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Enhancing transition into HE for diverse, non-traditional students: Steps toward connected pedagogical partnerships

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Abstract

This paper reports from the *Enhancing BTEC students' transition into HE* project, which was designed to identify and support effective pedagogical partnerships between academic tutors in both post-16 and Higher Education (HE) institutions. The aim of the project was to more effectively promote and facilitate successful progression to HE amongst students from diverse and non-traditional backgrounds, particularly students from low participation neighbourhoods who have undertaken vocational qualifications, such as BTEC (Business and Technology Education Council) awards in order to progress to HE. The project findings have led to a set of recommendations for building effective collaborative pedagogical partnerships across the post-16 and HE sectors.

1 Introduction

Recent research (Kelly 2017) attributes the increase in Higher Education (HE) participation amongst students from low participation neighbourhoods almost entirely to students accessing vocational qualifications such as BTEC (Business and Technology Education Council) qualifications in the UK. We conducted earlier work (eg Gartland & Smith, 2018) in relation to transition into HE and found that pedagogies and practices on BTEC courses can effectively support young people who have not previously considered going to university in developing relevant social and cultural capital and promoting future “possible selves” (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Rossiter, 2009; Ibarra, 2007) as HE students. However, we found that the support available to young people was not consistent across post-16 providers (Gartland & Smith, 2018). Our study highlighted the importance of scrutinising practices within institutions and the opportunities institutions have to help young people in developing relevant cultural and social capital while supporting them in “*the development of positive learner identities and well-articulated possible selves as HE students*” (Gartland & Smith, 2018: 647). For institutions to effectively support young people in effectively navigating progression across sectors, as Hodgson and Spours (2014) identify, there is an urgent need to “*rebuild collaboration between all 14-19 providers, employers and HE*” (Hodgson & Spours, 2014: 480).

Students progressing from vocational pathways has been a significant contributor to the expansion of HE in the UK, and in other countries. However, among students from vocational pathways, significantly higher attrition rates in HE have been found compared to students progressing from more traditional academic routes. Our previous work in this area suggested that the pedagogies and practices used on vocational courses can effectively support young people in developing relevant social and cultural capital and promoting the development of well-articulated possible selves as HE students (Gartland and Smith, 2018). We also particularly highlighted the importance of connected practices for tutors and institutions, both *within and across* post-16 and HE institutions, to further facilitate young people in this process of effective transition into higher education.

2 Project outline

The *Enhancing BTEC students' transition* project was therefore designed to identify and support effective pedagogical partnerships between academic tutors in both post-16 and Higher Education (HE) institutions. The project sought to more effectively promote and facilitate successful progression to HE amongst students from diverse and non-traditional backgrounds. The project was funded by NEACO (Network of East Anglia Collaborative Outreach), which is a regional part of a national initiative, NCOP (National Collaborative Outreach Programme) for outreach work across the UK.

The project commenced with a series of workshops organised to bring together BTEC tutors from post-16 institutions, with tutors working in HE institutions. The workshops were used to discuss tutors' current approaches to enabling students' transition into HE and any challenges they were facing in this regard. Discussions were shaped by an earlier UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) funded project (Gartland & Smith, 2015) on support for BTEC students in their transition into HE, and also drew upon a conceptual understanding of transition informed by the "possible selves" literature (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Rossiter, 2009; Ibarra, 2007; Gartland & Smith, 2018). Gale and Parker's reconceptualisation of "*transition as 'becoming'*" (Gale & Parker, 2012: 734) was also influential in our shaping of the discussions. Transition as becoming infers that fluidity and flexibility are needed in recognising both the realities of, and diversity among, students' lives.

French, Kempson & Kendall, 2015) had also developed a Graduate Transitions Framework tool to support the planning, design and management of "*transitions policy and practice*" and to enable development work at institutional, group or individual tutor levels. The tool enables teachers to engage reflectively with their personal positioning in relation to students' experiences of transition and to appreciate the complex relationship between their own meaning-making about FE and HE, within institutional framing of students' transition experiences.

Overall, the workshops highlighted many shared approaches and areas of congruence across educational sectors. Many practices were discussed that effectively provide aligned opportunities for students to develop identities as potential and successful HE students, and that encourage and support successful progression and enable effective transition into HE. There is also potential to further share and develop explicit and aligned approaches to support students in this process of transition.

