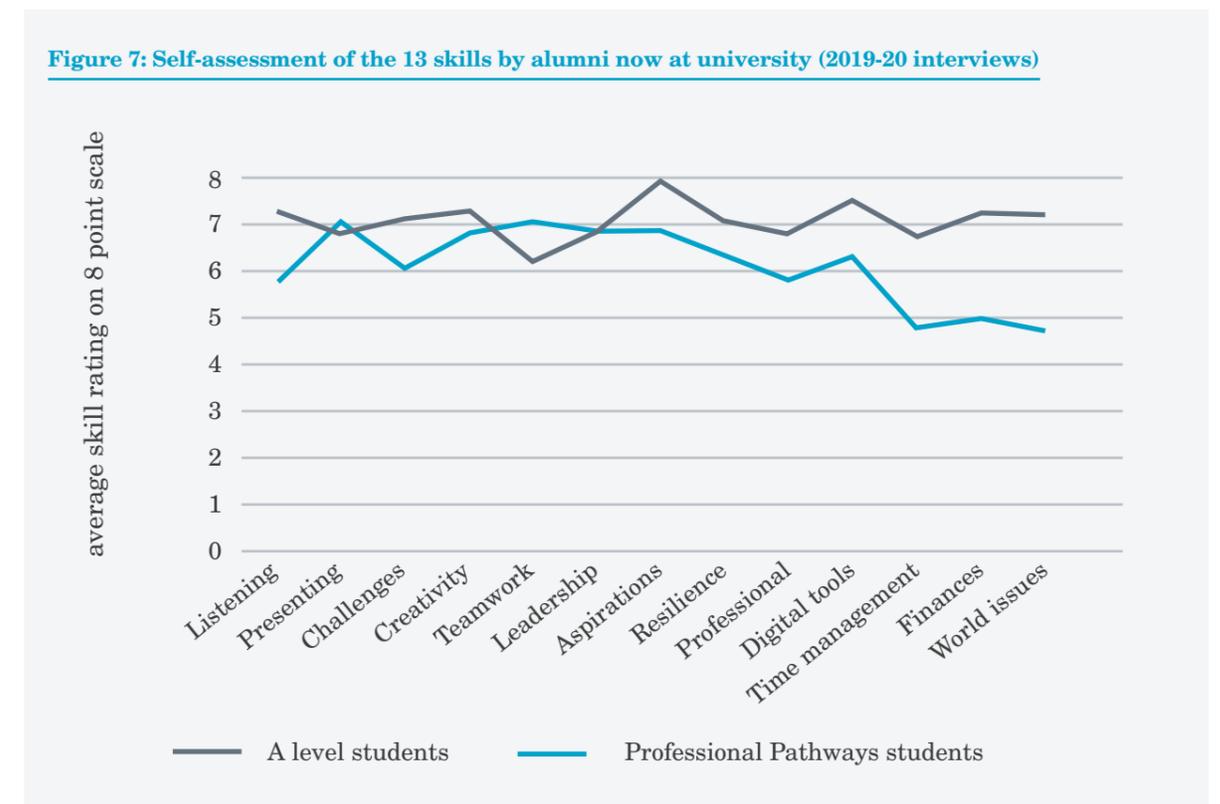
Professional Pathways far exceeds a generic BTEC, and in my biased way I feel it's way better. The programme had us actively connecting with professionals, going out to companies and networking events. (PP)

In the third year of the project (Sep 2019-Sep 2020) a group of Ark alumni (6 Professional Pathways, 6 A level) volunteered to take part in a series of interviews that would follow their progress through the first year of their university course. The skills statements gave a structure to the interviews and, towards the end of the year, the students completed a self-assessment of each of the 13 skills using an 8-point scale where 1 = weak, 8 = strong. This time, Professional Pathways alumni gave weaker ratings for 11 of the 13 skills than did those who had taken A levels (see Figure 7).

Figure 7 shows average ratings, and looking at the individual scores, by far the majority felt these skills were strong or very strong. Skill ratings of 1 or 2 (i.e. very weak) were never made, and ratings of 3 or 4 (i.e. weak) occurred only nine times. However, all nine of the 'weak' ratings were given by Professional Pathways alumni, and this created the overall difference between the two groups in the average scores. Two of the 'weak' skills were time management and financial management, both of which had been referred to frequently during the interviews. A third skill rated as 'weak' by some Professional Pathways alumni was 'interacting with professionals', which was unexpected given the opportunities for employer engagement offered by the programme. One of the alumni provided an explanation:

We did have quite a lot of contact with employers at school, but there's a difference between employers and lecturers. If someone sits in an office with you every day, you'd probably get comfortable with them. But a lecturer probably doesn't even recognise you, so if you have to talk to them, you can feel shy or lack confidence. (PP)

Figure 7: Self-assessment of the 13 skills by alumni now at university (2019-20 interviews)



To put this quote into a broader context, it is fair to say that Professional Pathways students also had many visits to universities during their programme, but the welcoming context of a school visit to a university is rather different to the real life experience in which a lecturer may walk into and out of a lecture theatre without any personal interactions with the students.

9.2 Skills self-assessment: perception and reality

The interview comments that accompanied discussion of the skills ratings made by the alumni provided an additional perspective. It is important to note that **self-assessment does not measure the actual skill, but the individual's perception of it**. Professional Pathways alumni had been more likely to describe a setback of some kind during the first year of their course and, when talking about this, sometimes interpreted the situation as a sign that perhaps university was 'not for them'. This could explain why some students' skills self-assessments were low, and could be linked to a reawakening of the lack of confidence some experienced after disappointing GCSE grades:

At the start of sixth form I had very low self-esteem, but the Professional Pathways programme changed all of that. But then I came to university and within a term my confidence had been wiped out. The lectures can be hard to understand, and the staff are not approachable. (PP)

However, there is another possible explanation for these lower skill ratings: when they spoke about skills and abilities, **Professional Pathways alumni were sometimes describing a higher level of understanding than their A level peers**. As an example, here are two self-assessments of the skill of presenting:

With presenting, well, we've only had to do that once but I was happy with what I said, and I don't think I'd have any problem doing it in the future so I'll probably give that a seven or maybe an eight. (AL)

Presenting is always part of teamwork on my course, so although I think my own presenting skills are high, I know that if a team is dysfunctional it won't produce good work. Individuals in a team can all be smart, great students, but getting the message across means operating in a way that gets the best from everyone, so I'll give that one a seven. (PP)

This was not an isolated example. Overall, it seemed that regular use of the 13 skills during the Professional Pathways programme may have instilled a higher degree of understanding that skill development is an ongoing process, with constant opportunities for improvement. This may explain why Professional Pathways alumni sometimes described a skill as very strong, but still gave a rating of seven, rather than the maximum eight.

One further factor that became increasingly apparent in the interviews that spanned the first 12 months of university life, was the extent to which skills are fluid, not static. This was particularly evident amongst those Professional Pathways students who had said at least once during the year that dropping out of their course was a possibility. A skills assessment at that point might have produced very low ratings for skills, whilst the same assessment at a later stage might have been high. The ratings shown in Figure 7 were collected at a stage when resit exams had been completed and all students knew that they had met the requirements to enter the next year of their course. However, Professional Pathways alumni sometimes reduced their skill rating because they were taking account of a problem that had been resolved, but perhaps might occur again:

For listening and understanding I'd give a rating of about 5, because although I might be a 6 or even a 7 right now, during the first semester I would only have given myself a 3 or 4, and I could imagine slipping back to that with one of the lecturers who is very hard to understand. (PP)

Overall, it did seem that Professional Pathways alumni tended to think more critically about the skill statements than those who had taken A levels, which is consistent with having followed a programme that makes essential skills explicit.

