

**How does the BTEC level 3 Children's Play,
Learning and Development course prepare
students for Higher Education?**

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Abstract

The ever-changing world of qualifications for the Early Years workforce depends on a wide range of factors. A dichotomy between the need for industry practice and academic skills is present within the current sector as changes to qualifications continue to develop. This paper explores one route of qualification into Early Years, the BTEC (Business and Technology Education Council) National Extended Diploma Level 3 in Children's Play, Learning and Development (CPLD) with Early Years Educator status (BTEC, 2015). An investigation into how this BTEC course meets its aims in promoting students' academic skills ready for Higher Education (HE) highlighted a key difference in expectations of Level three students from Further Education (FE) and HE participants.

Data collected through semi structured interviews from FE teaching staff and documentary analysis of the CPLD specification pose significant differences in their expectations of student 'academic' skills as opposed to the expectations of HE teaching staff. Further exploration continued to suggest that the BTEC CPLD specification focuses on more specific academic skills such as referencing than the conflicting finding of HE participants who presented different expectations and skills from Level three students progressing into HE.

Highlighting such a difference is imperative within the sector as it implies there is a need to address this gap of expectations for level three students transitioning into HE to both provide a smoother transition for students' development and to bridge the gap of qualification expectations of practitioners. This paper summarises with key recommendations for both FE teachers and HE academics as well as addressing the course specification design of the BTEC CPLD qualification.

Keywords: Academic skills; Transition; Vocational; Specification

Research Context

This paper explores the transition jump for Early Years students from the BTEC (Business and Technology Education Council) (2015) level 3 course (Children's Play, Learning and Development CPLD) into Higher Education to study a BA (Hons) in Early Childhood, Education and Care (ECEC). This transition mirrors a personal journey working within both of these sectors. My journey within academic teaching began course leading the BTEC CPLD (2015) course and experiencing the tensions students faced sitting exams and having controlled assessments to prepare them for Higher Education. But also to have to meet the growing needs of a vocational industry. Mirroring the progression of my students, I began lecturing at levels four, five and six on the BA ECEC course and discovered a range of conflicting expectations upon students progressing from a BTEC background. This paper is an opportunity to examine these expectations further with the intention of being able to put support in place for progressing students and close the gap of conflict between FE (Further Education) and HE (Higher Education).

When considering the jump between vocational education into HE, it is valid to consider the impact of such a change on both students and staff. Research such as that of Agherdian et al. (2018) has

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explored some of the contributing factors to impact students' readiness for H, highlighting maturity and skill sets as being dominant factors to student readiness. Although relevant, there appears to be a gap in current research to highlight how to support the transition for Early Years students from level three to level four. This research aims to explore FE and HE perspectives around the expectations upon students across this transition from level three to four in comparison to the claims BTEC make from their specifications: 'with specialist knowledge and skills ... for progression to a related higher education course' (BTEC, 2014, p.2.)

Research questions

There are two key questions which shall be investigated as strands across this paper:

1. From both a HE and FE perspective, what academic skill sets should students attain before progressing into HE?
2. How does the BTEC level three CPLD equip learners with the specialist knowledge and skills enabling progression into HE?

Introduction

Background to Changes

Changes within vocational education have been consistent within England (Wolf, 2011, p.4.) and are currently increasing within the education of 16-19 year olds (ONS in City & Guilds, 2001 p.6.). As part of the current educational reform, the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual), has triggered changes to all FE education including that of the Business and Technology Education Centre (BTEC) in making changes to their vocational programmes. Incorporated within this change is BTEC's introduction of course pathways; technical-based (DFE, 2016) education aimed at progression routes into employment or the applied based (Pearson, 2016) courses which are aimed at progressing students into higher education. As a key part of their intention, BTEC claim to develop students to: 'progress to a related higher education course' (BTEC, 2014, p.2). In my experience, students completing this course can and often do progress on to universities across the country into a wide range of courses to include paediatric nursing, ECEC, midwifery, teaching, play therapy and many more. However, this course (BTEC, CPLD (2015) which was released for first teaching in 2016 is also, in agreement by law, in conformity with the Early Years Educator (EYE) (NCFTL, 2013) who grant the qualified level three licence to practice upon completion of the course.

Vocational vs Academic

There is and has been a continuous debate between vocational and academic approaches to adult teaching within Higher Education (HE) (Dudley, 2017). Early Childhood is part of this debate. Whilst there is not the scope to examine this in further detail in this paper, it could be argued that the BTEC CPLD (2015) course examined in this paper is trying to bridge that gap within FE to provide both connections to the EYE industry skills and academic skills for HE.

