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## **TOWARDS PREPARING YOUNG PEOPLE FOR EMPLOYMENT AND FURTHER STUDY: FIRST EVALUATION OF THE CITY & GUILDS TECHBAC**

### **Abstract**

*Despite the UK government increasing efforts to tackle unemployment, young people face a number of barriers to be employed. As a leading awarding body, City & Guilds launched the TechBac in 2014 to address some of these barriers and provide learners with a balanced programme of vocational study. This article is based on the initial findings of the TechBac evaluation to assess its impact on learners. Using a mixed method approach, the research involved qualitative interviews with learners, tutors and employers and a quantitative learner survey. It aimed to understand the experiences of learners doing and tutors delivering the TechBac, identify mediating and moderating factors in this process and suggest improvements. The findings indicated positive impact on learners' knowledge, skills and their attitude to learning, which are demanded by employers. A few mediating (e.g. meeting stakeholders' needs) and moderating (e.g. insufficient information about some elements of the TechBac) factors in the programme learning experience and delivery were identified. The article concludes with some recommendations to improve future provision of the TechBac.*

**Keywords:** vocational education; impact; City & Guilds TechBac; learner; barriers; youth employment.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Vocational education has a number of benefits for learners. First, the proportion of vocational entrants is increasing, particularly of young people who enter higher education (HE) with a combination of vocational and 'academic' qualifications (Lynch, Sims, and Wespieser 2015, vii) and so it could facilitate their progression to further study. In fact, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) figures show more UK learners are taking alternative vocational qualifications alone or alongside A-levels to progress to HE (BBC 2016). Second, the flexibility of vocational education led in many cases to improve motivation amongst young people (14-16 years old) who lack motivation or are potentially disaffected/disengaged (McCrone and Morris 2004). Research suggests that further education (FE) tutors have a key role in motivating those who have not been successful in the school environment (Edward, Weedon, and Riddell 2008, viii). However, depending on young people's learning experiences, they may develop motivation towards their profession (or on the contrary may feel disappointed in their choice) (Kersh and Juul 2015, 19). Third, it is reported that the flexibility of vocational education led in many cases to improved confidence and self-esteem of young people (McCrone and Morris 2004). They can gain confidence and motivation from the opportunity to explore career ideas through individual, face-to-face discussions with a range of people including role models from the careers to which they aspire as well as mentors (DfE 2015a). Mentors can provide a more nurturing influence, helping young people to build their confidence and resilience (DfE 2015a, 12). Fourth, and more importantly, vocational education offers a real chance of labour market success for those who leave school with no qualifications or have not achieved their maximum potential yet (McIntosh 2004). Achieving a work-based qualification can increase the probability of being in employment (Lynch, Sims, and Wespieser 2015, vi). Nevertheless, young people often face a number of barriers, which may hinder their access to the labour market.

### **BARRIERS FOR YOUTH EMPLOYMENT**

Although the barriers below are intertwined, they might be categorised as being related to learners, employers and education provision.

#### **Learner's attitude to work**

Employers often report weaknesses in young people's attitude to work (CBI 2012, 6). When recruiting them into technical roles, employers place highest priority on attitudinal aspects rather

than technical knowledge/qualifications (EdComs 2013). Qualifications may form part of the initial sift, but are not a differentiating factor after this. Work experience and extra-curricular activities credibly demonstrate many of the attitudinal aspects employers seek such as drive, enthusiasm and an ability to commit (EdComs 2013).

### **Learner's making informed decisions**

Young people want and need to be well-informed when making subject and career decisions (DfE 2015a, 4). However, organisations feel that it is unrealistic to expect 16 year olds to make informed decisions about their long-term future employment. The pressure to do this is greater on young people taking a vocational path than on those taking an academic path, who are often freer to make up their minds later (Young Women's Trust 2015, 8). When choosing vocational education or other options, Edward, Weedon and Riddell (2008, vii) point to a range of factors affecting young people's decision-making, including: the availability of opportunities; the influence of others: family members, peers, teachers, careers officers; interest in the subjects; quantity and quality of information available about FE and/or training, and about the careers to which they may lead; and personal factors such as self-concept, identity, enjoyment and confidence. There is still no consensus on how these factors can be used to explain young people's decisions and actions and to guide them in ways which will assist their future development (Edward, Weedon, and Riddell 2008, vii).

