

Supporting transition to HE: stratifications and strategies in the post 16 sector (0258)

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Introduction

The FE and 6th form sectors serve high proportions of young people in disadvantaged areas (Smith, Joslin and Jameson, 2015), yet there is little comparative research exploring how experiences of different pedagogies and institutions, prior to entering university, impact on students' progression to and engagement with HE. In a fragmented and marketised UK post-16 education system, it is compelling to explore how the different types of institutions attended by lower middle, working class and poorer students affect trajectories and successes within HE. An understanding is needed of the 'heterogeneity' of students attending these institutions, and the 'diversity of learner identities' (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010: 120).

It is widely acknowledged WP students are not a homogeneous group (Burke, 2012; Stuart, 2012). Butcher *et al* (2012) suggest a conception of WP students as an undifferentiated group risks non-differentiated responses by HE tutors. We need to consider participants in more nuanced ways, noting in particular the institutional effects of pre-university education on young people's orientations to and perceptions of HE.

Methodology

The study, from which this paper is drawn, sought to explore young people's experiences of BTEC courses, their experiences of support and guidance, leading to transition into HE. The 6th form and FE colleges were geographically located in an area of low HE participation and in the poorest fifth of areas nationally (Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2010). We conducted 12 paired interviews with level 3 learners during their final term on BTEC courses, to openly explore learners' experiences.

We drew on constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) in analysis of interview data, systematically identifying categories of description. These categories were related to wider literature, particularly to the concept of 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 2003). Habitus is understood as 'a complex interplay between past and present' and as being 'permeable and responsive to what is going on' (Reay *et al*, 2009: 1104). 'Institutional habitus' (Reay, David and Ball, 2005; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009 and 2010) and 'possible selves' (Stevenson and Clegg, 2011) have been conceptually pertinent in exploring the influence of different institutions on students' developing HE identities.

Differently positioned colleges in the post 16 sector

6th form and FE college students experienced a range of support and advice in progressing towards HE but there were clear differences between the two institutional types. The institutional habitus of 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.

A natural progression from the 6th form college to HE was apparent. This included students who had not considered progressing to HE previously, with a new positioning of them as HE learners. Half of the students interviewed at the 6th form college (n=12) had not intended to progress to HE at the start of their BTEC course. Their accounts indicated being at the college instigated decisions to progress. The 6th form college focus on HE progression meant students had access to multiple sources of hot, cold and warm information (Gartland, 2014; Reay *et al*, 2005; Slack *et al*, 2012) so tended to be better informed, better prepared and more confident about progression. This institutional habitus supported the formation of well-developed possible selves as successful HE students (Stevenson and Clegg, 2011), motivating aspirations to progress to HE courses.

By comparison, the FE college catered for more vocational students, on a range of different trajectories, including directly into work and apprenticeships. The FE college was seen by learners interviewed as a 'denigrated space' (Hodgson and Spours, 2014), catering for less academic young people. It was evident the FE 'institutional habitus' did not support highly developed 'possible selves' in the same way as the 6th form college. The same levels of support were not available. Students' accounts also revealed BTEC courses at the FE college were derided on social media by local A level students, even referring to young people at the college as 'b-tards'.

Despite negative perceptions of vocational routes, BTEC students at both institutions reiterated how much they valued these qualifications, especially students who had not achieved well at school. For those interested in particular vocational areas, BTECs provided an important route into HE and for some, a route reigniting their enthusiasm for learning. The practical focus of BTEC courses, linked to real world applications of knowledge, with opportunities to work with peers sharing cognate interests were all positively discussed, as was the focus on coursework over exams. Students repeatedly described growing confidence in their subject knowledge in relation to HE courses. Confidence was reinforced through attendance at interviews, open events and taster sessions, with some feeling more knowledgeable and better prepared than peers on A level routes.

Students' experiences in moving from school to college-based learning environments were widely seen as supporting progression. However, though students at both institutions talked positively about HE, this seemed a relatively fragile orientation and a number of factors could undermine success in the HE sector. Tension was expressed between familial habitus and emerging identities as HE students. Family and peer groups offered highly developed alternative possible selves, at times at odds with students' developing HE identities. Heavy work schedules in paid

employment also posed potential threats to students' ability to engage fully with HE courses (Reay et al, 2010).

Conclusion

Our findings indicate the 'institutional habitus' of 16-19 sector institutions affects the development of young people's 'possible selves' as HE students. This study suggests the 'parameters of possibilities' (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010) for young people are shaped by the institutional habitus of post 16 providers.

Whitty *et al* (2015) observe changes in government funding have promulgated moves away from generic widening participation strategies to a focus on targeting the most able 'poor' students. This has led to neglect of some schools and colleges. Ball (2010) describes how current marketised systems leads to 'local economies of student worth' (163) with students valued differently, based on their academic performance. Hodgson and Spours (2014) identify practical measures to ensure 'middle attainers', such as the students who contributed to this study, are all equally served in the education system.

There are implications for practices in HE institutions. HEIs have vital roles in working collaboratively with 14-19 providers, supporting the provision of 'impartial CEIAG, progression skills and routes' (Hodgson and Spours, 2014).

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