

Transition to Higher Education

Research Project

**Funded By: Life Long Learning Network for Birmingham, The Black
Country and Solihull**

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INTRODUCTION

Far from being a recent emergence, concerns over the lack of participation in higher education (HE) amongst certain groups spans at least four decades. During this time various efforts have been made to address the perceived shortfalls. Despite these efforts however barriers to participation in HE are still seen to have continued persistence (Smith and Boccock, 1999). The aim of the current government is to tackle these concerns by increasing the participation in higher education to 50 percent by the end of the decade (HEFCE, 2003 cited in Greenbank, 2006 p.142).

Recent literature has shown that in order to encourage students to pursue courses in HE, it is important to ensure that the information and advice given to students is appropriate for their particular needs. Rhodes et al (2002) also state that the investigation of students' perceptions of key skills support offered within educational institutions may further assist in ensuring that the support offered to students is appropriate for their specific needs. In particular, study skills has been highlighted as an area that has a significant impact on course success and consequently students' opportunities to enter HE (Rhodes et al, 2002; Macleod, 2003). It is for these reasons that research projects such as the one contained within this report are of high importance, especially at a time when the widening participation agenda is being accorded such importance.

Newman College of Higher Education, Birmingham, has received funding from the Lifelong learning network for Birmingham, The Black Country and Solihull to undertake a study which will explore the issue of transition support and support services that are available to learners progressing from FE to HE. This stage within the educational process constitutes one of three key areas that have been pinpointed by the HEFCE as avenues through which participation in HE can be widened. In particular the research focuses on the transition process for 'unconventional learners' transferring from vocational education to HE. This research corresponds with the government's recent efforts to widen participation in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transition Support for Vocational Learners Entering HE

Introduction

Far from being a recent phenomenon, efforts towards widening participation within higher education have been ongoing for over two decades. As far back as 1963, the Robins Report promoted the expansion of HE (Greenbank, 2006). In 1987, the Dearing Report (1997), commissioned by the government, urged higher education institutions (HEIs) to make definitive steps towards the increase of admissions from non-traditional learners (Smith and Boccock, 1999). The Dearing report strongly emphasised the need for institutions to develop strategies for widening participation and to develop mechanisms by which progress within this area could be monitored (Greenbank, 2006). The government supported these avocations of the Dearing report through its suggestion that HEFCE direct funds towards widening participation projects aimed at addressing low expectations and achievement and at promoting progression into HE (Greenbank, 2006).

After the publication of the Dearing Report there followed a number of policies which effectively shifted the focus from access issues concerning the entry of non 'A'Level students into HE, to the accessibility of HE institutions and widening participation. Consequently the issue of access to HE and the widening of participation has shifted from occupying a rather subordinate position within the Dearing Report to having a more centralised positioning within government plans. 'Fair access' has been pinpointed as a key aim within the 2003 Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) strategy document which covers the period from April 2006 – March 2011 (Jones and Thomas, 2005). This document states that despite the expansion of student numbers, some groups in society are still under-represented in HE. These developments and realisations have cultivated a strong emphasis on making HE accessible to those who would not traditionally consider HE as a viable option (Macdonald and Stratta, 2001).

The aim of the current government is 'to increase participation in higher education to 50 per cent of those aged 18-30 by the end of the decade' (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2003 cited in Greenbank, 2006 p.142). Of particular concern within this area is the need for key skills. Students' competency in key skills has a significant impact on their levels of success and consequently their opportunities to proceed to higher education (HE). According to the widening adult participation LSDA report, there is a need for a better understanding of particular communities and their learning needs in order to supply appropriate provision (Macleod, 2003).

Widening Participation Agenda

The definition of widening participation within the context of HE has altered significantly within the last decade. This shift has been propelled by various national policy documents, particularly those published post 1997. According to Macdonald and Stratta (2001), the aim of widening participation is to make HE more accessible to a new cohort of learners and the recognition of a variety of different avenues into HE. As a result of this movement within England, peripheral groups of learners who were traditionally considered to be non-standard are becoming the norm. This development of alternative qualification routes to enter HE has disturbed the foundational perception of progression as being linear and vertical in nature, which is widely held within HE (Smith and Boccock, 1999).

Increasing the number of individuals who participate in HE has both social and economic benefits. According to the HEFCE 2006 strategic plan, increases in the HE knowledge base will contribute to the enhancement of economic development and in turn, increase the strength and vitality of society at large. This includes ensuring that everyone that is able to benefit from HE has the option to do so regardless of their social and economic background. Of particular concern is the under representation of learners from lower socio-economic groupings in HE (HEFCE, 2006).

Under current government efforts to address the deficit and difficulties of certain groups of students within HE, HEFCE seeks to widen participation through three main strands, these are:

- Increasing the demand for HE and the possible routes of access
- Providing new opportunities for progression from vocational courses and for life long learning
- Ensuring that widening participation is embedded in HEI policies

(HEFCE, 2006)

This research project is particularly concerned with the second strand, focusing specifically on progression routes from vocational education in to higher education. In the 2006 HEFCE strategic plan it was reported that 89 percent of learners with two or more A'Levels progress to HE, compared to only 50 percent of vocational learners at level 3 (HEFCE, 2006).

Responses to continued widening participation efforts can be attributed to one of two models of mass HE. The first of these is referred to by Smith and Boccock (1999), as the minimalist model where increased participation is constrained by a HE system that remains unchanged. In this model control remains largely with HE and any developments are handled in such a way that no fundamental changes are imposed on the HE system. Here, boundaries between the HE and FE sectors are preserved. The second model is of a more radical nature in that the significance of the boundaries between the further education (FE) and HE sector dissipate as the ethos of life long learning gains prominence. The aim here is to widen as opposed to increase

participation and to cultivate a smoother pathway from non-A' level courses to HE. The study conducted by Smith and Boccock (1999), suggests that in the UK the minimalist model remains predominant.

Within their critical assessment of the government white paper, Jones and Thomas identify a further three strands of access policy that effect institutional attitudes towards the widening participation agenda is approached. Firstly, the academic strand sees participation rates to be a direct result of the attitudes of individuals within certain groups. Here the structure and process of the institution are not considered to be determinant factors. The utilitarian approach may, like the academic approach, imply that low aspirations deter potential entrants. Within this perspective potential entrants are also deemed to lack academic qualifications. Within the third approach of transformative participation, the adjustment of HE institutions to meet the needs of learners is advocated. Here the focus is less towards the learner's attitude and academic ability as determinants of participation rates and more towards the HE institution which is responsible for catering for the needs of underrepresented groups (Jones and Thomas, 2005).

This research project is geared towards the promotion of the least of these models that in which the HE institution is held accountable for making adequate provisions for student needs. Such a model breaks the tradition of blaming the applicant, and look towards establishing initiatives and policies through which non-traditional learners can be adequately supported in the transferral and learning process.

Vocational courses and Learners

Alternative routes are designed to attract learners from a wider array of social and educational backgrounds than is achieved with conventional A-Level courses. For the most part, these routes include vocational courses such as; BTECs; OCR Nationals, General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs); national certificates and diplomas and access courses, all of which are conventionally located in FE colleges (Smith and Boccock, 1999).

Vocational qualifications can range from general qualifications where students can develop skills that are applicable to a variety of occupations to more specified qualifications that are geared towards a specific sector. National Vocational Qualifications for instance, demonstrate the skills and knowledge that are needed within specific occupations whilst the General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) provides an introduction to a broader vocational area.

Learners who pursue vocational courses are often referred to as non-traditional learners or unconventional learners because of the differences between vocational courses and other traditional academic courses. Nutt (2005) postulates that demands on non-traditional learners are likely to be higher than those placed on traditional students because they often mature

students who are often required to manage financial, family, work and social responsibilities alongside academic activities (McGillivray and Davies, 2005).

For the purposes of this study, vocational learners are defined as students from work-based training delivered by FE institutions. In particular, the study will focus on those pursuing courses in the key areas of health, care, education and early years.

