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Title: Supporting progression to HE: the role of colleges and vocational courses

Abstract

Vocational courses in England support the progression to Higher Education (HE) of large numbers of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, yet there is little research exploring the college experiences of these young people prior to entering university. This paper considers the experiences of young people on Level 3 Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) vocational courses in their progression to Higher Education (HE) from differently positioned post-16 colleges in England.

A qualitative study was undertaken into the experiences of students on BTEC courses in four subject clusters (science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM), arts and humanities, social sciences and health) at both a Further Education College and a Sixth Form College in an area of multiple deprivation and low HE participation. Young people's experiences of BTEC courses and the pastoral support and guidance they receive are explored through the conceptual lens of 'possible selves' and using Bourdieu's ideas of capital, habitus and field.

Pedagogies and practices on BTEC courses are found to support the development of relevant social and cultural capital and help young people formulate well-articulated 'possible selves' as university students, even amongst students who previously had not considered university as an option. The findings illustrate how differently positioned colleges support students' progression and identify challenges presented by an increasingly stratified and marketised system.

The study highlights the transformative potential of BTEC courses and their role in supporting progression to HE amongst young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The current emphasis on standardisation and rigour as mechanisms to better equip students for HE neglects the unique contribution BTEC pedagogies and practices make to encouraging HE participation. A Bourdieusian and 'possible selves' theoretical framework has provided new insights into these valuable learning processes.

Introduction

Socio-economic status and social class have been identified in the UK and other countries as impacting on Higher Education (HE) access, integration, retention and success (Reay *et al*, 2010; Gale and Parker, 2015; Thomas and Quinn, 2007). In the UK, vocational Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) level 3 qualifications (including combined BTEC and A levels) supported the progression of 26% of students to HE in 2016 (Gicheva and Petrie, 2017). Most BTEC courses are categorised as Applied General Qualifications, described by the Department of Education as 'for post-16 students wanting to continue their education through applied learning' (Kelly, 2017: 5). BTEC qualifications have particularly supported the progression of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Smith, Joslin and Jameson, 2015; Shields and Masardo, 2015; Kelly, 2017; Gicheva and Petrie, 2017). Kelly (2017) suggests that 'nearly all increases in students from lower participation neighbourhoods since 2008 can be accounted for by the increase in number holding BTECs' (2017: 13).

Concerns have been raised about the performance of BTEC students on degree programmes compared to their A level counterparts. A gap in the achievement of BTEC students on degree courses has been identified, with fewer BTEC students achieving first and upper second class

degrees. This exists even when demographics and entry tariff are accounted for (Shields and Masardo, 2015). There is a gap in completion rates: of students entering university in 2014/15 12% entering with BTEC qualifications dropped out, compared to 6.2% of all students. Kelly (2017) also points to a gap in completion rates linked to the type of institution, with the highest completion rates (72.4%) at new universities and the lowest rates (58.5%) at Russell Group institutions. Such issues have led to criticisms of BTEC courses as a route to HE and reactively, calls by the Chief Executive of UCAS to identify 'ways to increase participation in A levels' (Kelly, 2017: 21). However, further research into the impact of other factors known to affect students' success in HE, particularly in terms of students' socio-economic backgrounds, is needed for comparisons between A levels and BTECs to be more meaningful (Gicheva and Petrie, 2018). The UK government has responded to concerns by instigating a number of changes aimed to increase the academic rigour of BTEC qualifications, including the introduction of pass or fail exams. Kelly (2017) questions the benefits of this academisation and categorisation of BTECs as explicitly academic routes, problematising this move away from their original role as qualifications facilitating progression to the workplace as well as HE.

Significant changes are underway in the English post 16 sector. Current government policy is focused on the marketization of education and providing increased choice. Under the Coalition and Conservative administrations (2010-16), there have been significant shifts in post 16 provision. Academisation and the increased numbers of school sixth forms have heightened competition for appropriately qualified young people. As Ball (2010) points out, there are 'economies of student worth' (2010: 163) in this system, and those with fewer academic qualifications, predominantly from poorer backgrounds, have less value than higher performing peers. Within this stratified system, the college sector is increasingly positioned as the location for lower achieving, generally poorer, working class students, destined for vocational rather than academic routes. However, over recent years this sector has provided a high number of non-traditional students with a route into HE. Between 2008 and 2012 a total of 795,470 students progressed to university from Further Education (FE) and Sixth Form Colleges. Vocational courses played a significant role in supporting this: between 2011-2012 41% of these students progressed via BTEC courses (Smith, Joslin and Jameson, 2015). While the achievement gap between BTEC and A level students remains a concern, it is important to acknowledge success rates amongst BTEC students at degree level are still significant (Smith and Jamieson, 2015; Kelly, 2017; Gicheva and Petrie, 2018).

