DO UNIVERSITY TECHNICAL COLLEGES ENCOURAGE DEEP LEARNING AND INTRINSIC MOTIVATION IN YEAR 11 ENGINEERING STUDENTS?

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The secondary education system in England and Wales is undergoing a period of rapid reform. Students can now leave their school at 14 and move to a University Technical College to study a tailored curriculum in a specialist area such as Engineering. Pioneered by Lord Baker and the late Lord Dearing, University Technical Colleges offer students the opportunity to study a core general education that is integrated with technical studies. The aim is to provide a learning environment that is real and relevant where students can learn ‘German for engineering, not Goethe’ (Baker Dearing Educational Trust, 2012).

Underpinning this model of education appears to be the assumption that the UTCs integrated curriculum promotes deeper learning by encouraging students to relate what they learn in one subject to another, and in doing so encourage or maintain an intrinsic motivation in the specialism. At a time when UTCs are being rolled out across the country, this paper explores whether students who attend a UTC are more likely to report adopting deeper learning strategies when compared to students studying at state schools.

This paper draws on nine focus group discussions and a survey of approximately 200 Year 11 students which included an adapted version of the Learning Process Questionnaire and the Academic Motivation Scale. The analysis compares the deep and surface learning strategy scores and intrinsic motivation of UTC engineering students; state school engineering students; and state school non-engineering students.

Linear regression analyses suggest that, after controlling for prior attainment, students studying at a UTC are not more likely to engage in deep learning when compared to students studying at a state school. There is also some evidence that intrinsic motivation is higher amongst UTC students when compared to the two state school comparator groups. The focus group data suggests that the overriding pressures of the high stakes education system means that students struggle to engage in deep learning irrespective of whether they attend a UTC or a state school.