Barriers to Transferral to Higher Education

Despite the establishment of recent policies to widen participation within HE barriers to participation in HE still continue to persist. Recent evidence clearly suggests that claims that the under representation of certain groups in HE has now been resolved are somewhat debateable (Smith and Bocock, 1999). Over the years various efforts have been made to resolve the under representation of women and ethnic minority groups within HE, with variable results. It is also widely acknowledged that those from poorer backgrounds have a much lower chance of entering into HE (Smith and Bocock, 1999). An LSDA study carried out in 2002 also found that particular groups of individuals who face barriers to progression include: people with learning difficulties and disabilities; older workers; ex-offenders and people who are lacking in English language skills or other basic skills. This study also identified certain structural barriers connected to the delivery of learning provision and support services (Macleod, 2003). A number of authors additionally acknowledge that there still exist significant barriers that hinder the progression of vocational learners transferring from vocational education to HE (Rhodes et al, 2002).

Taylor and Knight report that situational factors can also have a significant effect on the learning experience of the student. These include the distance of the learning institution from the learner's home, the financial support available to the learner and the availability of childcare and time for study (Macleod, 2003). Mowlam, Murphy and Authur (2003) additionally discovered that students' choices were limited by the timing of teaching sessions on FD courses and also by work and family commitments.

Barriers to Vocational Learners

According to Smith and Bocock (1999), 'in general there has been a failure to eradicate the structural problems that hinder progression from FE to HE for many alternatively qualified students. As a result, the boundaries between the two sectors have been eroded in places but they remain substantially intact.' (Smith and Bocock, 1999: 298).

A number of authors including Marks (2000) and Watt and Paterson (2000), propose that among the key challenges to vocational learners wishing to progress to HE are: the lack of pre-entry guidance and prejudice within

admissions requirements (Rhodes et al, 2002). Even after negotiating entry into HE, students with vocational backgrounds may still face challenges in their interrelations with staff members. Staff attitudes towards non-traditional learners in particular, can also be a hindrance to learning, as found in a study conducted by Macdonald and Stratta (2001), where it was discovered that staff were ambivalent about identifying and responding specifically to a group of 'non-standard entry students'. Within this study the responses of tutors indicated that these staff members were generally in favour of maintaining the status quo despite the evolving student intake. Staff did however report a lack of institutional support and provision to enable them to adequately meet the needs of these learners (Macleod and Stratta, 2001).

Explanations for the persistence of such inequalities despite the formulation of widening participation policies, tend to focus on factors that are beyond the confines of HE. It has been said by HEFCE (1996) for instance, that the recruitment of those of the lower socio economic groups is dependant on actions earlier on in the educational process (Smith and Bockock, 1999).

Overcoming Barriers

Within the literature, a central point that has been increasingly stressed is the need for institutional change, resulting in the tailoring of institutional processes and teaching practices to meet student needs (Jones and Thomas, 2005). Work carried out by Tinto (1997) additionally suggests that there is a need to place more emphasis on the change of institutional structures and process in order to adequately cater for the changing student population as opposed to focusing on changing students to increase success rates.

Once students have enrolled on a HE course however, there is still the issue of retention to be considered. Research carried out by Nutt (2005) revealed that students' decisions on whether or not to continue their education when faced with difficulties were strongly influenced by the availability and quality of support (McGillivray and Davies, 2005). Such research suggests that it is important that students are given appropriate support throughout their course that is again sensitive to student needs. In particular, it is thought by Rhodes et al (2002) that key skills advice needs to be more specifically tailored to individuals in order to fulfil student needs more effectively.

In particular the LSDA report (2003) identifies taster courses as highly valuable components of the entry process along with advice and guidance concerning students' educational career paths and their confidence levels. Such courses are thought to be especially valuable because they are able to help individuals to decipher their interests and abilities, enabling them to make informed choices about viable progression routes (Macleod, 2003).

From this brief review of widening participation issues it is clear that whilst this area has attracted increased attention in recent years, it still remains one of much contention. Central to discussions in this area is the plight of non-

traditional learners transferring to HE and how they can be accommodated within a system that is in many ways founded and governed on a highly traditional outlook. Whilst debates on best practice and institutional change continue however, it is important that views and opinions are sought from the learners themselves, who are subject to the system.

METHODOLOGY

PHASE 1

Within phase 1 of the research, questionnaires were compiled and issued to FE and HE students within the target institutions within Birmingham and the Black country. All of the students included in this phase were pursuing or had completed vocational courses within one of the four target areas of study (early years, care, health and education). The aim of this phase was to gather the opinions and experiences of students with regard to the transition process from FE to HE. This research centralised the actual experiences of learners, an element that has been identified as a fundamental component of any attempt to widen participation (Smith and Bocock, 1999).

In order to effectively capture the varying experiences of students, two questionnaires were constructed: one for students within FE and another for HE students. The FE questionnaire was geared towards highlighting the aspirations and expectations of students and the nature of support that was available within their FE institution. The questionnaire for students within HE was geared towards capturing the retrospective views of students concerning their transition from vocational to HE and their experiences of the HE context as students with vocational backgrounds.

In order to ensure that the questionnaires had been appropriately constructed and worded they were first piloted with a group of 11 students at Newman College of Higher Education who were pursuing an early years education studies course. These students were asked to complete the HE questionnaires and also to make comments about its contents where necessary. Based on the students' responses, both HE and FE questionnaires were amended. Finalised questionnaires were then printed and sent out to teaching personnel within seven target HE and FE institutions, who issued the questionnaires to students and also collected completed questionnaires. In the case of one institution, students were provided with pre-paid envelopes which they used to post completed questionnaires back to the researcher directly. This measure was taken because students had already begun work placements at the time in which the questionnaires had been issued and therefore had no opportunity to return completed questionnaires to the course tutor.

Altogether 1200 questionnaires were issued to the various target institutions and 77 were completed and returned, these included 60 FE questionnaires and 17 HE questionnaires.

Analysis

All the quantitative data from the questionnaires was documented on SPSS spreadsheets after which a basic descriptive analysis was performed to ascertain the frequency with which particular response options were selected.

Frequency charts were produced to display this data in a visual format. In the case of the qualitative data, students' responses to each of the questions were placed together in separate charts. Each response was typed into the chart using students' exact words. Each chart also contained information concerning the age of the student, the student's highest or most recently gained qualification and their course of study at the time of the survey. Each of these pertaining to a particular question, was then labelled according to the theme to which the question was related. The collation of all the responses to each question in this way, allowed the researcher to more easily decipher any patterns and inconsistencies within the opinions and experiences of students within a given theme of the research.

General Sample limitations

A key hindrance to the processing of data within this research was the large number of uncompleted questionnaires. In many of the questionnaires, students failed to respond to questions. This means that whilst a certain number of students returned questionnaires, the analysis of the information gathered under the particular themes does not represent the views of all of those individuals. The spread of students was also imbalanced as one or two institutions had significantly higher return rates than the others. In addition, with regards to the gender of participants, there were many more females who took part in the study, than there were males. This however is reflective of the female domination within the academic areas on which the study was focused.

It is possible that these factors may have had some effect on the results gained. It is however true that the responses that were gathered during the course of this study, reflect the views and experiences of learners who have had first hand experience of vocational education and in some cases, have experienced the transition from vocational education to HE.

PHASE 2

Within phase 2, student support personnel at each of the target institutions were issued with a brief questionnaire concerning the provision of study skills support within their institution. These questionnaires were sent out to all target institutions, including those who were unable to take part in phase 1 of the research. The questionnaires required the relevant personnel to document the support and resources available to students within the study skills areas of; essay writing, academic reading, presentation skills, time management, exam skills, referencing, ICT and library skills. Personnel were also required to document the frequency of the study skills course or provision and were encouraged to provide course outlines or other relevant documentation where necessary.

These questionnaires were distributed to student support personnel by e-mail in order to save time and to make it easier for staff to complete and return the questionnaires. Also in the interests of time and simplicity, the questionnaire was formatted as a chart with spaces for personnel to fill in the relevant information concerning their institution.

