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Lifelong Learning Networks
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Research in the Lifelong Learning Networks

Edited by: Jenny Shaw, Jan Wise and Amelia Rout
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Foreword

I am delighted that we are now able to share with you this e-book which presents some of the research work completed by Lifelong Learning Networks during the past five years. The collection provides a deep insight of the work which has taken place and how individual LLNs identified real needs of vocational learners, rather than those based on rhetoric.

The research has informed developments within specific regions but indeed findings are transferrable across regions and it is hoped that they will form a basis for further research in some areas. Through the work we are able to gain a real insight into the issues surrounding the challenges of widening participation and how these challenges can be met.

One of the problems of the research work of the LLNs was that it would be lost at such a time that the LLNs were no longer funded. This work will ensure that it is not. My thanks go to the research group that steered this work and the researchers who completed it.

Jill Ward
Chair of the LLN Directors group

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Crossing Campuses: Level 3 Tutor Visits and Vocational Progression

Ruth Waring, WVLLN Progression Co-ordinator, University of Bath.
Kate Thomas, WVLLN Progression Co-ordinator, Bristol UWE.

Introduction

The Western Vocational LLN is organised around a largely decentralised approach, placing a FE Progression Co-ordinator within all but one of its partner HEIs. While the role of each Progression Co-ordinator depended to an extent on the institutional culture of their host and the way each was positioned within their institution, Progression Co-ordinators have been collectively responsible for researching, generating and implementing progression agreements and a range of progression-related activities at local and regional levels. At the time of writing, the authors of this chapter, Ruth Waring and Kate Thomas are employed as Progression Co-ordinators at the University of Bath and Bristol UWE respectively. The University of Bath is a member of the 1994 Group of internationally renowned research-intensive universities and Bristol UWE, a post-1992 university, is the largest provider of higher education in the South West of England.

This chapter focuses on an initiative arising out of investigations into perceptions of and barriers to progression to higher education (HE) among Level 3 vocational learners and their tutors in FECs. The initiative involved inviting small groups of FE tutors to take part in structured but informal visits hosted by Departments and Schools within the network's HEIs. These visits aimed to support Level 3 vocational tutors in Further Education (FE) in raising aspirations among successive cohorts of vocational learners by extending their own experience and understanding of HE. The tutors primarily targeted by the initiative were those working in the 16 Further Education Colleges (FECs) in the region who had moved into a teaching career via professional/industrial experience rather than through higher education. The chapter traces the early development of the initiative, presents participant feedback and considers the opportunities and challenges presented by a deceptively simplistic formula. In particular, the authors highlight the inter- and intra-institutional and cross-sector collaborative process required to initiate and sustain the initiative, its impact and the ways in which insights arising from the programme were fed back into practice around vocational progression to HE.

While not originally conceived as a research project, the systematic collection of participant feedback and recording of changes to practice as a result of the visits, reflect an action research approach: 'a form of research carried out by practitioners into their own practices' (Kemmis, 1988:167). The evolution of understanding and practice related to vocational progression to HE has reflected the 'spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting' central to action research (ibid:168).

Context

The activities the LLN programme as a whole are underpinned by the recommendations of the Leitch Review of Skills (2006) and evidence that less than 50% of learners with Level 3 vocational qualifications progress to HE by the age of 21 in comparison with 90% of learners with two or more A Levels (Connor et al, 2006). In their study, Connor et al identified attitudinal factors which presented barriers to applicants with vocational qualifications. In the first phase of the WVLLN's operation, its Progression Co-ordinators prioritised efforts to understand more about the attitudes towards higher education among potential vocational applicants themselves. A formal data collection exercise resulted in the publication of a report: *Level 3 and Beyond? Choice, Influence and Transferability in Level 3 Vocational Learning* (Thomas et al, 2008). One of the findings reported was that 50% of vocational learners in the region saw their tutors as the main source of advice about progression to higher education (ibid, p8). The role of Level 3 vocational tutors in FE Colleges as 'key influencers' on students considering their progression options is supported by recent research (Daly and Thomas, 2008; Aimhigher Greater Merseyside, 2008).

With relationships between WVLLN Progression Co-ordinators and staff in FECs in the region having been enhanced by the data collection process, one-to-one focused discussions were then held with Level 3 vocational tutors, Programme Managers and Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) staff about their experiences of supporting students on vocational courses applying to study in HE. In these discussions, FE guidance managers highlighted that a significant proportion of Level 3 tutors on vocational courses at FECs had progressed into FE teaching via professional and industrial routes rather than through higher education. Although the former route is obviously desirable for effective vocational teaching, it places lecturers at a disadvantage when it comes to talking to students about the experiences of studying higher education and/or living on a university campus. Furthermore, discussions held with HE colleagues showed that the majority of academic staff undertaking HE admissions-related roles, particularly at Russell Group and 1994 Group universities, had progressed to their current positions through the traditional A-level route in a school environment. This meant they were generally less familiar with the curriculum and teaching and learning approaches of Level 3 vocational courses and with Further Education settings.

One FE guidance tutor suggested a possible way to address the issue would be to provide an opportunity for Level 3 vocational tutors to spend time on a university campus meeting staff and students. This seemed to address the need for further awareness from both HE and FE perspectives. In focusing on Level 3 vocational tutors, rather than Level 3 learners such visits would complement, rather than duplicate, work done by university outreach schemes and Aimhigher. This suggestion formed the basis of the resulting initiative discussed in this chapter.

Level 3 tutor visits

In early 2008, one of the authors organised two small-scale, informal visits by FE tutors in Health and Social Care to the Department of Social Policy at the University of Bath. These visits were

intended as pilots, to explore their effectiveness as ways of sharing expertise and experience between the two sectors and improving the clarity of higher education progression routes for learners on Level 3 vocational courses. Each half-day visit included the following elements:

- informal meetings over coffee and lunch with Faculty admissions tutors and first year Social Policy lecturers,
- the opportunity to sit in on a first year lecture,
- a campus and department tour with student ambassadors.

The schedule allowed time for informal discussions about Level 3 vocational curricula, the higher education learning environment and the mechanics of application and admission to higher education.

Following the success of the pilots, the University of Bath and Bristol UWE Progression Co-ordinators collaborated to extend the initiative. The aims of the visits were formalised as follows:

- to facilitate FE tutors' raising of aspirations among successive cohorts of Level 3 vocational learners at FE Colleges in the region,
- to raise awareness of issues in the FE and HE sector around the progression of vocational students into higher education,
- to increase the level of communication/dialogue between relevant practitioners in the two sectors.

The target audience for the visits were identified as:

- Level 3 vocational tutors in FE in the region who may have moved into a teaching career via work experience rather than through higher education,
- any vocational tutors who were interested in visiting university departments as part of their continuing professional development (CPD),
- HE lecturers and admissions tutors who were interested in learning more about the experience of applicants and first year students from vocational Level 3 courses and the experiences of FE tutors who support them.

The other key elements incorporated in the visits were:

- keeping FE tutor participants to a maximum of six in order to maintain an informal, personalised environment,
- establishing personal contact with each FE tutor prior to the visit rather than relying on Programme Managers or Heads of Department to pass on the invitation and arrival details,
- following up the visit with individual emails thanking tutors for their time, responding to questions which had arisen during the visit and inviting future contact,
- an evaluation form or evaluative discussion at the end of each visit, to obtain feedback and suggestions for future visits and other contacts within Colleges.

The outcomes of the pilot visits and plans for extension of the initiative were communicated within WVLLN and institutional networks and among FE contacts. The Progression Co-ordinators began to negotiate dates for a further eight visits to a range of academic departments: four to the University of Bath and four to Bristol UWE. In discussions with academics and admissions staff within each HEI, the Progression Co-ordinators were careful to position the visits not as a recruitment or promotional activity for the department or HEI in particular, but as an opportunity to develop greater awareness of the common elements in the higher education experience, whatever the differences between individual campuses. While it was important that prospectuses, facilities and resources were made available in the interest of contextualising HE and subject study, these were not to be 'pushed' at visiting tutors. The Progression Co-ordinators felt it was equally important to stress that the visits were an opportunity for two-way dialogue between FE and HE and for staff development on both sides, rather than a 'lecture opportunity'. The Progression Co-ordinators' roles within the collaborative framework of the WVLLN provided a helpful background in this respect.

One of the issues when trying to organise the visits was the difficulty for Level 3 tutors in taking time out from their teaching schedule. During 2009, the WVLLN Progression Co-ordinators attempted to address this by discussing ways of embedding the visits within the options offered as part of one regional College's compulsory staff development days. Meanwhile, another College recognised that the visits formed a valuable part of tutors' CPD and those who had participated were encouraged to reflect on the activity as part of their portfolio of evidence towards Institute of Learning (IfL) registration.

IAG practitioners in some FE Colleges became increasingly interested in participating in the visits and invitations were therefore extended to these practitioners in the later stages of the initiative.

Feedback

Feedback from FE tutors was collected immediately after the visits. In two cases, feedback was also collected eight months later in order to assess whether tutors felt the visits had resulted in changes to their professional practice.

An original aim of the visits had been to give vocational tutors who may not have attended university themselves, an insight into the experiences the opportunity might open up for their students. The feedback shows that the visits met this aim with tutors commenting:

It will be great to talk with authority about what it's like on campus.

'I personally haven't attended university and so it was useful to get a feel for the establishment.'

'It has been inspirational for us to come here...if the students could see all the facilities, they would be inspired too.'

The small scale and informality of the visits also served to break down misconceptions about the university environment and to give important messages which tutors could pass on to successive cohorts of vocational learners:

'It's been much more informal than I expected, friendly and welcoming. My preconceptions about university were very different and that would probably be the same for our students.'

Achievement in relation to the second stated aim: to raise awareness of issues in the FE and HE sector around the progression of vocational students into higher education, was also borne out in participant feedback. Tutors gained specific information about the application process:

'The visit was extremely effective as it gave a good insight into the requirements of the course from both a tutor and a student perspective.'

'I wouldn't have known all this if I hadn't come here. It's very difficult to get this kind of information when you're teaching. It's been a good way to get a lot of information in a short time.'

In addition, FE Engineering tutors felt that the opportunity to sit in on a first year maths workshop and have informal discussions with HE lecturers had led them to view the University of Bath's entry requirements in relation to Level 3 maths in a different way than before the visit. One tutor fed back: 'to be able to understand their issues, helps us towards solving them.'

The highly personalised nature of the visits enhanced communication between HE and FE Tutors had commented anecdotally, that universities can seem large, impersonal and inaccessible places and it can be difficult to know who to contact, but one said after her visit:

'We have felt very welcome, as if, even though we come from a small college, we do matter.'

Personal contact between subject specialists from the two sectors broke down assumptions on both sides: from the FE perspective the assumption that 'the university's not interested in our students' and from the HE perspective: 'doubts about whether vocational students would be at all interested in applying for our more academic offer.'

An FE manager, whose staff had participated, reflected:

'Personalising the experience gives a better insight than just hearing about it, but it also gives the university an opportunity to understand the possible restrictions that are currently deterring students.'

Finally, there was encouraging feedback about the ways in which the visits might influence future practice. As a result of their visit to Bristol UWE's School of Health and Social Care, Health and Early Years tutors from Norton Radstock College said: 'We are keen for our college to participate in the Taster Days and other Aimhigher events' and a colleague said: I'd like to take my Early Years students to the School of Education'.

Case Study: Norton Radstock College

Norton Radstock College is a multi-site, community Further Education College with 6,000 students (full and part-time), located in rural Bath and North East Somerset. The College offers programmes from Basic Skills to Foundation degrees and delivers aspects of the 14-19 Diploma as a member of the Bath and North East Somerset Consortium. It offers full time vocational programmes in Health and Social Care, Engineering and Motor Vehicle, Construction, Animal Care, Horticulture, Art & Design, Hair & Beauty, IT and Business and Sport and Public Services.

In 2009, tutors from Norton Radstock College in Somerset participated in two visits: one by Engineering tutors to the Engineering Department at the University of Bath; the other by Health and Social Care and Early Years tutors to the School of Health and Social Care at Bristol UWE. Tutors were encouraged to reflect on the activities as part of their portfolio of evidence towards Institute for Learning registration. The WVLLN collected feedback from the tutors immediately after their visits and eight months later, to assess any impacts of the visits on their professional practice.

In February 2009, two Engineering tutors from Norton Radstock College joined tutors from Bridgwater College and City of Bath College at the University of Bath for a half day visit at the Engineering Faculty. The FE participants sat in on a first year maths workshop with opportunities to engage with current students, postgraduate helpers and HE academics delivering the workshop. They had an informal lunch with academic admission tutors from the department of Mechanical Engineering and Electrical and Electronic Engineering, toured the Engineering workshops with academic staff and technicians and had a tour of the wider campus with student ambassadors.

Norton Radstock tutors were initially wary about the visit:

'I didn't really understand what it was going to be to be honest. I didn't have any preconceptions as I didn't know....'

Another said:

'I don't know how many (of our students) would get the qualifications to go to Bath and that was one of my reservations...it made it difficult to become involved.'

However, their reflections on the visit were very positive:

'The whole campus looked a nice place to be and the facilities for staff surprised me.'

...the wind tunnel and composites lab - I could have stayed there all day...the casual look around the library was just phenomenal...in terms of specialism just knowing that it's there is fantastic!

The discussions during the day had tackled the recurring issue of maths entry requirements for Engineering degree programmes and the extent to which Maths A Level and the National Diploma unit Further Maths for Technicians prepared students for degree level study. As part of the observation of a teaching session, the Norton Radstock tutors had been impressed by a workshop in which postgraduate students acted as maths mentors to undergraduate students:

'We've talked about copying that idea with someone doing the lecture side and other lecturers in the room – across the patch a bit more.'

Tutors also reflected on potential impact of a student visit to the campus at key times within their Level 3 programmes:

I'd love to get the students up there at the time they're 'putting in applications for uni...to show them the facilities – it would make a difference...there's still a lot that would get them excited about higher education. But getting the kids there would be such a motivation...only one student a year might be suitable to apply but if we could get that one student to apply (to Bath) that would have a knock on effect.'

'the real student benefit...is what they see on a day like that. They don't see it on recruitment days, they don't see the level of detail...if you take them to a generalised Uni Open Day it's lost on them, but if you take them to the Engineering Department they'll get excited about it. They come back motivated, they've had a little taste of the real thing – they think WOW, so they want to come back and get those Distinctions.'

'Eight months on the University of Bath WVLLN Progression Co-ordinator returned to the College to discuss the impact of the visit with the tutors and the Staff Development Manager. She learned that an unexpected spin-off from the visit had been Norton Radstock College's entry into the F1 in Schools competition.'

'...in the workshop we saw this race car project and we said to each other in the car coming back we thought we could do something like that... we did something akin to that a week ago with some really good results. So the inspiration from what you see in these places is big.'

In March 2009, the Progression Co-ordinator at Bristol UWE arranged a visit for four tutors (two of Health and Social Care and two of Early Years) from Norton Radstock College's Health and Social Care Department to UWE's School of Health and Social Care. Two of the tutors involved had come into teaching via the professional route, another had completed a non-related degree 20 years previously. The fourth had studied for a degree and had recently completed a PGCE.

The visit included the opportunity to meet the UWE School's Admissions Tutor, the Aimhigher Health Strand Co-ordinator, Director of Widening Participation and Dean of School. Participants sat in on a first year lecture and were taken on a campus tour by current students in Health and Social Care. All participants ate lunch together and participated in a closing question and answer session.

The areas discussed throughout the morning included UCAS tariff points, application forms, the volume of applications to Bristol UWE Health and Social Care programmes including very popular (and therefore more selective) programmes; the impact or otherwise of CRBs on applications and interview procedures.

The Head of Health and Social Care at Norton Radstock College indicated that tutors had initially been reluctant to participate in the visit, primarily due to concerns about their workload and the issue of arranging cover. One tutor who currently taught Level 2 vocational programmes had questioned the relevance of the visit to her work and her students. The Head of Department had pointed out that Level 2 students often progress to Level 3 and 'as far as I'm concerned preparation starts as soon as they walk through the door'. On reflection the tutors who participated felt that:

'We learnt exactly what they're looking for in regards to filling in application forms, how many people apply and how many get offers...'

'It was good to...talk about the detail of admissions, particularly the personal statement, the way the (UCAS) tariff works and the CRB. We will be in a much better position to advise our students now.'

The tutors had welcomed the opportunity to talk to HE staff without students present:

'the more contact and partnership there can be the better – it's a good way of encouraging the students to go on further. The more we can understand each others' role the better.'

The College's Head of Health and Social Care commented that his staff had recognised a common cause between themselves and the staff they met at Bristol UWE:

'there was the potential to work together...they all had common core values and aims...they were all into developing professional practice...that was the really good bit.'

He also noted:

'One of them texted me on the way back and said 'Thank you, we've had a great day, it was well worth it.'

Following the visit and making use of the personal link with the Progression Co-ordinator, the Health and Social Care tutors took a group of their students to visit the School of Health and Social Care. Two of those students subsequently attended an Aimhigher Taster Day. The Early Years

tutors were planning to take their students to visit the School of Education. One said:

'Since the visit, I certainly think it's encouraged me and my colleague to talk to the students a bit more about it and to feel more confident about answering their questions.'

An action research approach

As previously explained, this initiative was not originally conceived as a research project but as a practical approach to an identified issue within the WVLLN's remit. However, in practice, the activity reflected the 'spiral of self-reflection' (Kemmis, 1988:175) and was 'essentially participatory' (ibid). In particular:

- Systematic collection of participant feedback: the structured feedback collected throughout the project allowed the authors to evaluate and modify practices associated with the visits, for example to keep the scale of each visit small.

- Research into practice: the presentation of the activity at a national research conference and the writing of this chapter have constituted part of a reflective process for the authors.

- Social change:

  'The practitioner is actively involved in the cause for which the research is conducted...such commitment is a necessary part of being a practitioner or member of a community of practice' (Smith, 2007)

The authors' active involvement in the generation of the idea, its implementation and evaluation can be interpreted as a means of enacting social change, however incrementally, in the arena of vocational progression to higher education.

- Collaboration:

  'The approach is only action research when it is collaborative, though it is important to realise that action research of the group is achieved through the critically examined action of individual group members.'
  (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1998:5)[1]

Planning and conducting the tutor visits required collaboration between FE and HE, within FE Colleges, between HEIs and between individual departments in HEIs. The intersection of these different models of collaboration created a deeper understanding of different perspectives on vocational progression, of barriers and potential which those involved could reflect and act upon.

Challenges

It would be inappropriate not to record the challenges presented by this initiative, not least because meeting those challenges constituted forms of reflection and action on practice.

Firstly, it proved challenging to secure appropriate contacts within FE College departments. The most 'appropriate' contact in a College was not always the obvious one, an individual staff member needed not only to have the status to facilitate time away from a teaching schedule but also to champion the visits, to make them possible. This 'insider' knowledge takes time to build up. In addition, while the Progression Co-ordinators drew on their existing networks and those of their WVLLN colleagues to initially 'sell' the idea of the visits within FE Colleges, the identification of individual subject tutors and establishing the appropriate method of contacting them could prove time-consuming.

Secondly, it proved difficult finding a mutually convenient time for HE and FE staff. Several attempts to set up visits floundered on this issue. HE and FE work to different calendars and schedules and a half day visit represents a significant block of time away from the classroom. An informed approach on the part of the Progression Co-ordinators to FE and HE participants, in relation to exam and coursework timetables and half-terms and holidays was essential and had to be combined with flexibility and perseverance. Even so, one of the planned visits had to be cancelled at the very last minute due to changed cover arrangements within the FE College.

Thirdly, there were internal challenges. Following the success of one of the visits, the HE Department involved suggested running a second event for a much larger number of tutors and replacing informal discussions over coffee and lunch with PowerPoint presentations in a lecture hall. While such an event would certainly have been beneficial, the Progression Co-ordinators wished to maintain the personalised nature of the visits based on feedback from FE participants. The dissemination of participant feedback was a particularly powerful way of communicating these benefits to HE colleagues.

Conclusions

This book celebrates the research achievements of Lifelong Learning Networks throughout England and the research activity described in this chapter is a testament to the additional capacity provided by LLNs in general. In this case, the Progression Co-ordinators had the remit, commitment and resources to make links, build relationships and create meeting points, often slowly and painstakingly, on behalf of FE and HE practitioners with hectic schedules and heavy workloads. As relative 'insiders' the WVLLN Progression Co-ordinators developed an awareness of the best way to structure visits in order to make it as easy as possible for staff in FE and HE to engage.

During the remainder of the WVLLN's sustainability phase (2010-2011), there is a desire to organise more combined Level 3 tutor and IAG practitioner visits to a wider selection of WVLLN HEI partner institutions. There is also the intention to develop the FE Level 4 vocational tutor visits into a more formalised scheme whereby interested practitioners can opt in to visit a range of academic departments at all WVLLN member universities as part of their regular college

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1 *'Understanding Progression: Enhancing Collaboration', presentation at LSRN National Conference, London 11 December 2009*

CPD activities. While the visits themselves are small-scale, the resources required to set them up should not be under-estimated, so the realisation of this intention will depend on staffing levels. The possibility of reversing the visits with small groups of HE staff visiting FE Colleges to enhance their awareness of vocational curricula and the FE learning setting more directly has also been discussed, but again, it remains to be seen whether these could become a reality. Whatever the future for the initiative, the story to date has shown that commitment to a continuous strand of activity can build on insights gained through action.

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Facilitating an Understanding of a New Qualification: The Linking London Response to the Advanced Diploma

Sue Betts, Kate Burrell, Pam Calabro, James Chappell, Andrew Jones, The Linking London Diploma Team

Introduction

A focus for the Diploma team at Linking London from early 2008 was responding to the needs of Lifelong Learning Network (LLN) partners in relation to understanding the complex curriculum content of the new Advanced Diplomas and what it means for student progression. Given that the first tranche of Advanced Diploma students would be arriving in Higher Education (HE) from September 2010, as a Network we considered it imperative that staff in both sending and receiving institutions were clear about what learning, skills and attributes these learners would be bringing with them, when applying to HE.

Now that the post-election landscape has brought the long-term future of this qualification into doubt – we already know, for example, that the Phase 4 Diplomas in Science, Humanities and Languages will not now go ahead, that the notion of learner entitlement has disappeared and that the Diploma Development Partnerships for Phases 1, 2 and 3, led by Sector Skills Councils, will cease work from September – these issues may, in some quarters, no longer seem so pressing. The number of Advanced Diploma learners nationally are still relatively small (just over 1400 in 2008/09, according to DCSF figures)[2] and in future, market forces alone will decide whether the Advanced Diplomas survive or give ground to other more long-standing non-traditional qualifications, such as Access to HE Diplomas and BTECs. However, while it is impossible at this point in time to predict what will happen, the learning from our work in this area with partners has been invaluable and we feel that there are lessons which may be transferable to other Networks faced with the challenge of embedding responsiveness to this or other new qualifications amongst partners.

In this chapter, we will discuss the support package that we put in place for LLN partners engaged in supporting Advanced Diploma learners progressing from FE to HE. We will discuss our work in setting up the Diploma Delivery Partnership group to support 14 – 19 staff in related London boroughs and the development of bespoke staff development events and publications for partners, designed to assist both academic and non-academic staff in understanding this new qualification. We will also describe the support we put in place for HEIs in developing their UCAS entry profiles to take account of Diploma requirements and the role that we have played recently, in highlighting potential progression issues to Government.

The account is underpinned by an action learning and action research approach. The experiences and learning which we will describe have been achieved through a robust process of peer / partner evaluation within the context of ongoing formative feedback both at meetings, at events and via the web. We have worked in consultation with a range of partners, at local and national level, and the importance of active networking and ongoing dialogue with key stakeholders to ensure successful outcomes will be highlighted.

Diploma Delivery Partnership meetings

Our involvement in the London Gateway Diploma Approval Board at the Government Office made clear to us early on, that there was a lack of planning for evaluation built into consortia approval processes. This highlighted a potential role for us as an LLN, in supporting 14 – 19 Diploma consortia in taking forward their work. Following on from visits to 14 – 19 Diploma consortia leads in June 2008, the Linking London Diploma Delivery Partnership group was set up, with the aim of examining progression from the Advanced Diploma to HE in the Linking London area and identifying potential support needs. Representatives from eight of the thirteen 14 –19 Diploma consortia in the Linking London area have attended these meetings and to date eight meetings have been held, focusing on a variety of topics. These have included establishing links with HEIs; the extended project; engagement with education business partnerships; CPD for staff delivering the Diplomas; and progression issues. The meetings have provided an opportunity for 14 – 19 Diploma coordinators and managers in partner boroughs to network and share good practice and have included attendance from several HEIs in the Network.

What has become clear from involvement in these meetings has been the complexity of work undertaken by consortia staff as they attempted to bring individual learning lines on stream. Progress across the implementation of individual learning lines has been uneven, which may reflect the difficulties faced by consortia in engaging across so many sectors. Most recruitment of learners across the Network has been at levels 1 and 2, which is indicative, perhaps, of consortia concern to 'get it right' at these levels, before attempting the Advanced Diploma. However, mapping of borough provision undertaken by Linking London in December 2009, indicated that deliveries at level 3 are now occurring in all but one of the thirteen boroughs in the Network and it will be interesting to see which of these survive.

Building on from our own work with the Diploma Development Partnership group, those staff in FECs / HEIs involved in supporting and planning for Advanced Diploma progression may similarly find it useful to set up meetings with their own borough 14 – 19 leads, particularly in the light of their changing roles. This will facilitate both local intelligence gathering and provide a focus to

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[2] *DCSF: Participation and achievement for the first year of national diploma provision, England, 2008/09*

discuss ways in which local partners can best work together to support key aspects of the Advanced Diploma qualification, such as the extended project, work experience and Additional & Specialist Learning (ASL). There are signs that this is already starting to happen in many London boroughs and this can only be welcomed if the Diploma is to be embedded in national qualification structures and successful learner progression achieved. For example, the University of East London, as part of a multi borough progression agreement from the Construction and the Built Environment and Engineering Advanced Diplomas, is looking into the feasibility of providing space and expertise to deliver part of the qualification on campus, using HEI facilities.

Staff Development and Publications

Engaging with 14 – 19 Diploma consortia through the Diploma Delivery Partnership meetings enabled us to get a firmer handle on issues being experienced by learners / staff on this qualification as they emerged and we were able to feed this into our planning of publications and events. For example, last year it became clear that consortia were finding that difficulties were occurring in the Functional Skills component, particularly in the area of maths and we were able to put on an event for partners, aimed at providing an overview of current issues. The Head of Functional Skills at the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency attended and was able to answer questions, as well as draw on the perspective of delegates. Being based in London made it easier for us to gain access to specialists like this, but we would recommend that other networks similarly tap into support and expertise in this way as, in our experience, stakeholder organisations are usually more than keen to have access to professional networks with which they do not have links.

Similarly, an event on the 'Additional and Specialist Learning' (ASL) strand of the Diplomas held in November last year, allowed us to gather together a range of key stakeholders, which included representatives from FE, HE, 14 –19 Diploma consortia, DCSF, Sector Skills Councils and Awarding Bodies, to discuss issues emerging in relation to this part of the qualification. A list of issues was generated from this meeting, which were raised with Iain Wright, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State in the DCSF later that month. At the meeting we also discussed further issues in relation to ASL already highlighted in our letter on the Diplomas in June in the Times Educational Supplement. At a subsequent meeting with senior civil servants at the DCSF, the issue of the quality of information on UCAS entry profiles was also raised. Such meetings highlight the benefit of bringing together key stakeholders to discuss issues of mutual concern, as they arise and, as in this case, so ensure that messages relating to progression are fed back at the highest level.