### **Learner's work readiness**

Some employers express concerns about young people's readiness for work, with 63% of survey respondents agreeing they lack insight into the working world and 57% agree young people lack work experience (CiPD 2012, 2). Lack of work experience for 16-24 year olds is one of the top barriers for youth employment (ICCDPP 2015, 2), which might be the result of lack of engagement from employers. Furthermore, 59% of respondents agree young people have unrealistic expectations about work (CiPD 2012, 2). In a research study conducted in Australia, young people felt that employers too held unrealistic expectations of their skills and abilities given their lack of experience (Oxenbridge and Evesson 2012, 4-5). Employers often cite a lack of work-readiness as a reason not to employ a younger person (House of Commons Education Committee 2015, 21). Even if they are work ready, employers find it difficult to assess them with limited work experience and young people find it difficult to 'market' themselves to employers (CiPD 2013, 4).

### **Employer engagement**

Employers are most likely to be involved with education through the arrangement of work experience placements (CiPD 2012, 19). Effective work experience is a key part of preparing young people for the workplace (House of Commons Education Committee 2015, 21) and developing their employability skills and confidence (Oxenbridge and Evesson 2012, 5). The employability of young people in the UK is important to both economic and social prosperity (City & Guilds 2016, 3). Yet, nationally, one in five employers say that nothing could persuade them to offer work experience placements to people in education (UKCES 2015). Work experience is the activity most likely to be categorised as demanding by employers, with four in ten respondents saying this is the case (CiPD 2012, 20). Although gap in careers advice provision might be filled by involving employers in the education system (OECD 2015, 13), too few employers are engaging with young people at schools and colleges to build their employability skills or providing them with access routes into their organisation. This is in contrast to countries with low levels of youth unemployment such as Austria and Germany, where employers play an active role in the vocational, education and training system, rather than seeing themselves as passive consumers waiting for the education system to churn out job-ready young people (CiPD 2012, 23).

### **Education provision and support**

Too many young people leave education without some of the skills and attributes they should have

to be effective at work (CBI 2012, 32). Some of the key skills employers are concerned about developing in young people during their first year in the job are: communication (64%), teamwork (60%), confidence (45%) and time management (37%) (CiPD 2015, 12). Of these the *most* challenging skills to develop are communication skills (19%), time management (18%) and confidence (14%). Confidence is an issue for many young people and many find interview situations particularly stressful as they have no prior experience of the workplace and they often don't know how to talk about their skills (CiPD 2013, 4). One-third of respondents (34%) agree that VET does not teach skills such as communication and teamwork (European Commission 2011, 8). As a result, employers are still struggling to find young people with 'soft skills' as well as 'technical skills', specifically 'time and task managing', 'customer handling skills' and 'team working'.

There is also insufficient support for young people during the transition from education to work, which is preceded by poor advice and guidance at school (CiPD 2013, 4). This lack of support might reflect the disconnect between jobs available and education received, which is perceived to be one of the major barriers for youth employment (ICCDPP 2015, 2). Most young people do not know where to turn to when they try to enter the labour market (CiPD 2013, 5) and it may not be surprising to find they are amongst the most disadvantaged groups in this regard (CiPD 2013, 8).

In Europe, a large minority (39%) of EU citizens believes young people do not receive enough advice concerning their learning and career opportunities from schools and employment services (European Commission 2011, 19). The findings of a more recent report (Archer and Moote 2016) highlight low levels of careers education and work experience taking place: fewer than half of all learners (aged 15-16) surveyed took part in work experience and fewer than two-thirds received career guidance. Only 57% of learners were satisfied with the careers education they experienced.

Many young people, as a result, lack the knowledge about job opportunities, how to apply for jobs, how to write a good CV and a good application (CiPD 2013, 4), which might impact eventually on their work readiness. A quarter of employers say that an increase in the quality of applications from young people would encourage them to recruit them, while one in five employers say greater reassurance that the education system is providing job-ready young people would make a difference (CiPD 2012, 23). Therefore, there is a need for greater support for young people during the transition phase between education and employment including better career education. Better connections between education and the labour market demand will 'increase employability, improve outcomes for both learners and employers' (UNESCO 2016, 15).

