The Thoughts, Feelings and Perceptions of Sports and Exercise Students Progressing from Vocational Education and Training to Academic Education

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Abstract

In 2017, 31% of students progressed from FE courses to HE, with many coming from non-traditional backgrounds such as VET. For those students entering HE with vocationally-orientated qualifications, their assessment will have centred around tasks with a more practical/occupational focus, and the skills, expectations and experience that these students bring to HE will differ significantly from those of the traditional A-Level entrants, who are familiar with an academic environment and the processes. Therefore, it is important that students progressing from VET make a successful transition between the vocational and academic education sectors, not only for their own achievement but also to reduce attrition and increase student retention at HEI’s. The aim of this research is to investigate the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of FE students studying on a vocational course and their forthcoming transition to an academic environment at a HEI; providing an insight into how sport and exercise departments in HEI’s can better support students, and improve retention and student satisfaction of future cohorts. The findings identified three key themes: Challenges Associated with Progressing into Academic Environment from VET; Further Personal and Professional Development by Studying in an Academic Environment; Expectation of Diverse Experiences when Transitioning. The findings have enabled a series of practical guidelines to be created which inform other HEI’s and FEC’s about understanding, supporting and managing students who progress between the two distinct education environments. Hopefully, reducing student attrition, improving retention, and overall student satisfaction.

**Key words:** Higher Education, Vocational Education and Training, Further Education, Transition, Retention, Attrition.

Biographical Notes:

Ashley J. G. Gill is an experienced senior lecturer at Staffordshire University, within the Sport and Exercise department. His main responsibilities revolve around the teaching of both undergraduate and postgraduate curricula, as well as the administration of courses. Ashley has a key role in partnerships for his department, working closely as a Link Tutor with further education partners, who deliver courses on behalf of the university. His main research interest focuses upon investigating the transition of students through key educational landmarks in their learning journey.

# INTRODUCTION

In the U.K., 773,000 students aged between 16-18 were educated in Further Education College’s (FEC) in 2015/16, with 31% of these students progressing from their Further Education (FE) course to Higher Education (HE) (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2017).

This transitioning student body is progressing from a sector (FE) that provides largely vocational based qualifications, which aim to 'up-skill' students whilst working towards meeting industry requirements, into a contrasting academic sector, where HE institutions are allowed to set their own standards and measures of educational performance; not necessarily governed by industry or vocation (Christensen and Eyring, 2011).

Hatt and Baxter (2003) highlighted that despite the widening participation agenda in HE over 20 years ago, the majority of entrants continue to be drawn from traditional groups, such as school leavers from middle-class background, aged between 18-20, with two or more A-Levels. These ‘traditional’ students have followed an academic programme of study and as a result have developed specific academic skills, such as skills for essay writing and examinations, which are also traditional methods of assessments regularly used in HEI’s. To bridge the divide, be more inclusive, and attract students from non-traditional backgrounds, HEI’s recruit students from a range of vocational backgrounds, not just the traditional academic backgrounds, and FEC’s have played a large role in this development…

“This increase [in students from non-traditional backgrounds] can partly be attributed to the growing availability of Level 3 vocationally oriented qualifications aimed at 16-year-olds. Such qualifications are increasingly marketed as providing a means for progressing into HE, so constituting an important component of attempts to widen participation.”

(Hoelscher et al., 2008)

This has not been more evident than in 2017, with 31% students progressing from FE to HE (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2017). Students who now have access to HE often come from these non-traditional backgrounds and progress from FEC’s, or the workplace, and vocational courses, such as Pearson BTEC courses, Higher National Diploma’s (HND’s), Higher National Certificate’s (HNC’s), amongst others. For those students entering HE with vocationally-orientated qualifications, their assessment will have centred around tasks with a more practical/occupational focus, and the skills, expectations and experience that these students bring to HE will differ significantly from those of the traditional A-Level entrants (Hatt and Baxter, 2003).

