

**CWLLN Research Project
'The Learner Voice'**

**A qualitative study of vocational learners in Higher Education
in Coventry and Warwickshire**

April 2010

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Introduction

This report presents the findings of three complementary research approaches used to explore attitudes to and experiences of Higher Education in Level 4 learners from a vocational background in Coventry and Warwickshire. The research built on previous research carried out on behalf of CWLLN with vocational learners at Level 3, and the analysis of data relating to vocational learner progression and retention. Learners who did not progress to Level 4 were included in the survey, as well as continuing learners and those who progressed but withdrew from their higher level programmes of study.

The purpose of the research was to support the development of strategies to increase the progression of vocational learners to Level 4 provision and to ensure that they have the best possible opportunity to achieve success within Higher Education.

This Report

In this report, the summary conclusions of the 'Learner Voice' project are presented at the beginning of the document. These are followed by the presentation of methodology and sampling for the overall project. The analysis and discussion of findings from all three research approaches are presented within their themes.

The report concludes with recommendations arising from the research project as a whole.

Summary conclusions

Managing the transition to Higher Education

- Vocational learners struggle at times to manage the transition to Higher Education, particularly within the university sector. This is predominantly so for the many students who have not progressed directly from Level 3, but have had a significant break from education
- Those who have progressed directly from Level 3 courses are often unprepared for the sudden absence of close support from tutors and the unanticipated need to work completely independently
- There is some evidence of a 'culture clash' between part time, work-based and younger, full time students at Level 4. In particular, tensions may arise during collaborative and groupwork tasks
- Vocational Learners of all ages commonly live in a family home, either parental or their own family home, rather than in student accommodation. This factor may contribute to isolation on campus

Support needs at Level 4

- Many of the respondents were unfamiliar with exams, particularly in their first year of Level 4 study, and felt that they would benefit from more guidance on exam technique. In this respect, 'A' Levels were perceived to be a better preparation for Level 4 than vocational entry qualifications
- A significant proportion of respondents struggled to understand tutor requirements of written work and may benefit from further guidance in academic writing
- Although academic writing support is widely available, some respondents were not accessing it because they associated the provision with specific learning disabilities such as dyslexia
- Mathematics support does not seem to have suffered the same stigma as writing support
- Many of the students felt that they were already over-committed in terms of time, and were reluctant to seek out extra support after classes, and so were not accessing student support facilities at their institutions – some of which were not available outside 'normal' working hours
- It would seem that attempts to equip students with required academic skills through extra units were viewed by some as additional and excessive tasks, irrelevant to their subject
- A number of students would have welcomed pre-enrolment access to study support

Motivation for entering Higher Education

- The majority of respondents had entered Level 4 courses in order to improve their career prospects, but had found fulfilment in learning itself which sustained them through their studies
- Obtaining a Level 4 qualification was a statutory requirement for employment for a number of respondents

Choosing a course at Level 4

- Proximity was a key consideration for our respondents when selecting a learning provider
- Most respondents had carried out extensive research, commonly online, when selecting their Level 4 course of study
- Vocational learners at Level 4 generally remain within their Level 3 vocational areas and follow planned routes to employment and further study
- The input of employers was a major factor in the choice of course

Positive features of studying at Level 4

- Despite facing challenges of time management, the opportunity to apply skills and knowledge acquired through study within the workplace was extremely positive for work-based learners
- Mentoring support from employers was in some cases excellent and a major contributor to students' success
- On the whole, course content was felt to be relevant to the workplace. This was a highly positive factor for part-time, work based learners
- It appears that our learners have often inspired other family members to enter Higher Education. We saw parents inspired by their children to study, as well as siblings, partners and offspring
- Respondents felt clear about their career paths and, despite the economic downturn, were almost unanimously confident about their future prospects

Common difficulties faced by vocational learners

- At Level 4, the common difficulties faced by vocational learners cross academic sectors and are not specific to individual subject areas
- The volume of work required at Level 4 was identified as a key concern by respondents. Overwhelming workload was a common cause for student withdrawal and was widely regarded as the worst aspect of student life across the respondent groups
- The research indicates that vocational learners frequently encounter problems with time management - often having to make compromises between academic work, employment, family commitments and social life
- The tendency in some courses to set simultaneous coursework deadlines exacerbates the time management problems of many learners
- Not surprisingly, money was far more of a negative issue for full-time students than it was for those who were working and studying at the same time.
- There is some evidence that information relating to the availability of student financial support, grants and bursaries is not reaching all learners

Withdrawal

- Withdrawn and continuing learners seemed to have more in common with each other than differences between them in relation to past experience of education, motivation and

aspiration

- However, withdrawn learners were significantly more likely to report that their Level 3 course of study was inadequate preparation for Level 4
- Withdrawal from one course was usually seen as only a temporary setback due to unavoidable circumstances, and the majority of withdrawn students were considering a return to education or had already re-enrolled in a Level 4 course

Methodology

Three complementary research approaches were used:

1. Online Survey

In 2008, 208 Level 3 vocational learners from CWLLN's partner institutions took part in a survey of their media habits and preferences. CWLLN's four key subject sector areas:

1. Health, Social Care and Early Years
2. Construction
3. Engineering
4. Cultural and Creative Industries

were represented in the sample. As part of this research, students were asked about their attitudes to Higher Education and their progression plans. The majority of these respondents gave their consent to take part in follow up research. An online survey of these participants was carried out to compare their planned and actual destinations and their subsequent experience of education and the workplace.

This follow-up survey allowed the tracking of the development of students' aspirations, the influences upon them and their progress through the education system and in the workplace. Key issues explored were:

- Take-up of activities planned in 2008
- Effectiveness of Level 3 course in preparing participants for the workplace and/or higher level study
- Plans for future higher level study
- Key influencers post Level 3
- Initial experiences of work and/or Level 4 study
- Impact of the economic downturn

An online survey was used in view of the fact that the majority of respondents expressed a preference for further contact to be made via email. In addition, this original cohort was now geographically dispersed.

Participation was incentivised with a £10 High Street voucher.

2. Depth interviews

30 depth interviews were carried out with current Level 4 learners from vocational backgrounds studying at CWLLN partner institutions within their key subject sectors (see above).

Depth interviews represent an effective and informative route to obtaining and understanding complex, individual experiences.

Interviews were carried out face-to-face at respondents' place of study or, where preferred, by telephone.

Although largely respondent-led, a depth interview guide was used in order to ensure coverage of topics such as:

- Triggers to progression to Level 4 learning opportunities
- Preparation for HE
- Experience of HE
- Support for study
- Factors impacting on academic success
- Employer involvement
- Impact of the economic downturn
- Vocational ambitions
- Learner identity
- Learner confidence

3. Telephone interviews with withdrawn learners

The survey was carried out through the use of telephone interviews. This method was most suitable for learners who no longer attend a central location and avoided any burden of travel and attendance on respondents. Key areas of exploration included:

- Factors in decision to withdraw from course of study
- Motivation for undertaking past course of study
- Support received from former institution of study
- Experience of Higher Education
- Current occupation
- Impact of the economic downturn
- Plans for future / return to study

The sample

1. Online survey

The sample was drawn from learners who had taken part in a previous survey of vocational learners' media habits and preferences by CWLLN in 2008. Over 150 participants had indicated their willingness to be re-contacted at a later date concerning their destinations at the end of their Level 3 courses and had provided their contact details including email addresses and telephone numbers.

23 responses were received (giving a response rate of 15%). Our response rate, although average for an online survey, may have been negatively affected by the time between our original and follow-up survey during a period of transition for our student cohort; there was a high incidence of expired contact details. One response, from a respondent who was neither studying nor in employment, was incomplete.

The respondents comprised 7 full time Level 4 students; 6 former Level 3 learners who had left education and were in employment and 8 respondents who were studying part-time at the same time as working. Two respondents were seeking work having left education but were at the time of the survey neither working nor studying.

All respondents indicated that their ethnicity was White British.

Seventeen respondents were in the age range 18 - 21; five 22 - 30 and one 31-39.

It is interesting to note that with one exception all respondents had remained within their Level 3 vocational areas.

2. Depth Interviews

Respondents were sampled from the cohort of Coventry and Warwickshire Lifelong Learning Network students identified as Additional Student Numbers by CWLLN Partners in 2007-08 and 2008-09 who were entering their second or third year of higher level study in academic year 2009/10.

A full analysis of the Coventry and Warwickshire Lifelong Learning Network cohort of students 2007-08 and 2008-09, prepared by Indie Samara, CWLLN Project Officer, including comparison with the national LLN cohort is included in the appendix.