Analysis

All data gathered via the student support questionnaires was collated and placed into one single chart so that the researcher was able to efficiently assess the provision available across all the institutions involved in this phase of the study. Responses from each institution were colour coded so that the researcher could easily identify the various services provided by each. Using this chart, the researcher was able to pinpoint the extent and nature of training and support currently available in the participating institutions.

Overall Ethical Issues

Before filling in the questionnaires the students were given a brief written explanation of what the research was about and the key research aims. On both the HE and FE questionnaires it was made clear that all information given by the student would be kept confidential and that they were welcome to contact the researcher if they had any queries about the research project. Students were also provided with blank sealable envelopes in which to return completed questionnaires to their course tutors. Student support and other personnel who were involved in the second phase of the research were given identical information about the research and assured that confidentiality would be maintained.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS: PHASE 1

RESPONSES OF FE STUDENTS

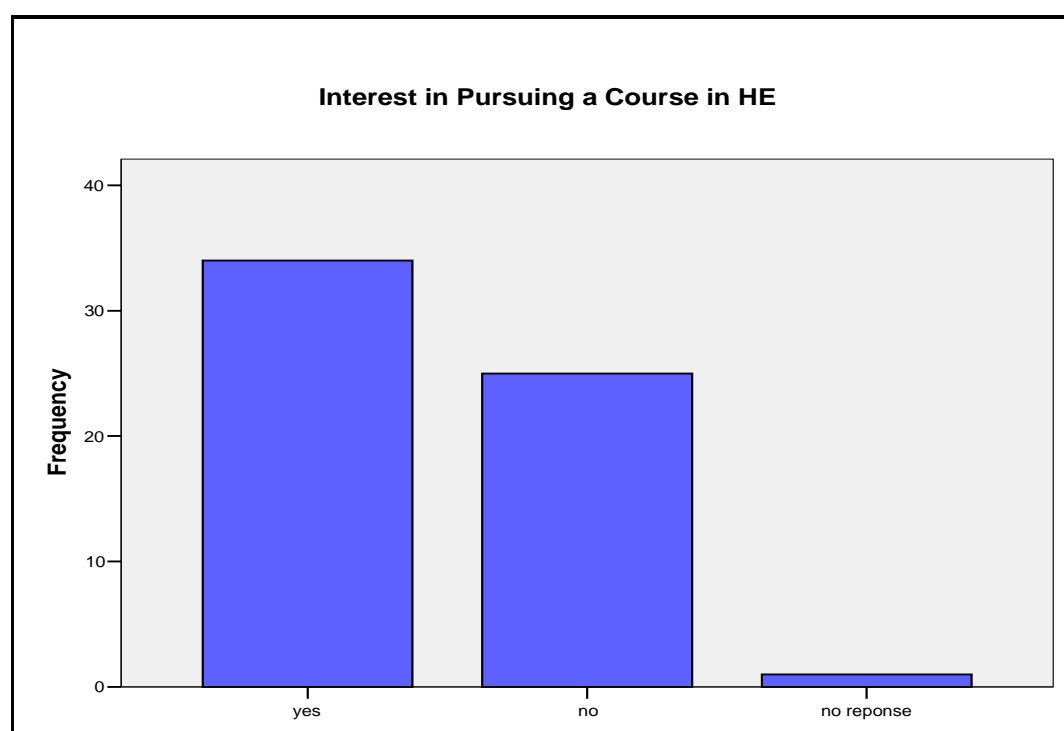
Description of Participants

In total, 60 FE students participated in the study. At the time of the study, these students were all studying various vocational courses within three of the seven participating institutions. These courses were all contained within the projects target subject areas of education, care, health and early years. Students were aged between 16 and 64 with the largest group of students falling within the 35 to 44 age bracket. At least 70 percent of participants were female and at least 15 percent were male. The largest ethnicity group was the white British/English group with at least 58 percent of participants falling within this category. This phase also incorporated small representations of a wide range of other ethnic minority groups.

At the time of the survey, the vast majority of students had already obtained GCSEs/O'Levels or other vocational qualifications. From the students that responded to the question, only five had gained A'level qualifications and two had completed Degrees.

Preparedness to learn within the HE context

Just over half of the FE students who took part in the study indicated that they were interested in pursuing a course in HE.



The predominant motivating factors behind this interest were personal ambition or interest and requests made by employers. A small number of students also indicated that they were motivated by a desire to change careers. When these students were asked how prepared they felt to learn within the HE context, responses were varied. Just under a third of students indicated that they were very prepared or would be comfortably prepared to learn within the HE context, the same number of students perceived that they would not be prepared. Just below a third of students reported that they were fairly prepared or quite prepared. From the responses two key factors of preparedness emerged, these were time and academic experience. Almost half of the students who stated that they would not be adequately prepared to embark upon a course in HE stated that this was because of a lack of time to pursue such a course. The following are some examples of these responses:

Not very prepared at all because of the time it may take
(2.17)

More time would be an issue as a working full-time mother
(2.22)

I work full time so taking more time out would be a problem
(2.23)

The individual's experience within academia also seemed to be a factor that determined their perceived preparedness. A significant proportion of individuals who saw themselves as being prepared, substantiated this claim by referring to their academic history.

I've got a degree and postgrad in other things so I'd be prepared academically but it'd have to lead somewhere
(2.15)

I would feel pretty prepared as I have completed my first diploma in health and social care and we used the same principles as if we were doing HE. I.e. referencing work, bibliographies.
(3.8)

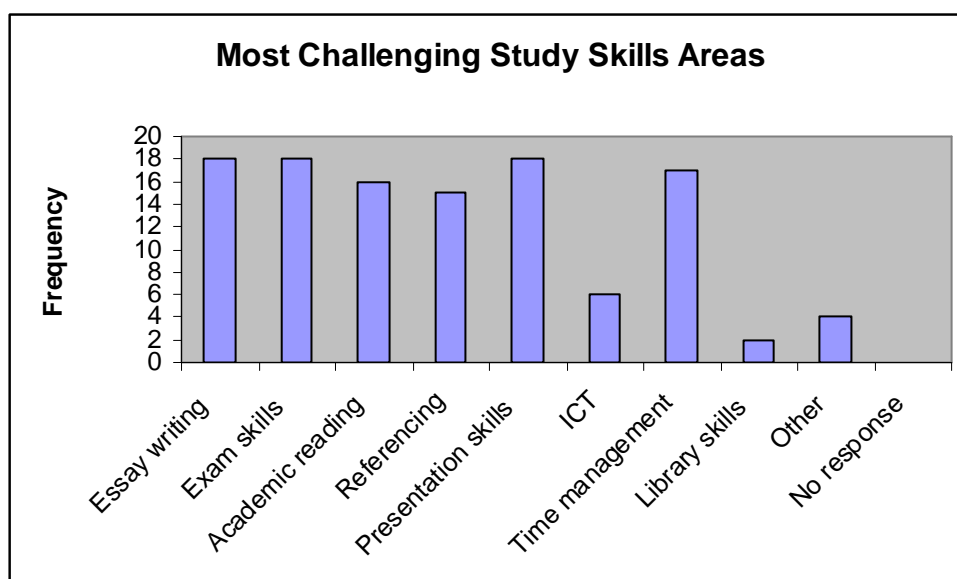
Similarly, one student indicated that it was because of their lack of academic experience that they did not feel very prepared to learn within the HE context:

Not very, haven't been in learning situation for a long time
(2.36)