Given the shifting landscape of these qualifications and their providers, it is vital to understand the success of BTECs in supporting progression to HE amongst students from lower socio-economic groups, and to explore how courses and institutions contribute to young people's progression and self-identification as university students. This paper focuses on the experiences of BTEC students located in FE and Sixth Form colleges in a low participation neighbourhood and economically deprived area in England. This has relevance for policy and practice in post 16 education and universities where students from lower socio-economic groups and BTEC courses are often problematised.

Past, present and future: the relevance of Bourdieu and Possible Selves

Bourdiesian educational research has highlighted the ways educational institutions perpetuate existing social hierarchies (Duckworth, 2013; Reay et al, 2005; 2010). Sixth Form and FE colleges are

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3 both located within the field of post-16 education but they are positioned differently, preparing
4 students in different ways to encounter the field of HE. Reay *et al* (2005) identify an institutional
5 effect or 'institutional habitus ... educational status, organisational practices and expressive order' of
6 post-16 institutions in influencing developing HE identities amongst young people (Reay *et al*,
7 2005:39). This expressive order includes 'expectations, conduct, character and manners', particularly
8 important are seen to be students' 'attitudes towards learning and their degree of confidence and
9 entitlement in relation to academic knowledge' (Reay *et al*, 2010: 109). Once in HE, Reay *et al*
10 (2010) contend the type of university working class students attend influences both 'how they see
11 themselves' and how 'they are seen by others in terms of both their learner and class identities' and
12 suggest this is important in how young people's learner identities 'evolve and develop' (Reay *et al*,
13 2010:111). The collective habitus of staff and the history and reputation of institutions contributes
14 to the cultural capital young people generate during their time at colleges and universities, and this
15 interacts with and informs their individual habitus. Following Reay *et al*, habitus is understood here
16 as 'a complex interplay between past and present' and as being 'permeable and responsive to what
17 is going on' (2009: 1104).

21
22 In response to ongoing concern about equality in progression into STEM subjects and careers, Archer
23 *et al* (2015) have extended Bourdieusian concepts of capital to include science capital. Their
24 research identifies how low and high levels of science capital impact on young people's subject
25 identities and post-16 plans, highlighting the importance of *science-related*: cultural capital,
26 behaviours and practices and social capital. This Bourdieusian lens critically informs our
27 understanding of how young people's learner and subject identities are shaped by curricular, extra-
28 curricular activity and social interactions.

31 Bourdieu provides useful tools for considering the past and present, and how structural constraints
32 affect young people's future orientations. However, Gale and Parker (2015: 81) point to the
33 limitations of Bourdieusian analysis in conceptualising students' aspirations as 'produced by and
34 reproductive of cultural histories'. They draw on Appadurai (2004) who argues against allowing
35 'pastness to dominate' and instead focuses on theorising aspiration as a future orientated
36 'navigational capacity' (Gale and Parker, 2015). James (2015) notes individuals are 'not the primary
37 unit of analysis for Bourdieu', as they are conceptualised as part of social processes; this means that
38 Bourdieu does not easily provide a 'recipe for action' (James, 2015: 107-108). Ferrare and Apple
39 suggest Bourdieu's emphasis on 'the macro view of cultural fields' has not allowed for more
40 'nuanced understanding of how actors construct, experience and struggle over meanings in local
41 contexts' (Ferrare and Apple, 2016: 45). Understanding wider social processes is vital, but to
42 understand how to better support students' progression to HE and how colleges in the post sixteen
43 field support this, we also need an understanding of the interplay between these social processes
44 and students' motivation and ability to take action.

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49 The 'possible selves' literature from social psychology, whilst acknowledging the centrality of the
50 past and the sociocultural location of individuals and the fluidity of identity, clearly conceptualises
51 young people as agentic (Erikson, 2007; Rossiter, 2009). Young people are seen through the lens of
52 possible selves to be envisioning desired and undesired possible future selves and to be actively
53 creating their own pathways towards their future (Markus and Narius, 1986; Rossiter, 2009; Ibarra,
54 2007; Stevenson and Clegg, 2011). Ibarra (2007), in her exploration of the processes of career

