

Student Transition into Higher Education: Exploring BTEC Sport and Exercise Students Forthcoming Transition to Higher Education Taught within a Further Education Setting

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Abstract

As of March 2017, 241 Further Education (FE) colleges were delivering Higher Education (HE) qualifications, with the majority of students enrolled on courses such as Foundation Degrees (FDs). FDs prove to be a popular choice amongst those entering HE from non-traditional backgrounds. Consequently, it is important that we explore and understand this student demographic. The aim of this research is to explore BTEC Level 3 sport and exercise students' thoughts, feelings and perceptions on their forthcoming transition to HE, delivered in an FE setting. The findings identified three key themes: differences are expected between the academic levels and students must make changes to meet the perceived demands; progressing to a FD is an anxious process and many barriers exist; students progress onto FDs for a multitude of reasons. A series of recommendations and guidelines have been created, which enable FE organisations to further support and improve the transitional process for HE students, and universities to better understand expectations and the needs of those students that transition to FD courses at partner organisations.

Key words: Higher Education, Further Education, Transition, Foundation Degrees, Retention, BTEC.

Introduction

Undergraduate courses, other than first degrees are seemingly more popular in the United Kingdom (U.K.) than ever before, in fact as of March 2017 there were 241 Further Education colleges (FECs) delivering Higher Education (HE) qualifications (HEFCE, 2017). Foundation degrees (FDs) in particular are a popular choice amongst those entering HE from non-traditional backgrounds (HEFCE, 2007). In 2015-16, FE organisations reported that 160,915 students were registered, or were expected to register, on sub-degree level HE programmes, which is an increase of 3,750 from 2011-12 (Universities U.K., 2017).

FDs specifically, were introduced in 2001 as specialist, vocationally focused qualifications, which had stronger links to employers and more work-based provision than the existing associate professional and higher technical Higher National Diplomas and Certificates (HND/Cs) (Edmond, Hillier & Price, 2007; Pike, 2008). Whilst HE institutions (HEIs) often validate FDs, the expansion and delivery of FD provision has largely been provided by the English FE sector (HEFCE, 2007). In fact, 75% of the FD entrants in the U.K. are enrolled on programmes delivered at FECs, 19% are on programmes delivered at post-1992 HEIs, and pre-1992 HEIs account for only 7% of entrants (Universities U.K., 2017).

The FD study pathway tends to attract students from non-traditional backgrounds, with less than one-third of students progressing from the traditional A-Level route to a FD (Craig, 2009; Simm *et al.*, 2015). Hoelscher *et al.* (2008) believes that these students, who perhaps did not have access to HE in the past, now regularly progress from these non-traditional backgrounds, often from popular Level 3 vocational courses, such as Pearson's Business & Technology Education Council (BTEC) programmes and National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), amongst others.

"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)

Hatt and Baxter (2003) assert that students entering HE with vocationally-orientated qualifications will have experience of their assessments being centred around tasks with a more practical/occupational focus, and as a result the skills, expectations and experience that these non-traditional students bring to HE will differ significantly from those of the 'traditional' A-Level entrants (Gill, 2017). Therefore, it is natural to surmise that popular FD courses, such as sport and exercise related subjects, will recruit students from FECs and non-traditional backgrounds, such as Pearson BTEC courses. Pearson (2017) states that 61% of students who complete their 2-year BTEC extended diploma course progress on to pursue a higher degree in a sport and exercise related discipline, with a large percentage of these students progressing to FDs.

Vocationally educated students perceive that they will encounter specific issues when transitioning into academic education (Gill, 2018) and there appears to be a diverse expectation amongst students of the type of experiences that academic study will provide, despite being positive about the transition to HE. Consequently, it cannot just be assumed that students progressing from popular vocational BTEC courses to more academically focused FD courses will have a similar transition experience to other student cohorts, such as those from more traditional backgrounds, for example A-Level entrants (Hatt & Baxter, 2003). With more students entering HE from typically non-traditional backgrounds (Craig, 2009; Simm *et al.*, 2015), it is important that we explore and understand this student cohort to better support the student body in their transition.

