"Older and Wiser than the Schoolkids on the Bus": The Impact of Academic Transition on Learner Identity in an FE Setting

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ABSTRACT

Educational transitions occur throughout an individual's academic career, but transitions from secondary school to college (which in England, generally take place at the age of 16) are currently under-represented in the literature. As students in England are now required to stay in education until the age of 18, it is crucial that this group of learners, typically aged 16–19, are appropriately supported in their transition to this next stage of their education. This paper presents some of the findings of the Learner, Identity and Transition Project (LITP), a case study exploring the impact of transition on learner identity in a college of further education in England. Through discussion of extracts from narrative interviews collected from students aged 16–19, the paper considers the academic and vocational qualifications available to students after leaving school, and the ways in which these are perceived. Findings suggest that whilst educational transitions can prompt worries about the academic and social changes involved, they are also a time of opportunity, offering the possibility of maturing and of forging a new, more authentic identity that participants believed was closer to their true self, as well as forming new friendship groups. Participants also demonstrated an awareness of the different values attached to academic and vocational qualifications. However, although this awareness impacted upon the ways in which participants narrated their experiences of transition, a more positive narrative around vocational qualifications as a means of progressing to higher education also emerged from the data.

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INTRODUCTION

Educational transitions occur throughout an individual's academic career, with Ecclestone et al. (2009: 11) suggesting that "transition depicts change and shifts in identity and agency as people progress through the education system". Much of the existing literature on the subject of transition agrees the process is likely to consist of – as a minimum – both academic and social change, with Terenzini et al. (1994: 58) noting the process of transition requires students to "become integrated into the academic and social systems of a college or university"; in other words, an individual must reconcile their own sense of who they are (and who they would *like* to be) with the educational structures and pathways available to them.

This transitional period is widely regarded as a time of potential risk; over the last twenty years, studies across a range of countries have suggested that children moving from primary to secondary school suffer drops in academic achievement or motivation (or both), due in part to an inability to handle the changes required by this process, such as new subjects and teachers (see, for example, Otis et al. 2005; McGee et al. 2003). Thus, much of the recent research in this area has explored the experiences of children making the transition from primary to secondary (such as Evans et al. 2018; Evangelou et al. 2008; Mumford & Birchwood 2020) and how pupils can be best supported during this process (for example, the emotional intervention designed by Bagnall 2020, and the focus on promoting resilience in Jindal-Snape & Hannah 2014).

There are similar concerns around transitions to Higher Education (HE) at universities worldwide. Over 20 years ago, Kantanis (2000: 100) noted that in Australia "approximately one third of students drop out in the first-year of university" in a study that suggests concerns over attracting and keeping students are not a recent development. Indeed, the changing nature of HE means that this sector continues to be a significant area of research interest (see, for example, the Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions model proposed by Jindal-Snape & Rientes (2016), which recognises that HE students – and in particular international students – face multiple and complex issues during transitions). In order to support and retain students, it is crucial to "raise awareness amongst academics, researchers, professionals, and policymakers of the positive effects of transitions, to build upon them, and of the negative effects, to successfully resolve them" (Jindal-Snape & Rientes 2016: 1).

This focus on retention is no longer limited to HE institutions. The raising of the school leaving age from September 2015 (DfE 2015) means that all learners in England are now required to continue in education or training until 18, giving rise to the category of 16–19 learners. Institutions receive substantial funding for each student they recruit and retain, and the penalties for failing to keep students can be severe. Thus it is crucial for educators to understand the impact of transition on students moving from secondary school to college in order to better support these students and ensure as far as possible that they are on the most appropriate study pathway. However, despite the wealth of research available on educational transitions, there is relatively little on transitions from secondary school to college and the impact the process may have on learner identity for those aged 16–19.

One key study in this field is Hernandez-Martinez et al.'s (2011: 119) research into A level Mathematics students transitioning from school to college, which found that whilst participants expressed some concerns (particularly around the difficulty of their Mathematics course), "these were largely balanced by a more positive discourse of challenge, growth and achievement". This research took place when college education was still classed as post-compulsory, but their findings still chime with many of my own, particularly in terms of "rethink[ing] transitions as a question of identity in which persons see themselves developing due to the distinct social and academic demands that the new institution poses" (Hernandez-Martinez et al. 2011: 119).