Students progressing from these non-traditional vocational pathways must make many adjustments, specifically adjusting to a change in teaching styles, teaching environment and system, independent learning, and assessment type (Jessen and Elander, 2009). However, this is not an exhaustive list and FE students may encounter many other adjustments in their HE journey. In some instances, students who transition from FE to HE may undergo a partly managed process, through the use of taster courses, or a preparatory module (Knox, 2005; Jessen and Elander, 2009). However, in most instances the transition from FE to HE is something that the student has to undertake independently and with little support (Gill, 2017). Therefore, this transition for vocational students is of paramount importance and can have a considerable impact upon the student continuing their studies and flourishing in their new academic environment. Conversely, if this transition to an academic environment is unsupported it may negatively affect student achievement, student satisfaction, and perhaps there may be a greater likelihood that students from a vocational background drop-out of university, thus increasing attrition and reducing course retention at HEI’s (Gill, 2017). As the aforementioned factors are benchmark themes by which HE is increasingly being measured, therefore, it adds credence to this phenomena being fully explored.

The aim of this research is therefore to investigate the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of FE students studying on a vocational course (i.e. BTEC Extended Diploma in Sport) and their forthcoming transition to an academic environment at a HEI; providing an insight into how sport and exercise departments in HEI’s can better support students, and improve retention and student satisfaction of future cohorts. The findings will enable a series of recommendations to be made on supporting and improving the transition of students that progress from vocational backgrounds, which will be beneficial for HEI personnel who aim to manage the transition of students and provide optimal conditions for effective transition to increase retention, and ultimately increase student achievement and satisfaction. Similar to Gill (2017) and Pike and Harrison (2011), it is hoped that the results will not only have internal generalisability to other HE departments, but also external generalisability across other HEI’s.

The findings will be of particular relevance for HEI’s who have a large intake of students from vocational courses, particularly the post-1992 HEI’s and those with sport and exercise related provision. Sport-related degrees are one of the ten most studied subjects at university, with the number of students graduating with sport degrees far exceeding ten thousand annually (Winsley & Tong, 2014), it is imperative that the transitioning demographic is explored thoroughly. The findings will ultimately serve as a guide for HEI’s to better help support and understand their transitioning sport and exercise students when they progress to HE.

# FURTHER CONTEXT

It is important that students are able to thrive and succeed in HE, rather than just be able to access it. HEI’s place great emphasis on the retention of students and their achievement over time, which are often key indicators on the perceived success of institutions and courses (Johnes, 2006). The critical importance of this cannot be denied, however, there are many other factors involved with the retention and success of students, many of which can be linked to the transition that a student encounters when progressing into HE (Gill, 2017).

Despite the large-scale nature of student transition, the field is under-conceptualised and research investigating the process is mainly small-scale (Briggs *et al*., 2012). Noteworthy research includes Bogdan and Elliott (2015) and Pike and Harrison (2011), who looked at the transition of direct entrants to the HE system and their thoughts, feelings and perceptions of the process, and Gill’s (2017) research into the transition of sport and exercise students from FE to HE. The research specifically conducted around the progression of students from vocational to academic environments is very limited, with only a handful of relevant articles exploring this specific pathway in the last decade; none from a conceptualised subject-specific standpoint. The key U.K. based research that underpins this pathway will be explored below.

The structure and configuration of both HE and FE in the U.K. has historically been the subject of much debate within public, government and academic domains (Knox, 2005). Often changing in scope depending upon and governed by the economic model of the political party that has leadership at that specific point in time. There have been many changes in agenda over the last 30 years, pertaining to the relevance and integration of vocational education and training (VET) into higher education. Smith and Bocock (1999) analysed the relationship between FE and HE sectors, whereas Gallacher et al. (2000) and Davies and Jones (2003), put emphasis on the significance of the movement of students across the two pathways to meet the government’s widening participation agenda. Knox (2005) believes that progression pathways between FE and HE are crucial. It has been contended that these progression pathways entice a different population of students into HE (Bocock *et al*., 1996; Gallacher *et al*., 1997) and their successful progression cannot be taken for granted (Knox, 2005; Smith & Bocock, 1999).