9.3: How often are the 13 skills needed in sixth form courses and university study?

The alumni interviews and the focus groups had raised the possibility of a mismatch between some of the skills that are actually *used* in a university course and the frequency with which those skills were used in sixth form study. In the final stage of the research (Jun-Jul 2020), we explored this more fully by including in the Ark leavers' survey a section that asked respondents to rate how frequently each of the 13 skills had been *needed* in their sixth form course. A corresponding section in the Ark alumni survey asked respondents how frequently each skill was needed in their current university course or employment. Overall, this data showed that most skills were needed with similar frequency in all three types of course (see Figure 8).

Whilst the graph suggests considerable similarity between Professional Pathways, A levels and university courses for most of the skills, there were two points where Professional Pathways students were less likely to say a skill was used 'frequently' or 'quite often': a) my ability to approach challenges and situations where the answer is not immediately clear, and b) my capacity to think creatively and develop new ideas. This might perhaps reflect the high level of guidance, support and feedback that Professional Pathways staff provide for their students, since this could reduce the need for a student to make totally unsupported responses to unfamiliar situations. However, since both of these skills do appear to be required more often at university, further research with alumni would be beneficial. This could provide an opportunity for reflection on the balance of time given to the 13 skills in Professional Pathways; some skills may need greater emphasis as a preparation for university.

The survey also collected comparable data from students taking an apprenticeship and, whilst the number of respondents was too low to draw any firm conclusions, it is worth noting that ten of the skills statements would have scored 100% on the graph below, suggesting the 13 skills may be of even more relevance to employment than to university.

Figure 8: Skills usage in Professional Pathways, A levels or university (2020 leavers and alumni surveys)



(Respondents to this question = 144, of which 18 PP, 92 AL, 28 alumni at university)

9.4 Do different ‘types’ of university require different skills?

The alumni interviewees represented a wide range of course types and universities, from those who were living in student halls at a Russell Group university, to those living at home and attending a local university that was not in the ‘top third’ list. Overall, it seemed that Professional Pathways students who had progressed to a course or employment that was more practical or hands on, were more settled and more confident:

I did have a place at a top ten university, but when I came here I could see that it’s a bit less focussed on academic work and a bit more focussed on what it would be like out in the world, which is very important. I chose to come here because in the end the job will be about how well you can do the practical things – and I’m feeling very confident about that. (PP)

We do have lectures on my course, you do need to have some theory, but most of the sessions are practical. And right from the start I’ve used my own time to develop these skills further because a lot of the theory just makes sense if you become familiar with how to apply it. (PP)

Both of these students knew they had the grades to enter a more prestigious university than the one they chose, and both had taken advice from people working in their chosen profession. Over the course of their first year, they described aspects of their current course or assessment for which they felt the BTEC style of learning had equipped them well, sometimes making comparisons with A level students on their course who were finding some aspects difficult. Amongst the interviewees, those who had entered a ‘top third’ university, particularly if it was a Russell Group member, were more likely to describe difficulties engaging with staff, who were sometimes felt to be ‘unapproachable’ or distanced from the students. The survey data in Figure 8 provided an opportunity for comparison with these interview comments. When the responses of the 28 alumni at university were broken down into the prestigious Russell Group members and ‘other universities’, the skill of ‘interacting with professionals such as lecturers or employers’ was only thought to be needed ‘frequently’ or ‘quite often’ by 30% of the respondents at Russell Group universities. At the universities that were not in the Russell Group, 72% of the students said that ‘interacting with professionals such as lecturers or employers’

was needed ‘frequently’ or ‘quite often’, perhaps confirming the perception that less prestigious universities may have staff who seem to be more approachable.

9.5 Confidence and the articulation of skills

During the first year of the research, an issue that had been raised by an A level interviewee was the lack of any preparation in sixth form for dealing with a competency-based selection process in which it was necessary to articulate skills by giving specific examples of a situation in which the skill had been used. Discussion with Professional Pathways staff indicated that this was generally thought to be an area where students might need additional support. In June/July 2019, a series of workshops with groups of year 12 Professional Pathways students demonstrated this. Using a real-world interview task in which students could draw on their school and personal experiences to answer competency-based questions, it was noted that students tended to consider a limited range of possible examples, and did not always choose the best example: groups had sometimes discussed very strong evidence of success that they did not use in the answer they gave. Evaluation sheets asking each group what they had learned from the session produced one particularly good answer: ‘We learned that we need to think about past experiences, the skills we gained, and how we can present this in a way that could influence someone to give you a job’. Broadening this into discussion with the students, it was apparent that many had concerns about appearing over-confident or ‘showing off’.

Many of the students taking Professional Pathways have encountered educational setbacks, some have also had difficult life experiences. Conversations with Ark employer partners confirmed that some students may need help to understand how they could make use of their experience in a positive way. As an example, a student who described himself as ‘flexible and a quick learner’ had not thought to mention that he learned English in just nine months to a level that meant he could pass several GCSEs. A helpful insight from an employer was that to be successful in a competitive environment, students must be able to articulate their skills in a way that brings those skills to life for people who are not part of their daily lives and do not share their background. Building on this, two further workshops with year 12 students used the same competency-based tasks but provided significant scaffolding in the group task instructions to support identification and description of skill

acquisition and application in and outside of the classroom. There was a noticeable improvement in how the students responded to the task.

9.6 A new form of self-assessment

Based on the research findings, the Professional Pathways team developed a new self-assessment scale for use during 2019/20. Strongly linked to the Skills Builder framework, the scale asks students to rate how frequently they use or demonstrate each of the sequential statements relevant to that skill, but there is also a question asking students how confident they feel that they have assessed their skill level accurately. The intention is to encourage deeper thinking about skills and develop a more nuanced understanding of the fluidity in skills assessment emerging from the alumni interviews.

Further research using the self-assessment tool may help to identify triggers that can affect confidence and impact on performance, but this element of the project has been affected by school closures due to Covid-19 restrictions. During 2021-22, it is hoped that Professional Pathways can pilot a new teacher-led skills assessment which will provide an in-depth termly report to schools. This new approach is likely to elicit higher response rates and more reliable data than the existing student self-assessment tool.

10. Embedding the research findings into practice: an iterative dialogue

The research methodology was designed to facilitate an ongoing iterative dialogue that could feed into development whilst the research was taking place. From the outset, the lead researcher had regular scheduled meetings with the Ark Pathways and Enrichment Team at which emerging findings were shared and the implications for Professional Pathways were discussed. This led to a series of innovations that have been embedded into the programme and, where appropriate, extended to all Ark students. The emphasis on student voice in this research has enabled ongoing evaluation of each innovation and informed the next stage of the research (see Figure 9).

One obvious advantage to this approach is that it provided an opportunity for Ark staff to develop their own research skills, facilitating further innovation and embedding beyond the timespan of the project. It must be acknowledged that this approach requires time and resources that may not be available to programme teams in all schools and colleges, but co-constructing research with practitioners can provide an excellent return on investment by equipping teachers and programme leaders to conduct more informed evaluations in their schools after the research project has ended (e.g. McGrath and Millen, 2003). In this study, the inclusion of Ark alumni has strengthened the research by providing direct evidence of the longer-term impact of Professional Pathways as the students transition to adult life. Another advantage of the methodology employed is that some of the participants have benefited directly from their own input because of the speed with which findings have been embedded into the Professional Pathways programme or the alumni network.

