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‘Bridging’ the Gap between VET and Higher Education: Permeability or Perpetuation?

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Abstract

Demands for admission to higher education from vocational routes are widespread across Europe but take different forms, depending on the recognition of tertiary VET or whether sharper distinctions between VET and higher education exist. In England, alongside policies promoting more employer-responsive tertiary provision, opportunities for ‘bridging’ from vocational routes to general university education, and vice versa, have been discussed. The study reported here examined four cases of existing provision supporting transitions into higher education, potential sites of practices supporting bridging across pathways. Each case provided valued support for progression to higher levels of study; yet these practices focused on existing routes rather than transitions between more academic or vocationally-oriented sites. It is suggested, therefore, that the explicit denotation of separate tertiary provision may be more likely to constrain ‘bridging’ provision than for the latter to help students move beyond their existing route into substantially different forms of higher education.

Keywords

higher education; transitions; bridging; permeability

1 Introduction

The relationship between VET and higher education varies across Europe, including its responses for demands for progression to higher education from vocational pathways. In several countries, a traditional system of universities is accompanied by a second tertiary pathway that includes professional and vocational degrees, sometimes generically described as Universities of Applied Sciences (Teichler, 2008). Particularly where these pathways are seen as part of VET, as with the Dutch *hogescholen*, admission for vocational students is less contentious, but questions of ‘permeability’ between VET and higher education remain in these countries (Hemkes, 2018).

In other countries, higher education is organised in a single, unitary sector, which can include vocational provision but is also likely to be stratified (Marginson, 2016; Shavit, Arum, & Gamoran, 2007). A dominant international example is the United States higher education system, which includes community colleges: these offer both progression to four-year degrees

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and vocational courses, with disadvantaged students generally ‘diverted’ into the latter (Brint & Karabel, 1986). In countries with unitary higher education systems, access to higher education for working-class students generally, but particularly beyond the lowest-ranked institutions, remains an area of controversy (Boliver, 2013, 2015).

This relationship between VET and higher education is further complicated by the tendency for institutions and sectors with missions to offer professional and technical studies to take on the attributes of more traditional institutions. In England, a succession of new sectors has been created with the aspiration of developing an alternative higher education sector, notably the colleges of advanced technology (CATs) in the 1950s and polytechnics between 1969 and 1992 (Pratt & Burgess, 1974; Pratt, 1997). In each case, the new institutions began to follow the academic norms of older foundations, eventually joining the ranks of universities in a further stratified system. This isomorphic process has long been characterised as ‘academic drift’ (Pratt & Burgess, 1974; Tight, 2018). Important distinctions between institutional types remain, with applicants holding vocational qualifications generally progressing to lower-ranked ‘post-92’ universities (Archer & Leathwood, 2003; Reay et al., 2001). Nevertheless, the institutional form of universities remains modelled on older institutions. As a consequence, higher education in England has long been dominated by full-time study for the bachelor degree in universities and sub-bachelor education courses are studied less frequently than in other countries (Musset & Field, 2013; DfE, 2018).

Policies under successive UK governments have sought to create a further diversification of institutional types. Since the Dearing Report in 1997, higher education provision in mainly vocational further education (FE) colleges has been promoted by various governments but this provision has not grown as a result (Parry et al., 2012). Coalition and Conservative UK governments since 2010 have encouraged a turn towards the market but this has resulted in the decline of the longstanding part-time provision in colleges (Esmond, 2015). Since then UK governments have sought further diversification, including private institutions (DBIS, 2016).

Recent impulses in this direction have flowed from the UK government’s attempts to develop stronger links to employment at secondary as well as tertiary levels. These developments include new apprenticeship ‘standards’, replacing earlier qualification frameworks, which are more frequently offered at higher levels, extending to bachelor-level degree apprenticeships (Richard, 2012; UK Government, 2015). The Sainsbury Review (Independent Panel for Technical Education, 2016), best known for its introduction of an upper-secondary ‘technical education’ pathway with substantial work placements, also included proposals for higher education. Sub-bachelor courses and higher apprenticeships were identified as forming a higher level of technical education, distinct from university bachelor degrees, which the Review described as ‘academic’ higher education.