Much of the older research on educational transitions for vocational students is markedly less positive in terms of presenting such transitions as an opportunity for growth or achievement, although the present study argues that such research is now dated and that perceptions of vocational qualifications and those who take them are beginning to change. For example, Ball et al. (1999) found in the late 1990s that A levels represented a well-trodden route into HE but that vocational students were vague and uncertain when considering their futures. Meanwhile, Colley et al. (2003: 482) argue that vocational courses can be perceived as aiming to "develop certain dispositions and demeanour", and identify "vocational habitus" as being one which

conditions learners to have lower expectations from their future careers and to develop more menial dispositions in preparation for their position in the workplace hierarchy (although it should be noted that this research took place within an occupational context). This perceived divide between "academic" and "vocational" courses means that choices made by 16-year-olds leaving school take on greater significance, with Fuller & Macfadyen (2011: 98) noting that "whilst students explicitly discuss autonomy in 'choosing' a vocational course...how students identify themselves in terms of academic success or failure matters in relationship to the educational choices they then go on to make". This process of "choosing" is in practice limited by the options available, as outlined below.

Most learners in England take GCSE exams, a level 2 qualification, at the age of 16, and then progress to a level 3 qualification. The choice available has largely been either what is deemed an "academic" pathway (most usually A levels), or a vocational pathway. BTECs are currently the most popular vocational level 3 qualification, although these are due to be defunded in 2024 and replaced by new T levels, a similar vocational qualification. A levels (short for Advanced Levels) were introduced in the UK in 1951 and have been positioned in government policy discourses as "qualifications [which] focus on traditional study skills...They are highly valued by schools, colleges and employers" (Directgov undated: unpaged). Learners on this pathway study three or four individual subjects, with externally assessed examinations at the end of the two-year study period. BTECs (short for Business and Technology Education Council, who first ran the award) were introduced in 1984 and were specifically designed to be "vocational" – in other words, relating to the needs of the workplace. They are continually assessed through coursework and practical tasks, and may involve the need to pass a work placement element, although some subjects are now partly assessed via external examination (DfE 2014).

The data reported in this article are drawn from the Learner, Identity and Transition Project (LITP), a qualitative case study conducted at Northlands College of Further Education (NCFE) (anonymised name) in the north of England. A literature review conducted as a pilot study to the LITP (Gregory 2012) found that A levels were presented as being superior to other level 3 qualifications in a range of literatures and discourses, including the popular press, government documentation and academic journals; in other words, seen as the gold standard (Snapper 2007) among level 3 qualifications. Thus, the LITP was primarily a study of identity, examining the interplay between the identities assigned to learners embarking upon different study pathways by external actors such as parents, teachers and educational institutions, and the learners' own sense of self perception whilst making the transition from school to college.

The LITP aimed to address the following four research questions:

- What factors do learners identify as having impacted on their academic choices in deciding to study either A levels or a BTEC as a level three programme of study?

- What ideas and attitudes do learners hold about their chosen qualification on entering the programme, and where have these come from?

- What is the impact of policy and other existing discourses upon the culture and practice of studying a particular programme, and what effect does this have on learner identities?

- How do students on different academic programmes narrate their educational experiences, and is a sense of collective identity evident amongst different cohorts?

By exploring whether a sense of collective or shared identity exists among learners on the same study pathway, the research draws upon Jenkins' (2004) notion that an individual's identity is both about sameness and difference, prompting a need to reconcile one's own sense of self as an individual with a recognition that elements of this identity are likely to be shared with others. Tajfel (1974: 67) acknowledges that throughout life an individual encounters "a network of relationships into which he must fit himself", and that the quest to "find, create and define his place in these networks" represents a "continuing process of definition". As such, educational transitions become a site both of potential opportunity and of conflict as individuals negotiate their place within these groups and bid to have their own habitus and capital recognised. Thus, the study also uses Bourdieu's (1977, 1986, 2004) thinking tools to consider whether the field of 16–19 education is a level playing field, or whether the different forms of capital attached to qualifications can lead to a sense of credentialing – the belief that following a particular study

route provides a set of credentials that pre-qualifies certain individuals for greater academic opportunities. The study is also interested in how such perceptions of academic superiority may be asserted or challenged through discourse (Fairclough 2015).

