'Transitions to Higher Education: The case of students with Vocational background'

Abstract

The paper examines the ways transitions to Higher Education are experienced and narrated by students with Vocational qualifications. Drawing upon the mixed-method project that documented transitions to HE, we utilise interview data to illustrate the centrality of the epistemic and pedagogical struggles that students with vocational background experience. More specifically, a process of differential epistemic positioning is evident in the participants' narratives. This manifests itself through a misrecognition of their worth in the field of HE. Further, pedagogical struggles were also narrated by the participants in relation to the teaching, learning and assessment regimes prevailing in HEIs. The paper concludes by arguing for the need to revisit the narrow and static policy framing that emphasises barriers to access. This requires addressing questions pertaining to pedagogy and knowledge, students' completion and retention rates and their ongoing engagement with the epistemic and pedagogical processes once they are within HE.

Introduction

This paper seeks to unpack the transitions to Higher Education (HE) of one significant and under-researched segment of the student body, those holding Vocational Education and Training (VET) qualifications. Progression of students from vocational pathways through the upper secondary education and training system has been a significant contributor to the expansion of HE in the UK and other countries (Hippach-Schneider et al. 2017; Hoelschler et al 2008; Moodle 2008; Pring et al. 2008; UCAS[i] 2015). Given that these students are more likely to come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds compared to those progressing through academic routes, their participation in HE is believed to fuel social mobility and contribute to reduction in social inequality (Britton et al. 2016; Crawford et al. 2016; Vignoles and Murray 2016).

A fundamental precondition for achieving these equity policy goals is the successful completion of HE studies. Evidence from the UK, however, shows that students progressing to HE from vocational pathways have significantly higher attrition rates in comparison with students progressing from academic pathways (Hoelschler et al 2008; Hayward and Hoelschler 2011) This effect is moderated by the composition of the student body. For example, attrition rates for students with VET background are negatively correlated with the proportion of students in a Higher Education Institution (HEI) with such a background (Hayward and Hoelschler, 2011, Shields and Masardo 2015).

Reaching an improved understanding of the possible factors contributing to these increased attrition rates conceptually requires the capability to deal with differences in attrition rates both between student groups and between HEIs. This requires the need for a dynamic approach that enables detailed examination of student-institution interactions. To that end, we utilise the notion of *transitional friction* as a conceptual tool to capture the ongoing tensions and difficulties that students with VET qualifications encounter in the HE field. The following section unpacks the conceptual and methodological framework of the study upon which the paper is based. We then examine the participants' accounts of transitions to HE with emphasis on the epistemic and pedagogical frictions that they experience.

Conceptual framework

In adopting a dynamic, interactional approach to understanding transitions to HE, we use the metaphor of *transitional friction* to make sense of and capture the multi-layered struggles, conflicts and tensions that are integral to the process of transitioning. *Transitional friction* as a conceptual tool, we argue, helps us overcome the rather static view of processes implied by the metaphor of *barriers* that dominates the *Widening Participation* policy discourse. At a descriptive level, the degree of *transitional frictions* is indicated by the conditional probability of making the transition to and successfully completing HE. The challenge is to explain the relative size of such conditional probabilities for students progressing through different pathways and to different HEIs.

Potentially, a range of factors, both individual and organizational, could affect the magnitude of transitional frictions for a particular student or a group of students (cf Attewell, Heil and Reisel 2011; Bean and Metzner 1985; Bowen et al. 2009; Braxton 2000; Braxton et al. 2014; Goldrick-Rab and Pfeffer 2009; Nora, Barlow and Crisp, 2005; Seidman 2005; Tinto 1987; 1993; Turner 2004). Scholars adopting a Bourdieusian framework have tried to explain HE non-completion primarily as a function of the degree of alignment between an individual and *institutional habitus* (Reay et al. 2005; Thomas 2002; Quinn 2004). More specifically, within the literature on HE transitions individual habitus is typically grounded in a learners' socio-economic background and the comparison is between those from more and less advantaged backgrounds. However, such a conceptualisation cannot explain why students progressing to HE via a vocational pathway are significantly less likely to complete their first year of study compared to those with a similar socio-economic background progressing via an academic pathway (Hayward and Hoelschler, 2011). Further, this approach pays insufficient attention to the complexity of the negotiations taking place between learners and institutions over time, and the multi-level nested hierarchy of HE provision. Thus, we need an explanation for the higher non-completion rates of students with vocational background that goes beyond individual/institutional habitus as conventionally construed in research on HE progression. This is not to argue that the Bourdieusian conceptual tool-kit - capital, field, habitus - is not useful, but that it needs to be applied in the way intended 'by making the concepts work in the context of the data and the research settings' (Reay 2004, 431).