Quota methods of sampling were used to ensure that the achieved sample contained representation from all subject sector areas, and a range of study modes, ages, gender and ethnicity. The sample contained a relatively high proportion of learners from Coventry University in order to ensure adequate representation of subject sectors.

The students in the sample group were from a wide variety of backgrounds, ranging in age from late teens to mid sixties. Not surprisingly, they had had a very disparate experience of life in general and of education at Level 3 in particular.

The CWLLN partner institutions provided respondent contact details along with information relating to their course title, age, any learning difficulty or disability and ethnic background. Respondents' addresses were also requested in order for them to receive the incentive of a £10 High Street voucher. All information was managed within the guidelines of the Data Protection Agency.

Informant co-operation was generally good. The research was widely perceived as beneficial to the development of learning provision and the desire to make their views heard sustained respondents through the research process.

3. Telephone interviews with withdrawn learners

The sample was drawn from the cohort of Coventry and Warwickshire Lifelong Learning Network students identified as Additional Student Numbers by CWLLN Partners in 2007-08 and 2008-09 who had withdrawn from their Level 4 courses of study without completing their target qualification.

The sample was determined by the data relating to identified CWLLN learners. In total, 20 learners were indicated as having withdrawn status within this overall cohort. A number of these withdrawn learners were not contactable as their details were no longer current. In total, 11 respondents were interviewed.

Eight of the sample group were mature learners who had withdrawn from teacher training programmes; consequently, the majority of the group had studied to Degree level or beyond or had achieved teaching qualifications such as CELTA. The other courses represented were Games Design related and Sports Science. It should be noted that the sample of students therefore was drawn from three programme areas.

Findings

The findings were broadly consistent across the three research methods and for ease of presentation are analysed and discussed within their themes.

Previous experience of Level 3 study

A significant number of respondents had returned to study after a long period of employment, a number of whom had completed 'A' Level qualifications at school:

I did 'A' levels and then went to work and then went back to education again.

[Female, Mature, Teaching Diploma. P/T]

Some respondents had attempted 'A' levels before changing to vocational university entry routes which they felt were easier and more directly related to their areas of interest:

I did attempt a year at 'A' levels but I failed that and was told to do a BTEC because you could still go to university with that.

[Female, Engineering. F/T]

I did 'A' levels in Art, it was kind of hard so I said, "This is not interesting for me" so I went into more software and design. I did that for the first year and then I left it to concentrate on my Graphic design.

[Female, Cultural and Creative Industries. F/T]

A very large number of the returning learners had had no contact with education at all since leaving school. For some however, there had been specific training provided by the organisations to which they had belonged:

The last formal education I had was in about 1993/94 I was in the Airforce and I got selected for an additional training course which was full time for about 14 months. It was Aeronautical Engineering based, but nothing since then.

[Male, Mature, Engineering P/T]

I had secondary school education, then nothing after that; I've done bits and bobs to do with work like health and safety courses; various police courses but nothing in Further Education.

[Male, Mature, Construction P/T]

The sample included a number of teachers studying on the Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning sector. These respondents had had a wide diversity of life experiences before undertaking the DTLLS, ranging from entirely practical skills- based, to the highly academic:

I just came straight from the carpentry into part time teaching. I did my basic Numeracy and Literacy at Level 2.

[Male, Mature, Teaching Diploma P/T]

When I left school I did an Engineering apprenticeship. Then I did an HNC in Engineering before doing a Degree at Warwick. That was '83 to '85.

[Male, Mature, Teaching Diploma. P/T]

The vocational route, rather than 'A' levels

The respondents had varied and in some cases very practical reasons for choosing the vocational courses they had studied at Level 3 rather than enrolling on 'A' Levels. For some, reasons included a general perception that 'A' Levels were an unattractive option with negative associations of school.

Many of the students had chosen their vocational courses because they believed that their specific work-related needs would be met by specialist courses; 'A' Levels were considered to be too general:

I needed to get technical skills.

[Female, Mature, Engineering. F/T]

There isn't an 'A' level as such.

[Female, Mature, Construction. P/T]

For some respondents, 'A' Levels were considered to be a more academically challenging option than vocational qualifications:

I think 'A' levels are harder - I have done both. I got the equivalent of 3B's in my BTEC but I don't think I would have been able to get 3 Bs at 'A Level. I wanted another route to university and that was the only way I was going to get in.

[Female, Engineering. F/T]

Some of the students felt that vocational qualifications, while not necessarily easier than 'A' Levels, were delivered in a way which was more appropriate to the way they learned:

It was probably better for me because I'm more of a lateral thinker. I don't do well in exams at school, I get all stressed out and 'A' levels are all exams.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

When I first came in this country I didn't really know English that much. When I started in my secondary school I was put straight in for exams so it was hard for me.

[Female, Cultural and Creative Industries. F/T]

Some of the students had calculated that vocational qualifications were a more efficient use of their time and energy and a better route for them into University:

I wanted to go to university but I like having money so I wanted to do something that would get me a job as well. My Dad is a builder so I knew I could do Civil Engineering.

[Female, Construction. F/T]

I chose to do BTEC because you can go straight on to a Diploma rather than do a Foundation year. To do Art and Design you have to have at least three 'A' Levels in Art and Design and they don't let you do that at most colleges or sixth forms so rather than do that I did a BTEC. It gives you the equivalent of four 'A' Levels.

[Male, Cultural and Creative Industries. F/T]

Many of the students had spent a long time outside education and felt that 'A' Levels were not an appropriate path for them:

I did okay at school, came out with five 'O' levels which I wasn't expecting. I was told I couldn't do 'A' Level - I could have. But I was on an apprenticeship three weeks after leaving school. Went to college, achieved my apprenticeship, many years then of working and children and then I hit thirty, and wanted to expand my horizons.

[Male, Mature, Engineering. F/T]

It was easier. I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do. I knew I wanted to work with children but I wasn't quite sure what sort. So for me the more sensible option was to get my Diploma, get into working as a nursery nurse and see what I wanted to do from there. Whereas if I'd done my 'A' levels it would have taken a lot longer. So I just went for the shorter, easier option really.

[Female, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

Many of the students were directly encouraged by their employers to embark on vocational courses:

I'd always worked in accounts, so banking and credit control, that sort of thing. Then I got interested in Aerobics and did a course to be an instructor. Then a job came up to be a full time operations manager at a local gym. The manager there had forgotten to send anyone on college courses and when I came in he said "Please go on one or I'll be in trouble with head office" so I did and it all snowballed from there.

[Female, Mature, Teaching Diploma. P/T]

It was an opportunity put forward by my current employers, and the fact that they would give me the time to do it, one day a week, that's why I decided to go and do it. My background is as an

electrician, that's what I trained to do when I left school. Then I progressed through and it's nice to have some Construction discipline under your belt really.

[Male, Mature, Construction. P/T]

For some of these working students, vocational qualifications were a closer, more useful fit to their working life than 'A' Levels would have been:

It's more related to what I do at work.

[Male, Mature, Construction. P/T]

It is more related to what I was doing. So it is not very difficult for me to understand because it is what I was doing anyway.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

Motivation for entering Level 4 course

The most common reason for continuing their studies to Level 4 was as a prerequisite of a specific job role, or as means of progression within a current career. For others, a Level 4 qualification had been a long-term, personal goal.

Some respondents had long intended to continue their studies into Higher Education but had simply not been ready to do so in the past:

It was something I had always wanted to do and I thought, "I'm not getting any younger." I used to have the attitude that "I can't be bothered" but as you get older you mature, don't you?"

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

For others, progression to Higher Education was simply part of their identity:

I always knew I wanted to go into a Degree, it was expected of me but nobody pushed me into going, I knew I wanted to go. I couldn't imagine myself without a Degree, I wanted to be educated, and I always wanted to go into Higher Education, ever since I was younger.

[Female, Construction. F/T]

For a number of respondents, a vocational qualification was a statutory requirement for entry into their chosen profession:

I got bored with being on the bench for twenty years and wanted a change but didn't want to get away completely from the field I was in. so teaching seemed like quite a good route. And you see some of the skills dying out and I wanted to pass them on. It's a government requirement now, to teach. So I had to do it just from that.

