'But you did this in A-level'

The impact of learning and teaching cultures on BTEC holders' sense of belonging in a research intensive institution.

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Background

- Vocational qualification holders have increasingly contributed to an expanding HE population in the UK (Katartzi and Hayward, 2019; Shields and Masardo, 2017)

- A-level qualifications form 72 percent of the level 3 population in comparison to just 19% of BTEC qualification holders (Finlayson, 2018)

- Overrepresented in post-1992, and underrepresented in research intensive institutions (Hoelsher et al., 2008)

- Less likely to perform well academically in research intensive institutions (Shields and Masardo, 2015)

- Lowest retention rates in HEIs belonging to the Russell Group (Kelly, 2017).

The Research

- Aimed to understand the academic experiences of students with BTEC Level 3 qualifications
- Explored the impact of these experiences on transitions into and through a research intensive HEI
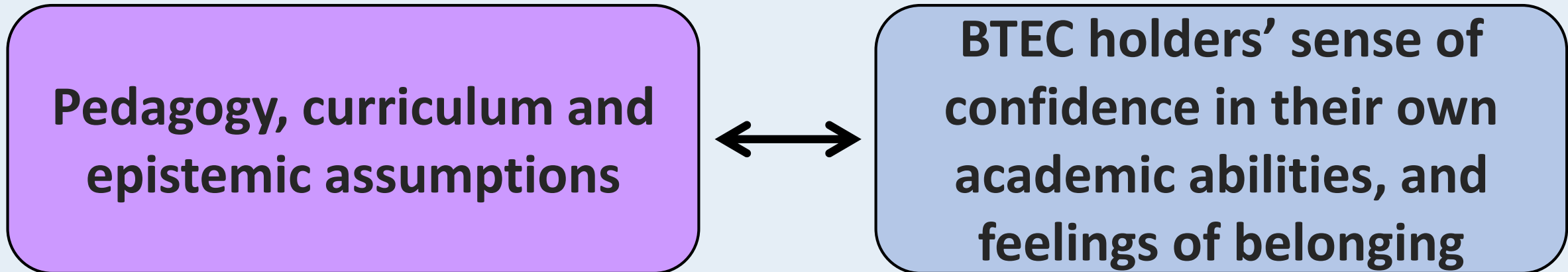
In-depth semi-structured interviews:

- 26 students (holding BTEC Level 3 as a minimum)
- 13 academic members of staff
- All faculties represented; 13 courses represented
- Cross-sectional, though attempted to capture experiences throughout student journey (1st, 2nd and 3rd year UGs).

The power of learning and teaching cultures, expectations, and epistemic assumptions
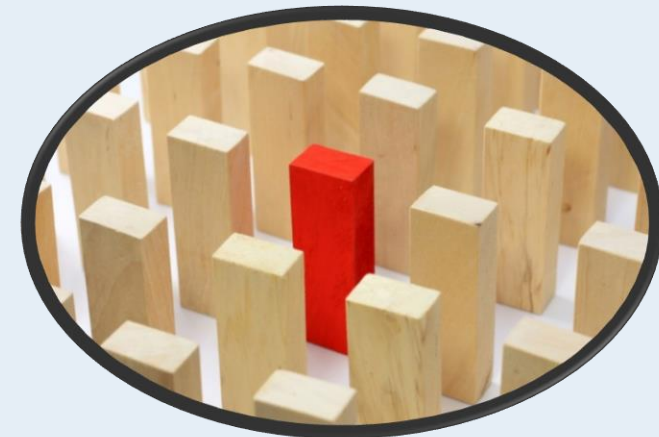
- Staff members' perceptions of BTEC holders' academic abilities differed between courses.

- Students' academic experiences varied substantially between courses.

