



Towards a Connected Approach for Inclusive and Positive Transitions into Higher Education

Subscriber Research Series 2015-16

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Subscriber Research Series 2015-16

In 2014-15, following a call for expressions of interest open to its subscribers, QAA commissioned six small-scale primary research projects intended to encourage collaboration between providers and promote the formation of communities of practice.

This report is one of three on the topic of the **transition experiences of entrants to higher education from increasingly diverse prior educational experiences**. It was submitted to QAA by University Campus Suffolk, written by Dr Clare Gartland and Dr Christine Smith.

The reports are not QAA documents, so we have respected the authors' approach in terms of style and presentation. We hope that you will read them with interest.

Other topics in the series are the role of student satisfaction data in quality assurance and enhancement; and an impact study of the guidance documents for higher education providers published by QAA in 2013.

For more information, and to read other reports in the series, visit www.qaa.ac.uk/improving-higher-education/research

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Executive summary

Introduction

This report presents findings from a small-scale qualitative research study, conducted in the East of England, into students' learning experiences, attitudes and conceptions of HE study, primarily with students studying on BTEC courses at level 3, in FE college and 6th form college contexts, but also with some level 4 undergraduates at a higher education institution (HEI). The report presents differences in learning about higher education (HE) and support for progression, as experienced by BTEC students at the two college institutions; outlines how BTEC courses promote awareness of a range of HE opportunities for students on vocational courses; identifies the pedagogical approaches which enable students to succeed on BTEC programmes; and explores how BTEC students develop vocational identities.

The aim of the study was to develop an understanding of learning issues associated with transition to HE, especially among widening participation (WP) students. The project has also sought to identify ways of working to enhance and improve students' transition into, and integration with, the HE environment.

The analysis, findings and conclusions from this project will be used to scope and run a developmental workshop open to colleagues in FE colleges, 6th form colleges and HEIs focused on identifying designs for resources, approaches and processes aimed at enhancing students' experiences of transition into HE.

The local context

The HEI in this study is a relatively new institution recruiting 'non-traditional', or 'widening participation' (WP) students, including significant numbers from disadvantaged and low participation backgrounds. Demographic data on students (in 2014) suggests 27% are part-time, 52.5% reside within the region and 61.4% are aged over 21 years. 12.6% are from ethnic minority groups and 13.7% have disclosed a disability. 99.4% of students coming direct from schools are from state schools. The area within which the feeder FE and 6th form colleges participating in this study are located has particularly low HE participation rates. The index of multiple deprivation indicates that much of the area is in the poorest fifth of areas nationally when looking at the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2010 and the Index of Multiple Deprivation Child Poverty.

It is widely acknowledged that the WP cohort is not a homogeneous group of students (Burke, 2012; Stuart, 2012) but the term is often misunderstood (Butcher et al, 2012). In Butcher et al's study WP students were frequently perceived as an undifferentiated group, which the authors concluded risks non-differentiated responses by academic staff in individual discipline and subject areas. In this report, we aim to understand our students in more nuanced ways, noting in particular differences in their perceptions around learning in HE, the diversity of their pedagogical experiences and their learning trajectories.

Background to the study

Research into transition has often focused on the experiences of first year students in Russell Group HEIs. The experiences of students in post-92 universities, where 'non-traditional' students predominate, are different. There is also a need to look at the use of terms such as 'non-traditional' or WP, towards understanding the diversity of student experience that these broad terms represent. Previous research studies point to gaps between students' experience of learning at school or college and expectations of them at university, with students frequently being (mis)construed as inappropriate or inadequate in the university setting. The FE and 6th form sectors serve high proportions of young people

from disadvantaged areas, yet there is little comparative research exploring how experiences of different pedagogies and institutions prior to entering university impact on students' progression and their engagement with HE learning and teaching. BTEC courses are increasingly popular in these sectors and provide a common route into HE. Research, however, indicates the emphasis in HE on acquiring and reproducing knowledge may disadvantage those students who have learnt on courses with a focus on coursework and project work. The importance of preparation for HE prior to transition has also been highlighted.

Our research questions

This aim of this research study was to explore how transition to HE supports the increasing diversity of prior educational experiences of entrants by asking the following research question:

What learning attitudes and conceptions of HE study are found among students in FE and 6th form colleges, and can these be further distinguished among three disciplinary clusters: science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), arts and humanities, and social sciences?

Methodology

The project methodological frame has been in grounded theory and phenomenography - in openly exploring the experiences and perceptions' of pre-university and first year HE students. We have conducted a grounded analysis of student interviews to identify specific categories of description related to one another.

The analytical frame for the study was shaped by a literature review around aspects of widening participation and transition into HE: including prior educational experiences; the non-homogeneity of WP learners; learner identity; learners' sense of becoming in the HE learning community; preparedness for HE study especially for independent learning; self-regulation; the wider context adjustments for HE study; the specific needs of first year students; and any disciplinary distinctions in transition. We draw here on the concept of 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 2003). Habitus is understood in the context of the 'fields' or locations within which people act, such as within particular communities. We follow Reay et al (2009) in understanding habitus as 'a complex interplay between past and present' and at the same time being 'permeable and responsive to what is going on around them' (Reay et al, 2009: 1104). The concept of 'institutional habitus' (Reay David and Ball, 2005; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009 & 2010) and of 'vocational habitus' (Colley et al, 2003) have been apposite for considering the impact on students' identities of the different institutions in this study and the vocational routes within which students are located.

Sources of data

We conducted 12 paired interviews with level 3 learners studying on BTEC courses within the areas of STEM; arts and humanities; health-related; and social sciences (SS). All students were in 6th form or FE colleges. Focus groups and interviews were also conducted with first year (level 4) students at the HEI, in a range of subject areas including health studies, nursing and midwifery, arts and humanities, and business studies. All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded to enable transcription.

All participating students were aged 18+ to avoid the need to seek parental consent. The interview process was conducted according to ethical codes of conduct. We worked to ensure the interviews were regarded as a 'positive experience' (Kvale, 1996: p. 36) by the

participants. Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed in full and these 'texts' categorised and coded drawing on grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014).

Milestones

The milestones of this project were realised at the end of the two main phases of the project. Phase 1 (March-June) led to a presentation of interim findings at the QAA Subscribers' Conference. Phase 2 has produced this final report including findings from the 6 interviews with BTEC students and from the interviews/focus groups with level 4 undergraduate students. A workshop is planned for teachers and lecturers from collaborating colleges and the HEI, but also open to others.

The long-term outcome of the project will be to use evidence from the findings of this report to design ways to better support transition. This will involve identifying learning and teaching strategies that effectively support the development of successful and robust 'learner identities' (Reay et al, 2010) among young people and that support them in accessing genuinely valuable information and advice about progression routes into HE.

Findings

Section 1: Transition and the role of institutional habitus

Sixth form and FE college students both experienced a range of support and advice from their institutions in their progression to HE but there were clear differences between the two. The institutional habitus of the 6th form and FE colleges and their positioning as institutions for different kinds of learners impacted in distinct ways on students' confidence and learning identities. There was a natural progression from the 6th form to HE which included even those students who had not considered progressing to HE. This was not the case in FE which caters for more vocational students on different trajectories, including directly into work and apprenticeships. The focus in the 6th form college on progression to HE meant that students at the college tended to be better informed, better prepared and more confident about progression to HE.

The experience of students at both colleges of moving from school or college to a different learning environment was, however, seen to support progression. Despite students' positive orientation to HE it was evident from their accounts that regardless of where it was gained, this orientation was relatively fragile and there was a number of factors that could undermine success in the HE sector. This included familial habitus which was often at odds with students' emerging identities as HE students.

Section 2: BTEC courses and new opportunities for progression to HE

Students' accounts indicated that many had not been aware before starting their course that BTEC courses provided a route into HE. Their experiences show that BTEC courses provide possibilities that many felt they had been excluded from when their GCSE results had not matched requirements for entry to A level courses. BTEC courses provide students with new learning opportunities which often motivate them to engage enthusiastically with learning and supported the development of strong learner identities where these have previously been damaged by negative school experiences or personal circumstances.

There was a general view that BTECs are viewed negatively particularly by A level students and as not equivalent to A levels despite the fact that they provide progression onto HE courses. Tutors were described as being very supportive of progression. Whilst BTEC enables and supports progression to HE courses, students interviewed were predominantly

progressing to courses at new or post-92 universities, not to courses at older or more élite institutions.

Section 3: Pedagogical approaches for transition and towards independent learning

Students experience BTEC courses as structured and supervised learning experiences in which learning is guided and supported by course tutors. The learning approaches on these courses support the development of strong learner identities among students. The unit structure of BTEC courses help students to make steady progress throughout their courses. Coursework assessments remove the uncertainty and anxiety that many students previously experienced on exam-based courses and also enable students to improve grades incrementally to reach requirements for entry to HE. Some courses comprise innovative and collaborative learning experiences. Many courses have work-based elements which students find useful. A number of students commented positively on the extensive help and support they had received from tutors. Assignments provide the 'driver' in much of the students' learning and research activities, and some students suggested integrated assignments, across different subject areas, help provide insights into a range of possible disciplines for future HE study.

Students expressed a range of views about the need for independent learning and how it may be developed. Many commented on how they had seen a significant shift away in the locus of control from the tutor to themselves as learners over the two years of their BTEC course. Most were expecting to have to manage for themselves far more with less direct tutorial support as they moved into HE and noted that you need to 'learn to do things by yourself' in HE. Some students still had anxieties about the transition to HE, and in their confidence to cope, as well as about whether their existing range of experiences was yet sufficiently developed.

Section 4: Vocational and professional subject belonging and identity

Acceptance into a professional field was seen as a strong motivational factor for many students undertaking the BTEC courses at both the 6th form and FE colleges, and for the degree choices made by level 4 undergraduates at the HEI. The work placement element of the BTEC programmes enables students to experience a variety of work contexts and contributes to their decision making in degree choice. For some, study on the BTEC course is a fully integrated part of their professional participation, as on the BTEC Engineering, or is a significant feature of health-related Level 4 HEI programmes.

Many BTEC students display a strong sense of vocation or professional identity with particular professional areas, and this influences their HE decision making. The work-related element of HE courses is regarded by level 4 HE students as contributing to a sense of 'difference': marking them apart from students not on work-related HE courses. A professional allegiance appears to be more important than the value or interest students might see in being in or progressing to HE as an endeavour or experience in its own right. A work-related degree is seen as a critical step for many students towards a chosen career. This is also seen to be highly gendered and often influenced by family aspirations and connections to specific professional contexts or careers. BTEC programmes can be depicted in terms of having 'strong' to 'weak' ties with both HE degrees and professional fields.

Conclusion

This study highlights points and issues affecting the transition of students from BTEC courses at FE and 6th form colleges into HE. The colleges connected to this study are located in an economically disadvantaged area with low progression rates to HE and

students contributing to this study were almost all first generation HE entrants. Identifying strategies to support these students in their transition to HE and to ensure they are well prepared and making progress, is vital to ensure these students have a positive and successful experience of HE. These strategies should also help to prevent attrition from HE courses.

- A key finding from the study is that the 'institutional habitus' (Reay David and Ball, 2005; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009 & 2010) of the 6th form college was supporting students' learner identities and the development of their identities as potential HE students. The students had access to a wide range of trusted sources of information about HE at the 6th form college which encouraged and supported progression. BTEC courses themselves were also found to support progression. These courses support the development of successful learner identities amongst students who have frequently had negative learning experiences and who have been relatively unsuccessful in academic subjects at school.
- The progressive models of learning and teaching described in students' accounts indicate BTEC courses can be supportive of students' development of independent learning strategies. Students on these courses demonstrated a clear understanding that these strategies would be needed in HE.
- The assignment briefs used on BTEC courses, which direct students in precisely what to do and where to find information, are indicative of directed pedagogical approach, providing close guidance to learners while they develop confidence in the early stages of BTEC courses. As an enduring approach used throughout the BTEC course, this may need to be problematised, for its potential to lead students into patterns of uncritically reproducing directly supplied information from standard texts; an approach which may persist into the first year of HE study (Cook and Leckey, 1999).
- BTEC courses provide a route into HE for those with strong allegiances to particular careers and areas of work; this was highlighted by students studying health and social care, forensic science, and engineering. Work placements on BTEC courses were highlighted as valuable opportunities to find out about careers and to support progression.
- While supporting vocationally orientated students, BTEC courses are also seen by a number of students as providing a breadth of study and new learning opportunities that support them in progressing into a range of HE subject areas.
- Students' accounts were predominantly positive about BTEC courses, however the study has highlighted that for students progressing onto some HE courses, there may be gaps in their knowledge, placing them at a disadvantage to students entering via traditional A level routes.
- Strategies to support transition might include identifying particular learning and teaching approaches to enable students to: engage in a progressive and coordinated approach to independence commencing at pre-entry and followed through in aligned HE activities, ie moving through 'dependency-deconstruction' to independence (Keane, 2011).
- There was concern among students about lack of experience of exams, especially amongst those opting for more traditional HE courses rather than vocational routes.
- Students' accounts illustrated a real lack of knowledge and understanding among 16 year olds of the viability of different entry routes into HE. The denigration of BTEC courses and the FE college by A level students was notable, but more generally this highlights a serious issue relating to careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) in schools and leads us to problematise how students are supported to make informed decisions about institutions and courses providing post-16 education.

- Familial habitus as well as trajectories and expectations of peer groups suggested that students' identities as HE learners may be relatively fragile. Financial concerns and demands made on some students' time by undertaking part-time employment contributed to this sense of fragility.

Towards a Connected Approach for Inclusive and Positive Transitions into Higher Education

Introduction

This report presents findings from a small-scale qualitative research study, conducted in the East of England, into students' learning experiences, attitudes and conceptions of HE study, primarily with students studying on BTEC courses at level 3, in FE college and 6th form college contexts. The study involved an higher education institution (HEI) and partner FE college and a feeder 6th form college. Complementary data was gathered from Level 4 HEI students, to better understand the expectations and attitudes among new university students.

The project focused on developing an understanding of identity and learning issues associated with transition to HE, especially among groups of learners commonly referred to as widening participation (WP) students. The project has also sought to identify ways of enhancing and improving students' transition into, and integration with, the HE environment.

Interim findings from the project were presented at the QAA Subscriber's Conference held in Leeds in June 2015. In addition, selective findings from the investigation with level 4 undergraduates were presented at the international Improving University Teaching conference, held at Ljubljana, Slovenia in July 2015.¹

The analysis, findings and recommendations from this project will be used to scope and run a developmental workshop open to colleagues in FE colleges, 6th form colleges and HEIs focused on identifying designs for resources, approaches and processes aimed at enhancing students' experiences of transition into HE. We are also intending to participate in a workshop to further explore findings with colleagues also undertaking cognate projects on transition into HE (funded by the QAA). In addition, a paper will be produced from the analysis of findings for submission to a relevant peer-reviewed journal.

The local context

The HEI in this study is a relatively new institution recruiting 'non-traditional', or WP students, including significant numbers from disadvantaged and low participation backgrounds. Demographic data on students (2014) suggests 27% are part-time, 52.5% reside within the region and 61.4% are aged over 21 years. 12.6% are from ethnic minority groups and 13.7% have disclosed a disability. 99.4% of students coming direct from schools are from state schools. The area within which the feeder FE and 6th form colleges participating in this study are located has particularly low HE participation rates. The index of multiple deprivation indicates that much of the area is in the poorest fifth of areas nationally when looking at the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2007, 2010 and the Index of Multiple Deprivation Child Poverty Index.

It is widely acknowledged that the WP cohort is not a homogeneous group of students (Burke, 2012; Stuart, 2012) but the term is often misunderstood (Butcher et al, 2012). In Butcher's study WP students were frequently perceived as an undifferentiated group, which the authors concluded risks non-differentiated responses by academic staff in individual discipline and subject areas. In this report we aim to understand our students in more nuanced ways, noting in particular differences in their perceptions around learning in HE, the diversity of their pedagogical experiences and their learning trajectories.

¹ Proceedings of the conference can be found at www.iutconference.com.

This study has provided a qualitatively rich evidence base which may be useful in promoting engaged student learning in HE and informing the design of HE academic resources and support processes for induction to HE as well as support for effective transition into HE.

Background to the study

Research into transition has often focused on the experiences of first year students in Russell Group HEIs. The experiences of students in post-92 universities, where 'non-traditional' students predominate, are different, especially in relation to students' sense of identity and belonging (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009 & 2010). There is also a need to look at the use of terms such as 'non-traditional' or WP, towards understanding the diversity of student experience that these broad terms represent (Burke, 2012). This study particularly focuses on the experiences of transitioning students from the 6th Form and FE sector; we suggest the importance of considering differences between different institutions catering for students broadly classed as WP and/ or 'non-traditional' students. The FE and 6th form sectors serve high proportions of young people from disadvantaged areas (Smith, Joslin and Jameson, 2015). Yet, these sectors are effective in supporting progression to HE; between 2008 and 2012 a total of 795, 470 students progressed to university from FE and 6th form colleges. Notably, these sectors support the progression to HE of young people who have not succeeded in achieving 5 GCSEs during their time at school (ibid.). The importance of the focus in this study on the role of BTECs in supporting progression is highlighted by data illustrating the dramatic rise in numbers of students undertaking BTEC courses in the FE and 6th form sectors; this rose from 22% of all students in these sectors in 2007-8 to 41% by 2011-12 (ibid.). While BTEC courses cater for students with significantly lower GCSE results than students on A level courses, achievement rates in HE are relatively high at 67%, though lower than for A level entrants at 83% (ibid.). However, the gap in achievement amongst those progressing from BTEC courses has been a cause of concern within the HE sector.