[Male, Mature, Teaching Diploma. P/T]

I left school many, many years ago and I ended up doing fostering. I was more of an administration person. The children were getting older and also the government's made it so that you have to do a qualification to do fostering. And I wanted to get a good job at the end of it.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

Many of the students were already working in the area in which they wanted to be, and felt that obtaining a qualification was the right way to progress in their careers:

Having worked with people as a support worker I just thought that I wanted to go further rather than just working at a low level for ever.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

I wanted to go into management. You can't really get a good job unless you have an education behind you.

[Male, Mature, Leadership and Management. P/T]

Reasons given by our online respondents for not continuing in education included a wish to start work, financial concerns, family commitments, and the offer of a job in the chosen profession. For one respondent, external training was limited to senior staff:

Have to be a manager to do course.

[Female, Level 3 Course: Health, Social Care and Early Years. PT]

Choosing an institution

None of our learners stated that they had made decisions about which institution to attend based on academic reputation or league table position. They had rather selected on practical considerations such as proximity to home, courses on offer, and what their employer wanted them to do.

A great number of the responses illustrated the point that geographical proximity is a major consideration for this group when choosing a course, particularly though not exclusively, for those students who were parents or who were working as well as studying:

I live locally and having children it is very handy for me. This year the classes are all finished by 1:00. So that gives you the chance to pick up the children.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

I live just outside Warwick so I was still living at home at the time and I was working from home so it made no sense trying to find somewhere further afield, more expense and everything else, it was location really.

[Male, Mature, Engineering. P/T]

For some of the respondents, the institution they were attending was not the only choice they considered. Significantly, these learners encountered barriers to entry from some Universities as vocational, rather than 'A' Level learners:

When I was filling in my UCAS form I did half Aerospace and half Civil because I'd always wanted to do Engineering and then I thought that if I did planes then it would just be planes whereas if I did Civil Engineering it could be everything from buildings to roads to bridges, anything and I thought "I won't just be stuck in one job." I live in Birmingham and I did want to move out. I did find that some of the other universities because it's BTEC didn't really want to take me on. I had a choice between Liverpool and ____ and when I went to Liverpool it was raining!

[Female, Construction. F/T]

I had five choices and ____ was one of them. I applied to all of them and ____ was the one which took me on. I applied to ____ and I was told I had a good chance of getting in but then they turned me down and when I wrote and asked why they said it was because I hadn't got any 'A' levels. So I took my life experience and all of that and came to ____.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

A major factor in the choice of institution for the group was the input of their employers:
Work suggested it. I looked into it and then agreed with them that it would be a good route for me to go down. Work chose it for me; I didn't really have much say in that.

[Male, Mature, Leadership and Management. P/T]

The company said they would send me on courses when I joined and this is the most closely related. The company has used the University before and knew they were good.

[Male, Mature, Construction. P/T]

My manager had done it and a few other people at my work who were quite high up. They even had the same tutor from ten years ago as it turned out! It's the local college.

[Female, Mature, Leadership and Management. P/T]

Recommendation by acquaintances influenced the choice of institution for some:

It was recommended to me by a friend who was actually one of the teachers on the course. And I wanted to try for myself what blended learning was like. I had got to the point where working all day and studying at night was getting too much.

[Female, Mature, Teaching Diploma. P/T]

I had known a few people who had done courses at the University, and I got the impression from them that it was a well structured course and that the tutors knew what they were doing. The fact that it was distance learning was quite appealing as well. I could have done it in house, but I wasn't getting positive feedback about doing it in house.

[Female, Mature, Teaching Diploma. P/T]

Institutions were at times selected because they offered a particular specialism or a particular pathway:

I went to ____ with the intention of going on for my full Degree there but unfortunately it wasn't accredited so that's what made me shift camps to this University. The HND was never the goal, this was always the goal [BEng] the HND was just something they gave you along the way.

[Male, Mature, Engineering. P/T]

It was the only one I stumbled across. I knew the University done a part time course I live in Northampton so I have to travel into the City anyway and Northampton didn't do a part-time Engineering course and this Uni did. That was the only course I thought was available.

[Male, Mature, Engineering. P/T]

Sources of advice and information

Although one student gave the joking response:

"I just sort of blundered into it really!"

[Male mature Engineering P/T]

the sample group had broadly made informed choices based on careful consideration and a wide knowledge of the options available to them.

Most of the respondents had researched online when seeking information about available courses:

I knew that if I got a Foundation Degree I'd get more of a wide range of what I wanted to be; you've got more options with it really. Researching really on the internet and seeing who is offering the courses and where is closest to home because I'm having to take time out of work - obviously I'm not getting paid for that.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

Straight after my PDP I went online and started looking. I didn't have the grades at GCSE but I managed to get the tutor's email and he said he would see me and it went from there because I was already working on a business basis so I took the last place.

[Male, Mature, Leadership and Management. P/T]

I looked online to see what was around and then it was a case of go to the college and speak to the manager and it just went from there.

[Female, Mature, Leadership and Management. P/T]

Some respondents had taken the advice of their employer:

It was recommended from my employer.

[Male, Mature, Leadership and Management. P/T]

One respondent had sought advice from Connexions:

I went to Connexions. When I failed my 'A' levels I was in a bit of a state, and they said to do the BTEC so I just kept the connection with them.

[Female, Engineering. F/T]

Course tutors played a role in advising some of the sample group, particularly if this involved continuing progression routes within the institution:

They asked the people on that course if they wanted to do a HNC course - they had all the information we needed to do it at college.

[Female, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

Our tutor at the time said they were introducing it as a course the next year.

[Female, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

Some students made direct approaches to their local university to see what was available:

I just went straight to the university and I did a bit of research into what the course entailed. I contacted them initially and they sent me info through the post and I was taking the steps towards the goal.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

Parental influence was still a strong factor with the younger respondents:

My tutor was very good. But I looked myself and sat down with my parents.

[Male, Construction. P/T]

The college didn't do a lot for the people who wanted to go to university; they did a little bit but not a lot 'cos most people didn't want to go. I've been back there and they seem to be pushing people more to go to uni. My Dad pushed me into it as well.

[Female, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

Level 3 course as preparation for Level 4

Some of the students felt that they were well prepared by their Level 3 courses for the rigours of Level 4, particularly when they stayed with their institution.

However, a significant number of learners did not feel that their Level 3 course had been a good preparation for their Level 4 course, particularly in relation to independent learning:

I didn't really know what to expect because the teaching style I had at school was different to what I had in the Airforce. And then uni is different again so I didn't know what to expect and how to go about it. A lot of the study is put on me and lecturers putting on lectures then me having to do the reading. I expected it to be just a higher standard of delivery, whereas that is not the case.

[Male, Mature, Engineering. P/T]

It was completely different. I left it for a while before going from Level 3 to Level 4 so... but no I found it completely different the way we reference it and the way we write it. It was a lot different from Level 3. I just thought that was normal. It's more like researching your own things from journals and so on. Whereas at Level 3 it was more taught to us and we put it down. Whereas now it's more: research it and find it out and write it down.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

NVQ is so different. At NVQ you have an assessor. She gives you the question and they come along and observe the work that you do. You don't really get assignments. You do Witness Testimonies, Personal Statements, they observe the work that you do.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

Lack of preparation at Level 3 for higher level study was cited as a factor in withdrawal by some respondents:

When I went into the HND it was a lot more intense. At BTEC we did "Body in Action" at HND it was "Anatomy and Physiology".

[Female, Cultural and Creative Industries. F/T]

Exams were a key problem for students whose vocational Level 3 courses were all coursework assessed:

I wasn't prepared at all. When I moved in I was in [student] halls; I had never lived with girls before because I don't have sisters, which was different it took some adapting. Just living and having freedom, in terms of that I was prepared, but in terms of the work, I was a bit argh! In BTEC it's all coursework so I had to get back in the habit of doing exams and I had to do a couple of resits at the end of that year, because I hadn't done exams for 2 years!

[Female, Construction. F/T]

There were, according to the respondents, significant gaps in their knowledge left by their vocational Level 3 courses, and unexpected extra elements to Level 4 which had not been covered at Level 3:

When I went to Uni I found that a lot of the Maths I had not done, because I hadn't done 'A' level Maths.

[Female, Engineering. F/T]

It could have been more. There wasn't a lot of information about all the extra things you have to do. There wasn't a lot about PDP or Advantage courses or anything like that. I thought it would just solidly be Graphic Design.

[Male, Cultural and Creative Industries. F/T]

However, Level 3 study could also be highly relevant to Level 4 study:

It got me back into the swing of doing assignments and many projects; we had a good number of projects that spanned a few months. When you jump into the Foundation Degree they are similar, obviously at a higher level.