There are few studies on the vocational to academic pathway that are student focused, and not governmental or strategic in nature (e.g. widening participation). Of the few, Bathmaker and Thomas (2009) found that transitions to degree-level study do not necessarily match the students imagined futures, though this was measured in a ‘dual sector’ institution delivering both FE and HE courses. The HE sports qualifications did not reflect the specific interests of the Level 3 National Diploma students, and the business students recognised that the AAT qualifications had more value than degree study in their sector of industry. Aynsley and Crossouard (2009) investigated the factors that affected young people’s decisions not to progress to HE after following a Level 3 vocational pathway and a lack of priority was the key finding, with a preference for occupational experience. Perhaps for vocational education students, there isn’t that great of an emphasis to progress to HE, possibly highlighting why students choose this pathway in the first instance. Research conducted by Johnes (2006), and much earlier by Spady (1970), and then Tinto (1975), on student 'wastage' and retention identified that the main reason for non-completion of academic courses in HE was students' academic ability and their educational experiences prior to starting university (Gill, 2017). These findings support the notion that students progressing from vocational education may be less likely to finish their HE course due to it being a new environment and set of systems that they have to integrate into and become familiar with.

Crabtree et al. (2007) explored similarities and differences in the teaching and learning environments between FE and HE. It was apparent that several factors were instrumental to a successful transition, these were attitude and ability of the student, tutor’s self-concept and beliefs, and the teaching and learning environment; all of which differ between the varying educational levels. Briggs et al. (2012) highlighted learner identity as the key factor in retaining students and ensuring that they are successful in HE. Similarly, Armstrong (2015) identified that with widening backgrounds of students in HE, and as a result a more diverse student body, the opportunities for social integration in the initial stages of the course would be beneficial to retaining more students.

Regardless of the teaching and learning strategies in place at the HEI’s, Hoelscher et al. (2008) findings highlight that at the system level, the traditional A-Level progression route still opens up opportunities into HE institutions with higher reputations, as opposed to vocational pathway’s. Typically, those coming from a vocational education background mostly end up in post-1992 institutions with lower National Student Survey (NSS), Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), and Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) results. It is findings like these that may give concern to some students who are progressing to HE from vocational education environments, with somewhat of an invisible cap on their aspirations solely due to their experience of studying in a more vocationally oriented environment.

It is the findings by researcher’s such as Hoelscher et al. (2008) and Gill (2017) that were the precursor to this research being conducted. Specifically, Gill’s (2017) results demonstrated that there were distinct differences in educational environments between FE and HE from a teaching, learning and assessment perspective. Students whom progressed from a vocational background believed that improvements were needed in the HE system to ensure that they better understood the academic requirements of the HEI and could integrate more quickly into the new environment and systems in place. This present article wishes to build upon this previous research by offering the perspectives of students in a FE environment, which Hoelscher et al. (2008) refer to as historically being seen as an ‘unsuitable’ pathway to HE study, and their forthcoming transition into a HEI. Investigating their thoughts and feelings towards this impending progression and fundamental change in educational environment. Hopefully, the findings from this research may help support and prepare academic institutions with their recruitment and retention of students from a non-traditional, VET background by emphasising students’ expectations and fears in changing educational pathways.

# METHOD

The design of this research was based on the need to develop an in-depth understanding of the students’ thoughts, feelings and perceptions about their forthcoming transition from a non-traditional VET background and course in a FEC, to an academic course and environment at a HEI. Therefore, looking to acquire a better understanding of the transition phenomena from the point of view of the participants, a qualitative ontological methodology was utilised, as opposed to an epistemological approach (Slevitch, 2011). In order to listen to the students’ voice and capture the reality of their transition an inductive approach was used within the qualitative methodology (Creswell, 1998). Having gained institutional ethical approval, focus groups were conducted as a means to collect data. This format allows participants to express their thoughts and feelings on a specific subject, whilst explicitly interacting within a group (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2013). Working in a group environment is a normal and common experience for sport and exercise students, therefore, discussions were designed to be fun, yet fruitful in this familiar environment, allowing multiple opinions and perspectives to be discussed (Krueger, 2014). The focus of discussion was outlined in a topical format to explore a range of perspectives. The number of focal themes was specifically limited to six to encourage students to share more of their personal thoughts and feelings on the subject (Krueger, 2014). Due to the small amount of research in the area the themes were selected by the researcher as key areas to discuss, these were loosely informed by Gill’s (2017) research into student transition.