Methodology

Research Paradigm

An Interpretivist paradigm (Giddings and Grant, 2006) was adopted for the use of this research. Highlighting a specific paradigm, according to Kivunja and Kuyini (2017.p13), allows for a specific connection to elucidate the methodology used. In this paper, an interpretivist paradigm provides the space to examine and understand the perspectives and experiences of the participants involved. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Morgan (2007), adopting an interpretivist paradigm is often the case in research which focuses on individual participants' understanding and perceptions rather than larger universal ideas. This is applicable for this research paper as it explores the perceptions of

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influential FE and HE participants as well as considering documentary analysis of the key specification being examined.

Ethics

Full ethical approval was certified to carry out the research stated in this methodology. Across all data collection, during analysis and following the research active period, the BERA (2011) guidelines were consulted and followed with regards to consent, anonymity and data collection/storage and disposal. Consideration was given to the latest introductions of GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) (Information Commissioners Office (ICO), 2018) and ethical considerations for insider research (Saidin and Yaacob, 2016). All considerations have been explored in depth when gaining ethical certification.

Mixed Methods

In order to explore the two research questions highlighted, a mixed method approach to research was adopted. This approach was deliberately chosen to combine the benefits of both qualitative research and document analysis in order to investigate the complex field (Barnat, Bosse and Troutwein, 2001) of HE readiness and academic skills. Whilst remaining within the realm of the interpretivist paradigm, this chosen approach allows for input from semi structured interviews (Denscombe, 2017) which involve thematic analysis (James and Jaber, 2011) of findings and critical document analysis (Rapley, 2007) of the current BTEC level three specification (BTEC, 2015). Using a mixed methods approach allows for the interpretation of data to be analysed at greater depth. Such methods shall now briefly be justified.

Semi Structured interviews

Denscombe (2017) explores the benefits and use of semi structured interviews suggesting their benefits when exploring an interpretive paradigm. Three HE lecturers, two from one institution and one from another were involved in semi structured interviews as well as two FE teachers who deliver the CPLD (BTEC, 2015) specification in a local sixth form college. All chosen participants were taken as a purposeful sample done so on the basis of their experience working with level three students transitioning into level four on an Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) course. Participants were fully informed of the research process and provided with the interview questions prior to interview in order to allow for deeper and reflected responses. Each interview was audio recorded and all data stored in accordance with both BERA (2011) and GDPR (2018) guidelines. Interviews were transcribed using thematic analysis.

Thematic Analysis

James and Jaber (2011) explore a range of different methods for analysing narratives gathered through interviews. However, thematic analysis allows for key themes to be highlighted, thus providing wider coverage and analysis of key responses. Thematic analysis was applied to the data collected through the semi structured interview process. A wide range of themes were highlighted across the five interviews but due to the scope of this paper, only the dominant ones will be explored.

Document Analysis of the level three Early Years specification

Document analysis examines the BTEC CPLD (2015) course specification. This method of analysis allows for a deeper examination of the purpose and specific information provided (Wyatt, 2009) within the specification. With BTEC changes across previous years (BTEC, 2014) there are consistent claims to prepare students with the skill sets they need for HE. Documentary Analysis of this specification, in experience, differs to the ideologies of the FE staff delivering it and the HE receiving students post qualification. Therefore, analysing this specification provided a sound basis of student expectations

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from the perspective of BTEC in order to further examine how this was interpreted by FE staff in delivery.

Discussion of findings

Within this section, participants shall be kept anonymous and be labelled according to the area of education they are participating. i.e. Higher Education (HE) - HE1, HE2, HE3 and Further Education (FE) - FE1, FE2. In line with the rest of this paper, this section shall maintain the thread of the two research questions and shall discuss findings alike.

What academic skill sets should students attain before progressing into HE?