[Female, Mature, Cultural and Creative Industries. F/T]

My course was definitely a good preparation; it was at the same institution.

[Female, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

Several of the students had found that the weaknesses in some areas of their Level 3 studies were balanced by a good foundation in other areas:

More Maths would have helped. But Electronic knowledge was good.

[Male, Engineering. P/T]

The BTEC was good; I knew things like CAD whereas people who did 'A' Levels didn't. The 'A' Level people did Physics whereas I struggle with Physics. But my Maths is okay, so I am about on par with them. When it came to Mechanics I found it hard.

[Female, Mature, Engineering. F/T]

Improved preparation for learners

As we have seen above, some respondents felt that they had been as well prepared for the entry in to Level 4 learning as they could be. However, for many, a firmer grounding in the key skills of writing, mathematics, exam technique and time management would have significantly helped them to make the transition. Some of the group worried that there might have been important information given to other students which they had missed.

Despite failing to access the support available in writing skills, many of the students said that they could have been better prepared if they had been shown how to write in an academic style:

If I'd have done it at 'A' level it would have been better; because I'd never done essays so I was chucked straight in at the deep end.

[Female, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

I think it would have been better if we had had some teaching on the essay style and the new way of writing because although we had about two lessons on how to do it, it wasn't really enough to feel confident about it.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

To be taught properly how to write a friggin' assignment for a start!

[Female, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

A number of respondents said that they could have been better prepared for the Mathematics components of their subjects:

I would just try to be a bit more focussed and keep me "Maths brain" on because there is a lot of Maths involved.

[Male, Construction. P/T]

I spent nearly two years doing coursework and I was okay with that one so it was the Maths that I needed to bridge the gap on.

[Male, Mature, Engineering. P/T]

Preparation on exam technique might have been beneficial in the view of some respondents, while others felt that some guidance on time management might have been useful:

Yes definitely, maybe an exam here or there, just so I could learn to handle the pressure a bit better. I think it depends on the college you go to.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

Not really, it's just one of those things that you have to pick up for yourself. Perhaps if they had something on managing your workload. Someone to sit down with to say "Right, you've got this much work so this might be how you manage this workload."

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

Some respondents felt that they might have missed out on information which other students had been given, and that they had been marginalised as a result:

Maybe some more information on what the course was going to be like would have been good I think for older students. I'm probably one of the older guys in the group there is 5 or 6 around my age.

[Male, Mature, Engineering. P/T]

I never attended, due to work again, the very first open day. They may have set out an elaborate "What you are in for" and I missed it.

[Male, Mature, Engineering. P/T]

A disadvantage was that I never did an Access course. I didn't do 'A' level. I hadn't done anything academic since I left school. We had to do a research module and I heard people say "We did all this on the Access course" some of the terminology they are used to because of Access or 'A' levels they've been on.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

Level 3 as preparation for employment

There was a mixed response from our online respondents to the effectiveness of their Level 3 studies as preparation for current employment:

I didn't learn enough about the industry itself, but gained a lot of confidence and understanding of scripts.

[Female, Level 3 Course: Cultural and Creative Industries. F/T]

You found out a little bit more doing the qualification, but not much different to Level 2; it was repeated ground. I'd got a lot of experiences so it didn't really teach me anything more - they are chucking Level 2s out of the window in a year or so, so you had to have it.

[Female, Level 3 Course: Health, Social Care and Early Years. P/T]

Worries about coping

Responses to the question “Were you worried about coping before you went on to Level 4?” were varied in this very diverse group. Additionally, those who had felt confident in their ability to cope often found that the work was harder than they had expected. Conversely, some of those who had been very worried were sometimes surprised at the ease with which they adapted to their new courses.

For many the prospect of studying at higher level was daunting. The experience of this respondent is not uncommon:

Yes, I was very worried about coping. I hadn't done any formal learning since school.

[Male, Mature, Leadership and Management. P/T]

However, a number of learners had been quite confident before enrolling about meeting the demands of higher study:

I think I'm the type of person who, if I set myself a goal, I'll do it. I didn't necessarily think too much on the workload; I knew it was going to be difficult but I thought it would be doable.

[Male, Mature, Engineering. P/T]

I knew I could cope.

[Female, Engineering. F/T]

Some of the group felt that they had actually overestimated how difficult higher level study would be:

I was a bit worried at first, but then I realised it was actually a bit easier than 'A' levels.

[Female, Mature, Cultural and Creative Industries. F/T]

I was a bit scared with this HNC but I thought “Just get on with it.” Last year I really enjoyed it.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

Initial confidence could be replaced by despondency when the pressures of academic life became clear, particularly for those who were working and studying at the same time:

I wasn't worried initially, but obviously having to come home from work and have to start working on assignments can be hard going sometimes.

[Female, Mature, Teaching Diploma. P/T]

Language issues were a source of worry for some of the respondents for whom English was a second language or who had specific learning disabilities such as dyslexia:

I was worrying because of my English, it's not that good.

[Female, Cultural and Creative Industries. F/T]

Very worried. I'm dyslexic myself so I was very worried that I might not be able to achieve it.
[Female, Engineering. F/T]

A significant area of general anxiety for some of the older respondents was rejoining the world of education which they had not been part of for a long time:

It was a bit confusing for someone who has been out of education for a long time. I bumbled through it okay I think.

[Male, Mature, Engineering. P/T]

I wasn't the most academic of people at school so it has been a bit of an effort getting into that sort of thing again.

[Male, Mature, Construction. P/T]

Managing the workload

Not surprisingly, students facing additional pressures of full time work and parental responsibility reported significant challenges in managing their workload (see section: *Greatest challenges*, below).

However, in our cohort of current learners, the additional pressures of obligations to employers and providing for families could be seen as a motivator to overcoming the challenges they faced.

Consistent concerns from part-time learners were around combining full time and part time students in the same classes (see section: *Greatest challenges*, below):

We are mixed in with the full-timers and I don't think any consideration is given to the amount of time we actually have. We have exactly the same deadlines as the full-time students. My coursework equals to 30 hours a week and I have to do a full-time job as well and it can seem a little bit impossible at times.

[Male, Mature, Engineering. P/T]

Some respondents were able to make the transition to study at Level 4 with relative ease:

I was a bit scared at the beginning, but I started to read more books and I was fine.

[Female, Mature, Leadership and Management. P/T]

It was difficult for the first couple of months but now I've just got used to it and it has become second nature.

[Female, Engineering. F/T]

Parents of grown-up children were more likely to find they had sufficient time for study at Level 4:

It's so much easier without the kids or I would have done it years ago. Here is a lot easier to get to because it's central and as well the hours are much better. The latest I'm here is four o'clock. I've chosen to do it full time because I don't think I could have managed working and the kids and studying, it would have been too much.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

Issues around the management of workload are explored further in section: *Greatest Challenges*, below.

Financial concerns

Respondents who were working and studying generally reported feeling free from worry about money at the start of their courses. Those whose grants and loans had been paid promptly were similarly confident about their finances. However, a number of full-time learners had faced complications over their grant applications which had caused acute anxiety.

Some concern had been perhaps unnecessarily raised for some respondents due to lack of knowledge over the payment of fees and grants at the outset of their courses:

I wasn't too sure about how I was going to pay for it. It wasn't very easily found out about; how to pay for it.

[Male, Construction. P/T]

It's been a nightmare going from part time to full time. I'd been unemployed for a while so my National Insurance number was all screwed up. I've had so many meetings but I'm still waiting for some of my loan to come through and it's the end of the first term.

[Male, Mature, Construction. F/T]

When I first started the HND I had no idea that I was entitled to all these grants and loans so it came as a complete shock. This year it's been a complete nightmare because it has progressed from student loans local authority to student loans England and Wales and I still haven't had my money through. No matter how many times you ring them up "Ring back in a couple of weeks".

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

Here there's some bursary available but you can't apply for it until you have the other bits through so paying for childcare is really difficult.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

Money worries did not seem to have been a factor for respondents whose loans had been processed before they began their courses:

No I just relied on my loan, I didn't really go round spending it, I'm quite sensible with my money and the student halls were quite cheap at the time.

[Female, Engineering. F/T]

I worried a little bit but I was lucky enough to get a scholarship. I applied to every grant and every bursary and every scholarship so I was quite lucky with that. It was through the university.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

I applied for a loan, so I wasn't really worried about that.

[Male, Engineering. F/T]

Repaying student loans did not seem to be a key concern for our learners:

You've just got to worry about paying it all back in a few years. I'll let you know on that one!