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3 identity transition points to the importance of the elaboration of career possible selves, particularly
4 during the liminal period when people are struggling with competing identities.
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6 Education policy in England presents young people as responsible for navigating their own career
7 trajectory, with failure and success widely attributed to individual talents and failings (Evans, 2007).
8 'Possible selves' provides a useful theoretical lens to explore young people's future orientations and
9 to consider how HE identities are formed. As Oyserman *et al* suggest 'if we wish to improve
10 outcomes for low-income and minority inner city youths, we must help them link wishes,
11 expectations, and concerns for their academic future with concrete strategies to take action'
12 (Oyserman *et al*, 2004: 145). This focus has implications for policy as well as practices within FE and
13 HE institutions.
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16 **Methodology**

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18 A small-scale qualitative study was undertaken as part of an HE transitions project for the Quality
19 Assurance Agency (QAA). The focus was to identify practical strategies to support transition to HE for
20 young people on BTEC courses. The Sixth Form and FE colleges where interviews and focus groups
21 were undertaken, are located in an area of low HE participation and in the poorest fifth of areas
22 nationally (Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2010) indicating students at these colleges are from lower
23 socio-economic groups. Twelve paired interviews were held with students who were planning to
24 progress to HE, during the final term of their BTEC courses. The students were studying on courses in
25 four broad subject clusters (science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM), arts and
26 humanities, social sciences and health). Participants were, with one exception, first in their family to
27 go to university and predominantly white British.
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31 The ambition was to find out about these learners' experiences of their current courses and
32 institutions, their decision making about HE courses and institutions, their feelings about progression
33 to university and their developing identities as HE students. The overarching research question was:
34 what learning attitudes and conceptions of HE study are found among students in FE and 6th form
35 colleges? Interviews were loosely structured and drew on narrative approaches (Hollway and
36 Jefferson, 2013) to encourage participants to identify areas of focus important to them during their
37 discussions of experiences. This article focuses on the accounts of students interviewed who were
38 intending to progress to universities rather than continue into HE in the FE college. The students
39 interviewed had volunteered to participate following a request from their college tutors and it is
40 acknowledged this will inevitably will impact on who was represented and that the voices of
41 students not engaged in learning and who are 'least well-served' (Silva 2001, 98) are unlikely to be
42 represented in this study.
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47 While existing literature was used in the development of interview questions, the approach to data
48 collection and analysis was inductive, drawing on constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014).
49 Data analysis involved systematically identifying categories of description following line by line
50 coding. Categories were subsequently considered in relation to the wider literature. Educational
51 research literature using Bourdieu's concepts of 'habitus', 'field' and 'capital' (Duckworth, 2013;
52 Ferrare and Apple, 2015; Reay *et al* 2005; Crozier and Reay, 2010; Reay, 2015) and the possible
53 selves literature (Markus and Narius, 1986; Ibarra, 2007; Rossiter, 2009; Stevenson and Clegg, 2011)
54 was particularly relevant. Drawing on this conceptual framework, students' accounts of their
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3 courses of study, the practices of their institutions and their developing identities as HE students
4 were considered. These perspectives have enabled an exploration of the extent to which young
5 people feel able to take action, whilst understanding their structural location and how this positions
6 them.
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8 Following Charmaz, the authors 'start with the assumption that social reality is multiple, processual,
9 and constructed' (2014: 13) and acknowledge the importance of their own positioning. Their own
10 experience of learning and teaching in higher education and in the 16-19 sector has inevitably
11 shaped the lens through which data have been considered.
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14 **An institutional effect: differently positioned colleges in the post-16 'field'**

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16 The group of young people interviewed were unanimous in the view that their FE and Sixth Form
17 colleges had supported their progression to university. Students repeatedly commented on how the
18 more 'adult' environment of college helped them prepare for HE:
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20 ... we've got the feeling of being treated as an adult here but it's not quite at university level
21 so it is preparing us a little bit and then we'll get treated completely like an adult and we'll
22 be treated to be independent and it's just a step along the way to helping us. (Sixth Form
23 College. BTEC Forensic Science)
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26 While students at both colleges were positive about their experiences, accounts indicated the two
27 institutions were differently positioned in the 'field' of post-sixteen education. The FE College was
28 viewed by both FE and Sixth Form students as 'being a bit shabby' (FE College. BTEC Health and Social
29 Care), a denigrated space (Hodgson and Spours, 2014). This was largely due to the perception that it
30 caters for the less academic whereas the Sixth Form College caters for the 'smart' students who
31 'want to learn' (Sixth Form College. BTEC Children's Play, Learning and Development). Students at
32 the FE college were acutely aware of the positioning of their college and implications for how they
33 were viewed. They understood this linked to the vocational courses offered at the institution,
34 whereas 'A levels, not diplomas, were the qualifications of choice' (Ibid.: 478). The FE students
35 described derogatory ways in which BTEC students at the FE College were talked about on social
36 media by local A level students:
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40 They do call us Btards.