10.1 Embedding the findings: the Professional Pathways curriculum

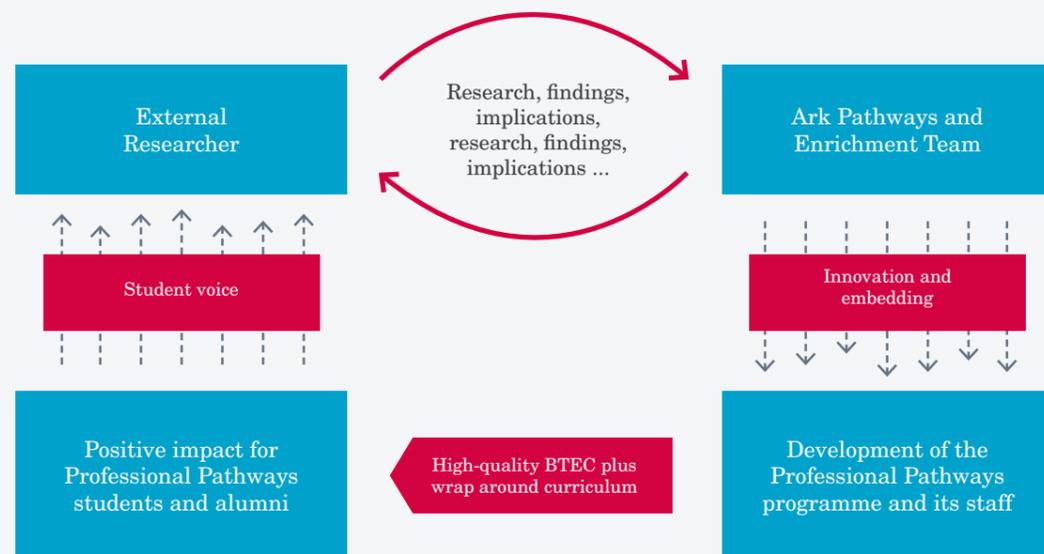
The Professional Pathways team have consistently used the research findings to develop the programme. Some initiatives have been specific to the work readiness curriculum, but others are open to all Ark students and alumni. Some examples, with timelines that show how embedding began within just weeks of the first research analysis becoming available, are given in Table 10 overleaf.

Whilst the content of the Professional Pathways wrap around curriculum has benefitted directly from the research findings, the content of the BTEC qualification is externally determined. When the research findings have indicated a possible development of the BTEC, the programme of staff training and development events has been used to explore potential opportunities. The training and development programme has a dual purpose of supporting teachers to deliver the materials whilst also providing a mechanism for teacher feedback to the Professional Pathways team, and has been used

to good effect to explore how BTEC delivery can be informed and developed by the research findings, particularly in relation to the development and articulation of essential and professional skills. An example of this can be seen in Figure 10.

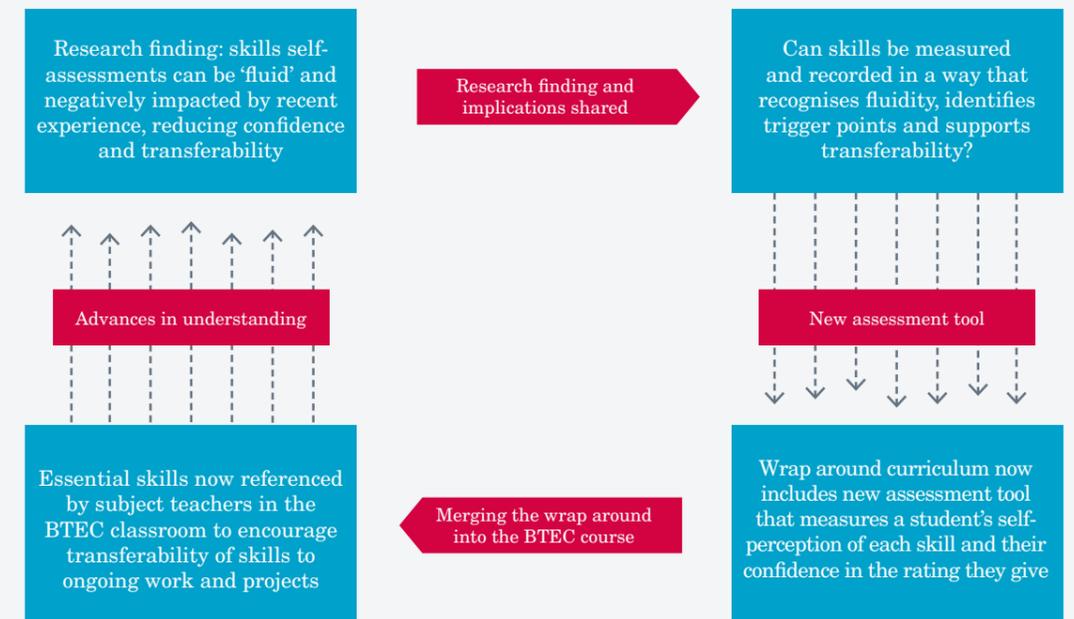
During 2021-22, a new dual approach to skills assessment will be introduced in which students will reflect on their own self-assessments whilst teacher's assessment of their class's skills are collected to provide a more accurate picture of skill level. This new approach is likely to elicit higher response rates and more reliable data than the existing student self-assessment tool.

Figure 9: Linking the research findings with the Professional Pathways Programme



McGrath and Millen, 2020

Figure 10: Bringing the research findings into the BTEC classroom



McGrath and Millen, 2020

Table 10: Examples of embedding of research findings into the curriculum.

| Research finding | Data source | Ark's response | Timeline |
|--|---|--|--|
| Some alumni had picked the wrong course or university. | Alumni interviews 2018 - 2020. Year 13 interviews 2020. | PP curriculum and student workbooks constantly evolving to encourage better research of options (inc. module content, teaching and assessment styles) and maximise informed decision making by year 13 students. | Autumn 2018 onwards |
| Alumni say financial skills were not developed at school. | Nov 2018 survey and interviews. | Financial Literacy module developed for PP wrap around curriculum. | Spring 2019 |
| | Summer 2019 focus groups | Online finance course requirement for all Ark Bursary students. | Autumn 2019 |
| Alumni say 6th form may not prepare for reality of university | Nov 2018 interviews | Presentation/discussion at PP Network Day on achieving balance between supporting BTEC students and stepping back to prepare for independent study at university. | Began March 2019, discussion ongoing |
| | Sep 2019 – Sep 2020 interviews | | |
| Alumni identify time management as key skill at university. | Nov 2018 interviews Summer 2019 focus groups | Specific lesson on time management developed as part of PP wrap-around curriculum, reiterated by teachers in BTEC classroom. | Summer 2019 |
| Alumni emphasise value of L3/4 apprenticeships. | Summer 2020 apprentice interviews | PP wrap around curriculum now confirms that non-degree apprenticeships can also be an ambitious choice. | During 2019/20 |
| | | Work ongoing to help students identify high quality destinations, e.g. L3/4 apprenticeships with strong progression routes. | From 2021 onwards |
| Self-assessment of skills is fluid; confidence levels vary. | Nov 2018 interviews | New self-assessment tool for PP students includes a 'confidence rating'. | Spring 2020 |
| | Sep 2019 – Sep 2020 interviews | A dual approach: students will reflect on their own self-assessments whilst teacher's assessment of their class's skills are collected as a more accurate picture of skill level. | From September 2021 |
| Low participation in clubs and societies at university. | Summer 2019 focus groups | Student-led clubs or societies being developed in some Ark schools. | Began in 2020 |
| | Sep 2019 – Sep 2020 interviews | Clubs and Societies in PP transition module for 2020 (delivery delayed by Covid). | Summer 2021 |
| Alumni describe a range of transition challenges | All strands of the research from Oct/Nov 2018 onwards. | Beyond Ark: enhanced support for alumni at critical transition stages, including entering university or employment and early career entry. Part of Ark's response to the challenges created by the pandemic. | Summer 2020 pilot |
| Positive endorsement of gap year employment. | Alumni interviews 2019/2020 | Ark Gap Year: a pilot in Ark schools to support English/Maths catch up and complete a Professional Development module. | 1 year pilot 2020/2021 |
| | Alumni focus groups Nov-Dec 2019 | PP wrap around curriculum in Year 13 has in-depth job application skills that support those who want to work during a gap year. | Autumn 2021 |
| Students/alumni frequently say mentors had a valuable input. | Alumni/year 13 interviews 2019/2020 Focus groups 2019 | Next Steps: structured mentor/mentee scheme that can link alumni by subject of study, university attended or career plans, and includes industry mentors. Key features of Next Steps embedded into the Year 13 curriculum. | Summer 2020 pilot 2021/22 Year 13 programme |
| Conversations with employers highlight need to 'tell a story'. | Summer 2020 partner conversations | New lesson developed to help PP students 'tell their story' when applying for apprenticeships or other employment routes. | Introduced in 2020/21 |
| Narrow range of year 13 extra-curricular achievements. | Summer 2020 surveys | Wrap around curriculum aligned with the Prince's Trust Personal Development and Employability Skills (PDE) Qualification. | Introduced in 2020/21 |
| Negative impact of Covid on student experience. | Summer 2020 interviews and direct calls to Alumni support staff | New PP content on mental and physical wellbeing, tips on where to find help at university or in apprenticeships, reminder of the Ark Alumni support offer. | Introduced in 2020/21 |
| The 'best' university may not always be the best destination. | Review of all data from 2018 – 2021. | Recognition that achieving the 'best fit' for each student can have a positive impact on degree completion figures. Strategy to encourage students to consider course/institution rankings alongside social, pastoral and other factors that may impact on their ability to complete the course. | Introduced in 2021/22 |