[Male, Engineering. F/T]

Many of the working and studying respondents were having their fees paid for by their employer, and were not feeling worried about money:

I had to wait a couple of days to find out if the company would pay for it but after that I haven't been worried about money.

[Male, Mature, Leadership and Management. P/T]

My work actually pay for me so I don't have to worry about that, just buying my own books.

[Female, Mature, Leadership and Management. P/T]

I haven't worried about money at all. I've been employed all the way through - if I wasn't working it just wouldn't have been an option.

[Male, Mature, Engineering. P/T]

Those students who were giving up a wage to study were worried about a drop in income:

I was really worried about losing my income. My husband had to work extra hours to make it up but we thought that it would be worth it in the end.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

We have to apply for the student grant. I found it very hard coming down from a decent wage in industry. But money can't buy time, and with my children growing up I wanted to spend some time with them.

[Male, Mature, Teaching Diploma. P/T]

For this respondent a return to study meant a big drop in income and a need to make significant sacrifices:

We got a retention bonus of £500 which paid for a holiday. But to do what I'm doing now I've had to convert my mortgage to interest only, I've had to take two years out. We have to start paying again next year. It will be a big hit in summer. The golden hello is wonderful. Being a demand subject, you get £4000, obviously before tax.

[Male, Mature, Teaching Diploma. P/T]

For those learners in receipt of loans and grants it was common to supplement them with other income:

Every student faces the same problems. I had a part time job which helped in the first year. It's just one of those things.

[Female, Engineering. F/T]

My husband got promoted to manager and that helped. And now I would say that with the loan and whatever we are coping okay.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

A key point made by learners was the need to research and apply for any grant or loan available, but to make sure that details written on forms were correct:

Just really research it. Check out all the information before you jump in. You can find out the best way of doing it. I found out that it was better to do it part time than to do it full time and come out of it owing a load of money.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. P/T]

Do it early and talk to someone else about it to make sure you've got your forms done properly because it can really delay things.

[Male, Construction. F/T]

Some of the group said they would advise new students to try to save up before they begin their courses:

Try to save up before you go.

[Female, Engineering. F/T]

Put away some money before you get here. I spent £600 in Freshers.

[Male, Engineering. F/T]

I'd say save up while you are still in industry. If someone's going to give you a grant, don't stand on your pride. Don't be shy; accept any help and advice people offer you.

[Male, Mature, Teaching Diploma. P/T]

Several respondents felt that new students might survive better financially through careful budgeting:

Have a budget so you know what you have to spend and make sure you include everything; things like clothes because you will need them. And always have a backup. A tenner put by.

[Female, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

You get money in once for three months but you must try to spread it. If you've got time you could even do a part time job. Just be within your budget.

[Male, Engineering. F/T]

Greatest challenges

Respondents commonly reported that, although the individual tasks they were required to do were within their abilities, many assignments were commonly set at once, and this caused a great deal of difficulty:

It's really hard this year. There is a lot of work and it all has to be done at the same time. All our projects are like seven months long but they are all running at the same time. It would be easier if it was start one, finish one, start one, finish one.

[Female, Cultural and Creative Industries. F/T]

There's no staggering it, they tend to throw everything at you all at one time.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

Just conquering the coursework. Not the subject matter, that's something you can cope with. It's just the sheer volume. Last year everything fell on everyone's laps all at once. There were nine pieces of coursework in two weeks. You want it spread out throughout the year as much as you can.

[Male, Mature, Engineering. P/T]

Lack of knowledge in the core skill of Mathematics was cited by many of the students as the single biggest challenge they had faced:

I went to my first structures module which is highly intense Maths. So I turned up at my first Maths lesson thrown in at the deep end having to do a whole load of calculations.

[Male, Construction. P/T]

Mechanics is my biggest difficulty, which is the Maths side of it.

[Female, Engineering. F/T]

Written English skills were a serious issue for some of the students, whether understanding English in general for speakers of other first languages, or understanding the requirements of academic assignments for those unfamiliar with academic style:

The first assignment, It was "Organisational Behaviour". English is not my first language and not Business English so it was quite hard to understand it and to write about it.

[Female, Mature, Leadership and Management. P/T]

Two challenges really: one is knuckling down to it; you get easily distracted: the other is academic writing which I've never done before, and that's quite hard. I can waffle on for hours, you know, but getting it "reflective" and "analytical" and all that sort of thing...

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

Learning to do the research and the writing, because it is a very different way of writing at Level 3. Whereas in Level 3 it was all "I believe blah blah blah..." it's more what other people believe and writing it in the third person, that's been the hardest bit really.

[Female, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

Unfortunately, it would seem that attempts to equip students with required academic skills through extra units were viewed by some as additional and excessive tasks, irrelevant to their subject:

The Advantage modules are an additional pile of work that you have to do to pass the year and they are not always relevant. The workload's the main challenge and I suppose it is all to do with time management. The problem is that at university you have different tutors for the different modules and they don't know how much work you've got because they only see their own module. And at BTEC you've got one tutor so they can see everything you are doing.

[Male, Mature, Construction. F/T]

Incorporating study into general life was an extremely common problem, highlighting, that for a large number of our vocational learners, other aspects of their lives competed for their attention with their studies:

Childcare. That has been the biggest problem for me. My children are thirteen and eleven and child minders generally don't look after children who are at secondary school. I don't think I can leave them together because they argue. College [Level 3] was terrible because the travel was an hour and a half each way.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

It's got to be coping with single motherhood, college, and work and everything. It's hard.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

As a family man with three children, I do find it very difficult fitting it all in.
[Male, Mature, Teaching Diploma. P/T]

For me I like more of a structured lesson because that is how my brain works, I sometimes struggle to think outside of the box. That is something I need to try and do, it just doesn't come naturally to me. I don't know, it is tricky; I have had a tricky time recently, I have just gone through a marriage break-up, and I have a daughter to look after. It is a struggle but I manage to cope.
[Male, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

Many of the part-time respondents said that working while studying was difficult to manage, and that no concessions are made for students with busy lives outside education:

It's a lot easier now I'm full time; I've got all the time in the world for it. Doing a forty hour week and then having University work on top of it I got to the stage where I just couldn't be bothered. It wasn't the work itself it was finding the time and the motivation to do it.
[Female, Mature, Engineering. F/T]

It's the time. The amount of time it eats into your life. My boss asked if I was enjoying the course and I said "I am, but how would you like to lose twelve hours of your time every week? So you know that when you get home from work you've got three or four hours more work."
[Female, Mature, Teaching Diploma. P/T]

Some of the part time students felt that there was a clash of cultures between them and the full-timers which was detrimental to their own studies:

It's a nightmare, I think part-timers should be with part-timers; we seem to want to get it done and it isn't just my group. The full-timers are on a different timescale to us, because they are young, they can sit up till 2 in the morning, I can't! They don't have a sense of urgency and 9 times out of 10 you will find the part-timers tend to do the most work. Even though it's groupwork and you can only do your sections, you need the other bits to submit the piece, so you find yourself doing 2 other people's work.
[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. P/T]

I'm having a problem with group coursework at the moment because it doesn't impact on their life. If they go through the whole course with just a pass then that's ok for them, whereas I have the goal of trying to get onto the Degree course. I'm finding out of this piece of coursework the others really couldn't care less and I find that quite difficult. The one with the most time doesn't care.
[Male, Mature, Engineering. P/T]

I don't think they're against you - they will try and help. It comes down to personal commitments, and some have less than others. That isn't the Uni's fault. I think if part-timers were given different timescales, things would run a lot smoother. I think it's the ladies that really suffer especially if they have families.
[Female, Mature, Engineering. P/T]

For some students, the biggest challenge had been overcoming the culture shock of arriving in a strange environment:

Just getting back into the classroom having worked for a few years and thinking “I’ve finished with education”. Now I feel like I’ve been put back.

[Male, Mature, Leadership and Management. P/T]

Not knowing what to do. Our tutors were there if you wanted them, but they wanted you to get on with it on your own.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

A large number of the respondents felt that the worst thing about studying at Level 4 was the loss of their social life through time pressures. This was a complaint both for full time students and for those studying and working alike:

The time it takes from your life. I’ve just had my first assignments and I’ve spent three or four weeks just working on that one assignment and not going out. I’ve been so stressed I haven’t been sleeping so that’s probably the worst thing I would say.

[Female, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

Overcoming challenges

Although many of the respondents felt that the transition to studying at Level 4 had taken place naturally, others felt that they had survived through putting in extra time and effort. Tutors and mentors were felt to have played a key role in the overcoming of challenges.