The target population were sport and exercise students enrolled on a vocational course at a FEC, who had applied through UCAS to study at a HEI. The participants were asked to volunteer and the criteria for selection of volunteers was that they were enrolled on a sport and exercise related VET course at a FEC, were 18+ years of age, had no previous experience of HE, and had applied via UCAS for entry into a HEI in the next academic year. Thirty-one students studying for a BTEC Extended Diploma in Sport met the criteria, and the 19 students who volunteered participated in one of three focus groups, conducted over a two-week period (Male-Female Ratio= 8:11, mean age= 18.33, SD= 0.41). Krueger (2014) states that focus groups containing 6-8 people is optimal for ensuing that there is depth, detail and richness to the data collected. The cumulative duration of the focus groups were 1 hour 43 minutes, averaging 34 minutes each. Focus groups were audio-recorded to minimise any difficulties in recall when transcribing the data (DiCicco and Crabtree, 2006). The audio-recorded focus groups were transcribed verbatim.

Thematic analysis of the transcribed audio-recordings was used to identify key themes, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The majority of the small-body of research in the area of student transition has used thematic analysis due to its logical nature of grouping and categorising key data to highlight trends and relationships (Bogdan and Elliott, 2015; Gill, 2017; Pike and Harrison, 2011). Gratton and Jone’s (2010) framework for undertaking coding was followed with relevant statements initially assigned a code, then codes were placed into first order categories, and finally key themes were formed.

# FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The research was carried out in order to investigate, and obtain a better understanding of the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of students who want to progress from a VET background in FE to an academic environment in HE. These findings have then been used to synthesise a series of practical guidelines to inform other HEI’s and FEC’s about understanding, supporting and managing students who aim to progress/who have progressed between the two distinct environments. Hopefully reducing student attrition, improving retention, and overall student satisfaction.

The findings suggest that vocational education students, studying on sport and exercise related courses, perceive many differences to exist between their current education and that which they will encounter when they progress to university. There were many diverse subjects that emerged from the results, however, there was a large degree of commonality within the students’ responses. Therefore, the data analysed was quantified into three key themes. Data analysis elicited 265 significant statements in total, which were categorised into forty-two data codes, subsequently grouped into eleven first order themes, and culminating in three key themes: *Challenges Associated with Progressing into Academic Environment from VET; Further Personal and Professional Development by Studying in an Academic Environment; Expectation of Diverse Experiences when Transitioning*.

The findings of this study are illustrated in Figure 1 (Pg. 8) and each of the key themes are discussed in the subsequent three sub-sections.



Figure 1. The thoughts, feelings and perceptions of vocational sport and exercise students on their forthcoming progression to academic education at a HEI.

## Challenges Associated with Progressing into Academic Environment from VET

There was a perception amongst the VET students that there would be issues challenging their progression and integration into an academic environment at a HEI, although it was apparent that these challenges could be off-set by the potential benefits of studying in HE. A student noted,

“… I expect university to be a lot harder [than VET] and uni will be a complete change to what I’m currently used to… but having a degree will make me more employable in the long run.”

Many of these perceived challenges come in the form of specific course related issues, such as increased workload and strict assessment deadlines, but also the students identified the increased amount of independent study in an academic environment as a potential challenge, with a perceived difference in the amount of support they will receive between the two educational environments. A student noted,

“At uni you are much more independent and are expected to do a lot more yourself, research and stuff, instead of being given the information… I think I might struggle with that.”