METHODOLOGY

A case study methodology was adopted for the research, in order to conduct "an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context" (Yin 1984: 23). This allowed me to collect qualitative data from learners aged 16–19 about their experiences of the transition process from level 2 to level 3 study, with my 'case' therefore being learner narratives of transition and identity. Interviews were conducted with learners (n = 24) in the first year of studying a two-year level 3 qualification at Northlands College of Further Education (NCFE), one of 231 general further education colleges in England (AoC, 2014), offering a range of courses at different levels to learners aged from 14 upwards.

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling via recruitment posters displayed around NCFE. At the time of the research, I was an A level teacher within the college, and thus it was likely that some potential participants would be known to me. Thus, interested parties were asked to contact one of my colleagues via email to express their interest, with the colleague then selecting participants randomly (but within the criteria parameters that participants be equally distributed across A level and BTEC study pathways). In this way, whilst not all volunteers were selected to participate in the study, I had no influence over the final selection.

Participants were split equally between two different study pathways: those studying an A level programme comprising three or four separate A level subjects, and those following a single-subject BTEC pathway. The randomised selection process resulted in a sample that included three BTEC subjects: ICT, Childcare, and Sport, although a wide range of A level subjects were represented in the sample. The study's interest lies in study pathways rather than individual subject choices, but it should be kept in mind that the findings reflect a relatively narrow spread of BTEC subjects and may be different had more been represented. For ease of identification, A level students were given alphabetical identifiers from A-L, and BTEC students were given a numerical identifier from 1–12. The research was conducted pre-Covid as part of a professional doctorate (Gregory 2018) and received ethical approval from a University Research Ethics Panel.

The participants were invited to take part in individual semi-structured narrative interviews lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. Narratives here are defined using Riessman & Quinney's (2005: 394) notion of "a discrete unit of discourse…topically-centred and temporally-organized" rather than a full life story. The conceptualisation for the study was provided by a theoretical framework called the MERITS Plus model, as summarised in Table 1 below. This model was designed over the course of two pilot studies and during the main fieldwork (this process is detailed further in Gregory 2020) as a means of understanding the literatures on learner motivations, expectations, realities, identity and transitions, and how these elements might interrelate to produce an individual's own particular story or experience of academic transition.

Interview participants were asked three questions relating to the first three elements of the model as a prompt for them to select and discuss the aspects of their experiences that were important to them: why they had selected their chosen course in preference to a different course or finding an apprenticeship, what their expectations of that course had been, and to what extent their experience had matched their expectations. These questions were worded to correspond to the first three elements of the framework as a way of eliciting data relevant to the next three – identity, transition and stories/synthesis – without asking participants directly about concepts they may find challenging to answer, such as whether they believed they shared a collective identity with others on their study pathway.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim before being subjected to both a thematic and linguistic analysis using the framework. Themes relating to motivations, expectations, reality, identity and the process of transition were identified, and in order to address stories and synthesis a linguistic analysis was conducted to identify the words most commonly used (in other words, identified by prevalence) in the participants' narratives to describe their experiences of transition as relating to the study's research questions. This reflected my interest in collective identity, by considering whether these frequently-used words were more common

to participants on a particular study pathway. The participants' own words were used to form composite profiles of the different types of students that may exist in this type of educational setting. These composite profiles are not discussed in this article for reasons of space, although a number of the words used most frequently in the narratives are presented in the findings. The final layer of analysis, the use of Bourdieu's (1977, 1986, 2004) thinking tools, was incorporated into the model as a means of understanding the data and their implications within their wider social contexts.

The findings are presented in the following section, where data from the interviews are used to help address the LITP's four research questions. Under each of the four questions, data from both the thematic and linguistic analyses are brought together to address each question.

Table 1 Summary of the MERITS Plus model.

Motivations	Why does an individual choose to study A levels or a BTEC rather than follow other academic pathways or apply for work or apprenticeships? What do they perceive to be the value of such a choice? Are these motivations largely extrinsic or intrinsic, or a combination of the two?
Expectations	What preconceived ideas (if any) might an individual hold before starting an A level or a BTEC programme of study? Where do these come from? How do they expect A level or BTEC lesson content and delivery to differ from GCSE classes?
Reality	How does the programme match up to these expectations in actuality? Has the shift from GCSE to A level/BTEC been challenging in terms of pedagogical changes? Do students think that GCSEs have adequately prepared them for the rigours of studying a level 3 qualification?
Identity	How do A level or BTEC students describe themselves? Is there any commonality in how individual students describe themselves, suggesting a collective identity amongst different groups of learners? Do they perceive that their identity may have changed since becoming an A level/BTEC student, and if so, in what way?
Transition	How effectively do A level/BTEC students feel that a/ GCSEs have prepared them for study at level three, and b/ A levels/BTECs are preparing them for study at Higher Education? What examples can they provide of skills they have developed through the process of moving from GCSE studies to A level/BTEC?
Stories and Synthesis	How do individual students bring together these feelings and experiences in order to narrate the story of their academic transition? Do they use similar words or phrases to suggest a commonality of experience and identity during the narration of these stories?
Linguistic analysis through identification of key words in the narratives.	
Creation of composite learner profiles.	
Use of Bourdieu's thinking tools to consider the implications of the thematic and linguistic analysis	