Many of the group were not sure how they had adapted to the rigours of Level 4 study, but felt that it had been a natural process for them:

I don’t know. It’s mind over matter. You just sort of learn to cope.

[Male, Mature, Leadership and Management. P/T]

Just to try to keep on top of it. Try to start things straight away rather than just leave them to the last minute. If I’ve got a spare moment I tend to have a look at it.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

You just sort of plough on. You sink or swim. I’ve just been lucky really, I’ve just mumbled my way through.

[Male, Mature, Engineering. F/T]

Some of the students said that they had overcome the challenges of academic life through sheer hard work:

Very, very late and early mornings trying to meet deadlines, assessments and things; having 2 children and a full-time job, it’s manic at the moment. I’m a bit of a perfectionist so everything has to be right. That’s my own fault, but I am not there just to pass, I want merits, because that’s just the type of person I am. I also want to go onto the Degree course so I have that extra bit of added pressure.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

Instead of going straight home from school I go to the library for a couple of hours. And I get a couple of hours when the kids have gone to bed.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

I do spend a lot of time, my own time, maybe two nights during the week plus one day over the weekend coping with the workload.

[Female, Mature, Engineering. F/T]

The most important sources of assistance cited by many of the group were the more approachable module tutors:

I think I bugged my lecturers a bit more in the 2nd year. Some are very, very helpful, some are less helpful and expect you to do it all yourself. It's a mix really.

[Female, Cultural and Creative Industries. F/T]

There's a few of us approached our tutor and showed her how much work we've got on and that helped. You can go in and explain and they do understand.

[Female, Engineering. F/T]

At work, mentors were able to give some of our vocational learners the help that they needed:

They are very good; it is in their interest to make sure I'm doing ok. It was partly their idea to do it as well, it's a matter of muckling through the best I can.

[Male, Mature, Leadership and Management. P/T]

I discussed things with my mentor. Gradually get a picture of what I'm supposed to be doing and battle through it really. It has been a challenge but it is very rewarding as well.

[Male, Mature, Construction. P/T]

Support services accessed

In general, our vocational learners showed a reluctance to obtain help with written work which they did not feel when accessing support with Maths. This seems to be because help with written work is perceived as something a "normal" student should not need, while lack of skill with Maths carried no stigma. Time is also a key issue restricting uptake of additional support for part-time learners:

There seems to be some perception that support services are not geared towards students in general but more towards those who need additional support because of specific needs:

We got a questionnaire when we started but I was always good at English so I've never been to get extra help.

[Male, Mature, Engineering. P/T]

I haven't accessed any help with my writing. I have a few friends who are Dyslexic and they have got extra help but I haven't.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

I have a bit of support with my Dyslexia; I have someone who will read through things with me.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

You can get some help on projects from the teacher but in university you have to be independent. My Dyslexic friend gets help with assignments.

[Female, Cultural and Creative Industries. F/T]

Maths support does not seem to carry any negative associations with the respondents from this group, who seem to take as a matter of course that extra numeracy skills might be needed when studying some modules:

No to be honest, there is a Maths support centre because there are a couple of bits I did miss out, which was quite good, because the people are really willing to help you. I think even a lot of people who did 'A' Level Maths went to the Maths support centre.

[Male, Construction. P/T]

The catch-up was easy; there was a Maths class and I went to the Maths centre. They've got one at the University. They eased you into it. There have been times when it was stressful but I think every student finds it like that.

[Female, Engineering. F/T]

There were issues for some of the group around Maths support in terms of what was made available and when. Some students would have welcomed pre-enrolment access to support:

I went to the Maths support side of things having been out of education for a long time and unfortunately in the real world, you don't need everything they taught you at school. When we went back I thought I'd need a few Maths sessions. It did help although you don't have access to the support until you have enrolled on the module.

[Female, Mature, Engineering. F/T]

Some of the students felt that visiting the support centres might mean taking on an extra burden on their time which they could avoid by calling on teaching staff for advice:

I've never been there; it's a time thing for me. I'm not fully aware of the things which are available. The lecturers, a good core of them, are very understanding and will make notes available and you can email them with questions so that's brilliant really.

[Male, Mature, Construction. P/T]

I haven't [accessed support] which is probably my downfall. The thing is after the class I'm on the motorway and I'm on the way back. If I lived nearby probably I would stay behind. When I did my placement in February I contacted my tutor several times and she was always very helpful.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

Support from employers

Respondents who were working full-time and studying part-time gave a range of responses when asked "Do you receive support from your employer", with payment of fees and flexibility over time to study being the issues most commonly raised. In some cases, employers who had relevant experience were able to give learners very valuable academic support.

A small number of learners felt that they had not received any support from their employers:

No support whatsoever.

[Male, Mature, Engineering. P/T]

Before the recession...

[Female, Mature, Leadership and Management. P/T]

A number felt ambiguous about the level of support they had received from their employers, with the main issue being flexibility over time to study:

You can't do your study in work time, but they do let me stay here after work and I can use the equipment and they fund my course.

[Female, Mature, Leadership and Management. P/T]

They are supportive in places; they gave me time to do my assignments during work hours which was pretty good of them.

[Female, Mature, Teaching Diploma. P/T]

They encouraged it but they didn't pay for it. I'm paying for it myself. At my PDP and my one to one they sort of encouraged it. I am allowed to leave fifteen minutes early but I have to make the time up.

[Female, Mature, Leadership and Management. P/T]

Unfortunately they don't give me any time off work at all. They pay for it but they said "You are on your own" Mainly because of the role I'm in at work. I'm in the control room, and it's shift based work, so if I had the day off they'd have to pay someone to cover my shift. Paying for it is the easy part, especially for a £250 million company. So I would say "No" they are not supportive. I've got a lecture on Tuesday morning next week. But I've got to miss it; I'm working and that's just tough. But I chose it and they said from the beginning "It's on your own back" so I can't complain.

[Male, Mature, Engineering. P/T]

Some learners felt that they were receiving a good level of support from their employers. Respondents felt particularly appreciative of employers who paid for the courses and who were flexible over time to study:

I approached work and they said they would pay for it. I wouldn't be able to do it otherwise.

[Male, Mature, Leadership and Management. P/T]

I get a three hours a week allowance. It's very good. They allow you to go and study on this course. That's in your timetable. We finish on the course days at two thirty and they don't timetable you any hours so you don't have to rush; they are very good like that.

[Male, Mature, Teaching Diploma. P/T]

Some employers seem to be exemplary in the support they give to staff who engaged in study, particularly where they themselves are on courses:

They are paying for the course and I'm really pleased because I couldn't have paid for it myself. It's an evening course so they don't have to give me time off. My mentor at work has just finished her Foundation and she's gone on to her BA honours believe it or not, so she's helping me out a lot. Sometimes you just need someone to say that you are doing things right because it gives you a lot more confidence. They are very supportive, they always give me days off when I need it; days off for exams and preparation; they are very supportive really. They read through my essays as much as they can, they sit down with me and go through my essay preparation. They are very good. Both my managers have just been through it so they know what it feels like and they are very understanding.

[Female, Mature, Leadership and Management. P/T]

I get a full time mentor and I can discuss any problems with that. And I've got a good team leader and line manager who look out for me and that.

[Female, Teaching Diploma. P/T]

I get lots of support. I hope they'll keep on supporting me to do a Degree and an MA.

[Male, Mature, Engineering. F/T]

Support from other learners

Around half of the respondents had enrolled with friends or colleagues on their courses of study:

I've only had the friends who came with me from college. Out of the class of ten, only eight came because two gave up. But I only talk to two of them because I don't like the others and I'm too old to talk to people I don't like. One of the ladies I talk to progressed from the evening HND.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

A couple of the girls at work did it a couple of years ago, so they gave me a clue as to how much work was involved and what was going to be necessary.

[Female, Mature, Leadership and Management. P/T]

Interestingly, some of our respondents seem to have given a good enough report of their institution to attract friends who had initially enrolled elsewhere:

My friend went to Leeds, and then she ended up with me on the same course.

[Female, Engineering. F/T]

A friend came to my Uni after starting at Brunel because it was all too theoretical and out of books.

[Female, Engineering. F/T]

The respondents who had not known other people on the course before they enrolled did not report that being isolated from their classmates was always a problem:

Because it was only one day a week I was a bit out of it. It was just go there, do the exams, and shift out at the end of two years. But everyone was great, and was helpful. We all helped each other when we could.