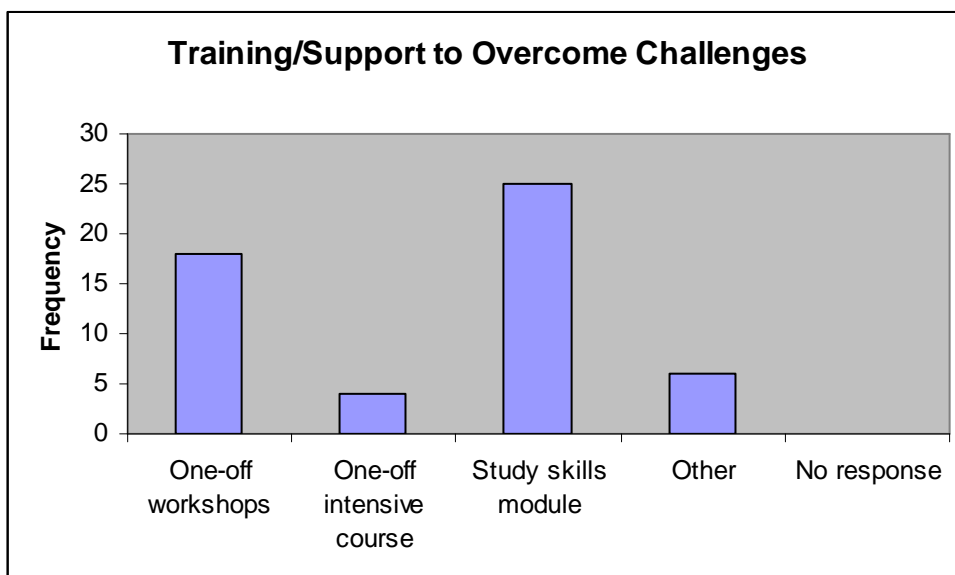
These comments indicate that students who have not had recent or significant experience within education are likely to be in need of particular encouragement from course tutors and other education/careers guidance personnel.

Within students' responses to the question of how they could be made to feel more prepared the issue of time again emerged as a key issue with some students stating that their preparedness would be improved if they simply had more study time. Another important issue that arose from these responses was the students' desire for practical information and advice concerning the requirements of HE and what to expect from learning within the HE context. This included first hand current advice on the norms and conventions of HE. Two students also suggested that it would be useful for them to have first-hand experience of the HE environment. These responses have revealed the value that students place on the knowledge of what to expect from HE or as one student stated 'knowing what I am getting myself into'. This incorporates not only the knowledge pertaining to the course contents and assessments but also the everyday functioning of the HE institution.

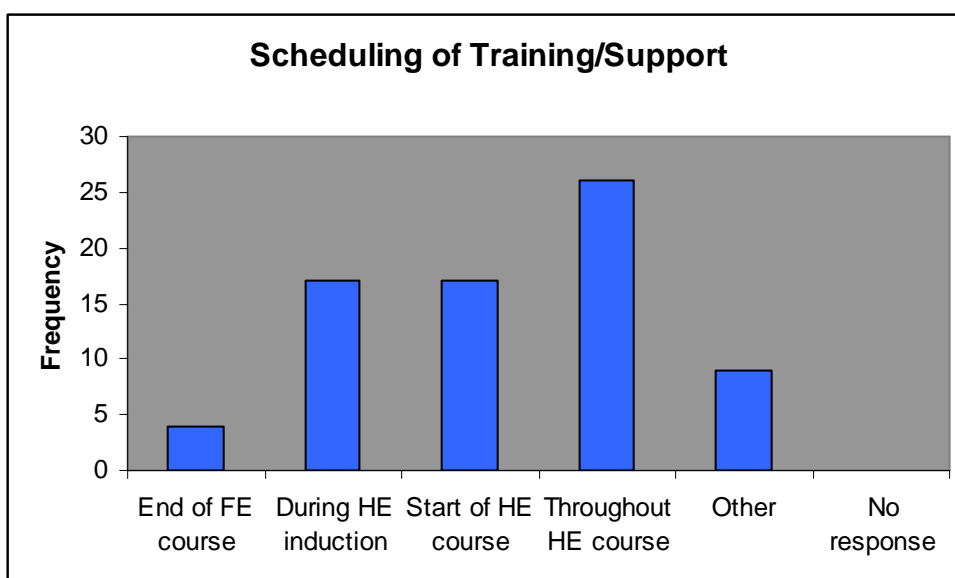
FE Students were also asked which study skills they thought would pose particular challenges if they were to pursue a course in HE. The chart below shows the frequency with which each study skills area was selected. From this chart it is clear that students envisaged that essay writing, exams, presentations and time management would pose the biggest challenges. It seemed that students were more confident in the areas of ICT and library skills.



As a means of addressing these challenges, students postulated that either a study skills module or series of one-off workshops would be most effective.

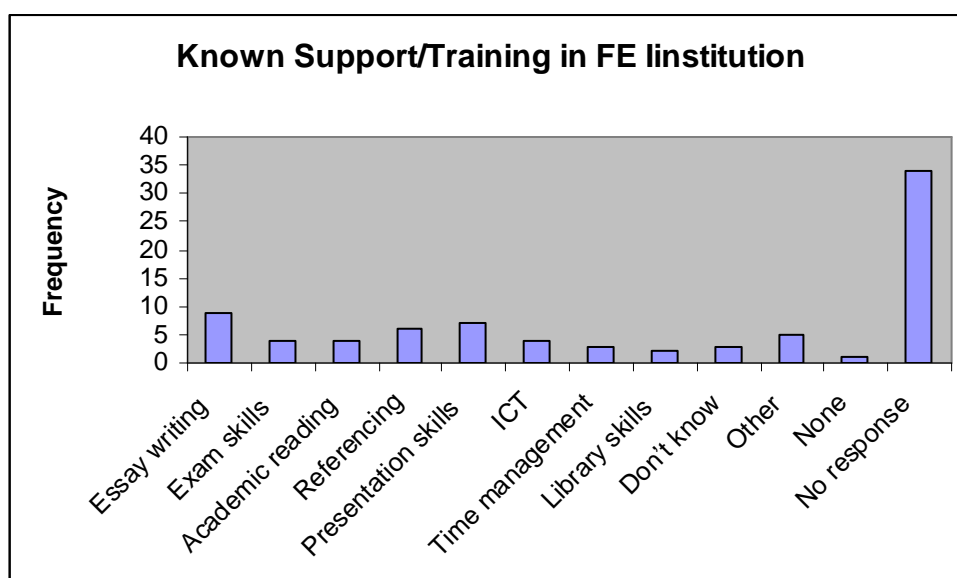


Most students thought that this intervention should be implemented throughout the course although there was also significant support for the implementation of training/support during the initial stages of the course.



Study Skills Training and Support in FE

This subsection refers to students' accounts of the training and support that they have received whilst in FE. Amongst the students that responded to this area of questioning, the vast majority were able to identify at least one study skills area in which training or support was available within their current college or FE institution. Only one student indicated that they had no knowledge of any support offered within their institution in any of the study skills areas.



Responses suggested that students had access to the most support within the areas of essay writing, presentation skills and referencing, with the least supported areas being time management and library skills. This provision corresponds with some but not all of the predominant support needs indicated by students who wish to enter HE. Only 14 of the 31 students that responded however, had accessed the study skills training available within their institution at the time of this survey. All 14 students reported that the training/support that they had received was effective in a variety of different ways which related to their personal circumstances. This disparity in the provision of effective support and low student attendance indicates that there may be certain factors hindering students' attendance at such support sessions.

Having had a break from education, I found the support helped me to get back into an academic mode
(3.6)

It helped me to qualify for higher education, gaining more skills
(3.7)

Helped me to set out the layout and use appropriate words in assignments
(2.5)

Perceptions and Expectations of HE

Students generally thought that HE would require an increased quantity of the elements that were required at FE level, particularly with regards to time, commitment and work. Only one student envisaged that HE would be the same as FE and another suggested that FE is more challenging than HE. Responses from other students amounted to what they perceived would be a more intensive and challenging learning experience that would require much

more than they were currently giving within their current vocational courses. The following are three examples that are typical of the responses given by students:

*I would imagine HE would be at a higher intensive level
(2.40)*

*More in-depth, time consuming, using own initiative a lot more
(3.6)*

*More academic approach
(3.13)*

Confidence Levels of Vocational Students Entering into HE

Two thirds of the students who responded to the question agreed that students within HE who have vocational backgrounds do lack confidence either generally or in particular areas of study. Although not all students gave reasons for their agreement with the statement in question 16, the reasons that were given mainly pertained to students' lack of academic ability or confidence and students' lack of knowledge concerning what to expect at HE level and what the requirements are. The former of these two concerns was also reflected in the possible solutions suggested by students. One of the main points here was that students gain an idea of what is expected at HE level through taster activities or specially tailored introductory courses. Another suggestion was that students be given adequate support and encouragement from HE staff during their courses. Other students advocated that group work could help to alleviate students' lack of confidence. Additionally, two students lay the weight of responsibility on the shoulders of the students themselves, stating that confidence is something that the students themselves must develop.