Arguably, an explanation for the higher non-completion rates of students with vocational background in UK HEIs needs to attend to the student-institution interactions occurring at the multiple levels of HE provision-individual, department, faculty, university and national levels (McPherson and Paterson 1990). As insightfully argued by Ozga and Suknandhan (1998, 320) 'non-completion cannot be understood solely by investigating particular student attributes or institutional practices'; rather, what it is needed is understanding the 'complex social process of student-institution interaction, in which the main elements may be characterised as student preparedness and compatibility of choice'.

In focusing on the learner-institution negotiations, we adopt a micro-level institutional perspective, since it is only at the micro-level that the effects of institutions can be directly observed (Collins, Hannon and Smith 2004). Further, our focus is on students with vocational background as learners, studying in particular academic areas and subjects embedded within varied subject departments and different HEIs. We construe subject departments to be *epistemic communities* (or collections of epistemic communities), that is 'amalgams of arrangements and mechanisms – bonded through affinity, necessity, and historical coincidence – which in a given field, make up how we know what we know […]that create and warrant knowledge' (Knorr-Cetina 1999, 1). Additionally, we construe students progressing to HE through vocational and academic pathways as possessing differentiated 'funds of knowledge', that is 'historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills' (Moll et al. 1992, 133). We see these funds of knowledge as being developed through participation in different modes of learning prior to progression to HE and as differentially preparing students for University studies.

Linked to that, we argue that a key dimension to the struggles students experience when entering into HE involves the processes of (re)positioning of themselves as knowers in a hierarchical field that valorises certain forms and classifications of knowledge over others (see also authors, forthcoming; Bernstein, 2000; Young, 2008). Seen through a Bernsteinian perspective, students with a vocational background are likely to have differentially structured knowledge, compared to those progressing from a standard academic pathway, namely weaker framing and coding with a horizontal rather than a vertical notion of progression (Bernstein, 1999; Young 2008). Thus, it can be anticipated that students with a vocational background might experience stronger *epistemic frictions* as they encounter the more vertically structured, strongly coded and framed knowledge structures of HE. This, we argue, often leads them to question the value that their funds of knowledge carry in the higher educational field.

Additionally, studies have suggested that the transition to HE is experienced by some students as 'social displacement' (Briggs et al. 2012, 4) fraught with struggles to fit in, causing feelings of alienation, isolation and anxiety (Read et al. 2003; Mann 2001). Tensions also arise from academic integration into the University life, dimension which remains relatively under-explored, although evidence indicates that it significantly

affects students' learner identities and the persistence in their studies (Briggs et al. 2012; Scanlon et al. 2007; Tinto 1998). In this paper, we approach academic integration as involving a long process of adjustment and familiarisation with the HE *pedagogical regimes* (see authors, forthcoming). The latter, can be defined as the constellation of teaching and learning modes, assessment procedures, curricular content and the general ethos prevailing in certain HE institutional contexts. Notably, *pedagogical frictions* also arise when there is a misalignment between the new-found pedagogical regimes and the ones experienced prior to HE entry.

Arguably, the transitional frictions occurring at, but not limited to, the epistemic and pedagogical levels, intersect with students' personal and social lives and the commitments and constraints that flow from these. It is worth noting that these epistemic and pedagogical transitional frictions are not regarded as essential characteristics of students; rather, they are produced in the *system-actor interactions* that take particular manifestations in certain institutional milieus and in students' biographical contexts. Although for analytical purposes we separate between the epistemic and pedagogical levels of transitional frictions, we see them as complexly intertwined and further compounding the experience of transitioning to HE. The following sections will shed empirical light on these transitional frictions and their intersections, examining in qualitative detail the ways students with VET background experience and narrate their transitions to HE.