The aim of this research is to explore BTEC Level 3 sport and exercise students' thoughts, feelings and perceptions on their forthcoming transition to HE, undertaking a FD course in a FEC. It is anticipated that the findings will highlight students' reasons for choosing to study HE in a FE setting, students expectations of FD courses, and the key barriers faced by this specific student body. The insight will allow guidelines and recommendations to be formed on supporting and improving the transitional process for students progressing from a vocational BTEC background to study in HE. The findings can serve as a guide for FECs to better support students progressing to FD courses at their institutions, hopefully reducing attrition, and improving retention and overall student satisfaction of future cohorts. Furthermore, the guidelines and recommendations will enable universities, and specifically sport and exercise related departments, to better understand expectations and the needs

of those students that transition onto FD courses at partner organisations. Similar to Gill (2017; 2018) and Pike and Harrison (2011), it is hoped that the results will not only have internal generalisability to other subject areas, but also external generalisability across other educational sectors.

Further Context

There has been great emphasis within U.K. educational policy on widening access and improving participation in HE, while providing graduates with relevant employability skills (Goodship & Jacks, 2007). FDs attempt to widen the access of HE to include a more diverse student group that increasingly includes individuals from lower socio-cultural backgrounds, mature students, people in full-time employment and those with limited scope for geographical mobility (Herrera, Brown & Portlock, 2015). To make HE more accessible to these non-traditional demographics, and promote the employer led ethos of FDs, 'The Dearing Report' recommended that future growth in sub-degree provision should be delivered by FECs, thus providing the appropriate platform for the delivery of HE in a FE setting (Huntington, 2009); for note HE delivered in FE is termed by some as Further Higher Education (DfES, 2004). FDs can provide a progression route to honours degrees (DfEE, 2000), which is deemed a useful mechanism in enabling students to top-up their FD and gain a full honours degree, with a further period of study which is usually equivalent to one-year (full-time) at an HEI/FEC (Greenbank, 2008); these students are often termed 'direct-entrants'.

Student transition to HE courses delivered in a FE setting is something that occurs on a large-scale, evidenced by the fact that as of March 2017 there were 241 FECs delivering HE qualifications (HEFCE, 2017). However, it appears that the field is under-conceptualised from a research perspective and the research that exists is largely small-scale, lacking comprehension (Briggs *et al.*, 2012). Penketh and Goddard (2008) support this viewpoint, stating that research focusing on the transition of specific demographics to HE is relatively small. The research conducted around the progression of students from FE courses to HE amounts to only a handful of relevant articles exploring the pathway, and none from a conceptualised subject specific standpoint, such as this research.

Of the noteworthy research, the focus is predominantly upon the transition of direct-entrants to an HEI. Bogdan and Elliott's (2015) research into direct-entrants transition to a final year degree top-up course highlighted that students who use an HEI to achieve their full honours degree show greater engagement with their course and subject discipline than other students. That said, the findings of Simm et al. (2011) alluded that FD students who previously studied at a FEC were less likely to be as successful, when compared those students that studied on a FD at an HEI. Pike and Harrison's (2011) research states that this direct-entrant pathway generates its own specific anxieties for transitioning students and that interventions should be put in place to ensure a smoother and less anxious transition process into an HEI. Gill's (2017) research into the retrospective transitional experiences of university students who had progressed from a FEC, found similar results to Pike and Harrison (2011), with students requiring more support during the transitional process due to anxiety surrounding studying an HE related course and the increase of academic difficulty. Gill's (2018) subsequent research on the transition of students from vocational education and training (VET) courses to HE, identified that there are challenges for students transitioning to HE and that students undergo very diverse experiences when transitioning (Gill, 2017; Pike & Harrison, 2011). It is important to note that Gill's (2018) findings facilitated the need for this piece of research. With the nature of his research exploring transitional experiences of different student bodies to HE, it was apparent that the research in the area focused predominantly upon direct-entrants progressing to an HEI, highlighting an obvious gap in the literature. With FDs at FECs being popular and offering a diversity of experience, as well as serving as an important vehicle for the promotion of widening participation and employability (Simm *et al.*, 2011), it was deemed purposeful to explore the demographic that progresses to a FD in the first instance. Thus, the current study aims to explore BTEC Level 3 sport and exercise students' thoughts, feelings and perceptions on their forthcoming transition to HE, undertaking a FD course in a FE setting.