In this study we explore students' experiences of BTEC courses in different subject areas and their expectations relating to transition. Previous research studies (Reay et al, 2005; Leese, 2010; Burke, 2012) point to gaps between students' experience of learning at school or college and expectations of them at university, with students frequently being (mis)construed as inappropriate or inadequate in the university setting. The first year at university is widely recognised as a time of substantial adjustment when students have to learn to negotiate 'the mass experience' and the de-personalisation of HE study (Rowley, Hartley & Larkin, 2008). Rowley, Hartley and Larkin also suggest 'mismatches between expectations and actual experiences can lead to disengagement with the academic process' on the part of students (Rowley, Hartley and Larkin, p. 399) with the potential to lead to underachievement. Cook and Leckey's study of students' learning attitudes indicates that 'many of the study habits developed in school persist into the first year of university' (1999: 157). Other studies also indicate that students' expectations of learning support are not met in HE.

Students coming straight from school expect to be given considerable support by their teachers, but often do not receive it, even in the first year at university. (Entwistle et al, 2002: 9). There is scant research exploring how experiences of different pedagogies in different institutions prior to and on entering university impact on students' engagement with HE learning and teaching. Research does, however, indicate that there are particular issues for new HE students within different disciplinary clusters, such as threshold concepts in STEM (Pampaka et al, 2012) and critical writing in the social sciences (Burke, 2012). Hockings et al. point out the emphasis in HE on acquiring and reproducing knowledge 'is likely to disadvantage those students whose learning has been continuously assessed through coursework, projects and other methods of formative and summative assessment' (Hockings et al, 2007: 724).

The growing body of literature around transition suggests students are likely to experience a more positive transition if they are prepared for HE study (Yorke and Longden, 2007) and have an understanding about the course they are to follow which may have been gained from undertaking a prior qualification linked directly or closely to their degree subject.

Rowley, Hartley and Larkin (2008) suggest key issues for transition centre round learner readiness for independence and lack of academic guidance. Lack of contact time with, and guidance from tutors, is seen as potentially troublesome for students in transition. As Rowley, Hartley and Larkin (2008) noted, despite anticipating less contact time with tutors, many students in their study reported surprise at how little contact time they had with tutors in the first year. They concluded that 'students had to experience university study before they could appreciate how different it was from their earlier learning experiences' (2008: 410). This led the authors to suggest there might be value in opportunities for students to experience the realities of HE study through summer schools or by presenting school curriculum topics in a university setting in the style of higher education.

The research question

This aim of this research study was to explore how transition to HE supports the increasing diversity of prior educational experiences of entrants by asking the following research question:

What learning attitudes and conceptions of HE study are found among students in FE and 6th form colleges, and can these be further distinguished among three disciplinary clusters: STEM, arts and humanities, and social sciences?

We undertook to give rich and thick descriptive (Geertz, 1973) responses to this question by using the following sub-questions:

- 1 What expectations of HE learning are held by pre-University BTEC FE and 6th form students? Where are the distinctions, the differences and the similarities in expectations between these two groupings?
- 2 Does the type of pre-entry course studied (BTEC) affect expectations and if so, to what extent? Can this be linked to one/any of the disciplinary clusters, e.g. STEM, arts and humanities, social sciences?
- 3 What prior learning experiences might be informing these students' expectations?
- 4 Are there other factors suggested as influencing their expectations of HE learning?
- 5 Do these students feel they will fit into HE? And what do they feel they need to fit in, from the FE/6th form and from an HEI?

Methodology

The methodological framework for this project is constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2003, 2014) and phenomenography (Marton, 1981; Richardson, 1999; Saljo, 1996) in openly exploring the experiences and perceptions of pre-university and first year HE students. This study has been undertaken in a very short time frame so these approaches have been drawn upon but not followed explicitly. Phenomenography aims to illuminate learning processes through exploring learners' different qualitative experiences and in this study we follow this approach through holding interviews with a small purposive group of participants. Working from the ground up, the bedrock of grounded theory has also been important in this study and has enabled a genuinely exploratory approach and fluidity within the data collecting process: 'coding helps us to gain a new perspective on our material and to focus on further data collection' (Charmaz, 2003: 258). Central to grounded theory and again vital to this study has been the constant comparative method:

a) comparing different people..., (b) comparing data from the same individuals with themselves at different points in time, (c) comparing incident with incident, (d) comparing data with category, and (e) comparing category with other categories. (Charmaz, 2003: 260)

As Charmaz suggests, we 'start with the assumption that social reality is multiple, processual, and constructed' (2014: 13). We acknowledge our organisation and presentation of this report as a construction and as such, it is important to consider our own positioning. Both researchers who undertook this project have experience of learning and teaching in different contexts and between us have wide experience of learning and teaching in higher education as well as in the 16-19 sector. This positioning has inevitably shaped the lens through which we have considered our data and has sharpened our focus both on learning and teaching and on the particular positioning of different institutions.

Analytical framework

The analytical frame for the study was shaped by a literature review around aspects of widening participation and transition into HE: including prior educational experiences; the non-homogeneity of WP learners; learner identity; learners' sense of becoming in the HE learning community; preparedness for HE study especially for independent learning; self-regulation; the wider context adjustments for HE study; the specific needs of first year students; and any disciplinary distinctions in transition. We draw here on the concept of 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 2003). Habitus is understood in the context of the 'fields' or locations within which people act, such as within particular communities. We follow Reay et al (2009) in understanding habitus as 'a complex interplay between past and present' and at the same time being 'permeable and responsive to what is going on around them' (Reay et al, 2009: 1104). The concept of 'institutional habitus' (Reay David and Ball, 2005; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009 & 2010) and of 'vocational habitus' (Colley et al, 2003) have been apposite for considering the impact on students' identities of the different institutions in this study and the vocational routes within which students are located.

Sources of data

Interviews

We conducted 12 paired interviews with level 3 learners studying on BTEC courses within the following disciplinary clusters: science/engineering/technology; arts and humanities; health-related; and social sciences (SS) totalling 24 students, all aged 18+ to avoid ethical issues, including the need to acquire parental consent. All students were in the HEI feeder contexts, at a 6th form college or FE college. During these interviews students were encouraged to consider and give an account of their experiences of learning and teaching on their current courses, their decision making regarding HE courses, and their expectations of learning in HE. Students volunteered or were approached by tutors to contribute to the study; it is important to note that those who contributed volunteered or were selected, may have done so because they were positive about both their BTEC courses and progression to HE.

An interview schedule was used to ensure that key areas were covered, derived from our research questions. The guide schedule, however, was not used prescriptively but to ensure that the same areas of focus were covered in all interview 'conversations' (Kvale, 1996). The use of open questions enabled participants to construct accounts with their own emphasis and focus rather than relying solely on focuses as set by the interviewer. This approach provided a context within which participants were able to tell their own stories about their experiences and expectations. These open-ended questions were followed up with questions relating specifically to what participants said and questions relating to topics on the interview schedule that may have been neglected in the initial accounts. This approach

provided us with detailed insights into the experiences and expectations of interview participants.

Focus groups and interviews

Also conducted with first year (level 4) students at the HEI in a range of subject areas (e.g. in Health Studies, in Nursing and Midwifery, in Arts and Humanities, and in Business Studies) to explore the students' early experiences and developing conceptions of learning in HE. During the focus groups or interviews, students were encouraged to reflect on their first year of HE against their preconceptions and expectations and asked to articulate what challenges have been faced. All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded to enable transcription.

Ethical implications

All participating students were aged 18+ to avoid the need to seek parental consent. The interview process was conducted according to ethical codes of conduct: participants were fully informed of the purpose of the research; interviews were confidential; participants' identities protected; and we worked to ensure the interviews were regarded as a 'positive experience' (Kvale, 1996: 36) by the participants.

Analysis, presentation and proposals for the dissemination of findings

Coding and analysis

Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed in full and these 'texts' categorised and coded drawing on grounded theory (Charmaz, 2003, 2014). This inductive approach has enabled us to engage in a process of genuine exploration and fluidity, with opportunities to focus on further data collection, and accommodating new areas of exploration. The comparative method supported by a grounded approach has facilitated a systematic analysis of the experiences and expectations of students and provided us with insights into differences and similarities between the expectations of student in different institutional contexts and in particular disciplinary clusters.

Milestones

The milestones of this project were realised at the end of the two main phases of the project. Phase 1 (March-June) led to a presentation of interim findings at the QAA Subscribers' Conference. Phase 2 has produced this final report including findings from the 6 interviews with BTEC students and from the interviews/focus groups with Level 4 undergraduate students. Two workshops are planned for teachers and lecturers from collaborating colleges and at the lead HEI, but open to others.

The long term outcomes of the project will be to use evidence from the findings of this report to design ways to better support transition. This will involve identifying learning and teaching strategies that effectively support the development of successful and robust 'learner identities' (Reay et al, 2010) amongst young people and support them in accessing genuinely valuable information and advice about progression routes into HE. Strategies to support transition will also include identifying particular learning and teaching approaches to better enable students to engage in a progressive and coordinated approach to independence, commencing at pre-entry and followed through in aligned HE activities (to move through dependency-deconstruction to independence (Keane, 2011).

Case studies

The following cases provide accounts of four students who contributed to our study. These cases highlight a number of issues facing the young people interviewed. They also illustrate how BTEC courses and pedagogies and institutions can help to support the development of more successful and robust learner identities.

Jerome

Jerome moved to the area and started at a new secondary school in the middle of his GCSE course. He did not do well in his GCSE exams. Jerome did not enjoy school and thought he would never be able to go on to university. While neither of his parents had gone to university themselves, his older brother had just started and was enjoying his course but because of Jerome's GCSE results, his family had said he couldn't follow the same route. He described how he felt that his family viewed him as not capable of going to university and as 'the dumb one' of the family.

Having no clear plans for the future, Jerome started at the 6th form college to retake his GCSEs. He then decided to progress onto a BTEC course in forensic science as the course looked 'fun'. Because of his negative school experience, he was keen to try something 'different'. He described how being at the college had changed his views about going to HE. He explained how at the 6th form college 'they prepare you for uni when you've only (just) started' had helped him to believe that he could go. The focus on HE within the college and the support and information provided there had made university seem to be a genuine possibility for him, which he was keen to take up. This was in the face of real opposition from his family.

Jerome decided to progress onto a forensic science degree. He had looked into career progression from this course and felt that it led to a wide range of possible career options which suited him as he did not yet know what he wanted to do. He had selected a university in an area where accommodation and beer were relatively cheap and was looking forward to the opportunity to leave home so that he could 'actually be me'.

Katie

Katie had successfully completed her GCSEs in the local area but due to a bad experience of physical bullying by a group of girls she decided to leave and move to another town. She decided to take up an apprenticeship in childcare as she had always liked the idea of work rather than academic study. She enjoyed the apprenticeship but missed her family and friends so after a year decided to return home.

Katie planned to go on to the local FE college to continue with the BTEC course she had started during her apprenticeship but found this was not transferable. She decided to go to the 6th form college instead because it had a better 'reputation' and a 'better choice of courses'. She selected to undertake a mixed A Level Health and Social Care and BTEC Childcare course. Katie was also working virtually full-time in the service industry though this was not approved of by her teachers.

Katie had never thought about going on to HE but started considering it as a possibility in her first year at the 6th form college. She realised that if she studied for a degree she could progress into a job related to the courses she was doing at college. She had received an unconditional offer of a place at a pre-1992 university to study mental health nursing. She planned to live in halls of residence at the university but continue with her

current job, which required an hour's commuting, until she could sign up to undertake agency work. She felt this was essential and not earning money was not considered a possibility.

Jenny

Jenny was second year BTEC Health course student at the FE college. Most of her time in college was spent on assignments but she valued the availability of a tutor for additional support. Jenny was an older student who had been in foster care but now living independently and had re-established connections with her biological family. Jenny's choices in her BTEC course and in her plan to do a degree in social work were influenced by her own life experiences, as well as by the BTEC work experiences. The importance of being close to her family was evident in her plans for a career and the location for her HE level studies.

I want to do social work. When I applied to universities I wanted to apply to far away ones 'cause I'm in foster care. I've never felt like stable so I thought I can stay anywhere but now I feel stable - I've started to feel like I'm in a good place and stable...But I really want to do social work but I now want to be closer to home as well.

Jenny could not call upon family members to advise her, as none had been to university, but she emphasised the support she had from friends who encouraged her not to miss the opportunity to go to university. Jenny's personal experiences had nurtured her personal skills. In her second foster home she described she had learned:

How to iron and wash clothes and to do all of that, and then obviously living on my own I have to do everything on my own now.

She saw going to university as another important towards fully being an adult:

From school to here there is a big change like you're treated more like an adult, but when you go to uni you are an adult.

Tom

Tom described his BTEC Art and Design course at the FE college as providing him with 'a clear path to follow'. In the first year he had undertaken a number of projects, each to explore a specific medium or artistic/design movement. Tom said his tutor was 'always encouraging' him and 'pushing us to learn different medias' but advising when help was needed. He recognised she set projects 'to take him out of his comfort zone'. In his second year, Tom specialised in fine art even though earlier he had 'hated painting'. Tom liked that this course would give him the equivalent of three A levels in Art. He liked being able to wholly focus on Art in ways that studying A levels would not have allowed him. Tom was intending going on to a foundation degree at the same FE college to extend his portfolio and to further gain relevant skills and experiences such as presenting his work in exhibitions, before making the transition into a full university degree. He felt he needed to extend his fine art work before he would feel prepared for university.

Tom was aware of an increasing shift in the locus of control to him as he progressed on the BTEC course and of an increasing depth of engagement within his specialist area:

It's quite independent like - she gives us weekly plans. We had to write our own briefs this summer...anything to do with your specialism and then you must pretty much write...your own brief for the final major project.

Tom suggested his skills to cope as an independent learner were improving from struggling to cope and poor time management in the first year when he was always having to rush to getting his projects done:

Now I've gradually learned...the second year [I've] definitely sort of got more control over what I'm doing

Section 1: Transition and the role of institutional habitus

Summary

Sixth form and FE college students both experienced a range of support and advice from their institutions in their progression to HE but there were clear differences between the two. The institutional habitus of the 6th form and FE college and their positioning as institutions for different kinds of learners impacted in distinct ways on students' confidence and learning identities. There was a natural progression from the 6th form to HE which included even those students who had not considered progressing to HE previously. This was not the case in the FE college which caters for more vocational students on different trajectories, including directly into work and apprenticeships. The focus in the 6th form college on progression to HE means that students at the college tended to be better informed, better prepared and more confident about progression to HE.

The experience of students at both colleges of moving from school or college to a different learning environment was, however, seen to support progression. Despite students' positive orientation to HE it was evident from their accounts that wherever it was gained, this orientation was relatively fragile and there was a number of factors that could undermine success in the HE sector. This included familial habitus which was often at odds with students' emerging identities as HE students.

Institutional habitus: differently positioned colleges in the post 16 sector

A striking feature of the 6th form college students' accounts across all subject areas was that half of the students interviewed who had attained conditional and unconditional HE places had not intended to progress to HE at the start of their level 3 courses (6 out of a total of 12 students). Their accounts indicated that being at the 6th form college had instigated their decision to progress on to degree-level courses.

One student explained how the 'atmosphere' at the 6th form college had changed her way of thinking about what to do next, and how she had realised that if she continued in HE she could actually progress into a job in an area related to the courses she was enjoying studying:

I think it's the atmosphere of coming to do A levels...it's the transition from having the idea of what you enjoy doing at college...you might as well turn something you enjoy into getting a degree and into a career. You realise those steps...how I'd be going to A levels and to uni to do it and to then have a job in it. (6th Form College. BTEC Children's Play, Learning and Development.)

Another explained how she hadn't 'even thought about' university but the fact that university is 'talked about' at the 6th form college and her enjoyment of being at the college had led to her decision to continue studying:

I didn't really want to go but when I sat here I hadn't even thought about it - I'll just go to college then any outcome - it's been great here. Like it's talked about - not like a show or anything and it's mentioned and you think oh - then I started looking at universities and open days last year and I was like, oh I like the look of that but I'll wait until I've done like this assignment. We're all advised to apply but then it is there if you want to go and if you don't want to go you don't have to so we all applied this year and that was it really, you know. I like it here. (6th Form College. BTEC Forensic Science.)

These findings indicate that the 'institutional habitus' of institutions within the 16-19 sector affects students' perception of themselves as potential HE students. Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2010) identify the importance of institutional habitus within the HE sector.

Institutional effect, what we call institutional habitus...acts as an intervening variable, providing a semi-autonomous means by which class processes are played out in the HE experiences of students, and provides the parameter of possibilities in terms of identity work and the range of learner identities (2010: 111).

This study indicates that the 'parameters of possibilities' for young people are also defined by the institutional habitus of post-16 providers. Research into HE transition has explored the differential experiences of those from the private and state sectors catering for the established middle classes, compared with working class students and those from more disadvantaged circumstances. In the ever more fragmented and marketised post-16 education system, it is increasingly relevant to also consider how the different types of institutions that lower middle, working class and poorer students attend affect their trajectories and successes within HE. This should be considered alongside an understanding of the 'heterogeneity' of the students who attend these institutions and the 'diversity of learner identities among them' (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010: 120).

Students' accounts in our study illustrated how the two colleges were perceived by them to cater for different students, with the 6th form college seen as for relatively high achieving students, likely to progress to university. This was linked in students' accounts of young people's learner and classed identities: students' at the 6th form college suggested that they were viewed as 'snobby' or 'stuck up' by those at the FE college. The FE college was viewed by both FE and sixth form students as a denigrated space (Hodgson and Spours, 2014), catering for the less academic. The 6th form college students linked this to learner identities, suggesting that students at the FE college 'don't want to learn', a perception linked to the vocational course offer in non-academic subject areas, at the FE college:

I: So you were going to go to [place] college?

Yeah but this kind of made me see more opportunities to get into uni whereas - I don't know, I always associate the other college with - you do that and then you're done, you don't go to uni.

You do though - you have a reputation of an establishment.

Yeah - like here you expect you get your A Levels and you go uni, you go somewhere other than just the workplace or something.

I: And did that motivate you to come here then - you were aware of that?

Yeah - it was labelled - they've definitely got labels, haven't they, the colleges?

Yeah - this one is quite high sort of like if you want to go to uni.