Relationship evident between:

Pedagogy, curriculum and epistemic assumptions	↔	**BTEC holders' sense of confidence in their own academic abilities, and feelings of belonging**

Students' confidence in their own academic abilities and subsequently, their feelings of belonging in HE was <u>decreased</u> by:

- Unfamiliar assessment practices, namely examinations.
- Epistemic assumptions by staff (assuming all students held A-level knowledge).
- Prioritisation of a culture of 'academic excellence' by staff.
- Limited or no peers who held BTEC qualifications.

A lot of things, **the assumed knowledge that some of the lectures were built on**, some of it I didn't have. So, everyone would be like, 'But you did this in AS' and, 'You did this in so and so' and **I was blank**. (Nina, 3rd year, Biology)

I felt like **people with A-Level did kind of have an advantage over me because a lot of the stuff they'd learnt it before**, so they kind of knew about a lot of stuff in psychology that I didn't. So I felt a bit at a disadvantage when I first started to kind of like get up to speed. (Elaina, 2nd year, Psychology)

I would say **99% of people on my degree are A Level taught**. <u>So they know a lot more than I do</u>... I'm not prepared enough, whereas everyone with an A Level seems to know how to do this (Erin, 2nd year, English)

Cultures of 'academic excellence'

- Staff who reported a high investment in maintaining a culture of 'academic excellence' felt that the BTEC qualification was not considered 'equivalent' to A-levels

- The desire to widen participation for some academic staff members, in these departments seemed irreconcilable with the image of 'academic excellence'

- There was a reluctance to amend curriculum content and assessment practices

- Accepting students from BTEC courses was often framed as an 'ethical dilemma'

- Perceptions of BTEC students as being low achievers, academically 'weak' and 'problem' students were also more commonly expressed.

Students' confidence in their own academic abilities and subsequently, their feelings of belonging in HE were <u>increased</u> by:

- Varied assessments formats (not an overreliance on examinations)
- Opportunities to choose elective modules
- Prioritisation of, and investment in, **a culture of WP and diversity** by staff
- Familiarity of module content in students' first year (i.e. subject content that demonstrated similarities to their BTEC course)
- Larger number of peers who held BTEC qualifications.

You didn't feel alone. You didn't feel like you were not to the same standard as everyone else because the department did start from, like, the basic and built us up to second year and **there was a majority of BTECs so you didn't feel left out** and they would talk about their experience. (Sakhina, 2nd year, Nursing)

I'd actually **revisited assignments from my BTEC** level and read through them again to get refreshers ideas on things that I'd done at University in those assignments, so **it was quite nice that I was able to do that and draw on previous knowledge.** (Casey, 3rd year, Education)

I've **chosen more of the hands-on practical modules**…I think it probably helped me rather than hindered me. So I'll say it has definitely prepared me well. (Jennifer, 3rd year, Music)

Investing in a culture of WP and diversity

Staff on courses that reported an investment in WP and diversity…

- Invested time into ensuring assessment formats were varied.
- Created more opportunities for students to construct their own curriculum via the choice of elective modules.
- Incorporated curriculum content that was similar to students' BTEC qualifications (in first year).
- Perceived high value in the knowledge, skills and qualities that the BTEC qualification provided to students.

Challenges to implementing inclusive learning and teaching practices.

- Time and resources.
- Large course sizes.
- Not enough BTEC students to justify changes (to curriculum and assessment practices).
- 'Elite' culture: Institutional pressures to increase attainment for courses to be viewed as 'successful'.
- External rules and restrictions: Barriers to admissions due to course numbers being governed externally (number caps), and being required to report reasons to the NHS to explain why students were not progressing.

Reproduction of inequalities…

If the majority (A-level holders) are succeeding and having positive academic experiences, then change is not perceived as 'worth it'…

- BTEC underrepresentation may deter new entrants and/or increase risk of drop out due to isolation

- Absence of inclusive curriculum and assessment practices could have the same effect

- Cultures of inclusivity and investment in WP are hard to create without diversity…

How can we break the cycle?

References

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