41 Clare: Who calls you Btards?

42 The A level students.

43 There's a lot on social media.

44 People perceive BTEC students to be so dumb. (FE: BTEC Health and Social Care)
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50 The 'perceived lower status' (Ibid.: 478) of BTEC courses is linked to the fact that BTECs, while
51 recognised by some HEIs and courses, are not universally recognised by universities (Hodgson and
52 Spours, 2014; Shields and Masardo, 2015; Kelly, 2017; Gicheva and Petrie, 2017).
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54 Students' accounts suggest the hierarchical positioning of colleges and their access to these
55 institutions affect their self-perception, learner identity and shape their individual habitus. The
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3 process of applying to and progressing from differently positioned colleges within a stratified system
4 can reinforce and bolster the learner identities of young people, or undermine and even damage
5 them. Two students at the FE college talked emotionally about their rejection from A level courses,
6 due to their GCSE grades, and argued passionately that BTEC and A levels were in fact equivalent. In
7 her exploration of a psychosocial understanding of habitus, Reay (2015) describes that, 'the learning
8 that comes through 'inhabiting pathologised spaces' can lead to a 'predilection for shame, fear,
9 anxiety and even righteous indignation'. She goes on to suggest that these 'affective and
10 psychological transactions become sedimented in certain habitus' (Reay, 2015: 12). Attaining
11 denigrated (BTEC) qualifications within a pathologised learning space is unlikely to support a sense
12 of 'confidence and entitlement' amongst these young people. In contrast, students' attendance at
13 the Sixth Form College where 'smart' students go, is likely to contribute to these young people's
14 'attitudes towards learning and their degree of confidence and entitlement' (Reay *et al*, 2010:109).
15 The positioning of students within the stratified field of post sixteen educational provision is
16 therefore likely to impact on students' identities, regardless of the quality of their learning
17 experiences.
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22 There were differences identified between the practices at the two institutions. The FE college has
23 strong links with local industry and offers vocational work-related courses with only a minority of
24 students progressing to university and level 4 courses. FE students on work-based vocational routes,
25 particularly the engineering students, were often on clear progression routes onto HE courses within
26 the FE college. However, those moving onto courses at universities described receiving little
27 institutional support:
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30 Help with UCAS generally in the college – that was quite bad. I basically did the whole thing
31 by myself. (FE: BTEC Health and Social Care)
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33 In contrast, the Sixth Form College focuses specifically on 16-19 education and supporting
34 progression to HE is a central aim: offering A levels, BTECs as well as mixed A level and BTEC courses.
35 The institution presents HE as an option academically and through the careers information, advice
36 and guidance (CIAG) provided. Half of the students interviewed at the Sixth Form College, all of
37 whom had attained conditional and unconditional HE places, had not intended to go to university at
38 the start of their level 3 courses (six out of a total of twelve students). Their accounts indicated that
39 being at the Sixth Form College had instigated their decision to progress. Typically, one student
40 explained how she hadn't 'even thought about' university but the fact that university is 'talked
41 about' at Sixth Form College and her enjoyment of being at the college had led to her decision to
42 continue studying:
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46 I didn't really want to go ... I hadn't even thought about it – I'll just go to college then any
47 outcome. It's been great here. Like it's talked about – not like a show or anything and it's
48 mentioned and you think oh – then I started looking at universities and open days last year
49 and I was like, oh I like the look of that... (Sixth Form College. BTEC Forensic Science)
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51 While research has highlighted students from lower socio-economic groups (Reay *et al*, 2005),
52 predominantly remain local whilst studying for their degrees, nine out of twelve BTEC students
53 interviewed at the Sixth Form College had applied to universities in different areas of the UK.
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3 These findings indicate that differently positioned institutions within the field of 16-19 education
4 affect students' learner identities and perception of their 'possible selves' as HE students. This
5 'institutional effect' shapes students' habitus and defines their 'parameters of possibilities' (Reay *et*
6 *al*, 2010).
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8 **Possible Selves as University Students: BTEC courses and Institutions**