FINDINGS

WHAT FACTORS DO LEARNERS IDENTIFY AS HAVING IMPACTED ON THEIR ACADEMIC CHOICES IN DECIDING TO STUDY EITHER A LEVELS OR A BTEC AS A LEVEL THREE PROGRAMME OF STUDY?

The data suggested two key factors that had influenced academic choices: advice from teachers, parents and other influential adults, and the learners' ambitions for the future in terms of further study and/or employment.

The A level participants largely expressed their reasons for choosing their course either based on a future life goal such as university or in terms of other people's perceptions of their academic ability. Seven participants stated they had been explicitly advised by parents or teachers that the A level route was a more desirable choice for students with particular academic ability or ambitions. Student K's boss at her part-time job had said that "BTECs weren't as clever" and that she'd "be wasted on them"; she went on to say that her parents had "pushed" her to study A levels as they are "academic and more recognised as a qualification in the world". On a similar note, Student B's parents "preferred A levels" as they would give her "a better chance", and Student L's parents said, "A levels would be good – I'm able to do it so I should". The vague language used here ("better", "good") suggests that parents – perhaps the most influential adult role model in a young person's life – do not themselves have a clear understanding of why

they are recommending this particular pathway other than a general notion of A levels being perceived more favourably. However, a message of desirability had clearly been communicated to the study's participants whilst they were considering their academic options.

Student K in particular had begun to espouse these reasons as her own, making it clear that she didn't see BTECs as an equivalent – "it sounds really bad but I see BTECs as more a practical thing...A levels will get me further". This twin external motivator of A levels being perceived and recommended as more appropriate for students likely to do well in their GCSEs and as a better option for going on to further study was reflected in many of the A level narratives, with ten of the 12 interviewees citing a desire to go to university as a key reason for choosing A levels ("and obviously you need A levels for that" – student K). The remaining two inferred this through discussion of a career aim that required a degree-level qualification. The data suggest this message is being confirmed by teachers who, along with parents, emerged as a key influence on learners in making academic choices, particularly in the recommendation of the A level route for students with strong academic records: "the teachers said I was a really bright girl and assumed that A levels would be my next step" (Student G).

However, whilst all A level participants spoke of a desire to go to university as a motivating factor in their choice of course, many of the vocational participants stated the same. Five of the 12 interviewees stated that they wanted to go on to undergraduate study, with a further five considering the possibility, and there was a clear sense in the interview data that studying a BTEC could be advantageous both in HE and in the workplace. Student 1 felt that A levels were "too theoretical" to adequately prepare him for a career in sport and that college was "the next step in becoming a professional and thinking about the future", whilst Student 4 had specifically chosen a BTEC in ICT as "better preparation" for studying this subject at university thanks to the more "in-depth knowledge" this route provided. This positive identification of future goals amongst the LITP's participants suggests a potential change in the way in which vocational learners perceive and narrate their skills, abilities and chances of success.

WHAT IDEAS AND ATTITUDES DO LEARNERS HOLD ABOUT THEIR CHOSEN QUALIFICATION ON ENTERING THE PROGRAMME, AND WHERE HAVE THESE COME FROM?

Once again, teachers and parents were cited in the data as sources of information that had influenced participants' ideas and attitudes. Five of the twelve BTEC respondents showed an awareness that their course may not be perceived by others as being equivalent to A levels, with Student 1 saying "there's nothing wrong with doing a BTEC" although they're "seen as not as good", and Student 5 commenting that doing well at school followed by A levels and then university was the "set standard". Student 9 referenced similar ideas but originating from his parents, who felt that "BTECs didn't seem as good...what's the point in going to college if you don't do A levels?", and went on to say that BTECs seemed "a bit of a cop-out" as "people think they are easier and not an equivalent [to A levels]".