Method

The design of the research was grounded on the requirement to develop an in-depth understanding of student's thoughts, feelings and perceptions about their

forthcoming transition to HE, studying a FD delivered in a FE setting (HEFCE, 2007; U.K. Higher Education, 2017). For this reason, grounded-theory was utilised, providing an inductive approach within a qualitative methodological framework to effectively listen to the student voice and capture the reality of the cohort's forthcoming transition (Cresswell, 1998; Gill, 2017; Gill, 2018).

Having received institutional ethical approval, focus groups were utilised to collect the data. Focus groups allow participants to express and convey their views and feelings around specific subjects, whilst explicitly interacting within a group (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013). The group interaction required in the focus groups should imitate familiar settings for students from sport and exercise backgrounds because they will be used to small group work and team-work principles, therefore, this will hopefully allow students to be comfortable and permit multiple opinions and perspectives to be discussed in a fun and relaxed manner (Krueger, 2014).

The key discussion themes were arranged in a topical format to explore a range of perspectives, whilst extracting appropriate data to meet the outcomes of the research. The number of discussion themes were limited (n=8) to encourage participants to share more in-depth and personal thoughts and feelings on the subject (Krueger, 2014). The themes were selected by the researcher as key aspects to discuss. Due to the small amount of research focusing upon perceptions of forthcoming educational transitions, the themes were loosely informed by Pike and Harrison's (2011) research, and more recently Gill's (2017; 2018) research into student transition.

The participants were recruited from a cohort of BTEC Level 3 students, enrolled on a sport and exercise vocational course at a FEC. The participants were asked to volunteer and the criteria for selection of volunteers was that they were over 18 years of age to safeguard both participants and researcher, enrolled on a BTEC Level 3 sport and exercise course at a FEC, and had applied to study a FD in the next academic year. Twenty-three students met the selection criteria requirements and ultimately 21 students volunteered to participate in one of three focus groups that were conducted over the duration of a day (male-female ratio= 10:11, mean age= 18.48, SD= 0.43). Krueger (2014) suggests that 6-8 participants is optimal in focus groups to ensure that there is depth, detail and richness to the data collected. The collective duration of the focus groups was 2 hour 13 minutes, averaging 44 minutes

each. The focus groups were video-recorded to minimise any difficulties in recall and help identify specific participants when transcribing the data verbatim (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). According to Longhurst (2003), video-recordings allow the facilitator to focus fully on the interaction of the participants and not to feel pressured by making notes during the focus groups.

The transcribed data was analysed using thematic analysis to identify key themes and categorise the data, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Similar studies in the field have utilised thematic analysis due to its logical nature of grouping and categorising key data to highlight trends and relationships (Bogdan & Elliott, 2015; Gill, 2018; Gill, 2017; Pike & Harrison, 2011). The Gratton and Jones (2010) framework for undertaking coding was followed with relevant statements initially assigned a code, these codes were then placed into first order categories, and finally key themes were formed.

Findings and Discussion

The research was undertaken to investigate and obtain a better understanding of the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of sport and exercise students on their forthcoming transition into HE within a FE setting. The findings have been used to synthesise a series of practical recommendations and guidelines to inform educational institutions of the specific requirements of this demographic. The findings will be highly relevant for FECs around understanding, supporting and managing BTEC Level 3 student transition to their HE provision. Furthermore, HEIs, and their sport and exercise departments, will be able to better understand expectations and the needs of those students that transition to FD courses at partner colleges, providing an insight into this non-traditional demographic utilising this relatively contemporary entry route into HE. Specific action based on the guidelines and recommendations developed from this study may help increase recruitment, reduce student attrition, improve retention, and increase overall student satisfaction across the educational sectors.