Key differences were noted that could pose challenges for students moving between sectors. Pedagogical, epistemological and sociological challenges for students progressing to HE have been widely discussed (Hockings *et al*, 2007; 2010; Gale and Parker, 2014). One apparent issue is that students are sometimes moving from BTEC student groups of twenty, where they have close relationships with tutors and peers, to large lecture groups and cohorts of over a hundred students. A related issue is that students from BTEC courses may commence HE with different prior knowledge to students from more traditional academic routes, such as UK "A levels". It is a challenge for university institutions and tutors to effectively engage with students' prior knowledge and experiences, and not leave students feeling excluded or marginalised, or "othered" by virtue of a perceived deficit model of prior knowledge and experience. Additionally, the course content offered on vocational BTEC courses can be quite prescribed. BTEC students may not feel well-prepared in their knowledge or be given prior opportunities to learn to navigate the freedom associated with independent learning that will be expected of them in HE.

Working collaboratively across sectors to more effectively support students in both progressing into and succeeding in HE was seen as a valuable approach by all staff attending the workshops. These members of staff had volunteered to attend, and were clearly committed and motivated to best support their students and to understand challenges in transition. All

tutors attending said that they would like to collaborate further on supporting effective transition.

The areas of focus identified for future collaborations included observing teaching across contexts; bringing students to HE seminars and workshops; further discussion of curricula alignment and cross-sector pedagogical approaches; identifying ways to develop students' research skills and critical thinking; discussing personal tutoring; and discussing pluralistic approaches to promote positive students' identities and aspirations.

The workshops were followed by interviews with tutors who attended the phase one workshops and/or tutors in relevant disciplines who have engaged in relevant outreach activities supporting progression and transition to Higher Education. The project researchers gathered data using semi-structured interviews on tutors' personal perceptions and experiences around supporting and enabling BTEC students' transition into HE. We were interested in both tutors' attitudes and approaches to transition, in order to help improve practice across both post-16 and HE sectors. We also wanted to know whether working collaborations between teaching staff in these different sectors have been established, and whether they have or might contribute towards effective, coordinated approaches to students' progression and transition.

3 Overall project findings

The project has contributed to understanding and awareness among teachers and lecturers (i.e. tutors working in post-16 and in HE) of their pedagogic practices when working with students from non-traditional backgrounds. It has fostered the development of pedagogic partnerships across educational institutions, ie post-16 institutions (offering BTEC and BTEC and A level courses) and HE providers. There is potential to contribute towards policy developments and national initiatives linked to collaboration in, and enhancements to understanding around, outreach provision, and to counteract notions of "*transitional friction*", a conceptual term recently suggested by Katartzis and Hayward (2019) to capture the ongoing tensions and difficulties that students with vocational education and training qualifications encounter in the HE field. Transitional friction helps to make active sense of the multi-layered struggles, conflicts and tensions integral to the process of transitioning.

Tutors' accounts indicated both "pedagogic" and "epistemic" frictions for vocational students during transition to HE. Pedagogical frictions encompass the modes or practices of teaching and learning, but also the assessment procedures and curricular framing, structure and content of courses. Pedagogical frictions can be encountered in the ethos or institutional habitus of HE, as well as in the extent or otherwise of learner support offered, through to the practices in place to afford development of learners' self-regulation and independence. Epistemic frictions included the extent to which the curricula and knowledge bases of post-16 and HE courses are differentially structured between academic and vocational pathways. Epistemic frictions may need to be traversed in students moving into the knowledge communities of specific subjects.

We also bring to the fore the social/sociological perspectives that intersect with both epistemic and pedagogic sources of transitional friction. Students from different backgrounds conceptualise themselves as HE students in varied ways, and their perceptions of possible selves are shaped not least by family history and prevailing structural or environmental constraints. Students' preparedness and the compatibility of choices in progression, alongside expectations and developing identities, are critical aspects to consider in holistic and interconnecting, rather than atomistic, ways. Figure 1 (adapted from Katarzi and Hayward, 2019) is used to present a schematic of transitional frictions drawn from our findings in the project.

Transitional Alignments or Sources of Friction?