### **RATIONALE OF THE TECHBACC**

In addition to the need to address the above barriers, the UK government announced the Technical Baccalaureate (TechBacc) in April 2013. The aim was to provide a programme of study (vocational alternative) on par with A levels consisting of an approved vocational level 3 qualification, a core maths qualification and an extended project. For those aged 14-19, employers believe schools and colleges should be prioritising development of employability skills (71%). They also want to see more done to strengthen literacy (50%), numeracy (45%) and technology skills (30%) (CBI 2012, 6). While all types of qualifications (academic and vocational) are seen as aiding development of particular employability skills, no one type is seen as delivering on all the essential areas (CBI 2012, 6). STEM qualifications alone aren't enough either and as mentioned above, many employers find that applicants lack general workplace experience (42%) and are weak in employability skills (39%) (CBI 2012, 40). The study programme principles, set out in Department for Education (DfE) guidance (DfE 2015b) and based on the Wolf review of vocational education (2011), suggest that all 16–19 learners should be given the opportunity to follow a study programme which incorporates the elements below:

- **Progression:** to a level higher than that of their prior attainment (IPPR 2015, 34) both to skilled employment and to further levels of education. This could be through a flexible, interchangeable vocational pathway, like the Dutch model (IPPR 2015, 42) for all learners including those with negative education experiences and opting for the vocational route as an alternative (Kersh and Juul 2015, 29).
- **Qualifications:** that are of sufficient size and rigour to stretch the learner and that are clearly linked to suitable progression opportunities in training, employment or higher levels of education.
- **Maths and English:** requiring learners who do not already have a GCSE A\*–C grade in maths and English to work towards them (or other qualifications that will act as a stepping stone for achievement of these qualifications in time). Younger workers in the UK ‘do not have markedly better skills than older workers. Hence, there is no doubt that improving basic skills of school leavers remains challenging’ (Vignoles 2016, 8). In fact, at ‘every qualification level, low basic skills are more common among young people in England than in many other countries’ (Kuczera, Field, and Windisch 2016, 25). The UK should consider ‘further investment in improving the basic skills of both school leavers and adults who are already in the labour market’ (Vignoles 2016, 9), which current reforms seems to address (Kuczera, Field, and Windisch 2016, 13).
- **Work experience:** that is meaningful, related to any vocational areas of the study programme, develops employability skills and/or creates potential employment options for those who cannot do substantial vocational qualifications. Learners should spend most of their study programme time taking one or more substantial academic or vocational qualifications (equivalent in size to two A levels of 300 hours taken over two years); undertake a traineeship or extended work experience and take part in non-qualification activity such as tutorials, work experience or other work-related learning. This has been called a historic change, urgently sought by employers and much needed if the UK is to compete internationally (DfE 2013 quoted in Kersh and Juul 2015, 12). However, research shows that 41 out of 73 colleges reported having difficulty offering work experience in some curriculum areas (IPPR 2014, 34).
- **Development of skills, attitudes and confidence:** Includes other activities unrelated to qualifications that develop the skills, attitudes and confidence and support progression (IPPR 2015, 34). Having support networks in place (that is, mentor, buddy, line manager) is the most important factor to consider during the role design process (72%) (CiPD 2015, 13).

Just like other awarding bodies responding to the DfE requirements, City & Guilds, as a UK leading awarding body, decided to explore the possibility of offering its own TechBac at level 2 and 3 at University Technical Colleges and FE colleges. TechBac aims to better prepare learners for their next steps, be that into work, an apprenticeship or progression to higher levels including HE. At its heart (Figure 1) it has a technical qualification that has been endorsed by employers and universities, but it also offers a range of other elements that correspond to the above principles and allow learners to cherry pick additional skills (including maths and English skills) to help them progress.

Figure 1: TechBac design



Aware of the importance of employers’ role (Beddie 2015; UKCES 2013), City & Guilds aimed to

involve employers in developing and endorsing the qualifications within the TechBac to respond to the needs of learners (i.e. better chance of gaining employment/further study), industry and community and tick the 'quality' box from their perspectives (Griffin, forthcoming). After seeing the information about the TechBac, they were impressed by the idea as it fills a gap in their needs when recruiting for entry level technical roles. The TechBac was seen positively and endorsed by employers; it aims to provide the missing key elements, which when combined, creates a good base for further in-house technical training. The work placement was valued; it demonstrates candidates are work-ready, and when combined with the extended project provides an excellent illustration of how they can apply themselves in a work situation. As TechBac was designed to facilitate progression to HE as one of its outcomes, this is likely to address employers' and other stakeholders' concerns about the transferability of vocational qualifications (Kersh and Juul 2015, 29). The enthusiasm for the concept was reflected in the fact that the vast majority of employers consulted during the programme development stage were interested in supporting City & Guilds to develop the TechBac and especially in offering young people work experience. The consultation with employers concluded that further evidence on how the TechBac would work in practice is needed (EdComs 2013). This, among other objectives, highlighted the importance of conducting an evaluation of the TechBac programme and its impact on learners.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The TechBac evaluation aimed to 1) assess its impact on learners' knowledge, skills and attitudes to learning 2) identify mediating and moderating factors in this process and 3) suggest improvements to the programme, with four research questions in mind:

- To what extent has the TechBac prepared learners in developing the knowledge and skills required in their chosen industry?
- What impact has the TechBac had on learner attitude to learning?
- What are the mediating and moderating factors of doing and delivering TechBac?
- What could be done to further improve the TechBac learning experience and delivery?