There were a diverse range of themes that emerged from the results, however, there was a large degree of commonality within the responses. The findings suggest that students studying on BTEC Level 3 sport and exercise related courses perceive the

step-up to a FD to be a significant and anxious process, with many changes required in order to be successful. The data analysis elicited 264 significant statements in total, which were categorised into fifty-three data codes, subsequently grouped into nine first order themes, and culminating in three key themes. These key themes were: students progress onto a FD for a multitude of reasons; progressing to a FD is an anxious process and many barriers exist; differences are expected between the academic levels and students must make changes to meet the perceived demands. The findings of this study are illustrated in Figure 1 and each of the key themes is discussed in the subsequent sub-sections.

Students Progress onto a Foundation Degree for a Multitude of Reasons

There were a multitude of factors surrounding the BTEC Level 3 students' choice to progress to HE delivered in a FE setting. Students shared thoughts and opinions on their forthcoming progression to a FD and the variation of responses may in some way be attributed to the demographically diverse group of students commonly found in these cohorts (Stephens, Hamedani & Destin, 2014). Interestingly, a few used this opportunity to discuss their decision to study a FD at a college instead of progressing on to a course at an HEI, like some of their peers. A student noted:

“...I have decided to stay here [FEC] and study because I know everybody here. I know the staff, I know the people...I'm familiar with the environment, the college...A couple of my friends are doing it [the FD] so I might as well do the course too.”

The social factors that facilitate students' decisions to progress to HE appear to be strong amongst vocationally based students. The friendships and rapport that students develop with both staff and peers in the FE setting are key reasons why students choose to remain in a FE setting for HE. Collings, Swanson and Watkins (2014) identified that peer support is key to the wellbeing, integration and retention of students in HE. Similarly, Maunder (2017) found that students who report a strong attachment to their peers also demonstrated higher levels of adjustment to life in HE and attachment to their institution, whilst students who reported difficulties in their relationships with other students had lower levels of peer attachment and adjustment to their new course. Therefore, the desire to follow peers into HE