These developments do not yet form an explicit second sector like the earlier polytechnics or European ‘applied’ institutions. Indeed, they sit alongside alternative attempts to promote a more vocational higher education provision, such as the formation of ‘institutes of technology’ scheduled to begin operations in 2019 (DfE, 2019). The Sainsbury proposals lack even a consistently-used term for this provision, although ‘higher technical education’ is mentioned. Nevertheless, this represents the outline of an alternative tertiary pathway. Designed to be more employment-oriented, with qualifications meeting the requirements of ‘panels of industry professionals’ (Independent Panel for Technical Education, 2016, pp. 44-45), these proposals were explicitly posed as an alternative to the relative autonomy of universities. They constitute the outline of a new binary divide, albeit so far in the most vague and underdeveloped sense.

Yet even before this putative ‘technical’ higher education was firmly established, the Sainsbury panel felt obliged to address problems of access and permeability. These are important concerns in countries where high numbers study at universities, addressed in the design of ‘degree apprenticeships’. Their report also proposed opportunities to progress from

the ‘technical’ awards they put forward at upper secondary level onto ‘academic’ higher education. The Sainsbury Review argues that 16-18 education cannot ‘meet[...] the needs both of employers and undergraduate degree admissions’ (Independent Panel for Technical Education, 2016, p. 29) so that ‘any student choosing to start on one option at age 16 will be able to move seamlessly to the other option’ (ibid.).

The review thus proposed that ‘bridging’ provision should support transitions from ‘technical’ awards at upper-secondary level to ‘academic’ higher education. Provision of this type, aiming to support higher education progression by those who do not meet the standard admissions requirements of universities, has been developed over a period of 40 years in England. However, this provision has mainly been conceived as preparing for higher levels of study rather than as supporting transfer between substantially different pathways. It aims to support the ‘transitions’ of higher education entrants, largely by preparing them for higher levels of study but also by acculturating them to the academic norms of higher education. In this, they imitate programmes organised by universities, which Gale and Parker (2014) distinguished between the transition type they characterised as T_1 , focused on acculturation to the institutional practices of the institution and those, denoted by T_2 , concerned with the acquisition of ‘student’ identity. Very little provision, or discussion in the literature, as Gale and Parker (2014) observe, addresses the possibility of ‘lateral’ movements between pathways.

These developments raised practical issues relating to the kind of opportunities that would enable young people to make successful transitions across pathways to higher levels of study. A study was commissioned by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation to explore what practices on current programmes supporting young people’s transition would best contribute to future ‘bridging’ provision. The study reported here addressed these practical issues. However, it also revealed important issues about the relationship between the two sectors and their permeability.

2 Methods

The study was commissioned to examine what kind of curriculum and practices might be included within provision to support bridging between pathways at the same time as progression to higher levels of study. The design of the study was negotiated with the funding body. It was agreed that there would be four case studies in areas that were likely to be sites of practices promising for future ‘bridging’ provision across pathways.

Formally, the Sainsbury proposals had suggested that young people should be able to make transitions both from work-based ‘technical’ upper-secondary education to ‘academic’ higher education and in the opposite direction. The selection of field sites was therefore based on finding features that would support progression from work-based studies (i.e. those with features of ‘technical education’) into degree-based higher education; and those supporting movement from general education into work-based higher education. The identification of suitable sites encountered complications: since the ‘higher technical education’ envisaged by the Sainsbury Review as sitting outside recognised higher education hardly existed beyond the less-than-successful ‘higher-level apprenticeships’ at Levels 4 and 5. At higher levels, sites of work-based learning organised independently of universities were rare. Nor was it always immediately clear in which direction the provision in the case studies intended to help its students move, as will be seen from the case studies discussed.