TechBac was first introduced and piloted with 85 learners at three participating UK centres (i.e. colleges/training providers) during the academic year 2014-5. The findings presented in this article are based on the first evaluation of TechBac, which adopted a mixed method approach. First, qualitative data were collected during summer 2015, which involved individual semi-structured interviews with 9 tutors, triad semi-structured interviews with 35 learners and telephone semi-structured interviews with 3 employers to understand their views of the TechBac and recommendations for the future. In total, 47 participants took part. Apart from employers, the data were collected from participants based at the centres. Each centre had a slightly different delivery approach, which reflects the flexible design of the TechBac and its associated elements as shown below.

**Table 1: TechBac elements**

	Centre A	Centre B	Centre C
Technical qualification (mandatory)	✓	✓	✓
Project qualification	x	✓	x
Work placement	x	✓	✓
Online mentoring platform	✓	✓	✓
SkillsZone (SZ)	✓	x	✓

Second, quantitative data were collected through the follow-up online learner (n=40) survey, with a response rate of 47%. Most survey respondents were males (n=35) and the rest were females (n=4).

12 learners were aged less than 16, 24 were aged 16-18 and 3 were over 18. One respondent skipped two questions in the survey hence the total number of respondents may vary between 39-40.

The research was conducted in line with BERA ethical guidelines (2011). All participants were informed about the research aims, their rights to remain anonymous and withdraw at any stage. With their permission, all the interviews were audio recorded for accurate transcribing. Multiple methods were used (i.e. triangulation) to study the same phenomenon for the purpose of increasing study credibility (Hussein 2009). All the methods were designed specifically for this research and had been piloted before the data collection.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

Presented under the research questions, the findings generated both qualitative and quantitative data. The former focuses mainly on the TechBac elements while the latter examines mostly its impact on learners.

### ***RQ1: To what extent has the TechBac prepared learners in developing the knowledge and skills required in their chosen industry?***

The qualitative findings indicated that all TechBac learners at the centres progressed in relation to their knowledge and skills. The positive impact on learners' knowledge and skills was confirmed in the quantitative survey too (Table 2). 85% of respondents (i.e. learners) strongly agreed/agreed they had a better understanding of the 'behaviour' employers expect of them and to a lesser extent of the 'skills' required in the workplace (80%) as a result of doing the TechBac. Nearly three quarters of the learners (72.5%) strongly agreed/agreed they had 'better knowledge to make informed decisions about their future' and became 'more confident in their verbal communication'. 70% knew 'what industry they want[ed] to work in', 'the 'qualifications' necessary to succeed in their career and felt 'confident in written communication skills'. They (67.5%) also strongly agreed/agreed they had become more confident in their time management skills and 'applying for a job or for a place at college/university'. Similar number of learners (65%) indicated they could 'use tools more effectively' to manage their time and had 'clearer idea of what they can go on to do after the TechBac'. This is a little lower compared to that percentage of learners who 'knew what industry they want[ed] to work in'.

**Table 2: Impact on knowledge and skills**

As a result of doing the TechBac programme...?	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I know the behaviour that would be expected of me in the work place	35%	50%	12.5%	2.5%	0%
I know the skills that would be expected of me in the work place	25%	55%	20%	0%	0%
I feel I have better knowledge to make informed decisions about my future (e.g. further study, looking for a job)	12.5%	60%	22.5%	5%	0%
I am more confident in my verbal communication skills	20%	52.5%	20%	7.5%	0%
I know what industry I want to work in	22.5%	47.5%	27.5%	2.5%	0%
I know the qualifications I'll need to be successful in the career I want	17.5%	52.5%	17.5%	12.5%	0%
I am more confident in my written communication	17.5%	52.5%	27.5%	2.5%	0%

skills					
I feel more confident about applying for a job or for a place at College/University	20%	47.5%	25%	7.5%	0%
I feel more confident that I can manage my time to meet deadlines	20%	47.5%	22.5%	10%	0%
I have a clearer idea of what I can go on to do after the TechBac	10%	55%	22.5%	12.5%	0%
I use tools more effectively to help me organise my time e.g. diary, calendar	12.5%	52.5%	30%	5%	0%

NB: N=40

When asked in a separate survey question about their plan to apply for a job in the same industry as their TechBac programme nearly two thirds of the learners (62.5%) were 'unsure' while a third (32.5%) said 'yes'. This is much higher than the percentage of those who neither agreed nor disagreed with the above statement about 'knowing what industry they want[ed] to work in' (27.5%). It also contradicted the above findings, which showed that 70% were clear about their chosen industry. Of those who replied in the affirmative to the question about their future plan, one respondent was offered an 'apprenticeship' already. However, the remaining two respondents (5%) said 'no'. This might be related to the issues experienced in doing the programme: *'the first exam wasn't what they said for it to be'*.