Methodology

In this paper, we utilise interview data collected as part of a mixed method project[ii] mapping the transitions to HE of students with vocational background . Interviews were undertaken in a quintain (Stake 2006) of five contrasting case study Higher Education Institutions that provided degrees in the three subjects of Nursing, Business Studies and Computing. This sampling frame ensured an adequate population of students with a VET background in each HEI to survey and interview.

A semi-structured interview protocol was used to explore students' rationales and personal motivations for transitioning to HE, their occupational aspirations, and their identification of the affordances and constraints shaping their learning careers and academic progress in HE. In more detail, students' learning and professional careers prior to entry to HE were examined, along with the ways and the extent to which these

prior learning and professionally-based experiences had prepared them for HE study. Interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed for analysis.

The analytic method, informed by a narrative-discursive approach, involved reading, re-reading and analysing the interview transcripts as a corpus of data with the view to identify the shared elements in interviewees' accounts and the discursive resources they mobilise in their talk (Taylor and Littleton 2006).The empirical section that follows details the key themes (Phoenix 2013) that emerged in the participants' narratives of their transitional and learning experiences.

Transitioning from VET to HE: The role of epistemic and pedagogical frictions

Epistemic frictions
An immediate point of experienced tension can be identified between what students with a VET background perceive as the 'natural way' to progress into HE', namely via an academic pathway, involving the British GCE A levels, and 'straight from school'. This was seen as opposed the 'unnaturalness' of their progression pathway through VET, often combined with extended work experience. In the following excerpt 22-year-old Antoin, indicates the idea of a comparator group – those who have taken the 'natural' or 'normal' progression route into HE - captured in the following quotation by AS and A2, the two components of GCE A level at the time the interviews were undertaken. The young man attempts to counteract the tension that beset transitions for students with VET background by stressing the value of their work-based, experiential leaning:

> *The college that I went to was called Spring Vale Learning and it was a thing set up in 1997 for [pause] like to have a cross community kind of thing. [...] I just wanted to use it [the College] as a tool in order to get me the NVQ to get me on to do other things because I wanted to like go on. The main thing was that I wanted to go on placement and get the experience because I think anyway the only way you really learn is by actually like doing it, day by day you know especially if you're in the workplace. I think there's no better way to learn, that way, you know [...] Most people come straight out of school and that's the natural progression into university or whatever you know. [...]Well, it would have been a lot easier for me if I had just stayed on and done my A2's, maybe*

re-sat a couple of my AS's and just done straight down the road right into university thing. But at the same time I'm glad that I got the experience that I've had you know. (Antoin, 22 years-old, Computing in Central University)

Antoin has clearly accumulated significant knowledge through the vocational learning pathway – the NVQ (National Vocational Qualification) – and the work experience, as the extract illustrated. It is these 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al. 1992) developed through participation, what he refers as 'learning by doing', which in his view enable a practice and experience-centered form of learning. However, this seems to be a double-edged sword for Antoin. On the one hand, he feels that this is the way one learns best. On the other hand he perceives this form of knowledge as not enabling a smooth transition to HE, which could have otherwise been achieved by following the academic route. His striving to accommodate to the new HE institutional setting is marked by *epistemic doubts* - the questioning of the value that his knowledge carries in HE. The latter, relate to processes of re-positioning of one's self as a knower in the academic hierarchy. This is evident in the accounts of this study's participants, as they compare themselves with the idealised students who have followed the traditional academic pathway. The extract below is provided Lee a 23-year-old studying Computing at Home Counties University after working for several years in the information and technology sector. He feared that he might be under-prepared in relation to the students who have followed the A-level pathway, although this expectation was found to be misplaced and not confirmed by his experience:

> *It wasn't the whole studying thing because I had experienced it all, through my work I had studied for professional qualifications and stuff at home. So, I wasn't worried about whether I'd cope with the work or anything, I was more worried about the sort of people who had just done their A levels knowing more about the subject than me, maybe falling behind, which wasn't the case. […]I think I've got an advantage of having come out of studying and making the choice to come back to study rather than just to progress in it because that's what people do. But I really want to do it so I'm making sure I do well. I guess I've got a more mature approach to studying* (Lee, 23-years-old, Computing, Home Counties University)