I know that college perceives us to be like the smart kids, the stuck up kids and everything but we associate that college with.

...being a bit shabby. It's not.

Yeah and they don't really want to learn - they're just there because they have to be.

We're branded as being really snobby and really stuck up because we're all academic whereas some of them don't learn like that. Some people learn vocational

- they do engineering over there and hairdressing - all sorts. I imagine it's just as hard. (6th Form College. BTEC Children's Play, Learning and Development.)

[Name] college has always been a bit like...

Yeah people do look down on the college still now...

Like it's got this whole look with it.

Reputation (FE College. BTEC Health and Social Care.)

Two FE students described how they had applied to the 6th form college but had not been accepted onto the courses they had hoped to take. Entry requirements based on GCSE performance are a ubiquitous requirement across the 6th form sector and are based on statistics relating to the success of students on different courses. This selective process is driven by both the desire to ensure students are able to succeed on their courses and the importance of meeting benchmark attainment figures for league tables and Ofsted ratings. However, this was experienced by two of the students interviewed as a very personal rejection. The BTEC course at the FE college offered several students interviewed with a second chance, allowing them a route into HE despite GCSE grades that precluded them from continuing onto their chosen A level courses at the 6th form college:

I personally went over to the 6th form first. I had my interview there - they were awful to me, really nasty. I came out of there crying.

I: Why - what happened?

Well you're just not clever enough to do that. I was like - okay - like my Mum was with me and she was horrified. We ended up having a meeting with the principal over there and she was getting out all of these graphs...so I came over here...and I thought [place] College are having a laugh and I'll have no teacher and I was told by a family member the Care Department is like really, really good here and I was thinking - you're just saying that and I went up and had my interview and they were really, really nice. (FE College. BTEC Health.)

Students' accounts indicate how the hierarchical positioning of the colleges, and their access to these, can affect young people's perception of themselves and their learner identities. As Ball (2010) suggests, the current marketised education system leads to 'local economies of students' worth' (2010: 163) with students valued differently based on their academic performance. The process of applying to and progressing into these differently positioned institutions can both potentially reinforce and bolster the learner identities of young people or undermine and even damage them. This highlights a need for careful, informed and sensitive CEIAG both at transition points and throughout students' learning careers.

Availability of sources of information about HE

A key aim of the 6th form college is to prepare students for university. During the focus group with staff, teachers explained:

The college's strategy is to add value - there are lots of cross college strategies - loads of initiatives.

Students at the college 'massively lack confidence [about going to university] and don't think they can go or have been told they can't go and it's part of our job to get them to realise that it is an option. (6th Form College. Teacher focus group.)

The institution is organised to present HE as an option both academically and also through the CEIAG provided to students undertaking courses there. In contrast, the FE college has strong links with local industry and offers vocational work-related courses with only a minority of students at the college progressing to university and level 4 courses. These different focuses were reflected in the support provided for young people at each institution.

At the 6th form college students and staff described a wide variety of sources of information and advice they had accessed. Prospectuses and open days are widely viewed as important sources of information (Slack et al, 2012) and students at the 6th form widely discussed accessing both of these sources. Most students had completed UCAS applications in good time. UCAS applications and the writing of personal statements were supported by subject teachers, personal tutors and advisors from a local university as well as by student services. Students described feeling well supported with the UCAS application process:

Everything was done really quickly ... we had just done it and it was done. Yeah it was really quite easy. And help with our personal statements too. Like 'cause we wrote them, then our teachers looked at them and then another member of staff looked at them and then we had people from [a local university] come in to look for what they look for in personal statements. So they were done like perfectly.
(6th Form College: BTEC Applied Science.)

The students on combined A level and BTEC courses had tutorials with 'mentors', who are recent graduates. These young adults were described by students as providing significant help and support with the UCAS application process:

We have our mentors ... they're quite young ... they've literally just graduated so with UCAS and stuff. They're literally on it. I think she sat there for three hours with me doing my last amendment and my personal statement. (6th Form College BTEC Children's Play, Learning and Development.)

Staff also explained how tutorials are held with students where they look at maps and work out the distances and travel options for different HEIs. One member of staff explained that this was to challenge them and encourage them to think about going to a wider range of universities in different localities:

They are scared of going very far. They like it here and are scared of going - especially to cities. (6th Form College. Teacher focus group.)

As well as open days, students also discussed attending careers fairs and a range of other visits to HEIs including summer schools and taster sessions. Some of these activities appeared to provide genuine insights into courses and learning and teaching approaches. Typically, one student's account illustrated how a taster session and talking to student ambassadors had provided him with information both about the demands of lectures and the organisation of the first year course:

The main lecturer of the criminology course there, he specialises in CCTV images and the uses across the globe in certain places but he gave a lecture on that and it was only about an hour long or so but it was very in depth and you would have to be quick with the typing and the writing of it all. At times he did stop and recap on what had been said and he summarised it so it was easier but speaking to other students, who I don't know, they have either done it or are finishing or leaving for other things. In the first year they make you do between four to ten hours of lectures in the week and then you spend probably another thirty doing your own work by yourself.
(6th Form College. BTEC Forensic Science.)

It is important, however, to question the quality of the information universities provide during these activities. The reliability of the information provided by student ambassadors has been questioned (Slack et al, 2012; Gartland, 2014). At times, students' accounts indicated a focus on marketing and promoting their own courses and institutions rather than general information giving. One student enthusiastically described an entertaining lecture he had attended during a taster session which appeared unlikely to be representative of the reality of the course itself. As Ball et al (2000) suggest, this type of promotional activity can contribute to 'opacity rather than transparency' about the reality of HE.

Students from one subject area at the 6th form college described how their teacher encouraged students from previous year groups to keep in touch, informing her and other students about their course:

I got to know some of the second year forensic students so they're all still in communication with our teachers. They still email [teacher] like - we've just done this.

Yeah - we've just done this or can you help me with this.

So it's still - even though she's sent us on our way, she's still there.

She wants us to keep her updated on how it's going and we can come back and visit and help the years below as well. (6th Form College. BTEC Forensic Science.)

Various studies have focused on how young people make HE choices, and the literature points to the importance of informal relationships in providing information. Such research (Ball and Vincent, 1998; Ball et al., 2000; Reay et al., 2005; Brooks, 2003, 2004; Archer et al., 2003) has identified that working-class and poorer students and their parents rely more heavily on 'hot' sources of information, grapevine knowledge gathered from social contacts, than their middle-class counterparts. Slack et al. (2012) also identify the importance of 'warm' sources of information, such as 'previously unknown university students' met during university open days. This reliance on 'hot' and 'warm' sources of information can limit working-class students' understanding of HE and possible progression routes. However, the students at the 6th form college described accessing a relatively wide range of sources of 'warm' and 'hot' information about university, though this varied from student to student. One student described the process of how a trip to a careers convention at a local university organised by the 6th form college had enabled him to differentiate between the courses different universities offered. Following this he had attended an open day and experienced a taster session which had confirmed his choice:

I'd never heard of [his chosen university] before at all 'cause I was checking out online about other universities 'cause I really wanted to do music business 'cause I really like that and not a lot of unis offer that option. They normally just do music itself, just composing...and then I got the option to go to a trip to UEA and they had a lot of stands for all the universities in England and right in the corner I saw one called [the university] and it had loads of guitars over it and I went there and they told me all about and I absolutely loved the idea of it...I went a couple of weeks later. I went on an open day and I went all the way down to Brighton and I checked it out and I just loved it as well. It's such a nice place. I checked out the business course so you have to sit there for like an hour and just have a test of the lesson and I really enjoyed that as well and I really enjoyed the whole area as well as just Brighton. I wasn't just looking at the uni I was looking all around to see the opportunities and just how life was there. I was looking at day and night life and it was just really, really nice. I'm really happy I've chosen that one. (6th Form College: BTEC Music Technology.)

The support of 'mentors', teachers and other adults also appeared to have helped students access more 'cold' and formal sources of information (Smith, 2011). The 6th form students' subsequent choice of HEI was then relatively informed. This was illustrated by some of the detailed knowledge students exhibited about the courses they planned to undertake. During one interview, two students expressed their concern about lack of support from HE lecturers compared to 6th form and how this had contributed to their decision about where to apply, avoiding one university because of the large numbers students on the course:

[A discussion of a local university] - because there's something like three hundred students in the subject area on their courses...

It's crazy

I: What about you - how many?

Um I think there's between thirty and fifty - something like that. There's very few places - really hard to get into.

I know in [subject area], the biggest group they had was about seventy and they said they'd never go that big again so it was going to be just under seventy, which sounds quite nice. (6th Form College. BTEC Forensic Science.)

Staff at the 6th form college explained how they focus on 'dispelling myths' about HE as most of the students are first generation students and so have a lot of misconceptions about university. This included challenging perceptions about teaching always comprising formal lectures. Teachers also described maps displayed in each faculty for BTEC students, illustrating previous students' pathways to university.

FE students on work-based vocational routes, particularly the engineering students, were on clear progression routes onto higher level courses within the FE college (HE in FE). However, those moving into HE courses outside the FE college described receiving much less support than the 6th form students. While students were largely enthusiastic and positive about their BTEC courses, several students commented on the lack of support offered by the institution with HE applications:

I: ... any less good things about it [the course]?

Not about the course but probably help with UCAS generally in the college - that was quite bad. I basically did the whole thing by myself. (FE College. BTEC Health and Social Care.)

I think the negative is like, when it came to doing uni stuff like personal statement, applying for uni we didn't get much support on it. It was like we had to do it ourselves. We were left to do it...I didn't really get that much support but overall I think this course is so good (FE College: BTEC Health and Social Care.)

Advice was provided about the UCAS process but this was given in June, several months after most of the students who were progressing to university had applied:

Yeah like a couple of weeks ago someone from the advice centre came over to speak about UCAS and was asking if we knew about it. I was like - it's a bit late... it's a bit late for someone to be talking to us about uni - like two weeks ago - it's really late (FE College: BTEC Health and Social Care.)

The FE college had provided several of the students interviewed with work placements that students valued highly. These placements contributed to students being able to make informed career related HE choices (this will be discussed further in section 4):

I: Anything particularly that you'd want to say that's been really good about the course?

I think the opportunities to do placement, that's what I like the most.

Yeah that's for me as well. (FE College: BTEC Health and Social Care.)

Yeah like placements are so helpful 'cause honestly ... You see it all and like when they go through things like I just done one at the [hospital] on the maternity ward, which was sorted by the college (FE College: BTEC Health and Social Care.)

Another important 'hot' source of information about HE for young people discussed by both 6th form college and FE college students was their peers. These accounts varied. Brooks (2003a; 2003b), reveals that for the groups of lower middle class 6th form pupils in her study, friendship groups were not comfortable places for discussions about HE decision making. She explored how such conversations tended to be avoided as they highlighted 'significant differences between friends and others in the wider peer group' (2003b: 237).

The friendship groups of pupils and wider peer group in this study, though, operated powerfully on pupils' HE choices in other ways. The academic hierarchies within which pupils viewed themselves served to define their selection of type of HE institution and, in some cases, choice of subject.

Of the students interviewed here on BTEC courses, the majority were on a trajectory into the post- 92 university sector. BTEC students at the 6th form college often appeared to be sharing information about courses with their peers on the same course. A few students were even sharing plans about HE destinations. Two of the students studying ICT intended to progress to the same course at the same institution and described how having friends was important to their decision where to go. One student even relied on his friend for information from the university; there was a sense from their accounts of a joint decision-making process:

I wasn't too keen on going to a place which is really far away and I didn't know anyone else going and I had [chosen university] as one of my other options - this was before a firm choice or anything - and I found out that two of my best friends are going there and that the area of [place] looks really nice ...

I: That's good and you've been to visit?

All talk together and laugh.

He went up there and I said take loads of photos for me 'cause I haven't been up there but it looks really nice and I've heard nothing bad about it and hopefully I'm going up there next month. (6th Form College: BTEC ICT.)

However, in contrast, students on the BTEC Health and Social Care course at the FE college described how the application process became competitive, with students not wanting to collaborate:

When we were all writing our personal statements that got a bit hairy 'cause no one really wanted to help each other but again we all understand how competitive it was so it became a bit of a joke - you're not reading mine! - you're having a laugh.

So then it became light-hearted, didn't it, like even though we knew we couldn't help each other 'cause we were against each other at the end of the day but there wasn't that nastiness about it.

No.

It was understandable 'cause everyone was going for the same thing but...
(FE College: BTEC Health and Social Care.)

This different experience was linked both to courses in nursing and related subjects accepting relatively small numbers of students and also to students wanting to remain local, therefore all were applying to a limited number of institutions.

It was evident from students' accounts that at the 6th form college, university was 'talked about' widely by both students and teachers, contributing to institutional habitus and effectively establishing HE firmly within the 'parameters of possibility' for the BTEC students interviewed. In contrast, the BTEC students at the FE college progressing to HE did not have access to these wider conversations and application to HEIs was described as a more difficult and individualised process.

Experiencing a new environment

Students at both the 6th form college and the FE College felt that the college environment was helping them to feel more like adults and therefore more prepared for university life:

It just seems like the difference from high school. They treat you more like mature - like an adult, which is really good. They don't teach you like a kid. (6th Form College. BTEC ICT.)

Yeah [another local college] is a bit like school isn't it? A bit like a prison as well. It's very dark and gloomy corridors and everything whereas here you aren't treated like you're at school at all. (6th Form College. BTEC Child's Play, Learning and Development.)

I think you won't have -'cause from school to here there is a big change, like you're treated more like an adult but when you go to uni, you are an adult (FE College: BTEC Health and Social Care.)

Some students commented that school had been very structured and explicitly controlled by the teachers while at college there was more flexibility and freedom:

The first year it's sort of a shock to the system when you're not used to having all this...planning to do for yourself 'cause at school it's all set out for you. It's all organised - you'll do this on this day and you'll do that on that day but here it's ... it gives you a chance to be more of an adult because in the great working world you're not going to have someone give you a timetable saying you're doing this for this hour - you've got to do it yourself. (6th Form College: BTEC Applied Science.)

Students at both colleges described how when they had started at the colleges they had not known many people. Many of the students did not know any of their peers on the BTEC course before commencing. Their success in developing positive working relationships with peers and extending their friendship groups beyond their school friends again contributed to their confidence about going on to university and meeting new people:

We have made friends because of the course - but I didn't really know anyone when I first came here and because of the course I met a few friends who I still sit with ...

but other than the first year friends as well and obviously they look to the second years for help. (6th Form College: BTEC Forensic Science.)

The students had a sense of responsibility to help each other and equally expected this approach would also be met when they started at university. There was some realisation they would all be 'in the same boat' at the start of the degree and therefore the need to help and support each other was important:

You're all in the same boat - all of you are first years. Obviously you'll come from different walks of life but you'll pretty much be in the same boat and you'll just look after each other. That's all I'm hoping. (6th Form College: BTEC Forensic Science.)

Students described how they found groups of students with similar interests and attitudes to work.

Like our table's the ones that want to get to uni and genuinely revise and do the work.

You've got some that are like -mm I don't know what I'm doing with my life. (6th Form College: BTEC Child's Play, Learning and Development.)

The 6th form college was literally seen as a 'safe learning space' (Burke, 2012) where, unlike in many secondary schools (Reay, 2002), working hard and doing well academically is acceptable. Several students observed that a difference between school and the college was that the students all mix and are not separated into different groups:

People were different as well - 'cause our school...the main thing was popularity but here there's no popularity groups or anything and everyone just mixes but in school you've got all the popular people, like the unpopular people - just like everyone's in groups but that's one of the main differences for me. (6th Form College: BTEC IT.)

One student explained how her experience of moving to 6th form college made her realise the importance of keeping an 'open mind' when meeting new people at university:

I think you need to go into it with an open mind and not judge someone. I think you definitely need to get to know the people rather than like - 'cause we didn't get on in the first year 'cause we didn't click but then you helped me with something and then we're like... best friends.

Yeah so I definitely think you have to go into it with an open mind and not like ... it's like here, like at high school you have your groups of people, don't you. You have the people who stay away, the nerds like that whereas even here you have your friendship groups but you're not like - oh stay away from them people.

Yeah it's not like groups against groups. (6th Form College: BTEC Forensic Science.)

Another student, who had experienced bullying at her secondary school, commented on how safe the college felt:

It's simple really - it's simple and it's quite relaxed here. You never hear anyone being bullied.

That's one thing I've never heard. Never seen anyone being bullied here.

Never seen any bullying. Never seen any fights here. It is quite relaxed here. (6th Form College: BTEC Child's Play, Learning and Development.)

The 6th form college students particularly noted how the college acted as a stepping stone both academically and socially, preparing students for university. The experience of being at the college was seen by students as contributing to their confidence about going to university:

'Cause I feel like once we leave here we've got the feeling of being treated as an adult here but it's not quite at university level so it is preparing us a little bit and then we'll get treated completely like an adult and we'll be treated to be independent and it's just a step along the way to helping us. So we are prepared now because we know the levels, understanding what we need to do and it's prepared us so we're not worried. (6th Form College. BTEC Forensic Science.)

I've absolutely no idea of what it's going to be like - just uni itself. I just have no real experience of how everything works there but I think that's just one of the exciting things about it 'cause it's something completely new. I think that's the same thing as here - like this is a lot different from my old school and that's going to be the same as uni - it will be completely different from how this...and that's just the exciting thing about it - it's a whole new experience. (6th Form College. BTEC IT.)

I'd go now - I was like ready two months ago. I can't wait to go...I really want to go so I'm just sad that I have to go through the boring stage of waiting for it to come - when I can finally move there and like be there but I'm absolutely prepared for it (6th Form College. BTEC IT.)

Most students appeared confident about meeting new people and, perhaps informed by their positive experience of moving to college, were optimistic that university is a place where people are not left 'by themselves':

People are going that I know a little bit but I'm looking forward to meeting new people (6th Form College. BTEC Forensic Science.)