Four sites were eventually negotiated, putatively representing each direction of travel. In the original design of the study, transitions into ‘academic’, i.e. university-based higher education were represented firstly by ‘access to higher education’ courses at a further education college, supporting candidates without standard (‘A’-level) entry qualifications onto university progression. These have become well-established routes mainly for adults over a period of 40 years: candidates are usually mature students who often have work experience but limited academic foundations. In order to capture the diversity of these experiences, the second

institution-based progression chosen was an innovation module enabling Foundation degree (sub-bachelor) students to gain credit during work-based studies, thus easing their path into more academic studies at higher levels. Two further courses completed the study: an industry-based ‘bridging’ course supporting progression from level 3 (upper-secondary) qualifications onto professional degrees in nursing and midwifery, which was seen as a transition into a more work-oriented direction; and a selection of firm-based higher-level (i.e. sub-bachelor) apprenticeships.

The four studies used case study methods (Yin, 2018), including documentary analysis and interviews of staff, students and employer representatives. Data was primarily collected at institutional sites: colleges, universities and workplace training sites. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using schedules that focused on the students’ experiences during their studies but which provided elements of context both for students, exploring their earlier experiences of study and their progression where applicable, and the background to curriculum developments as reported by educators and employers.

At each site, data was collected from both educators and students, although the balance varied and each case study was assembled with a slightly different range of sources. For the better-known routes, access and apprenticeships, a wide range of written sources was available to supplement the interviews, extending to published sources. In the more specialist cases, the industry bridging course and the innovation module, whilst documentary sources were of a more local and less generalised type, an extensive range of participants were available for interview, ranging from course designers and authors, to educators and students, as well as representatives from institutions to which the students progressed.

An extensive range of data was assembled for each individual case. Interviews were taped and systematically transcribed in full. Coding of documents and transcripts identified key themes for each case before thematic analysis procedures were used to draw out the key themes across all four studies. Salient findings are set out below.

3 Results

Each of the case studies produced evidence of potential for that route to support higher-level transitions. The access programme had established a wide range of courses that were providing successful transitions to nearby universities, including both ‘post-‘92’ and former CAT institutions. The manager leading the programme emphasised its rigorous entry requirements, its careful monitoring of the university courses to which it offered progression and its demanding course requirements. Students valued these as ‘more like university than school is’, with both current and past students interviewed valuing this foretaste of university life.

This emphasis on the expectations of universities represented a key strength of the provision in supporting its students’ progression. For the adults on the course it provided ‘a gauge to see if... you can manage it with other commitments’, reflecting the pressures of life as much as academic requirements. Its strength was its strong focus on the expectations of destinations. Yet, as a model of future bridging courses, the access course appeared to draw less on any expertise that students had developed during their working lives. The programme manager for example noted behavioural problems linked to social issues: ‘You name it, literally, it all comes through that door.’ Yet the older students interviewed regretted a lack of any recognition for the expertise they brought from the vocational sphere. This included their work experiences but extended to their vocational qualifications, which were regarded not as relevant sources of expertise but as the wrong certification on which to base their future studies.

This pattern was to some extent repeated in a second case study, of an industry-based bridging course designed to support applicants who had completed apprenticeships onto nursing degrees. This route had been selected because it led to professional qualifications and attracted some students with academic qualifications: it was anticipated that this might provide

an exemplar for progression in the opposite direction to the access qualification. Yet this course too was focused on the expectations of university courses. In this respect it evidenced high levels of success. The university leader of nursing degrees interviewed reported that degree students completing the work-based 'bridging course' succeeded just as frequently and as well as students with general education qualifications, indicating that the course provided a sound preparation for university study.

Yet there were contradictory accounts of how far the course drew on the existing expertise of students, all of whom had completed apprenticeships as nursing assistants. The course designer spoke about the skills they had acquired as senior support workers, knowledge of anatomy and physiology, and experiential learning. Although they would lack academic skills, these could be situated in the practice of the workplace and 'contextualised in healthcare'. Training managers interviewed at a hospital where the course was offered spoke warmly of the possibility to overcome obstacles to admission that universities had operated earlier. Yet at local level this vision appeared to operate rather differently. A classroom teacher interviewed emphasised the challenges of academic study in an environment where they would receive less support. The students interviewed described the course as 'very academic, whereas we're more nurse-guided, and it's not focused on the nursing side'. In a focus group of 11 current students, over half already held qualifications that could have provided foundations on which to build a critical engagement with their vocational knowledge.