10.2 Embedding the findings: the Alumni Network

The launch of an alumni platform in 2018 coincided with the start of this research project. The platform has provided Ark with the ability to track students' sustained destinations and continue to contact and support students now at university or in employment. Close cooperation between the Ark Alumni Engagement Manager and the lead researcher has been of mutual benefit, supporting the development of the alumni network in two main ways.

Firstly, through sharing of knowledge and expertise the Ark alumni team have increased their research skills, building their capacity to conduct independent research in the future. One example is the development, administration and analysis of a school leaver survey and alumni survey, providing a solid format for Ark to use as required, enabling year on year comparisons to chart progress, providing an opportunity for Ark alumni to input ideas and suggestions, and acting as a vehicle for other forms of engagement. Another example is the development of a format for focus groups that meets the twin aims of exploring ways in which Ark schools might improve their preparation for the skills and knowledge needed for the transition to university or work, and gathering suggestions for how the alumni network can support former students in their present and future roles. A valuable spin-off is that most of the alumni who took part in interviews for this research were found through the network.

Secondly, the information gained from the research project has informed new initiatives that expanded the alumni programme in the Summer of 2020 in ways that provided additional support to Ark alumni facing the considerable challenges resulting from the pandemic. These included:

Beyond Ark: a support package for alumni, giving them access to resources, events, job/volunteering opportunities, online networks and partner opportunities through a monthly newsletter and the Ark Alumni online platform. For example, a two-week programme of 33 virtual workshops and careers talks with 18 partner organisation and 235 attendees.

Ark Gap Year: a structured gap year for Year 13 leavers who become tutors in Ark schools supporting catch-up in English and maths whilst also completing a professional development module to help strengthen the skills they will need to succeed at university or in employment.

Next steps: a mentoring programme to support alumni at two key transition points, leaving school and entering their early career. Participants begin with a mentor from the alumni network and later progress to have an industry mentor and take on the mentoring of a younger student themselves.

Whilst the Gap Year and Beyond Ark were seen as necessary pilots, the Next Steps initiative will continue into 2021/22 in a revised format, by supporting current students to better prepare them for post-18 transitions. The focus will be on building confidence, resilience and skills to support success in their post-18 destination.

10.3 Embedding the findings: training and development for all Ark staff

As a large multi-academy trust, Ark has the capacity to provide regular Network Days that bring together school leaders and teachers for training and development across a wide range of common themes. Professional Pathways has taken full advantage of this, and in addition to the ongoing training that underpins schemes of work and immediate classroom delivery, the research findings emerging from this project have been disseminated beyond the programme and, where appropriate, beyond the sixth form. Two examples follow.

The research indicated that some Professional Pathways students had initially held negative attitudes towards a programme that resulted in a BTEC qualification, rather than A levels. Ark now encourages schools to start student recruitment to the Professional Pathways programmes in Y10 and early in Y11. Recruitment messaging has a focus on making this route an intentional choice, including careful consideration of preferred learning and assessment styles, to encourage choice of Professional Pathways by those students for whom this would be an appropriate progression route.

The research showed that information about apprenticeships would be beneficial for all students. However, whilst staff have considerable experience of supporting students with university applications, they are less familiar with the requirements of apprenticeship applications, which may be a barrier in supporting students. Training for staff to deliver the Ark 'Access to Apprenticeships' programme has increased staff knowledge and understanding of the apprenticeship application process so they can better support students who choose this route.

Key findings continue to be incorporated into guidance and training for careers leads in schools to ensure that all students are provided with enough information to make informed choices about their destinations.

10.4 Going forward: embedding the findings into CEIAG across the Ark network

Coinciding with the completion of this research, Ark was starting to shape a full curriculum framework. The framework gives narrative to the student journey across all the phases, from primary to sixth form, including academic as well as personal and cultural development.

Informed by the research evidence, as well as centrally collated destinations and sustained destinations data, Ark plans to focus central resource on sustained and diversified destinations. This falls into two main areas:

1. Expanding the breadth of the central offer to better support students from primary to KS4
2. Focussing KS5 support explicitly on destinations.

This is likely to include but is not limited to:

- student and teacher tools to support more nuanced decision-making around UCAS choices
- earlier promotion of work-based pathways to address knowledge gaps and build parity of esteem with the higher education route
- apprenticeship resources and opportunities for year 7 onwards to create a pipeline of students for the existing KS5 Access to Apprenticeship programme
- more explicit focus on academic reading and academic skills.

10.5 Challenges

Whilst the Professional Pathways programme has been rapidly and successfully developed in line with the research findings, this has not been without challenges. Senior level buy-in to the programme is evident, but discussion with Ark senior staff and school leaders has shown that resourcing the programme in every school is not easy. Finding good staff for both subject teaching and the wrap around curriculum, timetabling the weekly work readiness lessons, producing staff and student workbooks and other materials, and running the student conferences takes up time and resources.

In addition there are potential local difficulties that may impact on individual schools (e.g. the local availability of good subject teachers) and there are also regional factors that create disparity of opportunity (e.g. schools outside central London will inevitably have less access to 'top' employers). As a multi-academy trust, Ark is probably better equipped to address these issues than many other schools.

In principle, a similar programme could be delivered alongside any established BTEC course. In reality, some schools or colleges might find this difficult to resource.

11. September 2021: building a career in a post-Covid world

This final section of the report draws on the experience of Ark alumni who finished school before the pandemic and, with at least two or three years of post-school life behind them, could provide a more mature reflection on their sixth form experience. The comments that structure this section are drawn from interviews with 15 Ark alumni (eight Professional Pathways and seven A level). These included university graduates, final year or placement year university students, and employees in non-graduate roles. All of the interviewees had completed some further study or training since leaving school. These interviews show how the impact of Covid had strongly influenced their ability to realise their career aims, particularly for those seeking an employment-based career route.