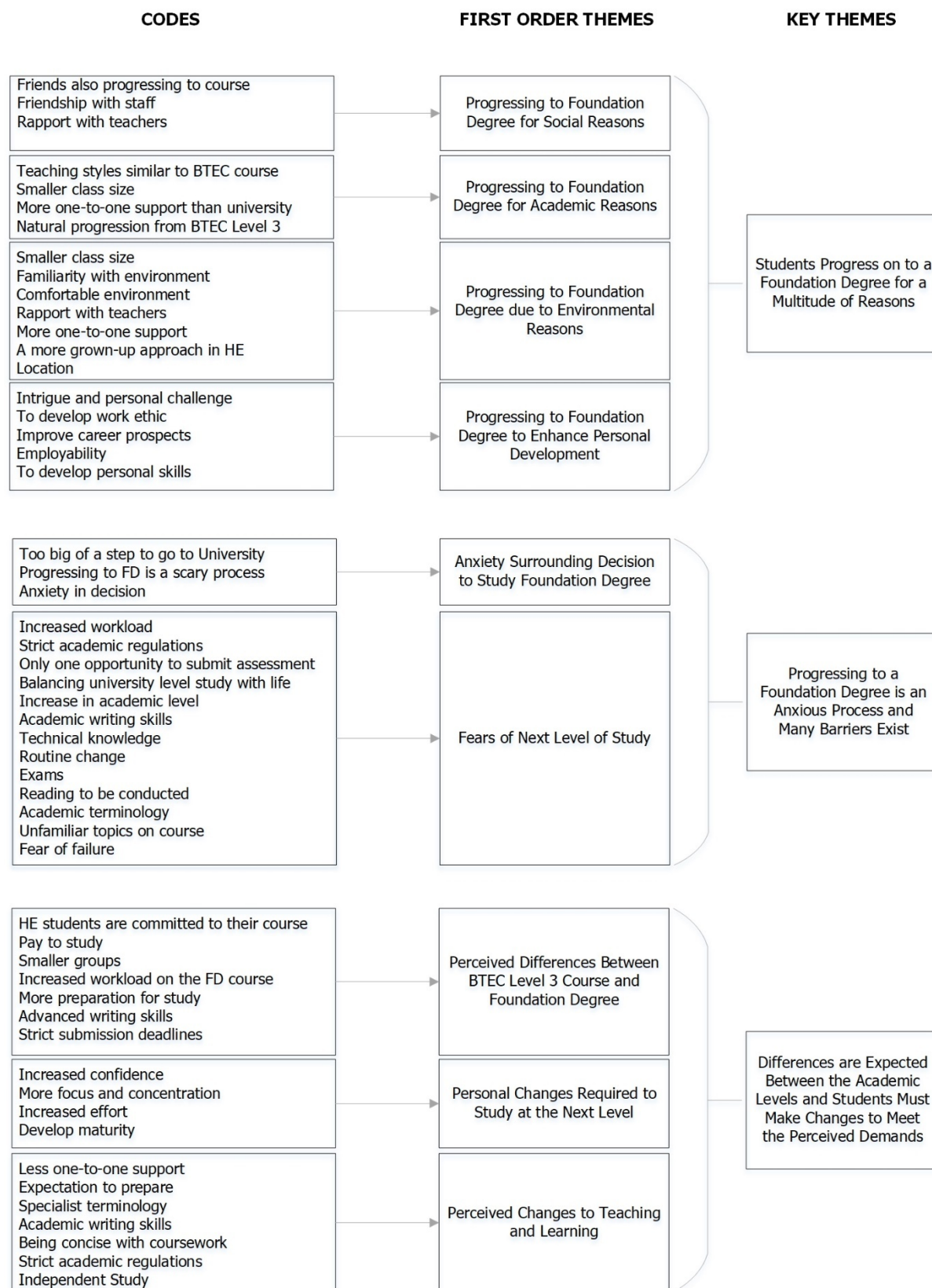


Figure 1. The thoughts, feelings and perceptions of BTEC Level 3 sport and exercise students on their forthcoming transition to HE delivered in a FE setting

because of social attachments may be directly beneficial to the integration and success of these students.

Academic and environmental reasons were also prevalent amongst students' reasons for progressing to study HE in a FE setting. Factors such as teaching styles, one to one support, and smaller class sizes were common amongst the respondents. For example, students noted:

"It makes perfect sense to keep going [to FEC] because I know everybody...how they deliver lessons and they are very supportive of us... I will also get more support in smaller classes compared to uni."

"... it is close to my house, my friends go there and I know the place... I am familiar with how the teachers work... Why would I consider anything else at this point?"

The findings support Hoelscher et al. (2008), who found that the importance of familiarity when making decisions on where to study HE was substantially higher at a FE college (over 80% of students). Gill (2018) identified the notion of smaller class sizes and the perception that there is less support at a university as key motivating factors for students to continue to study in familiar academic environments. The distinct differences in the approach that vocational and academic education adopt to plan and deliver their curricula, and the systems in which they employ appear to be significant factors in a student's choice of where to study HE (Bandias *et al.*, 2011).

Furthermore, the findings highlighted that students have chosen to study a FD to enhance their personal development. The challenge of HE courses, and the subsequent development of a work ethic and personal skills were perceived to improve future career prospects. These findings were synonymous with those of Gill (2018) and Holmegaard et al. (2014), who identified that personal development was one of the key contributory factors to students progressing into HE. Moreover, Kaye and Bates (2017) suggest that the choice to study HE is largely motivated by career opportunities associated with degree-level education. When considered in conjunction with the findings of Oreopoulos and Petronijevic (2013), it appears that students perceive the investment in an HE level qualification to be proportionate to the earnings premium associated with a degree-level education.

Progression to a Foundation Degree is an Anxious Process and Many Barriers Exist

The findings identified that there were feelings of nerves, worry and apprehension associated with students' decision to study a FD degree. Students spoke of specific anxieties surrounding the transition to degree-level education:

"I will stay here [at FEC] to do my Foundation Degree because it is too big of a step to go to university... I know this place so why would I stress myself out with uni?... Still worries me though..."

"It is scary going on to a Foundation Degree, I don't know what is required of me... Will I be able to cope with the course [level]?... What if I fail?"

Gill's (2017) research on the transition of students to an HEI from a FEC found similar results, with students deeming the process of transitioning to HE as an anxious process. It appears that regardless of whether the students are progressing to an HEI or not, the thought of progressing to a new course at a higher academic level generates its own anxiety. Pinheiro (2004) believes that the transition to HE level education is a difficult process because of the simultaneous educational, ecological and developmental changes faced by students. This may have been evident in the findings, where the first order theme of 'Fears Surrounding the Next Level of Study' encompassed the largest number of data-codes (n=13) of any emerging theme.