The majority of participants recognised that their chosen level three course represented a clear step-up from GCSEs in the standard of work required. However, the BTEC students appeared more flexible in their interpretation of what exactly this next stage of their education might encompass, whilst the A level participants adopted very similar terminology in their narratives. Nine of the twelve stated that their chosen course would be "harder" or "more difficult". When prompted to explain, the idea of having to work more independently than at school was an almost constant presence in the narratives, with eight of the A level cohort using this term (and three of them specifically contrasting it to the "spoon feeding" of information provided by teachers at secondary school).

The A level narratives indicated that, for many, this new challenge was a source of worry rather than something to be excited about: Student C had seen her brother "go from getting As at GCSE to Us at A level" and was worried she wouldn't be able to handle the amount of work, whilst Student D echoed this concern and thought that A levels might be "really overwhelming". Student L, like Student C, had been warned by an older sibling and also by her teachers to expect "a big jump from GCSEs to A levels". Student K's cousins had passed on a similar message, suggesting the influence of family and teachers in transmitting opinions that

the A level students then adopted as part of their own narratives in order to reinforce their position as the more academic learners on the more challenging pathway.

By contrast, only one of the BTEC cohort used the word "harder" to define their expectations of their chosen course, with one further participant expecting it to be "tough". Instead, there was a pervading sense of embarking upon a course that would be more suited to their learning needs and styles than the GCSEs they had undertaken at school, with one commenting he was "excited" at the thought of managing his own workload and that he expected his college course to be "better than school", and another saying she expected college to be "welcoming" and the BTEC to be "more enjoyable" than her GCSEs. Much of the enthusiasm across the cohort appeared to be directly linked to the expectation of a more practical, "hands on" style of learning with fewer exams, and the ability to study the subject of their choice in depth.

These examples characterise the two cohorts in their general expectations of their chosen course, with a clearer sense of nervousness that the work would be too demanding espoused during the narratives of the A level learners compared to the excitement expressed by the BTEC students, suggesting the academic pressure had been removed from the vocational cohort once their pathway had been selected.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF POLICY AND OTHER EXISTING DISCOURSES UPON THE CULTURE AND PRACTICE OF STUDYING A PARTICULAR PROGRAMME, AND WHAT EFFECT DOES THIS HAVE ON LEARNER IDENTITIES?

It was notable in the data that two overlapping senses of identity were presented by participants: that of being a college student as opposed to a school pupil, and that of being part of a particular programme as an A level or BTEC student.

A sense of maturity and increased confidence was evident across the data. When discussing how they thought their identities had changed during the transition to college, growing up and maturing was key for many of the participants. Six A level students used the terms "matured" or "more mature", with two more alluding to the same concept in different words: "[college] forces you to grow up" (Student K); "I feel older and wiser than the school kids on the bus…I know more than them as I've had more experience and am on to the next stage of life" (Student L). This distinction between school and college was also highlighted by Student K, who felt that "[at college] you're given more responsibilities, which forces you to grow up…they expect you to be a grown up as soon as you get here, whereas you feel like a child as a high school student".

It was noticeable that whilst the concept of maturity was often linked to academic progression for A level participants ("I've matured as a person as I've adopted a more organised approach to private study" – Student A), this went hand in hand with personal and social development. Student F felt "good about himself" as he had become more sociable and undergone "personal progression as well as academic"; Student D stated she had become "more mature and organised – travelling independently, managing money and deadlines…I can't rely on others, it's just me now". It seems that, for the majority of participants, physical transition to college marked a new, more mature phase of life, even though they had only been in that new environment for a few months, and a distinction had already formed between themselves and "the school kids on the bus". However, some sense of division between different groups of level 3 students was also present: Student G commented (unprompted) on the division at NCFE between A level and vocational students, having seen male students ("boys") play-fighting in the Construction Centre and deciding "it looked like school".

Only two BTEC students specifically used a variant of the word "mature", with many of the others using different phrasing to explain how they felt they had changed in this regard. Student 6 had "grown…I still mess about a bit as I'm very active and sociable, but I've matured a lot both socially and academically", whilst Student 11 commented "I like to think I've grown up a bit since high school". Where the vocational participants diverged most clearly from the A level students in their discussion of maturity was in the emphasis placed on more positive relationships with their teachers; five students alluded to this, with two saying that their teachers treated them more like an adult and implying that by being treated in such a way they were being prepared for life after college: "they phone you about absences rather than your parents – it makes you feel like you've got more responsibilities" (Student 12). Student 9

echoed this positive relationship, saying that "college is a lot different from school, as you get to know your teachers – they're not just a teacher at the front of the class, which is good".