Two of the eight students who stated that they did not think that vocational students lacked confidence, actually perceived that vocational students were at an advantage because they had more background knowledge and because they undertake practical work experience which adds clarity.

Other additional personal challenges mentioned by students were finding time to complete the work set, combining academic studies and home life and organising childcare.

Summary

Whilst it is clear that most students were interested in entering into HE, it was also evident that students envisaged a number of challenges embedded within this transferral, mainly, time management, essay writing, exams and presentations. These indications are particularly concerning because these

study skills are directly related to the academic course assessments by which student ability and development is measured.

These envisaged challenges may account for the notable disparity between the number of students who expressed interest in proceeding to HE and the number of students who envisaged that they were adequately prepared to learn within the HE environment. The extent of the students' academic career also seemed to have a bearing on their perceived preparedness. Alongside definite responses however, there was also a sense of uncertainty about the HE environment and its requirements and students clearly felt a need for practical information concerning the HE environment.

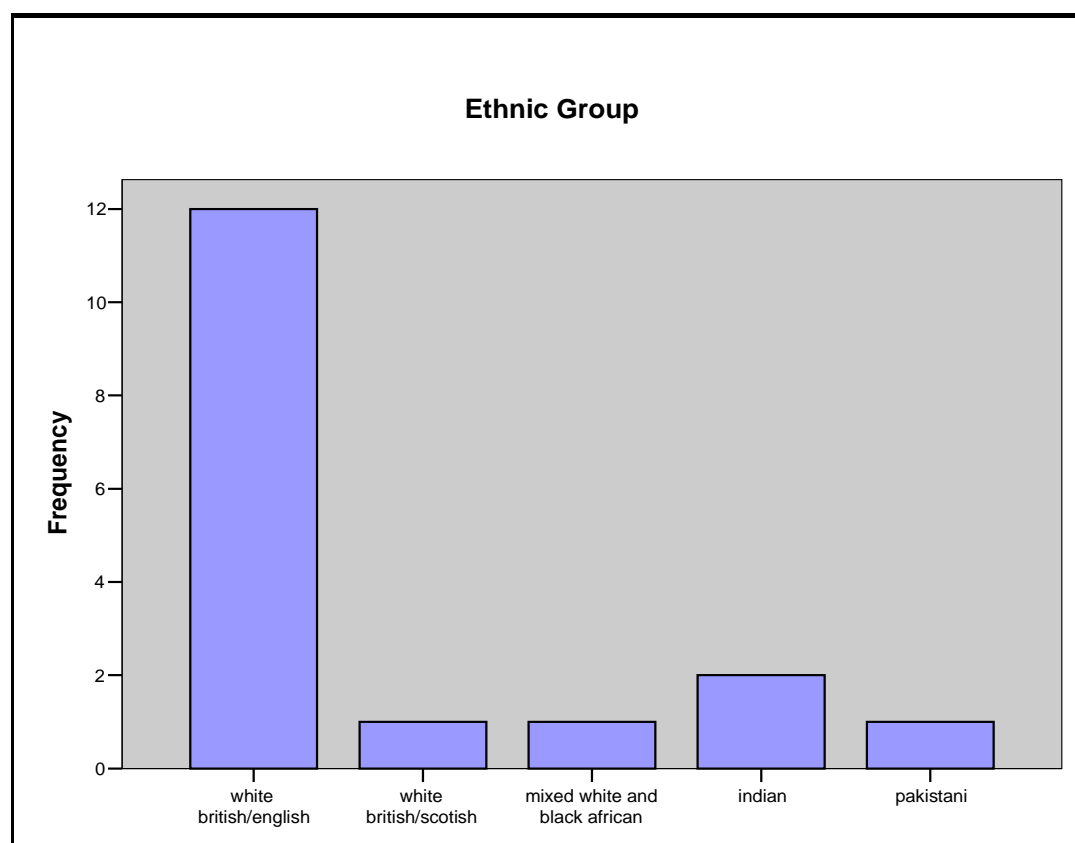
Whilst FE institutions did offer some study skills support to students, it was clear that not many students participated in these support activities. Those that did however, reported that these activities were effective, which suggests that students' non-attendance was more an issue of access than quality. Most students thought that study skills training that would be useful for those wishing to enter HE should be implemented throughout the course. There was however, significant support for the implementation of training/support during the initial stages of the HE course.

Not surprisingly, students envisaged that HE would generally be a lot more challenging than FE, with a significant number of students expressing doubt concerning their ability to work at HE levels. Students perceived that this lack of confidence could be alleviated through opportunities to learn about the practicalities of HE life, encouragement from staff and group work. Alongside these responses, however, there was also some realisation of the value of certain aspects of vocational learning that are not present within traditional courses.

RESPONSES OF HE STUDENTS

Description of Participants

Altogether 17 HE students took part in the study. These students were all female and were age between 18 and 64 with most falling within the 25-44 age range. In terms of ethnicity, the vast majority of HE participants were from a white British/English background, however, there was some representation of other ethnic minority groups.



These HE students were all studying courses within the target subject areas of education, care, health and early years and had all transferred from vocation courses to learning within the HE context. Although there were seven institutions involved in the study, the sample of HE students contained representatives from only three of these institutions. In terms of their qualifications almost all student had obtained GCSEs or some form of vocational qualification prior to embarking on their current vocational courses. Only one student had obtained 'A'Level qualifications. Most of these students chose to progress to HE because of personal interest or ambition. This motivational factor was followed by employer request.

Preparedness to learn in HE Context

Responses to questions concerning the preparedness of students to learn in the HE environment showed that most students did not feel adequately prepared. Only four of the 16 students that responded gave definite indications that they were prepared for study within HE. Two students also commented that they were prepared in some ways and not in others.

Out of the nine students who stated that they were not prepared for learning within the HE environment, three mentioned a period out of education as the reason for their lack of preparedness:

After not studying for 10 years, was not sure what would be expected of me at this level.

(Foundation degree student)

I did not know what to expect as I was returning to studies after 5 yrs so was very nervous, but wanted to give my 100% effort

(Foundation degree student)

Another two students perceived that they were not academically prepared for the challenge of learning in HE. In particular, one student highlighted the challenge of academic writing compared with the essay writing they were accustomed to. The other student stated that she should have completed a GCSE in English before beginning the HE course. This suggests that academic writing was also the problematic area here. One student also mentioned the difficulty of time management when working and studying full-time.

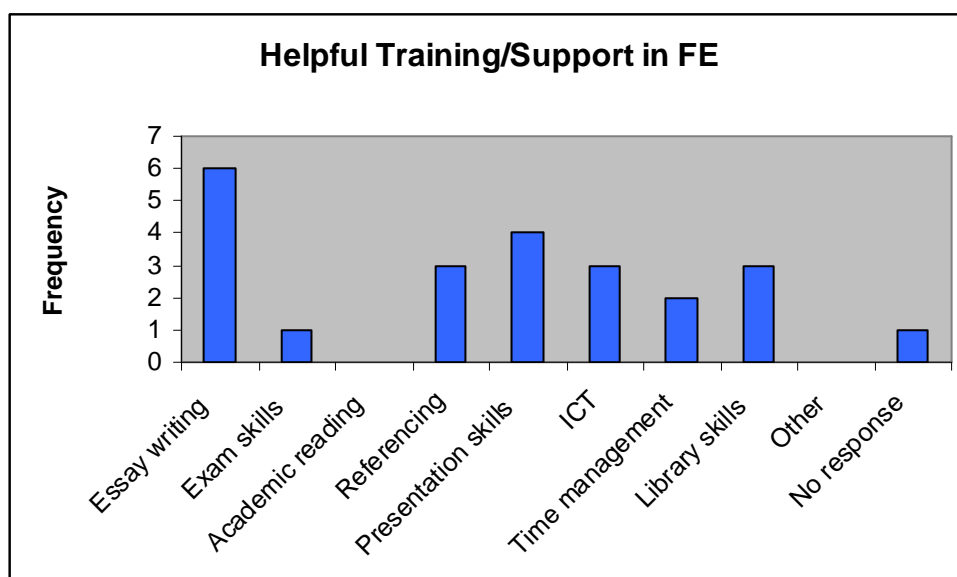
Two of the students who stated that they were prepared stated that they had attended an Aim Higher bridging course which had given them a good idea of what would be expected at HE level. Similarly another student claimed that they were prepared due to the fact that they had had substantial experience of academic study and therefore felt that a course in HE was the next logical step.