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10 The assumption in education policy that young people are future orientated, envisioning their future
11 employed selves in their active engagement with post-16 and HE providers (Stevenson and Clegg,
12 2011) is problematic. Young people's aspirations are circumscribed by social conditions and the
13 range and detail of possible selves available to them is constrained by their immediate social world.
14 Markus and Nurius point to how the range of possible selves available to young people 'derives from
15 the categories made salient by the individual's particular sociocultural and historical context ...and by
16 the individual's immediate social experiences' (1986: 954).
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19 For a number of the students contributing to this study, possible selves as university students had
20 not previously been an envisioned future. Contributing to this was student's familial habitus as well
21 as low levels of attainment at GCSE, with schools in the area consistently achieving well below
22 schools nationally. A number of participants had left secondary schooling without the GCSE grades
23 necessary for progression to A level courses, widely seen (Kelly, 2017; Gicheva and Petrie, 2017) as
24 the route to HE. Students' accounts indicated some had left school with 'negative prior experiences'
25 (Duckworth and Smith, 2017) and damaged learner identities. Studying on BTEC courses at the FE
26 and Sixth Form Colleges provided these young people with new and different learning experiences,
27 motivating them to re-engage. BTECs provided some with a second chance and an opportunity to
28 progress to university when they had not previously considered this a possibility. Crucially, the
29 experience of studying on BTEC courses supported the development of new identities as successful
30 learners. Research widely indicates the vital role positive learner identities play in supporting
31 progression to HE (Brooks, 2003; Reay *et al*, 2009, 2010). For some, immersing themselves in
32 positive learning experiences in the present through their BTEC courses, was a vital stage in
33 overcoming negative experiences from school and in being able to subsequently envision their
34 futures (Stevenson and Clegg, 2011).
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40 And the work itself – I just enjoy that. I used to hate education, like literally [at school] it was
41 the white board ... the worst thing... [now] I just really enjoy it. (Sixth Form: BTEC Music
42 Technology)
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44 The experience of being on BTEC courses was transformative for some. Jack described how one
45 teacher from his secondary school who moved to the college, noted this transformation in his
46 attitude to work:
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49 I used to be really lazy but you ask my teachers – when [a teacher who had taught him at
50 secondary school] came here, 'cause he wasn't here when I started ... and him and [Head of
51 Department] was speaking and he said 'oh what's happened to Jack? I used to teach him
52 and he used to be one of the laziest students in the class'. But it's just like so much work
53 you've got to change your attitude towards it. It's good for you – it's not bad for you. (Sixth
54 Form: BTEC IT)
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Ibarra (2007) presents a model for career identity transition where career change involves a change in identity which involves a change in individuals' set of possible selves (Ibarra, 2007; Rossiter, 2009). Ibarra suggests three avenues in the elaboration of new career possible selves: direct action (*activities*), social interaction (*relationships*) and sense making (*events*). For many of the students in this study being an HE student had not been considered prior to starting BTEC courses. Ibarra's model is relevant in understanding these students' transformation. Ibarra's three avenues are used to frame the discussion of the following sections.

Activities – experiential learning on BTEC courses

The practical focus of learning activities undertaken during BTEC courses encourages students to reflect on the practical application of subject knowledge in real world settings. This raises students' awareness of their possible future positioning within these settings. Rossiter (2009) suggests the 'operative dynamic' in this 'is experiential learning...learning about new roles and their potential fit for one's identity by engaging in actions associated with those roles' (64). Experiential learning is based on 'concrete experience, reflective observation of experience, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation' (Colley et al, 2003: 56). Students' accounts of learning experiences on BTEC courses indicated this experiential learning was motivational, providing them with opportunities to understand real world application of knowledge and to find out about associated roles and career possible selves:

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 ... 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. (Sixth Form. BTEC Music Technology)

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. (Sixth Form. BTEC forensic science)

The Health and Social Care students at the FE college talked enthusiastically about placements experienced on their courses which provided opportunities for experiential learning, where they gained a genuine insight into relevant careers: 'placements are so helpful cause ... you see it all'.

These learning activities were supporting the development of embodied cultural capital of particular value within subject areas and occupational fields. One student described her pleasure that during interviews for HE midwifery and nursing courses, she knew the terminology used by lecturers. This linguistic capital provided her with a sense of confidence and even entitlement:

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: BTEC Health and Social Care)

The structure of courses with ongoing assessments rather than exams, also provided the opportunity for students with negative experiences of examined courses, to see themselves as successful