I think it depends what sort of person you are 'cause if you're quite quiet you're not going to go up to their room - really rowdy - you've got a confident group of people - they're all, everyone - there's never anyone by themselves there. (6th Form College. BTEC Forensic Science.)

Some recognised they were likely to meet diversity in the student groups encountered at university and welcomed this as an opportunity to engage with people holding different perspectives, to meet peers with different ideas and with different interests:

From what I've seen it's going to be like a massive mixture of people. Even in our courses like there are different people from different places and then you've got international students coming in. It's very varied, which I think is nice because when you live here for a while it's the same old people like doing the same old thing at the same old college and everyone is like - people are coming from wherever to uni and you get to know about other places I guess, a lot more, which is nice. (6th Form College. BTEC IT.)

A number of students had joined Facebook or other social media groups since visiting their intended university and these groups were already established among potential peers for particular courses. This contributed to students' confidence about progressing to HE. These friendship groups were felt to be motivating and positive in helping students feel they have friendships already forming well before they arrive at the university.

Fragility of HE identities and family pressures

The students interviewed were predominantly the first in their family to go to university. A few had siblings and cousins who had gone or were now on degree programmes and an even smaller number had parents with experience of university. Students' accounts indicated that parents who had been to university had done so as adults or were even currently studying at local universities. There was one exception, a student whose parents and extended family had been to university themselves. It was evident that it was simply expected that she would also go:

Practically everybody in my family that went to university, they said it is a really great experience, you should go. And it's also a learning environment where you get to meet new people and you don't only just learn from your course you learn from other things and experience other things so that kind of got me into it...I think my Mum did business and economics and my Dad - he has three degrees so I don't know which one he did - something in engineering and some other stuff. (6th Form College. BTEC Business Studies.)

The other students' accounts of their families' response were more complicated. A small number of parents were described as simply supportive. One student described how her parents had been prevented from going when they were young so were accepting of her being able to go:

They were young and they didn't really get to do it. But my Dad applied to go to uni and was going to go and Mum had me and stuff...obviously they couldn't - so they accept that I can. (6th Form College. BTEC Forensic Science.)

A few students described how going to HE would make their parents proud. One student described actually feeling pressured by her mother's enthusiasm about her going to university when her HE place was not yet guaranteed:

I've got above and beyond what they're asking for that but I haven't got my maths GCSE and my Mum like keeps saying oh I just can't believe it, I just can't believe it. Mum it's not a definite yet - let's just keep it quiet. (FE College. BTEC Health and Social Care.)

A few students described how having cousins and siblings recently at or currently studying at university has provided them with more confidence about going to university as they had visited which gave them confidence about what to expect:

I guess I'm kind of like the lucky one out of the three of my sisters that I'm not the one going first so I already know what it's like for them. (FE College. BTEC Health and Social Care.)

The overwhelming majority of students' accounts indicated some ambivalence in their parents' responses. Several students described particularly their mother's anxiety or sadness about their going. This was, at times, in contrast to their father's approval:

Mum is really supportive as well but like she is still sad that I'm going away 'cause we're so close as a family. My Mum is like literally my best friend and we do everything and obviously my little sisters as well. (FE College. BTEC Health and Social Care.)

Mum's a bit scared. Dad wants me to go - he wants to get me out of the house more than anything. (6th Form College. BTEC Forensic Science.)

My Mum's sad. She's proud of me but...she's like - I need to teach you to cook ... and my Dad's just like, go have fun. (6th Form College. BTEC Forensic Science.)

A mother's anxiety was vividly described by one student who explained that her mother felt she was too 'small':

Yeah I think my Mum's more scared than I am. My Mum's petrified.

I: What's she petrified about?

Well she says I'm small (laughs). You're small - how are you going to stand up for yourself? Mum - I'm nearly nineteen. I may be short but I'm fine.

I: Mums are made to worry aren't they?

For sure – she'll be like, if you don't like it I'll come and pick you up. Just give me a ring. I'll be there. You don't have to stay there if you don't want to. (6th Form College. BTEC Forensic Science.)

Some students faced negativity from their parents or extended family members about going to university. There were concerns around finance and worries about whether the degree would offer them any better likelihood of a good career:

My Mum is supportive of me going to [university name] - my grandparents aren't. They don't really see it as anything great. They think it's a waste of money but they're in their seventies and eighties. (6th Form College. BTEC Childcare.)

My Dad's quite negative about it. He's always said like he thinks I should get a real job and not do music and he was quite negative about it. My other sister says I'm going to fail. My sister who dropped out of uni, she's really supportive. So I've got half a side of my family being really supportive and want me to go and do what I enjoy the most and the other half is saying I should just get a job and just do something that's going to give me an earning. (6th Form College. BTEC Music Technology.)

One student even described his mother being so unsupportive about his going to HE that she was being obstructive about providing the necessary information for applying for student loans:

My Mum especially does not want me to go - to the point where she won't reply to the student finance emails or anything saying what her income is so I'm having to kind of snoop around and ask her co-workers and stuff and reply to the emails myself. (6th Form College college. BTEC Forensic Science.)

As Brooks (2004) identifies, parents are also clearly influential about the choice of HE. Students frequently discussed their parents' views about the location of the universities they considered. A number of students were circumspect about being independent of family, and had chosen locations 'not too far from home'. In some instances, the decision to stay local had clearly been influenced directly by concerns raised by family members:

They're all quite proud actually. My Mum, when I said I was going to York, was really worried but they were all okay with this [a local university].

But you'll live in at [university]?

Yes I'll live in halls. (6th Form College. BTEC Childcare.)

Another student, who had lived in care for many years, had decided not to go away to university and to look for a place at a local HEI to avoid losing newly established relationships with her family:

I just think, now I want to be closer to home 'cause obviously everything's going really well with my family - everything's going really well with my friends and like obviously I've had a long time apart from all that. (FE College. Health and Social Care.)

Friendship groups were also important to young people and several commented that very few of their friends were going on to HE. One student explained:

A lot of my friends do apprenticeships...they're all still around here and I did say to one of my mates, I do as like - Oh I'm going to uni next year and he was 'oh don't go' cause we're close mates so it would be weird not seeing each other at the weekends and go out and play football and rugby...most of my mates work so they don't want me to go to uni. (FE College. BTEC Art and Design.)

These students' accounts indicate a fragility to their developing HE identities. Family habitus is presented here as being in contrast to the institutional habitus of the 6th form college. For many of the young people in this study there was some 'dissonance' (Reay et al, 2010) between home and college. Students emerging HE identities are, at times, at odds with parental expectations. For some of these young people, families are supportive of their progressing to HE but equally are supportive of their giving up HE identities and returning home. Parents, extended family and friends' perceptions that HE is not an obvious or automatic route presents young people with an easy return home if they encounter difficulties at university.

Living arrangements/ finances and confidence gained from being informed

Uncertainties relating to living arrangements and finances contributed to the fragility of students' HE identities. These were expressed by students themselves and also in students' accounts of their parents' responses to their plans. A few students on the Art and Design course were planning to progress to a foundation degree at an FE college rather than progressing straight onto HE courses. These students explained that they did not feel ready to go on to university yet. One student explained 'I don't feel like I'm ready to actually leave home. I'm not independent enough'. In students' accounts there was a sense that they viewed themselves as very much responsible for their own finances. Parental contributions were only mentioned by one student as a possibility.

While being financially independent was seen by a number of the students interviewed as being an important part of the experience of going to university and becoming an 'adult', concerns about how to manage finances were common:

Money is going to be a definite thing I think - the lack of student finance. It's going to be interesting...'cause they did say that we can't prioritise a job over the course... (FE College. BTEC Health and Social Care.)

Some students were already working long hours on top of their college work. One student described working 34 hours a week and planned to continue with this at university. This student described plans to commute to her present work from university. For her and also for other students interviewed, having a job was viewed as essential for university, even though this was not always approved of by teachers:

I mean they don't like it when you have a job but obviously you need a job...they are sweet and they're concerned and they're like - well you shouldn't be working as

much. But my grades are still fine...but you've got to save money. It's uni - you can't not. (6th Form College. BTEC Childcare.)

As Reay et al (2005: 162) have described 'working in term time, living at home and problems of funding' make the experiences of higher education for working class students very different from those of students from more financially privileged backgrounds. Undertaking long hours of paid work alongside HE mean that young people's learner identities are 'constantly at risk of being subsumed by their responsibilities and commitments as workers' (Reay et al, 2010).

Students' accounts also indicate the importance of particular subject areas and different vocational routes to students' HE experiences. Students moving onto nursing courses, for instance, described how they would be unable to undertake paid work during their course due to placement commitments. These students currently receive funding for tuition fees:

When I went to (university) they said the first year you can definitely get a job - you'll have time to get a job and be able to work but the second and third year is going to be really hard because you'll be doing placements all the time...(FE college: BTEC Health and Social Care.)

The students progressing onto foundation degrees in Engineering at the FE college clearly had no financial concerns. Their companies were paying for their level 3 college work as well as paying them, in most instances, above the minimum wage while they worked and studied. For these students, progression onto the foundation degree and beyond was potentially going to be funded by their companies. It was clear from their accounts that they were not experiencing the conflicts and concerns expressed by students and their families progressing via more traditional routes. One student even described plans to buy a house:

I: How would your family feel about you doing a university degree?

Oh it's fine - they want me to do it - especially if the company pay for it. It's a fantastic opportunity and they obviously just want me to do the best I can and excel. (FE College. BTEC Engineering student.)

I'm going to try and look at staying at home while I'm an apprentice and I'll come out of my time sort of twenty-one or twenty-two so I think that's probably a good age - try and save a bit of money while I'm at home and I've got a lot of disposable income so I can sort of go out and put a deposit down, a decent one and hopefully get a nice place. (FE College: BTEC Engineering.)

While these routes appear to present these young people with an alternative to the potentially uncertain career pathway and debt presented by many traditional degree courses, apprenticeships in engineering are limited in number (Hodgson and Spours, 2014) and also heavily gendered with girls massively under-represented (WISE, 2014).

For students progressing to HE courses where no funding was provided, it was evident that being informed about how funding worked and how much money they would have on a weekly basis was reassuring:

Once you deal with student finance you get the thing of how much you've got but then you need to take away how much your rent is going to be for the time you're there and then you've got to budget yourself from what you've got remaining ... I've got £125 to live off a week but what I've decided to do is I'm going to live off between £75 and £100 so that will leave me money on the side if there is an emergency. (6th Form College. BTEC Forensic Science.)

Originally my Dad didn't want me to go to uni 'cause he didn't know too much about the debt thing but then we spoke about it, like me and my step Dad we got into conversation about it one evening and the debt. It's not like a normal debt and my Dad's looked into it and eventually he wants me to go. He's really up for me going. (6th Form College. BTEC IT.)

As with information about courses, students at the 6th form college had access to more information about finances than their counterparts at the FE college. This information was clearly important for students, enabling them to feel that they had some control over their finances:

They help you here with like knowing how much money you'll be getting, they've got flyers around the place to let you know what you can get.

I: And you've done that while you've been here - talked to people about...

We've learned that if you get worried about it there's always someone you can talk to. (6th Form College. BTEC Applied Science.)

I understand when people think...you'll get into debt. And it's like what 9% on 20 grand a year is what £30 a month. It's like tax, it's like a mobile phone that comes out of your wage slip before you even see it so it's like if you don't smoke and you don't drink that's sort of the same kind of money, probably less than that money. (6th Form College. BTEC Childcare.)

Section 2: BTEC courses and new opportunities for progression to HE

Summary

Students' accounts indicated that many had not been aware before starting their course that BTEC courses provide a route into HE. Their experiences show that BTEC courses provide possibilities that many felt they had been excluded from when their GCSE results had not matched requirements for entry to A level courses. BTEC courses provide students with new learning opportunities, which often motivate them to engage enthusiastically with learning and support the development of strong learner identities, where these have previously been damaged by negative school experiences or personal circumstances.

There was a general view that BTECs are viewed negatively particularly by A level students and as not equivalent to A levels despite the fact that they provide progression onto HE courses. Tutors were described as being very supportive of progression. While BTEC enables and supports progression to HE courses, students interviewed were predominantly progressing to courses at new or post-92 universities not to courses at older or more élite institutions.

BTECs: repairing damaged learner identities?

Many of the young people interviewed arrived at the two colleges having not achieved the necessary GCSE results to progress onto A level courses and some described disliking school. The BTEC provided many of these young people with new and sometimes exciting learning experiences which motivated them to engage enthusiastically with learning and provided them with a second chance, enabling them to progress to university. Crucially for a number of students interviewed, the experience of studying on BTEC courses supported the development of new identities as successful learners. Research indicates the vital role positive learner identities play in supporting progression to HE (Ball, Maguire and Macrea et al, 2000; Brooks, 2003; Hockings et al, 2007; Reay et al, 2009, 2010). Several of the students interviewed described how much they had enjoyed their courses and their time at college:

I'm glad I chose this over [another local college] 'cause I really enjoy this. It's the very best time I've ever had in education. (6th Form College. BTEC IT.)

And the work itself - I just enjoy that. I used to hate education, like literally [at school] it was the white board... the worst thing...[now] I just really enjoy it. (6th Form College. BTEC Music Technology.)

The practical focus of BTEC courses and links to real world applications of knowledge, to work with others who share the same interests and enthusiasms and to use new equipment were all described as part of the appeal of BTEC courses, especially for those who had not enjoyed learning at school (this is discussed further in sections 3 and 4):

I'd never experienced some of those things before like being able to play a gig or even set up a gig or get a band in and record them and just meet them and see how they play. I've never experienced that before and it's college that's given me the opportunity to do that - just try new things, play new instruments 'cause they've got pianos, bass guitars ... and just hear other people play as well 'cause you get like people who play flute come in, saxophones. You experience them playing as well. (6th Form College. BTEC Music Technology.)

A student at the 6th form college described how she had been unable to take science subjects at A Level due to her GCSE results, so chose instead to take a BTEC in forensic science rather than resit her GCSEs. She explained that she was 'glad she did' because the BTEC course offered 'more variety' and a 'wider range of learning' than A Level courses. Real world application of knowledge was identified by students as part of the appeal of the course:

Well I'm glad I did because there's more variety. There's like criminology, psychology, all the sciences and it's more a sort of wider range of learning. I've learned so much more than I would have done just doing the sciences and I'm glad I've done it ... At one minute you can be doing biology but at the same time you'll be doing criminology or psychology. It's a mix-up.

It's also how they do some of the assignments, like in the crime scene one we had to do in the first year, instead of just giving us pictures of one they've done or scenarios or something, they actually make a crime scene for you and they give you the suit and they give you bits of information and they send you in to do it ... it's you who is doing the solving. You get in there and it changes. (6th Form College. BTEC Forensic Science.)

For one student on the Art and Design BTEC, the course provided the opportunity to specialise in a subject area they enjoyed:

I could have done A Levels at the 6th form at my school but I'd have to choose like two other subjects as well and I just wanted to focus just on my art. (FE College. BTEC Art and Design.)

The experience of being on BTEC courses was transformative for some students. One student described how a teacher had noted a transformation in his attitude to work:

I used to be really lazy but you ask my teachers - when [a new teacher] came here, 'cause he wasn't here when I started...and him and [Head] was speaking and he said 'Oh what's happened to...I used to teach him and he used to be one of the laziest students in the class.' But it's just like so much work you've got to change your attitude towards it. It's good for you - it's not bad for you. (6th Form College. BTEC IT.)

Several students who had experienced failure in GCSE exams at school commented on how the structure of the BTEC course and not having to take exams had supported their success on the course:

I'm really glad I chose music 'cause I feel I would have dropped out, in my opinion, if I'd done GCSEs and A Level. I definitely prefer BTEC 'cause I can do it at my pace - if I want to be quick and do my work quick I can just do it 'cause at A Level you just have to keep revising until a certain date when you do exams and I definitely prefer doing coursework over exams. (6th Form College. BTEC Music Technology.)

One student described how he failed his GCSEs and was seen as 'the dumb one' by his family but that he now had the opportunity to progress to university and was 'going at it head on':

Because I failed my GCSEs I was always the dumb one of the family. I've got two brothers, one's the sporty one, one's the smart one and one's the failure one ... I'm the middle and my younger one's the sporty one and my older one is the intelligent one so that left one for me. So I've always been told and it's always in the

back of the mind that I'd never make it to uni, kind of thing, so now that I've got the chance I'm going at it heads on. (6th Form College. BTEC Forensic Science.)

For a few students interviewed, the route to their BTEC course had been long and meandering. One student on the engineering course at the FE college described how he had left school and worked in a supermarket for several years before starting the BTEC in engineering. After starting the course he had the opportunity to start an apprenticeship and is now a paid employee while also undertaking the BTEC course. As with other engineering students on apprenticeship routes, he described how supportive his company is of his continuing to study:

They basically said as long as my grades stay up...I won't have to pay for it and if there are any other courses I want to do they'll put you on it. (FE College. BTEC Engineering.)

The role of tutors in supporting transition

Students at both institutions described how they had not heard of BTECs before they had started at college. The schools in the area where this study was undertaken have extremely low GCSE pass rates and many progress into the post-16 sector without GCSE English and Maths. Students' accounts illustrated how negative school experiences or poor GCSE results leave some young people disheartened and uncertain about what to do next. Students' lack of awareness of the possibilities offered by BTEC as a route into HE is repeatedly highlighted in their accounts:

I just didn't want to carry on with education but...when everyone was planning for college and I thought well, I don't want to be sitting around at home doing nothing so I applied for plumbing to do at [the FE] College...I started it and let's just say I absolutely hated it...I tried to apply here. I was a bit too late...and I waited until the next September to apply here again and I originally wanted to do A Levels - like A Level Drama, A Level English - that kind of thing but I was told I didn't have enough GCSEs so they gave me the option of doing a year doing GCSEs and two years doing A Level and I would be finished or they gave me an option to do a BTEC. I'd never heard of BTEC and I was looking through some of the courses that they do like the BTEC Sport, the BTEC Business and just for some reason music stood out to me. (6th Form College. BTEC Music Technology.)