In our work, we have always tried to be proactive and to generate the capacity to react to needs as they arise. A good example of this is the Diploma Roadshow, a series of development events aimed at staff involved in advice and guidance in FECs and sixth forms, Connexions and 14 – 19 Diploma consortia staff in the London region. This provided an overview of the level 3 Diplomas in the context of UCAS / university entry requirements. We have also actively supported the staff development work of our partners, notably the seminar series offered last year by the Institute of Education which focussed on HE preparations for applications from Diploma students. These events have all been very well received and again highlight the value of offering a bespoke, tailored response.

As noted earlier, developing publications has been a key part of our work and feedback from partners has highlighted that they have valued the opportunity to access short publications which are well researched, focussed and timely. In our planning, we became aware, early on, of the lack of publications on the Advanced Diploma aimed at HE staff and potential students, in particular, and to fill this gap we wrote a number of publications, aimed at developing knowledge and understanding across a range of key areas. These have included:

- The New Advanced Diplomas: What they mean for HE in Curriculum Terms
- The Extended Project: 14 – 19 Reform – Key Principles & Processes
- The New Advanced Diplomas: Emergent issues and Priorities from Gateway 1
- The New Additional & Specialist Learning Strand of the New Advanced Diplomas: Updated Perspectives
- Progression from the 14 – 19 Advanced Diplomas to Higher Education: A Guide for Learners

These are all available to download from the Linking London website (www.linkinglondon.ac.uk) and have been circulated widely to partners and other key stakeholders.

Web Developmental Work

As we developed publications, the need to have a well organised, easily navigable web-site became increasingly evident. Investing in our website has enabled us to keep printing costs down and also to provide a place where items, as well as publicity relating to events, can be stored safely and accessed easily by partners.

We have found it useful to provide a webpage relating to particular qualifications within our portfolio and the Diploma page is available from www.linkinglondon.ac.uk/resources/diplomas/. On these pages are listed all the resources we have developed in support of our work; there is also a dedicated FAQs section, which includes further links, at www.linkinglondon.ac.uk/faqs/diplomas/). We created this resource because felt that it was important that partners should find it easy to locate information in one place. Monitoring of the 'hits' on these sites indicates that the resource has been well used by partners and this has, usefully, fed back into our planning.

2.4 Entry Profile Mapping and Progression Database

2009 saw an abundance of information about the opportunities offered by studying an Advanced Diploma on Government[3], Local Authority, Sector Skills Councils and other websites being produced, aimed at potential learners and their parents. However, it was our perception that there was a lack of guidance in relation to opportunities for progression following Diploma study. Since HE Entry Profile information is a key resource for applicants seeking places in HE, as part of our work in supporting Diploma learners, we invited partners to bid for development funds to take forward their work in mapping their curricula against the first five Advanced Diploma lines. This invitation highlighted the lack of preparedness of many institutions in articulating clear entry criteria for these learners.

[3]*www.direct.gov.uk/diploma*

To help fill this gap, we worked with our 14-19 Diploma consortia group members across the Network to produce an IAG resource aimed at both IAG advisers and learners. This resource, the *Progression Routes Database* provides an on-line, information tool which details current potential progression routes from each of the first five Diploma lines to HEIs in the Network, together with the specific ASL required for entry on to particular programmes. Included within the database is also a 'lucky dip' section, which identifies HE Diploma progression routes that do not require a specific line of learning. This resource has been well received by partner FECs and boroughs and has provided a useful stimulus to HE partners to review their entry profile information. Leading on from this, we have completed a further piece of work which involved sampling UCAS entry profile information for all non A level qualifications at 10% of HEIs in England. (See *Quality of admissions information for applicants to full-time undergraduate study, Linking London Lifelong Learning Network,* February 2010). This work has recently been shared with key stakeholders including the Department for Children, Schools and Families; The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills; Supporting Professionalism in Admissions; UCAS and the LLN National Forum.

Such work, again, highlights the value of collaborative working and how working proactively, we have been able to develop bespoke solutions to locally identified problems as they emerge. It also highlights the valuable perspective that LLNs, working regionally and nationally, have been able to bring to bear on issues of vocational progression. As neutral and independent organisations not directly involved with issues of day-to-day delivery, we have had the time, energy and resource to tackle some of the challenges currently facing partners, to create innovative and lasting results.

Creating Progression Agreements from the Advanced Diplomas
Many of our HE partners were unfamiliar with this new qualification. Our work on HEI's UCAS Entry Profiles showed that many were asking for A-Levels as part of the ASL requirement when, in fact, not all FE partners were making this option available to their learners. We therefore felt it vitally important to ensure that progression agreements were brokered from the first five Diploma lines to ensure successful progression.

To date, a range of agreements have been signed, which include:
- Society, Health & Development and Construction & the Built Environment Advanced Diplomas (Hackney Community College) on to 18 courses at London Metropolitan University
- Construction & the Built Environment and Engineering Advanced Diplomas (London Boroughs of Haringey, Enfield, Hackney, Thurrock, Tower Hamlets and Newham College of Further Education) on to 10 programmes at the University of East London
- Information & Technology Advanced Diploma (London Boroughs of Enfield and Barking & Dagenham College) on to 10 programmes in ICT at the University of East London
- Society Health & Development Advanced Diploma (London Boroughs of Lambeth, Enfield, Thurrock, Haringey and NewVIc and Barking & Dagenham College) to a variety of programmes in the School of Health and Bioscience and the School of Humanities and Social Science at the University of East London (UEL)
- Business & Finance Advanced Diploma (Tower Hamlets College, City & Islington College and Lewisham College) on to all undergraduate courses in the Business School at London Metropolitan University

As well as continuing to broker further PAs from other lines of learning and adding boroughs and receiving courses to existing agreements, we have used the opportunity of working on progression agreements to develop progression agreement flyers aimed at potential learners, and this has proved to be a useful marketing tool for partners.

The Progression Advice Line
We launched an advice line in September 2009 in response to a number of requests for information on various aspects of the Advanced Diplomas, and in an attempt to predict the information needs of partners supporting year 2, level 3 learners with progression. Designed, initially, to support Diploma learners only, it now offers a one-stop shop for queries about non-traditional qualifications, which can be submitted either by phone or by email, by any staff within the Network. Use of the advice line has so far been limited, which is probably reflective of the fact that number of Advanced Diploma learners across the Network completing this year is still relatively small. However, we intend to continue this service for the foreseeable future, as more Advanced Diploma learners progress to year two. We are aware that the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) and Specialist Schools and Academies Trust's support for Diploma deliverers is time limited, and that funds will not be available in future years. FECs / HEIs may also, therefore, wish to consider whether providing such an advice line might be an appropriate support tool to offer learners engaged on a range of vocational / non-traditional qualifications.

Tracking Learners
Early on, it was decided that it would be useful to monitor the experience of Advanced Diploma learners on individual learning lines, to gauge their perceptions of the qualification and their own experience of planning for progression. It has not been particularly easy finding partners delivering at level 3 on the first five learning lines and, initially, we were only able to meet with a relatively small number of students on the Creative & Media and Society, Health & Development lines. However, this year, we have become aware of at least 100 learners within the Network who will be completing their Advanced Diploma studies and we have recently conducted a short questionnaire survey aimed at eliciting their feedback (See the publication *What we have learnt from students on the new Diplomas 2008 – 10*, June 2010, on our website).

Our work here highlights the difficulties involved in monitoring developments on any new qualification. Staff in schools / FECs are extremely busy and have their own priorities. Our work necessarily, therefore, has had to be based on a pragmatic, flexible approach. However, we recognise the importance of supporting this first tranche of Diploma learners and would recommend that other Networks consider undertaking similar work, to ensure that these learners are supported both into and through HE. All LLNs will be aware that, following the meeting early this Spring at the DCSF, which was attended by UCAS and SPA, the LLN National Forum has committed LLNs to providing this support to partners, wherever possible.

Conclusions
As our analysis above highlights, supporting developments across any new curriculum initiative requires creativity, hard work and, above all, perseverance. It takes time to gauge where interventions will be most effective and partners will also need help in understanding what it is they

need to know. The Diplomas have presented a particularly testing learning curve for partners and only time will tell which Diploma lines will become embedded in the new market-driven educational landscape.

Despite the complexity of the Advanced Diploma, our work has probably been helped by the fact that it is a new qualification. Because of this, there has been a wide range of events and publications for partners to access. Equally, given the fact that many of our other qualifications such as Access and BTEC have been around for such a long time, there hasn't been the same complacency and established mindsets to overcome.

Our experience working in this area has been a very positive one and the team have built on and used a wide range of skills, as we have developed our approach. The ability to offer support on a range of fronts has, perhaps, been our greatest strength and the reason why our work has been successful. For example, our recent work in the area of UCAS Entry Profiles, in particular, has meant that we have been able to identify potential issues in relation to ASL that have been fed back to partners, the DCSF and other key stakeholders and is indicative, perhaps, of the value of carrying out small-scale research in a timely fashion. Our role as a conduit for the dissemination of issues, trends and cases for concern has already been highlighted and every effort has been made to take advantage of opportunities to contribute to national conferences such as Aimhigher, Action on Access and the Forum for Access and Continuing Education. We have also obtained representation on four national and regional HE Diploma advisory and steering groups, although these groups may not continue and so not afford the same opportunities for Network partners in the future.

In many ways, working to embed progression from the new Advanced Diplomas has thrown up many of the issues that colleagues will have encountered with other established qualifications, such as Access and BTEC and, given that these are themselves going through a period of change currently, it may be that some of the approaches highlighted above, are equally applicable to these and new ones, such as Advanced Apprenticeships. Notwithstanding current changes to these established qualifications, the Diplomas themselves have constituted the most significant curriculum reform for over a decade. This major change was implemented speedily, within a politically driven educational agenda and, not surprisingly, there have been significant teething problems, not least the challenge of addressing HE responsiveness.

Our work has highlighted that communicating clearly and effectively with staff, learners and their parents will be intrinsic to the future success of this qualification and that this will only be possible if all key stakeholders are clear about both what the qualification consists of and the nature of student learning that will be achieved. Our experience in working to develop an understanding of the Advanced Diploma across the Linking London region has also demonstrated to us the paramount importance of partnership working across boroughs, schools, FECs and HEIs and this will need to continue if the Advanced Diploma is to emerge as a preferred qualification of choice for learners over coming years.

'Mentoring for Progression': bringing the benefits of peer mentoring to non-traditional learners

Emma Thomas, Progress South Central and Karyn Buck, The Learning Ladder

This chapter reports on two interrelated peer mentoring projects managed by Progress South Central in partnership with training and mentoring consultancy The Learning Ladder. These two projects, along with a third, were run on The Learning Ladder's established 'Mentoring for Progression' model and have aimed to bring the benefits of the mentoring relationship to new groups of people. In the projects reported in this chapter, two distinct groups of non-traditional learners benefited; learners enrolled on vocational further education (FE) programmes in Progress South Central's partner colleges, and young offenders at HMYOI Reading.

The projects have built on previous projects delivered by The Learning Ladder for Aimhigher (Milton Keynes, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire). The projects used a specially designed set of thought-provoking exercises and planning tools to facilitate the mentoring process and have brought the benefits of the mentoring relationship to people from different backgrounds, ages and levels of previous achievement.

Background and context

Mentoring generally and peer mentoring in particular, has been promoted in recent government initiatives. The Government's 2003 Green Paper *Every Child Matters* recommended increasing the number of learning mentors as a means of improving school attendance and behaviour (DfES, 2003: 27). The subsequent Green Paper *Youth Matters* stated an intention to promote peer mentoring in schools, colleges and universities as part of encouraging young people to support other young people (DfES, 2005: 7). It also stated its intention of expanding opportunities for peer mentoring:

> *'(Peer mentors) can act as role models, raising aspirations and achievements and exerting a powerful influence on young people. They can be particularly effective with those who have become disengaged from their communities or from learning."* (DfES, 2005: 41)

As an outcome of the recommendations in Youth Matters, the then-DfES contracted the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation, the national strategic body for practitioners and organisations working in mentoring and befriending, to manage a national peer mentoring pilot project, which subsequently established a formal peer mentoring scheme in 180 secondary schools across England. Mentoring is an important element of the Aimhigher programme as part of its overall brief to raise the aspirations and develop the abilities of young people from under-represented communities with regard to accessing higher education (HE).

Much of the available documented evidence for the benefits of mentoring, and particularly peer mentoring, in the educational context relates to schools (Knowles and Parsons, 2009; Nelson, 2003; Dearden, 1998; Younger and Warrington, 2009). The last reference is interesting from an LLN point of view as it cites evidence for the beneficial effects of mentoring on the subsequent progression to FE and HE of students from non-traditional backgrounds. An independent evaluation of the government's Formalised Peer Mentoring Pilot project in secondary schools in England, referred to above, showed that 97% of participating schools reported improved pupil ability to cope with school life and 96% recorded improved pupil confidence. Mentors and mentees were reported to have responded overwhelmingly positively to the experience and schools reported a number of beneficial outcomes (DCSF, 2008).

Evidence at a local level for the success of Aimhigher's mentoring activities in schools has come from focus groups held with school students in years 9, 11, 12 and 13 (Aimhigher MKOB, 2010), which have provided evidence for the success of mentoring in helping students gain an increased awareness of FE and HE and some increased understanding of the various progression routes possible. Beneficial effects on general motivation and aspirations were also reported.

Moving beyond the school context, there is documented evidence on the success of peer mentoring schemes among university undergraduate students (for example Bakhshi et al, 2009; Hixenbaugh et al, 2005; Fox and Stevenson, 2006; Hill and Reddy, 2007; Page and Hanna, 2008) but less in the FE college context. A Memorandum submitted by the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation to the House of Commons Select Committee on Children, Schools and Families in 2009 noted that many schools had introduced peer mentoring schemes as a direct response to the *Every Child Matters* and *Healthy School* initiatives. A survey undertaken by the Foundation with FE colleges in 2007 found that 30% of those who responded operated peer mentoring projects and of those that did not, 54% expressed an interest in setting up a programme.

Mentoring in the prison context was discussed in the Seventh Report of the Select Committee on Education and Skills (2005), which cited beneficial effects of those prison mentoring schemes that had taken place and urged the Government to look at significantly increasing the role of mentoring in prison education, including supporting existing successful programmes on a national basis. Irwin (2008) has cited evidence for the importance of learning from peers and claims that her interviews with inmates showed evidence of peer mentoring practices (informal, in this instance). Currie et al (2002) reports on a project to widen access to FE and HE for ex-offenders, and one Lifelong Learning Network has sponsored a project that began to identify offender and ex-offender aspirations and barriers to accessing HE (Hampshire & Isle of Wight LLN, 2009). Evidence for

the benefits of mentoring in the prison context includes, at a local level, the work of The Learning Ladder at HMP Spring Hill near Aylesbury (Aimhigher MKOB, 2009). This has been a significant success, with (as at July 2009) over 1000 prisoners engaged with and more than 140 personal development plans delivered. 98 prisoners are known to have progressed or to be planning to progress, including 44 progressions to college courses and 19 to university. In 2009, 36 ex-offenders took up a college or university place, more than double the number the previous year. The re-offending rate for those involved in the project has been measured at under 6%, around one-tenth of the national average.

More widely, peer mentoring projects in prisons have been run by Prisoners' Education Trust, which claims that peer mentors play an invaluable part in encouraging prisoners to start, persevere with and succeed in education and learning and issues a plea for more resources to help more prisons make use of peer mentor roles for learning support (Prisoners' Education Trust, 2010).

Relevance of mentoring for the work of Lifelong Learning Networks

While obviously fitting in with Aimhigher's brief to raise aspirations, mentoring is also consistent with the aim of Progress South Central which, as a Lifelong Learning Network, has progression as its central focus. As noted above, there has been substantial recent government focus on mentoring within schools. Progress South Central has aimed to focus on learners outside the school context taking less traditional routes into HE, via providers of work-based learning, via FE colleges and, potentially, via prison education. The LLN works closely with the Aimhigher partnerships in the region and were aware of the 'Mentoring for Progression' model as one that had already been piloted and was achieving good results. The LLN's aim in the projects discussed here was to apply a tried and tested model to a wider range of beneficiaries over a wider and more diverse geography. These projects have aimed to address potential barriers to progression from vocational FE into HE by helping potential HE learners identify progression routes that will help them achieve their aims.

Involvement in prison mentoring is appropriate given the plea from the Seventh Report of the Select Committee on Education and Skills (2005), referred to above, urging an increase in the role of mentoring in prison education, which coincided with the first year in which Lifelong Learning Networks were funded. However, a search of the Lifelong Learning Networks National Forum's research repository[4] suggests that mentoring projects have not been widely undertaken by LLNs – curriculum development projects and studies of student progression dominate. Progress South Central's involvement with 'Mentoring for Progression' has aimed to explore another avenue through which learners can be encouraged to progress to the next level.

Peer mentoring in college

This project aimed to train pairs of Level 3 vocational students to mentor one another with the aim of inspiring Level 3 students to progress to Level 4 and beyond. The expectation was that the students would commit to an ongoing mentoring relationship. The impetus for this project was a similar project delivered by The Learning Ladder on behalf of Aimhigher MKOB and the opportunity to introduce peer mentoring and its benefits to colleges that had not previously experienced it.

Sessions were planned as half-day workshops, delivered on college premises by The Learning Ladder. The workshop was delivered in three stages over approximately 3 hours. The sessions were interactive and required a high level of participation from the students, and it was intended that they should seem informal and fun. Participants were trained to mentor each other to identify life goals and aspirations, to research solutions and to produce an action/progression plan. Students were given the chance in the session to carry out internet research, utilising a designated web page[5], to assist them in producing an action plan. Students used the links provided to access websites where they could review job profiles, HE institutions and courses and student finance.

Students worked in pairs to produce a mini Personal Development Plan (PDP) document. They worked through some 'Life Plan Questions', which included asking about their interests, their favourite subjects at college, what they did and didn't like doing, and their ideal job. This then led on to producing a summary of their abilities, experience and areas of interest enabling a more informed decision about what they wanted to achieve and, importantly, how they would achieve it. The final stage was to log the results of their internet research into job profiles, possible progression pathways and finance options and to note where they felt they needed additional support and information.

Five of Progress South Central's partner colleges took part in the mentoring project and a total of eight half-day peer mentoring sessions were held; details are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Summary of participating institutions and numbers of participants

COLLEGE	NUMBER OF SESSIONS HELD	DATE	NUMBER OF STUDENTS PARTICIPATING
Abingdon & Witney College	1	May 2009	15
Aylesbury College	3	May 2009	37
BCA	1	June 2009	14
Bracknell & Wokingham College	1	Nov 2008	14
Newbury College	2	Oct 2008	31
TOTAL	8		111

111 students took part in the peer mentor training, and 106 of these provided feedback after the session. Of those who provided feedback, 30 students said before the mentoring session that they were planning on going on to HE, and this had risen to 43 students after the session. After

[4]www.lifelonglearningnetworks.org.uk/research-evaluation/
[5]www.thelearningladder.co.uk/student_links

undergoing the training, 90% of respondents felt that they had learned more about how they could progress to HE, and around 85% felt that they had learned more about achieving their career goals. 70% responded that taking part in the session had made them feel more positive about studying to get further qualifications.

The session leader's impression was that most delegates came away better informed and with an understanding of tools that could help them with future options and decisions. Some problems were encountered which the 2009-10 iteration of the project is aiming to address. Although the intention had been for colleges to advertise the flyer prior to the sessions and for those students who attended to have voluntarily decided to attend, in most cases sessions appeared to have been organised at the last minute and scheduled within class time, with the result that students were a 'captive audience' rather than necessarily willing attendees[6]. A booking form is being used this year in an attempt to address some of the issues that arose in 2008-09, for example requesting that the session takes place in a classroom or similar environment (as opposed to an open area such as a library) and that a college tutor is present throughout the session, as sessions were found to work better when a member of college staff was present in addition to the trainer. The requirement to sign and return a booking form has also helped to reduce the number of last-minute cancellations by colleges.

One of the stated aims at the outset of this peer mentoring project was that the peer mentor 'pairs' would commit to an ongoing mentoring relationship. It is not yet clear whether this has occurred, but Progress South Central is in the process of contacting the students concerned as part of the Student Voice project that forms part of our impact measurement strategy. The project has served to raise awareness of peer mentoring in the colleges concerned, which was another intended outcome.

This project was rolled out in 2008-09 to five FE colleges in Progress South Central's region, and, due to its success, is being rolled out again in 2009-10. At the time of writing, ten mentoring sessions in the colleges have been completed and five FE colleges have taken part, including three who did not take part in 2008-09. Lessons learned from the first iteration of this project have helped to inform the second, with the result that colleges have been engaged and sessions booked in earlier in the academic year.

Mentoring in prison

This project aimed to train and empower prisoners at Reading Young Offenders Institution, between the ages of 18 and 21, to enable them to reach their full potential by gaining relevant qualifications, including progressing into HE where appropriate. It built on previous work at HMP Spring Hill in Buckinghamshire which had suggested that an effective way of empowering prisoners through mentoring was to move as quickly as possible to a situation where prisoners themselves are acting as mentors.

Fourteen prisoners applied to take part in two preliminary IAG sessions that acted as a screening process for subsequent participation in the peer mentoring. These sessions aimed to 'sow the seed' in prisoners' minds regarding taking advantage of educational opportunities during their time in prison. Examples were presented of former prisoners who had 'made it' in terms of gaining qualifications and subsequently obtained productive employment. The aim of the sessions was to set a positive and encouraging tone regarding the options open to the young men, while balancing this with setting out realistically what employment options would and would not be open to them on release – for example, making it clear that convictions for violence and sexual offences debar one from working with children or vulnerable people. As a result of prisoner demand, a further half-day weekend IAG session was run, in which eleven prisoners participated.

As a result of the screening, seven prisoners were chosen to participate in peer mentoring sessions. In these, prisoners were given the opportunity to understand and appreciate the benefits of mentoring, experience the benefits of receiving a mentoring session from one of their peers, to put their mentoring skills into practice by delivering a peer mentoring session and to build a personal action plan.

The methodology used in this project was based on that used in previous 'Mentoring for Progression' projects, with adaptations made to reflect the particular context. The mentees completed action plans similar to those completed by the FE college students as outlined above, with the addition of some context-specific questions around their educational experience prior to coming to prison and their expected release date. Because the prisoners were not able to carry out their own research, due to lack of access to the internet, the research component was carried out on behalf of the prisoners by The Learning Ladder and the information then fed back to the mentor-mentee pair.

In deference to the amount of form-filling that it was felt the young offenders already have to do in prison; evaluation of this pilot initiative took the form of a semi-structured focus group of participants. The focus group, run by Karyn Buck and Learning Ladder team member Sven De Cauter (himself a former prisoner at HMP Spring Hill[7]), was attended by three Reading prisoner mentors:

> **W**, 19-year-old male, previous education 12 GCSE's A to C. After participating in the mentoring for progression training, W has decided that upon release he will start an engineering course or apprenticeship at college.

> **A**, 20-year-old male, expelled from school at the age of 14 in Year 9. A re-entered education doing a motor mechanic's course at college, which he passed. During his time in prison A has completed various general courses. However, by completing his personal development plan, A has now passed his Level 1 in English and Maths and also has completed a Level 1 in Music Technology.

> **M**, 20-year-old male, had a very inconsistent school education and does not participate in

6 *The student feedback reported in the previous section can be viewed as even more positive in the light of this.*
7 *www.independent.co.uk/news/education/higher/going-straight-the-exconvict-signing-up-other-prisoners-for-degrees-1880710.html*

education in prison. However he has decided to have a further look at the possibilities of becoming a tree surgeon or going into the Army.

The outcomes of the focus group are reported here in the form of responses to selected questions:

1 Did you enjoy the training session?
W "I did really enjoy the training as we have experienced the mentee/mentor process from both sides."
A "I found it very interesting not just work and work."

2 What would you like added to the training?
A "I don't think there are any improvements needed to the training. Maybe a few more game time activities."
M "I found the handouts really easy to understand and very helpful, books, ruler, note pads were all very clear and useful."

3 What did you find the most useful?
M "How to mentor someone and the constructive and honest feedback from Karyn."
A "All the communication skills we have learned, assertiveness and listening skills."

4 Do you know stuff now you didn't know before?
M "Yes. How to mentor someone and motivate them. How to be more assertive and personal people skills."
A "I have gained a lot of self-esteem and have realised that I can achieve much more than I thought. I have got much clearer career ideas and now know my goals and ambitions."

5 How has Sven helped in being here?
A "By seeing Sven we know that it is possible to change. If he can do it so can we. He is a positive role model and he knows how it feels to be in here."
M "Sven gives us hope and ambition. I find it very important to have a good role model."

The difference being trained as a peer mentor can make is evidenced by feedback from those taking part. This also demonstrates, in the words of the prisoners, the importance of the mentoring being carried out by fellow prisoners rather than members of staff or external mentors:

'If the governors tried to do what we do then the prisoners wouldn't listen, they would just see it as lecturing – but we are in the same position so they are more likely to listen.'

'Having you has been great cos you don't work for the prison.'

'Because you are not from the prison I concentrate more.'

The extent to which the mentors have learned the skills needed to take on the role and to work

with fellow prisoners is also demonstrated by the comments they made on the mentoring sessions they have already done:

'One lad, he seemed alright. The other lad – we chatted in his cell for 40 minutes and got nothing, it was like trying to get blood from a stone. He said he wanted to go to college but he didn't have good motivation. The first lad was on the ball really. He wanted to be an electrician. He already has some GCSEs. He had made a silly mistake that cost him 18 months of his life. He was from a decent background and a caring family. Or he wanted to be a plumber; he was very motivated, his ambition was to own his own house and have his own business like his dad. So I reckon he will do it and get what he wants.'

Encouragingly, the feedback also highlights the difference peer mentoring can make to self-esteem, confidence and, critically, the prisoner's attitude to their own potential for re-offending:

'I look differently on how I spend my time and help myself for when I am released so I don't come back.'

'You challenge us more to think differently, it has made me take more responsibility for my actions and staying straight.'

"More of this should happen because you are giving people a future, who thought they never had a future.'

Some changes were made to the original aims in order to tailor the project to better meet demand – given that this was a pilot project, it had been noted at the outset that it might be subject to change as it progressed. It had originally been intended that the project would involve external mentors conducting intensive one-to-one mentoring with prisoners from the Kennet Unit (a rehabilitation wing), but given that prisoners in this wing already have access to prison-provided opportunities along these lines, it was decided that the project team could best provide value added by delivering a more general IAG session to Kennet Unit prisoners. A half-day session was duly run at a weekend and eleven prisoners attended. Feedback was positive, with nine out of the eleven attendees expressing keenness to progress their education further.

The pilot peer mentoring project appears to have been extremely successful and there is interest in embedding the scheme in the prison. The seven prisoners who took part in the peer mentoring sessions are now equipped to act as mentors for fellow prisoners and have already run personal development sessions themselves. The prison as a whole is much further along the road to embedding peer mentoring thanks to the decision to equip a number of prisoners with the skills to act as peer mentors for other prisoners. With this in mind, The Learning Ladder are now sponsored by Progress South Central, running a further round of peer mentor training sessions in the prison.

Given the way the project has demonstrated the importance of using peer mentors rather than external mentors, embedding this in the prison will require enough prisoners equipped with

the necessary skills to work with all of those who are committed to coming into the project. The Institution has a high turnover of inmates so that the project will need to identify new potential peer mentors and equip them with the necessary skills. Another lesson from the HMP Spring Hill project, evidenced by the feedback from the Reading project, is that regular update sessions with the Learning Ladder team are greatly valued by the peer mentors. The sessions are an opportunity for them to refresh their skills or learn new ones and to have a sounding board for any issues they have come across in their peer mentoring work.

This pilot project was intended to be a positive experience for the prisoners that would enable them to plan a successful future and see the benefits of further study including, potentially, HE. The project also has the potential to assist with the reduction of re-offending rates, based on the previous project run at HMP Spring Hill. During a recent European Social Fund project, the prison kept in touch with ex-offenders after they'd been released. The re-offending rate for those involved in the project – i.e. the percentage of offenders who commit further offences on leaving prison - was under 6%, around one-tenth of the estimated national average figure.