The word "confidence" was used by four A-Level and six vocational participants. The most common interpretation was that the transition to college had given participants greater confidence in talking to new people, emphasising the importance of social as well as academic transition – nine of the ten used the term in this sense. Six of these were vocational students, who made clear links between this attribute and the workplace/future career paths. Student 12, for example, was explicit in linking her greater confidence in "talking to new people and working with new children" to her BTEC course, showing awareness that this would be a useful skill in the workplace, whilst Student 2 had "developed more confidence being forced to meet new people...my social skills have developed" and identified that these would be useful both at university and at work.

Only three of the A level participants spoke of this type of confidence, as exemplified by Student B: "I feel more confident as a person and better at talking to new people...I was shy before but now I'm in small classes and around new people I talk more". This suggests that for A level students, the change of environment has fostered confidence rather than the course itself, albeit facilitated through the smaller, more focused classes; in fact, only one participant (Student H) spoke of feeling more confident in her academic abilities as a result of her chosen course. This seems at odds with the stated purpose of A levels – "the new A levels will be linear qualifications that make sure that students develop the skills and knowledge needed for progression to undergraduate study" (DfE 2014: 4) – and suggests the social process of transitioning from school to college plays an important role in preparing learners for further study, regardless of the course they choose.

The word "practical" was used exclusively by the vocational participants, and seemed to have two different applications for interviewees – "practical" in terms of continuous assessment through assignments rather than summative external examinations, and "practical" in terms of providing skills perceived to be useful in the future workplace. For some, these two aspects were inextricably linked; Students 1 and 2, for example, had chosen a BTEC in Sport and Fitness for similar reasons. Both wanted to work in the sports industry, with Student 1 commenting the "specific", practical "training" provided by the BTEC was a more suitable route than the more "theoretical and academic" A-Level option, whilst Student 2 stated the combination of practical work alongside research activities would allow him to become either a basketball player or teacher depending on how his career worked out.

Such comments were typical in the vocational narratives, which simultaneously displayed an awareness that the non-examined, practical nature of the qualification meant BTECs were viewed as "not as good" (Student 1) or a "cop-out" (Student 9) whilst also defending the value of the capital conferred by such a pathway. Five participants stated one of their motivations for choosing a BTEC was that they were not good at passing examinations: "I was never good at doing tests...the BTEC workload is only hard if you don't keep on top of it" (Student 11). Whilst to some extent this replicates existing social inequalities through BTEC participants' own positioning of themselves in relation to A level students within their narratives, there was also a clear recognition how such a practical qualification might benefit them. Student 6, for example, talked of how a BTEC had "helped" an older friend into a prestigious job in IT, and specifically mentioned the drawbacks of A-Levels where (in his view) "they teach you to pass an exam".

Both cohorts perceived their chosen programme as a form of progression, with three A level and five BTEC students using the words "preparation" or "preparing". Students J and L both talked of college as part of a journey: "things are going smoothly...it's like I'm on a track from school, to college, to uni, preparing me constantly for everything" (Student J). This comment, and the stated intention of all the A level participants to progress to HE, indicates that for these participants the A level is seen as a specific form of preparation and entitlement for university. Student B had chosen A levels as the "best route to university" despite being unsure of her future career path, suggesting she believed this qualification (and her subsequent degree) would provide the generic skills required for any future job she entered.

There was greater variety in the vocational narratives concerning what exactly college was preparing them for. As already discussed above through use of terms like "confidence" and "practical", more BTEC students showed an awareness of the future workplace in their

narratives, some in quite explicit terms: "[a BTEC in ICT] opens the door wider for going into an organisation with more skills" (Student 3). Once again, it is noticeable that vocational qualifications preparing students for the workplace are narrated within these stories as a positive rather than a negative or limiting factor, delivering the skills and knowledge required to acquire a desirable job but also allowing the possibility of going on to further study – Student 2, for example, felt he had developed "good skills" that would be useful both "at uni and at work". Whilst it appears true to at least some extent that A levels prepare students for further academic study whilst vocational qualifications prepare students for the workplace, the picture presented in these narratives is not as clear-cut as traditionally supposed, as discussed further in the conclusions to this paper.