In this extract Lee also highlights the importance of work-place experience in enabling his 'more mature approach to studying' and placing him in an advantageous position

compared to his peers who have transitioned straight from school. Furthermore, his decision to return to education is invested with reflexive awareness, a sense of agency juxtaposed to the linear academic route to HE representing 'what people do' approach. This operates as an affirmation of choice, fuelling the determination to succeed in the new field of HE. Arguably, in these two excerpts we can see both Antoin and Lee reflexively engaging in a positive reconstruction of their knowledge, derived from work-based experience. At the same time, in comparing themselves to students entering HE via the more traditional academic pathway, they question their own preparedness and relative academic standing. This results in experiencing feelings of ambivalence and anxiety that seem to accompany transition to HE for students with VET background.

Further, this study's participants narrated the transition to HE experienced with a visceral sense of unease, insecurity and apprehension, what we see as the embodiment of *epistemic doubt*. A student from Central University recalls with intensity the way he experienced his induction week:

> *I have done- is it called fresher's week- and it scared me actually because of the things they told me; I think it was quite a good thing; I don't think you should lie; I think you should tell the truth. Don't say "Oh don't worry about anything". She said to me, it was a lassie for the human resources, she's a dead nice woman but she didn't beat about the bush, she told me the truth, she told me that I'd have to do a certain amount of self-study, there were books I'd have to get, sometimes on a mad dash as everybody goes to the library to get this book and a lot of stuff. Everything she said to me, I couldn't fault her one wee bit because [pause] don't get me wrong [pause] she scared me and I did contemplate [pause] I know people that did not come back after the first week because of that and I said to them, people who I've have kept in touch with, I've said aye it is hard but you would have got through it, they just didn't want to take it on but its preparing you isn't it really. So I was happy with that.* (John, 36 years-old, Computing, Central University)

For some of John's prospective fellow students the encounter with the unchartered field of HE, with its unknown rules and requirements, the self-study and frantic rhythms of working, seemed too formidable to cope with. References to anxiety, nervousness and unease can be identified in mature students' accounts as they were negotiating their

decisions to progress to HE. Intense fears of acceptance by peers, attributed primarily to the age difference, are further heightened by the 'imagined' intimidating ethos of HE. This is portrayed as an unfamiliar terrain triggering doubts as to how one is positioned as a knower:

> *I was really nervous because I'm not one of the brightest bulbs in the pack, and I have to work a lot harder than other people do[…]there's a lot of 19 year olds here and I'm 35, so it's like 'Oh my God, I'm so old going to University'. That was sort of really like, you know, you've got all these young kids that are like so full of it[…]enthusiasm, and they're clever really, and I think it was the academic side of it, because I'm not very academic, you know, the practical side[pause]fantastic, I know that I'll be brilliant, but the academic side, it's just 'oh' I think that's more nerve wracking than anything else, coming somewhere, full of youngsters, and being a bit thick I think. (Katie, 35-years-old, Nursing, Home Counties University)*

What is evident in Katie's account is her perceived intellectual inferiority compared to her younger fellow students, along with a heightened sense of insecurity linked to her dispositions towards practice-based learning. This points to how different forms of knowing and ways of acquiring knowledge are perceived to be unequally valorised and valued in different educational sub-fields. As Williams (1997, 38) has argued, 'a continuing hierarchy of worth which distinguishes the academic from the vocational, education from training, remains embedded and influential in higher education'. Students with VET background seem to have internalised the social representation of knowledge in terms of the polarising dualism of practical *versus* academic. It is this internalised, differential valorisation that they are using as a basis for making judgements about their own academic abilities and worth. It is prominent in Katie's account, the comparison with the idealised 'other' who, as Webb (1997, 68) has argued, represents 'the norm against which the others are judged and may be found wanting'. Like Katie, this study's participants' doubts and self-judgements are primarily about their relative standing in the hierarchical HE field. In the latter, the 'ideal' student is constructed along the lines of social class, gender, ethnicity, age, disability (Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Reay et al. 2005; Riddell and Weedon, 2014), but also along their *epistemic positioning*, as this study's participants' accounts have powerfully indicated.

