



Lifelong Learning Networks

NATIONAL FORUM

A Synopsis of LLN Research 2006-2010

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March 2011



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Introduction:

Watt and Patterson¹ in a study on widening access to higher education, asked the opinions of practitioners what their areas of greatest concern were in the field of widening access to include marginal socio-economic groups. The survey found that the primary concerns fell under six headings: pre-entry guidance, qualifications frameworks and transfers, structural barriers and flexibility, attitudinal barriers, student finance and institutional finance. The Lifelong Learning Networks have also concluded that these areas are still of great concern to improve widening participation and much of what follows here is a synopsis of LLN research conducted from 2006-2010. The Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) funded thirty Lifelong Learning Networks, all hosted by English Universities for periods of between three and five years within this time span. The HEFCE LLN document of spring 2005 indicated that LLNs were to:

Identify what further curriculum innovation and development, and changes in learning and teaching styles, are required to facilitate progression

Funds were used to target interventions to aid widening participation such as through the development of Progression Agreements but a good deal of the funding went into research about the vocational learner and their journey into and through Higher Education. Much of the research has been hard to track down as there was never a recognised repository but researchers² have used the remaining LLN websites, published papers, books, conference information, website publications and e-books to try to summarise much of the important findings.

MOVE is the Lifelong Learning Network for the East of England. Like many LLNs, MOVE engaged in an early review of the curriculum area provision within their area Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) colleges. Bravenboer, Cairns & Judson were funded by MOVE to produce a review 'Development for Change' which discussed the use of targeted funding in HE. Their findings were not unique to their geographical area and can be summarised as follows:

- There was insufficient curriculum fit between existing vocational further education (FE) programmes and existing higher education (HE) provision in the region and some HE subjects did not relate sufficiently to the subjects and learning provided by FE.
- From the perspective of employers existing HE and FE vocational provision was not sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of those wishing to progress through work based learning routes and did not meet work force development needs.
- Much of the existing provision had been developed by educational institutions with a 'supply led' approach driven by institutional recruitment targets rather than considerations of employer demand.³

The following review expands on these issues and others and looks at the recommendations from the LLNs that can be taken forward either as future research or as indicators for change within the HE landscape.

¹ Watt and Paterson (2000) Pathways and Partnership: Widening Access to Higher Education [Journal of Further and Higher Education](#), 24, p107 - 116

² Researchers: Jenny Shaw of Fidela Consulting and Jan Wise of JWEducation and Training

³ Bravenboer D et al. 'Development for Change' 2009, MOVE p8

Advice and Guidance:

Higher education entry requirements have been traditionally expressed in the terms of A Level qualifications with which universities are familiar. Widening Participation units in HE have achieved much to change the admission requirements. Examination of the entry requirements to HE courses as seen on the UCAS website go a long way to support this and vocational courses, especially BTEC Nationals are accepted entry requirements into many undergraduate courses.

It is generally perceived that students studying A Levels generally have high aspirations, reinforced by teachers and parents and they see higher education as a natural progression of their studies. A Level students see themselves as suitable applicants for any type of university and this is reinforced by the expression of higher education entry requirements in terms of the 'A' Level qualifications with which they are familiar as seen on the UCAS website.⁴ LLNs set out to discover if vocational students were less confident about higher education entry and the value of their qualifications. The Progression Manager for the Hampshire and Isle of Wight LLN would not have been alone in discovering that vocational lecturers frequently encouraged certain students to apply for higher education and failed to mention opportunities to others.⁵ LLNs also set out to find if vocational learners felt disadvantaged when applying for HE.⁶ Schwartz (2004)⁷ said that reasons for this include a lack of guidance about higher education opportunities, a lack of confidence in the credibility of their qualifications and a difficulty in relating their qualifications to university entry requirements. Schwartz also said that 'vocational learners tends to feel excluded from applying to high status universities where entry requirements are publicised in terms of 'A' Levels and find that their access to higher education opportunities is restricted as a result.'⁸

Information from HEFCE and the report cited above also acknowledged that knowledge of vocational courses was spread unevenly across the higher education sector although awareness of '*diversity of qualifications and pathways to higher education is gradually increasing*'.⁹

Learners with vocational qualifications are also spread unevenly across the higher education sector. Vocational entrants are generally concentrated in certain courses, for example Foundation Degrees, or in particular universities and colleges, typically post 1992 and HE in FE providers (Schwartz, 2004).¹⁰

LLN Networks have been able to target advice and guidance for those who work with vocational learners at Levels 3 and 4. Benefits have been the rise in interest in HE from vocational learners.¹¹ Research work from Higher Futures, the South Yorkshire Lifelong Learning Network confirms this:

Almost all partners reported changes in practice and processes in the organisation and delivery of information, advice and guidance (IAG), with benefits for staff continuing professional development (CPD). A wide range of changes were identified, including embedding IAG into the curriculum, linking of activities between

⁴ <http://www.ucas.ac.uk/>

⁵ This came about when a BTEC National Diploma Engineering group were used as a focus group for different types of progression agreement paperwork. The engineering lecturer told the LLN staff that only two students would go to HE. It became apparent that the other 18 members of the group did not know about HE opportunities and seemed to be unaware that the BTEC National Diploma which is recognised as being vocationally equivalent to 3 A levels, qualified them to apply.

⁶ HE in this report means any higher education offered by Further Education Colleges, Mixed Economy Colleges and Universities.

⁷ [Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice](http://www.admissions-review.org.uk/downloads/finalreport.pdf) forward by Professor Schwartz www.admissions-review.org.uk/downloads/finalreport.pdf

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ http://extra.shu.ac.uk/higherfutures/docs/partner_survey_exec_summ.pdf

The Construction Group of Hi-LLN ran a direct intervention research project with construction workers. Hi-LLN had a Construction Curriculum Group led by a past Head of Construction at a local FE College who organised a research project aimed to offer information, advice and guidance to employers and construction workers.¹⁴ Whilst the project targeted experienced workers it also considered potential candidates with Level 2 or 3 learning. Employer contacts were from personal contacts of the project leader, Train to Gain, Connexions and from sector specific training boards. The project ran through the summer of 2008 and attracted interest because of the down turn in the construction industry. Employers welcomed the approach from Hi-LLN as they felt that the project leader was not representing any one HEI so wasn't doing a selling job on a course or set of courses.

Eighty-eight potential FE and HE candidates were given IAG at their places of employment or at the college at special events; 34 companies were contacted. A follow up survey found that many of the earlier interviewees had left the construction industry or lost their employment. Follow up information was achieved from 72 potential learners. The majority of companies were familiar with the HE offer. Several were more interested in management courses rather than technical for their senior personnel.

The follow up survey found that 30 of the original 82 given IAG about progression in the construction industry had enrolled on college courses.¹⁵

Key themes from those who did not follow up the IAG indicated that:

- The employer did not see the benefit to their company of the qualification.
- The candidate could not afford a qualification in either time or money

One candidate thought that returning to study would cause a problem.

The project captured insufficient data to see if varying delivery mechanisms may have made a difference to enrolments although a barrier to engagement was cited as 'Employers did not give time for study and courses did not run in the evening'.¹⁶ Only one candidate required a course that was not delivered in Hampshire or the Isle of Wight and chose to go to London to study for a part time degree in Building Services Engineering. Employers had good knowledge of traditional HE but there was a lack of understanding about what Foundation Degrees offered and that they were designed for industry by industry.

The project concluded:

- Publications should explain the benefits of work based Foundation Degrees and encourage APL applications.
- The profile of technical apprenticeships should be raised. Employers knew about and understood craft apprentices but were unaware or seldom considered technical apprentices.

A single document that summarised CPD across all the HEIs in the Hi-LLN area would be welcomed by the industry. None of the employers interviewed had considered linking an in-house training course to a qualification.

¹² ibid

¹³ See full report: http://extra.shu.ac.uk/higherfutures/docs/partner_survey.pdf

¹⁴ For full report see Hi-LLN http://www.hilln.co.uk/cms/site/docs/EHTRLIC_report%202.pdf

¹⁵ These were over a spread of L3-4 courses

¹⁶ Legal update: from April 2010 11 million workers across the UK will be accorded a new right – to ask for time off to train known as 'time to train.' This new piece of policy will at first be only enforced in companies with over 250 employees. Small businesses have until March 2011 to comply. Employees can make requests to undertake any training which they believe will improve their effectiveness in their employers business and the performance of the business. The training they undertake can include accredited or unaccredited provision. There is no limit to the length of time to be requested but they do not have the right to be paid for the time. <http://online.businesslink.gov.uk/bdotg/action/detail?site=210&r.s=sl&r.lc=en&type=ONEOFFPAGE&itemId=5001468575>

GMSA funded a curriculum review of Retail¹⁷ and Logistics 'A study of Educational Programmes (Undergraduate, BTEC and Level 3 onwards) in Retail, Logistics and Supply Chain in the Greater Manchester Area'¹⁸ from the University of Bolton led by Kandadi & Salimi.

The report relates to this section because the recommendations mainly relate to IAG. The report identified significant challenges and opportunities for improving programme delivery and information about available courses. 4 out of 5 universities and 7/18 FE colleges delivered courses in the target subject areas. There was a substantial amount of private training providers delivering short courses and L3 programmes including warehousing and distribution in the area. There are 45,000 people employed in the Logistics sector largely concentrated around Trafford, Wigan and Rochdale. The retail area is supported by large shopping centres in the Manchester City Centre and the Trafford Centre. There are higher Level skills needed in the target areas especially in middle and senior management.

37% of the target courses offered in the GMSA area are at degree Level. Fewer courses were offered at HNC or Foundation Degree Level: 8% Foundation Degree, 7% HND, and 1% HNC. 32% of courses were offered at NVQ3. The research found that those without qualifications were interviewed for degree and other courses but there was no framework that could evaluate experience. The research also recommended a need for greater collaboration with private training providers and noted that many did not have any course details on their websites.

The project recommended:

- A uniform and single point access for up to date course information at all Levels and duration
- A list of colleges, universities and private training providers delivering these courses including contact details for programme leaders and an access point that gives funding information
- A qualifications framework for people without qualifications but with substantial work experience. This would include promoting degree and masters' Level entry or agreed CATs points using APL for experienced staff.
- Programme development to meet employers' needs.

A research report 'Moving on the Creative Way'¹⁹ by Percy and Hudson of the University of East London for the Creative Way²⁰, looked at reasons for learners progression choices. The creative industries have been growing at double the rate of the economy and there has been a major drive of economic and social regeneration along the Thames Gateway where the Creative and Cultural Industries (CCIs) have been a major part of this redevelopment. Within this area data showed that there is an unsatisfactory number of leavers progressing from Level 3 to Level 4 study.

The research focussed on specific aspects of progression: inhibitors and enablers especially the influence of learners' families and issues of learner confidence.

The report drew on key areas that are central to progression:

- Curricula aspects; how do students see opportunities and choices which are before them?
- Informing learner choice; what do students see as constraints to educational progress?
- Learning to learn at work; how do students see the creative and cultural job market?

Percy and Hudson took a qualitative approach to get behind progression data and used methods to capture perspectives of learners, teachers and support staff.