This notion of there being less support for students at university is one that is all too common. The students’ thoughts and feelings of a perceived lack of support in academia resonate with the findings of Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) and Read et al. (2003). Both studies found that non-traditional students in post-1992 universities felt strongly that they were expected to be independent learners early on in their university course but without sufficient supervision and guidance. This highlights the distinct differences in the approach that vocational and academic education plan and deliver their curricula, and the systems in which they employ (Bandias *et al*., 2011). Gill (2017) states:

“… it is understandable that transitioning students should notice and feel a tangible change in academic differences between the largely vocational systems in FEC’s and the more academically rigorous HEI systems.”

However, to what extent should this ‘tangible change’ be evident? The strict assessment deadlines and increased workload that the students perceived as a potential challenge could be attributed to progression to a higher level of study, as well as changing standards of awarding bodies. Often VET qualifications are accredited by awarding bodies, whereas universities set their own standards and measures of educational performance, which are not necessarily governed by industry or vocation (Christensen and Eyring, 2011). This results in a difference between educational standards, and the perception amongst students that these standards will present a significant challenge to overcome simply because they haven’t been required in previous forms of education. It is understandable from the students’ perspective when, for example, Pearson BTEC Extended Diploma courses allow students an opportunity to improve their summative coursework grade after the work has been already been formally assessed. However, this practice contrasts markedly with well-established systems and processes designed to uphold academic rigour, policy and guidelines, therefore, it is far less likely to be utilised in a HEI.

Reay et al. (2010) believes the view of there being less support in HEI’s is a cultural one and about social identity. Students from middle-class backgrounds have developed a strong sense of themselves as successful learners by the time they reach university and found that ‘they do academic and they do it well’. Contrastingly, students from working-class backgrounds are more fragile and unconfident, with a sense of self-doubt and anxiety around learning. The students utilised in this research project were from a socially disadvantaged area, therefore, this phenomenon could have been evident within the results.

It was evident that there was some anxiety about the progression to a different educational environment and the systems and environment that is commonly employed in HE. A student noted,

“… if you get down to it, if you get into the swing of things in the first couple of days, couple of weeks, whatever its going to take. Then you’re going to do be able to do everything, but if you don’t and you try and remain in BTEC way of thinking… then you’re going to find it hard. I’m a bit worried about that.”

This reflects Gill’s (2017) findings, who identified that there were negative feelings and anxiety prevalent in those students that had transitioned to HE study. Pinheiro (2004) believes that transition to HE is a difficult process because it is multifaceted, with the simultaneous educational, ecological and developmental changes faced by students. The findings support Pinheiro (2004) viewpoint because it was apparent from the results that in addition to the academic differences, money and fees were a source of worry. It is likely that the student’s will apply to Student Finance England for a loan to study in HE because of the increasing costs associated with university courses. For most, this often means that the students must manage a large amount of money for the first time, which is a significant responsibility. A student noted,

“… I know a lot of people that have gone to uni last September and have gone in with a load of money and after the first few weeks struggling because they’ve spent up, in fresher’s week basically. Can’t pay for anything else. They’re even dropping out, or having to go home every now and then to get the money.”

Students perceived this money management as something that would be different between the educational environments, and were nervous about taking on such a responsibility in case they didn’t adjust to university very well and ‘wasted’ their fees. Wilkins et al. (2013) identifies that this viewpoint is a trend, with increasing student anxiety regarding the financing of HE studies and the financial issues in English HE, affecting the study choices of all students.

## Further Personal and Professional Development by Studying in an Academic Environment

The findings identified that academic study had many benefits for the individual, with a range of personal and professional reasons given for wanting to study in HE. The students stated that factors, such as enjoying their learning, investing in themselves for the future, and wanting higher-level training, all motivated them to progress into the unfamiliar academic environment. Furthermore, when the students were reflecting on their choice of study, career possibilities were present in almost all their narratives, similar to Holmegaard et al. (2014) findings when discussing progression to university. Student’s noted,

“… it’s the only way [to achieve career goal]… because I want to be a physio… it gets you recognised quickly ...”

“I need it to achieve what I want and for career progression...”

“It [HE] opens more doors for your career, rather than just having a dead-end job, you’ve got a wider variety of jobs that you can then go into...”