HOW DO STUDENTS ON DIFFERENT ACADEMIC PROGRAMMES NARRATE THEIR EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES, AND IS A SENSE OF COLLECTIVE IDENTITY EVIDENT AMONGST DIFFERENT COHORTS?

Whilst a number of commonalities were identified in the data, most notably linked with the transition to college conferring benefits in terms of social and personal growth, the LITP also found a great deal of diversity amongst each cohort, neither of which emerged as a homogenous group.

This was particularly true of the A level students: despite the participants' evident sense of credentialing, they were actually in reality achieving varying levels of academic success. Student I, resitting her AS year after failing her end of year exams, was forthright about how she had underestimated the level of work required for an A level student to be successful: she had "breezed through GCSEs" and thought she "could do the same at college…I took advantage and went for the social side a bit too much. I was so naïve about it at first and didn't understand the importance of working hard". She admitted this had been "the wrong mentality" and that her first year results were "a shock…I realised I needed to step it up and work harder or I wouldn't get into uni".

Three of the vocational participants had initially chosen to study A levels but had made the decision to drop out and enrol on a vocational course instead – a move that each narrated in very positive terms. For Student 9 the move to a BTEC had simply given him "another chance", whilst for Students 5 and 6 the change of course was narrated in terms which very strongly emphasised the perceived benefits of the vocational pathway for "preparing for the future" (Student 5) and offering a "constant, hands-on, practical style of learning" rather than the "more theoretical A level, where they just teach you to pass an exam…you just regurgitate at the end of the year" (Student 6). In other words, far from simply being a second (and presumably last) chance, the change of course was viewed by these participants as a valuable move in terms of the future benefits it could confer. This aspect of the data also suggests that possessing strong grades at GCSE does not automatically make A levels the most suitable pathway for particular individuals, who might be better suited to vocational courses despite gaining the entry requirements for A levels.

Both learner cohorts elected to focus heavily on the positive social aspects of transition, although a sense of social cohesion was more apparent in the vocational programmes. This sense of collectivity amongst the vocational learners appeared more than just a result of the mechanics of timetabling, and social cohesion emerged as a key part of the culture of studying a BTEC qualification in a particular subject: "some of my closest friends are from the BTEC…they are much better than in high school. They include me – I don't have to do much to be included" (Student 7). Student 11 even credited her new friendship group with a change of attitude and identity: "at the beginning I was a nightmare to tutors and could be rude…I was hanging around with the wrong people. Looking back this wasn't very good. I'm glad I've changed – it's all thanks to them [the rest of her group]".

Despite such comments, there was no indication in the narratives that BTEC students in a particular subject would mix with those from another subject area, suggesting that while vocational learners may espouse similar motivations and experiences of transition, they form a series of homogenous groupings linked to subject areas rather than one larger group comprised of all vocational students: "my BTEC group just clicked…I've still got friends from primary and secondary school too. The three groups don't mix" (Student 5).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The data raise interesting questions of how to conceptualise what it means to be an A level or a BTEC student, and how such conceptualisations impact on the ways in which learners narrate their experiences of transitioning from level 2 to level 3 study. Whilst a number of common ideas emerged in the data across the two cohorts, such as growing in confidence and having more freedom, other points were surprisingly different considering that all participants had studied the same qualification – GCSEs – before moving to college.

The frequent mention of A levels as an academically-superior form of qualification in both sets of narratives appeared to stem from a combination of intrinsic belief and extrinsic approbation from parents and teachers, with the narratives of the A level participants protecting and re-asserting their sense of identity by emphasising their differentness from the other group under consideration – in this case, those perceived as being on the less academic programme. Their similarity with others on the A level programme could only be established by evoking differentiation and creating a boundary that both includes themselves and excludes others (Jenkins 2004). For some participants, this went beyond perceived academic ability to encompass levels of behaviour and maturity, as seen with Student G's comment about "boys" play-fighting in the Construction Centre behaving as if they were still in secondary school. If power is not permanent or undisputed (Fairclough 2015: 94), then "those who hold power at a particular moment have to constantly reassert their power" – even if this assertion may not always appear to be a conscious decision.

