Exploring 'Vocational' and 'Academic' Routes into Higher Education

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HE progression routes: the current landscape

- Over 50% of qualifications awarded to 16-18 year olds are currently vocational

- 26% of students progressing to HE with BTEC qualifications (Gicheva and Petrie, 2017)

- Increases in students progressing to HE from lower participation neighborhoods since 2008 due to students progressing with BTECs (Kelly, 2017)

- Over 80% of students with just BTECs stay at university after their first year and over 60% of graduating BTEC students gain a 2:1 or above (Dilnot, Macmillan and & Wyness, 2022)

- 98% of students with A-level A*A*A* go to high tariff institutions compared to 21% of students with BTEC D*D*D* (OfS, 2018)

- Lower levels of HE achievement or outcomes among those from vocational pathways (Shields and Masardo, 2015)

- Higher attrition rates among those from vocational pathways (Kelly, 2017; Katartzi and Haywood, 2020)

- BTEC only students 2x more likely to drop out than A level students before second year (Dilnot, Macmillan and & Wyness, 2022)

- UK vocational qualifications focus on developing workplace knowledge and skills …Academic qualifications (e.g.GCE A level) designed to support Higher Education as key function (Katartzi and Haywood, 2020)

Research into HE progression and transition

Highlighting issues: the importance of theory

Progressing to HE from different post 16 educational institutions

Gartland, C. E., & Smith, C. (2018). Supporting progression to HE: the role of colleges and vocational courses.

UK based study. A small scale qualitative research study of students attitudes to and conceptions of HE. Interviews were undertaken with students at colleges in a de-industrialised area of multiple deprivation with low HE progression rates and low GCSE attainment.

Participants included BTEC students in 6th Form and Further Education (FE) colleges. 1st generation in family to progress to HE.

Ambition of study was to develop practical strategies to support HE progression

- **Habitus (collective, familial and individual), capital and field**

On the one side, it is a relation of conditioning: the field structures the habitus, which is the product of the embodiment of immanent necessity of a field … On the other side, it is a relation of knowledge or cognitive construction: habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense and value, in which it is worth investing one's practice (Bourdieu, quoted in Wacquant 1989, 44).

An **institutional effect** '…educational status, organisational practices and expressive order – influence the choice-making process' (Reay, David & Ball, 2005: 39)

- **Possible Selves**

'According to Markus and Nurius (1986), the repertoire of possible selves held by an individual at a given time is influenced by her or his past experiences, sociocultural life context, and current situation. Further, these future oriented self-conceptualizations, or **possible selves, vary according to three factors: valence, level of elaboration, and psychological accessibility**' (Rossiter, 2009)
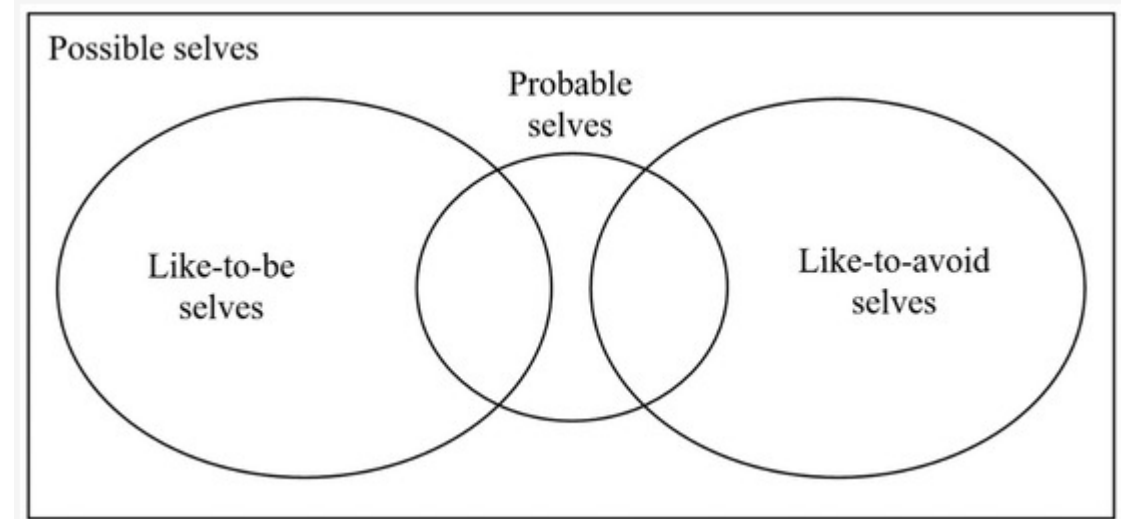
Habitus and Field
An institutional effect: FE and 6th form colleges

- Institutional focus in the 6th form college on progression to HE (displays, maps, mentoring, careers events, open days, personal statements)

- 'Natural' progression from 6th form college to HE ('a fish in water'?) - promoting progression amongst students who had not previously considered HE to be an option for them

- Professional context important, especially to students in health-related areas. Work placements at the FE college were seen as influential over decision making

- FE viewed as a 'denegrated space' (Hodgson and Spours, 2014). FE students labelled '**B-tards**' by other students on social media. BTECs were seen to be viewed negatively and not as equivalent to A levels .