Conclusion

The Mentoring for Progression projects form one aspect of the LLN's work that will hopefully be sustainable beyond the end of our funding period, given the evidence for awareness-raising and embedding in the institutions that have participated. Embedding of aspects of the Mentoring for Progression projects has already taken place, as reported above, and follow-up of the participants is taking place during 2009-10.

Tentative recommendations, based on the outcome of these projects, would include:

- Mentoring, particularly schemes involving the training of in-house and peer mentors have obvious potential for embedding and are therefore a viable way of ensuring sustainability of LLN initiatives.
- The enthusiasm, with which the project has been received at HMYOI Reading, and the success of the previous project at HMP Spring Hill, suggest that there is mileage in peer mentoring schemes being rolled out more widely within the prison service, particularly given the recommendation of the Seventh Report of the Select Committee on Education and Skills (2005).

The aims and outcomes of the Mentoring for Progression projects are consistent with several of the original aims for LLNs as set out by HEFCE (2004), especially the brief to provide support for learners on vocational pathways, to value vocational learning outcomes and provide opportunities for vocational learners to build on earlier learning. They form a complement to the creation of progression opportunities via curriculum development and progression agreements. They are 'on the ground' work at an individual level to clarify learners' goals and increase their awareness of the progression opportunities, including the HE opportunities, open to them. It is hoped that this work has played a part in creating a culture of peer support and of increased awareness of the potential for progression among those institutions that have participated.

Progress South Central   www.progresssouthcentral.org.uk

The Learning Ladder Ltd   www.thelearningladder.co.uk

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Reasons for non progression to HE among early years students

Laura Gibbons

This chapter described a study that was designed and carried out to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying reasons for non-progression to HE (HE) amongst vocational Early Years students on a Council for Awards in Children's Care and Education (CACHE) Diploma programme. The research took place at Longley Park Sixth Form College involving second year CACHE Diploma students and was carried out by the Information, Advice and Guidance Officer at the College as part of the Higher Futures project. Longley Park Sixth Form College is a widening participation college, which aims to raise aspirations and broaden horizons among its learners. The college is based in North East Sheffield; an area which has traditionally low levels of participation in Further and Higher Education. Since opening in 2004, just over 800 students have progressed to HE from Longley Park, with the first cohort graduating in June 2009. Over 60% of all College students to progress to HE have gone on to attend Universities within the city, indicating a strong trend towards favouring locally based provision.

Early Years students at Longley Park are part of the Higher Futures project through which they receive intensive support with HE choices and applications. However despite this work and students being aware of the increasing demand for graduates in the Early Years sector, 45% of the CACHE diploma second year cohort did not apply to HE in the 2008-09 cycle. This was, however, an increase on the proportion of applications seen in the previous year, perhaps indicating that the Higher Futures initiative had started to have an impact. The students who did apply in the 2008-09 were highly successful in gaining places with several students achieving places on competitive Early Years Teaching degree courses.

There is a wealth of existing research regarding issues surrounding widening participation to HE in general and some more specific examples which relate more directly those studying Early Years related courses. Two of the most relevant studies, carried out by Bingham and O'Hara in 2004 and 2007, focused on widening participation to Early Years degrees at Sheffield Hallam University. In their two studies, Bingham and O'Hara (2004 and 2007) concluded that the three key factors linked to participation in HE were family background, student finance concerns and worries regarding academic skills and pastoral support. In their studies, Bingham and O'Hara were specifically referring to HNC/HND students progressing to full degrees, but it is interesting to consider whether the key themes uncovered are reflected in the findings of this project working with level 3 students considering progression to HE. This will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

Another relevant piece of research is that conducted by Heath, Fuller and Paton (2007) at the University of Southampton. This work focused on how social networks influence decision-making with regard to HE, with emphasis on people who have the entry qualifications to access HE but have chosen not to do so. In this regard, it is interesting to compare how the findings of Heath et al (2007) compare with the findings of this research. Do the non-participating students in this project share similar views of the influence of social networks, for example family and friends? Furthermore, the Heath et al research has useful findings from a methodological perspective. The authors note that many projects focussing on issues around widening participation involve participants who have actually accessed HE, despite the barriers they may face, rather than being conducted with non-participants. They point out that this may be due to the difficulties of accessing people not in the formal education system, but clearly this is a methodological weakness. Thus the findings of Heath et al have been important in terms of the planning of this project and the decisions made in terms of participant involvement in the research.

The study sought to address the following questions:

- What are the main reasons why CACHE Diploma students decide not to apply to HE?

- How do these compare to the views of CACHE Diploma students who decide to progress to HE?

Research design and methodology

The research design evolved significantly over the course of this project in response to several key factors. Originally, second year CACHE Diploma students in the 2008-09 cohort received a briefing about the research within class, and were given an information sheet about the project. Second year students were chosen as research participants as they were the ones who would have already made their decisions with regard to progression to HE, whereas first year students would perhaps have still been unsure about their choices. Following this, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire to gauge reasons for either progression or non-progression to HE. For those who had decided to apply it gathered information such as choice of institution and course. The questionnaire was also designed to ascertain students' level of awareness of the introduction of Early Years Professional Status, a postgraduate award currently being phased in to the sector.

Students who agreed to participate also engaged in a group session where they worked together in small teams to generate ideas of why they chose to apply/not apply to University. Teams were predominantly a mix of students who were applying and students who were not, in order to promote discussion about the reasons for progression and non-progression.

Following the initial analysis of the questionnaire and group activity responses, the students were briefed about the next stage of the research and volunteers were sought to take part in individual interviews. However, it was found that students were reluctant to participate in individual interviews. The research design was therefore modified and focus groups were offered instead. Several members of the second year CACHE Diploma 2009-10 cohort were asked to participate in a focus group. Some of these were identified by the group teacher as being students who would

perhaps be willing to participate and others were chosen through random selection from a group who identified themselves as being non-university applicants. The students identified by staff were then approached individually and invited to participate. Similarly, the students selected at random were asked in class if they would like to take part. In order to ensure that the focus group did not unintentionally reinforce negative stereotypes with regard to non-applicants to HE, the design of the focus group was carefully constructed to ensure that no negative assumptions were created within the group with regard to choice surrounding progression to HE. For this reason, the initial group of potential participants consisted of a mix of students in terms of their intended progression routes. In total 8 students were invited to take part (3 applicants 5 non applicants). Of these, 5 agreed to participate (3 applicants and 2 non-applicants), 2 were unable to attend due to prior commitments and 1 declined the invitation. Of those who accepted the invitation to participate, only 2 students attended (both university applicants). One of the students who was unable to attend due to prior commitments took part in an individual discussion at an alternative time. Several of the students who had agreed to participate were given a reminder on the day of the focus group, but two of these still failed to attend (both non-applicants).

The students who did attend were asked a series of questions based around key themes which emerged from both the questionnaire results and also the background research, such as the influence of family and friends on the decision making process and the key advantages/ disadvantages they perceived with regard to progression to HE. The approach taken was semi-structured, which allowed for some flexibility. The student who participated in an individual discussion was asked a similar set of questions with the same semi-structured format. Prior to participating, the focus group participants were asked to fill in a short questionnaire in order to ascertain basic details about their background which they may not have felt comfortable divulging in a group situation, for example their family's educational background.

Several issues were encountered during the formation of the research design. Firstly, the sampling was an issue. Several methods of sampling were used, as outlined above, including self-selecting samples, and samples guided by teacher input. Each of these have advantages and disadvantages, but clearly there was an issue around the teacher led sampling choice, as all the students in the group were not given equal opportunity to participate in the focus group. However, it was felt that given the various time constraints of the project, only approaching students who would realistically be willing to participate was important and so this choice of sampling method was utilised. Furthermore, there was an ethical issue surrounding the design and questions of the focus group, with the possibility of reinforcing negative stereotypes with regard to not applying to HE, as outlined above.

Data analysis and findings

Questionnaire data was analysed using a tally chart and totals for each option were generated from this. The qualitative data gathered from the group activity was recorded in a document in order to identify key themes and allow responses to be compared and contrasted. All the data, both quantitative and qualitative was recorded in a Word document so that the key findings were clearly accessible for analysis. Analysis of the interviews consisted of transcribing the discussions held and colour coding participant responses according to key themes. This meant that key themes which emerged from the discussions were clearly visible and could be linked back to the questionnaire results.

A total of 18 students participated in the initial questionnaire and group work exercise, comprising 13 students who had made an application to University and 5 who had not. The initial questionnaire stage of the project resulted in some interesting preliminary findings. From the questionnaire, designed to gather mainly quantitative data, a distinct trend immediately emerged amongst students who had not applied to HE in terms of their reasons why – all of the respondents stated that they did not want to continue studying. This trend is reinforced by the qualitative participant responses in the group activity, with students making statements such as *'don't want to cope with uni work'* and *'fed up of studying'*. Another key trend which emerged was the desire to gain more experience of the world of work. 3 of the 5 (60%) respondents cited this as a reason for not progressing to HE, and again this was reinforced by qualitative responses, with respondents saying they want to *'gain experience'* and *'know what the world of work is like'.* Interestingly, only 2 of the 5 (40%) of the non-HE applicants cited student finance as a concern within their questionnaire responses, but this emerged as a much stronger theme in the qualitative data, with participants making comments such as *'Don't get in debt'*. Another interesting piece of information to come out of the questionnaire was the fact that out of the 18 respondents, only 3 (16%) stated that they were unaware of the introduction of Early Years Professional Status and the drive for graduates in the Early Years workforce, illustrating that students clearly had a general awareness of this issue. The questionnaire results also showed that of the 13 students who had applied to HE, only one had not applied to the most local University, Sheffield Hallam. The majority of students had applied to universities within the Yorkshire and Humber region, with only a few students stating they had applied to Universities outside this area, indicating a strong preference for local HE provision.

Three key themes emerged from the focus group held with students intending to apply to University. Firstly, they felt that a key factor in their decision to apply to University was the availability of courses at local universities (within daily travelling distance). When asked to consider what they would do if their courses were not available within the local area, they agreed that they would probably not apply:

Researcher: If you couldn't go to a local University, if you had to move away, would you go?
Participant: No, I don't think I would, no.

This reinforces the findings of the questionnaire and group work as outlined above. Linked to this factor was that of debt and financial concerns. The participants agreed that this was one of the main disadvantages of going to University, and that it was also a key factor in their decision to stay at home and study. However, when asked to discuss the issue of student finance in more detail, they agreed that due to the support available, such as grants and bursaries, they felt able to cope financially, commenting that *'I'll probably be eligible for a grant as well so that's alright'.* One participant also made the point that as the repayments were taken in a similar way to tax, she felt more comfortable about the repayments and being in debt: *'the fact that you don't even see the money go out of your bank, it's just like a tax'*. When asked about the influence of their friends and

family on the decision making process, participants initially concurred in the view that they had not been influential in any way. One participant made the point that none of her family had been to University before, and were relaxed about her making her own decision. However, when asked if an unsupportive family would have put them off applying to University, they agreed that it would have, as they would have probably had to move out, linking back to the other theme of staying at home and commuting to University, *'if they weren't supportive then we'd obviously have to move out'.* Therefore, there appears to be some ambiguity with regard to the importance of family support. It is clear that the participants feel that they have made a choice independently without being pressured by their family in any way, yet they are aware that without the tacit support of their family, they would probably have chosen not to go. Thus, it can perhaps be interpreted that in some cases family support has an implicit, rather than overt role to play in HE related decisions.

Another student who participated in a separate discussion also raised a number of interesting points. The student had originally intended not to apply to University, but had changed her plans and decided to apply. When asked about the reasons for this change, she cited anxiety about not getting the grades required for University as the main reason for originally not making an application. The student cited positive encouragement from teachers and a discussion about her likely grades as the main reason for her change of plans, as well as positive support from her family. In this case, the role of family support has clearly taken a more overt role in the decision-making process, with the participant identifying it as a key factor.

Discussion

From the students who did participate in the research it is clear that the availability of local HE provision, the level of financial support accessible and family support were key influencers in their decision to progress to University. This has several implications with regard to informing the practice of Information, Advice and Guidance work. Firstly, it is evident that information about the range of options open to students and also the financial support available to them should they choose to continue their education is crucial in terms of supporting students through the decision making process. Also, work with parents/carers is recommended as these clearly play an important role in students' decisions, whether in an overt or more subtle way.

Another key factor which emerged from the finding of the research was the importance of students' belief in their academic ability and their desire to continue studying. Thus, it is clear that with regard to academic ability, the encouragement and realistic prediction of grades on the part of teachers has a key role to play in order to ensure students are fully aware of their potential to achieve.

It is clear that the findings outlined above are closely linked to those of Bingham and O'Hara (2004 and 2007) in terms of the importance attached to perceptions of academic ability, family influence and concerns about student finance. In the case of the research carried out at Longley Park, participants identified these as significant factors in their decision making process when choosing whether or not to progress to HE. In the Bingham and O'Hara (2004 and 2007) research studies these factors were also perceived by students already engaged in the HE system as being crucial in terms of their progression. Thus, it can perhaps be argued that there is a degree of consensus amongst those considering HE and those who have already made the decision with regard to the key influencing factors on the decision-making process.

Furthermore, perhaps the most fascinating conclusion which can be drawn from the research is the problematic nature of engaging students who are not applying to HE. As also found by Fuller et al (2007), throughout this project there were issues with finding students who were not applying to HE who were willing to participate in the research. Fuller et al (2007) also encountered problems when gaining access to non-participating students as they were not in the education system. In this research access to students was not an issue as they were still engaged in the education process, but they were still reluctant to participate in the research. This is a distinct contrast to the reactions of students who were applying to University, as these students were much more willing to participate and share their views. If time were available for further research, it would be interesting to explore the reasons for this.

Recommendations for practice

Several key messages for practitioners can be derived from the research findings. Firstly, it is important to ensure that accurate information about HE options is communicated to students to enable them to make informed choices. With reference to the significance that participants' placed on local provision, it is perhaps pertinent to focus on regional opportunities when delivering this information. Alongside this, information regarding student finance arrangements is also essential as it was clearly identified by the participants that knowledge and understanding of this prevented finance from becoming a barrier. Additionally, it is vital to ensure that students have realistic expectations of their predicted grades in advance of making their progression choices. As such, involving their subject teachers in the decision making process is a key part of assisting students to make decisions. The involvement of students' family members is also crucial, as the research clearly demonstrates that students feel their family members are key influencers when making their decisions.

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Tracking the Entry of Vocational Learners into Higher Education in a Rural Area of England

Donna Obrey and Colin Wood
Herefordshire and Worcestershire Lifelong Learning Network

Introduction

Increased entry to Higher Education for students with vocational qualifications has been an aspiration of the widening participation and skills agendas of recent years. The creation of Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) in 2004 was intended to increase the numbers of vocational learners progressing into Higher Education, by stimulating curriculum development, advice and guidance and progression agreements. Whilst the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) monitors the success of LLNs in achieving these goals, it is more difficult to assess the impact within an area particularly where there are a number of providers. Thus the purpose of this research is to establish some baseline data and measure the impact of the Herefordshire & Worcestershire Lifelong Learning Network (HWLLN) over the five years of its operation.

The context and timescale of the research is pertinent. The area is predominantly rural with low population densities, low average incomes and limited access to Higher Education. Census data (ONS 2008) for 2001 shows the population density of Herefordshire as 82 people/km_, and 320 people/km_ in Worcestershire. This compares with a regional average of 405 people/km_.

HEFCE data (2005) shows that participation rates in the two counties are around average for the region, but that in many places learners are geographically remote from Higher Education. UVAC (2010:18) states that nationally the percentage of students with Level 3 vocational qualifications only on entry to Higher Education courses in 2006 was 8.6% for Post '92 Universities and 13.1% for FE or HE colleges. By comparison the overall rate in Herefordshire and Worcestershire in 2006 was 34%.

The range of Higher Education providers is somewhat different from other regions with one Higher Education Institute (HEI), a Specialist Arts College and a number of Further Education Colleges serving a population of around 735,000 people in an area of 3915 km_. This means that a considerable proportion of Higher Education delivery takes place within Further Education Colleges (FECs).

The timescale of the project coincides with improved HEFCE funding for curriculum development.

Within this area this was distributed by the HWLLN which was set up in 2006-07 with the involvement of all FE and HE providers in the 2 counties. HWLLN has had a strong focus on facilitating curriculum development and collaborative working within Herefordshire and Worcestershire and, to a lesser degree, within the wider region. Given the timescale of curriculum development the impact of HWLLN is only apparent after 2007-08 with 56 courses developed with 13 institutions. This tracking project was initiated in 2006-07 to assess the impact of the Network and to monitor the changes in access to HE for vocational learners.

In consequence this research does not claim to map national trends; rather the research provides evidence of the progression of vocational learners in areas of low population density and low higher education provision – characteristically the rural areas of the UK.

Methodology

The research collected and considered student level data on 11,927 students from 5 Higher Education (HE) providers in Herefordshire & Worcestershire, and identified vocational learners that were progressing on to HE courses within the two counties. Given the complexity of such data collection, the research did not include all registrations on to all HE courses in Herefordshire & Worcestershire; rather it focused on Undergraduate (UG) courses that fell within one of the HWLLN's themes which were:

- Health & Social Care
- Sport, Tourism, Heritage, Culture & Media
- Leadership & Management

To avoid double counting, students were assigned to the institution which held their student numbers. Therefore, the student may not necessarily be shown against the institution where the course is delivered. In addition several institutions had student numbers from other universities, and these students are not included in this research.

The data from participating institutions was incorporated into a single database and this was used to generate the data for this study.

A number of methodological difficulties were encountered in the collection and collation of data for this research.

- Firstly, although data was collected from five institutions, one institution was unable to provide all of the data required, therefore only Figure 1 contains data on all five institutions to give an overview of the total number of students registering on to Undergraduate courses in the two counties.
- Secondly, the two commonly used data sets were insufficiently detailed to provide the level of analysis required. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data sets did not differentiate between vocational and non-vocational learners; and the University and Colleges Application System (UCAS) data did not include highest entry qualification and mode of study, and was not available for part-time learners.

- Thirdly, HEIs and FECs do not collect the same data from their HE students. Thus the initial data from providers was not comparable. In consequence, the study developed a single data set that was based on registration to the first year of an undergraduate course, but where data related to individual students. Whilst this provided good quality data the sample size was too large particularly where it was necessary to manually check student files. The sample size was therefore scaled down to focus on just those students who were registering for an Undergraduate course, and registering on an HE course within the subject area of one of the LLN's curriculum themes.
- Fourthly, it was not possible to obtain information regarding Highest Entry Qualification for the majority of the non-prescribed HE courses and therefore these qualifications are recorded as 'Not Known'.

Changes in the numbers of vocational students entering higher education

One of our first findings was that there has been consistent growth in the total number of student registrations on to UG courses in the three curriculum areas (Figure 1), with a 70% increase in registrations from 2005-06 to 2009-10 (1,749 students registered in 2005-06 compared with 2,971 students registered in 2009-10).

Figure 1 : Total Number of Registrations on to Undergraduate Courses in each Academic Year
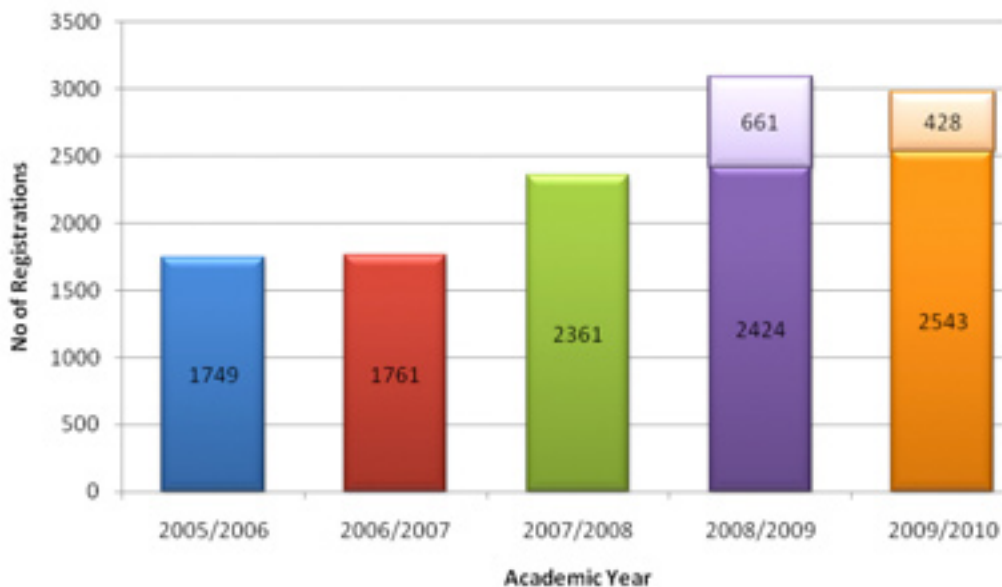
Although the overall rate of growth was 70%, the figures are inflated in 2008-09 and 2009-10 by a large Foundation Degree which boosted registrations (shown in the faded section of the charts) by 661 in 2008-09 and 428 in 2009-10. Whilst this Foundation Degree was part-funded by HWLLN and provided opportunities for a considerable number of vocational learners, the scale of this course somewhat obscures the underlying trend. Thus, if this Foundation Degree is removed from the total, then the research shows a 45% underlying increase in registrations from 2005-06 to 2009-10.

The study found that from 2005-06 to 2009-10; all participating institutions experienced an increase in registrations. University of Worcester had the greatest increase in student registrations with an additional 610 students representing a 57% increase over 5 years. There was also significant growth in two other institutions, with a 181% increase in student registrations at one FE College and 156% increase at another. However this data is based on Additional Student Numbers (ASNs) assigned to institutions rather than on the location of course delivery, thus the figures under-report the number of students for the Specialist Arts College and Further Education Colleges. This occurs where the University of Worcester validates courses in the colleges, where courses are delivered in partnership, and where courses are validated outside of the two counties.

It is notable that in the period 2005-06 to 2006-07, the number of registrations was fairly constant, with the period of greatest growth from 2007-08 to 2009-10. This reflects the time taken to establish the HWLLN and the timescale for curriculum development. Therefore, the data suggests a strong link between curriculum development activities and the number of registrations onto HE courses.

The study considered the highest entry qualifications of students registering onto UG courses in the three curriculum areas. Despite year on year variations and a high proportion of students whose entry qualifications were 'Not Known', it is clear that there has been a growth in the number of students with level 3 vocational qualifications. Over 5 years this equates to an increase of 42% (228 students). By comparison students entering with level 3 non-vocational qualifications (primarily A' levels) had increased by 47% (141 students) over the same period. It is worth noting that there had also been a 54% (182 students) increase in registrations to undergraduate courses where the student already has a level 4 qualification. Whilst commonly considered as non-vocational qualifications it seems probable that many of these students were returning to education and may have had a depth of vocational experience, or may be progressing from Foundation Degrees to Top Ups.

Figure 2 : Total Number of Registrations onto Undergraduate Courses by Highest Entry Qualification
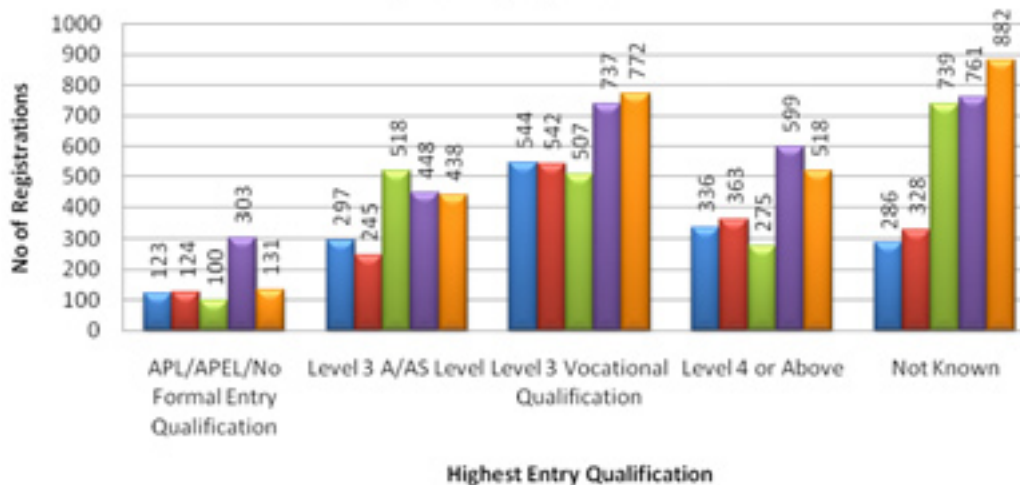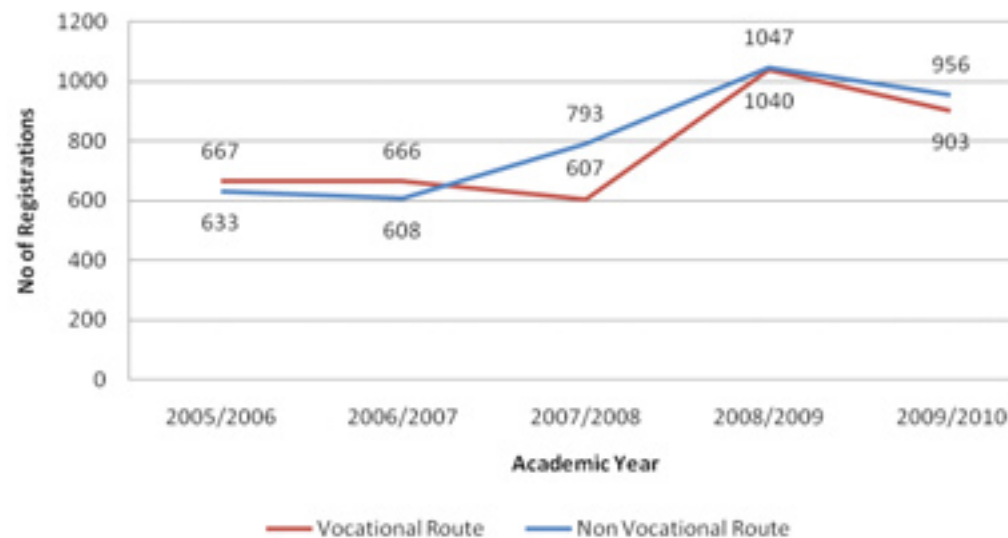

Figure 3 : No of Undergraduate Students entering via a Vocational Route compared with a Non Vocational Route

The growth in the number of students entering HE with vocational qualifications in part reflects national trends, but also reflects the strong linkage between vocational Level 3 and HE in this rural area. The majority of FE colleges in Herefordshire and Worcestershire have their own Higher Education provision; this is especially true in Herefordshire, where the travelling times to a Higher Education Institute can be in excess of 1 hour by car. In most cases, local Higher Education provision articulates with the Level 3 vocational provision, and in some cases it is delivered by the same teaching teams.

The provision of LLN funding to FE colleges has led to increased development of Foundation Degrees and HNDs, allowing the colleges to further enhance the progression opportunities for their vocational students. Depending on the nature of the courses, institutional strategy and the resources available, FE colleges have opted to develop validated programmes and collaborative provision. A number of FE colleges have also developed BA/BSc programmes and contribute to Masters courses in specialist areas.

A further finding was that the proportion of students following a vocational route to those following a non-vocational route has declined from 51.3% to 48.6% from 2005-06 to 2009-10. In Figure 3, student registrations on to undergraduate courses in the three curriculum areas are categorised as 'vocational route' and 'non-vocational route' by the highest qualification on entry (see appendix 3 for definitions). This excludes any students whose highest entry qualification was recorded as 'Not Known'.

The study found that the number of students entering through both routes has increased from 2005-06 to 2009-10, with a 35% increase in students following a vocational route, and a 51% increase in students following a non-vocational route. Whilst the increasing number of 'not known' qualifications makes exact conclusions impossible, it is clear that the proportion of students following the vocational and non-vocational routes has been broadly constant.