[Male, Mature, Construction. P/T]

Family experience of Higher Education

Take up of Higher Education seems to have been common in the families of those who took part in the research, even where they were first generation participants. Many had siblings or partners who had studied to Level 4. Several respondents had families where parents were following the example of their offspring and attending Level 4 courses:

My brother's just finishing doing a Physical Education Degree in Plymouth. My Mum and Dad just went straight into work.

[Female, Engineering. F/T]

My husband went to university but unfortunately he didn't finish it because of the move to Britain and he got so lazy he's never going to finish it!

[Female, Mature, Leadership and Management. P/T]

Some respondents were surrounded by supportive family members who were currently studying or had previously studied at Level 4:

I come from a family of educated people, my Dad is an engineer, my Mum is in Economics and both my brothers are doctors. It's very Asian.

[Female, Construction F/T]

My sister's doing a Degree in English Language; she's doing it full time. At the moment she's doing child language so I'm helping her, and she's helping me with essay typing and grammar. It's good team work. My boyfriend's just finished and he helps me.

[Female, Mature, Engineering. F/T]

My daughter's just gone to university. She's doing a three year Degree in Dance at Northampton. She's finding the academic side hard too.

[Female, Mature, Teaching Diploma. P/T]

Some parents seem to have followed their children into Higher Education:

My mum's doing a university course now!

[Female, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

My husband, he did a law Degree, and my sister, she did Community Work, Youth Studies. They encourage and motivate me. My sister-in-law as well. They did it many moons ago so I'm trying to catch up. My son's in Liverpool, studying Engineering, my daughter's in Nottingham studying Psychology.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

Several of our learners stated that they were the first ones out of their immediate families to progress to Level 4:

No I'm the only one. We're all Construction workers. A long line of Construction workers.

[Male, Construction. P/T]

When I went to school it was only a handful of people that did Degrees. It seems to be that everybody is doing a Degree now.

[Male, Mature, Leadership and Management. P/T]

Home environment of learners

The majority of our respondents were living in their parental or own family home.

Positive features of studying

Many of the group felt that being given access to academic knowledge at a high level was the most valuable aspect of higher level study, while others enjoyed applying the knowledge gained in the

lecture hall to their jobs. Becoming more employable was important for some, while a more general sense of self improvement was revealed in the statements of others.

All of our full time student online respondents were following their intended path from Level 3 and were satisfied or extremely satisfied with what they were doing. Overall, they felt that they were making progress in their chosen careers through their study:

Feeling like I'm progressing in life and getting closer to achieving my goals.

[Male, Mature, Engineering, FT]

The majority of respondents had entered Level 4 courses in order to improve their career prospects, but had found fulfilment in learning itself which sustained them through their studies:

It's like an opening thing for me because you meet so many people with very different colour cast, very different life and whatever. You see life in a broader way. You become more intelligent. You see the world in a more critical way. The way I used to see things is not the way I see things now.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

For some, the best thing about study at Level 4 was acquiring new practical skills which were relevant at work:

The improvement in my teaching technique, without a doubt. Discussing with other people how they do it and observing them. It's made a huge difference. You just learn so much.

[Male, Mature, Teaching Diploma. P/T]

I just enjoy learning new stuff and being able to apply it.

[Male, Construction. P/T]

For me personally the business acumen. So that when I'm in big meetings I can actually tell what they are talking about. And the Maths side of it too; because I work on contracts, all the "Gross Margin" and that kind of stuff, it's really interesting.

[Female, Mature, Leadership and Management. P/T]

The prospect of getting a good job was the best thing about studying for some respondents:

Just knowing that at the end you will have a qualification that is recognised and that will hopefully get you something better in the future.

[Male, Mature, Engineering. P/T]

It's advanced my knowledge and I've managed to get a better job from it. I think it helped with my interview.

[Male, Mature, Leadership and Management. P/T]

A sense of achievement was for many respondents the best aspect of life as a student at Level 4:

It's certainly raised my game and my self esteem. The fact that I've got this far has given me quite a lot of confidence. I never thought that I would have been the type of person who would have gone to university.

[Male, Mature, Construction. P/T]

Keeping the grey matter going. Coming from the background I was brought up in, council estate, I never thought I would envisage that I would be graduating from Coventry Cathedral...I never envisaged that. And once I got that taste! Well, I wanted to come back.

[Male, Mature, Teaching Diploma. P/T]

One student made the interesting point that a negative response to studying a subject could actually prevent learners from making wrong career choices:

It does show you whether you want to do something. Whether it's right for you. If "Yes this is the right thing for me" or the other way "This isn't really what I want to do."

[Female, Cultural and Creative Industries. F/T]

Reasons for withdrawal

Reasons for withdrawing from Level 4 courses given by the group included inability to cope with the workload and the academic demands of the courses, pressures of ill health, demands of young children, changes at place of work, offers of employment and the simple realisation that the whole thing had been a mistake and that the respondent no longer wanted to pursue the career the course led to.

Some of the respondents found they were unable to meet the intellectual demands of their Level 4 course:

I didn't pass the core units. They just weren't going in my head. I'd say the amount of information and the key words you were supposed to use. Probably my written work wasn't the best. I'd put my hand up and say that. And with the assignments I'd do it right and hand it in on time and then realise I'd left a load of key points out. It was probably me reading it and not understanding it.

[Female, Cultural and Creative Industries. F/T]

I don't think I had any idea how difficult I was going to find the course. I literally wasn't there for long- it was a matter of months. They just gave you some idea of what you were supposed to be doing and then left you to it. When I did the Public service course, it was brilliant, I really got on well with my tutors and there was a lot of work to do but they spread it out better. I think a lot of the others have dropped out since.

[Male, Cultural and Creative Industries. F/T]

Some of the respondents found that the heavy workload at Level 4 proved to be beyond their ability to cope:

At the moment, at Uni, the workload isn't anything like the load at College. At one time we had twelve assignments to hand in on one day! It was too much.

[Female, Cultural and Creative Industries. F/T]

For teachers undergoing teacher training while working at the same time, the burden of paperwork could prove too heavy:

Yes, well, trying to plan lessons and write them up for the course was tricky at times.

[Male, Mature, Teaching Diploma. P/T]

I decided that I didn't want to be a teacher. The bureaucracy! In the end it was the amount of paperwork that I had to face which made me decide not to go on. I wasn't enjoying it. It wasn't the course, I was enjoying the course and I would have liked to have finished the course in some ways.

[Male, Mature, Teaching Diploma. P/T]

The demands of a growing family made continuing difficult for this respondent:

When I started the course my youngest was three and it was just too much. I felt guilty anyway putting him in with the childminder and if I had to work at night and felt bad having to just keep ignoring him. I'd just been taken on with a permanent contract as well.

[Female, Mature, Teaching Diploma. P/T]

For one respondent, a change in teaching assignments at work meant that they could no longer apply what they were learning on their course to what they were teaching in the classroom:

I stopped doing the kind of teaching that you have to do to do the course, it had to be state funded ESOL. If I had been able to stay at _____ College doing my normal hours, it would have been easier.

[Male, Mature, Teaching Diploma. P/T]

This learner felt strongly that he had been encouraged to enrol on a course at Higher Level, despite his concern that he was not ready to do so:

They should have put me on the right course to begin with.

[Male, Cultural and Creative Industries. F/T]

Despite withdrawing from their courses of study, All of the respondents had enjoyed their time as a student, with the social side of learning, the feeling of achieving something worthwhile, the acquisition of practical skills, and the pleasure of learning something new all being cited as favourite aspects of studying at Level 4.

Contact after withdrawal

None of the students had been contacted by their institution after they had withdrawn, although some felt that it had been made clear by staff that returning to the course in the future was an option:

Not that I recall but when I said that I was going to withdraw I sort of said that I might come back and they were very keen that I should do that.

[Female, Mature, Teaching Diploma P/T]

They wrote to my employer and said "She's an exemplary student, we'll be happy to have her back" which smoothed my way.

[Female, Mature, Teaching Diploma. P/T]

Future plans

Our respondents appear to have given careful thought to what they would do when their current studies came to an end. While some were intending to enter employment, perhaps by moving

overseas or working for themselves, by far the greater number were considering continuing their studies if circumstances allowed.

A number of our students were planning to leave education having accomplished everything they needed to for career reasons:

Just continue on with the teaching. I don't really fancy the management route I like working with the learners and passing on the skills.