Pedagogical frictions

One of the key challenges this study's participants face concerns the adjustment to a style of learning and teaching that has at its core the mode of *self-directed study*, illustrated in the following excerpts:

> *I found coming from like college to here, was quite easy but that was like thinking about it "I will be fine, I'm going to university", but the first couple of weeks I was still kind of thinking like college. We went into a class and you were just expected to kind of start your work whereas I was waiting the lecturer saying "We're doing this, we're doing that". So that's a wee bit different and some people find it quite hard to get used to that, that they have to do it themselves. But other than that, it's been fine. I've coped with it quite well.* (Laura- Ann, 22-years-old, Computing, Central University)

> *At the start I was a bit unsure about the whole technique[…]this whole self-study thing as well, you know, I find that quite hard and I'm saying "She's not taught me that or he's not taught me that" but at the end of the day I've got to go and teach myself some stuff you know so aye[…]the college lecturers are brilliant, you know, they really help you then you come in here; these guys help you and all but it is a different way of learning you know, and you take it on yourself […] The self-study thing; it really is tough [pause] the stuff you've got to go and do yourself you know*. (John, 36 years-old Computing, Central University)

Laura and John jointly highlight the difficulties encountered by themselves and peer students when transitioning from the pedagogical regime of a Further Education College, characterised by a tutor-scaffolded approach to learning, to the more independent model practiced and valued in HE. Other studies drawing upon students' accounts of University studies similarly identify how the expectation to act as independent learners is experienced as a source of struggle (Briggs et al. 2012;Roberts 2011). This indicates how independent learning is not only a cheap and expedient pedagogical device, but it can be both isolating and unrewarding for students (Roberts, 2011, 192).

Added to the difficulties that self-directed study involves, *assessment* also features as a key concern. Examination-based modes of assessment are clearly a major source of pedagogic uncertainty for students with vocational backgrounds. This is the case

because students with vocational background in the UK typically will have been assessed either through a competence based approach, looking at whether they can perform a task or job to a specified standard, evidenced through a portfolio and direct observation of work by an assessor, or through practice-focused assignments. The latter, often requires the development and utilisation of knowledge and the marshalling of evidence with less emphasis on semantic memorisation that is needed for academic examinations. This is illustrated in the case of students who have progressed into studying Business at HE level holding Advanced Vocational Certificates in Education (AVCE), as the latter involve non-exam based forms of assessment:

> *For me it's basically having more exams because I've only ever had I think it was 2 or 3 on the AVCE and now we have like[pause] we've had six this year so[...] I don't like doing exams. [...]I don't know, I suppose it's like with the assignments you have like books you can look at and you've got your tutor's help but in an exam it's like you're remembering everything and so my mind just goes blank.* (Francesca, 19-years-old, Business, Middle College)

Furthermore, and perhaps even more importantly, students across the selected HEIs tend to refer to *subject-based difficulties* as presenting significant academic challenges. The case of Gary, a Computing student at Home Counties University who holds a General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) in Information Technology, is indicative in that respect as he struggles with the advanced level of Mathematics involved in his course:

> *I don't like the formal systems[...] this is basically very advanced mathematics using computer software to overcome solutions and stuff like that. Basically the Maths I suppose. I'm obviously rubbish at Maths. Didn't really do much Maths involved in it [GNVQ]. It was mainly programming, fixing a flash kind of stuff. A lot of people are a lot better at it than I am. I'm not really that[...] just generally not that good with numbers.[...] I've just forced myself to basically learn Maths despite not actually liking the subjects, I know subconsciously that if I don't learn it I'm not going to pass so I have to. I haven't really asked my tutors for support in that area. I've been asking my fellow students because I don't want to waste their time at the moment. Obviously if I thought it was a huge, huge problem and I just wasn't getting it whatsoever I would have, but I*

> *understood the way they were teaching me it.* (Gary, 19-years-old, Computing, Home Counties University)