- Fragile identities as HE students: familial habitus was often at odds with emerging HE identities . Financial concerns and heavy commitments to part time employment contributed to this fragility.

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)**
- **sense making (events)**

Using the Lens of 'Possible Selves' to Explore Access to Higher Education: A New Conceptual Model for Practice, Policy, and Research (2018) Harrison

- **Activities—experiential learning on BTEC courses**

Motivational experiential learning providing opportunities to understand real world application of knowledge and associated roles and career possible selves.

"…instead of just giving us pictures of one (a crime scene) they've done or scenarios …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)

- **Relationships—peers, tutors and other sources of information**

Students' relationships with their BTEC course tutors were significant in providing vital information about HE; tutors were "guiding figures" (Ibarra, 2007, p. 27).

A "people rich" (Gale et al., 2010) environment at the Sixth Form College …These closely knit and cohesive networks "convey a clarity and consistency of identity expectations" (Ibarra, 2007, p. 14)

"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" (Sixth Form, BTEC IT)

▪ **Key events—careers events and visits to universities**

The transition from school to college was clearly a key event, instigating thinking about new possible selves for all students interviewed.

Visits were often viewed by students as key events in their decisions about choice of courses, subjects and institutions.

Baker (2020) highlights the gaps in opportunities to visit institutions between FE (VET) students and A level students. Available financial resources and targeting practices of universities are highlighted as issues.

▪ **Transition to HE: navigating the gaps and the bumps**

Katartzi & Haywood (2019) Transitions to higher education: the case of students with vocational background

UK study of student experiences of transition to HE with VET qualificaitons. Interview data collected as part of a mixed-method project mapping the transitions to HE of VET students.

Interviews with students in five contrasting case study Higher Education Institutions that provided degrees in Nursing, Business Studies and Computing

Ulriksen, Holmegaard & Madsen (2016) Making sense of curriculum— the transition into science and engineering university programmes

A Danish study of recruitment and retention of students on STEM HE programmes. The study employed a qualitative approach to study the 'complexity and interrelation between different elements in the students' experiences' and a longitudinal design to explore students' experiences over time (427)

Transitional frictions - metaphor 'to capture the ongoing set of tensions and difficulties VET students encounter in the HE field.' (Katartzi and Haywood, 2019: 7)

Need for 'engagement with the epistemic and pedagogical processes' once students are within HE (Katartzi and Haywood, 2019: 8)

Epistemic friction

'**different forms of knowing and ways of acquiring knowledge are perceived to be unequally valorised and valued** …Students with VET background seem to have internalised the social representation of knowledge in terms of the polarising dualism of practical versus academic. It is this internalised, differential valorisation that they are using as a basis for making judgements about their own academic abilities and worth' (7)

Pedagogical Friction
VET students 'adjustment to a style of learning and teaching that has at its core the mode of self-directed study'
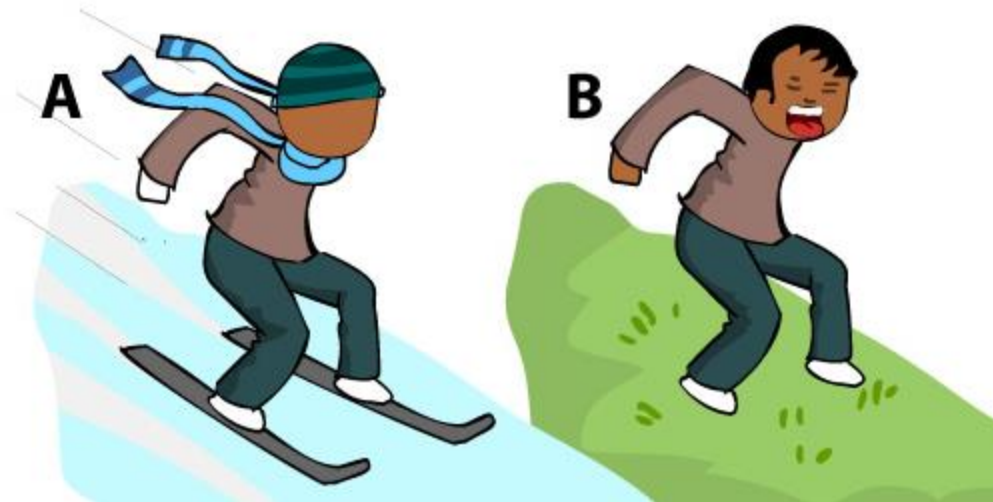
- **Pedagogical Friction**