11.1 Reflections on Professional Pathways

Earlier sections of this report have shown that Professional Pathways students and recent alumni were very positive overall about their sixth form experience. Interviewing alumni who were now graduates, employees or final year university students, showed that opinions remained overwhelmingly positive:

It was the first year of Professional Pathways and I was a bit hesitant, but it gave me experience in so many professional settings... networking, interviews, getting an internship, working with people I'd never met before. I was developing the skills that I need now that I've graduated and am looking for a job. (PP graduate)

When I first started the BTEC I was upset at having to do that because my friends all took A levels. By the second year of Professional Pathways, it was different. The events with employers made us stand out, and there were a lot of smart people doing Professional Pathways – I think we all felt we were better than the A level students. (PP graduate)

Having also done one A level, I really prefer the BTEC style of learning. With A levels it's mostly theory and there might be no opportunity to apply it, but in the BTEC we might learn something and then apply it in a practical way the following day. (PP self-employed)

Before sixth form BTEC is looked on as a bit of a joke but when you start doing it you realise that is just not the case. It gives you so much more experience than A levels and it can get you the same universities, apprenticeships, as A levels. (PP employee)

Interview comments that suggested Professional Pathways had not prepared a student for life after school were rare, but one student who had moved directly into employment-based training for a non-graduate career did feel that the transition to an adult workplace could have been easier with a more adult approach to sixth form students:

After sixth form, you're expected to go out into the big world, and I don't think they really equip you for that. Fair enough, it is still school, and they need to have rules, but we were becoming adults and I think sixth form should have a lot more about how to deal with real life and build us up for going into work. (PP employee)

This interviewee also spoke about the many forms of employer contact provided by Professional Pathways, but felt these were not always relevant to the type of workplace some school leavers will enter:

When we were taken to employers it was usually sitting in a conference room with different people speaking to us, then at the end of the day we would stand up and give a presentation. It felt a bit like school but in a different setting. It was nothing like the job that I came into after school. (PP employee)

11.2 Skills developed in Professional Pathways

The thirteen essential skills that underpin Professional Pathways were often spontaneously mentioned by the alumni in these final interviews. Both graduates and employees had positive things to say about skills and knowledge acquired through both the BTEC course and the wrap around curriculum. For example:

In Professional Pathways we had to do a lot of presenting and a lot of coursework, which meant we had to time manage as well, so university wasn't a big shock to me because I was already doing those things. University was just on a bigger scale. (PP graduate)

I've worked in three different jobs now and I'd say that communication is maybe the most important skill for Professional Pathways students to develop. A lot of young people don't know how to communicate with employers or don't have the confidence to speak out. (PP employee)

In Professional Pathways there was a lot of teamwork, so I already knew that we all had different parts to play for it to come together, and there has to be compromising and listening to everyone, getting feedback, so here I took a bit of a lead in that. We all had the same end goal which was to get a good mark. (PP graduate)

In the BTEC, there was quite a lot that was relevant to starting up your own business. How to do market research, how to market...the importance of standing out, developing a USP. And we learned about finance, taxes, and things. And learning how to use Excel was maybe the best thing, because I use it now every day. (PP self-employed)

11.3 Professional Pathways as a preparation for university

Interviews with first year students had suggested that traditional courses in Russell Group universities might create a particularly challenging environment (6.2, p30), but the graduate reflections indicate that this may depend on the specific course chosen, and there may be considerable variation within a university. One graduate of a Russell Group university described a smooth transition due to a non-traditional approach to teaching and assessment that had many similarities with the BTEC course:

If anything, Professional Pathways prepared me better for university and really did help me at the start. Some of my friends who did A levels even had to figure out things like finding references before they could write their first assignments. (PP graduate)

The two Professional Pathways students who appeared to be most settled during their first year of university (9.4, p50) had described an approach to teaching and assessment that had parallels with BTEC and had been found in universities outside the 'top third', a deliberate choice. However, these final stage interviews offered a reminder that individual courses may vary considerably, regardless of the type or status of the university, with one interviewee finding an unexpectedly traditional approach to teaching and assessment in a 'middle third' university that would, on the surface, appear to offer practical, vocationally oriented courses:

After sixth form I went to university to study Business, but the course reminded me of A levels, which I'd tried before Professional Pathways. The way that university works seems more like A levels than BTEC. And the content of the course was not what I expected. I had expected more about business and was surprised by the amount of maths in the economics units. (PP self-employed)

Having completed the first year, the interviewee quoted above had left university to take up employment in a different field. Unfortunately, this sector was then severely affected by Covid, forcing a move to self-employment in challenging circumstances and demonstrating a high level of the essential skill of 'staying positive':

I enjoyed the university experience and leaving London was a positive, when you begin to see the rest of the country you realise it is so different. I don't regret going to university but looking back I think there was a lot of pressure to go from school and parents. There's this idea that when you start university you start making your life, but that has turned out not to be right in my case. (PP self-employed)

This experience resonates with the finding that students could sometimes have done more research into course content, teaching and assessment before making their UCAS choices (5.3ii, 5.3iii pp24-25) and made more effort to find out what a university was really like (6.6, p32). It also raises concerns that students entering university in 2021 will have done so with little or no opportunity to attend open days or visit university departments, both of these being key to gaining a full understanding of university life and how a course is taught and assessed.

First year students had often spoken of time management and planning being essential to successful performance on a BTEC course, and poor time management was often mentioned by students who had found the transition to university challenging (6.7, p33). A Russell Group graduate offered, with the benefit of hindsight, a more insightful view of the relationship between Professional Pathways and university:

The main difficulty in coming to university was that you have to plan everything out for yourself, how you are going to work, deal with assignments, prepare for exams, manage your time and your money. In Professional Pathways if you do the work, put the effort in, you will get what you are capable of. But at university it's all about strategy, and I arrived with no idea how to develop a strategy for being successful. (PP graduate)

11.4 The impact of Covid on university experience and outcomes

The impact of Covid-19 on the university experience has been well-publicised, with TV and press reports of students confined to halls of residence and studying entirely online. For Ark alumni now in their final year, the pandemic has fundamentally changed all three years of their university life:

Very early in the pandemic my university transitioned to online, and restricted campus access. I'd hoped things might be better in my second year, but that was entirely recorded lectures with an online check-in every Monday. I'm starting my final year now and it will be online again. There are some benefits with recorded lectures, you can pop in and out, but it's a very mono style of learning and gets a bit boring to be honest. Not being able to go to the library, or even just walk around the campus... it's been tough. (AL final year student)

Despite the potentially depressing nature of the Covid-19 restrictions, interviewees often described strategies for staying in contact with friends, and some felt this was a crucial part of their learning experience:

There's a lot of collaborative work in Professional Pathways. When online learning started at university, I was in touch with friends on my course every day, and 5 or 10 minutes before each lecture we'd Facetime and stay connected throughout the lecture and discuss it straight after, which was so good for learning and understanding. (PP graduate)

Considerably less media attention has been paid to a potentially more damaging aspect of the pandemic: significant change to course content which, in some cases, has resulted in a different qualification being awarded. For example, a three year degree in Business instead of a four year degree in Business with Year in Industry.

A recent report by the Sutton Trust (Montacute and Holt-White, 2021) has demonstrated the impact of Covid-19 on the university experience, with 87% of students saying their development had been negatively impacted by pandemic restrictions. Another recent Sutton Trust report (Montacute, Holt-White and Gent, 2021), data for which was collected before the pandemic, has demonstrated the importance of essential life skills for graduate employability. Both reports show an association between the type of home background and involvement in a range of university activities that enhance employability, including study abroad, work placements or internships, and involvement in clubs and societies. All of these were found to develop life skills such as communication, leadership and resilience, but students from working-class backgrounds were much less likely to have taken part in such activities even before the pandemic. The negative impact of Covid-19 on the wider university experience was significant, with the participation gap between middle-class and working-class students widening as those from less well-off backgrounds were increasingly living at home and

taking no part in extra-curricular activities. Many aspects of these two reports resonate with the experience of the alumni interviewed.