A source of anxiety for students was the perception that transition to an academic course at a higher academic level would result in increased workload. Specific academic skills, such as referencing, reading and writing were also a cause for concern. A student noted:

"I hope that its not as hard as I think... I'm not great at writing [academically] and I've never referenced anything that hasn't been copied and pasted from the 'net'."

These findings are similar to those of Gill (2018) where students were anxious about the increase in academic level and the strict academic policies and regulations that govern HE, as well as the assessment procedures. Both Christensen and Eyring (2011) and Gill (2018) suggest this phenomenon could be attributed to the changing

standards of awarding bodies, with Pearson BTEC having their own set of vocational oriented standards and measures for educational performance and universities having their own divergent academically focused standards related to educational performance. Bandias et al. (2011) allude to this, highlighting that there are distinct differences in the approach that FE and HE plan and deliver their curricula, and the systems in which they employ. Therefore, the students perceived differences of the somewhat tangible gap between the two educational sectors may add more pressure and anxiety to the transitional process (Gill, 2017). In fact, Gill (2017) further identified that academic skills were a source of anxiety for prospective students, stating that writing styles, referencing, word-limits, and proof-reading were key standards that were different between students HEI and FEC experience, where there was an acknowledged leniency with academic standards in FE compared to HE. However, Wilkins et al. (2013) counters this notion of FE having more lenient standards, stating that with the emergence and popularity of HE and FE partnerships in recent times, FE is increasingly delivering higher levels of education that can often rival HEIs.

Students also mentioned their fears surrounding how they would be assessed, specifically discussing traditional examinations.

“... the reason I chose a BTEC is because there were less exams than A-Level’s... if there are a lot of exams on the degree then I’m in trouble...”

Whilst BTEC courses limit the number of examinations as part of their assessment strategy due to the vocational and skill-based focus of their qualifications, HE has a very different, more traditional assessment focus. 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 & Eyring, 2011). However, in recent times HE has undergone somewhat of a revolution, moving further away from the traditional and towards more student-centred assessment formats, such as portfolios and project work (Flores *et al.*, 2015). Tam (2014) deems this paradigm shift away from traditional philosophy, structure and framework to a more student-centred approach as a way to create and sustain an effective learning environment, where the teacher is implicit and acts to facilitate learning. Here the emphasis is on what the students

are expected to be able to do at the end of the learning experience, not how well they can absorb taught material, which is a skill predominantly required for examinations. Despite this more contemporary approach to learning being adopted by some in HE, examinations are still used routinely throughout academia for summative assessment purposes. As a result, students are anxious about these methods of assessment, with traditional written examinations perceived as not being fair or effective for learning by students who are assessed in this manner (Flores *et al.*, 2015), let alone those students that are not familiar with this type of assessment method, such as BTEC students.

The findings identified that the fear of failure was significant amongst students; it manifested itself in anxiety and trepidation about the transition to HE. Morgan and Sisak (2016) describe that fear of failure may be a form of loss aversion and for those students harbouring such fears, failures weigh more heavily than successes. Both of which are measured relative to some reference point, which in this instance may be the unknown of a more academic focused education. Whilst little information exists that focuses on students and fear of failure, within entrepreneurship the effect of fear of failure on entry decisions is unambiguously negative. Therefore, if commonalities exist, a higher fear of failure may discourage entry into HE for students studying sport and exercise courses. Sogunro (2014) counters this notion, whilst supporting the fact that the anxieties and fear of failure that students bring into the classroom can sometimes be unnecessary baggage, these traits can also have great motivational potential to allow a student to succeed. Students are clearly aspirational about their education and employability, whilst it is natural to have some doubts surrounding new experiences and environments, the students are positive about improving their prospects by studying a FD. This reflects Gill's (2018) findings, where students perceive the benefits of studying for a higher-level qualification clearly outweigh the anxieties surrounding the transition.