With regards to how students felt they could have been more prepared, there was a variety of suggestions. Some of the students thought it would have been useful for them to have gained feedback from previous HE students and/ or to have had access to some examples of HE coursework. These responses demonstrated the desire of the students to have had a practical introduction of the HE learning environment. This also indicates that the induction that they did receive was perhaps not as detailed and practical as they would have liked. Two of the students mentioned that the completion of a GCSE English would have placed them in a better position to enter into HE. Also related to these comments was the view of another student that it would have been useful to have more training in research and academic writing skills. Three other students also commented that having a break between courses, realising how physically taxing the HE course would be and more

focus on deadlines would have prepared them more adequately for the HE course which they had undertaken.

Training and Support in FE

All but one student indicated that they had received some form of training or support within their FE institution prior to entering HE that was helpful in the transition from FE to HE.



Responses show that the most support had been received within the area of essay writing and presentation skills. However, even though these two options were chosen most frequently by students, the number of times these options were selected was still minimal considering the number of students surveyed. Responses indicate that students received the least support in the areas of exam skills, academic reading and time management. Responses also suggest that the majority of this training/ support received by students was implemented throughout the course. It must be noted however, that over 50 percent of students failed to respond to this particular area of enquiry.



As can be seen from the above chart many students failed to comment on the effectiveness of the training and support they had received. Of the six students who did respond however, five agreed that the training/support that they had received was effective whilst the other two stated that it was not effective. These two students stated that they needed more training than they had received. The other three students documented a range of reasons why the training/support they had received was effective, including: the insight it gave into what the course required; the implementation of support throughout the course, the confidence that was gained through the training/support whilst gaining core skills and the general usefulness of the training and support received.

Expectations and Reality of HE

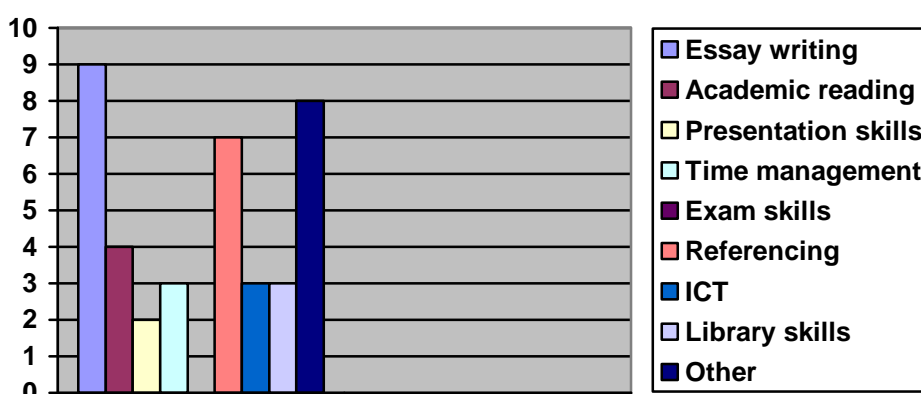
Students' comments concerning their expectations of learning in the HE environment were largely similar. Students seemed to have the same nature of expectations. The two key expectations were that the workload would be heavy and challenging and that time management would be difficult. Two students mentioned their expectation that it would be difficult to juggle academic work and employment work. There were however a minority of students for whom the workload was unexpected. Two students also mentioned the unexpected impact of their academic studies on other aspects of their lives, namely their employment work and family lives.

Most students indicated that their expectations of learning within HE did not compare with the actual reality that they had experienced. Only five out of the 15 students that responded indicated that their expectations were accurate. Two students commented that they needed more support than

they first anticipated. One student additionally commented that they expected to receive more support within the HE environment.

With reference to the challenges of learning within HE, students pinpointed a number of key areas, namely time management, referencing, academic reading and essay writing. This indicates that written assignments pose a particular challenge to these unconventional learners even beyond other forms of assessment such as exams or presentations.

Training and Support in HE

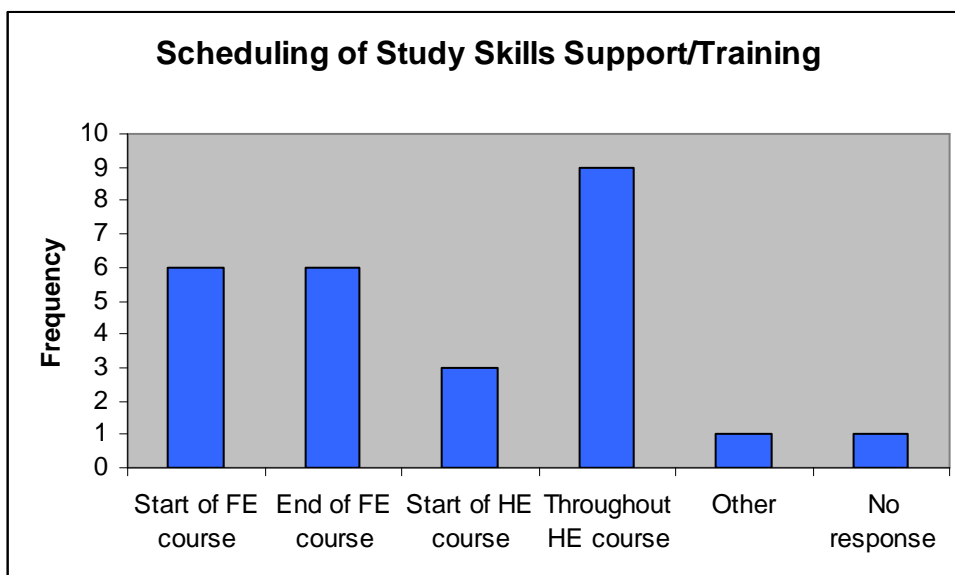


All but one of the HE students were able to highlight two or more areas of study skills training that they had received since starting their HE course. The study skills areas that were most frequently selected were essay writing and referencing.

Most students who responded to question 10 on the questionnaire, indicated that the study skills training/support that they received was very helpful and adequate for their needs. Two of the students mentioned the staff members whilst another two emphasised the relevance of the training/support to their particular needs. Another student mentioned the academic progress she was able to make as a result of the training/support that she received.

Comments made with regards to the shortcomings of study skills training/support within HE all related to timing issues. One student explained that the support had been given after the assignments had been submitted and was therefore too late. Another student suggested that more time needed to be allocated to study skills training/support whilst another student advocated that more time flexibility be allocated to such support.

Most students advocated that study skills support be provided throughout the HE course, indicating the preference for ongoing support, as opposed to short-term or one-off initiatives.



Confidence Levels of Students

Students' perceptions of the confidence levels of vocational students entering into HE were mixed. Out of the 15 students who responded, six agreed that students with vocational backgrounds did lack confidence on entering the HE context and five indicated that they did not lack confidence. Students recommended practice and experience, confidence building courses or training, the gradual introduction of unfamiliar tasks and increased support as the means by which students' confidence levels could be increased. Amongst the students who indicated that students with a vocational background do not lack confidence, two students felt that vocationally trained students were in fact at an advantage because they were able to gain valuable experience and knowledge that was is not available on other courses.