Earlier stages of this research had already shown that involvement in extra-curricular activities was low amongst first year students, and Montacute and Holt-White (2021) found that participation in extra-curricular activities was substantially reduced by pandemic restrictions. It is therefore unsurprising that, in these final interviews, involvement in Clubs and Societies was only reported by those students who had been active since Freshers' Week:

Last year I had two society positions, Vice President of one and Marketing for the other, but because everyone was working from home it was very difficult to get anything going. After my placement year I will re-join the societies but probably not take on a role because I really want to concentrate on my final year coursework and assignments. (PP placement year student)

If the society happened to be one that operated off campus and out of doors, maintaining or even expanding its activities was a possibility:

Last year I felt we had a responsibility to offer something for Freshers, and we took the Kayak Club from an average of 40 members up to 95. People were just so happy to join something that took them off campus. (AL final year student)

School leaver survey data (6.1, p29) had shown that Ark sixth form students were more likely to be involved in volunteering than extra-curricular activities such as sport, music or drama, and the only final year student who reported picking up a new activity during the pandemic had become a volunteer mentor:

The mentoring scheme went ahead despite Covid. We started with a training day in the school and got a couple of weeks in person at the start, but then due to Covid it all went online. I was talking with my mentee about preparing to go to university, how to settle, make the most of study skills. I was mentored myself in sixth form, so I know there are things you can't get from your teachers. I think you hear things differently when it's from a person your own age. (AL final year student)

Perhaps the most significant impact of Covid-19 fell on those interviewees who had to graduate a year early (2021 instead of 2022) with just a standard three year degree, rather than the four year course (with industrial placement or year abroad) that they were registered for. This appears to have had little coverage in the media or academic research so far, but the lack of a placement is an obvious disadvantage in career terms. The interviews revealed a second disadvantage: these students could also be at risk of gaining a poorer degree classification because of the sudden push during the summer vacation to find a dissertation topic, something which forms a significant part of the final degree classification and can be a vital component of a CV:

Students who should have done a year abroad have had to accept a dissertation supervisor who is available but may not be in their field. Someone I know who is doing cultural geography has been given a mathematical modeller. There is talk of providing second supervisors who do have some relevant knowledge. (AL final year student)

I was on a four year course with one year spent abroad, but we were just told that it was reduced to three years with the year abroad cancelled, so that meant going straight into my dissertation. I also moved back home and it's very difficult to be at home and doing Uni – it felt like the balance was off. (PP graduate)

Of the interviewees who were taking a course that should have included a year in industry, only one had been able to complete this. The Institute of Student Employers reported that applications for internships and placements had risen by 9% in 2020 whilst vacancies had fallen by 29% and 25% respectively (SIA, 12/11/21). A growing number of students are competing for a shrinking number of opportunities. Universities appeared to vary in the extent to which they were offering support to help their students find a placement:

The university's position has been to continue offering support to placement applicants but prepare us for possibly not being able to get one this year. I had some help from my lecturers with writing applications, which was really useful. (AL final year student)

One student at a multi-campus university was anxious and unsure of the arrangements for their placement year because of restrictions on moving between sites:

I chose the four year course for the work experience and really wanted to go to China but now I don't even know if the university will be able to guide me through the application process, because that's run at the other campus and we can't even go there. (PP placement year applicant)

When students did have support to apply, the competition was found to be intense:

I did apply for a year in industry placement and was told that I was placed 15th out of 854 applicants. With so few opportunities and that degree of competition, I realised that even if I did get a placement it would probably be for something I wasn't really interested in, so decided it was best to focus on my dissertation and final year. (AL final year student)

The one interviewee who had been successful in gaining a placement acknowledged that initial aspirations had not been realised, but found that there were unexpected compensations:

Early in year 2 I was pursuing a placement opportunity with a very prestigious company but so many students were not getting responses that I decided to reach out to other companies. With a large global, it's the name and prestige, a small company was initially my less preferred option, but I know now that the experience you get is different. I've been able to customise this placement. It's project-based and multidisciplinary and will give me progression in areas that will help me, including topics that are not on my degree course. I feel it will better prepare me for next year, and I'm already on track to get a first. (PP placement year)

Although this interviewee also described feeling 'lucky' to have got a placement year, this outcome was due to more than just luck. Throughout the research project this student had made constant reference to the importance of networking, describing a very efficient system of gathering and recording contacts for future use, an approach that embodied key elements of Professional Pathways and had produced the intended result:

I've done a lot of networking, even at sixth form, and I think that helped with getting this placement. I'd met the CEO in person on one occasion and when he saw on LinkedIn that I was looking for a placement he contacted me. (PP placement year)

Universities with small or distant satellite campuses may have faced particular challenges in continuing to deliver their courses, with one Professional Pathways alumnus told early in the autumn term of year two that their campus was to be permanently closed at the end of the academic year. The options for the final year were either a move to the main campus (many miles away) or an application to transfer to another university. The student decided to suspend their studies, work for a year, and apply to a local university for direct entry to year two, an outcome far less disruptive than beginning somewhere new at the start of year three.

Loss of opportunity that did not affect the course or qualification was perhaps less worrying, but most of the students and graduates had missed out on things they felt might affect their future career prospects. For example:

I was chosen for a work placement abroad but it was cancelled due to Covid, there was nothing I could do about it. I have put in my CV that I got chosen for this, it just wasn't possible because of the pandemic. (PP final year student)

I applied for a paid internship at a top company last year and was offered a place. They had lots of applications, so I guess that's a success, but it was cancelled. (PP final year student)

I applied for the summer placement in America when I was in my first year, but it's been rolled over again till 2022, by which time I will have graduated. (AL final year student)

11.5 Finding graduate jobs

During earlier stages of the research, references to 'keeping options open' were common. Becoming a graduate did not necessarily mean that career decisions had now been formed, and some interviewees were clear that they still needed to keep a range of options open:

One of the reasons I did the Business BTEC is that it's quite broad. I didn't really know what I wanted to do but I enjoyed some modules more than others, and at university I picked a course where I could choose most of my modules after the first year. I've done more marketing modules and also law, things that I've enjoyed. It's the same for finding a job, looking for something broad and then I can narrow it down when I work out what I really want. (PP graduate)

Applying for graduate posts in a pandemic was a greater challenge than sixth form students could have been prepared for and something their schools could not have anticipated. Even with a good degree from a top university in their subject, none of the interviewees seeking graduate posts had yet been successful, though they demonstrated resilience and a determination to keep trying.