Differences are Expected Between the Academic Levels and Students Must Make Changes to Meet the Perceived Demands

A perception exists that there will be significant differences between the two educational environments, with students having to make substantial changes to ensure a successful transition from FE to HE. Students spoke of specific changes that they personally feel they would have to make:

"... I'm going to have to show more commitment to the course... I will pay for the degree, so I've got to be more dedicated and try harder"

"This will be the first time that I'll have to pay for my education, I don't want to go into debt, but I know I will benefit in the future. ... I have to make sure that I turn up and work hard because lots of reading, writing, deadlines, referencing... it will be hard, no doubt"

This notion of paying to study, possibly for the first time in a student's educational journey, appears to be a crucial motivator for students to make specific changes to their habits and work ethic. Walsh, Cullinan and Flannery (2018) state that students are willing to pay for education and that the students' academic ability is a key factor in the level of education studied. Higher ability students are willing to pay considerably more fees for higher-quality institutions, compared to lower ability students. Many students progressing from FE are considered non-traditional entrants to HE, therefore, they may possibly be from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Yorke & Thomas, 2003). These constraints may inform their choice of HE studies, with FDs being a considerably cheaper option to students than an undergraduate degree at an HEI. It could be argued that there is less-risk for students from both a personal and financial perspective by choosing to study HE in a FE setting. Bachan (2014) supports this assertion, stating that the higher a student discounts future income, the greater their expected debt, and the more risk averse a student, the lower the expected debt.

It is evident students perceive there will be a host of differences between their Level 3 BTEC study and that of a FD, with many of these related to teaching and learning. There is a perception that there are specific demands undertaking a HE course, such as a significantly increased workload, as well as an increased amount of preparation and research to adequately prepare for lessons. Students noted,

"... there will be lots more work on the Foundation Degree course. I will have to read a lot more books and prepare for lessons... it will be different to what I'm used to"

"I've got to be switched on. ... its [HE] different... more preparation, more deadlines, and tighter rules means that I must focus from the beginning, so I don't fall behind"

Student workload has been recognised as a major factor that influences the quality of learning (Giles, 2007; Kyndt *et al.*, 2011). With transitioning students, this perceived increase in workload could be very real and have a significant impact early in their course due to the developmental changes highlighted by Pinheiro (2004). Therefore, the quality of learning could also be impacted due to the sheer volume of new information that transitioning students will be subjected to in a new academic environment, such as academic regulations, as well as the specific research that will need to be conducted around their subject (Kyndt *et al.*, 2014).

Gill (2017) believed that it is normal for transitioning students to notice and feel a tangible change in academic differences between the largely vocational systems in FE, compared to the more academically rigorous HE systems. Gill (2018) identified that many of the perceived differences come in the form of specific course related processes, with similar findings from VET students transitioning to HE, where workload, assessment deadlines, academic writing and the amount of independent study were perceived as potential challenges to transitioning students. The differences between FE environments and HE environments lead to the comparison of courses from a difficulty perspective. Gill (2017) found that students believed their HE studies were more difficult than their previous FE studies. This phenomenon may be explained somewhat by the varying academic levels commonly delivered on courses, with BTECs commonly being Level 2 and 3 qualifications, and FDs being Level 4 and 5 higher qualifications. Also, it is important to note that the issue might not be the academic level of study and could possibly be the change in learning environment from a vocationally based qualification to a more academic oriented course that utilises different policy and regulations.

Unfortunately, there are distinct gaps between the systems utilised in FE environments and HE academic systems (Gill, 2017). Tranter and Warn (2003) suggest that action is required to bridge the gap between the differing educational systems, possibly bringing the two closer together. Gill (2017) opined that FE colleges have a responsibility to prepare their students for either employment, or further study, suggesting that it would be good practice for awarding bodies of Level 3 qualifications to incorporate and emphasise academic guidelines into their vocational qualifications. A soft implementation of key academic regulations, such as varying the assessment formats, adopting different writing styles and attempting to

introduce a wider-range of reading and referencing, would be directly beneficial to their own students' development and progression into HE, which is increasingly being delivered in-house in the form of FDs. The 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 is definitely something that requires further exploration/action.