Hybrids of university teaching approaches and pedagogic changes have been an ongoing area for discussion with limited real certainty and outcome across the last 20 years (Boud & Solomon, 2001). However, despite vocational research such as that from Nutbrown (2012) which indicates that Early Years Practitioners should have progression routes into HE and the Government's requirement for level six qualified (DfE, 2018) nursery practitioners, there is minimal research into the set expectations of students entering HE. Two key themes were highlighted within the realm of this question:

Academic writing skills

Firstly, a strong focus around the need for academic writing skills was shared by all FE and HE participants as a definitive skill students required when progressing into HE. Opposing expected standards were repeatedly highlighted between FE and HE interviews around the need for students to be able to write academically. One view point expressed by both FE participants was that students at level three should develop, through their qualification, the ability to write an extended piece of work. Both participants suggested that writing skills and essay formats were really important so that students could answer both exam questions and write 'academically'. Further questioning for both FE practitioners, highlighted the understanding of the phrase 'academic' to refer to writing at a higher level and being able to structure long essays. It would be fair to argue that the academic expectations from both FE participants could be seen as high standards for level 3 students to achieve. This expectation is strengthened within the CPLD specification (BTEC, 2015. P19) which states the course provides 'skills required for particular degree courses, including reading technical texts, effective writing with analytical skills' (p19).

In contrast to this, when asked the same question, the HE participants' responses were pitched at lower academic expectations. It was highlighted by H2, and supported by the other two HE participants that:

'it would be helpful if level three progressing into HE students' were able to construct a meaningful sentence, be able to use grammar correctly within their work as they often come in without these skills and even often lack basic punctuation and grammatical skills' (HE2).

The clear difference between these two levels of expectations on students is paramount when considering the transition process into HE. Potential reasons as to why these high expectations of FE fail to meet the minimal expectations of HE shall be discussed further within the findings.

Study Skills

Secondly, a key difference which was outlined across all of the participant interviews was the different expectations of study skills. When exploring this concept with FE participants a range of ideas were presented including:

'the need for students to be able to reference correctly, work as part of a group to complete a task and learn how to work with others and carry out research (FE2).

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A further list of skills were presented across the two interviews with FE participants but all related to the theme of students being able to perform or deliver a skill set. However, in contrast to this skill mastering ideology of FE participants, a contrasting view was presented by the HE participants who collectively focused on independence skills, autonomy and self-management.

'It's crucial they know how to learn. Level four students usually have no idea what they don't like, let alone what they want from learning. As HE academics we can teach them how to structure work and master writing skills but are limited with capacity to spend time helping them learn about themselves or how to read' (HE2)

The shift in focus away from specific skill sets to personal growth was paramount within this research as one participant highlighted:

'ideally they need to know what they want, have passion and respect for children as well as their own learning. This has to be a priority' (HE1).

Despite contrasting views between FE and HE participants, BTEC indicate their student outcome goals are researched and in line with HE. It is clearly stated that the specification aims of this course is to promote students to develop skills such as:

'self-presentation... interpersonal skills: self-management, adaptability and resilience, self-monitoring and development' (BTEC, 2015 p19).

It could be argued that these ideologies are similar to that of the HE participants who highlighted the need for students to know and learn about themselves over the need for high academic skill sets. However, whilst such a specific and yet extensive list of aims is clearly aspirational, a number of them are highlighted by FE and HE staff as being effective in practice through limitations from the specification design.

It is clear from this section's findings that there is limited parity between the expectations of study skills attained during a level three course from HE and FE/ BTEC's aims. Therefore, it is worth exploring further why there are conflicting expectations of students on their journey in FE and the high expectations of FE teaching staff compared to the more 'internal' expectations of HE. Such answers shall be unpicked within the next research question by exploring how the BTEC (2015) level three meets the ideologies discussed above.

How does the BTEC level 3 CPLD equip learners with the specialist knowledge and skills enabling progression into HE?

Findings highlighted in the previous section explored the different perspectives of what academic skills students should attain before progressing into HE. Whilst no definitive list could be produced in agreement between FE and HE, a significant finding is the need for student autonomy and learning. This following section explores this further by examining the perceptions of FE teachers as to why they feel BTEC's claim are not fulfilling the academic skills previously discussed. Three key themes emerged from analysis: how BTEC provided autonomy; the impact assessment has on student experiences; and how the 'academic skills' BTEC states it provides students with are developed through the specification. Each shall be explored further.

Autonomy/Independence skills

Document analysis of the BTEC specification (BTEC, 2015) indicates that across the course there is a focus on 'interpersonal and thinking skills required to be able to succeed in employment and higher education' (p5). However, when explored with FE teachers delivering this course there was significant

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disagreement. When asked to consider how well the specification provides independence, both FE participants alluded to the view that it allowed for group work and opportunities for some self-reflection across their assignments and portfolio unit, however one FE participant highlighted that:

'students really struggle to think for themselves and the units are too prescriptive to allow for this to be supported' (FE1).