Right now, I'm looking for graduate schemes. I'm not 100% sure what I want to do so I'm trying to find schemes that let me rotate within the business but that's quite hard to find and it's very competitive. I applied for a group Q&A which was for TFL applicants, and they were giving tips on what they were looking for...how to prepare for their tests so that it was easier to do them, and how to prepare for Teams meetings for the interviews. Not many companies offer that. I did pass all of their test stages but didn't get through to the final interview. (PP graduate)

I've got an interview coming up for an internship here at the university, and I've been connecting with teachers at my old school. I'm also getting involved with training and coaching via Zoom and I constantly practise the things we agreed in the sessions. (PP graduate)

Everyone around me is saying to just keep on applying for graduate schemes and keep on doing practice tests, most of them start with numerical tests and reasoning tests, then other psychometric tests. It's just so competitive. (PP graduate)

Professional Pathways students often made spontaneous comments about elements of their course they felt had prepared them for finding and entering employment (referring to both the BTEC and the wrap around curriculum). This was partly because most of them had continuity between their BTEC subject, their degree, and the type of employment they were seeking. For example:

Professional Pathways and the BTEC (in Business) prepared me for going into businesses, interacting with professionals in a friendly way makes you feel that things are attainable. Even then, if I went for an interview, I would feel way more confident than other students who were there. (PP graduate)

Their A level peers did not refer to A levels as a preparation for work. If they spoke about work experience or employer events, these had been offered by the Careers Adviser to all students. Indeed, some acknowledged that they had chosen A levels and degree subjects they were passionate

about, despite knowing from the start that career opportunities in the field were very limited, even for students who graduated before the pandemic:

I got a first class degree but so far there have not been any opportunities in my field, so I came home and I'm now full time at the place where I did part time work in sixth form. I'm trying to stay in contact with the professionals I met through networking at university, and doing all I can to promote myself, but my sector is really struggling. (AL 2019 graduate)

In contrast, when A levels and degree subject were in recognised shortage areas, particularly STEM subjects, this could produce a relatively relaxed approach to career plans:

Straight after graduation I am going overseas to do some basic teaching at an international university which is linked with my university department. Teaching skills will help me in any job and although I do still want to work in the vocational field I've trained for, I'm yet to decide what I want in the long run. I'd like a job I want to get up for. (AL final year student)

However, none of the interviewees had yet found graduate-level employment, and national data confirmed the difficulties they were facing. In the first year of the pandemic, the Institute of Student Employers found that graduate roles decreased by 12%, whilst employers received 14% more applications for them (SIA, 12/11/21). In May 2021, graduate job postings were reported to have dropped by 24% compared with 2019 (HR Review, 2021) and by August 2021, the number of graduate jobs being advertised was said to have fallen by 60% (CV Library, 2021).

11.6 Employment, self-employment and entrepreneurship

Amongst those interviewees who were not at university there was often a willingness to take non-graduate employment, partly from financial necessity (and some of these roles were very well remunerated), but also to gain real world experience. Survey data had shown that many Professional Pathways students did paid work whilst at school (6.1, p29), and this had often been continued whilst at university:

I've been doing hospitality work for a while now, waiting and bar work, and quite a lot of weddings. I tend to dedicate my weekends to paid work and schedule my study for the weekdays. (AL final year student)

Before Covid I'd been doing all my paid work in the holidays, but when I was back in London I had to manage my time. As I work at a cinema, I would go in early and do my work in the coffee shop before my shift started. (PP graduate)

Finding paid work on campus can be the dream job for a student and is understandably competitive. Only one of the interviewees had managed to get a campus job, but the benefits were obvious:

My paid work has all been on campus. I've worked in the shop, as a tour guide, as a Covid tester and at the student recruitment call centre. Because these are all university jobs there's been a lot of flexibility to work around my studies. Being the student rep for my course has had a lot to do with getting the work on campus. (AL final year student)

The industry sectors most often described were retail, hospitality and security and, whilst none of the interviewees said this was their intended career, such work had sometimes raised awareness of the potential for 'climbing the ladder' in a company:

I started helping out with an events company whilst I was still at school and worked my way up to higher level roles. Some of the venues are very big, global, and I knew I could work at those as soon as I left school. (PP employee)

School did encourage me to look at websites for places like KPMG, PWC, but it would have been good to look at non-graduate jobs as well. I'm working in security now while I apply for the Civil Service, and even here I've realised the importance of getting a foot in the door. (AL employee)

Those who were employed in non-graduate roles usually said they were still undecided about definite career plans, but that they needed to work. They had often taken jobs already being done by family members, sometimes at the same company. Family could be a strong influence. A background of business start-ups and a strong culture of independence could encourage an entrepreneurial approach:

My father taught me how important it is to be able to take care of a family. I worked for him even as a child and if I'd gone to university, my ideology would have been 'let me study for three days a week and then have a pop-up shop, selling mobile phone cases or something'. I just hated the idea of getting in debt so anything that gave me an income would have been my plan. (PP employee)

Some students had chosen degree subjects that they felt could easily lead to self-employment (e.g. pharmacy, computer science, business management). Some had created opportunities to develop business skills and acumen alongside their academic studies, often starting this in sixth form.

I'm business motivated already. I've set up two cleaning companies and I used the work experience I did at an investment bank to do that. They really broke down how to set up a business model. I also set up a pop-up bar but that got closed down when the site was sold. (AL final year student)

I worked all the way through sixth form in a supervisory role where I had responsibility and could use my initiative, so I'm confident about finding work and making opportunities. My university refunded some of our summer term rent money because of Covid, so I used mine to buy a motorbike and set up doing deliveries. (PP final year student)

For some, self-employment was a 'forced choice' having chosen to build a career in a sector where few 'employees' actually have a contract when they are starting out.

I wasn't really an employee, the way it works is that the 'staff' are all self-employed, you pay the company a fee every month to get a certain number of hours access to the facilities...about £200 for 12 hours a week...and then you have to reach out to get clients. In reality, it's difficult. I'm quite a shy person. If you can't get the clients you still have to pay the company, so you can make a loss every month. (PP self-employed)

For this interviewee, the start of the pandemic had resulted in instant unemployment, a challenge that was faced with a high level of positivity and initiative, turning a crisis into a possible opportunity:

When Covid hit, the premises were closed, leaving me with absolutely nothing. That's what influenced me to think about starting my own business. I started researching how to work independently, reading about how to set up my personal brand and develop a model for working online with individual clients. The BTEC had a lot that was relevant to that. (PP self-employed)

The impact of Covid-19 could have serious consequences even for those interviewees who had completed training for work that would ordinarily be regarded as a secure vocation:

After sixth form I went straight to college to do a City and Guilds with two days every week in the workplace. I was in my second job since qualifying when lockdowns began, and the place where I was working closed down because all of our clients had been let go from their own work, and so they didn't need our services anymore. (PP employee)

The financial implications of Covid-19 had been considerable for some of the interviewees because their age and stage of life meant that inevitably some would fall outside the government schemes to support workers who suffered an immediate loss of income. Given the circumstances, there was an impression of remarkable resilience and fortitude in the face of very difficult circumstances.

Ark schools place a strong emphasis on aiming high, encouraging their students to apply for top universities and apprenticeships. This final stage of the research project has shown that in the current climate, even a good degree from a top university may not provide a smooth path to employment, let alone the type of graduate traineeship that successful students might have expected in the past.

Interviewees who had taken low-level employment as an expedient and hopefully temporary measure had sometimes had bad experiences with employers, and one suggested that it would be helpful if sixth forms could provide students with a basic understanding of their entitlement in the workplace:

You've got to have the confidence to speak out and bat for yourself because for the top people, well, it's just a business for them. I researched all the hours I could legally work and things like that, but I saw another young person get taken advantage of because she didn't know what she was entitled to. (PP employee)

11.7 Preparing for a post-Covid career

Market Research (e.g. Highfliers, 2021). suggests there may be a modest rise in the number of graduate vacancies in 2021 compared with 2020, but the country's top employers have received 41% more graduate job applications compared with the equivalent period in the 2019-2020 recruitment round. Young people, including graduates, are clearly facing significant challenges.