[Male, Mature, Teaching Diploma. P/T]

I want to work in the field; to tackle the problems from where they are coming from. Not to sit behind a desk. I didn't want to work with children before I started but now my attitude is changing and I want to work with them.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

I won't do another course after this one. I'm fifty now. I want to teach Maths basically. What I'd like to do eventually is to teach Maths to people who want to learn it.

[Male, Mature, Teaching Diploma P/T]

A very large number of the students were considering carrying on with their studies:

I want to be a forensic pathologist but to do that takes a medical Degree after this and a Pathology Degree after that and that's eight years of studying so I have to think long and hard about that.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

I want to do a Masters but I don't know if I can afford it because you can't take out a student loan, and if you take out a loan from the bank it can put you in a lot more debt. You can do Masters anytime you want, so you could work for a year then do one, or even do one part-time. I'm thinking of doing it like that.

[Male, Mature, Leadership and Management. P/T]

I don't think that work will fund a Master's. I'm concerned that if I take a year to decide, I might not get back into it. I think that while you are on a roll, just keep going, and keep up the momentum. I certainly haven't ruled it out. I'm not sure what it would be into. There's lots of people I've spoken to about an MBA and it depends a lot on the institution. I'll possibly consider one of those. I've got to pass first.

[Male, Mature, Engineering. P/T]

If I get promoted there will be extra money for studying so maybe a Masters...

[Male, Mature, Leadership and Management. P/T]

Several of the younger respondents intended to work abroad after their studies:

The plan is to get a job overseas Middle East or whatever.

[Male, Construction. P/T]

I'm thinking I want to travel and go to places where there have been disasters and help to rebuild.

[Female, Mature, Engineering. F/T]

Emigrate to Germany, America or Australia to work in research and development.

[Male, Engineering. P/T]

Just two respondents intended to work for themselves:

I'm going to set up my own Design company. You can either do a placement or a brief. I'm going to set up a live company for ten weeks.

[Female, Cultural and Creative Industries. F/T]

Confidence about career prospects

With the country in recession, and graduate unemployment at a high, it would be reasonable to expect that our learners would have low levels of confidence about the future, and would be anxious about their employment prospects on leaving their courses. In fact, confidence was high within the group as a whole, and even those who were concerned about the job market tended to think that they would find employment eventually.

Most respondents felt that there was a bright future ahead when they finished studying:

I feel quite confident because Social Work is quite wide isn't it? You can use Social Work to do so many things. I'd like to go into teaching young mums. I'd like to go into working with young mums, that's where my heart lies.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

In Civil Engineering there will definitely be a job, it's just when I come out, what my Degree is. If I get a good enough Degree I'll definitely get a job.

[Male, Mature, Construction. F/T]

Very confident really at the minute. I know that's what I want to do and when I've got an aim in mind I've got to achieve it. I'm a bit of a monster like that really. Obviously assuming the government don't pull away the funding because I wouldn't be able to do it.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/T]

However, a small number felt worried about what the future held after their courses finished. Some even seeing education as a useful place to shelter until job market conditions improved:

I'm a bit scared because I don't know whether I'll get a job, I'm not there yet actually. There are graduate placements yet. One thing for your CV is you should have a driving license. I don't have one unfortunately; I want to learn to drive though, even during my third year.

[Female, Engineering. F/T]

The prospects in the Construction industry at the moment they are pretty bleak, and have been for the last year and a bit. If it isn't looking like there will be a career out of it then I will start looking somewhere else. I would get a job in another sector there is talk of new money being invested in the next few months.

[Male, Construction. F/T]

I will stay while things are a bit up and down in the manufacturing market at the moment in the UK. But what is available to me when I finish I have no idea; plus part of the contract of me doing it, I am tied into the contract while I study, if I leave while I am still tied with them then I have to pay the money back, but there has to be an opening there for me, because with what I am doing I will be overqualified for my job. I would look elsewhere if that was the case, but I'm not thinking about that

at the moment. The job market is tough at the moment if I do get a new job it would have to guarantee a decent salary.

[Male, Mature, Engineering. P/T]

All of the respondents felt that their career prospects had been improved by the Level 4 course they had enrolled on:

It was spot on.

[Male, Mature, Engineering. P/T]

Yes, it has made me much more confident. I know I'm not ready yet but I know I will be. You get experience through the work placements and I think it makes you a different person.

[Female, Mature, Health, Social Care and Early Years. F/]

I couldn't have asked work to fund a sociology Degree. This is the closest thing to the environment I work in. It won't get me a job but it might just open the door to an interview. All the jobs I'm interested in a BEng is the standard qualification.

[Male, Mature, Engineering. P/T]

If I was to do it all again I would choose the same way of doing it.

[Female, Engineering. F/T]

Interestingly, most of our withdrawn learner respondents had decided to continue in one form or another in education, with only two of the group deciding to pursue other career options. Those in the teaching profession had, of course, little choice but to achieve teaching qualifications, while those studying Sports had been able to qualify as coaches via specialist courses and felt that this was, in any case, a more useful path than Level 4 study. One interesting group was the HND Games course from which five further withdrawn students were not contactable. These had, according to their parents, gone on to university courses away from the region, just as the one HND Games student who could be contacted had done.

Most of the DTLLS students had already returned to Level 4, or intended to enrol on new courses in order to be able to continue being employed as teachers:

For the foreseeable I'll be staying in teaching. I need to get some better qualifications. I'm alright here but I couldn't get the same thing if I applied for it somewhere else.

[Male, Mature, Teaching Diploma. P/T]

Those who were had been studying Games Design had found other courses in their chosen fields.

Sports students, who had found Level 4 too difficult academically, had instead enrolled on specialist coaching qualifications to pursue their chosen careers:

I passed my sports coaching in the disabled side of things and I enjoy that side. I've been asked to do the Level two in coaching football. I might go, but not yet. I'm just interested in coaching disabled groups. Football and athletics. Other than that I've always been interested in the police.

[Female, Mature, Cultural and Creative Industries. F/T]

One respondent felt that they might be able to get credit for the academic achievements they already had when enrolling on another course:

If I could find somewhere that could let me do the extra 60 credits and could convert it into a Degree.
[Female, Mature, Teaching Diploma. P/T]

Two of the students had decided to leave education:

I have my own business and I've gone into politics; I'm a Councillor now.
[Male, Mature, Teaching Diploma. P/T]

Recommendations

Improve vocational learner preparation for Higher Education

It is evident that many vocational learners are entering Level 4 with little idea of what is required of them in terms of workload, curriculum content and assessment activities. Many learners struggle with the transition from vocational Level 3 courses within the supportive FEC environment to Level 4 provision at University with its focus on independent study and formal examinations. Mature, work-based learners returning to study face similar problems, frequently exacerbated by the demands of employers and family responsibilities. On-course provision to equip learners with essential study skills is too often perceived as an additional burden of work. It is suggested that pre-course preparation for learners could address some of these difficulties, particularly if provided via a delivery method which does not demand attendance by learners. On-line methods of delivering essential skills to vocational learners entering Higher Education should be explored, with a particular emphasis on relevance to their course of study and industry context. Content, where possible, should avoid extensive reading and written tasks which may place additional burdens on learners, but be delivered via a range of media. The majority of vocational learners are highly motivated and would be likely to make use of such provision.

Provide more targeted information about financial support available to vocational learners in Higher Education

Many of the respondents had not been aware of the financial support available to them. Information clearly is not reaching some vocational students. Information could be disseminated to vocational learners on application to courses, and disseminated via Level 3 learning providers and employers.

Promote take-up of support services to vocational learners

Take-up of support services such as guidance in academic writing and study skills was low across much of our vocational student cohort. Barriers to accessing support appeared to relate to a perceived stigma and also practical difficulties of additional attendance. Such support, freely available at partner institutions, would be of particular benefit to vocational learners and part-time learners and could not only enhance their experience of study, but also prevent drop-out.

Open support facilities outside hours

Accessing academic support is difficult for those who have work and family commitments. Opening of student support facilities outside normal hours and at weekends should be considered.

Reduce 'overloading' at certain times in the academic year

It may not be possible to stagger coursework deadlines in the case of many courses. However, where it is possible to do so, any reduction in the number of assignments due at the same time would be keenly appreciated by the students. This may demand coordination across modules.

Separate some activities for full –time and part -time students

Due to the different time pressures on students who work and those who study full time, a degree of separation might be desirable in terms of assignment deadlines and groupwork tasks.

Maintain contact with past learners and offer new opportunities - even to withdrawn students

All of our vocational learner cohorts were considering further study, even those who had previously withdrawn from courses. Completed and withdrawn students offer great potential for re-engagement and in understanding the needs of future learners.