Pronounced in this quotation are a sense of personal inadequacy and the individualisation of the difficulties experienced by a student who, rather than seeking advice and support from academic staff, is placing the onus of responsibility on himself. Linked to this is the case of Ben, another mature student with a VET background, who experiences and narrates the transition to HE as involving 'a huge jump'. This gives rise to substantive academic challenges pertaining to his ability to cope with the advanced mathematics required for his course and linked to the possibility of dropping out. The quotation from Ben underlines the paramount importance of the academic support systems in overcoming these challenges, in reducing anxiety and improving students' self-perceptions of their academic abilities:

> *How the sessions work is like [pause] we would have really complex Maths because we've jumped from GCSE Maths to degree level Maths and to actually be able to understand the Maths, we [pause] I found that we've got some gaps in the basic knowledge so because the jump is going from GCSE to degree, we've no A level in between and that jump is huge and sometimes I've sat in the lectures and I've just thought "Er, what was that about?"[...] and the Students Office provides support of all sorts support, you know, I don't know what else they do but I know they've got loads of flyers with all different types[...] it just so happened that somebody from Students Office in the first few weeks came and gave a talk, told us about what they did and we was like "Oh that sounds cool, we'll have some of that" and so we went up there, booked an initial appointment with the Director of Students Office and told him what the issue was and now crikey, me and Tasha are in the top 2 of the year for Maths. That's not an easy ride because what's expected is we have to go away, do the work and then he'll help us refine[...]I've got to be honest I probably would have [pause]I may have dropped out of university if it weren't for that facility because the Maths is really, really difficult.* (Ben,30-years-old Computing, South East University)

University support systems and the personalised, systematic help offered by academic staff are perceived of utmost significance for remaining in HE and not dropping out. This observation adds validity to our argument about the close link between anxiety

engendered by epistemic doubt and pedagogic tensions, and retention. This points to the need for a responsive and 'inclusive model of teaching, learning and assessment' that could improve the completion rates and the learning outcomes rather than reinforce, as Thomas (2002, 235) has argued, "the social and academic distance between students, and the HE 'norm'".

Conclusion

This paper unpacked the transitional experiences of students with VET background. The metaphor of *transitional friction* was used to capture the ongoing set of tensions and difficulties these students encounter in the HE field. We argue that the metaphor of a *friction*, as opposed to the dominant one of *barrier*, is a potentially useful for drawing attention to the ongoing dynamic and multitudinous nature of the transitional process. The analysis illustrated in qualitative depth the transitional frictions associated with *epistemic doubts* and *pedagogical tensions*, in tandem with the emotional strains and anxieties that environ and mutually constitute the diverse transitional experiences lived and accounted by students with Vocational background.

More specifically, the evidence presented in the preceding sections shows that students with VET background perceive themselves to be differentially positioned as knowers and learners. This differential epistemic positioning manifests itself through a self-misrecognition of their worth in the field of HE and their subject departments, relative to their counterparts with academic qualifications. This epistemic misrecognition, we argue, functions as the primary generator of the increased frictions associated with transition and progression in HE for students with a vocational background. Epistemic misrecognition mainly involves the devaluing of the funds of accumulated knowledge acquired during often extensive periods of career-related education and training. Clearly, the value of institutionalised cultural capital of VET qualifications has increased over time (leading to the increased progression rates to HE of those with such qualifications). However, the ways in which the knowledges of those progressing via VET pathways are structured, valorised and embodied, and their own conceptualisation of what is to count as knowledge and how to learn - that is their view of themselves as knowing and learning subjects - lead to differential epistemic positioning compared to those progressing via the academic pathway. It is this relative epistemic positioning that we argue generates the increased transitional friction experienced by VET students, which in turn contributes to the higher probability of non-completion.

The encounter with the unknown *field* of HE has engendered for this study's participants *epistemic frictions* linked to the classification of knowledge and their associated, relative positioning as knowers in the academic hierarchy. *Pedagogical frictions* were also experienced by the participants in relation to teaching, learning and assessment, with difficulties more specifically arising from the prevalence of the self-directed mode of study, the lack of support systems and the limited personalised academic in-put, thereby leading some of them to individualise their academic struggles. This appears to be all the more the case for students who find themselves in HEIs with 'lean-and-mean' pedagogies' (Blackmore 1997, 92) where under-resourced teaching necessitates increased class sizes and limited face to face contact with often casualised teaching staff (Briggs et al. 2012; Leathwood and O' Connell 2003).