I was going to do A Levels...but they told me like you shouldn't really do like five A Levels 'cause like I'm not that confident when it comes to exams...I didn't think at the time that I could go to university so originally I planned to do an apprenticeship after this and when it came down to the first year room - we were all talking to the tutor about it - I found I could go to uni - I just thought BTECs couldn't go. (6th Form College. BTEC IT.)

Students' relationships with their BTEC course tutors were in many instances significant in providing them with vital information about progression routes. Students on BTEC courses spend considerably longer with individual subject tutors than those studying for A Levels. For students in several subject areas such as forensic science, IT and art and design, this had facilitated a close relationship with tutors. Students spoke with genuine affection and enthusiasm about some of their BTEC tutors:

I can't thank my teacher enough 'cause he not only helps me with all college, he helps me in my personal life as well. If I have personal problems as well I can just go to him and talk to him about it and he helps me with my job and all that kind of thing - just gives me advice and everything so it's really helpful 'cause there's not

many people I'd talk to about that kind of thing or has a good understanding of it but my teacher does. (6th Form College. BTEC IT.)

Tutors were often instrumental and influential in raising students' levels of awareness of university as an option open to them following their BTEC course, and in raising students' self-esteem and confidence to apply to university. During the focus group with 6th form college teachers, one tutor described how she insisted on all her BTEC group preparing their UCAS forms, regardless of whether they planned to go on to HE or not. Her rationale for this was that many students 'massively lack confidence' and it is important to make sure that they do not miss out on the potential opportunity or be left to apply at the last minute:

Most do and once they start doing it and filling it out, they start to realise maybe they could go. A really high number from [the subject area] do go to HE. (6th Form College. Teacher Focus Group.)

Teachers were also influential in how some students had chosen their university and the courses to study. Many described their tutor as 'young' and therefore able to talk authentically about their own university experiences. One tutor explained how she talked to students about her own experiences of university, different jobs, pay and mortgages. She explained that she was deliberately countering messages from home where parents were advising students not to go to university. Her account again illustrates the 'dissonance' between the institutional habitus of the 6th form college and familial habitus (Reay et al, 2010):

Some of them don't have a role model in the family. They hear it on the news - media narratives of fees going up and they think that there's no point going and their parents say you need a job - they're encouraging the opposite. (6th Form College. Teacher Focus Group)

Students clearly listened to their tutors and in several instances tutors' own accounts had been influential in the students deciding to go to university themselves. Tutors were certainly viewed as trusted 'hot' sources of information about university (Ball and Vincent, 1998). Indeed one pair of students had chosen a particular degree course and a specific HEI based on their tutor's direct experience of having studied on that same programme at the same university:

I never had interest in uni in the first year. For some reason in the second year it just came to me that I wanted to do it. It mainly was 'cause the teacher was telling me all about it saying there is always a choice either to go to a job or apprenticeship or uni. He's just telling me about each one and just saying about how - 'cause he went to uni - and just saying how uni really is and just the whole process of it and that's what got me interested. (6th Form College. BTEC IT)

Another student studying art at the FE college described being 'close' to his tutor and how this had influenced him to want to stay on at the college and progress onto the foundation degree. He discussed his plans to go to the same university his tutor had been at on completion of the foundation degree:

Because we've had our tutor, 'cause we've had her for two years...we've got quite close with our tutor so I feel like she's going to help me a lot more than if I had to go somewhere else and meet a new tutor 'cause she knows all our strengths.

I: She teaches on the foundation course as well?

I think she helps a little bit as well...because we'll be in the same area, even if I'm not having her as a tutor, I can still go and see her and be like - is this the right thing.

I was going to go to the same one as [tutor] - [place] 'cause [place] looks rather nice - it's sort of a huddle. (FE College. BTEC Art and Design.)

While these accounts illustrate that BTEC tutors play an important role in supporting, engaging and motivating their students and, in some instances, providing them with inspirational 'role models' (Gartland, 2014), these accounts also demonstrate the lack of CEIAG students are receiving earlier in their education. Students described being very poorly informed about progression routes when they were at school:

When I was at school I didn't even know about college and uni. I actually didn't - honestly I did not know much. I didn't know that I needed GCSEs to get into uni. (FE College. BTEC Health and Social Care.)

Supporting transition

Students' accounts suggested that the BTEC courses had supported their progression to university in a number of ways. This included providing an alternative to A Level at which they could succeed, informing them in depth about their proposed area of study and offering coursework assessment rather than exams. Several students suggested that BTECs had been key in enabling them to progress to HE comparing their current trajectory into HE with what might have happened if they had undertaken GCSE retakes and A levels and concluding that without the BTEC course, they would not have been able to go to university:

I'm on target to get a distinction star and a distinction star B so equivalent to A*, A*, A so how can they say I won't be clever enough when I got a B in English. And now look, like if I'd gone there, I'd be at least a year behind myself so without this as an option I wouldn't be - you know, and now I've got a uni offer and everything so ... I don't know what I'd do without BTEC. (FE College. BTEC Health and Social Care.)

Data from the Association of Sixth Form Colleges supports the students' confidence in BTEC as an enabler to progression to HE. For students with an average GCSE score of 5.8 or lower, progression to HE is higher from BTEC courses than it is from A Level across the sector. It is only with prior attainment above 6.4 that the data suggests much higher rates of progression for A Level students. (Allen, 2013).

One factor in the success of the BTEC route as an enabler of progression to HE appeared to be the advice given on admission to the 6th form college which supported students in identifying progression routes for those who may have struggled with A Level courses:

Well during my interview I was advised to choose this BTEC because it's applied science and so I wanted to do something like engineering for my degree and this is the only BTEC course I could have chosen and that would get me enough UCAS points and good enough grade to go and do that. (6th Form College. BTEC Applied Science.)

For students interested in particular vocational areas, the BTECs provided a particularly helpful route. Students repeatedly described their increasing confidence in their subject knowledge in connection with related HE courses after meeting university students, attending interviews, open events and taster sessions where they found themselves to be already well informed about the subject matter:

I went to [university] midwifery and I'm on the reserve list for them and I've got a place at (university) for nursing and when I went to the interviews for both of them, the things they were saying, I was just - I knew and I was sitting - like there was a couple of girls I was sitting next to at Ipswich in particular and they were saying all about safeguarding, multidisciplinary teams, you know, all that kind of thing and I was like thinking yeah I know what she's talking about. (FE College. BTEC Health and Social Care.)

We did the taster sessions on the open day at uni... (in) forensic psychology, they were teaching us about something you learn the first term you're there. It was eyewitness testimony and the reliability of it and I did that in my first year here. I did a whole investigation and scientific report and everything on it and I was like - I know these answers - it's very...it's the same really. (6th Form College. BTEC Forensic Psychology.)

Students on the Art and Design course described how the BTEC course was enabling them to develop areas of expertise and identify areas of interest to pursue at university:

If you come to do art and fine art at college but don't know what you want to do, you've got the first year to try out a lot of stuff to then work with and then you can find something that you can specialise in in the second year, which then you might do at uni - 'cause I didn't know what I wanted to do. I know I want to do art and design but within that I didn't know where it would lead me but now I've actually got a path to follow; sort of a bit of structure. (FE College. BTEC Art and Design.)

Another way that the BTEC courses appear to support transition is that assessment through coursework means that students know what grades they have achieved as they progress through the course. This encouraged motivation and focus amongst some students:

(My tutor) will check with me saying this is the course you want to do and this is how many UCAS points you need and then he'll go through how many points you've currently got and then say what I'll need to get in my units to get to that point and that's when he'll say you'll need to redo some of these older units to push up your grade. (6th Form College. BTEC IT.)

This process also means that students know comparatively early whether they have achieved high enough grades to progress to their university of choice. While A Level students anxiously wait to take their A Level exams, many of the BTEC students not only know which university they are going to go to but have even applied for their accommodation and know where they are going to live:

We see them stressing and pulling their hair out and we're like - it's exams starting now. Facebook and Twitter saying how stressed they are because of exams - but I'm sorry - we don't do exams.

We're sort of sitting back. (6th Form College. BTEC IT.)

For many students, BTEC courses clearly support the development of confidence in approaching the transition to university and engaging with HE level study. This appears to be related to their experience of BTEC courses, in that the courses support the development of positive learner identities despite earlier, negative school experiences.

'BTards': negative perceptions of BTECs

The status of BTEC courses is a concern for a number of students. Students on BTECs, particularly at the FE college, were acutely aware that 'A levels, not diplomas, were the

qualifications of choice' (Hodgson and Spours, 2014: 478). A group of students at the FE college were clearly upset about the derogatory ways in which BTECs were talked about on social media by A Level students:

They do call us Btards.

I: Who calls you Btards?

The A level students.

There's a lot on social media.

People perceive BTEC students to be so dumb. (FE College. BTEC Health and Social Care.)

This perception of the low status of BTEC was apparently tied to the wide range of vocational courses offered at the FE college many of which do not lead to study in HE. The conflation of more academic vocational courses with 'hairdressing courses' by A Level students in comments on social media, was a cause of real concern for this group of BTEC students, one of whom argued passionately that BTEC courses and A Level courses are equivalent:

A Level students say it's not equivalent - it's not, it's not, it's not - well it is because I am about to do the same degree as you and you've got A Levels and I've got BTEC - so they are equivalent but people seem to not - they actually don't think they are and then I think that puts people off coming to BTEC 'cause they think it's not but it is. (FE College. BTEC Health and Social Care.)

The 'perceived lower status' of BTEC courses is in practice linked to the fact that BTECs, while recognised by some HEIs and on some HE courses, are not universally recognised by universities (Hodgson and Spours, 2014: 478). There was some suggestion in this study that BTEC courses support progression to some subject areas better than others. Some of the engineering students had undertaken A Level courses before starting their apprenticeships and BTEC courses. In contrast to other students who contributed to the study, they observed that, while the coursework-focused approach of BTEC courses suited them while they were working full-time alongside their study, A Levels would prepare them better for engineering degree courses as these demand a greater breadth of knowledge than the BTEC. The mathematical demands of an engineering degree course were particularly highlighted by these students. These students, however, in contrast to the others in the study, were not aiming to attain distinctions and merits on their BTEC courses as they were only required by their companies to pass and progress to the foundation degree. This may well account for their perception of the lesser demands of BTEC over A Level courses.

Another factor impacting on the status of BTEC courses is that students who undertake BTEC courses are also predominantly located in post-92 universities (Hoelscher et al, 2008). This is reflected in the HE destinations of students contributing to this study though a small number of students had received offers from pre-92, traditional universities.

The role of advice and guidance for students on the BTEC route to HE

This study highlights the complexity of routes into university for young people who select BTEC courses. While BTEC courses are clearly supportive of students' transition to HE, there is an evident need for students to be carefully informed about progression routes both to ensure that the courses they select provide genuine opportunities for progression and to raise awareness of BTEC courses as a viable route into HE. Recent policy has focused on 'aspiration raising', in attempting to redress the low numbers progressing to HE from the lowest socio-economic groups in the UK. This negative perspective suggests that individual

young people lack appropriate aspiration (Burke; 2012) but research reveals that young people do not. (Archer et al, 2013; DCSF, 2009). As this study demonstrates, what they do often lack is detailed information and understanding of possible futures and progression routes. The quality of CEIAG that young people receive in the UK has been widely critiqued over recent years but the current government policy of giving schools responsibility for careers advice has left many young people, often those who most need it, with very little support. The House of Commons Education Committee (2013) emphasised the importance of local information and good quality CEIAG and highlights the need for better mechanisms to enable information to reach schools. There is a role that universities and post-16 providers can play in ensuring that young people are better informed. This is hampered by the marketised environment in which institutions are competing for students and have little incentive to provide impartial advice (Hodgson and Spours, 2014), and where differently qualified students are of different financial value to institutions (Ball, 2010).

Hodgson and Spours identify practical measures needed to ensure that 'middle attainers' such as the students who contributed to this study, are better served by the education system. This entails input from all stakeholders and specifically includes:

'Rebuilding collaboration between all 14-19 providers, employers and higher education and wider stakeholders in order to focus on impartial CEIAG; progression skills and routes 14-19 and 18+ transitions to the labour market and higher education.' (Hodgson and Spours, 2014: 478)

The town where this study was undertaken provides a genuine opportunity to build this type of collaboration, particularly as currently the schools are 11-16 and, unlike in many other localities, are not competing with the colleges for students.

Section 3: Pedagogical approaches for transition and towards independent learning

Summary

Students experience BTEC courses as structured and supervised learning experiences in which learning is closely guided and supported by course tutors. The unit structure of BTEC courses helps students to make steady progress throughout their courses. Coursework assessments remove the uncertainty and anxiety that many students previously experienced on exam-based courses and enable students to improve grades incrementally to reach the requirements for entry to HE. Some courses comprise innovative and collaborative learning experiences. Many courses have work-based elements which students find useful. Many students comment positively on the extensive help available and value the support of tutors. Assignments provide the 'driver' for much of the learning and information seeking by students, and some students feel integrated assignments across different subject areas provide insights to a range of possible disciplines for future HE study.

Students express a range of views about the need for independent learning and how it may be developed. Many comment on how they have seen a significant shift away in the locus of control from the tutor to themselves as learners over the two years of their BTEC course. Most expect to have to manage for themselves far more, with less direct tutorial support as they move into HE and note that you need to 'learn to do things by yourself' in HE. Some students still have anxieties about the transition to HE, and in their confidence to cope, as well as about whether their existing range of experiences is yet sufficiently developed.

The structure of BTEC courses

The BTEC courses were generally described by the students as following a tutor-led and knowledge-acquisition model (Laurillard, 2012) of teaching, learning and assessment: sequenced as initial tutor inputs at the outset of a unit of study, followed by students working on tutor-monitored individual, mainly written assignment work:

Like in the first year, we'd go in and just learn about a certain thing and then we'd get given an assignment and we'd do the coursework and we'd go through the teacher - so learn about what is in the assignment and get the grade. (6th Form College. BTEC IT.)

The assignment brief will tell us what we need to include and so the teacher will give us that at the beginning of the lesson and then we'll go through everything we need to add so you see it on Powerpoint up on the board and they explain to us what we need to do. (FE College. BTEC Health.)

We'd have like presentations, we might do some questions...sort of interactive and sort of listening to him and having discussions. (FE College. BTEC Engineering.)

This structuring around continual assignments is something one student found required them to adjust their own approach to learning:

[The assignments are] just too long to leave till late. I've really had to change my style of learning I guess because I've had to accept I can't work like that, I'm going to have to start working, like doing them gradually. (FE College. BTEC Health and Social Care.)

This pedagogic model is one which the students are likely to find familiar from their prior school experiences. One student had also gained reassurance that doing the extensive assignment work would be beneficial for university:

One of the girls, who is an ambassador, I spoke to at the [university] open day ... she did this course and she said she didn't struggle at all...she said she felt almost a step ahead of everyone else because she was constantly writing assignments. (FE College. BTEC Health.)

It was apparent many students were taking BTEC courses because they had previously poor educational experiences with academic writing or with GCSEs and with exams, and some particularly with A Levels. Students recognised the BTEC courses as designed for and giving them (second) chances, especially to those who were trying to recover or reassert their learning identity, such as those who had not achieved the grades needed to access A Levels, or for those for whom exams caused anxiety and stress:

I've learned quite a lot - I've come along way with my writing - like when I first used to start writing my analysing weren't that great, like it was quite simple. Well I've sort of developed that as I've come along as well. (FE College. BTEC Art and Design.)

Some initial tutor inputs on units were followed by a group activity such as a group-based discussion before each student commenced individual work on their assignment for the unit. This structured and largely tutor-managed learning environment is found to support students' developing confidence in their learning and career potential, as well as for some, in regaining confidence in their own learning capacity and self-efficacy, and in rebuilding 'learner identities' (Reay et al, 2009 and 2010).

The structure of the BTEC courses around units of study as 'pockets of work' was found to assist learners in making steady progress over the course of the programme, removing the uncertainty inherent in final examinations (of A Levels) as well as the associated anxieties of examinations. The facility on current BTEC courses to re-submit assignments clearly enables learners to improve on previous achievements. This re-submission opportunity is used by some students to upgrade their scores in working towards the grades needed for acceptance onto a chosen degree course:

Because when we get an assessment sheet and within the assessment sheet it tells you what you have to look for and basically how the passes, merits and the distinctions work so in the passes it's kind of like saying it's a starter - you're just explaining briefly and then a merit you're talking a bit more about that and then a distinction is all the conclusions. We'd get a deadline with that so within the deadline we hand in our work and then [tutor] would give us feedback if we need to improve on the work that we did and if we do need to improve we would need to re-submit it again. (6th Form College. BTEC Business.)

The compartmentalised structuring of knowledge acquisition and skills' development on BTEC courses around units of study and assignments, and the lack of examinations, were questioned by some students. Whether such structuring impedes the synthesis of key concepts and perspectives by learners across, as well as within, their individual units of study, needs to be considered. This links with concerns about effective practice for transition into HE, not least with expectations for learners to cope with independent study in HE.

Some differences, in the extent of structuring and management of the learning environments, were identified across the BTEC courses at both the 6th form college and the FE college. BTEC science-related courses tend to be organised around regular student attendance and time working in labs, whereas in subject areas such as healthcare, students talked of spending significant periods of time working independently.

The BTEC Forensic Science course at the 6th form college was described by students in terms suggesting they found the learning environment both stimulating and innovative, reflective of student-centred pedagogical practice.

We do mock crime scenes and mock court scenes.

I don't think I'd ever have done anything like the mock crime scenes ...
I was interested well personally, it's interesting. (6th Form College.
BTEC Forensic Science.)

