

Introduction

OECD nations aim to shift higher education systems from mass to universal participation. In working towards this aim, more and increasingly diverse groups of students are entering Higher Education (HE) and therefore research on the transition to HE is becoming increasingly important ([Gale & Parker, 2012](#)). This transition to higher education is a challenging and crucial phase for most students. This seems to be particularly true for students with a background in vocational education and training (VET) ([Ertl, Hayward & Hölscher, 2009](#); [Hoelscher et al., 2008](#)). For instance, in the UK, these students study mainly in post-92 institutions that have lower Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) results ([Hoelscher et al., 2008](#)). This pattern is partly attributed to selection mechanism at more prestigious Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), but also to the non-academic background of non-traditional students who are often an underrepresented minority at their HEI or who are the first in their family to enter university ([Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012](#); [Crozier et al., 2008](#); [Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2009](#)). While the students' pathways have been researched ([Hoelscher et al., 2008](#)), the actual study behaviour of non-traditional students (in particular VET students) has not yet received the same level of attention ([for an exception see Crozier & Reay, 2011](#)).

This study aims at shedding further light at the transitions of VET students. Two research questions guide our inquiry: a) Which systemic differences can be identified between VET students' transition to Higher Education (HE) in Switzerland and England? b) What are students' individual challenges when entering HE?

Research Methodology

Our investigations are based on document analysis and expert interviews. For the systemic comparison of the two transition systems, official documents and secondary sources were used to re-construct the possible pathways. For the research questions regarding students' challenges, expert interviews were conducted with student advisors and lecturers at a number of HEIs.

First results

Different Pathways in England and Switzerland

The two systems differ regarding the size of the VET sector. In Switzerland, about 60% of the students choose VET as their pathway for upper secondary education at the age of 16 ([Bundesamt für Statistik BFS, 2015](#)). They participate in so-called dual apprenticeships which consist of work in a company, 2 days of schooling in a vocational college and additional courses provided by the employer.

In England, the majority of students continue the path to general A-levels at the age of 16 ([Cuddy & Leney, 2005, p. 23](#)). However, the vocational pathways for students are quite diverse: For instance, if a pupil in England chooses to go into VET, he or she can complete the vocational general certificate of secondary education (VGCSE) (equivalent to level 2 in the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) framework). They can then continue into Vocational A-Levels (NVQ level 3). There are also a large number of vocationally-oriented qualifications such as BTECs, provided by Further Education Colleges or private providers. Finally, apprenticeships are offered in certain sectors such as engineering, agriculture and hairdressing.

Students' transition from VET into Higher Education in Switzerland is designed such that students either complete vocational A-levels as part of their dual apprenticeship or in one-year course on top of their apprenticeship. They are then qualified to start a bachelor's degree at a so-called University of Applied Sciences. With an additional year ('Passarelle'), they can directly enter a full University.

In comparison, in England most students with a background in VET who wish to continue their studies enter Further Education (FE) colleges. There are a substantial number of two-year programmes at FE colleges that qualify for entry into the third year of a regular bachelor programme at a university (Gallacher, 2006). There is also the area of FE Colleges offering parts of courses that lead to degree level qualifications awarded by HEIs as part of franchise agreements ([Ertl & Allen, 2014](#)). Thus, these more complex transition processes in the English context result in students with a background in VET usually studying in two different institutions in order to reach their undergraduate degree.

Similar challenges

Despite the different pathways that students can take in the two countries, the challenges that students encounter in their transition phase are often of similar nature. One major problem seems to be the adjustment towards the new kind of academic learning that is required in higher education. Depending on their concrete pathway, students in England meet this challenge only when they make the transition from FE into HE as the courses in the FE colleges are rather vocational (interview partner 1, HEI A).

Contribution to Research and Limitations

This research contributes to theory building on both students' transition into HE as well as the particular challenges of non-traditional students. The comparison of the two countries provides valuable insights both regarding the two systems and the students' challenges. Research is limited as we could only draw on data from expert interviews, however, have not yet interviewed or surveyed students on their experience. This could be an area for future research.

Literature

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