However the data does show a slight trend away from the vocational route, with a decline from 51.3% to 48.6% in the proportion of vocational to non-vocational students. This slight shift in favour of non- vocational qualifications needs to be seen in the context of the overall increase in numbers of students, and of the historic predominance of vocational qualifications within the participating institutions. It seems likely that this is indicative of increased reputation and specialisation of HE on provision at participating institutions. This analysis is supported by evidence presented later in this chapter which suggests that the proportion of students from outside of the region has increased over the period.

The findings of the study are closely related to the rural context. The region has few large employers, a large number of small and medium sized enterprises, and a predominance of semi-skilled workers (West Midlands Regional Observatory 2008). Consequently there are few apprenticeships and a large proportion of vocational education is provided through the FE colleges and the University of Worcester (HEFCE 2005). The West Midlands Regional Observatory (2008) Regional Skills Assessment Rural Profile also identifies significant skills gaps, particularly in higher level skills, and the findings of this study can be seen as evidence that the colleges are meeting this need through further developing their vocational provision.

Changes in vocational learners entering higher education in three curriculum areas

The study also set out to consider the changes in the number and proportion of vocational learners entering Higher Education between 2005-06 and 2009-10 by curriculum areas. These curriculum areas relate to the work-strands within Herefordshire and Worcestershire Lifelong Learning Network (HWLLN), and are best considered as indicative of the range of provision across the region, rather than comparable to HEFCE or HESA data. However this classification allows the tracking to be used to provide evidence of the impact of curriculum development in each work-strand on the opportunities for vocational students. The three curriculum areas in question were:

• Health and social care
• Sport, tourism, heritage, culture and media
• Leadership and management

Each of these is discussed in more detail below.

Overall the study identified a 32% increase in undergraduate registrations in health and social care over the five years from 2005-06 to 2009-10, compared to the 70% increase across all three curriculum areas. In addition the research identifies a very different pattern of change in student registrations on to courses in health and social care compared to all three curriculum areas. Thus, whilst the findings from the three curriculum areas point to a 42% increase in students entering undergraduate courses with Level 3 vocational qualifications, the evidence from health and social care (Figure 4) shows an overall increase of just 2% over the five years – but within this there is a marked decline of 36% (87 students) from 2005-06 to 2007-08 and an increase of 60% (91 students) from 2007-08 to 2009-10. In contrast, the registrations of students with 'Level 3 A/AS levels' increased 176% (80 students) between 2005-06 and 2007-08 and then dropped by 40% (50 students) from 2007-08 to 2009-10. Interestingly the data also shows an increase of 108% (103 students) with Level 4 or above qualifications over the five years, with most of the increase between 2007-08 and 2009-10.

Figure 4 : Health & Social Care
Number of Registrations by Highest Entry Qualification
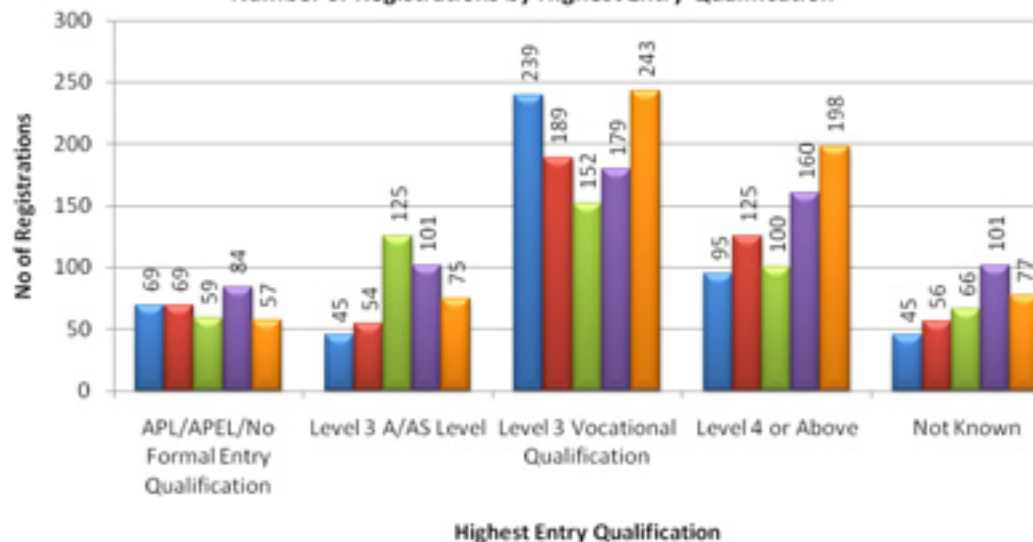
The large fluctuations in the types of qualifications held by students registering for undergraduate courses in health and social care suggest a significant change in provision or recruitment practice. When viewed as a proportion of all Level 3 qualifications, the Level 3 vocational qualifications swings from 84% to 55% and back to 76% over the five year period.

The proportional split between the Level 3 categories is as follows:

SUMMARY OF QUAL.	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	Grand Entry Total
A/AS Level	16%	22%	45%	36%	24%	29%
Vocational Quals	84%	78%	55%	64%	76%	71%

Given the large swing in these proportions, and the rapid change in student numbers it does not seem appropriate to consider the 5 year trend, and the study instead suggests that the period 2007-08 to 2009-10 is the most significant, as it coincides with new course development and reflects increasing need for degree level study in the fields of health and social care. Thus the tentative finding is that there has been a 60% growth in the number of student registrations on to undergraduate courses in health and social care with Level 3 vocational qualifications between 2007-08 and 2009-10.

Whilst the proportion of students holding vocational qualifications has swung widely over the 5 years, the data also provides evidence of a change in the types of courses that students with Level 3 vocational qualifications enrol onto (Figure 5) . Thus in 2005-06, 81% of students with highest entry qualifications listed as Level 3 vocational qualifications registered on to a Dip HE, by 2007-08 this had reduced to 57% and by 2009-10 this had further reduced to 38%, with a corresponding increase in registrations to foundation degrees and first degrees.

Figure 5 : Health & Social Care
Types of Awards that Students with Vocational Level 3 Qualifications Register on to

■ Dip HE ■ Foundation Degree ■ First Degree
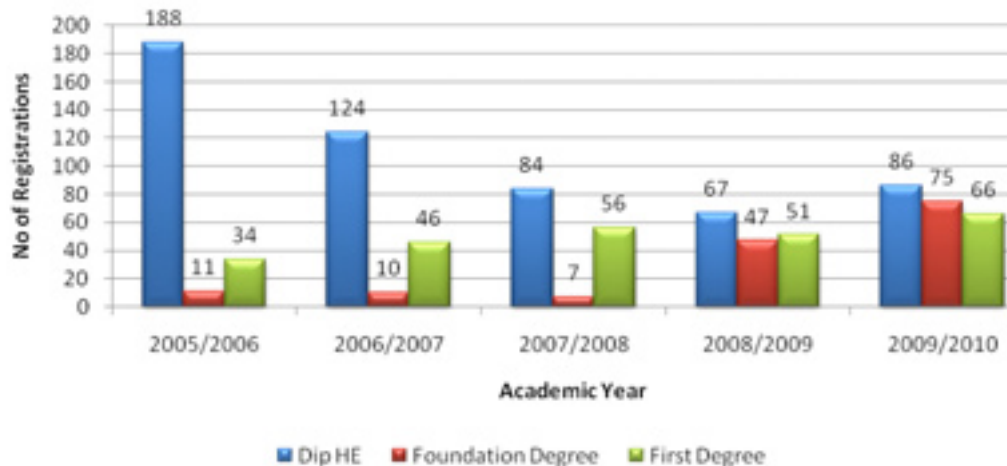
As foundation degrees and first degrees generally require higher entry grades than Dip HE, the data could indicate an increase in the level of achievement at Level 3 for students following a vocational route. However it is also possible that an increase in registrations on to foundation degrees and first degrees may reflect changes in health and social care provision, career structures in the sector and the wishes of the employers, who are involved in curriculum development. Indeed the research also shows a gentle movement away from Dip HE and onto first degree for students holding a level 3 A/AS level qualification, and a three-fold increase in registrations to first degrees by students with highest entry qualifications listed as Level 4. Consequently it seems likely that the increase in vocational students enrolling for longer courses reflects changes in provision and changes in career structure for graduates. In relation to the sport, tourism, heritage, culture and media curriculum areas, the study found an 88% growth in students with Level 3 vocational qualifications registering for courses 2005-06 and 2009-10.

Figure 6 : Sport, Tourism, Heritage, Culture & Media
Number of Registrations by Highest Entry Qualification

■ 2005/2006 ■ 2006/2007 ■ 2007/2008 ■ 2008/2009 ■ 2009/2010
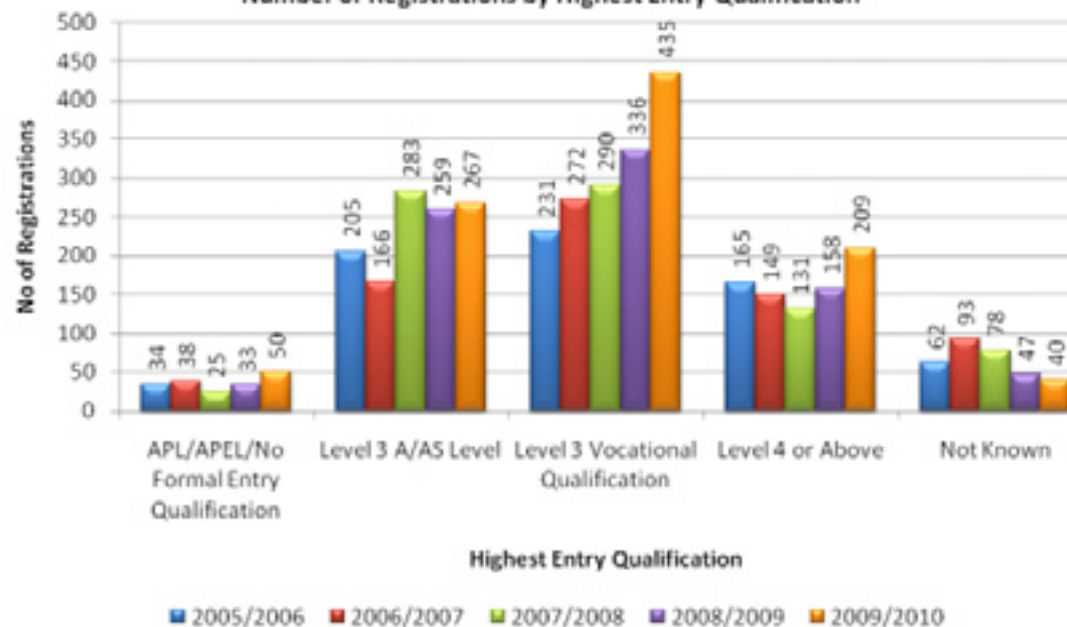
The study showed a 44% growth in the number of students registering onto undergraduate courses in this curriculum area. Within this it is clear that the category with the highest number of students entering courses in sport, tourism, heritage, culture and media each year was 'Level 3 Vocational Qualification', and that this category has increased by 88% (204 students) between 2005-06 and 2009-10. By contrast the number of students registering with 'Level 3 A/AS Level' qualifications has increased 30% (62 students) over the same period. A summary of the number and percentage increase within each category is shown below:

Summary of Entry Qual.	No Increase from 2005/06 - 2009/10	% Change from 2005/06 to 2009/10
APL/APEL/No Formal Entry Qualification	16	47%
Level 3 A/AS Level	62	30%
Level 3 Vocational Qualification	204	88%
Level 4 or Above	44	27%
Not Known	-22	-35%
Grand Total	**304**	**44%**

The number of Level 3 A/AS Level registrations stabilised over the last 3 years of the study, however the Level 3 vocational registrations continued to increase year on year. The proportional split between the Level 3 categories is as follows:

SUMMARY OF ENTRY QUAL.	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	Grand Total
A/AS Level	47%	38%	49%	44%	38%	43%
Vocational Quals	53%	62%	51%	56%	62%	57%

The data on courses related to leadership and management is inconclusive. Whilst it is evident that there is significant growth in this curriculum area, it is difficult to assess the relevance of vocational and non-vocational qualifications, as there is a high (and increasing) proportion of students where the highest entry qualification is listed as 'not known'. In 2009-10 the data on highest entry qualifications was missing for 70% of registrations (765 students).

Figure 7 : Leadership & Management
Number of Registrations by Highest Entry Qualification

Whilst it is not possible to assess changes in vocational entry, it is possible to draw some tentative conclusions regarding the appropriateness of the current means of measuring entry qualifications. Two issues seem pertinent: the recording of student data on courses in this area that are not HEFCE funded, and the recording of professional qualifications against qualification frameworks.

Firstly, many of the leadership and management courses are not HEFCE funded courses and therefore highest entry qualifications are generally not recorded by the colleges. Secondly, students applying for courses in leadership and management often have a broad range of professional qualifications that do not comfortably fit into the classifications. In a separate research project funded by HWLLN (2009), the vocational qualifications in this area were mapped onto the qualification and credit framework but as yet this is not incorporated in the measurement of highest entry qualification.

There is a further issue with the data for leadership and management. The year 2008-09 shows a sudden growth of numbers. This relates to a single course where the collection of data did not include highest entry qualifications. As this course was run in conjunction with a professional institute the information supplied by students was collected in a non-standard format.

Progression of vocational learners into higher education – a case study

Due to the high level of detail within the data received from the University of Worcester, it was possible to consider the progression of learners, and particularly vocational learners, from colleges in the area to the University. The data provided information on last place of study for 6,621 students (of which 2,028 were Level 3 vocational students) over 5 academic years to identify the changing patterns of progression from FECs into HE within the 2 counties and the wider region, particularly for vocational learners over the years 2005-06 to 2009-10.

To this end, a subset of the original data was created for this case study, based on student level data on:

- Registrations on to year 1 of an undergraduate course (e.g. HND, FD, First Degree, Top Up) at the University of Worcester
- Within one of the subject areas of HWLLN's curriculum themes (H&SC, STHC&M, L&M), selected by their JACS coding (see appendix 2)

The study identified the last place of study for students registering on to undergraduate courses in all three curriculum areas. The data was then grouped into three categories (Herefordshire and Worcestershire, West Midlands and Other – see appendix 5 for a detailed classification of these categories). Any records where the regions were recorded as 'not known' were excluded from the analysis, however over the 5 year period, only 1% of the Level 3 vocational student records were classed as 'not known' (20 out of 2,028 records), so the data represents in excess of 99% of students.

Figure 8 : Where do the Level 3 Vocational Students Registering on Undergraduate Courses at the University of Worcester come from?

The study identified that the number of local Level 3 vocational students progressing from local colleges in 2009/10 was 2% less than in 2005/06 but has risen in the last three years of the period, and that the proportion remains fairly high.

Figure 9 shows the proportion of students registering with a Level 3 vocational qualification as their highest entry qualification, whose last place of study was a local institution. This chart excludes those records where the previous institution was 'not known'. Over the 5 year period, 9% of records (178 out of 2,028) showed the previous institution as 'not known'.

Figure 9 : Percentage of Level 3 Vocational Students entering Undergraduate Courses at the University of Worcester from Local Institutions

The study identified an overall 37% decline in student registrations from 384 in 2005-06 to 313 in 2007-08, but since then there has been a 69% increase in student numbers. 'West Midlands' and 'Other' categories show a gradual increase in registrations from 2005-06 to 2009-10 with the overall expansion of student registrations. The area with the highest number and percentage increase is the West Midlands at 112% (109 students), students from outside the West Midlands increased by 108% (55 students), and Herefordshire and Worcestershire show a slight decline of 8% (19 students) over the five academic years.
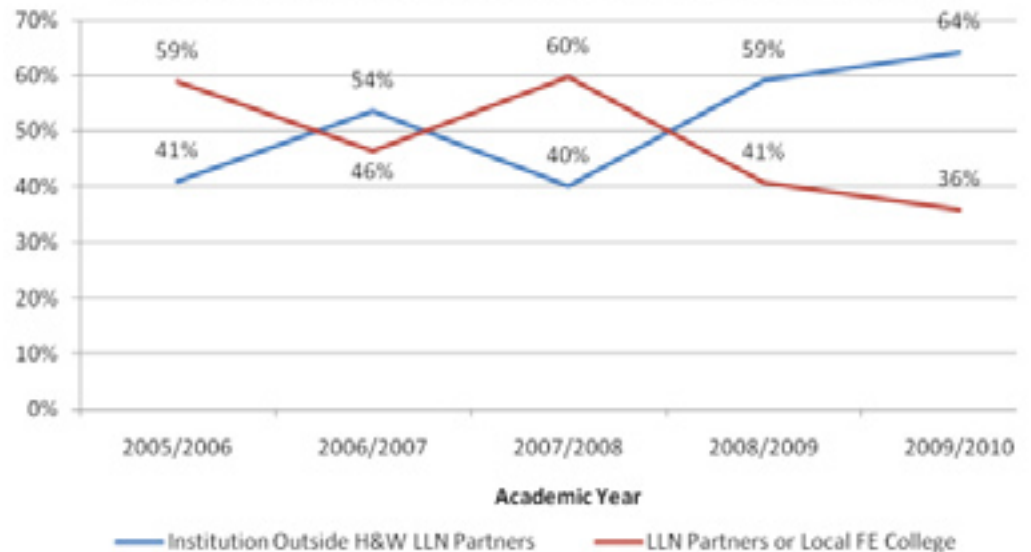
Whilst the numbers of students from Herefordshire and Worcestershire declined from 2005-06 to 2007-08, it has increased by 45% (67 students) between 2007-08 and 2009-10. However the proportion of the students whose last place of study was in Herefordshire and Worcestershire has declined from 61% of all registrations in 2005/06 to 41% in 2009/10. Over the same period, the proportion of students from the West Midlands has increased from 25% to 39%, and those from outside the region (or from overseas) has also increased from 13% to 20%.

The detail on the last place of study provides evidence of the relationship between local FECs and the University of Worcester, and particularly of vocational student progression. A subset was identified of students whose last place of study is recorded as a local college and whose highest entry qualification is 'Level 3 Vocational'. Local colleges were identified as HWLLN partner colleges and other FECs with partnership agreements to the University of Worcester (see appendix 6 for list of institutions).

The graph shows a high degree of variability in the proportion of vocational students progressing from local colleges, which may be a factor of the relatively small sample size (2,028 students). However the decrease in the proportion of students progressing from local colleges is largely explained by the big increase in the number of vocational students from outside the two counties, although it may also reflect the growth of HE provision in FECs over the period.

Conclusions
The tracking of student numbers across institutions is surprisingly difficult with numerous recording systems and different data sets. The issues of student confidentiality are also considerable. Despite this the participating institutions have worked hard to provide data that meets the needs of the study and produces an overview of five years of registrations to undergraduate programmes, for which the authors are very grateful.

Such an overview can only provide a bare image of the complexity of HE in a rural area such as Herefordshire and Worcestershire. It illustrates in the most simple terms how provision and registrations have changed from 2005 to 2010. Yet such research produces more questions than it answers. What drives the increase in the numbers of vocational learners in the area? How much are vocational student choices constrained by the difficulties of living in an area of low HE provision? Or perhaps the opposite is true – that the prevalence of HE programmes taught in FECs provides clearer vocational pathways for students than might be found in an area with more choice and less clarity.

The study also suggested that the HWLLN funding for curriculum development in the last few years has increased the number of places and choices for vocational learners, and that since 2007-08 this effect has been very marked. The extent to which such increases might have occurred without this funding is unknowable. Nor is it clear whether the increased numbers of vocational learners reflects the push of economic imperative or the pull of improved educational opportunities and progression pathways. Certainly at a time when the cost of studying has increased rapidly, one could reasonably expect that there would be a reduction in student numbers, particularly in areas where the average income is low. Yet the evidence in this research appears to show an increase in the numbers of vocational students entering HE and maybe this is a reaffirmation that the value of higher level skills still exceeds the costs of studying.

Finally, the authors would like to extend their thanks to the Principals and Data Management Units at the participating colleges for their co-operation in this project over five years.

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Highest qualifications on entry:

APL/APEL/No Formal Qualification:

APL/APEL, GCSE O Level, GNVQ Level 2, NVQ Level 2, mature student with previous experience, no formal qualification, Professional Qualification

Level 3 A/AS Level:

A Level or AS Level

Level 3 Vocational Qualification:

A Level equivalent, Access to HE, Diploma in Foundation Studies, Foundation Course, GNVQ Level 3, NVQ Level 3, ONC or OND, Non Advanced Qualification

Level 4 or Above:

CertEd/DipEd, Dip HE, First Degree of UK Institution, Foundation Degree, GNVQ Level 4/5, Graduate Equivalent, Higher Degree of UK Institution, HNC or HND, NVQ Level 4/5, Other Credits from UK Institution, Overseas Graduate, PGCE, PGCert/PGDip, UG Qualification with QTS

Appendix 2 - Criteria for filtering courses into curriculum theme areas

The student data for the University of Worcester students was filtered in to curriculum themes by utilising the JACS Code which refers to the subject area of the course they are currently studying. The following JACS Codes were assigned to each curriculum theme; all other JACS Codes were excluded from this research:

Health & Social Care:

- B700 Nursing
- B900 Others in Subjects Allied to Medicine
- L500 Social Work

Leadership & Management:

- N100 Business studies
- N200 Management studies
- N400 Accounting
- N500 Marketing
- N600 Human Resource Management

Sport, Tourism, Heritage, Culture & Media:

- C600 Sports Science
- P300 Media studies
- W100 Fine Art
- W200 Design studies
- W300 Music
- W400 Drama
- W500 Dance

Appendix 3 - Classification of vocational and academic routes

The entry qualifications classified under 'Vocational Route' and 'Academic Route' are as follows:

Vocational Route: APL/APEL/No Formal Qualification, Level 3 Vocational Qualification

Academic Route: Level 3 A/AS Level, Level 4 or Above

In addition, where a student at the University of Worcester has an equivalent Vocational and A Level qualification, the vocational qualification has been recorded

Appendix 4 - Data issues relating to Health and Social Care

The UW data does not include students studying individual Health modules or the Return to Practice course

Appendix 5 - Last place studied – classification of regions

The Counties assigned to each category are as follows:

Herefordshire/Worcestershire:
Herefordshire, Worcestershire

West Midlands:
Black County, Gloucestershire, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire and West Midlands

Other:
All other UK Counties and Overseas

Appendix 6 - Institutions included as 'LLN Partners or Local FE colleges'

The institutions included in the 'LLN Partners or Local FE College' category were:

- Gloucestershire College
- Halesowen College
- Hereford College of Arts
- Hereford Sixth Form College
- Herefordshire College of Technology
- Kidderminster College
- Ludlow College
- North East Worcestershire College
- Royal National College for the Blind
- South Worcestershire College (formerly Evesham & Malvern Hills College)
- Stourbridge College
- Warwickshire College (Pershore) (formerly Pershore Group of Colleges)
- Worcester College of Technology
- Worcester Sixth Form College

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Returning to Learn: the study experiences of part time foundation degree students

Mary Haynes, Sheffield Hallam University, Department of Education, Childhood and Inclusion

I developed an interest in the experience of non traditional students making the transition into higher education whilst teaching a range of vocational awards in early years at a college of further education. My commitment to enhance the learning experience of non-traditional students at university grew since I began teaching in higher education and became involved in development work within the Lifelong Learning Network. A desire to explore and understand the study support experiences of part time foundation students to help them make a successful transition and benefit from positive learning experiences led to the inception of this small scale study. The study was carried out between February and June 2009 and supported by a multidisciplinary team from Sheffield Hallam University comprising academic staff, the Learning Hub (information and support) and the Information Advisory Service who were all interested in the development of effective support strategies for part time students.

Background

Originally a polytechnic, Sheffield Hallam University has an emphasis on applied and vocational courses. It is one of the UK's largest universities with over 30,000 students, 32% of whom are part time. The university has a commitment to the enhancement of the part time student experience and supports initiatives to do so. This study was a small piece of evaluative work to explore the study support experiences of a group of work based foundation degree students who were 'returning to learn' at the university. Early years foundation degree provision was chosen for the study because it is an area of growth due to generous government funding. The Foundation Degree in Early Years is delivered by the university and partner colleges on a part time basis, to work based students both on and off campus in response to local needs and in support of widening participation. All of the students in the cohort selected for the study worked in the same large metropolitan borough where university staff travelled to deliver the foundation degree in a small community centre just over ten miles from the university. The learning environment was different both culturally and socially from that of the university campus with no direct access to university learning resources and limited IT facilities. The focus group who volunteered to take part in the study comprised eleven students all of whom were all female, white British ranging in age from mid twenties to mid fifties. They were all experiencing higher education for the first time; for some their prior educational experience had not been positive. All had followed a vocational route to achieve a level three qualification; most

had not been engaged in formal learning for a number of years and were the first in their family to access higher education. Their motivation was initially extrinsic having been directly targeted by their early years workforce development officer to enrol onto the foundation degree with the incentive of full course funding amongst other benefits as part of the national drive to up skill the early years workforce. They had therefore found themselves unexpectedly returning to formal education after a gap of several years and although in the middle of the foundation degree expressed low levels of confidence in the academic dimension of the course.

The landscape of higher education is steadily changing as the agenda for lifelong learning and widening participation becomes increasingly prominent (DfES, 2003). Foundation degrees were introduced in 2000 as part of the government agenda to increase provision and enhance access to higher education, close skills gaps and help to boost the economy (DfES, 2003). Within the early years sector they are recognised as a key route to encourage the workforce to develop relevant skills, knowledge and understanding to support the growth of a more highly trained workforce. Foundation degrees were designed to meet the needs of both the student and workforce by integrating academic study with work based learning. Part time work based students can however become worried as they are positioned into the 'alien culture' of academic study in higher education which can have a negative impact learning (Askham, 2008, p90), the significance of which should not be underestimated. Despite anxieties about academic study, students on foundation degrees do not always find sufficient or suitable levels of study support (Tierney and Slack 2005). The need therefore to adapt institutional habitus to meet the diverse needs of non traditional students and accommodate the increasingly wide range of provision which includes foundation degrees has led to debate around the changing nature of the teaching and learning experience in higher education (DfES, 2003). To cultivate success among non-traditional learners Bamber and Tett (2000) suggest their learning should be underpinned with adequate and appropriate support that will enable them to develop confidence and experience success. It is therefore critical that as non-traditional learners start their journey into higher education they experience a milieu where they are encouraged and supported to develop strong study skills that will help them to build confidence and experience success (Tait and Entwistle, 1996). Krause et al (2005) highlight the role that tutors and associated support staff play in the creation of a nurturing learning environment and Kift, (2008) suggests that integration of both academic and other support services has the potential to enhance and transform the learning experience for non-traditional students. This work was drawn upon during the evaluative study seeking to improve part time student experience of study support.

Methodology

Data was gathered from the focus group at the beginning of the project in February 2009 and again four months later to measure confidence, levels of digital fluency and evaluate the impact of interventions. A self audit of digital fluency was collected at both data gathering points. Qualitative data was collected through focus group conversations to evaluate student perceptions of the development of their study skills, challenges faced, strategies used to resolve challenges and approaches that the university could employ to overcome challenges encountered. All participants were given information concerning the nature of the evaluation project and all gave written consent to use information collected.