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3 learners. The focus on coursework in BTEC qualifications was seen as encouraging students to work
4 more consistently, whilst end of course exams were viewed as demotivating: 'I would have dropped
5 out, in my opinion, if I'd done GCSEs and A level ...at A level you just have to keep revising until a
6 certain date when you do exams' (6th Form, BTEC Music Technology). As Jack (Sixth Form, BTEC IT)
7 explained about BTEC coursework 'it's just like so much work, you've got to change your attitude
8 towards it'.
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11 Significantly, for students with developing interests in particular vocational areas, the BTECs
12 provided clear, articulated progression routes. As Oyserman *et al* point out, if under-developed,
13 possible selves do not evoke 'behavioural strategies'. Possible selves can 'regulate behavior' if the
14 self-concept contains 'not only goals or desired end states, but also strategies about how to behave
15 in order to reach the desired end state' (2004: 131). For Jack, the structured nature of the IT BTEC
16 course and his success on it, was motivational, supporting the development of his HE identity and his
17 attainment of BTEC qualifications. The possible selves literature indicates the development of new
18 viable and motivational possible selves are facilitated by 'visualizing and practising' (Rossiter, 2009:
19 70) the new self. BTEC courses with their vocational foci and clear pathways to related degree
20 courses and careers appeared to effectively facilitate HE identities and possible career selves
21 amongst students interviewed. Students at both colleges were able to 'reclaim...educational
22 identities' (Duckworth and Smith, 2017) damaged by past school experiences and re-envision
23 themselves as successful learners in both college and university settings
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27 *Relationships – peers, tutors and other sources of information*

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29 The opportunity courses presented to work with others sharing similar interests and enthusiasms
30 were described as part of the appeal of BTEC courses (Gartland and Smith, 2015). Some students
31 worked closely together and even appeared to be developing shared subject and student identities,
32 planning to go to the same university and study on the same course as peers. Two of the students
33 studying Information and Communications Technology (ICT) described intending to progress to the
34 same course and institution. One student even relied on his friend for information; there was a
35 sense of a joint decision-making process:
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39 I found out that two of my best friends are going there and that the area of [place] looks
40 really nice ... He [friend on the same course] went up there and I said take loads of photos
41 for me ... and hopefully I'm going up there next month. (Sixth Form: BTEC ICT)
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43 Brooks (2003) suggests friendship groups are not comfortable places for discussions about HE
44 decision making, as they highlight academic differences between friends applying for different types
45 of HE institutions. By contrast, in some instances in this study the friendship groups of students and
46 wider peer group operated powerfully on students' HE choices. A key reason for this may be that the
47 majority of students were similarly positioned and on a trajectory into the post 92 university sector,
48 the predominant destination for students with BTEC qualifications (Kelly, 2017; Gicheva and Petrie,
49 2018).
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52 According to Rossiter (2009) teachers often support or initiate the development of possible career
53 selves. Students' relationships with their BTEC course tutors were in several instances highly
54 significant in providing vital information about HE; tutors were 'guiding figures' (Ibarra, 2007: 27).
55 Students on BTEC courses spend considerably longer with individual subject tutors than A Level
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3 students. In several subject areas, BTEC courses were found to have facilitated a close relationship
4 with tutors who often seemed instrumental in raising students' levels of awareness of university as
5 an accessible option. Many described their tutors as 'young' and therefore able to talk authentically
6 about their own university experiences; tutors appeared to be 'sounding boards' for these young
7 peoples' 'sense making efforts (Ibarra, 2007: 27). The focus on experiential learning on some BTEC
8 courses may have also contributed to the positioning of tutors as role models (Gartland, 2014,
9 2015).

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12 Students listened to tutors who were clearly trusted 'hot sources' of information about university
13 (Slack *et al*, 2014; Smith 2011); in several instances tutors' accounts of their own experiences had
14 been influential in students' decision to go to university. A few even planned to study at the same
15 institution and on the same course as their BTEC tutor:

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

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26 Students' accounts illustrate BTEC tutors played an important role in supporting, engaging and
27 motivating them. However, different institutional practices were evident. Whilst individual BTEC
28 tutors provided students at the FE college with considerable support, there was a more extensive
29 network of support drawn from a range of sources at the Sixth Form College, providing access to
30 more relevant social capital. This is significant as whilst a close relationship with BTEC tutors can
31 positively support confidence and development and articulation of possible selves, the development
32 of relevant social capital is limited if other social sources of support and information are not
33 available.
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37 During a focus group at the Sixth Form College, teachers observed that when students start at the
38 college they often do not view HE as a possibility and identified it as part of the college's mission to
39 support students in understanding HE is an available option:

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

43
44 Students at the college massively lack confidence [about going to university] and don't think
45 they can go or have been told they can't go and it's part of our job to get them to realise
46 that it is an option. (Sixth Form: Teacher focus group)

