

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 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 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 (or 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 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 conference¹ 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 'Understanding Progression: Enhancing Collaboration', presentation at LSRN National Conference, London 11 December 2009

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 foundered 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, 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 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 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.

References

Aimhigher Merseyside (2008) *Aimhigher – Vocational Choices: Research Update* Liverpool

Connor H, Sinclair E and Banerji N (2006) *Progressing to Higher Education: vocational qualifications and admissions* Ormskirk: Action on Access.

Daly A and Thomas L (2008) 'Young people's educational identities and the process of decision making' Paper presented at Aimhigher Research Network (North West) Symposium, Edge Hill, March 6 2008.

HEFCE website (2010) (online). Available from <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/lln/>. (Accessed 11 May 2010).

Kemmis S (1988) Action research in Keeves J P (Ed) *Educational Research, Methodology and Measurement. An international handbook* Oxford: Pergamon.

Kemmis S and McTaggart R (Eds) (1998) *The Action Research Reader, Third edition*
Victoria:Deakin University Press

Leitch S (2006) *Prosperity for all in the global economy: world class skills* London:HMSO

Qualifications and Credit Framework website (2010) (online). Available from
<http://www.qcda.gov.uk/qualifications/60.aspx>. (Accessed 11 May 2010).

Seldon S, Waring R and Thomas K. *Continuing Professional Development for Level 3 Vocational Tutors: changing perceptions about Higher Education Teaching in Lifelong Learning* 2 (1) 69-71

Smith M K (2007) 'Action research', *the encyclopedia of informal education*. Available from
www.infed.org/research/b-actres.htm. (Accessed 11 May 2010).

Thomas K, Haslam W, Waring R and Trachy V (2008) *Level 3 and Beyond? Choice, Influence and Transferability in Level 3 Vocational Learning* Bristol:WVLLN