Baseline data was collected when the students began their final level four module. On completion of digital fluency surveys the focus group were split into three small groups to make the process less intimidating, merging at the end of the session to establish and record on flip charts a mutual understanding of emerging points from smaller group discussion. The main purpose of the focus group discussion was to establish an evidence base through the exploration of the students' perceptions of their development of study skills, challenges that they have faced and strategies that they have employed to resolve challenges identified. The final data collection point was four months later to evaluate the impact of study support interventions, identified from baseline data that had been implemented during the module. The purpose of the second focus group was to explore students' perceptions of their development of study skills, challenges faced in preparation and completion of their last assignment and strategies that they or the university could employ to resolve challenges identified. The focus group participants were invited to reflect upon interventions in response to data collected from the first focus group by noting the level of helpfulness using a simple traffic light sticker system on large charts. They then split into two small groups for initial discussion eventually amalgamating to determine and record on flip charts communal agreement of emerging points from the smaller group discussions. All participants retook the digital fluency survey. Data collected over the four month period was analysed after the each data gathering point and emerging themes identified. Data from the digital fluency survey was put into chart form; pictorial representation helped interpretation of data. All data from the first focus group was revisited during the evaluation and analysis of data from the second focus group.

Findings

Base line data from the digital fluency survey highlighted the lack of confidence that the majority of the group had in the use and application of IT. Analysis of data from the focus group relating to challenges encountered by the students fell into four key themes which were: course organisation, IT skills, study support, and tutor support. Specific issues agreed by all students in the focus group included lack of confidence when using Blackboard, (the virtual learning environment), problems with referencing, timing of assignment deadlines and the need for formative early tutorials to help them to understand how to improve academic achievement. Some students drew attention to difficulties such as understanding terminology in module handbooks, lack of clarity about the standard of work and the level that they should be working to, getting out and returning books from the learning centre and lack of software on their own computers. There was a clear message from the group as to how the challenges could be met by the university identifying, specifically, better organisation and information, consistency and further personal support from tutors and more IT support. Students attempted to meet the challenges by working together with family, friends, peers and mentors in the work place.

Some of the issues uncovered could not be resolved in the short term or within the study period and called for a full appraisal of the foundation degree to consider the embedding of study skills within the infrastructure. Interventions to support the development of study skills and competencies identified from the analysis of base line data that would be most useful to help the students fill skills gaps, gain confidence and start to manage their learning more effectively were provided. These included support with development of IT skills and competencies, conventions of academic writing and library skills including accessing electronic sources of information. Due to the lack of

IT in the community centre an IT room in the local further education college was used for study support interventions. Co-delivery with academic staff and relevant specialists was adopted to create a supportive learning environment to scaffold learning and build levels of confidence. The specialists designed and created a 'toolbox' of related support materials to help students practice and reinforce their skills independently, a study skills handbook was developed by the course leader and 'drop in sessions' were offered by the Learning Hub for further support. Practicalities of accessing university resource for this group who were learning at a distance from the university were also considered. The learning centre extended the book loan period from one week to three to ease access to book stock and an online study support service from the central student support service was provided for further guidance with academic writing and assessment. This approach drew heavily on staff resource but, as Bamber and Tett (2000, p73) point out, working effectively with non-traditional students is 'teacher intensive'.

Data collected four months later, after identified interventions had been put in place, proved contradictory in places. Results from the digital fluency survey suggested increased confidence in the use and application of IT, with the majority of the focus group perceiving themselves as very confident in handling basic IT functions and Blackboard. However, this self reported increase in confidence was not necessarily borne out in focus group discussions. Issues emerging from the discussion groups mostly related to confident and effective use of e-learning resources and technologies necessary to support and enhance achievement. The students indicated that the university could have done more prior to the start of the course to explain the significant role of digital technologies as part of the learning process. As many of the students had no recent experience of formal education they were surprised by the way technology has changed the learning experience and many saw adapting to this as the largest obstacle to success. They believed that ongoing interactive IT sessions were necessary to support study. Even after the interactive library skills session using IT, some students reported difficulty finding and accessing sources of information online, although they had been given paper support materials for supplementary guidance. Uptake of the online study support service was poor; some students described how they had attempted to use the service but were unable to because they did not know how to send an attachment. They found the newly developed study skills handbook, support materials and module readers helpful although their preferred method of support was face to face. The key messages emerging from the focus group were that steps should be taken by the university to ensure that students are better prepared before embarking on the foundation degree, services and support for study skills should be embedded early in the programme and ongoing support should be timely and accessible.

Discussion

The findings from this work suggested that the majority of part time students in the study had low levels of digital confidence at the beginning of the course and that information concerning the significance of digital technologies to enable success during the foundation degree should be highlighted prior to the start of the course. Although the students appreciated the paper based study support materials developed by specialists, take up of online central services study support was hampered by student's lack of confidence with technology. None of the students accessed the drop-in study support service offered by the learning Hub on campus. Clegg, Bradley and

Smith, (2006) found that the association of specialist learning support services with failure tended to make students reluctant to access them. This, alongside difficulties and practicalities of access to both online and on campus support, may have been a factor that further compounded the extremely low take up of study support offered. Clegg, Bradley and Smith, (2006) go on to suggest that the integration of study support into course design would be a more effective approach; analysis of data collected suggested that the students in the focus group may have found this beneficial in the development of digital fluency and academic writing skills. Knox (2005) calls for reconstruction of content, delivery and assessment structure and design to support non traditional students to experience success. The students in the study suggested that services and support for study skills should be embedded early in the programme with accessible ongoing support. This aligns with the work that Krause et al (2005) conducted with first year students, suggesting that the embedding of opportune support at the beginning of a course would help them to make a more positive transition into higher education. Kift (2008) also recommends the integration of both academic and other support services to enhance and improve the learning experience for part time non-traditional students. Within this infrastructure, student learning needs to be carefully scaffolded (Krause et al 2005) highlighting the influence and significance of tutors and associated support staff in the learning environment. All members of the focus group stressed that the benefit of support from peers, family and friends is highly valued, a finding consistent with those of other studies involving part time students (Askham, 2008).

This study provided valuable insight into perceptions of the study support experiences of vocational, work based 'returning to learn' foundation degree students studying off campus. The project highlighted their anxieties in relation to study support and its impact on learning. It suggests that institutional change is needed in relation to perceptions and understanding of the needs of part time students returning to learn. The project findings strongly indicate that more effective models of support need to be established to offer a more positive experience of study support for part time non traditional students in higher education. Two key areas of development to be considered to improve study support of part time 'returning to learn' students emerged from the study. Firstly, before enrolment clear expectations about the significance and central role of digital fluency to the foundation degree should be made. Secondly, an alternative model for study support should be seriously considered and firmly embedded in course structure and design.

Postscript

Initially the range of short term interventions to boost confidences and competencies of the foundation degree students had a positive impact on their progress but more recent behaviours and attitudes of the group demonstrate expectations of and dependency on a high level of support which has hindered the development of autonomy and is a potential threat to further success. Frustration and lack of aspiration with little evidence of any intrinsic desire or perception of individual responsibility to take control of learning is beginning to surface. This observation has been the catalyst of a larger piece of work aiming to improve the process of transition into higher education for part time work based students that nurtures an autonomous approach to their learning to help them realise their potential. The need to adapt the prior pedagogical approach informed by the study of experiences of foundation degree students described in this chapter has lead to the construction of a new infrastructure for the early years foundation degree that has embedded appropriate and purposeful study support designed to nurture autonomy and create a more positive learning environment.

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Women into Engineering

Amelia Rout and Dipa Patel, Staffordshire, Stoke-on-Trent, Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin Lifelong Learning Network

The Women into Engineering study was funded by the Staffordshire, Stoke on Trent, Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin LLN in 2009-10. It focused on exploring the reasons for the low numbers of female learners in engineering on foundation degrees and undergraduate courses in Higher Education Institutes (HEI). Within our study we included the full breadth of sub-sectors including civil, chemical, bioengineering, environmental, manufacturing, mechanical, engineering design.

In spite of an overall increase in HE applications, engineering remains largely a male dominated career in the UK. Statistics from the Engineering and Technology Board highlight that in 2007 only thirteen percent of new chartered engineer registrants were women in the UK. In 2008 the figure had increased to seventeen percent but the proportion is still low in comparison to male engineers. Data collected from the HE institutions in our area that run engineering courses confirm that enrolment figures for 2008/09 show a low percentage of female learners as set out in figure one, and that these figures are lower than national average of seventeen percent.

Figure one: Summary of 2008/09 enrolment numbers

UNIVERSITY	COURSE	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL	MALE %	FEMALE %
Wolverhampton	Degree	199	15	214	93 %	7%
Foundation	19	2	21	90.5%	9.5%	
HNC	48	2	50	96%	4%	
Staffordshire	Degree	234	26	260	90%	10%
Foundation	220	12	232	94.8%	5.2%	
Harper Adams	Degree	162	5	167	97%	3%
Foundation	20	1	21	95.2%	4.8%	

This project aimed to investigate how engineering courses in higher education could be promoted amongst female learners in the UK. The data have been used to make recommendations to HEIs about curriculum development.

The study encompassed several stages:

1. To carry out a literature review regarding gender issues in engineering.
2. To collect enrolment figures (females) in engineering courses for academic year 2008 in Higher Education Institutes in Staffordshire, Shropshire and Open University (UK).
3. To scope existing programmes/government policies promoting engineering to female learners.
4. To gather and analyse data on HE engineering courses from learners aged 16+.
5. To gather and analyse data from relevant teachers in schools, colleges and universities in Staffordshire and Shropshire.
6. To gather and analyse data from female engineering graduates based in UK and internationally to help gain an insight into different practices and suggestions.

In addition, prior to data collection the project received ethical approval and appropriate access measures were put in place to allow participants to be involved in the project. The findings of each project were shared with appropriate stakeholders which has facilitated the recommendations being taken forward.

This chapter focuses on a discussion of the results from stage four of the study. This stage was carried out using a questionnaire which included both closed and open ended questions. The questionnaires were completed by AS/A-level learners taking maths alongside a variety of other subjects (n=76), FE engineering learners (n=45) and HE engineering learners (n=27). The quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and the qualitative data were summarised by theme, representative quotes are provided below.

AS/A-Level Learners
The response rate among the AS/A-level group was ninety-eight percent (n=76). The results indicate that seventy-five participants were aged between sixteen to twenty-five and one participant was aged between twenty-six to thirty-five years. Forty-four participants were male and thirty-two were female.

The majority of the participants were taking two to four subjects. All participants surveyed were enrolled onto either AS or A-Level mathematics, twenty-two participants were studying chemistry, nineteen participants were studying physics, fourteen participants were studying psychology and other courses taken included biology, physical education, computing, business studies, law, English, French, Spanish, German and accounting.

Those participants who had taken physics, electronics and product design courses in combination with their other subjects would have an opportunity progress onto HE engineering courses.

Seventy-five (out of seventy-six) participants were considering progressing onto HE courses. Fifty-three participants stated which HE course they were interested in taking and these included accounting engineering, medicine, mathematics and biology. However there was a clear distinction between genders with none of the female learners suggesting they would progress to engineering courses, while six male students stated their intentions to progress to an HE course.

Figure two shows the supporting tools that participant's institute provided to help decide what HE course to undertake:

Figure two Bar Chart showing the tool(s) provided to help decide on what course to study at HE level
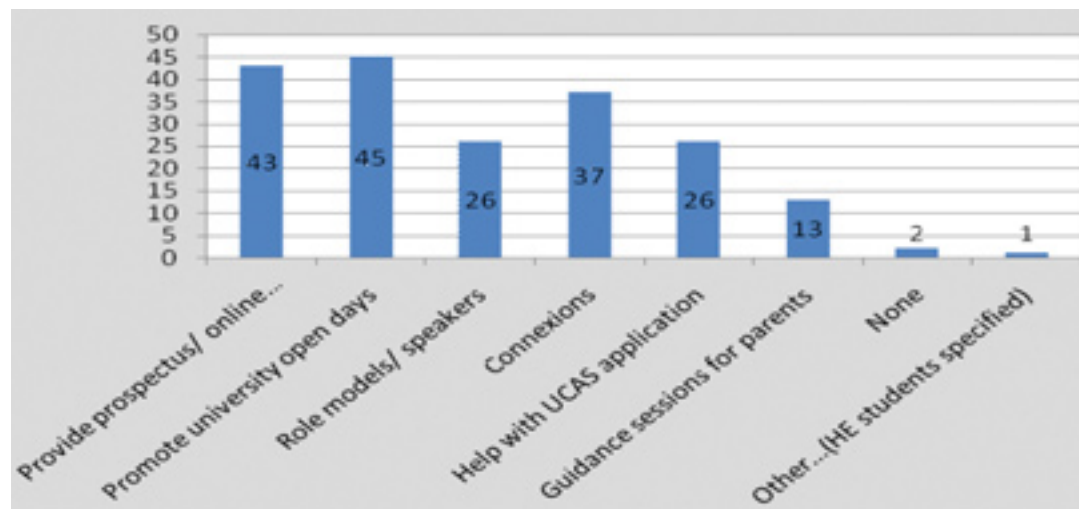
Participants were asked if they had considered engineering at HE level; fourteen participants had considered it, fifty participants had not considered it and eleven participants selected the do not know option.

Also participants were asked if anyone had spoken to them about courses available in HE engineering, the majority of the participants stated that they were not informed. Those participants who were informed of courses in HE engineering specified that the information came from teachers, parents and Connexions advisors.

Participants were asked what they thought studying engineering at HE level involved. Fifty-four participants responded to this question of which twenty-three were female learners. Results showed that ten female participants stated do not know or not sure when answering while the other thirteen female participants mentioned the following; designing and fixing mechanical things, cars, physics and hands on work. On the other hand, the male participants had a better perception of engineering where most mentioned involvements of mathematics, physics, problem solving and practical work.

Additionally participants were asked to express their views on whether they believed females were capable of becoming successful engineers. The results show that sixty-four participants believe that females can become successful engineers, four participants disagreed and eight participants

selected the do not know option. The participants that disagreed (all male) gave the following reasons; 'they are not strong' and 'many of the tasks will involve heavy lifting or grafting'.

The participants were questioned about whether they were aware of there being a high demand for female learners to study engineering at HE level. The results indicated that fifty-nine participants did not know, twelve participants selected no and five participants were aware of the high demand.

Finally, the following suggestions were made by the participants to help promote HE engineering courses to female learners in FE:
• Role models/guest speakers
• Course marketing
• Open days
• Introduce at an earlier age

FE Engineering Learners
The response rate for this survey was hundred percent (n=45). Forty-one participants were aged between sixteen and twenty-five, three participants were aged between twenty-six to thirty-five and one participant was aged between thirty-six to forty-five years. There were forty-three male learners and two female learners surveyed.

The participants were enrolled on an FE engineering related course such as mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, automotive engineering, motor vehicle engineering and general engineering. The results indicate that participants chose to study engineering because of subject interest, job prospects and the practical skills involved.

Of those who responded, twenty-nine were considering progression onto HE, three were not and thirteen selected do not know. Participants who were considering HE stated they were interested in undertaking electrical engineering, electronic engineering and applied technology. However a few participants were unsure of what course they may consider at HE level. Also participants who mentioned they were not thinking about progressing into HE stated:

"I don't want to because I'd rather get a job" and "Want an apprenticeship when finishing college".

Participants were asked to select the supporting tools that their institution provided to help decide what course to undertake at HE level. Figure three outlines the responses:

Figure three: Bar Chart showing the tool(s) provided to help decide on what course to study at HE level.
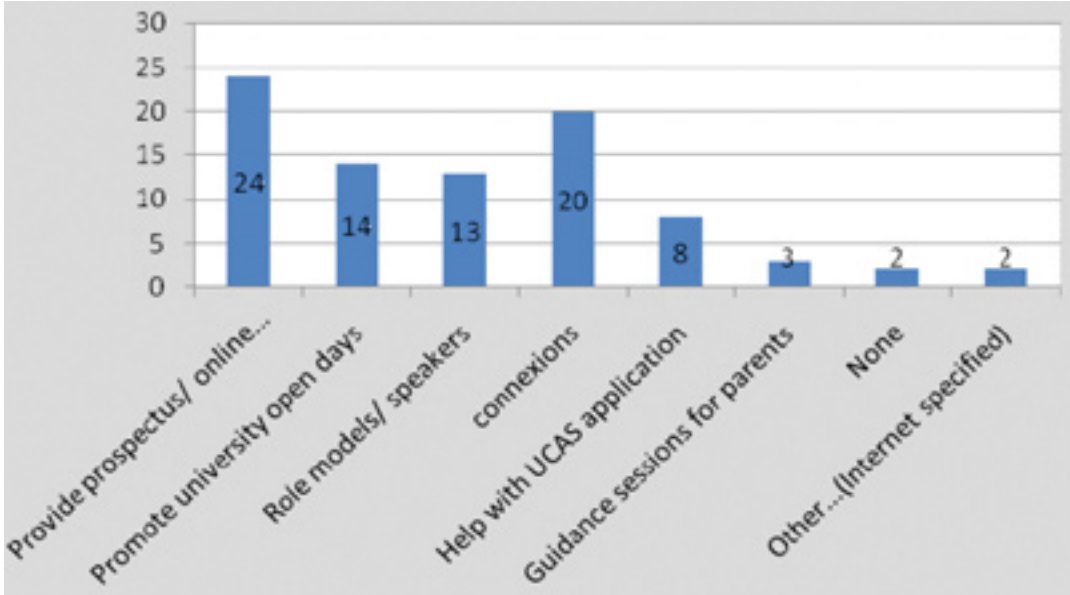
The participants were asked if anyone had spoken to them about HE engineering courses. Twenty-seven participants selected yes, eleven participants selected no and six participants selected 'do not know'. Participants stated that mostly teachers, Connexions advisors, guest speakers and friends informed them about HE engineering courses.

Thirty participants believed that engineering is a well paid career, five participants selected that it is not a well paid career and eight participants selected the do not know option. Most of the participants agreed that if they were to consider engineering at HE level they would be supported by their parents/partner/spouse.

The majority of the participants believed that females are capable of becoming successful engineers. When questioned about knowing whether there is a high demand for women learners to study engineering at HE level, the majority of the participants selected the do not know option, ten participants agreed to there being a demand and ten participants disagreed.

Finally, the following suggestions were made by the participants to promote HE engineering course to female learners in FE.
- Address stereotypes
- Introduce at an earlier age
- Role models/guest speakers
- Course marketing

HE Engineering Learners
Thirty questionnaires were given out to HE engineering learners across the Network area. A total of twenty-seven participants completed the survey (90% response rate, twenty-four male, three female). Twenty-five participants were aged between sixteen and twenty-five and two were aged between twenty-six and thirty-five. Fifteen participants were undertaking Agricultural Engineering degrees, eight participants were on the Off Road Vehicle Design degree and four participants were on the Engineering Design & Development degree.

Participants were asked their reasons for studying engineering, twenty six participants responded. Thirteen participants outlined that they had an interest in the subject area, seven participants expressed job prospects and six participants chose to study engineering due to the practicality and useful skills involved.

Participants were asked what supporting tools their prior institution used to help students decide on what courses to study at HE level. Participants had the option to select more than one from the list given. The results have been outlined in figure four.

Figure four: Bar Chart showing the tool(s) provided to help decide on what course to study at HE level
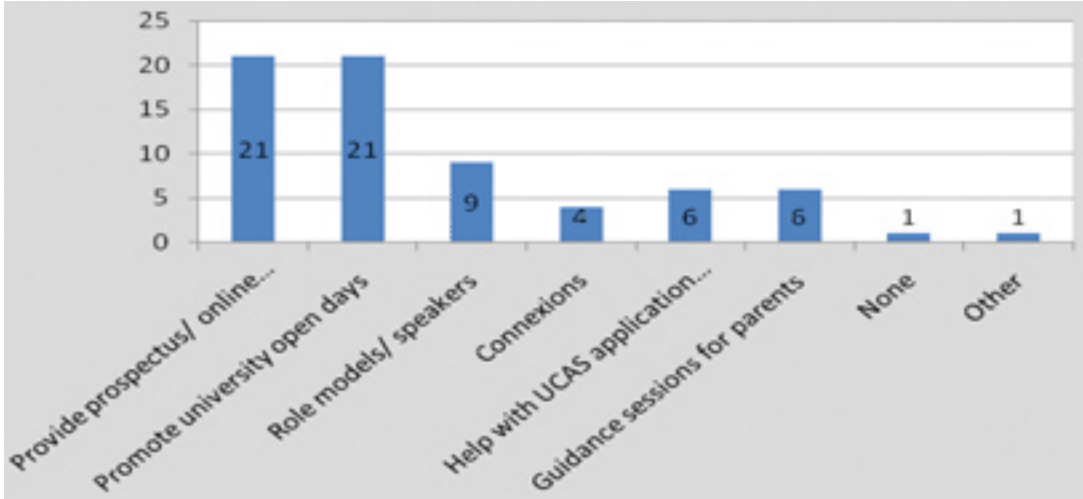
Participants were asked if anyone had spoken to them about what courses were available in HE. The results show that thirteen participants answered yes, twelve selected no and two selected do not know. Participants were asked to identify the individuals that had aided their selection to study engineering. Results show that seven participants stated teachers, three participants mentioned parent/s, one participant answered career advisor and one participant said HE institute.

Participants were asked if they believed engineering is a well paid career. The results show that thirty-one believe that engineering is a well paid career, four participants expressed that they did not believe it was and ten selected the do not know option. All participants stated that family members such as parents, partner and spouse supported the participant in choosing engineering.

The majority of participants stated that females are capable of becoming successful engineers, one did not know and no participants said no. Participants were asked if they knew there whether there is a high demand for women learners to study engineering at HE level. Eight participants answered yes, four participants answered no and thirteen participants selected do not know.

Finally, the following suggestions were made by the participants to promote HE engineering course to female learners in FE:
• Address stereotypes
• Role models/guest speakers
• Marketing courses
• Open days
• Introduce at an earlier age

Discussion and Recommendations

Many colleges and universities are working towards attracting more female learners into engineering. For example, Swansea College (UK Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology, 2006) worked with JIVE to introduce girls only taster day in 2005 focusing on encouraging girls to consider engineering as a career option before selecting their school curriculum courses. The latest engineering taster day for girls held at Swansea College successfully helped to recruit twelve girls into a Design and Technology course at Dylan Thomas School.

Organisations are also working towards increasing the number of women in engineering. For example, HP sponsor women's leadership and development conferences and have developed material to help attract more female employees. Chevron Texaco Oil Refinery in Wales adopted an equal opportunities policy which includes working with schools and colleges to attract female apprentices and believe women have a definite place in the industry (UK Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology, 2006).

Additionally JCB Academy in September 2010 is set to introduce their first intake of learners aged fourteen to nineteen years across Staffordshire, Stoke-On-Trent, Derby and Derbyshire. Currently teenagers and parents are being invited to a recruitment road show where one hundred and twenty learners will be given the opportunity to join the academy.

The findings from the survey provide some useful suggestions around how engineering courses can be promoted to female learners in schools/colleges including addressing stereotypes, providing role models and marketing courses.

The survey results indicate that there is a need to inform learners about engineering from an earlier age. Many female participants surveyed did not know what engineering involved and those that did answer associated engineering with mechanics. The survey suggests that many learners are not aware of the vast field of engineering and career choices available. These implications of findings echo the assertion made by Jamieson that:

"Engineering educators have a role to play; for example, by fostering innovation and connecting engineering to the world, as opposed to a sole focus on the more classic nuts-and-bolts, classroom-only, fundamentals-based curriculum" (Jamieson, 2009).

The research carried out shows that regardless of all the government policies and supporting organisations, gender inequality still exists in engineering.

"Despite sex equality legislation having been around for over thirty years, discrimination and inequality still exists" (Mason in UK Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology, 2006, p2).

Even though there are many initiatives in place to help young learners, especially women into pursuing an engineering career, the Higher Education Institutes enrolment numbers are not promising for female learners.

The following recommendations have been suggested as an outcome from this project:

• The LLN to deliver staff development programmes possibly across schools, colleges and private training providers.
• Information, advice and guidance training for teachers to encourage young learners towards engineering careers.
• To introduce engineering to female learners from a younger age potentially in secondary schools when aged between eleven to fourteen years old.
• Secondary school teachers and learners to attend HE engineering open days.
• To provide support to learners on HE engineering courses using social network tools such as Facebook, Twitter and MySpace.
• Information for learners, parents and general public on the ranges of engineering careers available.
• Employers should continue to engage with young female learners.

Work has begun in taking these recommendations forward. We have decided that rather than creating more information, advice and guidance, the route that the LLN will take will be to bring existing resources together and make them more accessible to teaching staff so they can be well equipped to provide female learners the information they need in order to consider progressing into an HE engineering course.

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Widening Participation in Academically Challenging Degree Programmes: Helping Vocational Learners Navigate the Admissions Process in Veterinary Medicine

Rachel Davis, Peter Nunn, Jon Parry, Sarah Field, Margaret Kilyon, Nigel Goode, Belinda Yamagishi

Background

Over the last five years, changing policy in higher education has encouraged a wholesale commitment to widening participation (WP). However, as highlighted in the Langland (2005) and Milburn (2009) reports, the demographic of students undertaking professional degree programmes, and presumably the resulting professional bodies, is still relatively homogeneous when compared to the wider UK population. Specifically, there is a dearth of students from socio-economic classification groups III (SEC III) and below (i.e. parents in intermediate occupations, routine work and long-term unemployed; www.ons.gov.uk), those from ethnic minority groups and, increasingly, young males.

A greater proportion of British society is being educated and to a higher level (approx 36% of young British people are in higher education (HE), HEFCE, 2010/03). For the 2009/10 academic year HE applications were up by around 10% (UCAS, 2010) even though with numbers capped thousands of students were unsuccessful in gaining entry to their courses of choice.

Places on professional degree programmes have always been at a premium because the graduates tend to have good employment opportunities, a higher than average salary and an elevated position in society (Cabinet Office, 2008). With more applicants than places and a highly academic programme of study, admissions teams have traditionally relied on A-level (usually sciences) and GCSE qualifications to select applicants. GCSE and A level results have improved year on year (Joint Council for Qualifications, 2010) meaning a greater emphasis is placed on assessing non-academic (non-cognitive) skills in the hope of distinguishing between the ever-growing pool of highly-qualified applicants (Schwartz, 2004).

Widening participation at the Royal Veterinary College

Veterinary medicine has a reputation amongst schools and colleges for being an extremely hard discipline to access, even surpassing other "higher professions" such as medicine or dentistry. This is not surprising when you consider that only seven institutions offer vet medicine in the UK, only approx 900 places are available each year (UCAS, 2010) and that the most common offer given to successful veterinary applicants is AAA at science A level[8]. It is therefore no surprise that the veterinary student demographic has become increasingly narrow.

The majority of veterinary medicine students are white females, and many have attended selective schools. In direct response, The Royal Veterinary College launched a one-year, pre-vet bridging programme. The first of its kind in veterinary medicine, the Gateway Programme targets students from low income families that might wish to join the veterinary profession but lack the necessary grades due to their educational disadvantage. Students fulfilling strict socio-economic criteria can apply for what is effectively a six-year veterinary medicine degree with CCC at A level or distinctions in BTEC in Animal Management. In addition, for October 2010 entry, the College is considering students with a number of different entry qualifications (including BTEC and Access to HE Diplomas[9]) for direct access onto the five year veterinary medicine (BVetMed) programme.

The admission of students with BTEC National Diplomas and lower A level grades represents a massive leap forwards in terms of WP in veterinary medicine. Students applying through WP initiatives are still however subjected to selection via their predicted grades, personal statements, work experience, interview performance and BMAT (BioMedical Admissions Test) scores[10].

Whilst conducting Gateway Programme interviews, we were struck by the wide variation in performance across the applicant pool, with the BTEC students faring worst. Anecdotal evidence suggests that our selection processes, although necessary to cap numbers and maintain academic standards, are putting up additional barriers to those most deserving of our help. We applied to the VetNet Lifelong Learning Network (www.vetnetlln.ac.uk) for funding to investigate application and selection at the RVC in more detail, with the ultimate aim of developing an online resource to support aspiring vets in application and selection for vet school.