This was further agreed by the second FE participant:

'There is so much content students are forced to regurgitate the content to even scrape a pass, let alone getting the depth required for analysis or deeper learning' (FE2).

Both of these comments highlight the lack of space students are provided with in order to be reflective and gain greater depth of their learning due to over populated specifications. One could suggest here that although BTEC may intend to provide a specification to promote autonomy, this is being clouded by the amount of specification content being taught and assessed.

Assessment styles

For students to study and complete the BTEC course in an extended diploma in Children's Play, Learning and Development, they are required to achieve a wider range of modules which totals 1080 guided learning hours (BTEC, 2015 P13). This typically includes a mixture of mandatory and optional units.

External/ Mandatory assessment

Within the three mandatory units of this specification, one is classed as an externally assessed unit in the form of an examination (BTEC, 2015. P15), and the other two are externally assessed units in the form of set tasks. BTEC's definition of a set task is where 'learners take the assessment during a defined window and demonstrate understanding through completion of a vocational task' (BTEC, 2015. P15). However, both FE participants strongly argued that students still see these assessments as exams due to the conditions in which they are taught and set. The justification of using external assessments is to imitate assessments from related HE courses (BTEC, 2015. P14). However, this was contradicted from both FE participants and all 3 HE participants in particular, HE1:

'the progressive Early Years degree programmes typical BTEC students go on to do not contain exams or controlled assessments. No practitioner skills should be tested with an exam, especially supporting key areas such as development literacy etc' (HE1).

It was further highlighted by two participants, HE1 and FE2 that the 'vocational task' used within the externally assessed unit was not appropriate to the level of study the students are at. Students had been given an Ofsted report and were being asked to advise managers about improving a settings outcome. FE2 argued:

'at no point in practice is a level three likely to step straight into a position where they are required to analyse Ofsted data making recommendations. Especially students in their first year of a level three program. Certainly not for the purpose of assessing students knowledge of children's literacy skills' (FE2).

These findings suggest that the examination of skill sets does not meet the expected requirements for level three practitioners in industry, neither does it promote the progression or expectations of HE. A fundamental highlight when examining how this specification is meeting its ideology aims.

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Internal and optional assessment

Alongside the externally assessed units, students are required to complete a number of assessments chosen by the teacher. BTEC (2015) advises teachers to:

'select the most appropriate assessment styles according to the learning set out in the unit. This ensures that learners are assessed using a variety of styles to help them develop a broad range of transferable skills' (p16).

However, whilst on the surface this could be argued as a positive in supporting students' skills, this provided different responses from the participants. A common theme which arose here is the idea that this heavily relies on teachers' knowledge of assessment ranges and creativity. FE1 highlighted that:

'although we try and think outside of the box, if teachers do not have up to date industry skills or the knowledge of different assessment skills then the prescriptive nature of the specification is likely to result in default written essays'

This lack of consistency was also highlighted as a concern across both FE2 and HE1, HE2. FE2 further argued that:

'non set assessments mean there is limited parity across institutions. Likewise, one student can develop and create a detailed analysis within their portfolio but then another it can be thin, just a scrape but they can achieve the same grade. With too much subjectivity in the specification students are just not all achieving the skill sets they need to progress' (FE2).

However, document analysis of this specification provides a very different picture in arguing that the assessments used originate from a HE perspective:

BTEC Nationals are widely recognised by industry and higher education as the signature vocational qualification at Level three. They provide progression to the workplace ... via study at a higher level. (p5)

It is fair to suggest that these ideologies are not being met within FE through either internal or external assessment methods as all participants argued that there is no student autonomy or parity within the assessment methods or taught content on this course.

Academic skills

Two clear stipulations are made by BTEC (2015) who state that:

Higher education needs students who have experience of research, extended writing and meeting deadlines (p5)

Transferable skills are those such as communication, teamwork, research and analysis, which are valued in both higher education and the workplace' (BTEC, 2015 p14).

These two clear aims from BTEC had different responses in HE and FE participants. When exploring these aims with each of the participants, a unanimous view was provided that the aims to provide academic skills were not met. As we previously discussed, there was a key difference in FE being skills focused and HE participants being focused on autonomy and self awareness. However, this section focuses on how the BTEC (2015) specification uses the 'academic' skills in order to support students.

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Two key areas were highlighted by the FE participants: Referencing and Word Counts, as paramount for students to develop into HE.