This course appeared to be promoting both coherence across the units of study and highly engaging, collaborative and inquiry-based learning (Laurillard, 2012). Students spoke of engaging in cross-disciplinary investigations, promoting their ability to draw together knowledge, skills and understanding from relevant disciplines and subject areas, including psychology, criminology and law:

You do learn much more than people think on forensic science. You think you're just going to be looking at bodies and crimes and stuff like that but you don't. You go into so much more depth with it, like the psychology side of it and it's just so interesting and honestly you do just learn so much. You learn more, my friend does psychology and I've actually learned more than what she's learned in her two years of just doing psychology. I've covered a lot more than she has and in a lot more detail as well, which is strange considering hers is a full A level and ours is like a little assignment. (6th Form College. BTEC Forensic Science.)

There's like criminology, psychology, all the sciences and it's more sort of wider range of learning. I've learned so much more than I would have done from just doing the sciences. (6th Form College, BTEC Forensic Science.)

However, there was also some disquiet among certain students about potential knowledge gaps in the curriculum covered on their BTEC course and whether the course was providing them with all the cognitive resources for their chosen degree. For example, one student on the BTEC Health who was intending to go on to a paramedic practice degree, commented there had been only one unit on anatomy on the BTEC course. She knew the degree course would feature anatomy and was worried about her own knowledge lacks, and whether this would place her at a disadvantage, especially in comparison with her future peers:

A thing I'm worried about because we've only done one anatomy-based assignment and that was last year and I quite like biology - like I pick it up quite quickly as a subject but I think not having done A Level Biology or AS Biology, I'm worried about that a little bit. (FE College, BTEC Health.)

Some students also anticipated they were likely to experience less variety in breadth of curriculum on their degree course than they were experiencing on the BTEC: attributing this to the more singular subject focus in their chosen university degree course (and this is further explored around 'strong and weak ties' between BTEC courses, degree programmes and professions, in Section 4 of this report). Another student commented enthusiastically on the opportunity HE would provide them to 'focus in' on a subject area, while another commented enthusiastically on being able to connect at university with tutors with significant disciplinary expertise.

The BTEC Forensic Science tutor had created authentic crime scenes and was facilitating learning in the use of these immersive learning environments, evolving the scenes as the students' investigations progressed across units of study. Students were required to thoroughly investigate the scene, working sometimes in groups or pairs, as well as individually:

Like when we do the crime scene we dip into groups of three or four and then in pairs you go round and it depends on what evidence you are collecting or taking photographs or measuring.

We have to take photos of the crime scene...and we take videos as well.
(6th Form College, BTEC Forensic Science.)

Some BTEC courses also featured work placements such as on the BTEC Health where students were required to undertake 100 hours in a range of relevant health contexts; while the work-based route was a highly integral part of the part-time BTEC Engineering at the FE college. The close links with work environments were seen as providing positive and authentic learning opportunities for students, enabling them to draw on work experience in their studies, as well as in helping ground their knowledge and studies to relevant work environments:

I: Do you think ... that by doing the course alongside work there's opportunities to put ideas you're meeting on the course into practice in the workplace...would you say that is valuable?

Yeah that is valuable - where we work you have a lot of engineers that have just finished their degree so they're like fresh faced out of university straight into a working environment and you know they'll be able to tell you all these qualifications and tell you all these things but they won't know how to do things with their hands and just a general understanding whereas starting off at the bottom and doing your education, you're going to know both sides of the coin. (FE College. BTEC Engineering.)

I think the opportunities to do placements that's what I like the most. (FE College. BTEC Health.)

The work experiences could also be instrumental and influential, in assisting the students to determine the area of study upon which to focus. For example, a Level 4 child nursing student at the HEI attested:

I initially wanted to do midwifery and that's why I did my health and social course, but then when I had done my work experience I realised that I liked working with children instead. And when I looked into child health nursing or midwifery, midwifery is pretty much adult-based, you care for the mum when the baby is born...so I thought I would change my direction, that's why I chose child nursing [degree].
(HEI. Level 4 Child Nursing.)

The role of tutors on BTEC courses

There was evidence across the BTEC courses of the active participation of tutors and of the value placed by students on their interactions with teaching staff. Staff:student interactions were clearly embedded in everyday learning practices and in close and positive relationships:

The teachers are quite supportive. [tutor] bless her, she brought in doughnuts and pastries and juice yesterday morning and we had a breakfast before our exam. They are very supportive of us. (6th Form College. BTEC Childcare)

They're really young, you can approach them like they're a friend.

Our teacher is awesome, she's lovely. (6th Form College. BTEC Childcare)

If you need a discussion then they'll always find time to do it. (FE College. BTEC Engineering)

We're actually very close with our teachers ... they make us feel very comfortable. Everyone is very friendly with each other, even the teachers. (6th Form College. BTEC Business)

Students also expressed a strong sense of their tutors' monitoring of their progress in close and personalised ways. Apprentices on the BTEC engineering course had a regular 45 minute personal tutorial each week to ensure they were making academic progress and to check if there were any personal concerns. Tutor support in undertaking assignment work also appeared to be closely managed and structured, especially during the first year of the course, with tutors introducing the students not only to assignment briefs, but also working closely with the students to manage study plans at all levels of detail:

There was one point in the year where I had three classes and I had about ten or eleven assignments at the same time and my teacher was like - right these are the ones - just get these ones done and hold off on these ones - make sure these ones are good and then we'll go back to the other ones. (6th Form College. BTEC Health)

Students described how teachers encouraged them to engage with ideas that initially they could not see as relevant or of interest. A student on the BTEC Art and Design course spoke of the tutor having required him to do painting, which the student had not wanted to do. The experience and achievement on the associated assignment work however prompted the student to choose Fine Art as his specialism and favoured medium of expression, along with awareness that he would not have done this without the tutor's insistence:

It takes people out of their comfort zone to try out a lot of different things. If not I wouldn't have been doing fine art 'cause I hated painting. [Tutor] told me to start painting and then I started enjoying it as well. (FE College. BTEC Art and Design)

Another student on BTEC IT at the 6th form college commented:

The teacher's great. My main teacher...left high school to teach here so it's been quite easy for me because I know him from high school and [he] is a very good teacher as well and it just seems like the difference from high school. They treat you more like mature - like an adult, which is really good. They don't teach you like a kid. (6th Form College. BTEC IT.)

Students were aware they would be expected to be able to cope with less tutor contact time and more responsibility for their own learning at university. Students spoke of an awareness of the dangers in a continuing reliance on their current tutors, to direct, monitor and manage their learning.

While monitoring student progress continues across both years of study on all BTEC courses, students described a lessening and transfer of control, such as in them assuming more time-management of assignment work, most notably as they progressed into the second year of the course:

Yeah well this year has been a lot more independent work, I found. Last year, because I think it was 'cause it was our first year, they were more - they were there a lot of the time so they were chasing us up with our assignments and things. But this year they've taken a step back I think, ready for if some of us are going to uni ... [though] they've still been really helpful, like if we get stuck on anything. (FE College. BTEC Health.)

The second year sort of got more control over what I'm doing. (FE College. BTEC Art and Design.)

Students frequently emphasised they were being treated 'more like an adult' with increasing expectations for management of their own study plans; for self-regulation. Pintrich (2004) suggests self-regulation involves an active, constructive process whereby learners set goals for their learning and then attempt to monitor, regulate, and control their cognition, motivation, and behaviour, guided and constrained by their goals and the contextual features in the environment.

This strategic pedagogical shift, from tutor to learner, clearly helps prepare learners in a progressive manner for transition into HE, giving them confidence in their own abilities to manage their learning. It accords with both Christie et al's (2006) account of the experiences of students in HE where limited tutor contact and expectations of students to be working independently are commonly experienced, as well as with statements from the interviews with Level 4 students at the Higher Education Institution (HEI) such as:

I've learned to be more organised...making lots of notes...become more organised. (HEI. Level 4 Radiography.)

Assignments as drivers for learning

Assignment work predominates as the 'driver' for learning on all the BTEC courses, with students working to detailed assignment briefs normally set by the tutor. All assessed work is submitted as individual pieces of work. The emphasis on students undertaking assignments individually was seen as instrumental in developing students' independence, by assisting them in learning to find information, research around topics and in developing their academic writing skills:

[Tutor] doesn't give us like more information 'cause we have to research it for ourselves but [tutor] gives us what we have to do and explains a brief little bit to us and then lets us get on with it. (6th Form College. BTEC Forensic Science.)

Students expressed some concerns around the lack of exams on the BTEC courses, though a number were also undertaking A Levels within the 6th form college and some BTEC courses do include an examination.

For most BTEC courses, the regular form of the assessment is as a written assignment, with reports and essays being most common in all but the Art and Design BTEC, though these also feature as part of those courses. In art and design, students referred to the development of a portfolio of work, often centred round their exploration of a particular medium and typically involves preparing pieces of written work to discuss the medium and (say) associated artists, followed by creation of a tangible artefact, applying their own creativity using the relevant medium.

Students are aware, most notably evidenced among learners at the 6th form college, that their efforts in assignments have a strategic value in relation to their preparations for HE. Students know precisely the grades they need to achieve entry to their chosen university and course of study. They described being able to re-submit assignment work to try and achieve a higher grade if they needed additional points towards university requirements for their chosen degree course.

Assignment work was seen by some of the students as encouraging them to engage with and to integrate knowledge from across a range of disciplinary perspectives. BTEC Health students commented on their research work for assignments as opportunities that encouraged their bringing together of ideas and conceptions drawn from areas such as

sociology, law and psychology. They explained how they were also using well known case studies in their assignments to reflect their own consideration of knowledge from across a range of disciplinary fields.

We get given case studies and that actually helps towards our assignments 'cause we can use that and apply everything to it. (FE College. BTEC Health and Social Care.)

Students described in quite varied ways how they undertook their assignment work. Some described how their BTEC courses had promoted them to undertake supplementary independent research to extend and elaborate the knowledge gained from the tutors' lectures. They commented that the assignment brief encouraged them to engage in broad reading around the assignment focus, undertaking extensive, independent research to find relevant information and resources.

But we also encountered mixed responses in the extent to which BTEC students were using credible and relevant sources, with some commenting on their own rather haphazard approach to finding information:

If I wanted to study David Walker [street artist]...I'll click on Google images and I'll go on one page with all the information and stuff like that I'll need...it's much better to just look online...you want to be researching something quick. (FE College. BTEC Art and Design.)

Also, the BTEC Engineering students (apprentices) suggested their assignments were encouraging them to learn and engage with knowledge in a compartmentalised manner in 'little pockets of work'.

The teaching is usually sort of enough to get you through the assignment. There's not a huge amount of research...the teaching sort of covers pretty much all of that. (FE College. BTEC Engineering.)

These apprenticeship students contrasted this approach to their own prior experience with A Levels, in which the examination structure required them to have a breadth of knowledge in preparation for unseen exams.

Indeed, assessment by exams feature only as a small part on a few of the current BTEC courses. This is part of their appeal to many of the students for opting for the BTEC course:

I struggle with exams and stuff and this is like all assignment based (FE College. BTEC Health.)

... sort of assignments, you've got the time you know the deadlines and you can just do it and get it in where an exam, you're waiting and waiting and waiting... and it just seems like a lot of worrying when you could just get an assignment. (FE College. BTEC Engineering.)

But some students were also aware they would be required to take exams at university and this caused a few to express anxiety and wariness about their lack of preparation to cope with them, with the BTEC focus on assignment work. One student commented on how A level students, as university peers, would not be similarly lacking:

They'll be more prepared for the exam conditions 'cause they've practised with it, whereas we're not used to doing exam conditions, are we? (FE College. BTEC Art and Design.)

Students also expressed anxiety in relation to exams on a degree course:

I know we have exams so there's obviously going to be revision and stuff but I don't know if there's that many assignments - but I'm coming prepared for that ...

I: Yeah and what do you feel about the exams - given you've not been doing them for a while?

Yeah that's the thing I'm worried about. That's one of the reasons why I stopped A Levels was because I just got myself in such a state but I don't know. I'm kind of hoping that's all right, well just have to see. (FE College. BTEC Health.)

Yeah via the BTEC it's coursework so I feel a lot more comfortable with that. Looking at foundation degree or degree in general it's exams and things which scare the hell out of me, doesn't it everyone? (FE college. BTEC Engineering.)

Progressing towards independent learning

It is widely acknowledged transition to HE presents a number of challenges for students. Students need reassurance and a key priority is developing their confidence while slowly withdrawing frequent low-level instructions. (Thomas, Jones and Ottaway, 2015: 33.)

Among all the BTEC students there was an awareness and acceptance that HE would require them to take more responsibility for their own learning, and that the transition to being independent learners would require levels of maturity and confidence in themselves as learners. Some were confident in their preparedness:

I think I'm needing that independence at the moment and the learning - I know it sounds like a bit nerdy, but I'm really looking forward to the learning. (FE College. BTEC Health.)

Students across BTEC courses frequently described doing assignment work and the investigation of sources and independent research activities to find information for their assignments, as an 'enabling process' for the development of information and academic literacy. The development of referencing skills and an awareness this would be important at university was commonly referred to in association with coursework. There was genuine belief these experiences would stand them in good stead for study in higher education and were providing them with resources for engaging effectively in study at a higher level:

Like they've taught us how to text reference and the Harvard referencing system and how to use sources and that as well and they've made us keep up to date with deadlines as well, which will keep us up to date with all the [HE] work. (6th Form College. BTEC Forensic Science.)

Some students commented on the development of time-management skills, but the experiences were varied. Some realised their skills were being improved by having set coursework deadlines, while others were finding that working to assignment deadlines was causing them concern and anxiety:

So you set yourself a plan of the work you want to get done that day...and you'll make sure you get it done...but you've got to sort of plan it for yourself. (6th Form College. BTEC Forensic Science.)

Expectations of preparedness for being an independent learner were not focused solely on skills in time management and in finding information for themselves. Some students were also developing their own voice and their understanding in their subject field and were

beginning to looking forward to meeting variety in viewpoints, with opportunities to exercise their own ontological perspective:

I don't know - I have no idea what it's going to be like [at university] other than I think I'll be treated like an adult a lot more and I'll be able to voice my opinion. I don't think if my opinion would change much but I'll be as happy to have someone to listen even if they don't agree with me, just be able to like speak to me. Like at school you can't. (6th Form College. IT & Music Technology.)

Students commented how the structure of their BTEC course had increasingly shifted responsibility for the management of learning and the ownership of learning activity, from the tutor to them as the student, over the length of the course. This was mentioned particularly at the FE college, notably on the BTEC Health course and on the BTEC Art and Design, when students astutely emphasised how the second year had seen a significant shift away in the locus of control from the tutor and putting responsibility onto themselves.

It's totally up to us, that's what they've said haven't they?...so what they're saying is if your work is late there's no one here to mark it so the decision is yours and I think a lot of people have struggled with that this year because they were really on us in the first year 'cause we'd just come from school and I think they were easing us out of it. When I look back it was quite similar to school, come on keep going. This year it was just like, do it great. (FE College. BTEC Health and Social Care.)

But BTEC Forensic Science students at the 6th form college expressed similar views:

This year was more independent. Because we'd done it last year they gave us a bit of help but we had to plan all the experiments ourselves and book the lab when we wanted it and our class had to do it so we had to make a list and the teacher pretty much didn't do anything for that. (6th Form College. BTEC Forensic Science.)

At the 6th form college, this was reflected in learners' statements about the expectations of their tutors on them as students, such as in a decrease in the 'spoon-feeding' some students felt typified their previous school-based educational experiences:

And if you don't get the work done they do give you numerous warnings, especially in the first year they do give you numerous warnings like - get the work done, get the work done and there's a couple of people that have just said well, I don't really care that have already been kicked out because you either have to have that mentality or adopt it or goodbye 'cause they haven't got the time to sit next to you and tell you what to type for the course and you've either got to want to get the grades or you haven't. (6th Form College. IT & Music Technology.)

One student described Directed Independent Learning (DIL) time, used on a regular basis, when students were expected to focus on their coursework. This also gave them time for catching up on any missed work with tutorial support available, if needed. One student described using this time to get ahead on his course:

Yeah we have independent learning sessions called DIL - it's directed independent learning and we use them, the Pods for that like outside of lessons.

I: Okay so these DIL sessions are additional to the course?

They're just time for us to do - say if we're behind on a piece of work, it's time set aside for us to get up to date or even go ahead of where we're supposed to be.

We're not forced to do it, no. It's just there to give us help on when we should do independent study. BTEC is a lot about independence and just doing it all yourself and that just gives us help on when we should do it outside of lessons.

I: Right so what kinds of things do you do in the DIL sessions then?

Coursework.

It's mainly just what you feel that you need to do. So say I've got a task question on say unit 42 that's due in on Friday, I'll do that in the DIL session.

It's quite helpful. ...that's why I finished my course so early because I just did all my work in my DIL time. (6th Form College. BTEC IT & Music Technology.)

Students described being organised and having plans as important to their development as independent learners. One student at the 6th form college commented on taking ownership of his own learning, undertaking one unit entirely independently:

When [name] my ICT teacher, she fell ill, we didn't have a proper teacher to teach us because they had to find someone to replace her for the time and I was just about to start a new unit - it was spreadsheet modelling and I thought I've been here for two years now or nearly two years and I feel I'm quite independent and stuff, I thought I'll just - 'cause I'm going to do it anyway, I thought I'll just do it completely on my own without any of the teacher's help and yeah, I done it all on my own, finished all the pass, merit and distinction tasks and overall when I sent her it for the final mark, she said I got a distinction for it and I was happy like 'cause I'd just done it completely independently without the teacher's help and I thought I would never have been able to do that in the first year or when I finished school or anything 'cause I was never independent but this college and BTEC has really helped me to become independent. (6th Form College. BTEC Music Technology.)

Other students outlined how they were managing coursework alongside often multiple, other demands on their time, notably with part-time jobs and work placements. However, many were able to describe coping with these substantial demands in positive terms, such as assisting them in the development of management of time needed for university.

That looks good on uni the fact that I can hold down a full-time job and do college because I'm going to do mental health nursing so I'm going to be doing all my placements, all my coursework and I'm still going to need a full-time job to support myself ... universities will look at the fact that you can balance and time management all of what you've got going on in your life and still come up with the grades you need. (6th Form College. BTEC Childcare.)