47
48 Staff explained how tutorials are held with students where they look at maps and work out the
49 distances and travel options for different HEIs. One member of staff explained this was to encourage
50 students to consider a wider range of universities in different localities. Staff discussed 'dispelling
51 myths' about HE, including challenging perceptions about teaching always comprising of formal
52 lectures. Teachers also described maps displayed in each faculty for BTEC students, illustrating
53 previous students' pathways to university.
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3 The students at the Sixth Form College also had additional tutorials with 'mentors', themselves
4 recent graduates, who were seen by students to provide significant help and support with the UCAS
5 application process:
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7 We have our mentors ... they're quite young ... they've literally just graduated so with UCAS
8 and stuff. They're literally on it. I think she sat there for three hours with me doing my last
9 amendment and my personal statement. (Sixth Form: BTEC Children's Play, Learning and
10 Development)
11

12 UCAS applications and the writing of personal statements were additionally supported by subject
13 teachers, advisors from a local university and student services. Students described feeling well
14 supported with the UCAS application process:
15

16 Everything was done really quickly ... we had just done it and it was done. Yeah it was really
17 quite easy. And help with our personal statements too. Like 'cause we wrote them, then
18 our teachers looked at them and then another member of staff looked at them and then we
19 had people from (a local university) come in to look for what they look for in personal
20 statements. So they were done like perfectly. (Sixth Form: BTEC Applied Science)
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24 The 'people rich' (Gale *et al*, 2010) environment at the Sixth Form College appeared to have helped
25 students access more 'cold' and formal sources of information (Smith, 2011). Two students for
26 example, discussed how the cohort sizes at different universities and numbers attending lectures
27 had influenced their university choice. These closely knit and cohesive networks 'convey a clarity and
28 consistency of identity expectations' (Ibarra, 2007: 14) to young people. The ongoing and varied
29 opportunities to discuss possible HE and career identities with teachers, tutors, mentors and other
30 advisors facilitated a detailed elaboration and articulation of possible selves on specific courses and
31 at particular universities.
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34 *Key events – careers events and visits to universities*

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36 The transition from school to college was clearly a key event, instigating thinking about new possible
37 selves for all students interviewed. A difference between the two institutions was students' access
38 to careers fairs and university visits. These events were arranged and actively encouraged for
39 students at the Sixth Form College, whilst students at the FE College described having to navigate
40 such events independently. Such visits were often viewed by students as key events in their
41 decisions about choice of courses, subjects and institutions.
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44 One student described how a college trip to a careers convention at a local university had enabled
45 him to differentiate between the courses different universities offered. Following this he had
46 attended an open day and experienced a taster session which had confirmed his choice:
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49 I'd never heard of [his chosen university] before at all 'cause I was checking out online about
50 other universities 'cause I really wanted to do music business ... and then I got the option to
51 go to a trip to (local university) and they had a lot of stands for all the universities in England
52 ... and they told me all about it and I absolutely loved the idea of it ... I went a couple of
53 weeks later. I went on an open day and I went all the way down to Brighton and I checked it
54 out and I just loved it as well. It's such a nice place. I checked out the business course so you
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3 have to sit there for like an hour and just have a test of the lesson and I really enjoyed that
4 as well and I really enjoyed the whole area (Sixth Form: BTEC Music Technology)
5

6 Students at the Sixth Form College widely discussed attending careers fairs and a range of other
7 visits to HEIs including summer schools and taster sessions. Some of these activities had provided
8 genuine insights into courses and learning and teaching approaches. Typically, one student's account
9 illustrated how a taster session and talking to student ambassadors had provided information about
10 the demands of lectures and the organisation of the course:
11

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13 The main lecturer of the criminology course ... gave a lecture ... it was very in depth and you
14 would have to be quick with the typing and the writing of it all... but speaking to other
15 students, who ... have either done it or finishing or leaving for other things - In the first year
16 they make you do between four to ten hours of lectures in the week and then you spend
17 probably another thirty doing your own work by yourself. (Sixth Form: BTEC Forensic
18 Science)
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20

21 These experiences played an important part in students' detailed articulation of HE possible selves
22 and this clarity served to motivate their engagement with their BTEC courses. A number of students
23 discussed closely monitoring their performance on their BTEC courses to ensure that they achieved
24 the distinctions necessary to take up university places offered.
25