Whilst Fairclough (2015) posits that individuals lacking in power may decide to make a bid for it through their discourse, this does not appear to be directly the case in the narratives provided by the vocational learners. Instead, the data suggested a sense of freedom and relief at the different expectations now required from them in comparison with those on the A level pathway, particularly with the removal of examinations as the key means of assessment. This resonates with the vocational learners interviewed in Fuller & Macfadyen's (2011: 96) study, where "students were keen to emphasise a view of themselves as a 'different type of learner', a learner much better suited to college and the courses they have chosen". It was also noticeable that the narratives of the vocational learners created Jenkins' (2004) notion of boundary not through criticism of, or negative comparisons with, the other group (in this case, the A level students) but through an emphasis on unifying factors such as personality and personal and professional interests *within* the cohort, suggesting Tajfel's (1982: 11) belief that "when the group suffers at the same time from low status in the society at large, the strength drawn by its members from its internal and positive social identity may come into conflict with the negative evaluations from 'outside'". This focus on social cohesion was a key theme in the vocational narratives, and may represent an indirect bid for power and recognition of capital by the vocational participants.

Bourdieu's (1986) notion of capital can help understand why different values might be attached to different qualifications that are, in theory, academically equivalent, and by whom. In particular, if cultural capital "is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and which may be institutionalised in the form of educational qualifications" (Bourdieu 1986: 47), it follows that for students entering any given educational field – in this case, the field of 16–19 education – the odds of academic recognition can be automatically restricted or enhanced by the choice of a particular "game" (or educational pathway) conferring a particular kind of cultural capital. In other words, educational fields are not level playing surfaces, particularly since it is capital that makes "the games of society…something other than simple games of chance offering at every moment the possibility of a miracle" (Bourdieu 1986: 46). As noted, a literature review conducted as a pilot study to the LITP (Gregory 2012) found that A levels were recognised as being superior to other level 3 qualifications in a range of literatures and popular discourses, suggesting this particular educational choice currently carries higher value in terms of the cultural capital it can confer, along with recognition that those entering the A level pathway may already possess more cultural capital as a result of their academic success at school. However, the objectified nature of this form of cultural capital means that values are not fixed, and instead are modified as cultural tastes adapt and change, offering the potential for a shift in any given field.

This perception of certain qualifications as being more desirable than others suggests that a particular game is in play in the field of 16–19 education, where academic choices carry far greater significance than a simple decision based on personal preferences. The findings presented in this article, however, suggest that the "rules of the game" (Bourdieu 2004: 64) may be beginning to change. The findings of the LITP contradict existing research suggesting vocational learners have lower expectations than their more "academic" counterparts, such as Fuller & Macfadyen's (2011) findings that from a cohort of 40 vocational students across two FE colleges, only two had any aspiration to go on to HE. Similarly, Ball et al.'s (1999) findings that only A levels offered a well-trodden route into HE are contradicted in the data presented here, with a clear sense of trajectory outlined in the vocational learner narratives both in terms of further study and future career prospects. Thus, the findings of the LITP are in line with data suggesting the status of vocational qualifications is changing, with more than a third of employers valuing vocational and academic qualifications equally (CBI/Pearson 2015), and with more learners entering HE with vocational qualifications than previously (HEFCE 2015). Such changes take time, and at present still come with caveats; more A level applicants are admitted to university than those with BTECs (UCAS 2021), and BTEC students are more likely to attend a post-92 institution (see, for example, Shields & Masardo 2015).

Whilst it is evident, however, that the LITP's participants were at least partly aware of the perceived value of their academic choices and of the discourses that exist around particular qualifications, the data also suggest some young people are beginning to construct new narratives around their educational choices that have the potential to modify the existing values attached to academic and vocational qualifications. In this way, transition from level 2 to level 3 study has the potential to remain a time of exciting opportunity both socially and academically, offering possibilities for positive changes in identity as well as challenges.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study focused on a relatively small sample of 24 students in one single location, and as such cannot claim to be representative of the population of level 3 learners. As a case study however, the research aims to be illustrative and provide insight into the views of learners at a particular place at a particular time rather than making claims to be representative of a wider population. I am also aware that in interviewing participants on different study pathways, I may be contributing to a sense of divide between qualifications. However, the use the same three open questions for all participants aimed to minimise this by allowing participants to talk freely about their experiences and self-select the aspects they wished to present in their interviews.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

As this research formed part of a doctoral programme, participants were not asked to give consent for their data to be made widely available and thus data has not been made accessible for this publication.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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