The findings are also synchronous with Kaye and Bates (2017) research, who suggest that the reasons for choosing to study in HE is largely motivated by career opportunities associated with degree-level education. Similarly, reasons for choosing specific courses was related to vocational interest, suggesting strategic decision-making processes of students about to embark on HE study. With the wide-range of graduate employment opportunities presented to students through an academic sport and exercise pathway, it is clear to see how this would motivate FE students to transition from their vocational environment to the academic environment of HE and study a subject of their choosing. Despite some anxieties expressed by the student’s about progressing into the unfamiliar academic environment, it was apparent that the students perceived the benefits to outweigh the limitations. A student noted,

“… it will be tough but going to uni and getting a degree will be worth it in the end having a career.”

This supports Oreopoulos and Petronijevic (2013) findings that the investment in academic education appears to payoff for both the average and marginal student because of the earnings premium associated with a degree-level education.

Aside from professional aspirations, the findings indicate that the personal development of students from a social and life experience perspective are also key to their progression into academia. Most of the students are positive in their thoughts about having to relocate to study their chosen courses, they appeared to relish the thought of integrating into a new community, immersing themselves within a community with shared interests, and the social benefits this integration will have. A student noted,

“I’m looking forward to independence! I know you’re independent like, with your work and stuff. But when you’re living with like-minded people, that you’re with a lot of the time… its more social [at university] because you’re with people all of the time and having fun. Whereas at college, you just see people in your lessons and stuff.”

The experience that ‘going-away’ to university and changing social environments can personally have are numerous. According to Baum and Payea (2013), individuals who complete an academic course at a HEI acquire significant personal and social benefits compared to those that don’t study in HE. These benefits include higher cognitive skills, improved social cohesion, greater appreciation for diversity, and the desire to give back and participate in their community, amongst others (Chan, 2016). The social aspects of university are at the very root of the experience, Musselin (2015) believes that universities are a place where knowledge and humanistic values are protected and diffused. However, she also sees these personal and social aspects of HE life ever-diminishing, with a greater focus now on universities preparing students for employment at the detriment to the softer skills.

These findings suggest that student expectations of university and their chosen degree course tends to be very instrumental and personal. Whilst the academic aspect of their HE study is a necessary consequence to achieve their professional ambitions; not posing a substantial enough risk to significantly impact their experience and development.

## Expectation of Diverse Experiences when Transitioning to an Academic Environment

The perceptions and expectations of the students progressing from a vocational environment in FE to an academic environment at a HEI were diverse. There were students who were not daunted by the impending transition to an academic environment, despite their VET background, believing that their experiences had prepared them adequately for HE and that they would in turn flourish in an academic environment. A student noted,

“… I tend to take things in my stride and university will be no different. I’m confident that I’ll be ready when I go…”

However, contrastingly, there were those students that believed they would not fare so well with the change to an academic environment and systems. Students noted,

“I’m really unsure about going to uni, I mean it is totally different from college… the work and deadlines will be different, hopefully I’ll be alright.”

“… maybe I’m not ready for university just yet but if I don’t go I know I’ll get left behind. It’s totally different to my [current] course and what I know… at university there will be many systems that I don’t know”

Despite the students’ perceptions of their transition to an academic environment, it has been found that often the transitions to degree level study do not necessarily match the imagined futures of the students (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009). This may be the case for those students entering HE with vocationally-orientated qualifications because Hatt and Baxter (2003) proclaims that their assessment will have centred around tasks with a more practical/occupational focus, and the skills, expectations and experience that these students bring to HE will differ significantly from those of the traditional A-Level entrants.