26 **BTEC a vehicle for social mobility? Limitations and constraints**

27
28 Forming positive learner identities and possible future selves as HE students during BTEC courses can
29 support students to progress to HE. However, a series of measures is needed to redress existing
30 inequalities. There is a need to address eligibility issues. While BTEC qualifications have value as
31 'legally guaranteed qualifications' (Bourdieu, 1986: 247), they are not equally valued in the field of
32 HE. BTEC students occupy different positions in this field to peers with A level qualifications.
33 Students who undertake BTEC courses are predominantly located in post 92 universities (Shields and
34 Masardo, 2015; Kelly, 2017; Gicheva and Petrie, 2017). This orientation was reflected in the HE
35 destinations of students contributing to this study, though a small number of students on mixed A
36 level/ BTEC routes at the Sixth Form College had received offers from traditional universities.
37 Research has highlighted degree courses in post 92 universities are unlikely to offer the same
38 graduate career destinations as traditional universities and have a lower wage premium (Gale and
39 Parker, 2015; Kelly, 2017), though Gicheva and Petrie (2018) point to a wage premium associated
40 with a BTEC route through university in some regions and industries.
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45 Another issue with BTEC courses is these routes into HE are often highly gendered: of those
46 interviewed, girls were progressing from BTEC health and social care courses into related HE courses
47 such as nursing, while boys from BTECs in IT were moving into IT at university. Engineering BTEC
48 qualifications undertaken alongside apprenticeships at the FE college were exclusively undertaken
49 by male students. As well as polarising the workforce in these sectors, this segregation has
50 ramifications for gender pay equality. This points to an urgent need for better CEIAG to challenge
51 students' gendered understandings of career routes.
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54 There were clear differences in students' accounts of the match between their current BTEC course
55 and course they were planning to pursue at university, with some courses promoting clear
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3 progression routes through HE into particular jobs. Kelly (2017) highlights arguments that BTEC
4 students are more suited to applied courses and that Russell Group and other elite institutions offer
5 fewer of these courses than post 1992 institutions. Students' accounts in this study indicate
6 embodied cultural capital acquired through study on BTEC courses, can be highly relevant for
7 applied courses, but may not be transferrable to other degrees. Gicheva and Petrie (2018) argue for
8 increased support for students to access and succeed in universities to ensure parity of esteem
9 between vocational and traditional academic routes.
10

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12 A further issue likely to affect HE retention and achievement is that many of these students have
13 well-articulated possible selves outside HE, in the (work) identities of family and friends. While
14 students may view these possible selves negatively, if their experiences of HE proves difficult or
15 disappointing these other identities are likely to present, tempting alternatives. Sixth Form tutors
16 described deliberately countering messages from home. Tutors' and students' accounts illustrate the
17 dissonance between the expectations of the Sixth Form College and the familial habitus of some
18 students:
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21 Some of them don't have a role model in the family. They hear it on the news – media
22 narratives of fees going up and they think that there's no point going and their parents say
23 you need a job – they're encouraging the opposite. (Sixth Form: Teacher)
24

25
26 Students' HE identities are likely to be fragile which supports calls for HEIs to focus on the academic
27 provision and support offered to these students.
28

29 **Conclusion**

30
31 Using a joint Boudieusien and possible selves lens in considering students' accounts provides new
32 insights into how BTECs and colleges support students in their progression to HE. The findings of this
33 study highlight how BTEC pedagogies can support the development of positive learner identities and
34 well-articulated possible selves as HE students amongst young people from lower socio-economic
35 groups, including students who had not considered university as a possibility before starting their
36 BTEC courses. BTEC courses at both colleges provide these young people with relevant social and
37 cultural capital for courses in HE, particularly in applied fields. In light of this study, concerns that
38 BTEC courses are not sufficiently rigorous or standardised and do not properly equip students for HE
39 appear simplistic, overlooking the positive contribution these courses make to students' academic
40 and social development in relation to HE courses.
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44 The study illustrates that positioning young people within a stratified and marketised post 16 system
45 can be problematic, with the denigration of FE colleges having implications for student's self-
46 identities as learners. Findings also highlight the importance of practices within colleges, and the
47 opportunities they can provide in facilitating access for young people to relevant cultural and social
48 capital, supporting them in envisioning themselves as HE students. Given the success of BTEC
49 courses in motivating and engaging students from lower socio-economic groups, how courses and
50 institutions support successful learner and HE identities is also of relevance to practices in HE, if HEIs
51 are to ensure these students' continued success. As Ferrare and Apple point out, 'there are no
52 deficits inherent in the cultural dispositions of students; only deficits in the social relations
53 embedded in the practices and meanings that are constructed within our educational institutions'
54 (2015: 46).
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