Summary of HE Responses

The responses of HE students have shown that educational experience again had a significant bearing on students' perceptions of their own preparedness to enter into HE. The students' knowledge of the HE learning environment also featured as a key factor of preparedness. This was reflected in students accounts of how they could have been better prepared. Some students expressed a desire to have been given a practical induction to the HE environment. With regards to study skills support, the support provided within the FE institutions, however, students indicated that this had been effective.

Similar to the FE students surveyed, the HE students had expected that the HE environment would pose greater challenges in the areas of workload and time management. In reality, students reported that they had been challenged most in written assignment related skills.

Students' responses indicated that effective study skills training or support was available in their HE institutions and that they had most utilised the training/support within the areas of essay writing and referencing, both written assignment related skills. Despite the provision of such training, most students still envisaged a significant lack of confidence among vocational students entering into HE, however a similar number also disagreed with this perception. There was some suggestion from students, that effective study skills training should be continuous and generally considerate of students' assessment deadlines.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS: PHASE 2

Description of Institutions

Phase 2 involved six FE institutions, all of which were represented on the Life Long Learning Network for Birmingham, the Black Country and Solihull. The *study skills provision chart* below displays the key study skills areas and the nature of support offered by the FE institutions that completed the study skills support questionnaire (see appendix IV). Each college is numbered. The study skills marked with a * are those that have been identified by students as the most challenging study skills areas.

Learning Support Provisions

All the provision pinpointed by participating institutions was available either throughout the course or on a weekly basis. In most study skills areas, provisions were available in at least four of the institutions involved in this phase of the study. The areas of exam skills and essay writing seemed to be the least provided for, with three of the institutions having no provision within these areas.

The nature of the provision available was a mixture of on-line materials, training within the course of study, workshops, handouts and books/booklets and tutorials. The methods employed were generally dependant on the particular institution in question. Not all the institutions demonstrated this variety in training/support provision and there is clearly some scope for institutions to provide a wider variety of provision. This will enable institutions to cater more effectively for the diverse needs of the student population.

Study Skills Provision Chart

Study Skill	Description of training/resource available	Frequency
*Essay Writing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Offered as part of course/student support 2. No 3. Students expected to produce assignments throughout course 4. Drop-in workshop and study skills sessions 5. Help included in distance learning courses, study skills booklet, 	Weekly
Academic reading	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Offered as part of course/student support 2. No 3. Students encouraged to do research 4. Drop-in workshop and study skills sessions 	Weekly
*Presentation Skills	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Offered as part of course/student support 2. No 3. Part of key skills but limited in terms of actual training 4. Study Skills 	Throughout course
*Time Management	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Offered as part of course/student support 2. Yes 3. Students given deadlines on range of areas of activity 4. Tutorial 	Weekly
Exam Skills	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Offered as part of course/student support 2. No 3. No 4. During main subject sessions 	Throughout course
*Referencing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Offered as part of course/student support 2. No 3. We encourage learners to use recognised referencing system 4. Study skills 	Throughout course
ICT	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Offered as part of course/student support 2. Yes 3. All students have access to ICT facilities 4. Workshop 	Weekly
Library Skills	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Offered as part of course/student support 2. No 3. All students have library induction giving general knowledge on research skills 4. In LRC Induction 	Weekly

CONCLUSIONS

It is clear from the results of this study that whilst FE students displayed a significant interest in progressing to HE, these students for the most part did not feel prepared to enter into the HE environment. The same sentiment was expressed in the retrospective accounts of HE students. These learners envisaged a number of study skills challenges that they would have to face within HE learning, in particular, those related to written assignments. In addition, students' responses also indicated that students were in need of more practical advice and information concerning HE learning, in order to be better prepared.

The study skills training received by students at both FE and HE level was considered by most students to be effective. At FE level, students reported that they had received the most support within the areas of essay writing, presentation skills and referencing. Two of these areas correspond with students' perceptions of the most challenging study skills areas within HE. It is important to reiterate however, that despite this provision, the majority of students' did not feel prepared or did not feel that they were prepared to enter into the HE learning environment. This indicates that there is a need for further study skills support within students' key areas of concern.

Within the context of HE, students reported that they had received the most training and support within the areas of essay writing and referencing. This again corresponded with the key envisaged challenges pinpointed by FE students and also the challenges that HE students reported that they had faced in reality. Responses of HE students again highlighted the particular need for support within study skills areas related to written assignments. Alongside the expressed needs and apprehensions of HE and FE students however, there was some realisation of the value and unique nature of vocational education in preparing students for HE life.

With regards to nature of study skills provision, most students (both FE and HE) recommended that support/training be implemented throughout the HE course. There was also significant support for the implementation of such training/support within the initial stages of the HE course. Completed phase 2 study skills support questionnaires suggested that whilst FE institutions clearly provided training/support in study skills areas, the variety of this provision clearly has scope for improvement, enabling the more effective engagement of an increasingly diverse student population.

STUDENT RECOMENDATIONS

FE Students

With regards to the transferral of students from FE vocational courses to HE courses FE students recommended that:

- Students are given practical information and advice concerning the requirements of HE and what to expect from HE, including first hand advice on the norms and conventions of HE
- Taster courses or specially tailored introductory courses be provided for students entering into HE from FE vocational courses
- Students are supported and encouraged by HE staff throughout the course
- Group work be implemented within HE courses
- Students are able to gain first hand experience of the HE environment prior to starting their courses
- Students be provided with a study skills module or series of one off workshops throughout the FE course to address the most prominent study skills needs.

HE Students

FE students recommended that:

- Students be given access to feedback from previous HE students and examples of HE coursework prior to starting their HE course.
- Study skills support be provided throughout the HE course as opposed to short term or one-off initiatives
- Confidence building courses be provided for students and that unfamiliar tasks are introduced gradually in order to increase confidence levels of students.

OVERALL RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above conclusions, this report makes the following recommendations:

- The implementation of highly practical and informative study skills modules the run throughout HE courses, particularly within foundation degree courses which are accessed by high numbers of vocationally qualified students.
- The particular emphasising of written assignment related skills such as essay writing and of time management.
- The wider utilisation and development of practical bridging programmes, courses or taster activities to raise the confidence levels of students along with their perceived levels of preparedness.
- Further research into the accessing of currently available study skills support/training within HE and FE institutions.
- More extensive detailed research into the nature study skills training/support currently available within FE and HE institutions and the responses of students to this training/support.
- Further research into a wider scope of academic areas, beyond health, care, education and early years.

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APPENDIX I: FE Student Questionnaire

Transition to Higher Education Research Project

Questionnaire for Further Education Students

This questionnaire is being administered as part of a research project on the support needs of vocational learners who wish to enter or have entered higher education. The intention is that the information gathered in this research will be used to improve the support offered to vocational learners wanting to transfer to higher education. This research is being funded by the Birmingham, Black Country and Solihull Lifelong Learning Network.

Whether or not you are thinking of making the transition into higher education, it would be very helpful if you could answer the following questions. All the information that you provide will be kept confidential at all times.

If you have any queries please feel free to contact the researcher at: a.simon@newman.ac.uk or on 0121 476 1181 ext 2340.

Please note that further education and higher education have been abbreviated to FE and HE.

Thanks very much for your help.

Please write clearly and with as much detail as possible

1) What course are you studying at present?

2) Are you interested in pursuing a course in higher education?

(If NO please go to question 5)

Yes

No

3) Which course would you like to do?

(Tick all that apply)

Foundation Degree

Higher National Diploma

Bachelor's degree

Other: _____

Please state Subject/s: _____

4) Why do you want to progress to higher education? (Tick all that apply)

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Career change | <input type="checkbox"/> Request from employer |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Career progression | <input type="checkbox"/> Personal ambition/interest |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other employment related reason (Please State) | |

5) If you were to progress to HE how prepared do you think you would feel to learn within the HE context? (Please explain your answer)

6) In what ways (if any) do you feel you could be more prepared?