Work experiences, whether organised as part of the BTEC or as an additional activity (undertaken for financial reasons), were seen as part of the development of students' relevant skills and experiences for moving into HE.

A BTEC Art and Design student commented that his particular specialism meant he was required to find information and develop his specific subject knowledge in this field more independently. He was aware his tutor could offer academic advice on academic writing and technical advice on drawing but he was also aware that the tutor's knowledge of his very particular specialism was limited.

There was also awareness that the college environment, whether at the 6th form or FE college, was distinctly different from earlier experiences in the school environment. Most frequently students felt they were treated more as adults in the college environment

than they had been at school. Use of tutors' first names was cited as representing the different kind of relationship with tutors from those at school. Students spoke of how the college environment was actively leading them towards feeling fully adult:

We've got the feeling of being treated like an adult here but it's not quite at university level so it is preparing us a little bit and then we'll be treated completely like an adult and we'll be expected to be independent and it's just a step along the way so we are prepared now because we know the levels, understanding what we need to do and it's prepared us so we're not worried. (6th Form College. BTEC Forensic Science.)

There was also a comment by one student that the steps to independence could be made more purposefully on their BTEC course, particularly to prepare them for coping on their chosen course within a university, where the cohort sizes in their area of student was anticipated to be large:

I think maybe in the second year we should be left to our own devices a bit more. (6th Form College. BTEC Childcare.)

Learner independence and Level 4 students

BTEC students were explicit about expecting to have to manage for themselves far more with less direct tutorial support as they moved to being independent learners in HE. This expectation was also confirmed by Level 4 students at the HEI when asked for their own experiences and advice to new students about to commence in HE:

Don't expect to be spoon-fed. Be prepared for how independent you need to be. (HEI. Level 4 Child Nursing.)

'I think for me it's been more of a learning journey. At the start you think I don't know it all. But you're not going to know it all, that's why you're here and you are going to learn and get things wrong, but being able to learn from it and that's good... It's definitely made me more independent...has helped me building confidence in me'. (HEI. Level 4 Graphic Design.)

A Level 4 midwifery student described the shift as a 'natural step', from being provided with the necessary information on a pre-entry course, to managing independent research at the HE level, commenting:

You were always fed all the information whereas here you just go and find out a bit more for yourself...you feel it's the natural step. (HEI. Level 4 Midwifery.)

A business studies student commented on the independence associated with being given details of assignments in advance:

You have to prepare yourself, you know what you're working for which is really helpful and gives me a wider range...for developing my skills....I know what I'm doing, I'm building up slowly, slowly looking forward. It's given me a different way of appreciating what I'm going to do as I go on [whereas in college] you were less independent because you've still got tutors chasing after you. (HEI. Level 4 Business Studies.)

Radiography students noted that learning to do things by yourself in HE, while challenging, could also be a positive experience:

I think it's more personal and all round, you learn to do things by yourself and you do get yourself through things which is like a good learning curve. I would just encourage everyone to go to university.

I probably have changed...I think I've relaxed a little bit...not as uptight as I was.
(HEI. Level 4 Radiography.)

Section 4: Professional Participation and Professional Identity

Summary

Acceptance into a professional field is seen as a strong motivational factor for many students undertaking the BTEC courses at both the 6th form and FE colleges and for the degree choices made by Level 4 undergraduates at the HEI. The work placement element of the BTEC programmes enables students to experience a variety of work contexts and contributes to their decision making in degree choice. For some, study on the BTEC course is a fully integrated part of their professional participation as on the BTEC Engineering, or is a significant feature of health-related Level 4 HEI programmes.

Many BTEC students display a strong sense of vocation or professional identity with particular professional areas, and this is influential in their HE decision making. The work-related element of HE courses is regarded by level 4 HE students as contributing to a sense of 'difference', marking them apart from students not on work work-related HE courses. A professional allegiance appeared to be more important than the value or interest students might see in being in or progressing to HE as an endeavour or experience in its own right. A work-related degree is seen as a critical step for many students towards a chosen career. This is also seen to be highly gendered and often influenced by family in aspirations and connections to specific professional contexts or careers. BTEC programmes can be depicted in terms of having 'strong' to 'weak' ties with both HE degrees and professional fields.

Participation in the professional field: work placements and work-integrated learning

Acceptance into a professional field is seen as a strong motivational factor for undertaking the BTEC courses by many of the students interviewed at both the 6th form and FE colleges. The work placement element of the BTEC programmes is valued in enabling students to experience a variety of work contexts and in contributing to their decision-making in degree choice. The BTEC influences students in the choice of their degree. On the BTEC Health course, for example, students experience a range of contexts from school environments through to hospitals and care homes. From these experiences, students feel better informed about which area to choose for their degree. This focusing on work placements in progression to professional level work also accords with views held by professionals themselves (Bennett et al, 2008).

BTEC students explained how placements provide opportunities to build confidence and familiarity within a professional community in readiness to move into degree study at the HE:

We do our placements as well.

Yeah like placements are so helpful 'cause honestly...

You see it all and like when they go through things like I just done one at the [hospital] on the maternity ward.

Like we used to be like pre-schools and stuff like that thinking 'Oh God,' but now we actually go into hospitals and things and like when I went there they were taking me all through the forms and again it was just all stuff - I'd seen one of the forms. One of the forms she had shown me I'd seen as like an appendix on one of our units that our teacher had just showed us out of kindness to say you're going to come across - and I thought, 'Oh I've seen that, you know - so many things...' I just felt - and now I feel really ready for uni. I feel that there's no areas, apart from obviously that I am going to become a specialist nurse whatever, as a whole I feel

so prepared, I feel that there's nothing more I need to know. (FE College. BTEC Health and Social Care.)

Students at HE level were also aware of work placements as important sites for learning and for the integration of learning in practice settings. 'A work placement can inculcate new employability skills and *reinforce* the application of vocational techniques learned in the classroom' (Bennett et al, 2008: 106, italics used in the original).

Level 4 undergraduate students at the HEI, were articulate about the importance of professional links and work experiences. Work-integrated learning has been used as a scale of student engagement and satisfaction in relation to students' positive transition into higher education (Coates, 2008) and acknowledges the growing importance of the integration of employment-focused experiences into HE study.

One Level 4 child nursing student at the HEI, commented on getting 'insights into what the real child is like' through the placement, making a case for the value of placement experiences within, and from the outset, of the HE study programme.

Level 4 child nursing students suggested they had not anticipated such long placements so soon after commencing their course. But they and the midwifery students described how they had gained confidence from the work experience as well as how much they had learned already, especially in developing practical skills and procedural knowledge:

We didn't expect we'd get that far. (HEI. Level 4 Midwifery)

Several students spoke of being 'thrown in at the deep end' with work placements. But they also emphasised placements 'were a real highlight of the programme'. There was consensus in the value of strong links in a clear programme path to employment and that this was a strong motivator in their choice of degree 'You wanna get something out of it in the end, don't you?' There was strong value linked to gaining a sense of legitimation within the professional community, and of this being enabled through work-integrated learning.

The main worries and challenges expressed by level 4 students doing work experience were in being able to cope with independent study work while also doing work placements. In terms of seeing going to university per se, as an opportunity for enriching educational experiences and engaging in the broader aspects of university life, none of the level 4 students interviewed in focus groups or interviews, expressed this as an important or influencing factor in coming into HE.

Level 4 Child Nursing and the Level 4 Midwifery students enthused about the importance they placed on work experiences and professional community participation in learning skills for their chosen area:

Now we've got the experience and a lot more information and knowledge than we would ever have got doing any of the lectures.

I didn't think we'd be able to do the things we've done.

I didn't think we'd get that far.

I'm more confident in my practical abilities. (HEI. Level 4 Child Nursing.)

I feel like I fit in better in placement because I'm a learner by doing...I love it when we're doing practical things, that's what sticks in my brain...I have to work so hard...really hard to put things on paper. But when I'm there doing things, they just

sort of flow, so that's why I love it, that we're out on placement more, it's fantastic'.
(HEI. Level 4 Midwifery.)

The radiographers are all quite nice but every so often I'll admit I don't know anything and they do remind you that you're not meant to know everything...you're here to learn...we're meant to be learning...cause we just want to do it.
(HEI. Level 4 Radiography.)

The structure of the BTEC courses also afforded other opportunities for authentic learning (Colley et al, 2003) relevant to developing the requisite skills for the workplace such as problem solving and managing projects:

I do ICT, which is a subsidiary and music, which is a diploma so I do more of music and some of the things that we do in music technology is - what we're currently doing is we're learning how to do events management: how to set up gigs, how to use social media to promote and different promotional methods and trying to get in contact with PR companies. Another one is we're making albums and we were getting bands in to record them so we learn how to use a studio and recording equipment and some other ones that we have done is composing music - learning how to write songs - the different techniques in writing songs, different genres and that kind of thing. (6th Form College. BTEC IT & Music Technology.)

Several BTEC students talked positively of the practical and applied focus of their BTEC courses with the use of authentic projects or simulations for their assignments such as in the use of the 'crime scenes' on the Forensic Science course, in special effects projects on the BTEC Art and Design, and in organising a music gig on the BTEC Music Technology:

Yeah ... just the overall experience you get from it. Just from like the work 'cause I'd never experienced some of those things before like being able to play a gig or even set up a gig or get a band in and record them and just meet them and see how they play - I've never experienced that before and it's college that's given me the opportunity to do that - just try new things, play new instruments 'cause they've got pianos, bass guitars and all that thing and just hear other people play as well 'cause you get like people who play flute come in, saxophones - you experience them playing as well. I never had that kind of experience before and this college has really given me the opportunity to see all that and be a part of it. That's one of the main things I enjoy - 'cause I never had the opportunity before and this college has given me that. (6th Form College. BTEC IT & Music Technology.)

Another student mentioned the visits and exhibitions they had attended as part of the course in helping them make connections with professionals in their field:

Euro Gamer... that was good - I liked the opportunities and the amount of trips opportunities they offer.

I: Right - connected to your course or just general ones?

Yeah this one was connected to our course.

We were doing a gaming unit at the time so Euro Gamer - big sort of - there was loads of developers there just to go and meet. (6th Form College. BTEC IT.)

One BTEC Business student described role play and immersive learning activities on her course:

At the moment we're in one of our classes doing about health and safety and legal acts. It's based on the college so we talk about the risk assessments and what they have to go through and how it affects the business end of the college overall and in my other class we're doing about our own businesses so we have to pretend to make up our own business and talk about how we're going to start it off and how much money and things that go into it and the long term effects that's going to come from it. It's basically like the business is real and we have to go through everything. (6th Form College. BTEC Business.)

For one group, study on the course was a fully integrated part of their professional participation. This was the case on the BTEC Engineering, where students attended the college weekly for a day, while working full-time as apprentices. This integrated approach was viewed positively by students, enabling them to develop relevant practical skills and draw from their work experiences, alongside acquiring professional competence and theoretical knowledge:

I've always known that I wanted to go into something hands on sort of like engineering or whatever so while I was at school I just sort of looked for a lot of apprenticeships or maybe I sort of thought a little bit about going to uni but I think I'd just rather work and study a bit as well - sort of get a bit of a mix rather than it just be all academic and come over clever and then not know how to work with my hands so I looked through a lot of apprenticeships schemes, just applied for some and got one. (FE College. BTEC Engineering.)

Another Engineering student had been able to use the BTEC to help him gain an apprenticeship:

Yeah - when I started this course I wasn't an apprentice I was working in a supermarket and so I just went back to college to get into this sort of work. I've only been an apprentice since November so it's definitely got a lot more interesting now I've got the job to go with it. (FE College. BTEC Engineering.)

The apprenticeship was also influencing this student's ongoing learning choices:

I was going on to do a degree straight after this, off my own back and carry on with it but then I got the apprenticeship. (FE College. BTEC Engineering.)

The BTEC courses are regarded by many of the students as able to accommodate their individual, different and specialised interests especially in the second year of the course, when more independent work is expected of the learners and when their own intrinsic motivation and specific interests help them to manage and control their own learning.

One Level 4 midwifery student also asserted that 'being totally focused on midwifery makes it easier' in terms of academic challenge than coping with the range of subjects that had been studied on an Access to HE course, adding about the HE course 'You're learning what you want to learn, aren't you?' (HEI. Level 4 Midwifery)

Developing a vocational or professional identity

The concept of 'habitus' (discussed in Section 1) can also be understood in the context of the 'fields' within which individuals act, including within professional fields and Colley et al (2003) suggest the concept of 'vocational habitus'. Lave and Wenger's (1991) work has also been influential in advancing the concept of learning not as acquisition but as participation. They argue it is social participation, rather than cognitive acquisition, which enables newcomers to learn from more experienced practitioners, and it is intimately bound up with

the social context in which it is situated. Immersion in the social, cultural and emotional aspects of work are not merely factors which influence learning, but are central to it:

Social communities are in part systems of relations among persons. The person is defined by as well as defines these relations. Learning thus implies becoming a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by these systems of relations. To ignore this aspect of learning is to overlook the fact that learning involves the construction of identities...identity, knowing and social membership entail one another... (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 53.)

One Level 4 radiography student explained how the work placement had provided a sense of 'fitting in':

But I do feel like I fit in...my first placement I found really hard because I think I was struggling because it was so new and this placement made me feel like a different person. I suppose I found my feet...yes I do fit in now.
(HEI. Level 4 Radiography.)

Both BTEC and Level 4 students were aware of the importance of the degree experience in preparing them for a profession and its role in their professional enculturation: in 'becoming' within the vocational or professional context:

I'd always encourage people to really think about you know their pathways afterwards. Don't go [to uni] just for the sake of it. (HEI. Level 4 Business Studies.)

Situated learning enables early or novice, 'legitimate peripheral participants' to acquire and develop the competencies required for work at professional level as well as to help individuals to gradually construct professional identities in relation to their communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The BTEC students were aware learning to participate in the social and cultural practices of their professional area would be crucial in developing their own professional identity.

Work experiences are also highly instrumental in helping students acquire and develop a stronger vocational self-concept and the ability to reflect constructively on issues related to work (Bennett et al 2008). One BTEC Engineering student described his own learning as within an integrated work-based learning community:

I suppose 'cause we've all got the sort of working in the sort of like an engineering trade and studying sort of together, everyone's pretty easy to get along with. I think there's that sort of like balance between doing some work and then just having a bit of a laugh as well. I think that's just sort of like the work-based attitude, I suppose - sort of working hard at work sort of carries over to your course and all the sort of banter side, I guess, as well. I don't know really how that would be with full-timers but I think certainly apprentices or people looking to get into that sort of thing or maybe have been doing a bit of work and trying to get into engineering, you're all sort of singing from the same page, I guess. (FE College. BTEC Engineering.)

For the Level 4 Child Nursing students, the choice of attending a local university was intentional, reflecting these learners' strategic and focused reasons for being at university which was to gain their degree. It was not influenced by desires to broaden their general academic experiences but was wholly focused on seeking enrichment within the professional community.

Child nursing students expressed a strong sense of vocation and calling to the profession and this was prominent in their thinking about themselves, even as students in higher

education. Colley et al (2003) suggest vocational habitus requires a 'choosable' identity for the individual, one that falls within their 'horizons for action' (2003: 16).

The findings signal the centrality for these students in seeing engagement as a professionally oriented construct, over and above them seeing engagement as an HE-oriented focus. The data suggests the criticality of the students' sense of engagement and confidence in 'becoming' within the disciplinary and professional field from the outset of HE study: a sense of legitimate (albeit peripheral) participation in a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), gained not least through the work-integrated and authentic learning opportunities offered in HE. Heightened for many in that coming to university to study is a critical and strategic step towards legitimated 'being' in the professional community.

Choosing a work-related degree

A work-related degree was seen as a critical step, notably towards a chosen career for many of the BTEC students. It was also apparent this choosing was also highly gendered and influenced particularly by the student's family and life experiences. Several students expressed the importance of having a clear goal and planned career pathway in thinking forward to their university degree:

I'm really interested in designing and historical buildings so that's what really attracted me... when I first came here...at the opening [of the 6th form college building] all the architects came here so I was talking to them about it and they offered me a work experience for two weeks so I went...and the college helped me with that...I've always had a goal sort of thing...I wanted to be a fashion designer/architect. (6th Form College. BTEC Art and Design.)

I've always known I wanted to be a forensic psychologist so I knew this was the best bet of doing something close to what I wanted to do and it will get me where I want to go so that's why I ended up here...I want to speak to a murderer. I want to know why you are doing what you are doing...I'm going to university to do forensic psychology. (6th Form College. BTEC Forensic Science.)

The BTEC course was instrumental in achieving the plan, in 'realising the steps': including for one student on the BTEC Forensic Science, who had determined she wanted to study biosciences at university:

I couldn't go on to A levels because I'd done badly in my GCSEs...but because I decided to retake one of my sciences they took my worst grade, so I failed one of the sciences...so I couldn't do A levels here. Also because I didn't get a high grade average...they were like you can do fast-track GCSEs, which is doing all my GCSEs again to try and get a better average or they said you could try forensics but have a think about it...it will open the same doors as A Levels and I'll still get to where I want to be. (6th Form College. BTEC Forensic Science.)

For some, this realisation had not been apparent to them at the start of the BTEC course, but was now emerging, aided particularly by the tutor:

Yeah I never had interest in uni in the first year. For some reason in the second year it just came to me that I wanted to do it. It mainly was 'cause the teacher was telling me all about it saying there is always a choice either to go to a job or apprenticeship or uni. He's just telling me about each one and just saying about how - 'cause he went to uni - and just saying how uni really is and just the whole process of it and that's what got me interested. (6th Form College. BTEC Forensic Science.)

The thing that got me interested was, it seemed to me just like you go to a job and get a decently paid job, but I thought if I go to university it just opens a lot more opportunities. (6th Form College. BTEC IT.)