At a time of high unemployment and intense competition for jobs, gaining any type of extra qualification may seem a good strategy, particularly if the qualification offers a direct route to paid employment, a necessity for most young people:

At the moment I'm doing some part time work and training to get my SIA (Security Industry Authority) licence. Security work is quite well paid, the hours are flexible, and work is pretty much always available. It's giving me time to decide what I want to do. (PP employee)

For a young person who has just completed a degree, a Masters course may seem the obvious choice, and some universities have reported a rush of applicants. The temptation to have a CV that says 'postgrad student' rather than 'looking for work' is understandable, but some of the interviewees could see that this may not be a good use of resources:

If I was going to do a Masters, I'd want it to work for me. I wouldn't do it because there was no alternative, or if it wouldn't help my career prospects. (AL final year student)

I'm considering whether or not to pursue a Masters. Do I want to study for another two years? And I don't really know what I want to do. I think I need an internship or graduate scheme first to gain an insight into possible careers. (AL final year student)

The research with year 13 students (4.2, p16) had shown that Ark schools give their students a good understanding of the higher education sector, including knowledge of which universities are regarded as prestigious and therefore associated with better graduate outcomes. Professional Pathways students also left school with strong knowledge of employment-based opportunities and gave many examples of employer engagement, something that could have a significant impact on decision making in ways that challenge the conventional view:

At school we were made aware that Russell Group graduates earn higher salaries and have more opportunities, and I was definitely being pushed that way. But for creatives like me the university doesn't matter so long as my portfolio is up to scratch. (PP placement year student)

This student had spoken in several interviews about advice from professionals during work experience and internships with top companies, and the influence this had on choosing a course with strong practical elements and a focus on work readiness. The comment above does resonate with recent shifts by top companies towards education-blind applications that focus on skills and experience rather than university attended (e.g. Murray, 2017). The student's comment illustrates a possibly unexpected consequence of the Professional Pathways focus on better understanding of post-18 options; an informed realisation that in some sectors a prestigious university is not the only route to a successful career.

The Ark Alumni Network was often referenced by interviewees, who gave very positive examples of activities they felt were assisting with their career plans. These ranged from employer events to personal contacts:

Since leaving school I've done a lot of different things with the Ark Alumni Network. Paid work, volunteering, networking and lots of workshops and talks. It's definitely helped me to get experience and build the confidence I'll need to find a graduate role. (PP placement year student)

The Ark Alumni manager put me in touch with the CEO of a company who had done the same course as me at the same university. It was part of a mentoring project but after we spoke, he said it was obvious that I had the right mindset and was already doing all the things needed to be successful in getting a graduate role. He was honest and said he didn't think he could help me much, but he already had, because it gave me a lot of confidence to be told that I've got the skills needed to be successful. (AL final year student)

I think the best thing I did with the Alumni Network was an internship that was quite competitive. The other interns seemed so confident, but by the end it had changed the way I thought about myself because I realised that if I was one of them, I must have the same things to offer. (PP graduate)

During the interviews there were no spontaneous references to university careers services, and 'prompt' questions did not elicit any examples of opportunities found in that way. Most of the students had attended careers fairs at their university, but these were often felt to focus on STEM subjects with few opportunities for arts and humanities graduates. In contrast, students who had used the Ark Alumni Network were not only positive, they were also appreciative and often wanted to give something back:

I joined this research project because I heard about it through the Ark Alumni Network. I wanted to stay connected with Ark and I felt this would be a good way to do that, I also thought the project would give me a structure as I started university. I had some fantastic teachers at school and I'm really pleased that my contribution to the project will help Ark sixth forms to be even better. (AL final year student)

My school was amazing, and I still go back regularly. I think this research project and the way it gives alumni a voice is a great idea. But what I really want to ask you is this: will Ark listen? Will they do something to get all of the schools doing the things we are suggesting? (AL final year student)

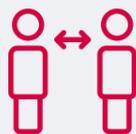
As this report has shown, Ark has indeed listened and, more importantly, they have acted.

12. Conclusions and recommendations

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 differences when compared to students taking BTEC qualifications in other schools or colleges. Professional Pathways alumni described outcomes comparable to those of their A level peers, and not reflective of the stereotypical view of BTEC as 'second-best'.

12.1 Conclusions

In relation to the aims of the project the following conclusions can be drawn:



Professional Pathways appears to remove any major differences between A level and BTEC students in their approach to choosing universities and courses

This is 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, including course content, teaching styles, assessment modes, facilities and league table position.

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 'second best'



Some Professional Pathways students strongly prefer the apprenticeship pathway and apply to university only as a reserve option

Enhanced employer engagement created real enthusiasm for an employment-based route to a career but there is a tension between this aspiration and the small number of opportunities available in comparison to university places.



The transition from school to university creates challenges for all students, but these may initially affect Professional Pathways students to a greater degree than A level students

Contributory factors may include mismatch between expectation and reality, difficulties in making friends and settling in, and the contrast between the supportive and accessible staff at school and those at university.

This last point was particularly relevant 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.



The essential skills emphasised in Professional Pathways proved highly relevant to university requirements and expectations in the workplace

Professional Pathways students demonstrated strong understanding of the role of skills and were often more reflective in their self-assessment than were A level students, which may be attributed to the wrap around curriculum and the BTEC classroom. Despite this, Professional Pathways students may sometimes need help to articulate their skills and experiences in ways that fully demonstrate their abilities.



The research methodology has been shown to be highly successful

This was 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'.



Alumni in employment-based routes were positive about their experience, even when the job was not directly part of their career plan

Apprentices and year in industry students could articulate clear links between their work and their education, but all employees gave examples of a wide range of skills they had developed in their work. Gap year students had been able to make better-informed university choices.



Professional Pathways alumni who are now graduates or final year students continue to reflect positively on their programme.

They describe outcomes that are comparable to their A level peers, though the challenges presented by the pandemic indicate that aligning elements of the wrap around curriculum with some key factors associated with success in non-graduate career routes could be beneficial for some students.

12.2 Recommendations and wider implications

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.** Ark schools deliver a strong CEIAG programme that often exceeds the Gatsby Benchmarks, but the data revealed that some universities had not been sufficiently researched, and some alumni now at university felt they had chosen the wrong course. It is probable that most schools and colleges will have students who need help to know when they have done sufficient research to make a fully informed choice
- 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.** The Professional Pathways wrap around curriculum and enhanced employer engagement provided strong knowledge of employment-based options that most A levels students did not have. This finding is likely to apply in most schools and colleges: students cannot choose an option they are not aware of.
- 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.** Inviting alumni to speak with current students about their experience of university or work is common practice, but this project has used alumni experience to inform the curriculum and develop classroom practice, providing a degree of currency that teachers and advisers cannot have themselves. Given that Covid-19 has fundamentally changed the learning experience, information from current university students has never been more valid.
- 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.** Difficulties arising from inadequate or inaccessible information were often described. One of Ark's partner universities described an extended ten-week induction programme that recognised and addressed the above issues, that was offered to students felt to be at greater risk of dropping out; BTEC students were included in this category.
- 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.** The UCAS process has a clear timetable: applications are submitted by mid-January, after which students are free to concentrate on their studies. In contrast, apprenticeship vacancies are advertised as they become available, each employer has a different application process and students may need to keep applying for many months alongside their studies. The start of the university academic year in September was a trigger point at which some students opted to take up a university place rather than risk being unemployed for a year.
- 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.** The findings show that providing information about apprenticeships creates real enthusiasm for this pathway amongst school leavers. There was a clear sense that the main barrier to entering an apprenticeship was not lack of interest but lack of availability.
- 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.** Assessment trends in higher education have seen a global shift towards including alternative modes of assessment. There is now an expectation that university students will encounter a diverse range of learning events; coursework, presentations, and other forms of assessment are increasing, and modular assessment is the norm. This research has shown that Professional Pathways students can achieve a good degree from Russell Group and other 'top third' universities, and also that they value the BTEC for its broadly-vocational focus that keeps many degree options open and facilitates access to a range of careers.
- 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.



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