

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Widening participation vs. 'academic excellence': The impact of learning and teaching cultures and epistemic assumptions on BTEC holders' sense of belonging in a research intensive institution.

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**Research Domain:** Access and widening participation (AWP)

**Abstract:** While Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) qualifications holders have been contributing to an expanding HE population in England (Katartzi and Hayward, 2019), studies have highlighted a relationship between vocational education backgrounds and lower rates of retention (Ertl et al. 2010). This extends to institution type, with BTEC students having the lowest degree completion rates in research intensive institutions (Kelly, 2017; Shields and Masardo, 2017). Drawing on findings from a qualitative case study exploring the HE experiences of students holding BTEC qualifications at a research intensive institution, this paper will illustrate and discuss how departmental cultures can exert a pronounced influence on students' perceptions of their own academic abilities and sense of belonging. This highlights the power of inclusive learning and teaching cultures in having the potential to ensure more equitable academic experiences for these students, and in making a contribution towards a reduction in the reproduction of inequalities in the HE landscape.

**Paper: Introduction**

While Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) qualifications holders have contributed to an expanding HE population (Katartzi and Hayward, 2019), studies have highlighted inequalities in HE access and retention between these and those possessing Advanced-Level (A-Level) qualifications. These inequalities are evident in progression to different types of HE institution, with vocational qualification holders being overrepresented in post-1992, and underrepresented in research intensive universities (Hoelscher et al., 2008; Masardo and Shields, 2015). In addition to inequalities in accessing HE, lower levels of retention of BTEC qualification holders exist generally, but this is more so the case in research intensive institutions (Kelly, 2017; Shields and Masardo, 2017).

A number of factors have been reported as contributing to lower levels of retention in HE amongst vocational qualification holders, including students experiencing the HE environment as 'alienating'

(Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003); one potential explanation for this is that more 'gaps' between their expectations of, and experiences in the HE environment are thought to exist for these students (Catterall et al., 2013). Furthermore, those who study vocational qualifications are more likely to be from lower socioeconomic groups (BIS, 2015), from minority ethnic backgrounds (Kelly, 2017), to be care leavers (Harrison, 2017), or to have a disability (DIUS, 2009) which can further exacerbate such feelings.

This paper will draw on data from a qualitative case study that explored the academic experiences of BTEC holders in a research intensive institution. Specifically, the paper will report on findings associated with experiences of departmental learning and teaching cultures, and how these influenced students' confidence in their academic abilities, and sense of belonging. This can enhance understandings of what may contribute to lower levels of retention for BTEC qualification holders in research intensive institutions.

### **The study**

The research consisted of a qualitative case study which aimed to understand the academic experiences of students with BTEC Level 3 qualifications at a research intensive HE institution in England. More specifically, the research sought to identify the impact of BTEC qualifications on students' transition into, and progression through, this institutional environment by uncovering factors that enabled or constrained their academic experiences.

Data was collected between 2017 and 2018 via individual semi-structured interviews. These were carried out with 26 undergraduate students, and 13 members of academic staff. Both student and staff participants were recruited from each faculty within the institution, resulting in a range of subject areas to be represented, including: Accounting; Biology; Health Sciences (e.g. Nursing); Philosophy; Law; Psychology; English Literature; Theatre; Education; Music; and Engineering.

### **Key findings**

This paper will focus on a constellation of themes to illustrate the power of learning and teaching cultures, expectations, and assumptions on BTEC holders' sense of confidence in their own academic abilities, and feelings of belonging in a research intensive institution.

### ***Pedagogy, curriculum and epistemic assumptions***

Students' academic experiences varied quite substantially across different faculties within the institution. This was also the case in terms of staff members' perceptions of BTEC holders' academic abilities. Relationships between pedagogic practices, curriculum and epistemic assumptions and students' academic confidence along with their sense of belonging within the institution were apparent in the data.

Students' confidence in their own academic abilities and subsequently, their feelings of belonging in HE was decreased by:

- a) Unfamiliar assessment practices, namely examinations
- b) Epistemic assumptions by staff (assuming all students held A-level knowledge)

- c) Prioritisation of a culture of 'academic excellence' in the department
- d) Limited or no peers who held BTEC qualifications
- e) Large course size.

Though, these were increased by:

- a) Varied assessments formats (not an overreliance on examinations)
- b) Opportunities to choose elective modules
- c) Prioritisation of, and investment in, a culture of WP and diversity in the department
- d) Familiarity of module content in students' first year (i.e. subject content that demonstrated similarities to their BTEC course)
- e) Larger number of peers who held BTEC qualifications
- f) Small course size.

***WP & diversity vs. 'academic excellence': The impact of departmental cultures on academic confidence and belonging***

Academic staff perceptions of the BTEC qualification and the abilities of students who had studied them, were strongly connected to departmental cultures; these consisted of either an investment in a culture of WP and diversity, or one focused on 'academic excellence'. Staff in departments that adopted an investment in WP and diversity perceived value in the knowledge, skills and qualities that the BTEC qualification provided to students, such as being able to manage their time effectively, strengths in assignment writing and delivering presentations, an ability to 'think outside the box', and strengths in practical/applied aspects of their courses. Due to this, staff had invested time into ensuring assessment formats were varied, created more opportunities for students to construct their own curriculum via the choice of elective modules, and incorporated curriculum content that was similar to students' BTEC qualifications. Students undertaking degree courses in these departments, as suggested above, articulated higher levels of confidence in their own academic abilities and a sense of belonging at the institution.

Conversely, staff who reported a high investment in maintaining a culture of 'academic excellence', felt that the BTEC qualification was not considered 'equivalent' to A-levels, was more relevant in preparing students to study in post-1992 institutions, and lacked academic rigour. Perceptions of BTEC students as being low achievers, academically 'weak' and 'problem' students were also more commonly expressed by staff in such departments. Degree courses in these departments reflected the assessment and pedagogic practices, along with epistemic assumptions, that were noted earlier as being associated with lower levels of academic confidence, and an absence of a sense of belonging amongst students. Students explained that these feelings had been partially initiated through interactions with academic staff and their A-level qualification holder peers, leading to a sense of 'BTEC stigma' in the institution. Students were therefore more likely to experience an absence of social, and academic integration (Tinto, 1993), and an increased propensity to encounter 'learning

shock' (Griffiths et al., 2005) in departments with a higher investment in cultures of 'academic excellence' as opposed to WP and diversity.

These findings suggest that the power of inclusive learning and teaching cultures, and perceptions of value in BTEC qualifications by staff, may have the potential to assist in the progression towards more equitable academic experiences for students holding BTEC qualifications. Subsequently, this can contribute to a reduction in the reproduction of inequalities in HE progression and non-completion between BTEC and A-level students.

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