There were 30 group interviews with 155 students and 23 interviews with teaching and support staff (telephone interview or face to face). Primary data was collected through interviews with learners plus a short

¹⁷ The retail courses examined looked at the supply chain too, such as fashion design and marketing, food management and technology and advertising and brand management.

¹⁸ Greater Manchester is: Bolton, Bury, Oldham, Rochdale, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford and Wigan plus the two cities of Salford and Manchester. Around 2.55 million people (Office of National Statistics – 2006) live in the wider area. According to a GMSA survey nearly 600,000 of the GMA population have no formal education and training.

¹⁹ See full report: <http://www.creativeway.org.uk/PageFiles/12331/Moving%20On%20Report.pdf>

²⁰ The Creative Way LLN is a [partnership](http://www.creativeway.org.uk) of universities, colleges and training providers working together to connect routes through education and training to employment and enterprise in the creative and cultural sectors in London and the Thames Gateway <http://www.creativeway.org.uk>

demographic questionnaire. This research was supplemented by prospectuses and other publicity material collected from all parties in the Creative Way.

The research found that learners decided to go to an FE college from school to study Art and Design and Media because of the chance to focus on a creative subject and to be introduced to a wide range of other media in a practical, hands-on environment.

For many learners FE focussed on the good bits – the practical without the written (perceived) burden. By contrast requirements for HE seemed significantly different. Transition represented a significant step change in learning styles. Usually students had a distaste for academic study and a marked preference for practical over academic. Because of the discrepancy between student intention (gained places but did not enrol) to go to HE and the actual figures the research set out to discover if this was because the competencies required of an undergraduate are significantly different to those required in college.

The view of HE staff interviewed was that generally learners did not appreciate the Level of theory and formal abstraction found in a Level 4 Media course. However to support this view lecturers interviewed felt that university initial advice and guidance²¹ spelt it out.

Within the FE-HE Community of practice it was concluded that progression agreements would provide the fulcrum for inter-institutional dialogue, staff development and curriculum modification. The research acknowledged that Level 3 providers find it a challenge to embed critical thinking²², enquiry and learner confidence in literacy and numeracy into the creative curriculum.

Level 4 Enrolment is a result of information and advice from friends, family and teachers and learners were aware of the often dislocation between course choice and employment opportunities. Learners also used internet information and face to face encounters on open days to find out about the HE providers and it was noted that the welcoming characteristics of open days did much to inform and influence student decision making.

Learners who say they will take a year out usually for financial reasons need further IAG. Making an application a year later often means applying in isolation and this can be very difficult for this students group. Professional IAG services appeared to have a low profile among respondents and this is possibly because the approach that IAG services focus on is to reach some match between the learner and job title rather than understanding experiences and desires of the individuals.

The need for financial advice was equally urgent. Percy and Hudson discovered that Level 3 learners made wildly inaccurate estimates of the cost of HE study so fear of debt could be another factor for non progression. For these students the combination of perceived cost of study, fear of debt and employment uncertainty proved to be a deterrent to progression. Other Level 3 learners over estimated the adequacy of loans and their own earning power in part time employment. Financial concerns at Level 3 were coloured by class and culture. The research concluded that the majority of Level 4 respondents financially naïve.

*'Competitiveness of the CCI sector is a deterrent to progression and is especially the case for poorer first generation potential university students for whom the personal and financial cost of degree Level study is proportionally higher.'*²³

Work based learning and work related learning is considered essential. Many learners were working to learn with part time and near full time jobs and very few of these were working in the CCI or had work experience in these areas. Undergraduate learners on vocational courses from deprived socio-economic groups are more likely to be working than others. Unfortunately the cost of mentoring and supervising WBL is seen as a barrier to employers from offering placements. Work experience is welcomed as a reality test either to encourage or deter from a particular workplace or environment. The study recommended that L3 learners need greater access to work experience.

²¹ IAG in this case was course information, open days and other initial contact

²² These findings were not alone. The University of Portsmouth ran four staff development sessions on teaching Critical Thinking for the Hampshire and Isle of Wight LLN. The delegates were all HE tutors.

²³ Percy and Hudson 2007

The report also records that it is considered difficult for those with L3 skills already working in the CCI industry to upgrade their skills.

The project recommended joint work on bridging courses and outreach activities to improve understanding of L3 and L4 courses.

- There was scope for partnership opportunities and for universities to broaden out awareness away from people's own education and employment experience.
- Greater articulation between job market knowledge and course choice is required.
- A review of best practice in the area of IAG and linking courses to employment opportunities would help students make more purposeful course decisions
- Urgent need for a review of student sources of IAG – need to embed advice offered by college tutors to students.
- Need for greater clarity about student finance to enable learners to make more informed choices.
- Make work experience a meaningful component of the curriculum – celebrates practical competence and sees application of course content in terms of professional practice – also enhances employability.
- Progression agreements could offer work experience for L3 learners with university staff. This would introduce learners to university and work. Some pilot work could be done here.
- improve flexibility of delivery for work based learners
- recognise different types of learning experience; APL, experiential learning and employers own training programmes
- Identify clear progression pathways from work to HE. Emphasise how these connect to employment.

The National Arts Learning Network (NALN) reported on case studies of seven students and heard about the advice and guidance and interventions that had made a difference to these students when choosing their HE programmes. Student 1 was a third year degree student who had been bullied at school eventually suffering a breakdown and leaving school without qualifications. After working for four years they were taken on as a mature student on BTEC First Diploma Art and Design and progressed to an art BTEC National.

Student two was 21 years old and had four part time jobs (three of which are course related) including being a student ambassador. The student left school after taking GCSEs and also left home. The student then juggled BTEC Media education and a social life on supported financial before entering HE. The student had good support from their siblings who were all at university.

Both students one and two were influenced by taster days where they could meet the staff and see the facilities. Student 1 told the researcher that staff on the BA made a point of building relationships with students during the tasters and this continued throughout HE. Student two felt they received ongoing advice and guidance from tutors and was encouraged by staff in their work as an ambassador.

Student three was a third year HE Fashion student and after GCSEs left school and went to FE to study BTEC Nat Dip fashion. This student had strong family and staff support to complete their Level 3 studies and progress to HE. Student three went on an open day and then benefited from an internal progression agreement which supported her in moving on from the National Diploma in Fashion to the Degree course at Leeds College of Art & Design.

Student four followed a similar route and had benefited from a progression scheme which had a progression manager who had contact with students:

'You receive guidance on what you have to do on the course, training on how to present yourself and how your portfolio has to be. I'm quite a messy person; my work is all over the place so this helped give more structure to the work I submitted. It opened my mind on what I wanted to do as I didn't know before then, I didn't know whether I was good enough to go to University. Without it I think I might have finished my diploma, tried to get a job and been unhappy! I had a mock interview and found it quite hard to answer personal questions.'

Student 4 was reported as saying that they worked as student ambassador and felt that contact with potential applicants important as they would ask her questions that they might not ask staff. The student was helped to stay on the HE course because of excellent 1:1 support for students with dyslexia.

Students five and six were friends who both progressed from a BTEC First Diploma to a National and then to a Degree. One of these students reported that they were inspired by a motivating ND teacher. These two students met the Central St Martin's progression manager who came into their college. The progression manager arranged mock interviews from where they received advice on the actual interviews, an insight to the course and how to prepare/ present them selves and their work for interviews.

'It definitely helped and instructed us to present in a very high class way so helped in our progression.' Also 'advising us on projects we can expect on the course looking forward even to the second and third year. We got a really good insight and perspective on the course as a whole.' Both students recommended better preparation for HE while on their ND courses and harder work during L3 courses. Student 7 was a mature learner who was part of a progression scheme with a bridging course in the summer. 'It was a nice little glimpse in how the University worked and I thoroughly enjoyed it. We had mainly brief-led projects and got a sense of looking at other artists. It gave us background knowledge on University life and felt very supportive. It also re-skilled me in taking interviews and explaining my work - for that aspect alone it was thoroughly worth it'.

The conclusions that can be drawn from this research report emphasise good quality taster days with exceptional advice and guidance about the HE courses delivered by friendly staff.

A report²⁴ commissioned by the Birmingham, Black Country and Solihull LLN indicates the progression work that has been happening over the life of the LLN; 'Progression Opportunities into and through HE; Mapping Progression from HE in FE to local universities.'²⁵

Case studies looked at Early Years, Computing and Engineering progression. The Early Years case studies, for example, focussed on progression of individual students who talked about what had been important to them as they made their decisions for progression. Advice and guidance interventions that aided decisions about progression to HE could be cited as: excellent support during the FE courses, good information and tutor contact pre the degree courses, good college facilities and knowledge of the staff. These studies were for HE taught in FE.

Student B, for example was a learner who progressed from a Level 1 through to a Level 5 BSC. Student B wanted to join the Police but as he had low entry qualifications he needed to start studying at FE Level 1. His College experience sparked his enthusiasm and motivation to succeed and after achieving his GNVQ ICT Foundation, BTEC First Diploma in ICT and then the AVCE ICT, he went on to graduate with a HND in Computing from Solihull College. From the HND he progressed to a BSc (Hons) at a local university.

Student B also cited Level 3 experience as 'very good teaching so wanted to progress within same college'. He also knew the college tutors well and the college was easy to get to. Additionally there were vocational certificates 'as well as earning a higher education qualification it was possible for me to study other add on courses such as CISCO.' Student B went on to study a BSc (Hons) in Forensic Computing. He chose Birmingham City University as it offered the exact course he was looking for and for the convenience of its locality. Student B then hoped to gain employment within the police force or government in a computer investigations job role.

Student C had completed a City & Guilds qualification in Telecommunications in the 1980s and then gained employment at Network Rail. An HNC in Electrical and Electronic Engineering was suggested by a friend with the idea of matching work based experience to a qualification. Student C felt the course he wanted to do was combined with great facilities so contacted the course tutor who was supportive and encouraging. This initial contact was important in helping decision making.

Issues of learner support, learner choice and the progression of thirty eight students at the University of Hull Scarborough Campus on a Foundation Year 0 general course were researched by Diana Barker for YHELLN in 2008. The research grew from the desire of a careers adviser who wanted to ensure that the Careers Service was better informed to meet the needs of Foundation students especially as 30% of the students were

²⁴ Clarke & Sharrock

²⁵ For full report see BBC&SLLN website:

http://www.bbcslln.ac.uk/Content/pdf/cpwg/final_report_opportunities_in_he.pdf

international. The methodology included discussions with tutors and support service personnel, observations of lessons and interviews with students followed by questionnaires to collect data.

The key findings give advice that could be transferred to similar situations:

- Foundation year students frequently came to the course with a career and therefore progression in mind and sometimes expected course content to be related to these disciplines. This may have been supported by the poor attendance on some of the modules.²⁶
- Students were very influenced by their family and friend networks when making career decisions.
- Some international students did not make career decisions without the support of their family. One student stressed that they were unable to make decisions on career pathways without agreement from their parents.
- Student's lacked awareness of career prospects within a chosen field with regard to a match with their capabilities. Career choices and decisions may therefore be inappropriate if based on interjected values i.e.; how others' perceive them which may affect an accurate perception of themselves.
- Work shadowing or visits to employers' premises would enable a more realistic understanding of what a career might entail.
- Reference was made by students on more clarity on what to expect on the course. This suggests a need for more clarity in marketing information.