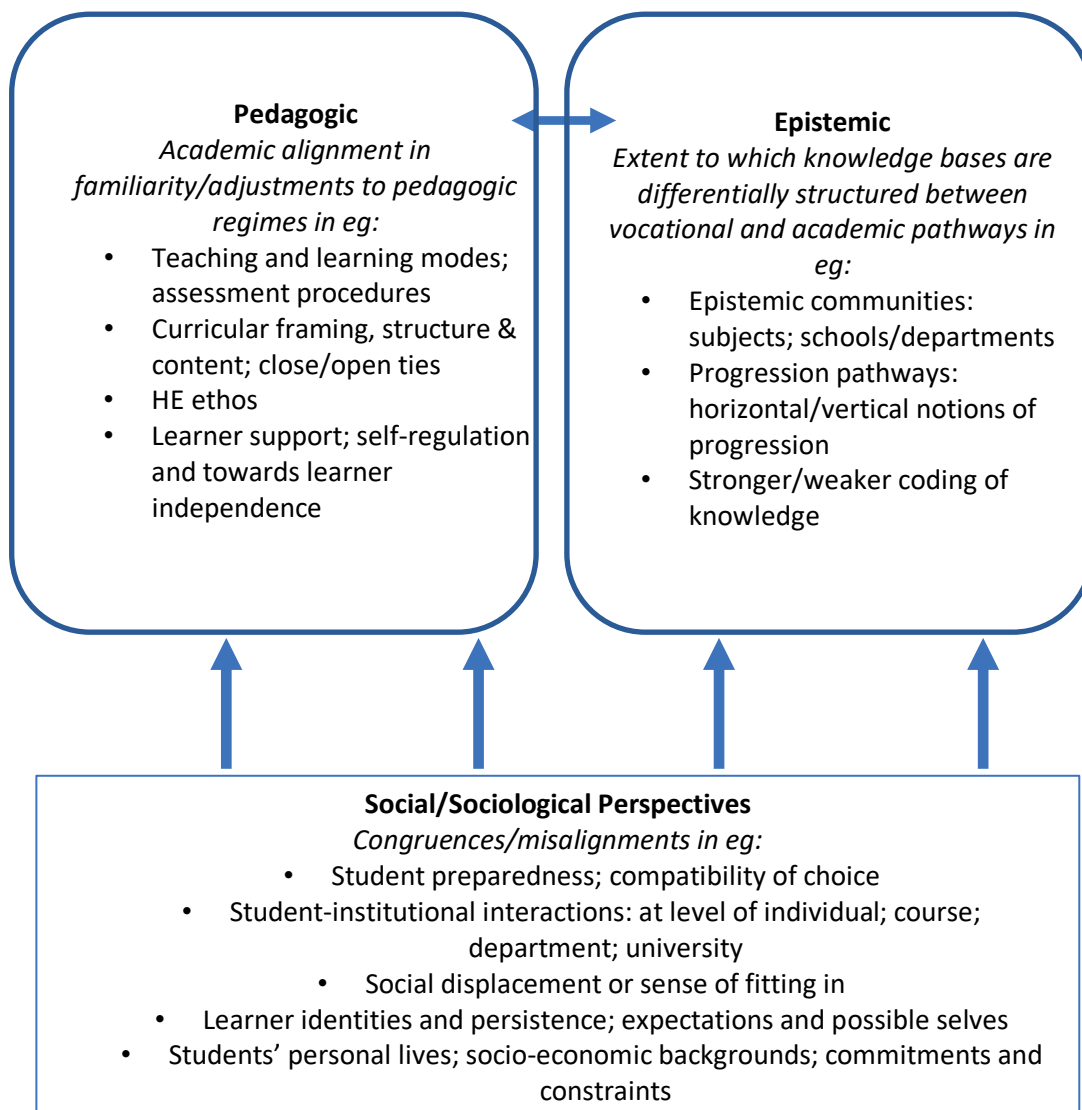


Figure 1: A schematic of transitional friction or alignment

4\ Recommendations and conclusion

The project's recommendations are outlined here to provide starting points for dialogue among post-16 and HE tutors who are interested in promoting effective student transition into HE, particularly for students with vocational qualifications.

1. There is a need for and value in building pedagogic partnerships between tutors located in the post-16 and HE sectors as a manageable and sustained effort to effect change in relevant actions.
2. Strategic, senior institutional commitment and resourcing is needed to underpin and enable the development of such partnerships.
3. The valued role of tutors, as well as peers, ambassadors and ex-students as role models, needs to be emphasised in effecting positive student expectations and in promoting successful progression.

4. In cross-sector collaborative activities, attention needs to be paid to addressing any knowledge gaps or any academic skills development needed in readiness for HE.
5. Opportunities for post-16 students to experience authentic HE pedagogic practices in advance of HE entry should be promoted and enabled.
6. HE outreach activity with schools and colleges (as pre-HE institutions) should focus on longer term subject specific and pedagogic focused engagements with groups of students, via shorter-term recruitment-driven events.
7. Better understanding and knowledge of students' backgrounds, their experiences and the diversity in progression pathways is needed (especially by tutors) within the HE context.
8. HE tutors are encouraged to scrutinise the looseness or otherwise in the framing and structure of curricula designs, to better accommodate students' identification of development and sense of becoming in the academic discipline and/or future professional contexts.

Our study revealed multiple benefits from cross-sector collaborations between tutors that could mutually benefit post-16 and HE institutions and tutors, as well as students. This includes generally supporting progression, but also helping students progress to appropriate HE courses. The alignment in practices afforded by close collaboration offers potential to improve retention on HE courses; to improve student engagement; to motivate and support higher levels of student attainment within growing, non-traditional post-16 and HE student populations; and, potentially, to impact on employability.

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