Methodology

We collated data from a random selection of BVetMed (n = 69) and Gateway Programme (n = 85)

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[8] *Entry requirements vary considerably amongst veterinary schools e.g. RVC will accept any subject apart from general studies as the third A level*

[9] *Applicants must achieve distinctions in selected science-heavy modules (that are unfortunately not widely available in FE colleges) and attain DDD (distinctions) in their course overall.*

[10] *RVC Gateway applicants are not required to either obtain veterinary work experience or sit the BMAT exam*

interview score sheets for the 2008 admissions cycle[11], and compared the numerical scores and written comments within the four sections. An online survey into staff experiences of student selection was developed using Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com), piloted with five staff, further refined, and then sent to all RVC staff (n = 90) involved in conducting BVetMed and Gateway interviews.

The survey consisted of twenty questions within six sections; demographics, interview training, interview content, BVetMed versus Gateway applicant performance, tips for applicants and other comments. The data from the interview transcripts and online staff survey were combined, analysed and used to form the content of a website (www.tobeavet.com) that provides vocational learners with advice and guidance on applying to veterinary medicine. This is discussed further below.

Results
Interview structure and content
BVetMed interviews are generally undertaken by a panel of two or three people, including at least one academic and one vet. Gateway Programme interviews are undertaken by two people, including at least one academic and one member of the academic services department (WP or learning support). The interviews take 20 minutes and follow a set format. Four topics or "factors" (see Table 1) must be addressed and then scored (from 0-4, low to high) by each interviewer, using a separate interview score sheet.

Interviewers are encouraged to elaborate on their scores through written comment. The score sheets are sent to the admissions office for further processing and the final interview score is calculated as the mean of the two or three individual scores (depending on the panel size). If there is a large discrepancy between scores, the written comments may be taken into account to enable adjustments to be made.

Table 1 Factors assessed during BVetMed and Gateway interviews

Factor	Descriptor
1	Scientific understanding, reasoning and curiosity;
2	Awareness of animal-related ethical issues, such as animal experimentation/intensive production systems. Quality of reasoning and judgement;
3	Quality of learning from work experience; an appreciation of public health issues, including any current issues;
4	Communication skills and demonstration of breadth of interests e.g. non- science.

[11] In the 2008 admissions cycle, 1096 students applied for 207 BVetMed places and 151 students applied for 30 Gateway Programme places.

Table 2 Mean interview scores for a random selection of BVetMed and Gateway Programme applicants undertaking selection interviews at the Royal Veterinary College in 2008

Cohort	BVM Offer				BVM Reject				Gateway Offer				Gateway Reject			
Gender	Female (n = 36)		Male (n = 5)		Female (n = 25)		Male (n = 3)		Female (n = 44)		Male (n = 11)		Female (n = 25)		Male (n = 5)	
Factor	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1	3.2	(0.72)	2.9	(0.64)	2.7	(0.77)	2.3	(0.43)	3.1	(0.67)	3.1	(0.77)	1.7	(0.67)	1.7	(0.54)
2	3.1	(0.61)	2.5	(0.52)	2.8	(0.71)	2.6	(0.49)	3.3	(0.53)	3.1	(0.56)	2.0	(0.60)	1.5	(1.01)
3	3.2	(0.66)	2.8	(0.60)	2.9	(0.76)	2.2	(1.06)	3.3	(0.58)	3.2	(0.69)	2.0	(0.72)	1.8	(0.86)
4	3.4	(0.63)	3.2	(0.80)	3.2	(0.67)	2.7	(0.87)	3.2	(0.63)	3.4	(0.75)	2.0	(0.60)	1.5	(0.53)
Mean	12.8		11.4		11.7		9.8		12.9		12.5		7.6		6.4	
	All BVM offers: **12.65**				All BVM rejections: **11.5**				All Gateway offers: **12.9**				All Gateway rejections: **7.6**			

Mean total interview scores (see Table 2) were strikingly similar in successful (mean score 12.7) and unsuccessful (mean score 11.5) applicants to the BVetMed programme. There was a significant difference between successful (mean score 12.9) and unsuccessful (mean score 7.6) Gateway Programme applicants. In both cohorts, male students received offers with a lower mean interview score than females. This difference was more pronounced in the BVetMed cohort where the female rejection mean score (11.7) was higher than the male offer mean score (11.4).

Comments given on the interview score sheet

For all factors, staff commented on both the applicant's academic (well-read, has asked questions, strong reasoning, no depth, little specific detail) and non-cognitive (thoughtful, rational, balanced, contradictory, naive, vague) skills. There were also a large number of comments relating to the applicant's personality traits, motivation and mood (amiable, enthusiastic, interested, mature, likeable, animated, shy, unenthusiastic, nervous, cold).

Details of written feedback for each cohort under each factor can be found in Table 3.

Table 3 Examples of comments given under each factor during interviews for BVetMed and Gateway applicants receiving offers (BVM-O, Gateway-O) and rejections (BVM-R, Gateway-R)

Factor	Cohort	Positive	Negative
1	BVM-O	Enthusiastic, good level of understanding, curious, balanced opinions, has asked questions, impressive, interested, excellent, able to talk through, well read, strong reasoning, good ideas	Hasn't thought about underlying principals, sometimes contradictory, reasoning limited, no depth, lack of lateral thought, no understanding of X
	BVM-R	Strong interest in chemistry, good in areas, had been paying attention, enthusiastic and interested, excellent, bright, sound	Nervous, no depth, little specific detail, unable to expand, poor, didn't know X, weak, superficial
	Gateway-O	Good, spoke well on X, enthusiastic, interested, well-informed, experienced, strong interests, excellent recall, descriptive, good/excellent knowledge/understanding, understands gaps in knowledge/limits of science education (BTEC)	Vague, no curiosity, slow start, no detail, lacks scientific background (BTEC),
	Gateway-R	Could talk about biology best, showed reasonable curiosity, described experiments okay, enthusiastic about coursework	Unenthusiastic, needed coaxing, limited, shy, little curiosity, poor level of knowledge/understanding, limited in sciences, nervous, has not engaged in school work, little explanation, weak, little detail, little critical thinking, had not thought through answers, little insight, not able to discuss anything in detail
2	BVM-O	Good level of knowledge, shows deep understanding, aware, considered, good reasoning, thoughtful, practical approach, sensible, critical thinker, balanced views	Naive, contradictory, needed prompting, ill-informed, standard answers only, superficial, illogical, poor level of knowledge
	BVM-R	Practical approach, aware, thoughtful, mature, thought on feet, non-sentimental, reasoned well, grounded, gave personal opinions, had a conscience, able to think things through, balanced, excellent appreciation, reasoning and judgement	Standard responses, not aware, nervous, rehearsed, weak, thin on detail, unclear, ill-informed

	Gateway-O	Sensible, reasoned, thoughtful, rational, aware, integrated approach, balanced, mature and engaging, strong opinions but considered and well thought-out, argued point well, pragmatic, measured, honest	Vague, naïve, unable to argue point, no depth of reasoning, needed prompting, uncomfortable, lacks detail, limited
	Gateway-R	Good sound arguments, some awareness, good understanding of issues, sensible and measured, balanced, reasonable	Had not thought in advance, could not think on feet, needed encouragement, standard answers only, didn't get going, some worrying opinions, limited, no depth of reasoning, rambling, awkward, standard – needs to think more, no insight, vague, lack of awareness, needed coaxing, strong but unrealistic views, confused, unfocussed, contradictory, lacks clarity
3	BVM-O	Learnt from experience, aware, descriptive, not-flustered, methodical, has asked questions, clear understanding of vet practice, integrated knowledge and applied it, animated, interested, well-informed, observant	Lacks depth – suggest extra background reading, limited critical appraisal, limited work experience, lacks curiosity, lacks breadth, well read, reasoned, engaged
	BVM-R	Good, practical, had obviously enjoyed work experience, good level of understanding	Light on current issues, lacks detail, basic level of knowledge
	Gateway-O	Engaged, variety of breadth and depth of work experience, had asked questions, appropriate understanding, interested, good appreciation of relevant issues, passionate, reasonable, great depth, sound knowledge, had thought about issues, good grasp of career, observant	Surface level responses, needs more experience, lacked depth, naïve, couldn't get a word in edgeways
	Gateway-R	Enthusiastic and knowledgeable, reasonable,	Almost no work experience, had not asked questions, little evidence of learning, knowledge and understanding did not match work experience, needed coaxing, not impressed, lacked depth, like pulling teeth, unaware, poor, superficial, inarticulate, struggled to get anywhere
4	BVM-O	Good/excellent communication skills, good eye contact, out-going, confident, chatty, personable, well-rounded, argues well, not fazed by difficult questions, engaging, amiable, mature, bright, composed, articulate	Took time to warm up, flustered, hesitant, nervous, needs practice, weak
	BVM-R	Mature outlook, aware, good communication	Nervous, rehearsed, no eye contact, quiet and shy, one word answers, no ability to think things through, bit fluffy
	Gateway-O	Considered and articulate, likeable, good/excellent communicator, mature, well-worded answers, thoughtful, eloquent, enthusiastic and clear, personable, discussion quality made up for deficiencies in answers, decent, driven, pleasure to interview	Hesitant, nervous, shy, quiet, limited, lacks depth, needed coaxing
	Gateway-R	Good team work and communication skills, pleasant, nice personality	Poor, few outside interests, very very nervous, little depth, reserved, lacked clarity, weak communication skills, lacks detail, lacks enthusiasm, cold, inarticulate, immature, spoke well but hard to get a word in, needed steering in right direction as did not answer questions, poor diction – very slow, limited

For a descriptor of each factor see Table 1.

Staff survey on selection interviews

We received thirty four responses (>30% of original number) to the online survey. Over half of respondents had been employed at the Royal Veterinary College for more than five years. Sixty five percent worked in the veterinary clinical sciences department, the remaining worked in other departments or the RVC CETL (Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning). Over a third of respondents were lecturers. The remaining were senior lecturers, readers, professors, teaching assistants or worked in academic services.

Just less than half (47%) of respondents had received specific interview training. Respondents were unclear as to the exact nature or timing of the training but for many it was thought to have been as part of a broader diversity and equality course. Other sources of training were direct observation of interviews, indirectly through peer mentoring or as part of a previous Post Doctoral or PhD training programme.

When asked to rank the four main factors assessed at interview (from 1, least important to 4, most important); scientific knowledge and understanding scored lower (mean score 2) than the other three categories (ethics, work experience, non-academic skills; mean scores of 2.5).

Respondents were asked to rank the importance of specific elements of the admissions process when deciding on the suitability of an applicant for the veterinary medicine degree (BVetMed or Gateway Programme). Most elements were deemed as important, but communication skills and quality of learning from work experience were considered very important. The teacher's reference[12], appearance and physical ability rated neutral. "Enthusiasm" was a very common adjective in the open-ended replies to this question.

When discussing work experience with applicants, respondents said they were looking for evidence of active participation in work experience (active learning) e.g. asking questions, reading more on a subject, thinking on their feet and having a real understanding of the profession.

Discussion

We investigated selection procedures for veterinary medicine degrees at the Royal Veterinary College (2008 admissions cycle). BVetMed (traditional entry) and Gateway (bridging) Programme selection interview scores and comment sheets were compared. The perceptions and experiences of RVC staff regarding the selection interview were obtained through an online survey.

Mean interview scores were alike in successful (12.7) and rejected (11.5) BVetMed applicants, suggesting that, as with A level grades, the current form of interviews may not be the best tool for selecting from a homogenous pool (Schwartz, 2004). It is likely that a requirement of three A grade science A levels already restricts the applicant pool so severely that interviews (at least in their current form) can have very little impact on the eventual demographic of the student body.

In direct contrast, there was a marked difference in the mean scores of successful (12.9) and rejected (7.6) Gateway Programme applicants. Interviews are therefore a more useful tool when selecting from a diverse population. However, we recommend caution when dealing with WP

cohorts because many of the non-cognitive skills assessed in selection interviews, such as knowledge of the profession, intellectual discourse and debating skills, are likely diminished in socially and educationally disadvantaged students (Morris, 1999).

The mean score for successful Gateway Programme applicants with a BTEC rather than A level qualification was 12.1, slightly lower than the group mean (12.9). The only rejected BTEC applicant scored 9, higher than the mean of the rejection group (7.6). Our experience of Gateway Programme interviews with A level and BTEC students leads us to expect a greater difference than was observed here. With only four BTEC students included in this analysis, further data needs collecting over the coming years to gain an objective picture of their personal and academic characteristics and the particular challenges facing them in application and selection.

Within our sample, mean interview scores were always higher in groups of female applicants. In fact, rejected female BVetMed applicants had a higher mean interview score (11.7) than the successful male applicants (11.4). Fortunately, interview scores represent one factor amongst others (personal statement, BMAT score, predicted grades) in our selection process. If the trend towards feminisation of the veterinary profession continues (see Slater and Slater, 2000 or Smith, 2006), we might want to look more closely at our selection methods which, in the interview at least, may well favour females over males.

Implications for practice

The feedback notes relating to individual interview scores (Table 3) are useful when making and defending difficult selection decisions, such as when scores awarded by interviewers are markedly different. The notes also allow the admissions team to provide the applicant with constructive feedback at a later date if requested.

On reviewing the interview score sheets we noticed that written feedback could be very useful to those preparing for veterinary medicine interviews, particularly those from non-traditional backgrounds who do not have access to such information. Feedback given to successful and rejected applicants under each factor was similar in nature and covered both academic and non-cognitive skills. Importantly, character and personality traits were regularly commented on and should be a priority for students when preparing for interviews. We included this specific advice within our website (www.tobeavet.com).

There is an informal, even unspoken, yet natural form of assessment in interviews that judges maturity, disposition and eloquence. An applicant's performance in these areas is likely to be related to their social class, gender or ethnicity as is an interviewer's judgement of said performance. This is something that needs further investigation to ensure fair selection (Morris, 1999; Lloyd et al. 2003).

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[12] *RVC admissions do not currently use the teacher's reference to score applications*

During the course of this research, we became concerned about the lack of direction given to staff undertaking Gateway Programme interviews and the fact that the interview score sheets were the same for BVetMed and Gateway cohorts. Our short term solution was to design a new set of interview instructions and interview factors, specific to the Gateway Programme, which is included as an appendix.

Interviewing is, without a doubt, a challenging and skilful task. In veterinary medicine alone, interviewers are required to discern potential amid either a highly homogeneous (BVetMed) or highly diverse (Gateway) pool of applicants. Gateway Programme applicants are likely to have considerably different socio-economic backgrounds and increasingly qualifications from the staff interviewing them (Schwartz, 2004). **We strongly recommend the provision of substantial, targeted training in application and selection for staff involved in the admissions process.** This seems to be particularly important in professional degrees where diversity, or the lack thereof, continues to be an issue (and see Lloyd et al 2003).

A general shift in emphasis, away from scientific ability may also instil a fairer form of selection and help level the playing field amongst all socio-economic groups (Lloyd et al. 2003). It would seem however that both grades and non-cognitive skills can put WP cohorts at a disadvantage, which begs the question: "how do we select from within this group?" More thought needs to go into resolving this conflict.

Improving advice and guidance for applicants

This research project was driven by our concern for students who lack access to the advice and guidance required for them to successfully navigate application and selection in vet medicine. The data obtained in this project were used to develop a website that provides students from non-traditional backgrounds with up-to-date information on applying to study vet medicine. Our breadth and depth of experience at the coal face of application, selection and teaching in vet medicine was invaluable in this process. Our website (www.tobeavet.com) offers advice and guidance on applying to vet school.

The site went live in September 2009. Average visits per day (a single person may "hit" many pages within a single visit) were 22 in 2009 and are currently at 32 in 2010. Visits peaked in October 2009 (37) and February 2010 (37), coinciding with application deadlines and interview dates respectively.

Feedback from the RVC admissions department has been positive, particularly with respect to applicants from "non traditional" backgrounds since they can be immediately directed to the site on contacting the RVC for further information. Previously, WP applicant queries took much longer to process.

The 'tobeavet' website is intended to be applicable across the different veterinary degree courses but much of it was, through necessity, informed by our knowledge of current practice at the RVC. It is hoped that other vet schools could be persuaded to collaborate in the project. However, timing and funding have so far precluded any collaborative effort.

Recommendations for further work

If we are to make significant progress in diversifying the professions, we need to gain a better understanding of the potentially broad range of skill sets within our wider applicant pool. We need to know whether there is in fact a difference in academic, non-cognitive and practical skills in students with varying A level grades and, more importantly, those with alternative qualifications, such as the BTEC in Animal Management.

On a more positive note, The RVC is now considering various entry qualifications including BTEC ND and Access to HE Diplomas for the 5 year BVetMed programme with the specific aim of increasing diversity within the veterinary student population.

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Appendix: New introduction to interview score sheet

The primary aim of a Gateway interview is to identify potential for success rather than confirm existing abilities (as in a BVetMed interview). Please be aware that the majority of candidates will not have prior experience of interviews or academic discourse and are unlikely to have had the opportunity to practise these skills with their teachers.

New factors descriptors:
(1) General interest in science (should demonstrate reasoning and curiosity)
(2) Awareness of ethical issues and challenges facing vets, appreciation of public health issues (even if does not have direct vet work experience)
(3) Quality of learning from work experience (of any kind)
(4) Communication skills and other non-academic interests

Bridging from FdA to Honours Degrees: A Report on Students' Perceptions

Diana Aronstam, London College of Fashion, University of the Arts, London

Background and context

As part of the National Arts Learning Network (NALN) Bridging Curriculum project strand, students' perceptions of their bridging programmes in three NALN institutions were investigated. The research was carried out between December 2006 and January 2008. The respondents had all completed a Foundation Degree in Art (FdA), and were required to undertake a bridging programme in order to progress on to the final year of a BA Honours degree. This document reports on the findings from this research.

In accordance with Foundation Degree (FD) benchmarks, all are required to have a progression route in place to achieve an honours degree (QAA 2004). In some institutions, this progression is automatic, while in others students are required to undergo a bridging programme. These provide a means of making up 'lost' subject content as a result of the emphasis on work placement and vocational content in the FD. Entry requirements for these programmes vary, as do the length and content.

There is a dearth of qualitative information on this particular form of progression. While there is an extensive literature on transition, it has tended to concentrate on the move from further to higher education and the experiences of first year students. (See, for example, Christie et al, 2008; Bennett et al, 2008; Knox, 2005). Typically, the focus has been on students from a widening participation background. Thus, as Penketh and Goddard (2008) note, in their study on the experiences of mature women students progressing from FD to Honours, a 'qualitative analysis of the perceptions of students progressing to honours by this route is ripe for investigation, particularly in relation to the significance this has for life-long learning and widening participation in Higher Education (p. 315).

HEFCE's (2008) review of Foundation Degree provision provides some useful statistical data in relation to progression. This indicated that 54% (2,485) of FD home qualifiers from 2004-5 immediately progressed to an honours programme in 2005-6, the vast majority remaining in the same institution. In the institutions where students stayed on, 87% were given full credit for their preceding two years, with only 3% having to start over. For those moving to a new institution, 14% had to start over, with 60% being given full credit for their FDs. This represents a 10% drop in relation to figures for the previous year.

In terms of success rates, 76% of those progressing onto a final year honours programme were reported as graduating in that year. Relative to figures for the previous year, this represents an increase of 5%. Of these, 8% attained Firsts, and 32% Upper Seconds. As the HEFCE (2008) report notes, a variety of explanations could account for the 24% who did not qualify: they may have failed, dropped out, qualified later on, or have been unable to qualify as a result of 'some formality'.

The HEFCE (2007) review on FDs points out that it would appear that for some students the transition from a FD to honours may be problematic, but in the absence of further data, it was not possible to draw firmer conclusions. One of the only studies to have examined the experience of students progressing from a FD at an FE college to an honours degree at a university found that the experience 'created considerable levels of stress for the students' (Greenbank, 2007: 91). This was largely attributed to the differences in culture between the FE and HE environments: the latter was found to have adopted a more academic approach, provided less support and emphasised independent learning to a greater extent. Penketh and Goddard (2008) found, in analyzing the narratives of mature women students, that while they had derived some confidence from their experience as FD students, their written assignments were the predominant concern. Most of these students, too, had not undertaken their FDs in the same institution, having studied either online or at an outreach centre.

The students reported on in the present study were accustomed to an HE environment from the outset of their FdAs, and did not have to adjust to a new institution for their final year; this would make for a substantially different experience from those progressing from FE institutions and outreach programmes. While the third year experience was not the main focus of the study, some findings on this issue will be presented.

Aims and methodology

The study aimed to investigate students' perceptions of their bridging programmes across three institutions, and to identify some of the issues for students making the transition from FD to the third year of an honours degree. It also sought to identify good practice in bridging provision and to disseminate this information widely across the NALN partnership.

Three institutions participated in the research. Confidentiality was guaranteed to both participating students and staff, and for this reason the institutions cannot be named. All three institutions are providers of art and design courses. At Institution A, students from 3 bridging programmes were involved. At Institution B, students from 7 programmes participated, while at Institution C, 5 courses were represented in the research. Bridging programmes ranged in length from 5 days to a term, and while many were run as discrete programmes, others were presented as an integral part of the FdA programme.

Research data was obtained from questionnaires[13], interviews and semi-structured group

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[13] *The questionnaire asked students to identify 3 things they liked and 3 things they disliked about their bridging course, as well as recommend changes. It also asked respondents to rate the extent to which they felt the bridging had given them the confidence to progress.*

discussions, between December 2006 and January 2008. The focus in each case was on the extent to which students had found their bridging programmes beneficial as a preparation for their third year. All respondents were self-selecting.

The questionnaires were drawn up following semi-structured group discussions conducted in December 2006 with students at institutions A and C. As far as possible, all group discussions were facilitated rather than led, but prompt questions were introduced at times in order to encourage discussion of relevant issues. These discussions were recorded and subsequently transcribed. A provisional coding structure was drawn up, according to themes. This approach was informed by grounded theory, as the themes were constructed from the data. Following this, responses were coded, verified by an additional person, and then analysed.

Summary of main themes

According to the QAA (2005), areas in need of attention in relation to progression arrangements include:

- Clear and timely information to students about all progression routes
- Well-designed progression opportunities appropriate to the expectations and needs of students
- A match between the modes of study on the articulated honours degree with the modes of study on the FD
- Provision of early information to students, including the selection criteria, where there is strong competition for places on the articulated honours degree
- Ensuring the FD provides an appropriate preparation, particularly in the curriculum and methods of assessment, for the honours degree.

All of these points were, to varying degrees, raised by the students who participated in this research, and these will be incorporated in the ensuing discussion. Implicit in this account is students' perceptions of their third year experience.

The value of bridging for students

The general consensus among the students surveyed was that bridging has an important role to play in the curriculum. While they were critical of the content, very few of the respondents, both in the discussion groups or the questionnaires, suggested that bridging in its entirety was a waste of their time. Certainly, one group of students implied that their FdA experience largely obviated the need for a skills development programme to enable them to progress; however, they were nonetheless of the view that progression should not be automatic. The clear implication of this is that the majority of students perceive a need for some structured intervention to enable them to make the transition successfully to the final year of an Honours degree. The main reason for this would appear to be the difference between the FdA and Honours degree in relation to academic writing practices. While for many this was seen as a quantitative leap, most students also perceived that, on a qualitative level, more would be asked of them. This was particularly the case for those whose experience had largely been confined to report writing.

In the three institutions surveyed, there was considerable common ground in relation to both the strengths and weaknesses of their bridging provision. It would be fair to say that the respondents most satisfied with their programme were those whose bridging placed the dissertation at the centre of the programme. The most common strengths identified included the fact that the bridging had given them some idea of what to expect in their final year; some helpful guidance in relation to their work; some essential new theoretical perspectives, and the acquisition of some useful skills that would enable them to succeed. Structuring an essay, referencing techniques, reflective writing skills and undertaking a literature review serve as examples of this. Altogether less common was evidence that the bridging programme had shifted respondents' thinking in any significant sense. The quotes from some of the students suggest a shift in their student identity as a result of their bridging programme. For the former, there was a move away from an 'FdA type of thinking' to a more conceptual, theoretical approach to their work. This entailed seeing themselves as artists who engage in a process, rather than simply applying a formula to achieve a particular look.

This identity shift took on a different hue for some of their peers on one of the other programmes: the transition for them was a quantum leap in the process of creating a product. While as FdA students they had had to primarily grapple with practical elements of their design, this experience brought about in them an appreciation of the analytic dimensions of the process. They were also empowered through having successfully produced far more than they had imagined possible. This different emphasis is most likely a reflection of the fact that students on this programme are not required to produce a dissertation in their final year, but an extensive design proposal and rationale instead. Their counterparts at another institution conveyed a strong recognition of the importance of a theoretical basis to their output; however, unlike their peers discussed above, they appeared to have felt disempowered by this awareness, as they found the conceptual level very challenging in such a short space of time.

There was widespread agreement that bridging represented a missed opportunity, albeit to varying degrees and in different ways, to adequately prepare students for the major requirement of the honours degree year – this being, in most cases, a dissertation. A substantial number of the respondents in this study found themselves struggling with the dissertation. For many, the significant omissions included opportunities to think about or formulate their topic; writing a proposal; planning the dissertation or final major project, and doing a literature review. For some, the bridging programme was seen as too short to do justice to all these areas. Respondents also invariably expressed a wish for more individual guidance as well as feedback on the work undertaken as part of bridging. This was, in many cases, not provided. It is recognised that the timing of the programme poses real problems for institutions to give students feedback; however, in its absence, they typically felt that their efforts had not been fully appreciated. Finally, many of the respondents expressed disappointment and frustration that, following the bridging, they had not been required to begin working on their proposals and topics. This was particularly the case where they had joined existing Honours students who had had this requirement imposed upon them in the summer break.

In most of the programmes surveyed, there were elements that students did not value. In one of the institutions, a large number perceived aspects of the content as irrelevant or repetitive, as they

had covered the ground previously or it was being taught in the final year. In another, it was mainly the omissions in the programme that shaped respondents' perceptions of value; however, some found the content too basic, unnecessary and the focus on essays, rather than the dissertation per se, unhelpful. For some, the main objections to the bridging centred on the difficulty of the programme, particularly for those who had not been previously exposed to theory and essay writing.

Information about progression and the bridging programme

All respondents indicated an awareness of the possibility of progression upon completion of their FdAs; however, many found the advance information on the nature of the programme insufficient and, at times, confusing. They were all aware of the entry requirements. These differed at one of the institutions, where students have only to attain a pass on their FdA to progress onto the third year. Most of these respondents were of the view that this was too generous, and that it should be made more difficult to progress. Other respondents felt that the level of difficulty of the bridging programme had been overstated, and that the programme itself should have been more challenging.

Most respondents were of the view that progression was seen as desirable on the part of their FdA tutors. One group, in particular, stressed that from the outset of their FdAs, the notion of progression had been implicit.

Length and timing of programme

Unsurprisingly, respondents' views varied considerably in relation to the length and timing of the programme. For some, the programme was too long and could have been shortened. For others, for example, those on a five day programme, it was not long enough. For those who had an entire term in which to complete their bridging studies, this issue did not arise. They were more exercised by the timing of the unit, which coincided with their final project work. Many were sceptical about the possibility of this shifting to the summer holidays, as they saw it clashing with work commitments or their need for time out from their studies. However, the majority of those undertaking bridging during the initial part of the summer holiday period did not raise this as an issue.

The biggest concern in relation to timing revolves around the fact that the FdA results are not always known at the start of the bridging course. Respondents were thus in the difficult position of not knowing whether they would be eligible to continue, particularly where a Merit profile is required. While it is hoped that students will have a good idea as to whether or not they are likely to meet entry requirements, there is evidence from tutors to suggest that some go on to the bridging course in the knowledge that their continuing participation is in the balance. Clearly, institutions have to find a way to minimise the extent to which this happens. If bridging is to be held at the end of the FdA rather than in the course of the third term, it is difficult to delay its start till after the final exam boards have taken place.