The research highlights the need for students to be supported in recognising and developing their transferable core skills to improve their overall employability and encourage a flexible approach to the world of work. Barker also recommends that for courses such as the one described that careers advisers could be involved early in the student year to help facilitate a successful progression route.

The Birmingham, Black Country and Solihull (BBCS) Lifelong Learning Network funded the Open University to research into converting overseas qualifications into UK equivalents. The percentage of economically active adults in the West Midlands who are qualified to at least NVQ Level 4 is 26.7% compared to a figure for England as a whole of 30.4%.²⁷ Regional economic studies suggest that there will be a growth in the proportion of occupations that require qualifications at Level 3, 4 and 5.²⁸ Skills gaps could be filled by migrant workers with higher Level skills and qualifications from overseas.

The West Midlands region over recent years has seen a rapid growth in net migrations, particularly from the A8 countries²⁹. Polish migrants followed by Indians account for the largest national group of migrants in the West Midlands. The research intended to inform the development of a model to help migrant workers gain employment in the areas for which they have overseas qualifications. Aims included mapping the knowledge and skills offered by migrant workers onto the gaps which currently exist or are forecast to appear in the Birmingham, Solihull and the Black Country area and to inform the development of a model to be used by migrants to convert their overseas qualifications into UK equivalents. Professional qualifications gained abroad including nursing, dentistry, medicine and law require conversion courses before holders can practice in the UK.

The key messages from the report findings may be used to inform other areas where migrant workers have settled.

- There is no single data source that provides a comprehensive picture of the numbers and characteristics of migrant workers in the region.
- Statistics suggests that migrant workers contribute significantly to the public administration, education and health sectors in terms of maintaining skills Levels and filling staff shortages in the West Midlands.
- The research found that the proportion of migrants with qualifications at degree Level or above exceeded that of the West Midland working population.
- 51% of migrant qualifications were classified as other qualifications, indicating that the qualifications could not be matched to the UK equivalence. This gives potential for APEL to be developed in some areas.

²⁶ P18

²⁷ HEFCE 2006

²⁸ Working Futures 2006

²⁹ Accession 8 countries that entered the EU in May 2004 were the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

- Qualification structures differ across the world making problems in translating qualifications to UK equivalents
- Migrant workers experience great difficulty in gaining recognition for their overseas qualifications and there is evidence to support the view that they often end up working in lower skilled jobs than they would in their home country.
- There is a lack of a mechanism by which employers can assess the qualifications.
- The single most important barrier to the short term integration of migrant workers into the local economy is lack of English skills. The longer term barrier is the process to convert their qualifications into UK equivalents.

The report recommends that a single comprehensive and easy to access source of Information, Advice and Guidance – IAG should be developed in the West Midlands to aid migrant workers and their potential employers. This source would include common themes such as culture, access to employment agencies education systems applicable to all migrant workers as well as sector specific IAG. The report also recommends that a co-ordinated orientation/induction programme be developed by the providers of education and training and employers ‘to introduce migrant workers to the culture of organisations in the sector including the rules and regulations that govern working practices as well as the technical English language associated with the sector.’³⁰ The report highlighted the need for an easily accessible qualification mapping system.

Canterbury College led a research project for Kent and Medway LLN called ‘Experimental Strategies for Re-engagement of Learners in HE’. The project worked with early leavers in FE from Level three and four courses and identified opportunities for their re-engagement with future learning. The project collaborated with Connexions and with the IAG team at Canterbury College to establish re-engagement activities.

A number of key points were made-

Reasons given by learners for non-achievement were:

- a lack of support, advice or guidance to help them with their problems
- struggling with the academic work
- the course was wrong for them,
- they were unhappy with the organisation of the course

Evaluation of the data showed that following strategies would benefit former learners to re-engage and achieve:

- Better support for learners through their studies
- Offering comprehensive pre-course IAG on course content and expectations and commitment needed from students. This could be delivered in a variety of ways such as from Progression Sessions, Familiarisation and Taster sessions where aspects of HE are experienced prior to the course
- Offering HE study skills opportunity as part of or pre-course study skills sessions.

The data showed that quite a few students had struggled with academic writing and through the conversations that took place during the time of the research it came to light that many had either not disclosed or had an undiagnosed special educational need, such as dyslexia.

Staffordshire, Stoke on Trent, Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin LLN considered the lack of women in engineering and reported that this was not solely a UK problem. Although Statistics from the Engineering Technology Board show that in 2007 thirteen percent of new UK chartered engineer registrants were women and in 2008 the figure had increased to seventeen percent but the proportion is still very low in comparison to male registrants. However the picture in UK is different with a seven percent increase in engineering and technology higher education applications in the last 5 years as registered by the Engineering and Technology Board (ETB). In spite of an increase in HE applications, engineering remains largely a male dominated career in the UK.

The research project aimed to investigate how engineering courses in higher education can be promoted amongst female learners in UK.

³⁰ http://www.bbcslin.ac.uk/Content/pdf/hsceye/final_project_report_migrant_workers.pdf p8

Recommendations from the research report focussed on improved marketing to highlight careers:

- FE and HE marketing departments would benefit from reviewing their illustrations about engineering to promote solving problems, hi-tech applications, working in clean and modern and that engineering is a very good career.
- Update teachers on changes in engineering careers so they can improve their promotions and make careers more attractive to young ladies.
- To have more ex-engineers as teachers in secondary schools to improve understanding of careers and HE engineering courses.
- Promote Engineering in the media as currently the subject is little seen and is something that can be easily addressed. Role models of female engineers who can champion engineering careers would be welcomed.

Recommendations to Improve Advice and Guidance

- Publications should explain the benefits of work based Foundation Degrees and encourage Accreditation/Recognition of prior Learning (APL or RPL) applications.
- The profile of technical apprenticeships should be raised with potential students.
- A uniform and single point access for up to date course information at all Levels and duration across geographical areas. This should include a list of colleges, universities and private training providers delivering HE courses including contact details for programme leaders and an access point that gives funding information.
- A qualifications framework for people without qualifications but with substantial work experience. This would include promoting degree and masters' Level entry or agreed CATs points using APL/RPL for experienced employees.
- Programme development within HE to meet employers' needs.
- Joint work on bridging courses and outreach activities between FE and HE staff to improve understanding of L3 and L4 courses.
- Scope for partnership opportunities and for universities to broaden out awareness away from people's own education and employment experience. This could include HE taster days for adults.
- Greater articulation between job market knowledge and course choice is required. A review of best practice in the area of IAG and linking courses to employment opportunities would help students make more purposeful course decisions
- Urgent need for a review of student sources of IAG – careers staff need to embed/recognise advice offered by FE college tutors to students.
- Need for greater clarity about student finance to enable learners to make more informed choices.
- Make work experience a meaningful component of the curriculum. This would celebrate practical competence and sees application of course content in terms of professional practice – also enhances employability. Work shadowing or visits to employers' premises would enable a more realistic understanding of what a career might entail. Progression agreements could offer work experience for L3 learners with university staff. This would introduce learners to university and work.
- improve flexibility of delivery for work based learners
- Identify clear progression pathways from work to HE. Emphasise how these connect to employment.
- HE should recognise different types of learning experience; APL/RPL, experiential learning and employers own training programmes
- Taster days should be well planned with exceptional advice and guidance about the HE courses delivered by friendly staff.
- Guidance for top up courses from L4 to L5 should be transparent.
- More clarity needed in marketing information with regards to course content.
- Students need to be supported in recognising and developing their transferable core skills to improve their overall employability and encourage a flexible approach to the world of work.
- Involve careers advisors early in the L3 programme to introduce advice and guidance for progression.
- Easier accessibility and use of APL is recommended for integrating qualified migrant workers into the English education system.

Admissions:

VETNET researched the attitudes and knowledge of HE admissions tutors in relation to non A Level applicants. 54% of the respondents said they had received training in vocational pre-degree courses. Of those who had little or no vocational awareness or training these recommendations evolved:

- Improve awareness and understanding amongst HE Admissions tutors of a range of vocational qualifications at Level 3
- Provide training for HE admissions tutors that goes beyond consideration of A Level applicants
- Improve awareness of changes to vocational qualifications and new developments in the 16-19 sector that impact on HE Admissions
- Encourage tutors of vocational students to provide UCAS references that clearly state the subject coverage and Level of achievement of vocational applicants to HE Provide easy access to clear information about the structure and content of vocational awards

VETNET followed this research up with information packs and training. Materials can be found on the VETNET site.³¹

APEL:

Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) is often recognised by HE admissions tutors as two separate entities; Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL) and Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL). Some research projects are now using the term Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as this terminology is used by universities world wide.

Many LLNs commissioned research on attitudes of higher education to APEL and these tended to examine if the promise of APEL as suggested by HE websites was easily translated to practice by admissions tutors. Research varied in scale and much was undertaken by the core LLN teams. Recommendations from this research are important and references for further reading are included in this synopsis. The HEFCE LLN document issued in Spring 2005 described the following as one method of identifying progression issues:

*'Credit equivalence: establishing the general and specific credit equivalence between different programmes'*³²

At the same time as much of the LLN research, the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) was developed to make similar processes available at all Levels of learning (1-8) for credit and qualifications in the regulated sector.

Credit for Learning³³ (2009) was written for MOVE, the Lifelong Learning Network for the East of England by Betts and Crichton.³⁴ This is an in-depth guide to help tutors understand the process of APL and answers

³¹ <http://vetnetlln.ac.uk/>

³² HEFCE 2005

³³ <http://www.lifelonglearningnetworks.org.uk/documents/document596.pdf>

³⁴ Mick Betts was the original director of MOVE. Brenda Crichton was the Administrative Researcher.

questions about CATS points and costings. A detailed survey of the APL information and processes provided by nine HEIs in the East of England³⁵ and the Open University is included in the report.

Crichton produced APEL Assessment in the East of England (2008) as a separate research report for MOVE. This report indicated that although there was very little variation in the process of managing and approving APEL 'the general perception was that portfolio assessment is onerous and this view prevents a more widespread use of APL as progression into or through higher education.'³⁶

These findings were echoed by other research reports as this attitude could disadvantage work based learners if they have to repeat learning already achieved through work and practice because 'opportunities for experiential learning to be recognised within an award are not taken into account via the APEL process'.³⁷ Crichton's report examines the strengths and weaknesses of various processes and the difficulties encountered by those claiming APEL.

Typical structure of an APEL portfolio:

- Employers' references
- Professional body qualifications
- Testimonials
- Continuing Professional Development (CPD) supported with attendance or module certificates as evidence
- Claims against learning outcomes for complete modules with a detailed commentary mapping the learning achieved to the outcomes.

Some institutions will also support APEL claims through the submission of reflective essays, questionnaires and a work based project.

Claims for APL using previous qualifications are also considered to be advanced standing by some universities. LLNs that looked at other certification for an APL claim notably worked with NVQ4 qualifications as an APL claim towards the first year of a Foundation Degree. The Childhood, Youth and Community Group for the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Lifelong Learning Network (Hi-LLN), held mapping meetings with Early Years HE staff and NVQ4 Child Care Learning and Development Staff to agree APL status for progression agreements. NVQ4 students can now claim APL on successful completion of their studies towards 60 – 80 credits of the first year of Foundation degrees within the subject area with 4 FD courses in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. The universities have agreed to review the agreements annually and the progression agreements have negated the need for admissions tutors to go through NVQ4 modules on an individual basis with each applicant³⁸.