Taking into account the educational and socio-demographic profile of students with vocational qualifications - typically classified as one of the targeted 'non-traditional' groups of Widening Participation policies - this study offers an empirically grounded account of the multiplicity of their experiences and standpoints that challenges the often monolithic and normative constructions of HE studentship. In a tertiary sector that is highly differentiated and heterogeneous, the diversity of its student body has brought into policy limelight questions about what the purpose of HE is and who the 'ideal' student is. The findings of this study indicate that for those students who enter into HE via routes other than the 'royal' one of the academic pathway, transition is an arduous process of continuous struggle against the odds to become HE learners. This *struggle of becoming* requires new forms of participation in epistemic communities, along with the *struggle to belong* in such epistemic communities. In meeting the demands of that struggle may lay part of the explanation for the higher non-completion of students with a vocational background[iii]compared to those who progress to HE via an academic pathway.

An additional policy question is the design of VET qualifications, given the political rhetoric under the umbrella term of 'parity of esteem' around their utility in supporting progression to HE. Amongst this study's participants, those progressing particularly with competency-based qualifications, such as National Vocational Qualifications, were clear in their judgement that they felt underprepared for HE studies. Given that

such qualifications were designed to develop specific forms of knowledge and skills geared to demonstrating occupational competence in work settings, it is not surprising that there is a disjuncture between the academic capital they generate and the requirements of HE study.

Finally, the findings of our study indicate the need to revisit [iv] the Widening Participation agenda's narrow and static framing. We take issue not only with the so-called *barriers to access,* pertaining to recruitment and selection procedures, but also with the lack of focus on students' completion and retention rates and their ongoing engagement with the epistemic and pedagogical processes once they are *within* HE. This policy reframing entails going beyond getting traditionally under-represented groups into HE, towards addressing questions pertaining to pedagogy and knowledge-what Gale and Parker (2014, 475) characterise as being 'the central narrative of HE'. We therefore argue that policy initiatives under the rubric of Widening Participation should aim at contributing towards the transformation of HEI's pedagogical regimes and organisational logics in the direction of epistemic inclusivity and pedagogical flexibility.

Commitment to and efficiency in delivering equal opportunities of outcomes for all University students, irrespectively of class, ethnic, religious but also academic backgrounds, requires constant intervention instead of piecemeal, remedial and deficit-inspired measures. Further, mobilisation of economic capital to support students with VET backgrounds is more likely to be needed in those HEIs with a greater proportion of such students. Due to the higher visibility of the students with VET backgrounds within a subject department, it might be the case that the challenges detailed above are recognised and acted upon. This could explain the inverse correlation between the proportion of VET students in a HEI and their attrition rates. However, such HEIs are the ones historically with the least amount of resources to undertake such work (Boliver, 2017). Furthermore, there is also the question of the capacity and willingness of HE academic and support staff employed in different HEIs, and in varied epistemic communities within these HEIs, to both recognise the issue and invest the necessary time to facilitate the progression of students with VET background. Linked to that, the participants' narratives reported in this paper serve as a necessary reminder of the long way HEIs still have to go towards increasing awareness of their student population, and

enhancing the responsiveness of the support systems they put in place, in order to cater for their students' increasing multiplicity of needs and diversity of knowledges.

Footnotes

i. The body that mediates higher education admissions in the UK, UCAS, as evidenced by the development of the UCAS Tariff as a tool to help admissions staff at UK Higher Education Institutions compare the utility of different qualifications to support progression to higher education.

ii. See author et al. for details of the data sets constructed for the project.

iii. It is essential to highlight at this point that these participants' stories were still 'in the making' and, although they represented successful cases of transition from Vocational to Higher Education, lack of evidence in regards to completion precludes us from making any inferences about their final study outcomes.

iv. This revisiting is also in line with the increasing research focus on completion and progression to employment.

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