The relationship between the FdA and BA Honours third year

On a number of occasions in the course of the group discussions, the issue of differing approaches to study between the FdA and Honours degree arose. Perhaps most obvious was the fact that for most respondents, the extended writing requirements of the BA were perceived as a qualitative as well as quantitative leap. Many felt that the report writing they had had to do on their FdAs did not significantly prepare for them for dissertation writing. For a few, the absence of extended writing assignments and the lack of exposure to theoretical debates on their FdAs were seen as impediments to their success; however, once they had to grapple with theory in the bridging unit, they testified to having found it very interesting.

Some respondents indicated that they saw extended writing as irrelevant to their forthcoming careers. Their reasons for going on to the third year were largely instrumental, as they felt their job prospects would be compromised if they left with just an FdA. These students were thus approaching their final year with a fairly narrow conception of what they would derive from it in intellectual and conceptual terms. Moreover, they viewed the academic component as having the potential to undermine their achievement. This is perhaps not surprising given that Foundation Degrees privilege practical and technical expertise and knowledge (Yorke, 2005).

At the same time, many perceived their BA counterparts as being way ahead of them academically and in a far better position to succeed in the dissertation. This was particularly the case where they were brought into close contact with the BA students. For some, having to encounter new lecturers, who had already established relationships with the BA students added to this sense of inferiority. However, invariably, as a result of the focus of the FdA, they viewed themselves as more technically capable, and thus in an advantageous position in this respect. While, for some, the third year will serve as an opportunity to refine skills already acquired on the FdA, it would appear that they have not recognised that the BA has a different set of concerns.

On a related point, many of the respondents in this study were exercised by the fact that they had not received as much individual guidance as they would have liked on the bridging course. While some stated that they had gained an idea of what to expect on the BA, there was scant evidence to suggest that this included an awareness of the cultural shift that they would be likely to encounter in relation to independent study, though one group of respondents did identify this as one of the best features of their bridging programme. Thus, the emphasis on self-directed work appeared, for many of these respondents, to be provoking a considerable amount of anxiety.

There were, however, others who felt liberated from the confining practices of the FdA. It should be noted that their sense of freedom was connected largely to their design practices.

For a few respondents, the modes of study they had experienced on the FdA matched what they were experiencing on the BA.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that the relationship between the final year of the FdA and the third year of the BA in respect of grading was a source of confusion for some respondents. They were unsure as to whether they were carrying anything over from their FdAs or if their degree result would be predicated entirely on the final year.

The third year experience

While there was a great deal of variability in respondents' experiences from course to course, three issues stand out. The first is that it would appear, in a number of cases, that the momentum established on the bridging programme in relation to the dissertation was not carried through in the first term. Many found this disconcerting, and felt unable to engage in any significant work on this. It is not clear whether this was a deliberate practice on these courses, or arose as a result of problems with teaching staff.

Second, many of the respondents who had progressed on to an existing Honours programme felt that they had integrated well onto the new course. As noted above, some, however, were of the view that, academically, they were at a disadvantage relative to their third year peers, but more advanced in practical terms. For a few, their sense was that their arrival in the third year had not been adequately prepared for, and they were left feeling that they were not being accorded the same respect and serious consideration as their peers.

Finally, despite respondents' concerns about their programmes and the pressures they were under, all felt that they had made the right decision to stay on. None indicated that they were likely to give up.

Areas of good practice

Throughout the research, many instances emerged of good practice in preparing students for progression. In sum, the key components of a comprehensive bridging programme could be said to encompass the following:

- the provision of clear and unambiguous information about the length and timing of the programme and selection criteria early on in the second year of the FdA
- the inclusion of handbooks and written information for students while on the programme
- ensuring that FdA students are at the same point at the start of the third year as their BA counterparts
- the inclusion of content that directly paves the way for students to take on the academic demands of the final year
- an opportunity to begin the initial planning for the dissertation
- exploring with students how the BA final year will differ from the FdA
- as far as possible, the provision of feedback to students on the work completed while on the bridging course
- an opportunity to meet with third year students who have successfully completed the honours degree.

Conclusions

This study has provided an indication of the perceptions of foundation degree students who have undertaken a bridging programme in order to progress on to the final year of an honours degree. It has shown that students generally value the experience; however, in many cases, they expressed a wish for bridging to address more specifically the academic demands they would encounter in the final year. Maintaining the momentum established on the bridging in relation to the dissertation/final major project early on in the first term was also seen as important to the respondents.

It has also highlighted the fact that bridging differs not only between institutions but within them too. This is in relation to not only the structure and content of the programme, but the learning outcomes as well. There appears to be no consensus as to what constitutes an appropriate set of outcomes for bridging. Furthermore, there is no clear answer as to whether a discrete model of bridging which takes place after students have completed their FdAs is any better than one placed in the final term of the FdA. There are, from the students' perspective, disadvantages to both; however, a tentative conclusion from the small sample here suggests that they experience more stress when it coincides with their final major projects.

Given the small number of students surveyed, it is of course not possible to generalise the findings of this research; however, it is hoped that the insights generated by the participants will offer providers some pointers should they wish to initiate or refine their bridging provision. This research has not addressed the extent to which FdA students are successful on their degree programmes. At the time of writing, information from all three institutions indicated that they had generally performed well, with a number attaining distinctions. There is no evidence to suggest that they performed less well than their BA counterparts; however, in the absence of precise data, this has not been possible to confirm.

Finally, this research would be incomplete without raising the question as to whether bridging is, in fact, necessary. In the course of investigations, academics were encountered who argued that if the FdA were doing its job properly, it would obviate the need for a bridging programme. Most of the students in this research had had some exposure to Level 2[14] academic writing and a range of theoretical constructs while on their FdAs; however, they nonetheless felt they needed support in making the transition. Perhaps the main reason for this is that, within the context of the FdA, they perceive these areas of study as marginal to their programmes. Alternatively, they may be presented to students as being of less importance than their practical work.

The fact that students find the transition challenging is perhaps not surprising, given the differing emphases of foundation and honours degrees. As Yorke (2005) observes, the former privileges practical expertise and knowledge. It seems likely that the inherent tensions between the aims of the FdA and those of Honours degree study will continue to pose a challenge for those students making the transition, unless a shift takes place on the part of one or both parties. For this reason, bridging has an important part to play in easing this transition. As one Programme Director responsible for bridging and the ensuing third year put it:

'The ability to engage in an intellectual design process is part of the FdA, but bridging gives you the opportunity to work to your own brief ... to become aware of the academic process, and it stimulates the kind of thinking students need for their final year.'

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[14] Bachelors Year 2

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New Creative Careers: The Problems of Progression and Uncertainty

Stephanie Taylor and Karen Littleton, Open University
Research funded by the National Arts Learning Network

This chapter presents findings from research[15] which we conducted with participants who were current and former art college students, practitioners in different areas of creative arts and design, and therefore workers in a relatively newly named part of the economy, the 'creative industries'. These industries have been defined as including, but not limited to, 'advertising, architecture, the art and antiques market, crafts, design, designer fashion, film and video, interactive leisure software, music, the performing arts, publishing, software and computer services, television and radio.' (DCMS, 2001). Originally identified by New Labour as a significantly successful new sector, they have subsequently received considerable attention from policy-makers and academic commentators in the UK and elsewhere.

The list of creative industries we have quoted also corresponds closely to the subject areas and activities of many art college courses, and this indicates how these institutions function as a vocational training ground and entry point for the creative industries. This connection is not, of course, coincidental. For policymakers and commentators, the creative industries are interesting and novel precisely because of the association between the arts and economics (O'Connor, 2009). These have traditionally been seen as incompatible: the fate of the artist was to starve in the garret rather than drive economic growth and urban regeneration and indeed some commentators suggest that the reality for many contemporary creative workers is not really so very different (Gill and Pratt, 2008). Whether or not the economic circumstances have changed, the 'creative' of creative working still retains the aura of the arts, a link to the classic image or 'romantic myth' of the artist as inspired maker and the assumption that 'the making of art requires special talents, gifts, or abilities, which few have' (Becker, 1982).

Becker considered art and creative practices in sociological terms, and part of his project was to challenge the image of the solitary maker by exploring the 'art worlds' which sustain and enable artistic or creative work, such as providing materials and markets and an audience to recognise and value it. Our aim in this research has been to consider contemporary creative careers as a social phenomenon, but using a different approach to Becker's, taken from social and discursive psychology.

Our approach is introduced in the first section below, in which we also provide more detail of the study. Subsequent sections discuss special issues which the research raised in relation to creative working. As part of this we consider the trajectories of creative careers, including the notion that these do not involved the 'age-stage' progression of a 'normal' career pathway. We also examine the linking of personal and professional development which characterises creative work. We then consider the implications of the research findings, for vocational learners themselves and for course providers, teachers and institutions. We discuss sources of advantage and disadvantage for learners, as indicated by our research and some further implications for those aiming to assist and expand lifelong learning opportunities.

The Research Study

The research discussed in this chapter was an interview-based study conducted in 2007. The special focus of this research, which was funded by the National Arts Learning Network, was to investigate the importance of university-level study in Creative Arts and Design, including postgraduate study, as part of a creative career. An additional interest was in people who had not followed a traditional educational pathway, perhaps as a consequence of a decision to return to study or training as preparation for a new creative career, or because of difficulties at some point in their educational careers. For some of our participants, therefore, a postgraduate course had been the ultimate challenge and achievement, especially for those who had struggled with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia. For others, postgraduate study was the point at which they focused down their interest onto what they really wanted to do. For yet others, it had been the point of change, the opportunity to begin working in an entirely new area. For participants who had not (yet) studied at postgraduate level, it was an option to be rejected or taken up in the future.

The obvious way to research all this might seem to be to collect statistics, perhaps through a survey to find out, for example, the ages and previous study experience of postgraduate students, and the 'facts' of their subsequent careers in terms of the work they did, their earnings and so on. This kind of research has been undertaken by others (Pollard et al., 2008), including in the alumni surveys conducted by many art colleges. Its strength is that it can provide a useful overview of the complex picture of a large number of lives. Its limitations, and every kind of research has limitations, are that it necessarily simplifies in order to produce generalisations, with the result that interesting details must be omitted and important differences may be obscured. People's answers to questions about what they will do in the future or in certain situations ('if') are a notoriously unreliable predictor of behaviour, and a statistical analysis does not provide much information about the ways participants view the world or their reasons for doing what they do.

The approach we adopt in our research, in contrast, involves the collection and analysis of data from a limited number of participants. The theoretical traditions which inform our research are social and discursive, from psychology and the social sciences. Readers who are interested in

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[15] *A full account of the research on which this chapter is based can be found at: http://www.naln. ac.uk/en/projects–research/progression-to-postgraduate-study-and-careers.cfm*

more detail and sources may want to look at some of our academic publications[16]. The overview we seek is of the ideas which participants share about study and work as part of creative careers. We assume that these shared ideas come from society in general (a 21st century UK world view, if you like, with all the larger historical and global influences which that implies) and also from our participants' common experiences, of school, art college and certain kinds of work. We were therefore interested in what they told us about their lives, and more specifically in how they characterised and valued what they talked about.

We recruited our participants through art colleges and their alumni lists, inviting volunteers who had followed a 'different' career path into Art and Design, for example by entering university study without 'A' levels, or postgraduate study without a first degree in Art and Design, or changing their field of work. The final sample of 46 participants included current students as well as people engaged in different kinds of creative work for themselves or others. They ranged in age from their 20s to their 60s. It is important to note that age was not an indicator of career maturity since the sample included people who had changed careers and others who had returned to study after a break. The participants' common experience was that they had all studied, or were currently studying, Creative Arts and Design.

Each participant was interviewed for about an hour about her or his study and work experience, plans and hopes for the future. The interviews were designed and conducted to encourage conversation. For example, the interviewer asked open-ended questions and although she followed a guide list of topics, she followed up points which arose and invited additional comments, so that each interview was different. (This contrasts with survey interviews in which every participant would be asked exactly the same questions, with a limited choice of possible answers.)

These interviews, audio-recorded and transcribed, are our research data. The transcripts were analysed together, as a single body of data, to find patterns across them in what was said and how it was said. We examined the talk as self-presentation, sense-making and performance, shaped by the interview interaction and also the discourses of the wider society which these patterns indicate, for example, through what is taken to be 'normal'. We treated participants' accounts as broadly truthful about the details of their study and work, and our aim was not to understand the participants as if they were clients in a therapy situation, or to read their talk as evidence of 'inner' mental states, like a window on a psychic arena. Our interest was and is in the possibly unrecognised implications of taken-for-granted ideas and social practices.

As one example of our data analysis, we noted that many participants were formally or informally categorised during their schooling as either 'academic' or 'artistic'. These are our category labels, summarising a pattern which emerged in different words and details as we compared many interviews. Our participants' accounts indicated that the 'academic' pupils were likely to have been directed away from 'artistic' subjects, by their teachers and also their families. A similar exclusion happened with pupils who were good at science who were discouraged from taking more creative courses which interested them. These early categorisations therefore had long-term consequences and sometimes a participant who had graduated and pursued a different career for some years, subsequently decided to return to an original interest in creative work which she or he had been discouraged from pursuing at school.

This is an example of the relevance of what may be called discourses or discursive resources, an instance in which meanings overflow language or talk to have a practical or material effect on people's lives: this is the kind of point which interests us in our analysis.

The shape of a creative career

The sociologist Howard S. Becker, who we cited at the start of this chapter, suggests that artists have a special status in society. He proposes that this carries some exemption from the 'rules of decorum, propriety, and common sense' (1982:14) which other people are expected to follow. The creative workers who were our participants did not stand out as improper or indecorous (although that was not a focus of our study), but they did emphasise the difference between their own careers, or prospective careers, and those of people in more 'ordinary' jobs. One way in which they did this was to distance themselves from the kind of idealised age-stage progression in which the working person moves steadily over time into higher status and better paid positions. In particular, some participants specifically contrasted themselves with professionals who had studied for a similar number of years and, our participants suggested, could expect this progressive career pathway in return.

We emphasise that we are looking at participants' discursive constructions of their past and prospective careers, that is, the ways in which they interpreted and presented their lives in their talk. In many cases, an alternative interpretation was obviously possible. For example, after completing their undergraduate or postgraduate studies, some participants had achieved good (though seldom spectacular) earnings and also considerable recognition. They had taken successive positions of greater responsibility, within institutions or independently, for example, on large-scale funded projects. In short, they did appear to have progressed steadily, although they presented themselves differently. The interest for us was in the way our participants constructed their experiences, and prospects. We argue that discursive constructions matter because they are connected to commonsense assumptions about what is good or bad, successful or unsuccessful, normal or abnormal, or, alternatively, ordinary or special, and they have practical effects on people's lives.

In this view, a particular description of a life or career may fulfil certain functions for the speaker. We suggest that one reason for participants to emphasise the difference between 'ordinary' careers and their own lives is in order to claim the special status which Becker described. In other words, the difference of your career pathway is cited as evidence that you are an artistic or creative person. This might be especially important in a career in which success is difficult to attain: it supports or validates a claim to be a creative worker. This might also be why a number of participants spoke negatively about more conventional lives: for example, a recent postgraduate talked about his fear of being 'trapped' in a 9 to 5 job, and a man past retirement age compared his life favourably with a friend who had made more money but had a very 'ordinary' life.

Conversely, for some participants, difference may be the starting point and being creative may function as the explanation. If your life to date has not conformed to an expected progression, being creative may

you may be attracted to a career in which an alternative path is accepted and even expected. This could be the case for people who have had negative educational experiences. They may also be attracted to take courses which seem different to the areas in which they had difficulties; we see again the effects of the idea of an academic/artistic contrast.

So far we have discussed the claim that creative careers do not follow a 'normal' trajectory (although of course many people in other fields may also consider themselves outside such a trajectory). Our research did indicate a different pathway for a creative career, which our participants referred to, often indirectly, in their discussions of their own work and lives. The idea of this alternative pathway is what we have called the narrative of the 'big break', of persisting in your work, possibly for years and even for an entire lifetime, until quite suddenly you achieve recognition and a kind of total success which resolves all problems. As we describe it here, this sounds like a rather silly fantasy, with overtones of tabloid celebrity stories. Our argument is certainly not that our participants, or other contemporary creatives, are silly, nor that they all explicitly claimed this as their expectation and ambition, although some of them came close to doing so. Rather, we suggest that this narrative, of extended effort which will bring results at some unknown time, underlies much of the taken-for-granted commonsense of creative lives. This commonsense was voiced by our participants, sometimes quoting tutors and other mentors, in statements like 'I'm not under any illusions that I'll earn money out of my art work' (Taylor and Littleton 2008). So participants accepted as a necessity that they must work hard, conserve money or fit in alternative work for an income, postpone planning or the expectation of greater security, and even avoid looking to the future at all. This echoes other research, with new media workers (at least some of whom come under the 'creative industries' according to the DCMS, quoted earlier) which noted their striking avoidance of planning for the future or even talking about it (Gill 2007).

Effort and uncertainty

The 'big break' pathway we have outlined implies the need for sustained application over an uncertain period of time, during which the creative work may not be producing much income. For some of our participants, the solution was one we call 'the double life': alongside their primary, creative work, they would do a separate job to earn money to support themselves (and others). Ideally, this job would not be too demanding, although some participants did develop a whole second career, whether in a related area, like teaching, or a different field, for example, as a chef or sub-editor. Living such a double life obviously requires enormous energy and effort, but it provided some participants with a stable if tiring life situation in which they could pursue creative work.

Other participants had working lives which were more fragmented. Although the creative industries have been claimed as an area of economic new success and the source of new jobs, commentators have noted that much of the work which is available is part-time or short-term, project-based, and often low-paid. Many creative workers therefore spend considerable time pursuing job possibilities, sometimes even doing unpaid work to promote themselves. This was the situation of new media workers studied by Rosalind Gill (2007) and web-designers studied by Helen Kennedy (2010). Some of our participants described similar situations. A positive view is that such 'portfolio' working can offer freedom, flexibility and interest (Leadbetter 2004): it has been claimed as the model for the future of work. Some of our participants also appeared to embrace

the uncertainty as an alternative to '9 to 5' working which they saw as stifling their creativity. More negatively, portfolio working has been criticised as exploitative, with the flexibility favouring only the employers, not the workers themselves. For example, our participants described the difficulty of 'juggling' multiple commitments, including pursuing contacts to find further work.

Both of these work patterns, the 'double life' and portfolio working, require huge effort of creative workers. It has been suggested that such effort is encouraged, and tolerated, as a consequence of the personalised nature of creative work. To understand this, we need to look back to a conventional image of artistic or creative production which centres on a solitary individual 'maker', driven by her or his (usually his) passions and personal inspiration. Of course this image has been challenged by a number of academics. For example, Howard S. Becker (1982) has written about the heavily peopled 'art worlds' which sustain and enable artistic or creative work, including by providing materials and markets and an audience to recognise and value it. Somewhat differently, psychologists have explored the collaborative nature of creative work (John-Steiner 2000; Miell and Littleton 2004; Sawyer 2008; Sawyer 2003), proposing that this involves more people than one named individual maker. The conventional image also excludes the networking which commentators have indicated is essential for contemporary creative workers. Nonetheless, the idea of creative working as individual and personal is one that persists, and it has been suggested that this attracts and motivates contemporary creative workers. In an influential book, Angela McRobbie (1998) suggested that young people are attracted to creative work as self-actualising, that is, a means of making yourself through what you do. Other writers have noted that for contemporary creative workers, the distinction between work and leisure is blurred because your work is 'about' you. More negatively, this search for personal fulfilment through work is seen to lead to creative workers putting in long hours for little return, often on insecure contracts, for little or no pay. If you regard the work as your own, unshared, and assume that success depends on your own continuing efforts, then there is never a right time to stop; these combined assumptions result, in McRobbie's words, in the 'self-exploitation' of creative workers (McRobbie, 1998: 103).

Our research confirmed many of these previous claims and findings about the personalised and individualised nature of creative work. Our participants referred frequently to their 'love' of their work. They had been encouraged to immerse themselves fully in their courses, especially at postgraduate level, and this came to seem a necessary condition for creative working: the work had to take priority over other parts of life. (In a previous study, postgraduate art college students had frequently described themselves as 'selfish' for their involvement in their work.) They had also learned, in art school contexts, to talk about their work and make connections to their personal experience.

After art college, personalised working had certain implications. First, the blurring of the boundaries between working and non-working life led, inevitably, to conflicts in the areas which more traditionally have been seen as personal: relationships with partners and even friends; parenting, actual or prospective, and sometimes the demands of other close people, like parents and siblings. Second, participants valued the ownership of their work, aspiring to work for themselves, or to keep their own work separate from work for others, such as employers or certain clients, in the 'double life' we have noted. The personalisation of creative work therefore, somewhat ironically, provided both the requirement for overworking and the motivation to sustain it.

Some implications of the research

The preceding sections presented some of our findings about creative work and careers, which we suggested derive from an established image of the artist or creative maker. We have indicated how this image influences our participants' own interpretations of the shape of a creative career and the way that they work and live. Does it have further implications for lifelong learning, for course providers, both teachers and institutions, and for the learners themselves? To explore these questions, in this section we will discuss our findings about who studies Creative Arts and Design, and what they expect of such an education and the institution which provides it.

The question of who studies and, relatedly, the advantages or disadvantages which some of them face is often considered with reference to conventional categories and markers such as age group, ethnicity, previous educational qualifications (for all of which some statistics are available) and class, which is a more difficult concept and one on which there is limited information on Creative Arts and Design students. We will not discuss our findings in these terms, for several reasons. First, in any social research there is a question of which category is most relevant: is a particular participant's position or experience or prospects or world view best explained with reference to her gender, race, age or class? And, relatedly, should these be separated? For example, are there special issues faced by, say, white working class men which will be missed if a study focuses on the category of 'men' only? A third issue around the conventional categories is that some, including class and race, are obviously difficult to define.

An additional issue for a qualitative research study like the one we conducted is that there are inevitably too few participants to generalise about in such category terms. There is a danger that a small number of, say, Black participants will be interpreted as 'types', as if every part of their situation and everything they say is a consequence of being Black so that anyone else who is Black would have the same experience and say the same things, which is clearly not the case! For the same reason, we are not simply summarising the experience of our participants and saying what they did or did not experience or decide. Rather, as the word 'implications' indicates, we are presenting an argument, or several arguments, about advantage or disadvantage, based on our data but going beyond it. We therefore present our answer differently, in terms of categories which emerged from our own study.

Academic or creative?

We have already introduced the 'academic' and 'creative' distinction which emerged from our data. A number of our participants emphasised that they had been unsuccessful at school, for different reasons. For some of these, Creative Arts and Design presented an opportunity for study at a higher education level which they had not previously considered. (One aim of the National Arts Learning Network, which funded our research, is to reach such learners.)

One prominent group which emerged in the study were the participants who attributed their previous study difficulties to dyslexia. It was not part of our study to debate the nature or diagnosis of this condition; our interest was in its meanings for participants. It could function as an explanation for previous failures and therefore, for some people, as an important and welcome exoneration. A few people went further and took dyslexia to be an extra indication of creativity: this is a variation on the academic/creative distinction.

For education providers, an important implication is that participants with a history of education difficulties wanted creative courses to 'look' different from academic ones. For example, a number of participants, including people who had completed postgraduate qualifications, recommended strongly that Masters-level courses should not include a written dissertation.

We also found, of course, that our participants did include people who had been highly successful in their earlier studies. Some of them had moved on directly from school to study 'creative' subjects (although these people were not the main focus of this particular research study) but others had followed less direct routes into creative work. Some had come to it indirectly, through an alternative specialisation. For example, there were participants who had studied engineering and then moved into design. Others had entered and followed whole different careers before changing to study on creative arts and design courses as mature students. Some women participants had made such a change after a break to raise a family.

We noted that participants who had made this later career change sometimes expected their new qualifications to open doors automatically; in other words, they transferred their 'other career' expectations of age-stage progression into creative fields, and were disappointed. For these participants, the academic experience perhaps took precedence over a view of themselves as entering larger networks, communities or fields of activity in which they would later work. One relevant point for an educational institution here is its own place within larger 'art worlds': we return to this below.

The influence of family

Family background was relevant to participants' study experience as an influence on course choices and a source of advantage or disadvantage in several ways. Those participants who might be characterised by others as 'middle class' (and in some cases described themselves in this way) mentioned some obvious advantages which their families of upbringing could provide. One was a degree of financial support, including in the form of a place to live during or after studying. Another was guidance in the processes of choosing and applying for courses, based on a general familiarity with Higher Education; this is the kind of knowledge and competence which is often linked to social or cultural 'capital' (Bourdieu, 1984 /2010: 59).

However, this background could be disadvantageous too: for example, parents who were professionals in salaried positions often had a clear expectation that students would follow conventional age-stage routes and that their study would lead directly into a secure well-paying job. In contrast, families with experience of self-employment or running small businesses could be more tolerant of career uncertainty and so place less pressure on students to present clear plans for the future. But some students from less academic backgrounds also faced the family expectation that all the time and money invested in study should produce an immediate return of higher earnings and greater employment security. These students were usually expected to maintain themselves by working alongside their studies, and in some cases, to financially support or otherwise take responsibility for other family members.

Participants whose families of upbringing had some connection to creative work seemed to be at an advantage: they were encouraged in their career choices or at least had less need to justify them. We have noted elsewhere how even quite distant or tenuous connections could also be cited by participants as validation for their own choice of a creative career (Taylor and Littleton 2006). Family members who were creative could provide useful examples of how to manage career uncertainty and self-employment. For some participants, family connections meant that art colleges were 'known places', so that the process of applying for entry was less daunting. However, for a few participants, there was an unwelcome sense of competition with other members of the family doing similar creative work, and some people had even changed their area of practice to avoid any possible comparison.

For many people, the family of upbringing was less relevant to their study experience than their own partners and, in some cases, children. We noted several different domestic patterns, marked by a central tension. The student or novice creative worker wanted to prioritise creative work, 'selfishly', as we have noted, and the claims of other people interfered with this; yet, in the long indefinite pathway of a creative career, those other people were also a vital source of support, whether emotional, financial, or both. Reconciling study with parenting was particularly difficult, although some participants managed it. Some women who had left previous careers to raise a family decided to take up creative work at the same time, or some years on when their children were older, but in this situation there was usually financial support from a partner with a secure income. Men with children often looked to the female parent to provide a steady income.

Implications for education providers

We have noted the unsurprising preference for creative courses to 'look' different from conventional academic study. There was a clear expectation that learning, like the creative work, would be personalised. As students, our participants valued personal attention from tutors; many referred to current or former tutors as strong influences. They also favoured courses which were flexible enough to be matched to their own interests. The process of matching your study to yourself extended to the courses and subject or skills areas. Participants often resisted fixed categorisations and described themselves as not only, say, a photographer, sculptor, painter or animation designer but as combining interests in different fields or subjects or media. A similar blurring occurred around 'applied' fields and 'fine art' which is why we have not used these distinctions to categorise our participants.

Perhaps as part of the same flexibility, participants spoke very positively about the experience of communicating with fellow students on different courses, being able to view and discuss their work, and of the more general influence of their peers. The importance of both tutors and peers may be that, like family members and other known people, they can offer practical examples of how to manage the uncertainties of a practical career. Education may offer similar support and an injection of energy and confidence at difficult times. The pathways described by many participants featured a complex intertwining of work and educational experience: they had returned to art colleges and other institutions to for short courses, further degrees and to work as teachers and tutors. This was one of the way in which institutions functioned to connect current and former students into larger 'art worlds'.

Teaching institutions, therefore, had a value for participants which went beyond the immediate provision of teaching and training. First, as noted above, colleges provided a point of connection into the larger creative contexts which students aspired to enter. One way this occurred was through degree shows. Current students looked for the contacts which the show might produce, and former students went back to their colleges to degree shows to look at current work and renew old contacts. Second, colleges could provide reassuring validation to set against the uncertainty of a creative career. This was given by the initial experience of being selected, whether through a competitive process or a favourable encounter with a single member of staff. Participants' memories of the selection process varied but the satisfaction of being accepted was an enduring one. Participants also took pride in having a prestigious qualification. A frequent comment was that, although success would ultimately depend on the quality of your work, the 'name' of a college or course might increase the chance that someone would open an application or portfolio in order to look at that work.