Hi-LLN produced an action research APEL project that enabled 12 private training providers to successfully achieve the basic teaching qualification: Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector (PTLLS). This qualification is now a requirement for any trainers working in the public sector. The original proposal was for 100% APEL claim against this QCF L3/L4 qualification in line with the QCF route 2 policy but the final recommendations were that 80% could be claimed with evidence and 20% needed to be workshop based input. All the evidence required to claim APEL was identified and agreed through focus groups, 1:1 meetings and interviews with trainers and teacher training staff in an FE college. This project was supported by the trainers because of the flexibility and that individual meetings with the tutor and the two workshop days could be diarised around busy schedules. The project succeeded because of the time provided by the LLN for the action research and support gained from the awarding body that recognised the need to give students the opportunity to claim APEL in a very simple way. The language of education was frequently misunderstood and the trainers felt that a workbook to translate the terminology would be beneficial for any following this process without the guidance of a qualified teacher.

³⁵ Universities: Anglia Ruskin, Cranfield, Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, East Anglia, Essex; Norwich University College of the Arts, The Institute of Continuing Education of Cambridge University, University Campus Suffolk

³⁶ Crichton B *APEL Assessment in the East of England* (2008) MOVE P5

³⁷ *ibid*

³⁸ See Hi-LLN.co.uk and follow links to progression agreements to find examples.

A University of Plymouth College research project recognised that APEL aids recruitment by helping students identify appropriate courses. Within this they considered if practitioners themselves needed further guidance and confidence to process APL claims.

Shell schemes were researched by the South West Lifelong Learning Network to incorporate a variety of credit schemes.

One point made by various projects was that if the APL system is robust then it should enable transfers between similar courses at the same Level. This is a common practice for first year students

Recommendations for APEL:

- Crichton: The QCF (implemented 2010) will bring consistency to the recognition of credit Levels and volumes and should facilitate the recognition of credit achieved through learning in the workplace. In order to ensure that this goal is achieved it may be helpful for some project work to take place to ensure that APEL processes meet all the criteria of standard modules or units of study.
- Crichton: Specific APEL modules to be designed to encapsulate the learning achieved through experience.
- Hi-LLN: support APEL claims with a workbook/study book
- Hi-LLN: map APEL and APCL against course outcomes and identify up front the necessary evidence. This can be produced as a proforma for potential students to map their evidence against.
- UPC: Undertake APEL as a credit rated in-course activity where the learner:
 - Reflects on past work
 - Is given the opportunity to evidence learning outcomes achieved
 - Plans how they might deal with the gaps

Progression:

Barriers to progression have been widely considered in different research projects. GMSA funded Auchterlonie & Ashworth to research into 'Real and perceived barriers preventing tradespersons progressing into higher education courses'. The research considered those who are qualified to QCF Level 3 and had not gone on to HE.³⁹ This is important because government statistics indicate that the number of 18 year olds is declining so that UK university candidates may in the future come from those who already are qualified at Level 3 but have chosen not to progress. For universities who have recruited through widening participation initiatives this means that universities and colleges are competing for a decreasing pool of students so need to attract non traditional learners. After desk research the authors concluded that very little had been published on this subject although there was anecdotal evidence. They noted that:

- employees may earn good salaries in craft occupations and feel no need to move into supervisory roles.
- an employer might not support HE studies in the employers' time because the course may not add value to the business. This might include not allowing time off to study as well as a fear of losing good staff after higher courses are completed.
- the lack of availability of suitable local programmes will inhibit progression.
- opportunities for evening and weekend study are only offered by a few colleges and universities.
- it is expensive for new HE courses to be introduced and validated.

³⁹ See further research from Professor Alison Fuller, University of Southampton <http://www.education.soton.ac.uk/files/projects/nphe/findings.ppt>

The research looked at building craft students on HNC courses and potential students to these courses. It aimed through interviews to establish actual and perceived barriers to progression. The study also aimed to inform students and potential students about higher Level opportunities available to them in the building industry. At the time of the research the building industry was buoyant and the authors discovered that many who entered higher Level courses were aiming for higher pay rates and that some HNC students already had HE qualifications in other subject areas. However, the authors found that many construction departments had closed after the recession in the early 1990s and there was a shortage of management Level entrants to the industry. In the light of the 2008-09 recession the authors felt that a further decline in entrants to HE courses because of lack of training monies, places and the cut in funding for ELQ students will only exacerbate a difficult situation for the construction industry.

The HNC is a valued qualification in the construction industry because it represents higher Level learning and work experience. Many HNC graduates work on construction sites with site management or quantity surveying roles. They might also have roles with building contractors. The research indicated that many HNC students saw this as their terminal qualification whilst 30% would use the qualification to progress towards professional membership. The research gives detailed findings about the background and age of HNC Building students from 2004-07 at the University of Bolton.

The research found:

- Mature students over 30 often made up to 20% of an HNC cohort. Some had recognised that qualifications would enhance their progression opportunities within the industry.
- Many HEIs recognise the HNC as an APL into a degree so enhancing the attractiveness of the HNC.⁴⁰
- The anticipated decline in student numbers by 2012 makes HNC students attractive to degree programmes.
- Data taken from the records of HNC entrants at the University of Bolton from 2004-07 showed that 32.3% came from A Levels, 43.7% came from NVQs but this disguised the fact that these were usually in a non-cognate subject. 14.2% came from vocational areas other than NVQ2 or 3.
- Students coming from trade disciplines were commonly bricklayers or joiners and this frequently reflected their progress to supervisory roles. Prior qualifications usually confirm the capacity to study.
- One of the main reasons for returning to study was 'to get off the tools'.
- Employers recognised the value of the content of the HNC.

So why do potential craft students not go into higher education? The researchers discovered that many of the reasons were self imposed rather than perceived ones. The small sample analysed indicated that there was a lack of self esteem, lack of confidence in own ability and lack of ambition and this prevents people from going into higher education. If money being earned is good then there might be a risk of dropping money to move into a supervisory role. The motivation to progress is a personal issue and stems from support or lack of it at home as well as work. There is also reluctance for employers to encourage good crafts people to move into management roles and to make the opportunities available to them.

The research recommended that:

- The opportunity to progress is not sufficiently promoted to crafts people. Taster days at HE might demonstrate to employees and employers the benefits to be expected from better qualified people.
- Improved IAG about course content and study commitment and what students might expect to be put on line for easy access⁴¹
- Better publication of opportunities supported with case studies of successful professional progression.
- Consideration of Foundation degree models of HE engagement with on the job training and work based learning possibly aligned to a competency approach.
- Financial incentives for small firms to support their staff. This is not an issue for large building firms who do invest in staff development.
- Flexibility in courses. Distance learning was not sought by many of the students interviewed because they preferred the camaraderie and support from their learning cohort.
- That the quality of apprenticeship programmes be looked at to ensure these provide progression opportunities.

⁴⁰ The APL route varies between institutions and courses exempting students from the first year or second year.

⁴¹ See Hi-LLN IAG Construction project referenced under IAG.

The authors concluded this paper by recommending that further research be carried out on the success of graduates from HNC into and beyond first and degrees and professional qualifications be considered.

Progression into and through undergraduate and post graduate studies has been the focus of wide ranging research.

Art from the Heart is an in depth research report produced for the National Arts Learning Network (NALN) by Hudson.⁴² It looks at the perceptions of students from widening participation backgrounds of progression to and through HE Art and Design. The research is about the perceptions of 48 students from different backgrounds and the focus is very much on the student voice. NALN intends the report and subsequent findings to be used to inform the development of widening participation. NALN commissioned work to:

- Track the experience of different aspects of HE Art and Design of a sample of students from widening participation backgrounds, on a range of HE Art and Design courses at two NALN member institutions.
- Assess the extent to and ways in which students from widening participation backgrounds draw on their life experience outside university, in their Art and Design practice.
- Explore student's views of the factors which support, and the barriers to, their progress.
- Track student's views on the development of their Art and Design practice, over the first two years of HE.
- Analyse non-participation in HE Art and Design in one of the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), through a small number of student case studies.⁴³

In this research, widening participation refers to students who⁴⁴:

- Are from socio-economic groups 4-8⁴⁵
- *Describe themselves, or are described by staff, as having entered HE through non-traditional routes. A traditional route in Art and Design is defined as a combination of A Levels and a Foundation Diploma in Art and Design⁴⁶. Non-traditional routes include vocational qualifications (e.g.: the National Diploma and Access courses).*

Research methods consisted of semi structured, in depth interviews with students and staff, informal conversations with students, staff and student mentors plus extensive analysis of student work, writings, emails and other relevant documentation. Research was supported by participant observation. Results were analysed using the qualitative software programme, NVivo.

Key findings included:

- Students from widening participation backgrounds drew on their rich life experience outside university, in the context of their work and in the skills they used in their HE courses.
- Most students experienced major issues with the literacy demands⁴⁷ of HE Art and Design, before and during their HE studies. Institutional support did not meet students' literacy needs systematically.
- Staff across the FE and HE sectors played often pivotal roles in these students' experience of art and design. Students particularly valued critical feedback from staff, tailored sensitively to the developmental stage.⁴⁸ In some cases positive and negative remarks made by staff, sometimes decades earlier could be recalled by students.⁴⁹
- There were four broad patterns of transition to HE in the first year although all students experienced issues with the initial transition. These reported issues were:
 - Understanding course expectations
 - Managing the degree of independence expected on an HE course
 - Working consistently over a project. This is an important point as although National Diploma and Access art students will have generally experienced full time art courses, students found that HE projects were often longer.

⁴² Hudson C *Art from the Heart* (2009) National Arts Learning Network

⁴³ Ibid P9

⁴⁴ Ibid P10

⁴⁵ All students except one were from these groups.

⁴⁶ A Foundation Diploma is a one year full time diagnostic art, design and media course that enables students to explore their strengths before applying to HE.

⁴⁷ Literacies are defined as the language, speaking and listening, reading and writing demands of HE Art and Design

⁴⁸ *Art from the Heart* P9

⁴⁹ Ibid P15

- Managing emotions in dealing with the unknown.

The findings of the report are detailed in pages 12- 22 of *Art from the Heart* and give information that could be used by many HEIs to inform educational partnership work with progression and transition. The non participation findings (pages 195-207) pinpoint the importance of careful careers guidance, based on listening to individual students about motivations and life circumstances.

VETNET commissioned a retrospective analysis of the effect of previous study routes on subsequent academic performance of undergraduates in the School of Animal, Rural and Environmental Sciences at Nottingham Trent University from Huws & Taylor in 2008/2009. The primary aim was to compare the performance of students who had progressed via a vocational (National Diploma) route with those who had studied A- Levels. The sample analysed comprised of 196 students⁵⁰ who graduated in Animal and Equine related degree courses between 2003 and 2007. The study was based on profiles retrieved from each participant's academic records. The variables included: age at entry, GCSE grades and subjects, UCAS tariff points and mean marks at the first, second and final year of study.