Unfortunately, there isn’t a precise measure of how well a student may fare in academia depending on their background and progression route, despite the use of many predictive grade systems. There is support for the notion that university could be a much more holistic experience than just the course of study, with each student’s set of experiences being unique to that individual (Temple *et al*., 2014). Therefore, there is a case that those that socially integrate quickly, manage lifestyle and finance effectively, and have appropriate support networks, will place themselves in a better position to flourish in the academic aspects of their university life. However, it is apparent from Hoelscher et al. (2008) research that students progressing from FEC’s and a vocational background will more than likely progress to a post-1992 institution, with lower UCAS entry tariff and NSS, QAA and TEF results. Especially compared to those students progressing from the ‘traditional’ A-Level route, which is seen by Hoelscher et al. (2008) to present the best opportunities into HEI’s with higher reputations, not the post-1992 universities. With the emergence and introduction of the governments TEF in universities, which is a measure of performance against benchmarks in the HE sector, ultimately awarding a grade of either bronze, silver or gold to each university, the market amongst post-1992 and Russel Group universities will be more competitive than in the past (Wild and Berger, 2016). This may open-up the HE market for prospective students, especially students progressing from VET backgrounds, providing more choice and opportunity by removing cultural and ‘traditional’ barriers.

The findings illustrate that students perceive differences between the two educational environments, particularly surrounding the attitudes and beliefs of others towards vocational study. A student noted,

“… people don’t see college courses the same as A-Level’s. It seems as if people think college courses aren’t as good and are for people who fail [compared to schools]. It’s not, it’s just another route…”

Billett (2014) states that the standing of VET is noticeable for how it is perceived by those who sponsor, participate in and work within it and how its provisions are supported and administered. However, this standing continues to be lower than other education sectors, such as academia. The reasons for this low-standing reputation compared to other education sectors are diverse. However, Billett (2014) believes that traditionally it has been the opinion and views of politicians, bureaucrats and academics, who have long been privileged in discourses about the standing of occupations and their preparation, that have shaped these attitudes and beliefs surrounding the educational sectors. Perhaps the students’ feelings that people ‘look-down’ on vocational education, and constantly compare it to academic education, is a direct consequence of the beliefs and attitudes perpetuated by the aforementioned figureheads in society, who have a role in shaping education. Whether it is right or wrong, the comparison of educational sectors is common despite the sectors having differing objectives. The fact that educational sectors have been trying to unify vocational and academic study, highlights, the importance of VET, hopefully providing more of a balance with academia and bridging the vocational/academic divide that exists in U.K. education and training (Chankseliani *et al*., 2016).

Finally, the findings indicate that the students feel that despite there being more coursework on their Pearson BTEC qualification than a degree course, FE has not been difficult, with information often being ”spoon-fed” at their respective college. There were concerns amongst the students that these factors would not adequately prepare them for progression to HE and studying an academic course. A student noted,

“… you won’t be spoon-fed at uni. Basically, the teacher will say it and that is all you get, not there’s this PowerPoint to help you and this paper… that is going to be tough… I’m not sure if college has prepared me [for university].”

This could be more of an institutional issue from a teaching and learning perspective, than something more endemic in FE or vocational education and training. There was no research forthcoming that supported this ‘spoon-feeding approach’, however, Dehler and Welsh (2014) believe that this approach provides disappointing outcomes and that students’ development is better achieved through more reflexive practice and sophisticated approaches to teaching and learning. These worries and fears are very real to the students and could provide a barrier to them accessing academic education in the future, especially if they feel that the difficulty of HE is going to be that much more than their previous experiences. To limit the impact that this may have, Gill’s (2017) research provided a guideline for post-1992 HEI’s to have a greater responsibility in developing partnerships and network links in the local area with VET providers; providing advice and guidance to the students so that the myths are banished and it is clear what will be expected of a student in academia. It is not a perfect solution but it may go some way to providing more clarity for students and enable those in VET make more informed choices about their educational and career progression.

# CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSED GUIDELINES

This research provides a much-needed insight into the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of vocational based sport and exercise students and their forthcoming transition to an academic environment in HE. The vocationally educated students perceived that there would be issues challenging their progression into academic education, and successful integration into the systems and processes at a HEI. However, it was apparent that these challenges were not significant enough to outweigh the benefits of studying in HE.