7) If you were to pursue a course within HE, which of the following study skills do you think would be your biggest challenges? (please tick no more than three options).

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Essay writing | <input type="checkbox"/> Exam skills |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Academic reading | <input type="checkbox"/> Referencing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Presentation Skills | <input type="checkbox"/> ICT |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Time management | <input type="checkbox"/> Library Skills |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ | |

8) What kind of training or support do you think would be most effective in overcoming these challenges?

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> One-off Workshops | <input type="checkbox"/> One-off intensive course |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Study skills module | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |

9) When do you think training or support in the above areas should be implemented? (Tick all that apply)

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> At the end of the FE course | <input type="checkbox"/> During the induction for the HE course |
| <input type="checkbox"/> At the start of the HE course | <input type="checkbox"/> Other |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Throughout the HE course | Please State: _____ |
- _____

10) Are there any additional personal challenges that you think you might face? (Please state)

11) Please list any study skills training or support offered by your current college or FE institution, that would be useful for vocational students wishing to proceed to HE? (Please see Q. 7 for a list of study skills)

12) Have you accessed this training or support whilst studying at your current college or FE institution?

- Yes (go to Q.13) No (go to Q.14)

13) Do you think this training or support was effective?

(Please explain your answer)

14) Are you aware of any other recourses or services outside your college or FE institution, that would be helpful for vocational students making the transition to HE?

15) How do you think learning at HE level would differ from learning at FE level?

16) It is frequently said that new students in HE who have a vocational background often lack confidence. Do you agree with this statement and if so, what do you think can be done to increase the confidence of these students?

17) Additional Comments

Please use this space to add any extra information about your experience of FE that you think may be useful for the research.

Thank you for your time

Please place in sealed envelope and return to your course tutor. Alternatively you may return directly to Amanda Simon at Newman College of Higher Education, Genners Lane, Bartley Green, Birmingham, B32 3NT.

APPENDIX II: HE Student Questionnaire

Transition to Higher Education Research Project

Questionnaire for Higher Education Students

This questionnaire is being administered as part of a research project on the support needs of vocational learners who wish to enter or have entered higher education. The intention is that the information gathered in this research will be used to improve the support offered to vocational learners wanting to transfer to higher education. This research is being funded by the Birmingham, Black Country and Solihull Lifelong Learning Network.

It would be very helpful if you could answer the following questions about your experience of entering into higher education. All the information that you provide will be kept confidential at all times.

If you have any queries please feel free to contact the researcher at: a.simon@newman.ac.uk or on 0121 476 1181 ext 2340.

Please note that further education and higher education have been abbreviated to FE and HE.

Thanks very much for your help.

Please write clearly and in as much detail as possible where appropriate.

1) What course are you studying at the moment?

2) Why have you chosen to progress to higher education? (Tick all that apply)

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Career change | <input type="checkbox"/> Request from employer |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Career progression | <input type="checkbox"/> Personal ambition/interest |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Please State) | |

3) Looking back to when you started your course how prepared were you to learn within the HE context? (Please explain your answer)

4) How do you feel you could have been more prepared?

5) Whilst in your previous college or FE institution, did you receive any training or support in the following areas that was helpful in the transition from FE to HE? (if no, please go to Q.8)

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Essay writing | <input type="checkbox"/> Exam skills |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Academic reading | <input type="checkbox"/> Referencing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Presentation Skills | <input type="checkbox"/> ICT |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Time management | <input type="checkbox"/> Library Skills |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ | |

6) At what stage was this training or support given?

- At the end of the FE course
- At the beginning of the FE course
- Throughout the FE course

7) Do you think that this training or support was effective?

- Yes No

(Please explain your answer)

8) What aspect/s of studying in HE do you find most challenging?

(Tick up to three of the following options)

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Essay writing | <input type="checkbox"/> Exam skills |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Academic reading | <input type="checkbox"/> Referencing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Presentation Skills | <input type="checkbox"/> ICT |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Time management | <input type="checkbox"/> Library Skills |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ | |

9) Are there any other personal challenges that you have faced in the transition from FE to HE? (Please State)

10) What study skills training or support (if any) have you received since starting your HE course? (Please see Q.5 for a list of study skills) (if none, please go to Q.13).

11) How helpful was the training or support that you received?

Unhelpful

Very helpful

- | | | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

(Please explain your answer)

12) Are you aware of any other study skills training or support that is available within your current university or HE college? (Please see Q.5 for list of study skills)

13) Before you started your course, what were your expectations of HE in terms of the workload, the difficulty of the work and the nature of the work that you would have to do?

14) How did your expectations compare with the reality of HE education?

15) It is frequently said that new students in higher education who have a vocational background often lack confidence. Do you agree with this statement and if so, what do you think can be done to increase the confidence levels of these students?

16) In your opinion when might it be useful to implement a study skills course to support vocational learners wishing to progress to HE?

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> At the start of the FE course | <input type="checkbox"/> At the end of the FE course |
| <input type="checkbox"/> At the start of the HE course | <input type="checkbox"/> Throughout the HE course |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ | |

17) Additional Comments

Please use this space to add any extra information about your experience of higher education that you think may be useful for the research.

Thank you for your time

Please place in sealed envelope and return to your course tutor. Alternatively you may return directly to Amanda Simon at Newman College of Higher Education, Genners Lane, Bartley Green, Birmingham, B32 3NT.

APPENDIX III: Additional Questions for FE and HE Students

Additional Information

Course _____

Place of study _____

1) What qualifications do you have? (Please tick the appropriate box/s and state the subject/s)

GCSEs/O'Levels

A'Levels

Subject/s: _____

Subject/s: _____

GNVQ

BTEC

Subject/s: _____

Subjects/s: _____

Degree

Other: _____

Subject/s: _____

2) Are you: Male Female (Please tick)

3) Which of the following age categories apply to you? (Please tick)

18-24

25-34

35-44

45-54

55-64

65+

4) What is your ethnic group?

Choose ONE of the following sections¹ from A to E, then tick the appropriate box to indicate your cultural background.

A White

British

English

Scottish

Welsh

¹ Sections taken from the Commission for Racial Equality.

Other (please write in) _____

Irish

Any other White background (please write in)

B Mixed

White and Black Caribbean

White and Black African

White and Asian

Any other Mixed background (please write in)

C Asian, Asian British, Asian English, Asian Scottish, or Asian Welsh

Indian

Pakistani

Bangladeshi

Any other Asian background (please write in)

D Black, Black British, Black English, Black Scottish, or Black Welsh

Caribbean

African

Any other Black background, (please write in)

E Chinese, Chinese British, Chinese English, Chinese Scottish, Chinese Welsh, or other ethnic group

Chinese

Any other background (please write in)

APPENDIX IV: Learning Support Provision Questionnaire

Transition to Higher Education: Research project

Survey for Learning Support Personnel

This questionnaire is being administered as part of a research project on the support needs of vocational learners who wish to enter or who have entered higher education. The intention is that information gathered, will contribute to the improvement of support services for vocational learners wanting to transfer to higher education. All information given, will be kept confidential.

This research is being funded by Birmingham, the Black Country and Solihull Life Long Learning Network and is being carried out by Newman College of Higher Education.

If you have any queries please feel free to contact the researcher Amanda Simon on: 0121 476 1181 ext: 2340 or at a.simon@newman.ac.uk

Job title (optional) _____

Name of your institution _____

Please indicate whether or not your institution provides any training or resources in the following study skills areas for students wishing to enter into higher education. Please feel free to attach course outlines or any other relevant documentation.

Study skills area	Training or resources available? (Please tick)	Brief description of training or resources available ie: 'Distance learning course' or 'workshop' etc.	Frequency ie: 'weekly' or 'throughout course' etc
Essay Writing	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		

Academic Reading	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		
Presentation Skills	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		
Time Management	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		
Exam Skills	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		
Referencing	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		
ICT	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		
Library Skills	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		
Other course/s provided			

Thank you very much

Please complete and return this form by (*deadline date*) to Amanda Simon by at: a.simon@newman.ac.uk.