The results demonstrated that students who entered university with traditional A Level qualifications outperformed vocational learners. There were no differences in the comparative marks in the first year of study which suggest that all learners were able to respond to the requirement for descriptive tasks. There was a significant difference in the marks achieved in the second and final years of study between the A Level entrant and the vocational entrants which implied that vocational learners do not develop the analytical and evaluative skills necessary for higher study. Huws and Taylor also point out that assessment strategies changed as the courses progressed and there was more emphasis on examination as opposed to continual assessment. Huws and Taylor concluded that the UCAS points awarded for the National Diploma lacked parity with A Levels and have little predictive effect for performance at Higher Education.⁵¹

Entirely separate to this and other studies, but with a synergy, VETNET conducted an investigation and scoping study around stretching specific more able vocational learners (BTEC National) in relation to developing their core science to give parity with A Level outcomes required by VET schools for entry. A mapping exercise identified gaps in the science modules of the National Diploma in Animal Management when compared to A Levels in chemistry and biology. Researchers then consulted with HEIs to determine the essential knowledge in the A Level syllabi. Key partners worked together to identify a top up curriculum.

This study importantly reveals that many learners are aware of the differences in vocation learning at Level 3 compared to the expectations of them at university. For those studying a BTEC National in Animal Management who were interested in Veterinary Sciences at HE, many were aware that there would be differences between the style and Levels of teaching:

- A higher educational standard would be required particularly around maths and science.
- Lectures would be more formal with the need for independent note taking and less reliance on handouts with less variety in learning resources and media used.
- There would be fewer practical sessions at the start of a programme.
- There would be a need for more independent study with commensurate study skills, research methods, use of journals and academic referencing.
- An assessment regime would place greater emphasis on written examinations and these would have to be passed in order to stay on the programme.

Recommendations for the bridging unit included:

- Some higher level biology
- Additional chemistry if the bio-chemistry National Diploma option was not taken. The lack of chemistry input in the National Diploma represented a significant barrier to progression.
- Functional Skills (Key Skills) application of Number at Level 3
- Higher Level study skills to include advanced note taking, research methods, study skills and advanced writing skills.

⁵⁰ 10 males and 186 females. The sample was restricted to young participants (aged 21 or under at the time of entry) on the assumption that they may have had a similar educational and cultural experience prior to going to university.

⁵¹ Full report: <http://vetnetlln.ac.uk/about-us/publications/Academic%20predictors.pdf>

As a result of this study it was recommended that the top up package included the completion of a City and Guilds Level 4 Certificate in Higher Level Study Skills. Teaching staff considered it essential that those following the top up programme should have the minimum of 5 GCSES including English, Maths and Science at a minimum of Grade B.

Further recommendations from the study were that the five specialist participating colleges involved aligned their National Diploma units to enable learners to make an easier transition to a veterinary science degree to provide a standard pathway to progression.⁵²

Woods & Obrey researched the HE choices amongst sports students in Herefordshire and Worcestershire for the Herefordshire and Worcestershire LLN. All eight Herefordshire and Worcestershire colleges offering sport at L3 (A Level and BTEC ND) were involved. The aim was to establish the progression of students to HE from sixth forms and FE. Paper and electronic surveys were sent to all the lecturers involved in teaching sport at L3 and the questions produce qualitative and quantitative responses. Although the questions were trialled on a sports lecturer the authors say in the conclusion that the questions limited responses.

The response rate was low with only six course leaders replying from five colleges. The research used as a means of drawing on the experience of lecturers in sport to identify the needs of their students as well as highlight issues of progression.

Key findings included:

- Of the sports students who progress to HE a small proportion do not progress to sports related courses.
- Over the respondent colleges progression to HE varied from 70% to 15%
- All lecturers thought students progressing wanted full time courses.
- When asked what courses were most popular the answer ranged from 83.3% Sports Coaching to 16.7% Sports Business/Law or leadership and Management
- Respondents felt students wanted HE courses with additional vocational qualifications such as coaching awards. This is possibly because HE is seen as academic.
- There was a higher progression rate to HE from sixth forms
- Higher progression was achieved from FE if the college delivered an HE in sport
- Respondents felt that students were interested in vocationally relevant courses which were predominately well established (no mention of why.)

Further research suggested targeting specific groups of students to identify their interests and also research to identify niche courses.

Susan Bishop and Dan Bennett, on behalf of Sussex Learning Network and Aim higher Sussex produced a research report 'Pathways and progression: a study in student decision-making about a future in HE'. The research was to better understand the key influencing factors affecting the decisions of Sussex-based students in Years 12 and 13 (aged 16–19 years), and also of students following programmes at FE institutions.

Thirteen schools and colleges worked collaboratively to implement a four-page survey distributing 1700 questionnaires. The University of Brighton received a return of 50% (878) completed questionnaires. Focus groups with 22 participants were implemented in two schools to deepen understanding of the findings. The information required from the study was:

- the likely subject areas for study
- the opportunities for new styles of delivery methods
- vocational and academic interests
- profile characteristics of students related to areas of interest
- the criteria for choosing a college or university
- the type of degree i.e. Foundation or undergraduate
- financial and other potential constraints relating to HE

⁵² Full report: <http://vetnetlln.ac.uk/about-us/publications/Vetnet%20Final%20Report%20-%20September%20Version.pdf>

Reputation and quality of teaching ranked high on students' list of academic criteria, supported by the findings from the focus groups. Signifiers that were captured for this were ranking tables, quality of teaching, entry requirements and results. Course availability and good employment prospects were also deemed to be important to the students' decision-making.

There was no clear-cut desire for distance or online learning, with many students still valuing face-to-face teaching (lectures and workshops), but there was an expectation that institutions would be more flexible in enabling students to work and study at the same time. However, part-time courses were not a favoured option.

When considering the personal and academic criteria combined, it was found that academic criteria made up five of the top six influences on a student's decision-making. These influences included quality, reputation, employment prospects and subject area offered. The only personal criterion in the top six combined was cost of living, with accommodation, location and tuition fees being ranked seventh, ninth and tenth respectively.

Many made reference to HE giving them a 'deeper Level of knowledge' about specific subject areas and there seemed to be some indication that deeper knowledge was preferable to broader knowledge. This clearly has implications for universities and what they teach on their degree courses.

Students still value the education experience and many are excited by the thought of progressing to university. They see it as a character-building and life-changing experience, and one that undoubtedly will also be a lot of fun.

The majority of students sampled said they wanted to take a degree because:

- There are good employment prospects and improved pay.
- Employment prospects ranked third in the criteria for choosing an academic institution and, for many students, future earnings and career progression were closely linked to this.
- Choosing a good university key to future employment.

There were concerns voiced about the cost of studying in HE, although an indication that students were looking to make their money back as soon as possible after graduation.

Progression to HE was considered to be a high-risk decision:

- high cost of studying
- potential for long-term negative repercussions if the course turns out to be the wrong one
- does not result in immediate employment
- evidence to suggest that students are seeking a lot of detailed information over an extended period of time before they make their final choices.

Cost of living, availability of accommodation, and location were the top three criteria when choosing an HE institution and were strong Influences upon the decision-making criteria. Cost of tuition fees was ranked fourth, suggesting that students are concerned about the financial aspects of progressing to HE.

The benefits to students of vocational and industrial elements of courses were unclear with many students not being interested in sandwich courses, Foundation degrees and work placements. At a time when HE is being encouraged to become more vocational and employer-friendly, institutions will need to think carefully about how they build this into their programmes of study, and more so about how they promote the benefits to students.

The Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance (GMSA) funded research developed by the University of Salford⁵³ that considered factors that influence decisions for someone to take an Access to HE course 'Access Courses as a Site of Engagement'.⁵⁴ A Site of Engagement in this context is a consideration of external education policy that results to changes and development in local curriculum initiatives and interventions which, after research and marketing, results in a review or a change to a course. The project methodology included face to face interviews after Access students had been contacted to take part in the research with a guarantee of anonymity. The researchers wanted to find out the precipitation of the decision to enrol on an Access course and the subsequent experiences that caused learners to withdraw before completing the course.

⁵³ Dr Eamon O'Doherty, Rachel Yeates, Rhona Cleary, Andrew Thomas

⁵⁴ Linked with a learner this provides a decision to change – a critical way of understanding change in identity through education.

'Engagement begins with the decision to change something and this may be unemployment, a dead end job, or it may be related to a perceived missed opportunity earlier in education'.⁵⁵ The internal engagement that learners dealt with enable the researchers to consider a range of individual experiences that prompted this internal conversation.

The researchers interviewed over sixty individuals who had withdrawn from access courses and found that the reasons for withdrawing was related to personal circumstances including financial concerns and for many of the women because of their roles as carers. Recommendations were that these individuals should be targeted by their previous colleges with the view to encouraging them to return to complete their studies at some point.

Wood & Obrey led a small research for the Herefordshire and Worcestershire LLN: 'FE Lecturer research into the HE choices amongst sports students in Herefordshire and Worcestershire'. All eight Herefordshire and Worcestershire colleges offering sport at L3 (A Level and BTEC ND) were involved. The aim was to establish the progression of sports students to HE from sixth forms and FE by drawing on the experience of lecturers in sport to identify the needs of their students as well as highlight issues of progression.

Although the questions were trialled on a sport lecturer the authors say in the conclusion that the questions limited responses. Paper and electronic surveys were sent to all the lecturers involved in teaching sport at L3 but the response rate was low.⁵⁶ The report does not list the nature of the colleges/sixth forms who responded.

- Of the students who progress to HE a small proportion do not progress to sports related courses.
- Over the respondent colleges progression to HE varied from 70% to 15% with higher progression to HE from sixth forms.
- All lecturers thought students progressing wanted full time courses.
- When asked what courses were most popular the answer ranged from 83.3% Sports Coaching to 16.7% Sports Business/Law or leadership and Management.
- Respondents felt students wanted HE courses with additional vocational qualifications such as coaching awards. This is possibly because HE is seen as academic.
- There was a higher progression from FE if the college delivered an HE in sport.
- Respondents felt that students were interested in vocationally relevant courses which were predominately well established (no mention of why).

Further research suggested targeting specific groups of students to identify their interests also research to identify niche courses that were not offered elsewhere.

So what are Higher Level Study Skills?

Higher Level Study Skills for vocational learners to succeed in HE were the focus of more than one action research. Much of the research involved finding out what the common knowledge gaps were and then trialling packages with students. A new online Academic Writing resource for Veterinary Nurses went live in February 2010. The resource was funded by VETNET in association with LIVE (Lifelong Independent veterinary Education) which is a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) based at the Royal Veterinary College, London.

The online course has been designed to help with the range of writing tasks that students will experience on the VN programme.⁵⁷ It has been created with veterinary nurses in mind and consequently most of the examples used relate to veterinary nursing. The principles apply to academic writing in general and are applicable to other disciplines.

Hi-LLN funded an author/researcher to produce a handbook to enable self study for higher Level skills. This was initially aimed at NVQ 4 Childcare and Learning Development students who were cautiously being encouraged by their NVQ assessors to use higher Level skills in their assignments. Hi-LLN mapped the content of the NVQ 4 CCLD against local Foundation Degrees in Childcare and Early years and identified that

⁵⁵ GMSA : see LLN Research

⁵⁶ 6 course leaders from 5 colleges.