Self directed study

'Independent learning is not only a cheap and expedient pedagogical device, but it can be both isolating and unrewarding for students' (6)

Subject Based difficulties

e.g. computing student with GNVQ in IT struggling with maths content of computing course

We suggest that students with a VET background are entering HE with a vocational habitus which tends to be **misaligned with the pedagogical regimes of HE**. .'
(Katartzi and Haywood, 2020: 309)

Ulriksen, Holmegaard & Madsen (2016)

'we combine an identity approach with studying how students experience the

curriculum and how these experiences interact with the students' construction of their disciplinary Identity' (425)

Table 1 An overview of the classification and framing

Classification	Power over the relations between different elements
Internal - Relations between elements within	Strong - No relation between elements Weak - An open relation between elements
External - Relations to elements outside	Strong - No link to external practices or experiences Weak - Content related to outside elements
Framing	Control over what happens in the educational context (selection, pace, sequence, etc.)
Internal - Control within context (typically the classroom)	Strong - The control is with the teacher Weak - A higher degree of student control
External - Control outside (e.g. over the context itself)	Strong - The control is with external actors (e.g. the political system) Weak - A higher degree of control

Using concepts of classification and framing to analyse curricula (Ulriksen et al., 2016: 425)
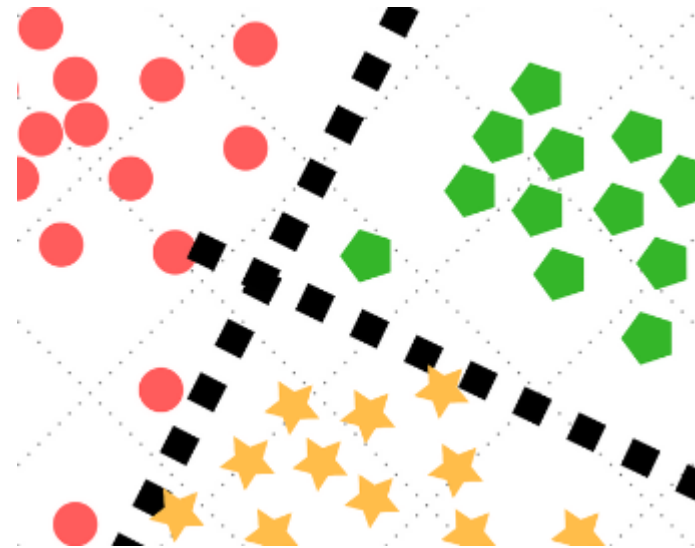
Student experiences related to classification

Strong internal classification: Students struggling with Maths (and other mandatory courses) on STEM courses

- Mandatory during first year on most STEM programmes: 'I've tried to ask but nobody seems to know (why)'
- Mandatory courses experienced as irrelevant and unconnected to area of study (e.g. engineering, biochemistry)

Strong external classification: Relation to the world outside university

teaching rarely linked the course content to everyday experiences or applications, e.g. in work life**.**

The framing of programmes

Strong framing-

- 1st year mandatory lecture- based courses

- high-paced lectures

- large amount of assignments and reading

- content ranging from highly engaging to apparently irrelevant.

 These experiences reflect a strong framing … content selected by teachers …the lecture format where the lecturers decide the pace of delivery … students must follow the order of the courses even when the content made no sense to them (434)

Weak framing
- a substantial part of the studying is supposed to be done by the students themselves—alone or in groups—and organised by the students themselves (434)

The social base
- Students and teachers are in separate worlds and … not expect to have any particular relation …
- This separation also means that students are expected to handle their difficulties themselves due to a division of labour between the teachers who plan and organise and the students who comply with the teachers' plans. (435)

'Change at systemic and organisational levels in the direction of epistemic and pedagogical inclusivity can be achieved not least **through narrowing the gulf between academic and vocational education** and through greater parity, flexibility and permeability of educational and vocational pathways.' (Katartzi & Haywood, 2020)

Rebuild collaboration between all 14-19 providers, employers and HE in order to focus on impartial CEIAG, progression, skills and routes (Hodgson & Spours, 2014)

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