Furthermore, the qualitative interviews found that various sub-elements of the project qualification (e.g. 'production log', 'evaluation', 'written report' and a 'variety of evidence') were useful to learners, e.g. 'provide learners with the necessary skills' and ensured at the same time their 'work is manageable'. With the presentation element, learners might 'not feel comfortable' presenting back, but they realised that 'this kind of skill is important'. Project qualification was working 'very well' to provide learners with a range of skills, e.g. 'group work' and allowed tutors to 'give learners a checkpoint in [their] learning development'.

The mentoring element of TechBac was used but infrequently. Learners already had 'a strong support' network consisting of 'people that they know'. They called on them for 'help and advice' relating to both programme-specific content as well as more 'general life advice'. However, there was often 'a need for a different perspective'. Therefore, the mentoring element had been 'effective' for some learners in meeting a key need that they had.

### **RQ2: What impact has the TechBac had on learner attitude to learning?**

Based on the qualitative fieldwork, practical elements of the TechBac seemed to have influenced learners' attitude to learning. At Centre B, learners 'enjoy[ed] the project-based learning nature of the programme'. However, it is difficult to pick apart the role TechBac has had, due to the centre's 'teaching ethos' being 'very similar to the TechBac ethos [i.e. approach]'. At Centre C, learners experienced a 'difference between themselves and their school peers'; they felt 'more confident, organised, and grown-up'. The 'less stressful nature of the programme' made them engaged. When learners are engaged in learning, they are likely to progress. Learners were able to demonstrate their learning progress through the project qualification. At one of the centres they were tasked with 'creating a BBQ', which they found useful; 'learners have put their knowledge to good use' and practice.

More importantly, learners felt that they 'would be ready for the next step' once their programme had finished. There were some anxiety in those who had not been on any work placements by the time they were interviewed; they might 'not know what to expect' from their work placement.

However, many learners had part-time jobs and so the programme had further developed their workplace skills such as *'timekeeping', 'teamwork', 'work management'*. With regard to doing further study, learners were confident knowing that their knowledge could be *'taken on to the next level'*. This, and the positive attitude to learning, were echoed in the survey findings below (Table 3). The majority of learners who completed the survey (67.5%) strongly agreed/agreed that they were *'progressing towards achieving their future plans'* and were *'more motivated to study/learn'*. Similar number of learners (60%) indicated they *'enjoyed learning more'* as a result of doing the TechBac.

**Table 3: Impact on attitudes to learning**

As a result of doing the TechBac programme...?	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am progressing towards achieving my future plans	22.5%	45%	25%	7.5%	0%
I am more motivated to study/learn	22.5%	45%	20%	10%	2.5%
I enjoy learning more	27.5%	32.5%	25%	15%	0%

NB: N=40

The positive impact on learners' knowledge and skills is further evident in the learners' responses to the survey question about the extent to which the TechBac met their expectations (Table 4). Three quarters (75%) believed the TechBac helped them a *'great'/'good'* deal to *'get a realistic idea of what it's like to work in their future career/industry'* and *'gain/improve their professional skills so they are more prepared for working life'*.

**Table 4: Meeting learners' expectations of TechBac**

My TechBac programme helped me to.....?	A great deal	A good deal	Somewhat	A little	Not at all
Get a realistic idea of what it's like to work in my future career/industry	20%	55%	15%	5%	5%
Gain/improve my professional skills, so I'm more prepared for working life (e.g. communicating with others & organising my work)	27.5%	47.5%	17.5%	2.5%	5%

NB: N=40

**RQ3: What are the mediating and moderating factors of doing and delivering TechBac?**

One of the mediating factors was that TechBac did meet the needs of stakeholders. For Centre B, it *'fits'* perfectly with their ideals of teaching approach e.g. *'project-based learning'*. This was true of Centre A as well, though to a lesser degree. Second, it fits with learner needs. Tutors realised that *'learners have different needs when it comes to teaching and this programme seems like a more inclusive teaching style'*. Third, it helped to *'position centres as being different from [their] competitors'* and remain *'fresh'* and *'interesting to learners and tutors'* alike. Centres were aware of the potential risks of delivering a new programme of study: *'We are a centre trialling a pioneer programme, we all knew that things would not be right first time, but the concept is so strong it was worth the risks'*.