⁵⁷ <http://vetnetln.ac.uk/about-us/news/vn-academic-writing-website-launched>

study skills were an important missing element as they were not an NVQ requirement. The resultant workbook can be adapted for any L3/L4 learners who are progressing to degree Level work.⁵⁸

Recommendations for Progression

- As many students intend to continue studying the same subjects in HE as in FE, and universities should get smarter about how they engage with students who already have several years' knowledge in the subject area. Consideration needs to be given to whether degree courses are conversion or continuation and how students can be kept engaged with the subject without it becoming repetitive.
- It is suggested that HE institutions work closer with FE schools and colleges to gain a better understanding of the pre-HE curriculum. This would ensure that a more worthwhile progression is offered.
- Many students intend to reduce their Level of debt by taking on part-time work while they study. With increasing demands being made upon a student's time, institutions may need to consider how they approach their teaching and learning strategies.
- HE should promote the benefits of work experience, sandwich courses and vocationally related courses.
- Institutions need to think more about the role that relevant part-time work plays in a student's life and how this can be linked to work-based learning.
- The opportunity to progress is not sufficiently promoted to crafts people. Taster days at HE might demonstrate to employees and employers the benefits to be expected from better qualified people.
- Improved IAG about course content and study commitment and what students might expect to be put on line for easy access⁵⁹
- Better publication of opportunities supported with case studies of successful professional progression.
- Consideration of Foundation degree models of HE engagement with on the job training and work based learning possibly aligned to a competency approach.
- Financial incentives for small firms to support their staff. This is not an issue for large building firms who do invest in staff development.
- Flexibility in courses.
- That the quality of apprenticeship programmes be looked at to ensure these provide progression opportunities to HE.
- Institutional support should meet students' literacy needs systematically and in a timely way.
- HE induction should include
 - Understanding course expectations
 - Managing the degree of independence expected on an HE course
 - Managing emotions in dealing with the unknown.

⁵⁸ Copies of the workbook are available from Hi-LLN: <http://www.hi-lln.co.uk/home.aspx> © University of Winchester 2009

⁵⁹ See Hi-LLN IAG Construction project referenced under IAG.

Transition:

VETNET LLN is a national network of veterinary schools, Universities and colleges. Dr Catherine Douglas of the School of Agriculture, Food & Rural Development at Newcastle University managed a Transition case study based on the North East and Yorkshire region. The study investigated extended induction, peer assisted learning and improving numeracy competencies as a means to improve the retention of vocational learners.

Extended induction recognised that Newcastle University Animal Science students are traditionally taught in large interdisciplinary lectures which limit opportunity to integrate and bond with social peers. The extended induction aimed to integrate students who lived away from University accommodation and who may have had (before joining the degree course) an impoverished social experience, with their peers who lived in university accommodation. The induction included study skills sessions and residential study trips with small group projects to enhance course identity.

'Animal Maths' is an accessible self directed learning package that contextualises and apply maths to the animal and veterinary related subjects. The primary rationale was to support transition of students moving from further education to higher education who may only have achieved the equivalent of basic GCSE.

The research case study also found that *'the alignment of the Level 3 course linked so closely to the progression degree subject and that working in partnership with local feeder colleges to support transition could be a very effective method for recruitment and enhanced retention, compared to the University's central generic engagement with schools offering a wide variety of A Levels with students aspiring to a diverse range of subjects at an array of universities across the country.'*⁶⁰

The case study also recognised that vocational students have committed their interest to their specialist subject 2 years ahead of most A Level students. The study recommended adjusting the initial HE curriculum to be more applied even if limited to a small tailor-made transition "add-on", so that this would enthuse these learners and assist with retention.

*'Focusing some teaching on these students' interests in stage 1 of their HE experience, rather than providing a purely academic foundation for future applied study, will enhance their HE experience, support their transition by minimising disillusionment with the subject choice and thus reduce attrition.'*⁶¹

The reported says that the researched model is being adopted in the veterinary curriculum: *'This pilot within Animal Science forms a workable model within the universities restrictive timetabling which promotes large-group, interdisciplinary, lecture-style, generic-principle teaching on many first year programmes, which can be an alien and uninteresting pedagogic experience compared to the applied teaching, that these WP students are used to.'*⁶²

Kent and Medway LLN explored Foundation Degree student reasons for leaving an FD course early identifying any themes or perceived barriers. As a result of this research a general report was produced with recommendations on how to overcome issues and improve retention⁶³. Qualitative and quantitative data was collected from 57 early leavers by interview and questionnaire. Recommendations focus on a cultural change to better accommodate part time, mature learners who are returning to study.

Recommendations for Transition

- Listen to learner feedback by creating representative groups. Training providers should incorporate the needs of Foundation Degree learners as the views of adult returning learners should be sought.

⁶⁰ Case Study 3: VETNET LLN North East see Research pages of National LLN site for further information

⁶¹ ibid

⁶² ibid

⁶³ For full report see www.gohigher.org.uk

Training providers should pay particular attention regarding the planning and reviewing of programme delivery and introduce flexibility.

- Tutors, admission and support staff should receive additional training to include pastoral skills, to raise awareness of issues affecting this particular group of learners.
- Impartial IAG to be incorporated into the admissions process to help ensure applicants are fully aware of the appropriateness of the course, in terms of academic Level, course requirements and necessary commitment to home study.
- Align local FE vocational courses to HE where appropriate. For instance if a maths element is needed in an HE progression then maths would be a recommended module at L3.
- Follow up early leavers quickly to give impartial IAG, to help address and resolve problems and re-engage the learners wherever possible.
- Recognise that vocational learners have been studying their subject for some time and HE staff should be aware of issues around the knowledge some of these learners already have. One idea from one BTEC Early Years course in partnership with a local university was to start the BTEC students six weeks later than the A Level students.

Extend induction so that the timetable is front loaded and is more familiar to Level 3 learners. Then after a reasonable timetable for 2-4 weeks students can start self directed study as the HE contact hours decrease.

Employer Engagement:

Borne conducted research on behalf of SWLLN into Promoting Sustainable Communities; Education and Training (Nov 2009)⁶⁴ working with town and parish councils (TPC). The research project is 'multifaceted ... a proactive project that aims to understand the training and educational needs of parish councillors and associated staff across Devon and Cornwall with a strong focus on developmental issues and skills gaps.'⁶⁵ The research design contained quantitative and qualitative methodologies. 6000 town and parish councillors were surveyed with a 50-70% response rate from the parishes. Details about the research phases can be found as indicated in the footnote. The research focussed on working with parishes towards sustainable communities so the project emphasised Devon and Cornwall specific issues in combination with broader global concerns. Findings indicate that varying degrees of diverse training were considered necessary for progress and for the skills sets needed for TPCs in order to respond to government and community needs and these were in: Sustainable Development, Community Development, Local Government, Planning, Environmental Planning, Project Planning, Legislation, Localism Agenda, Managing Complaints, Health and Safety and Communication. The potential training providers were to be the Open University, Cornwall College and Truro College. Through this training it is hoped that the TPC will be able to expand their agendas to embrace change and work towards sustainable communities whilst supporting local values.⁶⁶

Employer Engagement flows through many LLN research projects. The perspective of employers was sought mainly to engage employers in the updating or design and development of degrees or modules.⁶⁷ SLLN worked to establish a Foundation Degree Employers Forum and one of the intended outcomes was to produce an employers' handbook that could be disseminated to other colleges seeking to engage employers in their Foundation Degree programmes. One of the aims was to make foundation degrees reflect employers needs whilst:

⁶⁴<http://uplace.org.uk:8080/dspace/bitstream/handle/10293/115/ReflexiveReview.pdf?sequence=2>

⁶⁵ Ibid P2

⁶⁶ Further reading: <http://uplace.org.uk:8080/dspace/handle/10293/100> Borne 2010, Final Report: <http://uplace.org.uk:8080/dspace/handle/10293/348>

⁶⁷ FE colleges are familiar with Employer Advisory Boards but these models sought to actively look at new HE modules and engage employers to contribute.

- Auditing current Level 4 provision
- Evaluate employers' skills needs

YHELLN⁶⁸ commissioned a variety of research on the employer engagement topic. Stakes⁶⁹ produced a critical evaluation of the Greater Economic Success [GES] Group based in North Lincolnshire.

This group, which has been active for over five years, acts as a local business-focused knowledge exchange group and sets out to strengthen the business, community and economy of this unitary authority. Its function is described as “sharing and learning to improve business performance to enable companies to share best practice and create a culture of continuous learning” [publicity leaflet undated]. The strategy it is claimed, “Will develop both profitability and collective growth”.

OFSTED described this partnership as unusual and an example of outstanding practice in college/industrial links. The partnership is between four key elements within the local authority including local private businesses, the economic development team from the local authority, a local post-compulsory education and training provider and a university. The alliance helps to ensure that local businesses have the skilled workforce to remain competitive and successful.⁷⁰

The researcher conducted focus groups and interviews using set questions to evaluate the impact of this alliance with employers and academics in the alliance. The focus groups and interviews were all recorded, transcribed and analysed:

*‘Interviewee 1 described the overall philosophy of the group as “working together and sharing ideas towards contributing and working towards developing the new economy locally through a ‘business solutions’ and ‘knowledge exchange’ approach”.*⁷¹

The group used the reflective learning approach⁷² which helped to embed learning in organisations and develop best practice in areas such as customer service, managing change and project management. The GES forum established formal and informal networks that enabled participants to consider new ways of working as well as building inter relationships between businesses and business and education.

An important outcome of the partnership was the developments of fourteen bite sized training modules that addressed employer needs and were accredited as part of a 60 credit undergraduate professional award. The alliance recognised that everyone gained from the partnership, individually and collectively especially when understanding each others' contribution to the local economy and the regeneration of the area. Key factors in the success of the alliance included the contribution and support of committed individuals from business and education and the role of the FE Business centre in administrating the group (calling meetings, setting agendas).

Recommendations in setting up similar clusters:

- The nature of the alliance is replicable but may not be straightforward.
- Although the framework of participants may be easy to draw together for a similar venture, it may take considerable time to build up a working degree of mutual trust and confidence between the parties involved.
- The personalities involved in the group will determine its direction of travel and this will have an impact upon development and outcomes.
- The local education and training provider might be in the best position as administrator for the group.
- Developing groups could learn from direct contact with GES and this would help understand best practice and how strategies were developed to overcome difficulties.

This report is supported by a substantial literature review Learning from Success: The Learning Journey of the Greater Economic Success Group undertaken by Christopher Hardy for YHELLN.

⁶⁸ YHELLN : Yorkshire and Humberside Employer Lifelong Learning Network

⁶⁹ Reader in Higher Education at the University Centre, Doncaster.

⁷⁰ *ibid*

⁷¹ *Ibid* P3

⁷² Cf: Lewin 1951, Kolb 1984, Gibbs 1988

An interesting literature review of employer engagement in assessment of work-based learning in foundation degrees, in the UK and beyond, to date, with a specific focus on the early years sector was produced by Esther Painter for YHELLN in August 2009. The report considered how employers and foundation degree providers were currently working together and how work based learning and assessment actually worked. Information gathered looked at how employers identified training needs and then decided which employees should benefit. Some training was often cascaded to others in the workplace⁷³ but the introduction in 2008 by the DCSF of statutory legal requirements in response to the Leitch report in 2006 has meant that supervisors and managers in early years settings must hold various Level 3 or above qualifications whilst all staff must be supported in improving their qualifications. Painter reports that studies into work based learning show that different models of employer involvement were managed and operated across Foundation Degrees.⁷⁴ Depending on the Foundation Degree and the university involved different drivers for success can be measured.