It could be argued that Pinheiro’s (2004) assertions that transition to HE is a difficult process because it is multifaceted, with the simultaneous educational, ecological and developmental changes faced by students are made even greater when progressing from VET. Due to the complexity of the transition, the students had anxieties surrounding the progression to a differing educational sector/environment from their current vocational based training. Even so, the large majority of students remained positive and up-beat about the opportunities that academic study could have to their personal and professional development. In fact, the academic aspect of their HE study was a necessary consequence to achieve their professional ambitions, not posing a substantial enough risk to significantly impact their experience and development.

A series of practical guidelines have been created to help inform academic institutions, and VET providers, on how to further support students from vocational education progressing to academic study in a HEI, with the aim of improving student satisfaction and retention. They are as follows:

* There is an assumption that learning is something that students can just ‘do’, and as a result independent learning forms a large part of academic study. However, more guidance is required for both vocational and academic based students on how to learn independently and the skills that this requires. The HEI’s could integrate this into their pre-entry interventions and early-engagement strategies that target prospective students. Whilst VET may want to embed independent learning into their teaching so that it isn’t an alien concept to students if they progress to academic study.
* If VET incorporated and emphasised soft implementation of key academic standards and guidelines into their teaching and qualifications, such as strict assessment deadlines, independent research, amongst other study skills, it would benefit their students’ development and further prepare students for possible transition to academic education.
* To reduce the barriers to academic study in HE, more information needs to be provided by both VET providers and also HEI’s on financial support. Often this is the first time that the students will have access to a large amount of money and the skills to effectively manage this need to be developed early by educational institutions. HEI’s could integrate this into pre-entry interventions and early-engagement strategies that target prospective students.
* The aforementioned divide that exists in U.K. education between vocational education and training and academia needs to be addressed. This is a traditional viewpoint that has existed for a long time and is cultural. Academic education provider’s need to give VET parity with academic qualifications, and recognise the many skills and qualities that students from vocational backgrounds possess beyond that of the ‘traditional’ students they recruit. This is not a simple, or quick fix. However, being aware of the disparity between educational sectors will enable inroads to be made.
*
* HEI’s should take a greater responsibility for developing partnership and network links with local VET providers. The limited funds of vocational providers, such as FEC’s, mean that significant cuts have been made to advice and guidance. Therefore, if HEI’s can support this process by creating opportunities for both academic staff and students to provide information, testimonials, advice and guidance to VET students then it may ease the anxieties that these students have about progression to the academic sector.

The outcomes of the research provide an interesting insight into student transition that requires further investigation in the future. The limited research that has been conducted on the progression of students from vocational to academic sectors means that there are confines on the generalisability of the findings, especially across different subjects and other educational sectors. Specifically, the findings were based on VET students predominantly studying one subject, however, the ‘traditional’ A-Level students that Hatt and Baxter (2003) refer to study a range of subjects and generally progress form schools and sixth form colleges. This further affects the generalisability of the findings when making comparisons between these two progressing groups due to the diverse nature of A-Level students’ subjects and curricula, let alone the cultural and environmental differences between the educational institutions. There is an apparent need to investigate the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of a range of subject areas to assess generalisability of the results, comparing and contrasting the findings from this piece of research. Additionally, research into the perceived disparity between academic and VET sectors would be highly beneficial to increase understanding and hopefully change attitudes and culture surrounding VET.

It is important to note, that the intersectionality of the different cultures, genders, and backgrounds of the individuals involved in this type of qualitative research may have had an impact, and significant effect, on the responses and findings of the study. Each student has a myriad of factors that could affect their thoughts, feeling and perceptions towards a transition to HE, with their vocational education pathway perhaps being just one aspect. The widening of participation and students progressing from non-traditional backgrounds means that many factors influence transition, for example being the first in the family to go to university or the attitudes prevalent from students progressing from disadvantaged areas and low-income backgrounds, amongst others. These phenomena could be researched further to determine if there is a causal link between educational pathway and progression to HE.

The findings from the research will help academic institutions prepare more bespoke strategies and interventions to improve their recruitment and retention of students from non-traditional VET backgrounds. Additionally, the findings will enable VET providers to make HE more accessible to their students by understanding their students’ motivations and perceived barriers in respect to progressing to HE.

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