Concluding comments

Our research investigates creative workers' own views of their (current or prospective) careers, and the assumptions which influence their interlinked working and personal lives. Creative working has been characterised as precarious and the economic downturn will add to its uncertainties. However, it may be that the particular expectations and love of their work which characterises creative workers will also help them to deal with these additional difficulties. Our research indicates that the validation and connection provided by education providers, at the level of institutions and also individual teachers and trainers, may be an important additional support.

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Reflections on an Evolving Approach to Curriculum Development

Emma Thomas, Progress South Central

This chapter focuses on three case studies of curriculum development projects that exemplify the evolving approach to curriculum development taken by Progress South Central, the Lifelong Learning Network (LLN) for Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Surrey. This is set in the context of the LLN's overall curriculum development activity and of relevant government directives regarding curriculum development.

Government directives regarding curriculum development

The need for more relevant and work-related curriculum and for greater involvement of employers in qualification design was set out in World Class Skills (DIUS, 2007) as crucial to meeting the ambitious targets set in the Leitch Review of Skills (HM Treasury, 2006) regarding qualification levels of the UK workforce by 2020. A core principle of World Class Skills, and of the earlier Leitch Review, was that vocational qualifications should reflect the skills needs of employers which, it was argued, would entail a radical shift in the pattern of provision towards those colleges and providers that seize the opportunities to serve learners and employers in new ways (DIUS, 2007: 19).

The Government's 2009 *Skills for Growth* White Paper expressed the desire 'to build new bridges between the workplace and higher learning' (BIS, 2009a: 2) and set a new target of three-quarters of people participating in higher education (HE) or completing an advanced apprenticeship or equivalent technician level course by the age of 30, a target that puts increasing emphasis on the need to train people in advanced vocational skills at Levels 3 and 4, alongside continuing to expand HE. The vision for a future employment and skills system set out in the UK Commission for Employment and Skills' *Towards Ambition 2020* envisaged a system in which 'the content of learning and qualifications is shaped by the relevant sector, and up-to-date with emerging industry needs; whilst choice in provision is aligned to local labour market needs' (UKCES, 2009:13). *Higher Ambitions*, the Government's 2009 framework for the future success of HE, argues that an increase in vocationally-based foundation degrees and in work-based study is essential to attracting a greater diversity of students into HE and achieving the target of 50% participation: 'the next phase of expansion in higher education will hinge on providing opportunities for different types of people to study in a wider range of ways than in the past. The focus will therefore be on a greater diversity of models of learning; part-time, work-based, foundation degrees, and studying whilst at home.' (BIS, 2009b: 9).

Lifelong Learning Networks, with their core focus on improving progression opportunities for vocational learners into and through HE, have been well placed to fund projects that respond directly to the above agenda, which has been reiterated in HEFCE's Strategic Plan 2006-11.

Overview of curriculum development work by Lifelong Learning Networks

Due to the diversity of LLN setups and reporting mechanisms, it is difficult to get a systematic overview of the range of curriculum development work funded by LLNs. All LLNs are required to submit an annual monitoring return to HEFCE, which forces reporting in a systematic format. However, at the time of writing only one out of the 30 LLNs (West Yorkshire LLN) has their 2009 monitoring return accessible from their website[17]. A brief survey of those LLNs that do make summaries of their curriculum development work available on their websites[18] reveals that Foundation degrees are the most significant area of development, with 59% of projects in this area. Table 1 presents a summary overview.

Table 1 summary of curriculum development projects from a selection of LLNs

TYPE OF PROVISION	NUMBER OF PROJECTS	% OF TOTAL
Foundation degrees	110	59%
Honours degrees/top-ups	20	11%
Bridging courses (includes Access courses)	12	6%
Taster programmes/summer schools	4	2%
HND/HNC	6	3%
Bespoke provision in Health and Social Care	8	4%
Postgraduate provision	5	3%
Other	20	11%
TOTAL	**185**	**100%**

Currently, 45 out of the 183 projects listed (25%) on the LLN National Forum's repository of LLN research[19] can be classified as relating to the development of provision[20]. This is interestingly consonant with the proportion of allocated HEFCE funding that has been reported as having been spent in this area.

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[17] *Searched 29 April 2010.*
[18] *A search revealed accessible information from only 8 of the 30 LLNs.*
[19] *www.lifelonglearningnetworks.org.uk/research-evaluation/projects*
[20] *This list of research projects does not equate directly with individual curriculum developed by LLNs; it depends on whether or not an LLN has chosen to write up a curriculum development project as a research report for the National Forum.*

HEFCE (2010) report that curriculum development has been the most significant area of expenditure by LLNs in the 2008-09 academic year, with £5.6 million – around 20% of total allocated HEFCE funding – spent by LLNs in this area (an average of around £200,000 per LLN). 1150 new or modified curriculum developments were reported by LLNs to HEFCE for 2008-09, an increase of around 400 on the 2007-08 return. According to HEFCE (2010), a number of LLNs have reported that they view curriculum development as the area of LLN activity with the most opportunity for sustainability, due to it being relatively more straightforward to embed than other areas of LLN activity.

Overview of curriculum development work by Progress South Central

Progress South Central's first year saw a big emphasis on foundation degree (FD) development, with the LLN seen as a source of funding by colleges for areas where possible course demand was perceived. Development of FDs brings together curriculum development with employer engagement, and has been an important means for the LLN of engaging with employers. In some cases the LLN had been able to help institutions engage with the necessary professional bodies – this was particularly the case in Construction where CIOB (Chartered Institute of Building) registration is essential for any new provision developed. In Year 2 and beyond, there has been a trend towards becoming more involved in small-scale Continuing Professional Development (CPD) provision tailored to those in the workplace.

A summary of Progress South Central's curriculum development projects by type of provision can be seen in Table 2. Figure 2 shows the timeline of projects in the first three categories, plotted by the date the funding agreement was signed. In response to perceived needs and trends, an early focus on FDs has evolved into diversifying, for example, into Honours top-ups and latterly into bespoke CPD modules, notably for NHS staff.

Table 2 summary of Progress South Central curriculum development projects[21]

TYPE OF PROVISION	NUMBER OF PROJECTS
Foundation degree development	15
BA/BSc Hons top-ups	3
Bespoke provision for NHS and other healthcare staff	7
Other bespoke provision for learners in the workplace	3
Other (including 14-19 Diploma provision)	3
TOTAL PROJECTS	31

[21]NB curriculum development has here been fairly tightly defined. Studies e.g. identifying gaps in provision have not necessarily been classed as curriculum development.

Figure 1 project types by timeline

- Foundation degree development
- Honours top-ups
- Bespoke provision for NHS and other healthcare staff
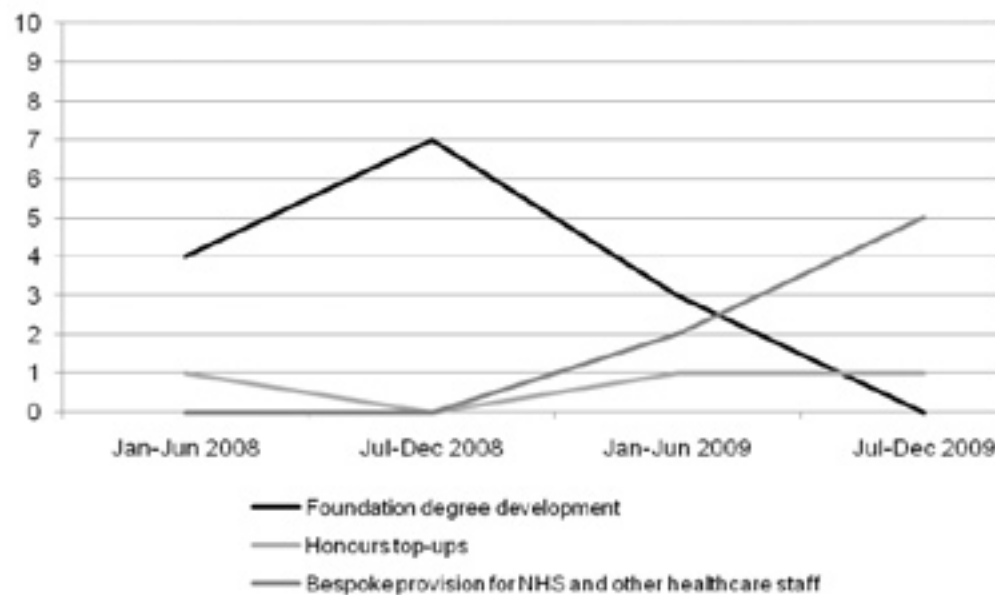
The three case studies discussed in the remainder of this chapter exemplify these three types of provision. The first is a FD developed at a partner FE college as part of a wider redesign and rebranding of their HE provision in the performing arts. The second is a BSc (Hons) top-up developed at a partner university to form a dedicated progression route for students studying animal management programmes at FD and HND level. The third is the development of an accredited award for mental health support workers within a local NHS Trust. The three case studies are taken from across three of Progress South Central's four funded vocational sectors: Creative industries, Land-based industries and Health and Social Care respectively.

Case study 1: FD in musical theatre

A FD in Musical Theatre was developed and delivered by the School of Higher Education Performing Arts at Amersham & Wycombe College and validated by Bucks New University. Developmental activity took place from September 2007 to April 2008 and the new FD was validated in June 2008.

The development of this new FD (formerly the HND Performing Arts: Musical Theatre) came about as a result of the reworking of Level 4/5 provision at the College and specifically the replacement of HNDs with FDs. The three HND courses previously offered all required reworking to take into consideration changes both in educational practice and in the evolving employment world. The development of a specific FD in Musical Theatre stemmed from Musical Theatre's position as the strongest area of recruitment in the School. The School's Level 6 provision was simultaneously redeveloped as a BA (Hons) Musical Theatre, forming a natural progression route from the FD.

The wider refocusing of the School's Performing Arts provision stemmed from a need to address falling numbers on some courses. In the case of Musical Theatre in particular, this was from the need to develop a more vocational training ground for hopeful future performers. Extensive consultation across the industry took place to ensure that the new programme would meet this criterion. The philosophy behind the new course development was to deliver relevant industry-focused training in a practical vocational area that would allow students to enter the profession (opportunities permitting) at the end of their studies, while at the same time allowing them to develop sufficient academic knowledge and skill to progress to Honours degree study should they so desire.

Progress South Central's funding of this FD development (and also of the new FD in Acting for New Media, developed in parallel) followed discussions between the LLN and Amersham and Wycombe College and a subsequent invitation to the College to submit a project proposal. The deal was brokered by Progress South Central's Development Manager (Creative Industries) who was proactively engaging with the College's HE Coordinator; here, as in the other two case studies in this paper, the role of a dedicated LLN resource was pivotal in bringing people together.

The rationale for Progress South Central's decision to fund this curriculum development was a desire to support employer engagement and the reworking of curriculum based on employer needs. The provision of funding was an opportunity to ensure that the subsequent development would avoid simply rebranding the HND as a FD without thorough refocusing and employer consultation.

The move to FD provision in itself reflected recognition of the need for increased focus on employer requirements. Employability was noted by the QAA (2004) as a key aspect in FD programmes. This new course addressed HEFCE priorities in terms of programmes designed or delivered in conjunction with employers and in terms of having work placement or work simulation opportunities as an intrinsic part of the course. The development of the programme was informed by contributions from a large number of industry professionals, although there are issues within the performing arts industry with regard to willingness to comment on specific aspects of courses. Additionally, owing to the audition-based nature of the work, major employers in the industry will not be drawn on what they seek from a performer. However, major union bodies and employers consulted during development commented that experience was the major factor in hiring a young performer and noted that they were impressed by the quality of the performance opportunities available to students on the new FD.

The standards expressed within QAA (2007) closely informed the programme's development. At the same time, there was recognition that in this creative field, academic standards alone often do not reflect employer expectations of a graduate. Because of this, the project team endeavoured where possible to find out employers' expectations in terms of skills and experience so that appropriate experience could be incorporated into the FD. A specific example was the inclusion of the opportunity for students on the programme to work with live musicians in a longer run of a show – something not directly linked to QAA expectations, but intrinsic to the success of graduates in the modern workplace.

Seventeen industry professionals made contributions that informed the development of the FD. Represented were, among others, the Independent Theatre Commission, the National Film and Television School, Equity, the Society of London Theatre and the Theatrical Management Association, as well as several notable individuals in the musical theatre world. Initial ideas of employers to approach were collated through the project manager's own industry contacts, with subsequent suggestions from both the staff team and other professionals once the research was underway. Approaches were usually made as an initial email request followed up with phone conversations and face-to-face interviews.

One challenge for the project team centred around the whole question of a new qualification in an area that relies on an audition system that is by definition hugely competitive. Several companies questioned the rationale for their being involved in the project on the grounds that there are already more than enough sufficiently skilled performers to meet their needs and that 'we don't need to help make more'. However, this viewpoint is called into question by a report recently published by Creative & Cultural Skills (2010), which claims that the performing arts sector is facing both skills shortages and skills gaps.

A bigger challenge in developing and validating the course was employers being prepared to speak 'on the record'. Many industry professionals were wary of committing themselves directly to recommendations made about courses for fear of endorsement. However, the organisations in question, once happy their views would not be quoted in public, were very interested in being involved in the course content and aims and the team encountered a wide range of support for and interest in the course.

With regard to successfully engaging employers in the performing arts industry, it is felt that guaranteeing discretion is the most effective way to open channels of communication and ensure buy-in. Some companies and individuals are passionate about training and developing the next generation, but are wary of conversations being turned into quotes on brochures or endorsements for courses. Having a course writer with an in-depth understanding of the industry helped to open more doors, as there is a tendency for employers to expect a college or university lecturer who has no experience of the 'real world' and this can adversely affect the tone of the subsequent meeting. The system adopted by the project manager of sending a one-page outline to a contact prior to meeting also proved very successful, as it provided a focus and helped give clear direction to the subsequent meeting.

Twenty five students enrolled as part of the new FD's first cohort in 2008-09, all of whom progressed to their second year in 2009-10 with two additional students transferring internally onto the course from other courses at Amersham and Wycombe College. Around five of the cohort were internal progressions from within the College from, for example, the Level 3 National Diploma in Performing Arts, while the majority of the cohort entered the FD from outside the College. The BA (Hons) Musical Theatre is the expected progression route for those students who wish to progress further, although the BA is also expected to attract external applicants.

Case study 2: BSc Animal Biology and Conservation

A BSc (Hons) in Animal Biology and Conservation was developed and delivered by Oxford Brookes University. This project aimed to develop a specialist progression route for students completing Level 4/5 provision in animal management subjects that would include content on the latest legislative protocols in conservation practices. It also undertook to engage with employers to research career prospects and to raise awareness of the Honours year programme. The programme has, at the time of writing, been successfully validated and marketing of the new provision is underway.

Top-up awards provide a bridge between a student's previous study of a FD or equivalent and an honours degree. The existence of a recognised progression pathway to a full degree award was one of the conditions attached to the recognition and validation of a Foundation degree (QAA, 2004).

The development of this Honours top-up was based on the recognition by Oxford Brookes University of the need for a specialist top-up route for the FD in Animal Behaviour and Welfare offered by one of their associate colleges, Abingdon and Witney College, and one that would be more attractive to students than the existing BSc (Hons) Biology. Research into the existing relevant BSc provision in the region suggested that the creation of a top-up route in Animal Biology and Conservation should offer a distinct top-up year for students interested in applying their knowledge and practical skills to wildlife conservation. The new provision would also respond to the increasing recent emphasis on monitoring and managing faunal biodiversity, through legislation, including the Habitat and Species Directive. The new top-up route was also intended, in conjunction with the FD in Animal Behaviour and Welfare, to address the skills gap of people qualified to handle endangered species.

Much of the 'legwork' in terms of brokering discussions and progressing the project was undertaken by Progress South Central's HE/FE Liaison Officer based at Oxford Brookes University. The role of the Liaison Officer has been critical in progressing development ideas and shows the advantage of having a dedicated resource 'on the ground'.

The project team at Oxford Brookes identified their existing employer contacts and were also able to make use of Abingdon and Witney College's contacts. Telephone interviews were undertaken with employers to identify desired potential subject areas for the top-up year. The project manager first explained to the interviewee the units undertaken in the FD, before asking employers which subject areas they would regard as useful to incorporate in the top-up year. She also enquired as to how often employees handled animals as part of their daily duties and analysed job descriptions within the sector. It had been hoped that an open day for employers might be organised in order to have a round table discussion about course content but this was not feasible within the timeframe of the project.

Telephone interviews with employers in the wildlife conservation sector revealed concerns that the pool of individuals with the skills and knowledge required to work as professional conservationists has diminished in recent years, particularly due to a reduction in field skills. This has been identified as a problem by non-governmental organisations such as Conservation Trusts, the RSPB, Defra, the Environment Agency, the British Ecological Society and the private sector including wildlife parks. Many organisations have lobbied funding and educational bodies on the importance of fieldwork and evidence has been submitted to the House of Commons Select Committee on Science Technology.

The interviews also revealed generally low levels of understanding of FD among employers and a tendency to want to employ BSc students with volunteer experience, or even Masters students, rather than FD students. However, the project team were able to suggest that students taking the FD followed by a top-up to BSc had the potential to be better prepared for work than students coming straight from a three year BSc, as this route would involve professional experience that 'regular' BSc students have traditionally had to gain through voluntary work. The two features of this route that were most liked by employers were the inclusion of training in survey and licensing skills and the inclusion of a large molecular component. A clear market was identified for students with knowledge and experience in animal care and handling within wildlife conservation.

Additionally, interviews were held with the course leader and some students on the FDSc Animal Behaviour and Welfare at Abingdon & Witney College, and with staff at Solihull College regarding the progression interests of students on Solihull's HND in Animal Management.

Some potential for future review of FD content was identified during the course of developing the top-up Honours year, particularly around statistical analysis for research projects.

The mapping of the modules of the FD in Animal Behaviour and Welfare was straightforward. An attempt to map other FD was less accurate as it was done from module names and course descriptions on institutions' websites. Most of the FDs considered could access the third (i.e. top-up) year of the BSc with some prescription on which 'advanced' modules would need to be taken to get the best result on the 'Honours' modules.

In terms of recommendations, the following can be identified:

- The timescale for programme development meant that the project development funding period was over the summer, which resulted in the project manager being unable to contract a student with a specialist research interest to carry out a survey of employers. This might have allowed the project to have a wider scope in terms of the number of employers surveyed.

- The project manager felt that using a survey form might have been more efficient and systematic both in terms of the number of employers who could have been approached and in terms of (in theory) obtaining comparable information from each employer. However, this needs to be balanced against the advantages of the less structured approach in terms of being able to tailor questions to particular employers.

- The project team felt that a forum meeting of employers with a round table discussion would have been ideal, although this proved impractical to organise within the timeframe of the project.

The new BSc went through the validation process in November 2009 and its first year of delivery will be the academic year 2010-11. So far, six applications have been received from FD students studying at Abingdon and Witney College.

Case study 3: New award for NHS staff bands 2, 3 and 4

New curriculum was developed and validated to form part of a new academic award pathway for mental health support workers within Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust. The curriculum was developed by the Trust in collaboration with Thames Valley University (TVU) and was funded by Progress South Central.

An Introductory Award at Level 2[22], a Certificate at Level 2 and a Diploma at Level 3 were developed and accredited with OCN Credit4Learning. The provision for Bands 2 and 3 support workers, comprising the Introductory Award for new starters at these bands (to be undertaken following their NHS Corporate Induction) and the Level 2 Certificate, has just been launched at the time of writing. The award for the Band 4 role is still in development but is likely to be a FD with the option of a further year to convert to a full degree.

The resulting accredited award will allow achievement of the required competences for support workers at Bands 2, 3 and 4 based on four identified themes. The aim is for the new award to be offered to all support workers and to provide career progression within the Trust. This provision forms part of an innovative tailor-made programme, the Aspire programme (A support worker programme instilling values, realising potential, embedding good practice).

The impetus for the new award stemmed from a concern within the Trust that the existing NVQs were not meeting the learning needs of its mental health workers. Research carried out by the Trust revealed that there was no clear career pathway enabling progression through the bands, and also revealed a limited number of Band 4 support workers. Existing 'off the shelf' packages, such as the NVQ in Health and Social Care, were viewed as not meeting the requirements of the Trust and staff. Specific problems included a lack of mental health content, a lack of assessors and the requirement to demonstrate evidence of competence without incorporating sufficient learning. There was also a need for provision to incorporate some learning of key skills and knowledge at the start of employment, in order to embed good practice and to incorporate work-based learning to ensure that skills and knowledge learnt could be put into practice.

The objectives of the new provision were to deliver key learning at the beginning of employment, to include a work-based learning element and to be a flexible award, with the overarching objective of enabling support workers to be competent and confident in their roles.

The new curriculum was developed and written by the Trust in partnership with Thames Valley University, and the award was aimed at mental health support workers on NHS Bands 2, 3 and 4. The new award was intended to be an employer-led bespoke package to be offered to all support workers that would allow achievement of the required competences for Bands 2, 3 and 4 and would provide career progression within the Trust.

The earlier part of this project was funded by Skills for Health, the Sector Skills Council for the UK health sector. Progress South Central then signed an agreement with the Trust to fund the development, writing and validation of the necessary new curriculum. A meeting at an event between the Trust's Project Lead and the LLN's then-Health and Social Care representative led to follow-up contact by Progress South Central's Development Manager (Health and Social Care), who progressed and managed Progress South Central's involvement in the project. There was some helpful liaison with West London Lifelong Learning Network, who sat on a steering group during the Skills for Health-funded stage of the project (TVU is a partner institution of West London LLN).

An added impetus for involvement in this project was the opportunity of engaging with Thames Valley University, which is not formally part of Progress South Central's partnership of institutions but nonetheless does serve the needs of students in the LLN's area. The opportunity to work with TVU on provision that would benefit local work-based learners was welcomed.

In addition to funding the writing of the curriculum, Progress South Central also funded a follow-on project to develop workbooks to meet the required learning outcomes of the Introductory Award Level 2.

This provision was an employer-led bespoke package. Unlike the provision discussed in case studies 1 and 2, it was designed specifically for those in the workplace. The innovative approach taken by Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust attracted Skills for Health funding in the first instance and the Trust has been made a Skills for Health Demonstration Site.

During the development of the award pathway, workforce data was analysed and interviews and focus groups held with Trust staff. These revealed a wide variation in the scope of support worker roles and associated levels of responsibility. Tasks and duties of the roles at each band were mapped against the National Occupational Standards and job descriptions produced. The subsequent writing of the curriculum was undertaken by TVU with input from staff within the Trust. Some of the learning in the Aspire programme will be delivered externally but the programme is also making use of expertise from within the Trust, with the development of a 'bank' of internal trainers to deliver the programme.

The development of this new provision stemmed directly from an employer-identified gap. Clear and targeted benefits were apparent. The project presented the opportunity to develop a workforce development strategy for support workers within the Trust. This included the creation of clear and consistent job descriptions which define the bands more clearly, ensuring all staff are working within their band and also enabling performance criteria to be set. Progression routes for bands 2, 3 and 4 have been identified and supported by the development of this award, giving the Trust clear direction for future workforce development for this group of staff. The benefits for the

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[22] Reference to QCF levels 1-8

Trust of the award pathway for support workers will include the improvement in standards and in recruitment and retention that should result from the provision of targeted training and education from the start of employment.

The project team identified a number of key lessons learnt. The presence of a dedicated project lead had ensured sustained momentum. There was a need to continually review the project group membership and to bring in extra members when required. Bringing in as many stakeholders as possible and using their expertise had worked well but had proved hard work. In future there would be a need to accept that people would be variably more or less committed depending on their other work pressures. The project lead noted that the presence of an executive sponsor on the Steering Group would have made it easier to drive through the proposed changes.

Two general lessons were learnt regarding partnership working: one being the need to understand partners' reasons for being involved in the project and their expectations and to ensure they are involved in all steps of the project, and a second being the need to build in realistic timescales given the tendency for things to take longer than expected.

One challenge moving forward is around identifying a sustainable source of funding to support learners on the Aspire programme longer-term.

The pilot of the Introductory Award and the Level 2 Certificate has just been launched at the time of writing and the intention is to have 15 Trust staff enrolled on each. Robust evaluation of the award is planned to measure the impact and return on investment.

Potential for the Aspire programme being 'sold' to other NHS Trusts may be investigated once the Berkshire pilot is complete and a cohort of staff have successfully completed the programme. Initial presentations to the other mental health Trusts within the NHS South Central region have been received positively.

Setting this project in the wider context of bespoke provision for learners in the workplace, this type of provision is likely to become increasingly relevant, particularly given the proposals set out during 2009 in *Higher Ambitions* and *Skills for Growth* (see section 2.1). BIS (2009c: 98) notes that many older students, who might in principle be well disposed to tackling a HE-level programme, require flexible learning provision to fit in around their personal and work commitments. Targets for participation in further learning, especially HE, by the existing adult workforce are likely to be heavily reliant on the existence of provision of this type.

Conclusions

Progress South Central's approach to funding curriculum development has been both proactive and reactive as the need has arisen. FDs were recognised early on as potential progression routes for vocational students and were widely promoted by fdf (formerly Foundation Degree Forward). At the start of Progress South Central's funding period, there was growing support for FDs as a qualification and evident interest among Progress South Central's partner colleges in developing them. Opportunities for development funding were welcomed by the LLN's partners and FDs were

subsequently identified as a priority for bids in Progress South Central's first round of development funding (First Steps Fund Phase 1) in early 2008. Two years on, the expectation is that those partners who are interested in FDs are familiar with what they are and have the in-house expertise to develop them effectively.

Funding from the LLN for Honours top-ups built on the initial focus on FDs – students on FDs in the region needed appropriate progression routes to Honours degrees. Although the existence of a progression pathway to a full degree award was a condition attached to the recognition and validation of a FD (QAA, 2004), it was not clear 'on the ground' that this had always been thought through in terms of ensuring that those progression routes available were appropriate for FD graduates.

The LLN's recent increased focusing on bespoke CPD for work-based learners is consonant with the emerging agenda for higher level skills for those in the workplace. It is also a response to the current economic recession given the emphasis on upskilling and on part-time and mature learners. There were clear local drivers in the Health and Social Care sector and particularly in local NHS Trusts, and Progress South Central were fortunate in having enthusiastic and committed partners keen to collaborate on projects. The LLN's second round of First Steps Fund funding in 2009 identified as a priority for bids the development of accessible progression opportunities and routes through models, programmes and packages of HE-level CPD. The role of Progress South Central's Development Manager (Health and Social Care) has been critical in brokering collaboration and for ensuring that momentum is sustained.

Although HEFCE (2010) reports that a number of LLNs have connected all curriculum development to additional student numbers (ASNs), Progress South Central has not done this, partly because, as one of the youngest LLNs, Progress South Central suffered from the cap on ASNs imposed by HEFCE for 2009-10 and 2010-11. However, Progress South Central had already diversified into types of provision not dependent on institutional numbers. One beneficial outcome has been to focus curriculum development funding on provision for learners in the workplace, a target group in terms of the acknowledged need for upskilling of the adult workforce. Given the brake on publicly-funded expansion in HE signalled by *Higher Ambitions*, and the suggestion that the future financial burden will have to be shared by employers, this evolving approach to curriculum development by the LLN represents a refocusing in line with national drivers.

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Lifelong Learning Networks
NATIONAL FORUM

c/o
Higher York
York St John University
Lord Mayors Walk
York
YO31 7EX

Tel: 01904 876350
Email: contactus@lifelonglearningnetworks.org.uk
Website: www.lifelonglearningnetworks.org.uk

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