The Early Years agenda is government driven so many FE colleges and universities have worked together to produce courses that meet the government requirements. Best practice is shown when the local authorities are involved as these have the overview of the registered nurseries and playgroups and understand how many trained staff have to be in place by 2015.⁷⁵ Because of the legal requirement involved the early years' staff have to follow the upskilling agenda in order to keep their businesses open. Painter's literature review has acknowledged that employer engagement in assessment of work-based learning is a complex area. The review considered some of the practices and roles of assessment and examined some available models of employer engagement in assessment in work-based learning. Painter suggests that this is a complex and emerging area of development for both employers and higher education providers but that assessment models that involve the education provider, the workplace assessor and the vocational learner that integrates theory and practice may be the way forward. Painter calls these connective tripartite assessment models.

Hi-LLN researched the need for management qualifications for the Hair, Beauty and Spa sector.⁷⁶ This was an action research project that resulted in the development of five specialist FD modules that sit within the University of Winchester's Foundation Degree in Management. The need for management qualifications for the Hair, Beauty and Spa sector is supported by HABIA the sector Skills Council for Hair and Beauty. Unlike the Early Years sector, however, a decision to up skill the workforce is the responsibility of salon managers and individuals. The hair and beauty sector lags behind other sectors in the number of employees with Level 4 qualifications (9% v 33%) with the number of graduates with sector related degrees being too low to be statistically significant.⁷⁷ Skills gaps in business and management are significant. Gaps in business and management skills can be related to all aspects of poor business performance. The Hi-LLN project worked with industry practitioners to produce modules that addressed identified skills gaps – mainly aspects of law, human resource management, and customer relations, marketing and sales. The success of the pathway will be dependent on the marketing and publicity of the University and the FE College delivering the specialist modules within an OFSTED grade 1 department.

MacDonald produced a research report for YHELLN on the Relevance of Language barriers to Work based Learning /Employer Engagement. The report surveys where language barriers have been problematic in these initiatives and says that issues around the lack of understanding between academics and employers can cause difficulties for joint ventures. MacDonald ventures to suggest that the use of technology as a tool for communication is worth considering supported by further research. Networking with employers to break down language barriers is also recommended.

VETNET LLN funded studies to investigate existing skills and qualifications in the dairy sector and the future requirements for continuing professional development (CPD) / training. Research coincided with the emergence of the industry's own professional body "Stockmen UK" who then worked with VETNET LLN at ways to promote the professionalism of the industry and explore how accreditation of training, or more formal training and a professional register might assist with this. The findings from these surveys are informing development of appropriate courses for the industry. The environment secretary, Hilary Benn, after an Agri-

⁷³ Painter E *Literature review of employer engagement in assessment of work based learning in foundation degrees, in the UK and beyond* 2009, YELLN, P3

⁷⁴ Painter P6

⁷⁵ An Early Years Practitioner has to be in place in each childcare centre by 2015 and by 2010 for Sure Start Children's Centres.

⁷⁶ Led by Jan Wise and Pauline Rachman for Hi-LLN and Stella McKnight for the University of Winchester

⁷⁷ Skills Active with HABIA *Analysis of Gaps and Weaknesses; Hair and Beauty Sector UK* 2008 P8

Skills group meeting⁷⁸ in April 2009, commented that “Farming is by its very nature a skilled profession, but more should be done ‘... to improve access to training for existing farmers’. The purpose of the Agri-skills discussions was to develop a clear and simple system so that farmers know where to go for advice on assessing their skills needs and on the most appropriate form of training.⁷⁹

GMSA funded a research project, led by Manchester Metropolitan University Business School, that looked at skills shortages and HR processes within the SME Creative Media and Marketing Sector of Greater Manchester.⁸⁰ The objectives of the research were to look at current and future leadership and workforce skills gaps and shortages. This included looking at how the sector monitored and met staff development needs and to evaluate how business might be helped to develop its strategy for developing leadership and workforce development capacity. The research was conducted through four company case studies.

Research showed that entrepreneurs that started the companies and were technical specialists now needed to learn new skills at managing and developing staff and establishing HR systems and processes. As SMEs grew this would also mean bringing in financial and operational expertise through permanent appointments or consultancy expertise. Findings included:

- Skills shortages were experienced by the case studies in account manager and account director roles and specifically within the digital/multimedia marketing specialisms. The reason for the later was cited as universities not producing enough digital designers.
- Placements were seen as a way of encouraging local students to work for local employers as permanent jobs did sometimes materialise at the end of degree studies. It was felt that unattached young professionals would often drift to London to look for work in the target area.
- Managers and staff in the contact areas worked closely and there was a lot of 1:1 contact and celebration of work. However there was a lack of guidance for career development and appraisal schemes so young talent often drifted off to other employers if they felt there was no career progression. Interviewed staff felt they needed advice on how to get to the next Level and what training they should pursue.

The research showed that companies might suffer through losing good staff by their under developed practices including regular meetings and opportunities for feedback from employees. The researchers felt that the lessons were not unexpected and that in a recession SMEs need to keep key staff. SMEs need to motivate, direct and develop staff so that they focus on client needs as creatively and cost effectively as they can. Recommendations included improving staff engagement and teamwork co-ordination so that ‘synergies could be achieved in the integration of expertise in the pursuit of client satisfaction’.⁸¹ The results of the research were disseminated through a breakfast workshop and as a result the following curriculum developments were organised:

- Two management learning modules at Level 7
- The development of CEO master classes
- A development workshop for top team building

The CBI suggests that the links between employability skills and graduateness are transferable qualities in the areas of skills, knowledge and attitudes.⁸² Cheshire & Warrington LLN commissioned research that looked at ‘Graduateness in the delivery of Employer training.’ This was because a recent increase in the development of short programmes at HE Level for delivery to employees had raised several issues. One issue had been noted by other LLN research and this was that Higher Education procedures require short programmes to meet the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) requirements for academic rigour. This places constraints on the course design and doesn’t always fit with employer requirements.

Research suggested that:

- The smaller the size of the award, the greater the tendency to specify and deliver a programme of study that focuses disproportionately on subject mastery.
- A range of higher level employability skills are required for the success of employer training.

⁷⁸ Lantra, VETNET and Stockmen UK

⁷⁹ See National LLN Research pages for further information about the survey

⁸⁰ The research was undertaken by Sue Shaw, Executive Head of HRM and OB division of the university, Gill Homan and Chris Pike.

⁸¹ Shaw et al. www.gmsa.ac.uk/download/?id=914 P6

⁸² See CBI report <http://www.cbi.org.uk/pdf/timewellspent.pdf>

For usefulness in employer training the research agreed that short learning bytes designed for employers need to build into a coherent substantial award. The project activity focussed on:

- Establishing relevant graduate and employability skills
- Developing a skills profile for use in programme development
- Piloting a profile in the development of employer short awards
- The outcome to the research provided a graduateness/employability skills profile and a report on the piloting of the profile in programme development.⁸³

A report commissioned by the LSDA in 2005 'Vocational Ladders or Crazy Paving' by Connor & Little 2005 echoes much of the LLN employer related research.

GMSA supported pro – Manchester⁸⁴ who were commissioned by the NWDA to produce a report about skills needs of the accountancy sector in the region and to recommend actions to address any potential skills needs and gaps. ABI Regional Data records 18,306 employees in the North West accountancy sector.

Armstrong Craven was appointed to carry out this work which included desk top research and consultation with members of the profession. Analysis looked at the Levels of the industry from the large accountancy firms to SMEs. Findings show that in practice there is an inability of firms to recruit the right people and this was cited as a major constraint on growth. Medium sized firms also look for more all round employees than may be available in the market place especially if large firm accountants are looking to move as these accountants are often too specialist in a particular area. There is a plentiful supply of graduates applying for jobs but the report says there is a concern at all Levels with 'the quality of graduates: the lack of business acumen, the 'can-do' attitude and personal qualities that differentiate excellence. Basic skills are also an issue.'⁸⁵

The report recommended that HE work with the Accountancy sector to identify the expectation of employers and how HE can deliver them. There was an acknowledgement that there may be an expectation gap as to what further and higher education are able to deliver. It was recommended that HE programmes developed skills in communication, selling and developed empathy and an understanding of emotional intelligence. These skills could be developed as part of a business programme of HE mentoring.

The same company was supported to research the skills needs of the legal sector. Over 50% of legal graduates do not go into the legal profession and this need not necessarily be seen as an over supply as a law degree has its own 'cachet'. The report recommended that HE work with the local market to identify and address known skill shortages especially where there are major regional investments. For example Manchester Metropolitan University is developing postgraduate modules in specific areas to meet projected shortfalls in eg: Media Law

The report also recommends that 'better guidance and information to be given to law undergraduates about job trends, professional choices and careers open to graduates to allow them to make better informed choices.'

Skills of particular importance are negotiation, communication, interaction with client and colleagues and advocacy and presentation skills. Advocacy, negotiation, letter writing, drafting, research and interviewing skills are now assessed, as part of Legal Practice Courses⁸⁶, and although other communication skills such as presentation skills and negotiation, are not formally assessed they still constitute an important part of the course for at least one LPC provider in the region and their importance is emphasised to students.

Coventry and Warwickshire LLN worked with employers to understand their skills needs and to collect views on Higher Education and work based learning. Employer voice was used as opposed to the common quantitative approach of other reports. The LLN felt that the 'employer voice', particularly in relation to SMEs, is underrepresented in the overall debate. The need for this research was to provide practical information to enable education providers in Coventry and Warwickshire to work with local employers and meet their needs.

⁸³ For further information: <http://www.lifelongcw.org>

⁸⁴ Pro-manchester is a private membership organisation representing the Financial and Professional service community in and around Greater Manchester

⁸⁵ Pro Manchester report P5: Skills Analysis of NW Accountancy Sector.

⁸⁶ The LPC is a practice-orientated course teaching practical knowledge and essential skills to people wishing to become solicitors.

The objectives of the research were to identify issues around employer engagement with HE learning in Coventry and Warwickshire by:

- Exploring employers' perceptions of learning providers
- Assessing employer awareness of the local Higher Education offer and employer engagement schemes
- Exploring the perceived benefits and non-benefits of Higher Education amongst employers
- Exploring employers' response to previous experience of engaging with HE providers
- Seeking employers' viewpoints on the role of skills development in increasing economic prosperity
- Identifying employer preferences in marketing approaches from local education providers⁸⁷

The research recommended:

- Education providers need to recognise the diversity and needs from employers within each sector and individual organisations.
- training needs of highly specialist, individual SMEs present a particular challenge
- learning providers need to meet ever changing requirements of businesses who themselves are adapting and changing to uncertain economic conditions
- Local businesses require a personalised approach that demonstrates a familiarity with their business objectives and curriculum requirements. Research showed that employers appeared to welcome learning provider presence at business events/industrial sites and were responsive to a genuine interest in challenges which they might face. Learning providers need to demonstrate an understanding of the current business agenda and awareness of different sectors so that training offers can relate specifically to these.
- Learning providers must present clear, detailed, targeted information to employers avoiding academic jargon.
- The availability of advice relating to funding and curriculum availability is confusing for employers so consistent and targeted guidance from learning providers is essential.