Correspondingly, the routes into work-based forms of higher education routes also reported successes, based on a rigorous focus on destinations. These routes had been selected to examine how young people with a more academic training might find their way into higher levels of study with a more practical orientation. Yet these were also focused more strongly on the needs of the firm students were to enter than on their foundational knowledge. This was expressed sharply by the head of a training firm that worked with leading engineering companies: 'We don't do students, we do people who are either new starts... or already in full-time employment.' Prior academic qualifications were recognised to some degree, but this varied largely according to the employer's needs. For example, a major company regarded a secondary maths qualification as a non-negotiable requirement; a major footwear company had recruited 5 of its 23 management trainees without this, whilst the firm working with engineering companies had battled with a validating university to include a higher level of maths than universities expected at this level of study. The successes of this provision were fundamentally based on the close integration of learning with work activity, rather than on the way they built on academic knowledge.

Finally, the innovation module in a college also succeeded by focus on the point of progression. This had been selected because colleges offer vocational routes to degree study; and it was expected that this provision would provide strong opportunities for students to make transitions from vocational knowledge to academic practice. The module supported student transitions by encouraging critical reflection on industry practice. Working with local employers and economic development experts, the college had created a module shared across all its sub-bachelor Foundation degrees. Students were asked to design a change to the practices of work organisations: a popular choice for local businesses and work organisations facing increasingly complex demands, and for students expecting 'a lot of sitting in lectures, a lot of taking notes'. Many of the students were part-time: a class-based focus group of students turned out all to work for the same firm, which they had also worked for whilst studying at upper-secondary level. They spoke of having learnt how to behave at work and not wanting to let their employer down, comparing their commitment to friends who worked less hard at university. As a route for former full-time students, the module depended more decisively on the support of local employers.

4 Conclusions

The four case studies certainly produced valuable examples of practice that might find a place in bridging provision. Yet in many ways these focussed on the norms of progression: Gale and Parker's (2014) T₁. The Access course leader expressed this as 'teaching the student the knowledge [and] the execution of it under pressure.' Acquiring student identities (Gale and Parker's T₂) perhaps had less resonance for adults hoping to enter university. Students already employed on higher-level apprenticeships or studying the innovation module had already adopted primarily the identities of employees.

Yet the courses were less oriented to the knowledge that students already possessed. Gale and Parker suggested a T₃, providing greater recognition of student differences, through which students could navigate change and risk. Certainly in these cases the vocational experiences students had accumulated counted for little: access students and graduates interviewed already held qualifications at a level which would have admitted them to university courses; those apprentices on higher-level employment progressions were already committed to these routes, whilst their academic achievements were valued for their usefulness in work. For these activities to enhance transitions across pathways would require deeper recognition of the differences among students, opportunities to build on their earlier knowledge and a critical orientation to their future expertise. Learning programmes that had genuine foundations both in the starting point and the end point of student progression would perhaps be more worthy of the title of bridging. The final recommendations to the client strongly emphasised the need for such practices.

The reasons for the disconnect from students' earlier knowledge also deserve exploration. It is perhaps inevitable that learning programmes focus more strongly on the destination than the starting point; but all learning builds on prior knowledge. One explanation may be that educators' expertise is usually based on the destination rather than the starting point, although this does not mean that the starting point is unimportant and that educators should not engage with students' earlier areas of expertise.

A broader question is whether the notion of two sectors, or two outline forms of distinctive education, necessarily reinforces a divide which also encompass the mechanisms to support transition. Any provision designed for that purpose will necessarily sit on either one side or the other of this 'academic-technical' or other conceptual divide and focus on the intended destinations of students rather than their earlier sources of expertise. In these circumstances, any putative 'bridging' provision, far from supporting permeability, might exhibit tendencies to reinforce rather than break down barriers between relatively autonomous general education and work-oriented pathways. The study reported above examined these questions in the absence of a formal sectoral divide: in the event of such a divide being legitimated by the development of two distinctive pathways, these difficulties might well be further reinforced.

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Biographical notes

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