The students liked that their BTEC courses involved professionally related experiences such as placements, and could see the benefit of the work experiences in developing a relevant repertoire of skills and experiences, as well as adding to their knowledge for applying to university. One BTEC Health student commented on being able to answer questions at university interview with confidence, drawing on direct experiences from her placements. She claimed without these experiences, she would have struggled or not have been able to answer effectively.

For some students, the choice of the university location was also motivated by a consideration of the professional opportunities available in the area of the university. For a Music Technology student, knowing Brighton to have a lively music scene was influential on the HEI choice:

I'm going to study music business, of all the subjects and that is what I'm hoping to do for next year and this year - yeah - and I'm hoping to have a job beside that as well, hopefully something in the music industry. That's what I'm hoping to do. (6th Form College. BTEC IT & Music Technology.)

Students could also see the strategic value of getting a degree. Two of the forensic science students at the 6th Form College commented:

I decided to go to uni 'cause the outcome of it will be much better than not going at all 'cause say if I went and got an apprenticeship it wouldn't guarantee me a job or anything like that and the wage is such, the salary wouldn't be as good as if I'd gone to uni and the course I've decided to do is like a sandwich so the third and fourth year I'll go to a placement and do work experience there and I was told the majority of time, I think it's around 90%, they employ you and the employment rate is good as well. It's very similar to an apprenticeship how they take you on but then you go very steadily and that's why I've chosen to go that route. (6th Form College. BTEC Forensic Science.)

I just think it will help me get into a job I want instead of just going to have a look for a job I want and not having the qualifications to actually get into it. Even if it's like low down, I could work my way up eventually. (6th Form College. BTEC Forensic Science.)

The influence of family on degree and professional choices

Menzies' (2013) review of the aspirations of disadvantaged school pupils found they were often high, but that commonly such young people, and their parents, lacked the knowledge and connections to provide reliable insight into how to achieve their career ambitions.

Family interests and traumatic personal experiences were also motivating students in choosing their degree course especially, but not exclusively, among those on health-related BTEC courses. One student hoping to go into mental health nursing confided:

My dad has a lot of mental health issues...so it's a kind of personal motivation to do it... his dad died when he was 15 and he's had a lot of problems... I've always wanted to work with adolescents to sort of help them change their lives. (6th Form College. BTEC Health and Child Care.)

Another wanting to do a social work degree spoke candidly from personal experiences:

My sister was hit by a car when she was younger and she's part brain-damaged so my mum would receive help with her from social workers because her anger issues were ridiculous. Mum just couldn't control her and then my brother grew up to be very troubled as well so we were constantly getting them round and we pretty much see them once a week...when they would say something like 'Why haven't you thought of this?' or 'Why haven't you thought of that?'...and I'm just like well if I can take it from being in that family situation and then taking it from the professional side then hopefully it would be awesome...but the fact that social work opens a lot of doors anyway so even if I don't want to go down the social worker route, it still opens a lot of doors for me. (6th Form College. BTEC Health and Child Care.)

One student explained that several of her family were involved in health and caring professions and this was leading her towards doing social work for her degree. Another had a close relative working as a paramedic and this had led to her own choice in her degree also around paramedic practice. A BTEC Health and Social Care student said:

I've always wanted to be a midwife so I wanted to do Health and Social Care wherever I went...and my Mum was a support worker and things like that so just influences like that. I was kind of clued up with it anyway so I just enjoyed it and thought, go for it. (FE College. BTEC Health and Social Care.)

Another Health and Social Care student said:

My Mum is a family support worker and she's highly qualified. She's just got another job as a mental health support worker so she's in the field. She's got a lot of friends who are like midwives, nurses and things like that. (FE College. BTEC Health and Social Care.)

Whereas mothers and female relatives were often identified as having influenced female students studying Health and Social care, the male student on BTEC Engineering identified male family role models:

A lot of people in my family work in engineering or sort of similar jobs to me, working with your hands, I suppose. (FE College. BTEC Engineering.)

My step Dad's in engineering but he kind of went the City & Guilds route rather than degree route. I think now he regrets not doing it because a lot of it is electronic and electrical now whereas in his day it was based on mechanical so a lot of his skills are out of date or not required or you know, you can get a mechanic everywhere - it's the electrical skills that they want, isn't it so? (FE College. BTEC Engineering.)

I didn't really think there was a lot of information apart from like talking to my Dad 'cause he worked in engineering or talking to sort of cousins and stuff and getting some information about what ways to go. (FE College. BTEC Engineering.)

The family influence was also apparent in students wanting to make their families proud of them in having a 'profession':

When people ask what you do for a living you can be proud and talk to them about work ... you can say 'I'm an engineer doing this' and it's quite a respected job isn't it? (FE College. BTEC Engineering.)

However some students were still uncertain of themselves in where to go next though still expressing professional allegiances:

I: But you're planning to do a foundation degree here?

Maybe...I'm a carer at the minute [but thinking about] doing like a kind of like social people skills kind of course - what is that called?

I: A social care course?

Yeah, yeah well if I do that then I can like, in the future - like obviously not anywhere near now, but I could then think about doing a nursing degree. I was a carer - well I looked after my Nanny for like seven years but that was never too hard until the very end 'cause she had dementia. I've always wanted to be a nurse and I've never known how to do it obviously 'cause I'm not clever enough and obviously you're going to need maths and stuff like that but I'll probably think about all that sort of thing. (FE College. BTEC Art and Design.)

Many students confirmed that parents and family were supportive and proud of the students' achievements. There were comments positively made in respect of these students having identified and chosen a career and now being on a pathway towards a career or profession. There were reports of family comments about students 'bettering themselves' and about the degree leading to a respected career, for example, in engineering:

My step dad's always been in chemical engineering and manufacturing and stuff so I've always been fascinated by how things work and engines and bits like that but it's always been more of a hobby. (FE College. BTEC Engineering.)

Strong and weak ties between BTEC courses and HE or professional fields

The BTEC programmes can be depicted in terms of '*strong*' to '*weak*' ties with both HE degrees and professional fields. Strong ties were seen when BTEC courses linked into specific degree programmes and professional fields. In interviews and focus groups, BTEC and Level 4 students presented a range of arguments about their reasons for choosing their current courses and their intentions in making those degree choices.

Students spoke of choices being centred on and informed by a pathway into a specific vocational area or profession i.e. in a 'strong tie'. Students recognised their current course gave them opportunities to develop appropriate knowledge and relevant skills to enter the relevant professional area or community of practice. BTEC Art and Design students, for example, clearly focused on progressing to a full university degree in Art and Design, albeit via a foundation degree while the students further developed their portfolio in more specialised and focused ways with a clear and closed trajectory towards specific careers.

One BTEC Art and Design student declared an appreciation of the specialist focus on the course which enabled him to focus his learning for the equivalent of 3 A Levels in Art, whereas taking an Art A level would have required him also to undertake other A Levels not in Art. The Art and Design students were conscious that development of their expertise and knowledge in Art was more important to them than a broad-based development in their academic achievements.

BTEC Engineering students were part-time students, working as apprentices and integrated within the professional context, following trajectories to full legitimation in the professional community (Wenger, 1998). By combining BTEC with apprenticeship they were following a highly focused, staged and incremental approach to development of their professional knowledge with eventual progression to a foundation degree before undertaking a full degree (if company sponsorship continued). Watson et al (2009) comment on how vocational degree programmes provide opportunities for participants to gather different forms of relevant 'capital', which are likely to be influential in ongoing success within the professional field:

In engineering, the only real way up is engineering manager and then beyond that you've got your engineering directors but it's engineering. They do their graduate scheme, which I thought if I done my degree, I can do the company graduate scheme and then that fast tracks you to a director. (FE College. BTEC Engineering.)

Yeah but I guess because our primary business isn't engineering, it's sort of we fix it and keep it running and put new lines in and stuff like that where there's a lot more of the manufacturing and sort of production side. To some degree you can sort of move between 'cause I know some manufacturing managers have gone into engineering and engineering into sort of team managers so I suppose there is a bit of leeway that way but I'd say if you stayed in engineering or stayed in production there'd be a lot more production opportunities than there would be in engineering. (FE College. BTEC Engineering.)

One engineering student contemplated how the BTEC and HE study might continue to be integrated but this was dependent on cost effectiveness of this for the company:

'Cause my company has always had apprentices and they've always done pretty well and everybody's been like 'Oh we're great, we're getting the new people, and they sort of tend to keep them and sort of like second them up or move them about or whatever and then the last few they saw really struggled through their apprenticeship so they thought 'Hang on, what's changed?' and they sort of looked at all the new ways apprenticeships are coming and that's why I'm the first apprentice in my company to get anything higher than Level 3 because they thought 'Maybe we need to train our apprentices to a higher standard - we'll give them a bit more time in their apprenticeship'.

They've now got a training matrix at work where we log our work we've done ... electrical skills, mechanical skills and to be able to work ourselves up the pay grades as well, we need to complete that as well as doing our college course so that's something they've sort of implemented to make sure the work stays the same ...

...and they were going to put us on the Level 4 Certificate of Higher Education. They were until I sort of questioned - you know we've got an extra one and a half years where we're not doing anything, could we utilise that for a foundation degree? So then me and the other apprentice in my year, we sort of got together, gathered up all our information and had a meeting with our chief engineer, our site training manager, each of the department engineering managers...so we all had a sit-down together, decided you know, is it worth doing any extra higher education, what would we get from it, what would you get from it, would this maybe help you progress around in the company and then they sort of redone all their apprenticeship scheme and if we do well on our higher education, they're then looking at sort of continuing that throughout...

and something that my mentor brought up was, you do another project in your last year and because the company is always quite tight on budgets 'cause of the way like food manufacturing companies work, a lot of the costs have been driven down by the supermarkets and stuff like that so money is quite tight so they were sort of like - is there any sort of cost benefits we could get from this course? 'Cause it's like fifteen grand per apprentice or whatever and my mentor said you could do like a cost saving project so you could make it as part of your course 'cause you've got to do presentations and stuff - do that about cost saving and then the part you do at work would then save the company the money, sort of theoretically, that they've paid for it.

So I suppose that's sort of quite a good challenge and then that sort of instils in you the skills 'cause not only do we fix things but we try and like optimise it as well - sort of improve it and obviously want more efficient running quicker and more cost effective so they've sort of all re-done all our apprenticeship scheme and I'm sort of the guinea pig, I guess. Yeah if I do well hopefully all our other apprentices that we take should be getting their foundation degrees as well. (FE College. BTEC Engineering.)

The engineering students could also see constructive alignment between their work and BTEC study:

There's a lot of support and [it's] quite structured as well. I think that also helps with sort of - my mentor, he's very good - when I was doing something at college, say on the Level 2 when I was doing motor testing or here with my project he'd always go - 'How can we make this the best?...Can I put you on jobs at work that would link to your course as well? So I'd come in - I'd go - I'm doing some panel-wiring at college, can I do some here and he'll get some parts and show me how to wire things up and draw circuits, for example or we'd sit down in my manager's office and just draw some circuits of sight seals or something just to sort of like add to the college bit as well so I think, yeah, the company's apprenticeship scheme has always been good. (FE College. BTEC Engineering.)

By contrast, 'weak' ties were suggested when BTEC courses engaged students in a broad multi-disciplinary curriculum and offered them options in their choice of succeeding degree. Students spoke of being able to engage with broad debates and acquire cross-disciplinary knowledge on the BTEC course. The BTEC Forensic Science, for example, brought together the disciplines of, inter alia, of sociology, psychology and the law:

...there's more variety. There's like criminology, psychology, all the sciences and it's more a sort of wider range of learning. I've learned so much more than I would have done just doing the sciences... (6th Form College. BTEC Forensic Science.)

Well for forensic science, yeah, there's quite a lot 'cause you can go into radiology, you could work in a hospital if you wanted or a morgue if you wanted to, become an actual forensic investigator, teacher, policeman. Some have gone to be a midwife who took this course. Someone else went on to be an estate agent. (6th Form College. BTEC Forensic Science.)

The BTEC Health and Child Care also encompassed theoretical perspectives from sociology, education and the law. Students following these BTEC courses were aware of a 'space of possibilities' opened up to them from these courses. Students spoke of going on to a diverse range of degree programmes and careers, such as into nursing from the BTEC Health Care, or onto a degree in psychology from the BTEC Forensic Science.

Weak ties are not used to signal negativity, but open opportunities, as one BTEC Health and Social Care student recognised:

We'd had done a whole unit on safeguarding children, adults, the legislation, we done equality, diversity of rights - literally done all areas and that can go to any career. You're always going to need to know about things - I mean obviously safeguarding and things are more towards Health and Social Care but you know things like confidentiality and things like that, they are things you would need to know, like if you worked in a bank you would need to know about data protection, you know, so it does go into other things as well. (FE College. BTEC Health and Social Care.)

Now I feel so open and I don't know I just think the course has made us grow up so much, hasn't it?

Because you get to learn about people that are so different to you and accepting that - things like that. (FE College. BTEC Health and Social Care.)

The BTEC interviews have further emphasised the significance for these students of having a professional career plan. Several students had chosen their BTEC course and were consciously choosing their ongoing degree paths with clear links to careers and professional contexts such as from BTEC Healthcare into social work, into nursing, into paramedic practice, and also BTEC Art and Design into a fine art degree. Though getting the precise and optimal plan in place was sometimes difficult with funded HE places, such as on nursing and midwifery degrees. One student had secured a place to do nursing but was really hoping to get on a midwifery degree:

I am a little bit more anxious if I do the nursing because I want to be a midwife so I'm a little bit worried that that isn't going to be 100% for me 'cause as much as they're similar they're also very different but I'm doing a placement next week at the [hospital] on a ward so that will be my first chance - 'cause I went on the maternity ward and was like I really want [HEI] to ring me 'cause I'm obviously on the reserve list there and then I'm going to do this and see if I think actually I could do this but obviously I've got nothing to lose really because [HEI] doesn't start until February and [a different HEI] in September - I think I'll be fine but yeah when I come out obviously I want to be a nurse or a midwife. I want to be a senior one day but we'll see. (FE College. BTEC Health and Social Care.)

Many of the BTEC courses were designed to bring together a range of disciplinary fields. This included BTEC Music Technology, BTEC Information Technology, BTEC Business, BTEC Child Care, BTEC Health and Social Care and BTEC Forensic Science. The forensic science BTEC course, for example, included students engaging with ideas and perspectives from legal as well as scientific bodies of knowledge. Students said they valued the broad and multidisciplinary base and felt this enabled them to go on from the BTEC course, to a wide range of degree programmes in which to continue their studies, as well as linking to cognate career-related opportunities:

Obviously I wanted to be a child nurse so I knew that Health and Social Care was the right course to become a child nurse (FE College. BTEC Health and Social Care.)

Students on BTEC Forensic Science courses felt the course curriculum offered a broad base and multidisciplinary base from which they would be able to progress to a range of different options for their university degree. The value of the course in keeping choices open to them in what they might study at university was regarded as positive.

Level 4 students studying child nursing and midwifery, at the HEI, felt that, having undertaken a BTEC (or indeed an Access to HE) course, had provided them with a valuable broad knowledge base across relevant subject areas before focusing in on their specialist area in their degree programme. This was also expressed as leading to an easing of pressure on them in now focusing on the degree, within a particular specialism such as child nursing.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted points and issues affecting the transition of students from BTEC courses at FE and 6th form colleges into HE. The colleges contributing to this study are located in an economically disadvantaged area with low progression rates to HE and students contributing to this study were almost all first generation HE entrants. Identifying strategies to support these students in their transition to HE and to ensure they are well prepared and making progress, is vital to ensure these students have a positive and successful experience of HE. These strategies should also help to prevent attrition from HE courses.

- A clear finding from the study is that the institutional habitus of the 6th form college supports students' learner identities and the development of their identities as potential HE students. The students have access to a wide range of trusted sources of information about HE at the 6th form college which encourage and support progression. BTEC courses themselves were also found to support progression. These courses support the development of successful learner identities among students who have frequently had negative experiences and have been relatively unsuccessful in academic subjects at school.
- The progressive models of learning and teaching described in students' accounts indicate BTEC courses can be supportive of the students' development of independent learning strategies. Students on these courses demonstrated a clear understanding that these strategies would be needed in HE.
- The assignment briefs used on BTEC courses which direct students in precisely what to do and where to find information, are indicative of a highly directed pedagogical approach, providing close guidance to learners while they develop confidence in the early stages of BTEC courses. As an enduring approach used throughout the BTEC course, this needs to be problematised, for its potential to lead students into persisting patterns of uncritically reproducing directly supplied information from standard texts, and that might well transfer across into the first year of HE study (Cook and Leckey, 1999.)
- BTEC courses provide a route into HE for those with strong allegiances to particular careers and areas of work. This was highlighted by students studying health and social care, forensic science and engineering. Work placements on BTEC courses were highlighted as valuable opportunities to find out about careers and to support progression; this was raised particularly by students on healthcare courses at the FE college.
- While supporting vocationally orientated students, BTEC courses are also seen by some students to provide a breadth of study and new learning opportunities that support them in progressing into a diversity of subject areas.
- Students' accounts were predominantly positive about BTEC courses, however, the study has highlighted that for some students progressing to some HE courses there may be gaps in their knowledge placing them at a disadvantage to students entering via traditional A level routes.
- Strategies to support transition might include identifying particular learning and teaching approaches to enable students to engage in a progressive and coordinated approach to independence commencing at pre-entry and followed through in aligned HE activities, ie to move through dependency-deconstruction to independence (Keane, 2011).
- There was concern amongst students about their lack of experience of exams, especially amongst those opting for more traditional HE courses rather than vocational routes.
- Students' accounts illustrated a worrying lack of knowledge and understanding amongst 16 year olds of the viability of different routes into HE. The denigration of

BTEC courses and the FE college, notably by A Level students, generally highlight a serious issue relating to CEIAG in schools and leads us to problematise whether students are effectively prepared to make informed decisions about institutions and courses.

- Familial habitus as well as trajectories and expectations of peer groups suggest that students' identities as HE learners may be relatively fragile. Financial concerns and demands made on some students' time by undertaking part-time employment contributed to this sense of fragility.

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