Referencing

Both FE participants indicated that they felt students should be able to reference:

'Referencing is a skill that students are expected to have at university. We should be preparing them for that transition but also to acknowledge where their ideas come from. Students at level three should then at least be able to find a source and have a go at referencing it' (FE1).

Whilst both FE participants highlight this as a paramount skill required, it is not acknowledged as a required skill by any of the HE participants. This again strengthened the contrasting expectations students are experience. Whilst seen as a key importance, it was clearly identified within both FE interviews and from document analysis of the specification that:

'apart from one external assessment set by BTEC (research module) there are no requirements anywhere for any referencing to occur' (FE2).

It was explained by FE1 that within the module referred to in this quote, students are encouraged to make a bibliography as part of the assessment and reference their research. However, further analysis of the BTEC specification indicates that other than the one research module FE2 refers to in the above quote, there is no definitive part of the specification which stipulates that learners are requested to do any referencing (BTEC, 2015, P50). This indicates that the participants' concerns around referencing, a HE skill they feel paramount, are valid and not promoted.

Word Counts

Although no reference to word count was initially made by the HE participants, both the FE participants considered this an academic skill which would support students in not only their studies at level three but progressing into HE:

'Students think the more they write the better the chance of them achieving. Obviously, this isn't the case so, as does the CACHE and other level three's, BTEC's guidelines should indicate word counts to help students develop their writing skills' (FE1).

An interesting comparison made by the experience of FE1 in the above quote as it suggests that this understanding of the importance of word counts is common across FE and other courses. One HE participant, although not initially, mentioned word counts as a bonus to student skills but this suggests that it is not of high priority. Another clear divide of expectations has been highlighted here as the importance of students using word counts as a skill is not valued as highly within HE as the FE participants argued.

Whilst there has been a clear divide between the expectations of HE participants suggesting the need for students to develop autonomous and independent skills. FE argue there needed to be a specific skill set achieved, such as word counts and referencing. Alongside this difference, there are also discrepancies between FE expectations and the aims BTEC provide and how the specification promotes these skills. It is important to highlight these conflicting views when we consider the transition experience that students go through between FE and HE. Conflicting expectations, it could be argued, could influence the effectiveness of this.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The overarching question 'How does the 'BTEC level 3 Children's Play, Learning and Development' course prepare students for Higher Education?' which binds this report and its findings has been explored from three different perspectives, HE, FE and the BTEC specification regulations. A number of polarising views have constructed debates around what students should be doing in order to be 'equipped with the skills for HE' (BTEC, 2015). Whilst it is apparent that all three viewpoints differ, there does appear to be one aligning theme of student autonomy between HE and BTEC, however findings suggest that this is not filtering through to practice.

The apparent conflicting expectations on students has developed some clear recommendations and thoughts worthy of further exploration.

Firstly, FE and BTEC partnerships

Findings have suggested that there is a lack of clarity between what the FE lecturers think students need in order to access HE which it claims to do. A working partnership group is needed here in order to develop future specifications. Although BTEC have claimed they work with HE providers, there clearly needs to be further communication and exploration of expectations between the providers delivering the specification and the development of it. In addition to forming partnerships, it would be worthy of exploration for further research to be carried out on a wider scale to repeat these methods with a wider range of FE institutions to gain a deeper insight into the changes that need to be made to specification design.

Secondly, BTEC and HE Partnerships

As explored within the findings of this paper, there is an acknowledgement from BTEC that their specification works in partnership with HE providers. It is difficult, from the findings of this research to evidence that the relationship has added to the specification design. However, there is one key alignment, being the idea of student autonomy been required. This research therefore recommends that partnerships be continued and developed to input the practicalities of how this should happen within the course design to close the gap of expectations on students.

Finally, FE and HE Partnerships

A key recommendation to be made from this research is to close the gap between FE and HE expectations on level three to four students. This can be done through a number of ways but changes to personal practice from these research findings include:

1. HE visiting FE institutions across both levels of BTEC level three to build relationships with students and share expectations with students as to what university is like.
2. Encouraging visits from FE into HE institutions for 'taster days' so students can experience lectures and learn more about the expectations HE has of them entering at level four.
3. Further combined research between FE and HE to examine and measure the impacts of different strategies on the impact of such changes.

In order to achieve the government requirements of Early Years practitioners in the workforce and provide students the opportunity to succeed, the transition between level three and four is important. Therefore, it can be argued that by generating a more informed transition with the sharing of expectations between FE and HE, staff can deliver a united and tailored transition to meet the needs of its students.

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