

Considering the Impact of Further and Higher Education Tutor Imaginings of BTEC Learners upon Student Learner Identities

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Research Domains

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Abstract

It is widely acknowledged that BTEC learners have less success within HE; however, data on progression and award gaps tends towards the quantitative, limiting the narrative and reasoning behind this picture. This research addresses the shortage of qualitative data, illuminating the ways BTEC students are differently imagined and supported within FE and HE, considering how these perceptions shape students' own emerging sense of self and belonging as learners within HE. This is achieved through adopting a multi-method qualitative approach, synthesising data from students' own lived experiences and the perceptions of academic staff working in further and higher education, from a Business and Law School context. By connecting further and higher education, this research raises awareness of the needs of BTEC learners to promote accessibility and inclusion of different learning needs, and ultimately, supports student success.

Full paper

The impact of entry qualification upon student outcomes within higher education (HE) has attracted increasing attention. It is indicated that BTEC qualifications have a negative impact upon student progression, retention, award and outcomes (Huskinson, 2016; Office for Students, 2018), whereas students with A-Level

qualifications have improved rates of retention and attainment (Schofield & Dismore, 2010). The result is an increasing gap between traditional and non-traditional students, reduced student success, and conflicted feelings of belonging amongst BTEC students who feel misunderstood by HE staff (Baker, 2021).

Transitional challenges from further education (FE) to higher education (HE) have been widely documented for students with vocational qualifications, with the question arising of whether the responsibility is that of the FEI or HEI. Barriers against progression and attainment identified are that of inconsistencies in student expectations of HE (Brinkwork et al, 2009; Crisp et al, 2009; Devlin, 2013; Zepke & Leach, 2010), revealing a misalignment and resulting in low levels of student satisfaction. Furthermore, there is a view that students lack the skills required for higher education, supporting a seamless transition between FE and HE (Shields & Masardo, 2015), in turn highlighting a deficit approach (Lawrence, 2005). In response, HEIs have integrated specialised units to facilitate the 'less prepared student' (Lumsden et al, 2010; Plowden & Hathaway 2013), finding benefits to modules dedicated to assessment methods and academic development, ultimately aiding students' understanding and knowledge of academic study. Despite this, a gap still exists, and the current approach is driven by the quantitative, limiting the narrative and reasoning behind this picture.

Therefore, this qualitative research generates new knowledge of BTEC students within the university setting by synthesising data from students' own lived experiences and the perceptions of academic staff within further and higher education institutions, from a Business and Law School context. This was achieved by examining how BTEC students were imagined as learners by HE and FE academic staff (RQ1), and the extent of how these imaginings engender different mechanisms of support and preparation for higher level learning (RQ2). In addition, how BTEC students experience and characterise academic support from HE and FE tutors (RQ3) was investigated, alongside the impact of these different modes of support upon the students own learner identities in their transition into HE (RQ4). Furthermore, this research utilised the concept of figured worlds (Holland et al, 1998) to consider the ways learner identities are embedded in a collective past, produced

in practice through life experiences, and mediated by discourse.

Taking a social constructivist approach, and located within a feminist and narrative framework, three participant groups were recruited: first year students possessing BTEC qualifications (n=10); HE academic staff (n=10); and tutors with responsibility for supporting BTEC learners within local FEIs (n=10). Student participants completed an initial questionnaire, a time-based diary, and an interview to reflect on their experiences within their first year within HE. Drawing on a tradition of longitudinal research with young adults (Henderson, et al., 2006) and HE students (Finn, 2015), this method generates temporal reflections on students' journeys through HE, to consider how their experiences of and identities as former BTEC students influences their emerging subjectivities and feelings of belonging. The staff groups participated within narrative interviews to gain insight into the ways BTEC learners are imagined, understood, and supported within the FE and HE settings.

This research is currently within the final stages of data collection. Significantly, an idealised level playing field has been identified amongst the HE staff group, drawing attention to the question of who's responsibility it is to ensure students are prepared for HE as posed earlier. Within the student group, the recruitment process highlighted the nuances behind the criteria as the majority of respondents also held A-level qualifications and/or completed a foundation year. This brings initial insights into the value of BTEC qualifications with some HEIs or departments requiring students to undertake foundation years, and reflects qualification profiles more broadly, with the number of students taking combinations of A-Levels and BTECs increasing (Kelly, 2017).

This research feeds directly into the national discussion of supporting students with BTEC qualifications. As previously mentioned, the current research in this area and strategies undertaken by HEIs are driven by the quantitative. By taking a qualitative approach and considering the lived experiences of students and academic staff from both FE and HE, a unique triangulation of perspectives is obtained providing the opportunity to raise awareness of the needs of BTEC learners to promote accessibility and inclusion of different learning needs, and ultimately, supports student success.

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