In relation to assessment, tutors perceived TechBac learners to be *'less stressed than [some other] learners'* who are *'under constant pressure due to assessments every six weeks. It becomes an exercise in teaching learners how to pass the assessments, and not develop other skills'*. This meant it could feel like school, which *'learners have moved to college to avoid'*. On the other hand, TechBac

learners *'do not have the same pressures put upon them'*. The more *'practical nature of teaching helps learners to feel less stressed'*. Learners believed that the *'amount of work on TechBac is manageable'* (also confirmed in the survey findings). The less stressful learning environment was *'conducive to learners helping each other out'* a great deal. Site visits were *'extremely useful'* as an addition to work placements. They helped to *'engage learners who might not have been that engaged, adding context to teaching and aiding motivation levels'*.

On the other hand, there were a few moderating factors. For example, centres did not fully understand the purpose of SZ. There were other reasons for the SZ not being fully utilised. Tutors' default behaviour was to use the centre's *'own learning platform'*, which they would *'upload content to after lessons'*. Lack of *'clear information at the start of the programme'* meant that tutors were *'not sure if SZ had to be used or not'*. They believed they would have to do *'more work'* if they were to use it, i.e. *'constantly logging in to check progress'*. As for learners, they had some reservations too. Some believed it was *'not relevant'* to them, i.e. content was not deemed to be specific to their programme, and so some struggled to see the value of this more *'general skills'* offering.

Despite the TechBac assessment being *'less stressful'* than some other qualifications, learners and tutors had some concerns about its content and format: *'We have been told that x will be in the exam, but we haven't even been taught that yet'*, *'will it be multiple choice, essays...?'*. Centres were used to receiving *'mock exams'* and detailed advice about how best to approach exam preparation so were concerned about the lack of mock exams.

The research indicated that work placements were not currently viewed as being different to what centres would normally do: *'we have our own work placement book that learners take with them on work placements'*. However, when they saw the TechBac book, they were happy to use it instead; it was very similar to what they were already doing. In contrast, sometimes learners were sent to work placements without a book to fill in and *'without seeing any of the workplace resources prior to attendance'*, thus not making use of the value that TechBac can bring to learners.

Employers noted it would be difficult to see any difference between a TechBac and non-TechBac learner, especially if the learner arrived early in the academic year and *'do not have background in the field that they are studying'*. Although TechBac learners might be *'more motivated'* than other learners to get involved in much more of the work at their placement, there would be some restrictions to apply all their knowledge, e.g. not being allowed to *'manage others'*, *'need a certificate before they are allowed to perform certain tasks'* or might be confined to *'a shadowing role'*.

Some learners faced difficulties in their mentoring experience too. First, they struggled to understand who the mentors were because they had not met them: *'I don't know who these mentors are'*. Second, when introduced halfway through the programme, it could feel as though it was just another thing to worry about even if it wasn't compulsory: *'why are you introducing this [mentoring scheme] to me now?'* Third, learners had to be taken out of class to be introduced to the mentoring scheme: *'I don't want to take time out of my busy schedule to learn about this'*.

#### **RQ4: What could be done to further improve the TechBac learning experience and delivery?**

A number of suggestions were made about the TechBac elements. With regard to SZ, it is important to *'emphasise its benefits'* to learners and encourage *'integration into learning'* plans *'from the start of the programme'*. Taking the above concerns of learners and tutors into account, *'clearer'* and *'more detailed information around assessment'* should be provided to them. In addition, other qualification/assessment-related suggestions were made in the survey by a few learners (n=4), i.e. *'faster results'* and *'better organisation'* of the programme. It might be better to recommend to

centres that the work placement should *'take place towards the later stages of the programme'* and from a logistics point of view, for *'all learners to attend placements within the same two-week window'*. Learners *'need time on the programme to increase their knowledge'*. Employers would expect learners to come with a *'certain amount of knowledge'*, thus it is crucial that this happens before they spend time with employers.

In relation to mentoring, learners suggested engaging mentors to *'visit the centre to speak with [them]'* to have an understanding of who these people are. It was recommended to *'introduce the mentoring platform at the start of the programme'*; learners would be seeking advice throughout the academic year and not just towards the end of the programme. Rather than taking learners out of class to learn about mentoring, it might be better to *'schedule training well in advance'*.