Conclusions and Proposed Guidelines

This research provides a much-needed exploration of the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of BTEC Level 3 sport and exercise students and their forthcoming transition to HE, delivered in a FE setting. The students perceived that there would be barriers affecting their progression and transition to an HE course, as well as specific personal changes required to be successful, regardless of whether the course is delivered at a university or FEC. Despite this, the progressing body of students were still highly motivated to study an HE course, reflecting Kaye and Bates (2017) findings, where the reason for choosing to study in HE is largely motivated by career opportunities associated with degree-level education, albeit sub-degree level education in this instance.

It was apparent that students who will soon undergo the transition from FE to HE, find it an anxious period, regardless of whether the students are progressing to a university, or not. Commonalities appear to exist between this study's findings and the research on student transition by Gill (2017; 2018), where the thought of progressing to a new course at a higher academic level generates its own specific anxiety. The nervousness, worry and apprehension regarding the transition centred around a perception that transition to a course at a higher academic level would result in an increase in workload, as well as the unknown commodity of the academic standards that will be required in HE.

A series of largely practical guidelines and recommendations have been formed from the investigation to improve the support and transition of students progressing from BTEC Level 3 sport and exercise courses to FD courses, delivered at FECs. It is hoped that these recommendations and guidelines will help better support the student body that transition in this manner. Personnel from universities who manage the transition

of sport and exercise students may also use the guidelines and recommendations to support partner organisations in providing optimal conditions for effective transition, thus hopefully increasing retention, student achievement and satisfaction of students. The guidelines and recommendations are as follows:

- The social factors and friendships with both staff and peers in the FE setting are key reasons why students stay at the FEC for HE. Therefore, familiarity with the HE teaching staff during their FE studies may be highly beneficial in retaining FE students for HE programmes. This could be facilitated by integrating HE teaching staff into the BTEC Level 3 teaching curricula so that FE students can start developing these important relationships with key personnel at an early stage.
- The thought of progressing to a new course at a higher academic level generates its own anxiety. One of the main sources of anxiety for students is a perceived increase in workload and the academic skills required in HE. Utilising workshops and/or bridging courses for prospective students to close the gap between FE and HE, from a policy and regulations perspective, may help to reduce anxiety and introduce students to academic skills prior to studying a HE course.
- If VET qualifications incorporated and emphasised soft implementation of key academic standards and guidelines into their Level 3 qualifications, such as stringent assessment deadlines, specific academic writing styles, independent research and other academic oriented study skills, it would benefit their students' development and further prepare them for transition to HE.
- The perceived differences between Level 3 BTEC courses and FDs are largely centred on teaching and learning related aspects of the courses. A perceived fear of the unknown could be somewhat remedied by the implementation of a robust induction programme/introductory module prior to the course starting, further bridging the gap. This may prepare students more adequately for their transition to academic study prior to being expected to implement specific academic skills into summative assessment.

- The university which validates FE partners to deliver FDs needs to have a greater responsibility in supporting students at the partner organisations. University departments and staff may be best utilised supporting the delivery of the courses and implementation of academic standards in a more hands-on manner to ensure FD students have a smoother transition to their HE studies.
- If HE staff had more of a presence within the FE setting and course delivery at a FEC, through outreach and engagement activities, it may provide increased social identity amongst prospective students and the university. At present, too large a divide remains between FE and HE, regardless of whether they are being delivered at the same organisation, or not.

This research focused upon the transition of sport and exercise students from a single U.K. educational institution. It can be argued that such an approach, using data from a single institution, has the merit of removing the effects of inter-institution heterogeneity. While the analysis presented may offer important information, guidelines and recommendations on the transition of students that are likely to be reflected in most comparable U.K. institutions, it is acknowledged that some of the results presented may not be generalisable to the broader U.K. student population. It would be interesting to see if these results generalise to other universities and for students on different degree programmes across the U.K. HE sector. It would also be interesting to see if these results extend to A-Level students contemplating progressing to HE, and whether or not their thoughts, feelings and perceptions correlate with this study's findings. These recommendations will hopefully provide fruitful avenues for further research in the future.

Disclosure Statement

The author declares that they have no conflicts of interest.

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