Despite the above moderating factors, at the end of the survey, learners were given the following statements to assess their level of satisfaction with different aspects of the TechBac programme (Table 5) and see where improvements could be made. The top three aspects they were very satisfied/satisfied with were the *'relationships at their college'* (79.4%), content of the TechBac programme and workload they were expected to do (71.8%). The majority of learners were also very satisfied/satisfied with how the programme *'engaged and challenged them'* (64.1%) and *'quality of feedback to support their learning'* (59%). Just over half of the respondents (53.8%) were satisfied with the *'availability of information about the TechBac'*. The aspect they were least satisfied with was about how the *'timetable was organised'* (46.2%).

**Table 5: Level of satisfaction with different aspects of the TechBac**

To what extent are you satisfied with the following aspects?	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neither	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
Relationships at your college/place of study (e.g. with tutor, learners)	30.7%	48.7%	18%	0%	2.6%
The content of the TechBac programme was relevant to your interests	18%	53.8%	23.1%	5.1%	0%
The workload you were expected to do	25.6%	46.2%	12.8%	15.4%	0%
Learning on your TechBac programme was engaging and challenging	15.4%	48.7%	25.6%	7.7%	2.6%
The quality of feedback to support your TechBac learning	15.4%	43.6%	28.2%	10.3%	2.5%
Availability of information about your TechBac programme	12.8%	41%	18%	25.6%	2.6%
The way the timetable was organised	18%	28.2%	25.6%	23.1%	5.1%

NB: N=39

When asked at the end of above question to add any *'other aspects'* they were satisfied/dissatisfied with, most of the learners who responded (5 out of 6) were dissatisfied with the *'organisation of the programme'* or *'lack of information provided by City and Guilds'*, which confirms to some extent the above findings. One learner called for a quicker turnaround of the exam results: *'I wanted the results faster'*. On the other hand, another learner was satisfied because *'the programme has helped me gain the skills of an experienced [technician]'*.

## DISCUSSION

The findings indicated that TechBac learners improved their knowledge and skills (e.g.

communication, confidence, time management), which are most demanded by employers. The development of such skills is an important step towards preparing young people for employment and further study and likely to address employers' concerns, which are found in the literature (CiPD 2015). The TechBac seems to have enhanced learners' ability to make informed decisions about their future career, which is stressed by the Department for Education (DfE 2015a).

The practicality of the TechBac programme and its elements allowed learners to put their knowledge into practice and thus prepare them for their future job. The importance of having a mentor, who is an expert in their field, as another element of the TechBac provision confirms the literature (DfE 2015a). In order to be fully utilised, perhaps more needs to be done in relation to the mentoring scheme, e.g. earlier introduction into the programme.

There might be three explanations for the discrepancy in their views about their future plan to apply for a job in the same sector as their TechBac programme. First, young people may find it difficult to make informed career decisions at such an early stage in their life (Young Women's Trust 2015), hence two thirds were 'unsure' about their plan to apply for a job in the same industry as their TechBac programme. Second, the issues they faced during the TechBac might have impacted on their views whether to continue in the same sector or not. Third, the wording of the questions might have influenced their views too. The statement in Table 2 asked them 'in general' about the sector they want to work in, which from learners' point of view may or may not be the same sector as their TechBac's. On the other hand, the follow-up question asked clearly about their plan to continue in the 'same sector', which might have caused this discrepancy. Nevertheless, the positive impact of the TechBac on nearly three quarters of the respondents' ability to make informed decisions about their career should not be overlooked.

Not only did the TechBac seem to have a positive impact on learners' knowledge and skills, but also on their attitude to learning. Employers identified learner attitude as a major barrier (CBI 2012), which the TechBac seems to have addressed. Vocational learner's expectations 'control or greatly influence' their level of engagement (O'Hara 1967, 4). TechBac learners had high expectations of the programme and this might explain their eagerness to engage in their learning, which eventually had a positive impact on their knowledge and skills. Therefore, it may be difficult at this early stage of the evaluation to associate this impact solely to the programme and rule out other variables for a number of reasons. First, some of the TechBac elements were very similar to the existing practices at the participating centres in terms of their ethos, teaching approach and work placement. This might imply that TechBac might have a bigger impact on centres with 'different' teaching practices. Second, the TechBac learners seemed to be more motivated than other learners, although this might be due to the programme itself (Kersh and Juul 2015) or their tutors (Edward, Weedon, and Riddell 2008). Consequently they might demonstrate more positive attitude towards learning. On the other hand, others might argue that learners' 'uncertainty' about future plans could be attributed to the programme of study (Kersh and Juul 2015). Learner anxiety about not having started their work placements by the time they were interviewed might imply they were eager to possess the skills employers seek (EdComs 2013). Those who had previous work experience the TechBac appeared to have consolidated their workplace skills and confidence even more. Their progression would be another indicator of the impact of the TechBac. It must be stressed that the post-16 achievements of young people are 'strongly linked to prior levels of educational achievement' (CVER 2016, 1) and cannot be attributed to the TechBac only.

Engagement with stakeholders in the design of the TechBac programme had ensured it would meet their needs. The importance of doing so was highlighted in the literature (UKCES 2013). The impact of this engagement might be reflected in the level of learners' satisfaction and the interest shown by centres to stand out from the crowd. Some of the features of the TechBac elements (e.g. less

stressful assessment experience) compared to other existing qualifications helped in this regard and was something appreciated by learners and tutors alike.

However, as with any other new programme of study, there were some issues along the way. In fact, one of the main objectives of conducting this evaluation was to identify and address those issues and ensure City & Guilds qualifications meet stakeholders' needs. The common theme across some of these issues was the insufficient information about some of the TechBac elements, e.g. SZ, assessment and mentoring scheme. Centres might need to communicate to learners the value and relevance of developing their 'general'/'soft' skills, which employers look for when recruiting young people (Oxenbridge and Evesson 2012). At the start of the programme, centres believed that they were doing more work to communicate and inform on TechBac than they should be doing. This could be mitigated if senior management at centres consult tutors so they feel knowledgeable about the TechBac programme and its delivery.

Employers were aware of their active role in developing learners' knowledge and at the same time acknowledging learners' need to have at least a base of knowledge to start with. Neither did employers expect learners to know everything about their chosen sector nor complain they lack work experience, which seems to contradict the findings of ICCDPP (2015). To make their involvement in this process manageable, they just requested learners to have some amount of knowledge. Their preference to allow learners to do their work placement in a block confirms the research behind the TechBac (EdComs 2013). Certain sector-related regulations impose restrictions on what employers could offer learners during their work placement. Implication for (future) centres offering the TechBac is perhaps to manage learner's expectations and explore additional options where possible (i.e. more job shadowing) where such restrictions apply.

Despite these issues, learners were satisfied with different aspects of the TechBac programme; it impacted positively on their knowledge and skills. Addressing these issues is likely to increase their level of satisfaction even more. One of the main suggestions to further improve the TechBac learning experience and delivery was to provide learners and tutors with more information about some of its elements so they can see the rationale behind it. This is likely to enable learners to plan ahead effectively and avoid being surprised by the inclusion of additional work during the programme. Lack of engagement with their mentors did not allow the learners to explore career ideas and gain more confidence and motivation as a result either. Better engagement with mentors from an early start is likely to improve learners' ability to make informed decisions about their future career, although there are other factors that can impact on their decision-making (Edward, Weedon, and Riddell 2008).

### **RESEARCH LIMITATIONS**

The findings are based on a small sample and thus not generalisable to similar programmes of study. The small sample impacted on the type of data analyses, which could be performed, i.e., comparison between groups of learners who completed the survey in terms of their gender, age or level. It would have been interesting to a) evaluate and report on learner destinations (i.e. further study/employment) and b) TechBac against similar programmes of study by other awarding bodies. However this information was not captured in this study and may be investigated as part of future evaluations.

### **CONCLUSION**

This article is based on the initial findings of the first TechBac evaluation. City & Guilds launched the TechBac programme, which was endorsed by employers and universities, in 2014-15 to better prepare learners for employment and further study and address employers' concerns about the employability skills of young people. Generally speaking, the TechBac programme seems to have

equipped learners with the knowledge and skills required in the workplace and improved their attitude to learning. In addition to the small research sample, it is difficult at this early stage in the evaluation to attribute this impact solely to the TechBac programme and exclude other factors such as learner motivation. A few mediating and moderating factors of doing and delivering the TechBac were identified. Some suggestions to improve the TechBac learning experience and delivery were made (e.g. early introduction of the mentoring scheme and centre senior management's engagement with tutors to better understand the TechBac and its elements). As it is a new programme, the 'teething' issues were expected and centres were aware of the likelihood of such issues. Centres are at the forefront of teaching and are seen to be differentiated from other centres through delivering the TechBac. City & Guilds are committed to address these issues to increase learners' satisfaction even more, ensure their needs are met more effectively and ultimately prepare them for their next steps.

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