The research found that SMEs would like more contact with providers than is currently available. Consistency is important as relationships get built then falter when individuals leave organisations. A local business enquiry 'hotline' to local learning providers with named contacts may help to address issues. Establishing a frequent dialogue between employers and learning providers will help place providers within industries rather than outside.

Skills for Sustainable Communities commissioned CFE (Research and Consultancy Specialists in Employment and Skills) to produce a research paper entitled 'The Road Less Travelled: Experiences of employers that support the progression of advanced apprenticeships to HE'. As very few Advanced Apprentices currently progress to higher education and as funding for higher education shifts towards individuals and employers, it is important to understand the barriers there are for advanced apprentices to study at HE Level. *The Road Less Travelled* research suggests that the employers contacted felt the benefits of supporting progression to Foundation Degrees, HNCs/HNDs and honours degrees outweighed the costs. These employers (many of them household names) recognised that a more highly skilled workforce is linked to increased productivity and profitability. The research showed that employers recognise that the benefits of growing and investing in their own employees leads to increased Levels of staff motivation and retention. The report recommends that barriers to progression which could be addressed in the HE sector were suggested as:

- The style of learning changes from FE to HE so transition can be a challenge.
- A lack of appropriate HE provision can be a major barrier to progression in some sectors.
- Some Employers and trainees were unsure about the financial support available for students. The provision of high quality information, advice and guidance is essential to enable progression.

Herefordshire and Worcestershire LLN considered employer engagement through identification of continual professional development needs within the creative industries. Research recommended that flexible training provision should be considered because of the pattern of young workers moving in and around the counties. This would enable students to have employment while studying for existing qualifications or use APEL as a means to enter new courses.

⁸⁷ <http://lifelonglearningnetworks.org.uk/uploads/document/793/employer-voice-report.pdf> P5

Herefordshire is a rural area with a large number of sole traders and small to medium enterprises. IAG is mentioned again in this report as it was identified that it is essential that businesses are able to access relevant information regarding support and funding for training more easily. This is particularly relevant where individual decisions are available to support funding for businesses that are not necessarily advertised or marketed.

Staffordshire, Stoke on Trent, Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin LLN asked the question: What are the challenges, barriers, opportunities and successes both internally and externally which influence learning and development in Shropshire nursing and residential homes?

This project explored the potential for higher education learning and development in the Shropshire care home sector. Researchers explored the current mandatory provision for learning linked to career development and considered the potential for further higher Level (HE) learning and the support that might be forthcoming from employers. The results suggested that while there was a lot of opportunity regarding statutory and mandatory training, there was less in place for those who want to progress beyond this Level and to develop their careers. The research also highlighted there were some gaps in clinical, study and IT skills. The LLN worked with Wolverhampton University to target some of the issues they discovered. For example the LLN supported development of a dementia qualification as module for senior staff in social care organisations. This module aims to improve the quality of life for service users with dementia by training staff who provide their services. This course has been developed as a twenty credit Level four module.

The research team also found that improved IAG would enable career progression suggestion that clear information should be given on the funding available for further qualifications and training, progression routes, flexible learning opportunities, study and IT skills and case studies. The research report hopes that their recommendations may help demonstrate to decision makers, staff and management the value of learning and development in terms of improved service, improved business and improved career progression.

Recommendations for Employer Engagement

- Establish relevant graduate employability skills and embed into the HE curriculum.
 - Establish skills shortages at advanced technical and middle management Level and above.
 - Use work placements as part of the assessed course to introduce students to the world of work. Additionally use local placements as a way of encouraging local students to work for local employers as permanent jobs do sometimes materialise at the end of degree studies.
 - Work with employers to establish appraisal/human resource systems which include careers guidance to encourage career progression.
 - Make sure the content of small awards is entirely appropriate to employer needs and where possible begins to build credits towards a coherent substantial award.
 - A range of higher level employability skills are required for the success of employer training.
-

Curriculum Development:

The Curriculum and Progression strands of the South West Lifelong Learning Network (SWLLN) were heavily engaged with several key projects: research into the learning and training needs of parish councilors and clerks in Devon and Cornwall⁸⁸ and the development of Foundation Degrees in Libraries, Museums and Archives; Information, Advice and Guidance and short courses in the areas of Emergency Response with options to combine into 60 credit university awards.

Access courses to provide specific progression have been the focus of research. In a response to skills gaps identified by research, SWLLN developed six new Access units in Heritage Studies with staff from Truro College. The units cover archaeology and heritage site management in Britain, researching family and community histories and museum studies and art validated by the Open College Network South West Region (OCNSWR) for delivery within their framework. Students who take these modules as part of an Access to HE programme will have the skills to go on to Foundation degrees or Bachelor of Arts degrees relating to heritage, history, archaeology and cultural services.

Hi-LLN developed an Access to Masters through an action research project led by the Adult Continuing Education Centre (ACE) at Peter Symonds College, Winchester.

SSTST&W⁸⁹ produced a research project 'Skills for Higher Education' to evaluate a planned new bridging module of the same name. This module was designed to encourage vocational learners to progress into and through to HE achieving 15 credits at either HE Level 0 or HE Level 1. Systematic literature reviews explored specific study skills/bridging courses for vocational learners that are available nationally. This critical review discovered that many articles were descriptive and reflective rather than research based. The exercise looked at the current provision of Skills for HE teaching in the Staffordshire and Shropshire area which covered a variety of courses including access and foundation courses. Some Skills for HE teaching was embedded into part of a degree course with a few number of standalone courses.

The SSTST&W report says that the scoping exercise illustrated that

'courses are aimed at non traditional learners as a more flexible approach in regards to entry requirements, delivery times and assessment methods makes it accessible to a much wider range of learners, such as those who have been out of education for some time or who have family/work commitments'.⁹⁰

Recommendations from this research looked at planning for future cohorts and included:

- Transition issues including fear of returning to study and a perceived or actual lack of academic and/or IT skills.
- Practical issues and constraints: poor access to IT, childcare difficulties, location and timing of courses and costs of courses.
- Modes of delivery: such as short or long courses, weekend courses and blended learning
- Courses to be designed so that funding can be accessed from the LSC and its predecessor or HEFCE so that costs are kept down for the student.

SSTST&W also recommend that further research needs to be carried out to assess whether this course or similar courses do have a positive effect on progression into HE and retention onto HE courses.⁹¹

YHELLN supported Andrew Holmes of the Centre for Lifelong Learning at Hull University in a research project to develop and implement a Free Elective workplace module (20 credits) for second year undergraduates to gain academic credit for the knowledge and skills which they develop through participating

⁸⁸ See previous section for further details of this project

⁸⁹ SSTST&W Staffordshire, Stoke-on-Trent, Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin Lifelong Learning Network

⁹⁰ Rout A et al. *Skills for Higher Education Research Project Pilot Report* (2009) Staffordshire, Stoke-on-Trent, Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin Lifelong Learning Network P3

⁹¹ Ibid P5

in workplace learning, including unpaid voluntary projects. The pilot included delivery to students undertaking voluntary work at HMP Everthorpe⁹² in 2008, supporting prison service objectives to reduce re-offending. Module materials with VLE support were produced. CRB clearance became problematic. Seven project pathways for students were identified by the prison in line with the UK's national offender management strategy (NOMS). Students were been allocated to each pathway: Attitudes thinking and behaviour, Drugs and alcohol, Children and families, Finance benefits and debt, Education training and development and Voluntary community sector/accommodation.

The developed module can only be delivered as an elected one as the prison authorities reserve the right to refuse student access to the prison (eg: poor security clearance or behavioural issues).

Security clearance was time consuming and needed to be factored into the year. The module was offered to second year students because of their maturity but even then not all were suitable. Strong partnership working with the prison officers was essential.

Mathematics remains an issue for many progressing into Higher Education. The lack of functional maths at Level 2 is a hindrance and can become a barrier to progression to students. Research for HI-LLN considered the mathematic requirements for those who might eventually follow or need to follow Early Years Practitioner status. As the work of Painter describes (see Employer Engagement section) where government has made a qualification a mandatory requirement for a particular job role then potential learners need to secure the qualification in order to gain employment. By 2010 designated Children's Centres must have one graduate leader. To be a graduate leader (i.e. a leading practitioner) a degree is needed and either Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) or Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). By 2015 every Ofsted registered full day care setting must also have at least one graduate leader.

The Children's Workforce Development Council website indicates:

*Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) ensures that those working with children under the age of five benefit from the highest Level of training. The skills and experience graduates acquire will not only give children brighter futures, but also enable EYPs to lead and inspire others to give all children the start in life they deserve.*⁹³

A prerequisite to this qualification is Maths GCSE at a Grade C or above. Realising that this could be a barrier to many early years practitioners, HI-LLN created a pre GCSE Maths course that helped practitioners revisit a subject they had previously found to be problematic.

VETNET funded Newcastle University's Schools of 'Maths and Statistics' and 'Animal Science' to consider how they could improve the numeracy competencies of students studying animal related qualifications. The emphasis was on making maths fun.* In this case Fun.* denotes "functional" i.e. the maths that students will actually need on their course, is applied to their interests and relevant to their future careers.⁹⁴ The research project developed interactive IT materials that were clearly related to the animal studies disciplines.

These widening participation vocational students have committed their interest to their specialist subject two years ahead of most A Level students. By adjusting the initial HE curriculum to be more applied even if limited to a small tailor-made transition 'add-on', this will enthuse learners and assist with retention. Focusing some teaching on these students' interests in stage one of their HE experience, rather than providing a purely academic foundation for future applied study, will enhance their HE experience, support their transition by minimising disillusionment with the subject choice and thus reduce attrition. This model is being adopted in the veterinary curriculum. This pilot within Animal Science forms a workable model within the universities restrictive timetabling which promotes large-group, interdisciplinary, lecture-style, generic-principle teaching on many first year programmes, which can be an alien and uninteresting pedagogic experience compared to the applied teaching, that these WP students are used to.

⁹² The prison is an all-male category C (i.e. a closed prison containing prisoners who can not be trusted in open conditions but who are unlikely to try to escape) training prison with a capacity for just under 700 prisoners. It is a level 4 prison, i.e. in terms of the quality of provision it is in the highest category

⁹³ <http://www.cwdcouncil.org.uk/eyps/what-is-an-eyp>

⁹⁴ Douglas & Foster 'Fun Maths'

Two research projects addressed the training needs for health care providers in the voluntary, private and charity sector. GMSA commissioned Barlow⁹⁵ on behalf of the GMSA Health and Social Care Sector Development Group and HI-LLN worked with Meads⁹⁶ from the University of Winchester. It is worth noting that there was no available data for third sector health care provision although some mapping was being done in Manchester by the Manchester Alliance for Community Care and a local Health Partnership was looking at the scope of commissioning for the third sector. Data bases or directories provided by the local Council of Voluntary Services (CVS) were considered by the GMSA team to be the most authoritative sources of information.

Difficulties were encountered in responses from the third sector for the GMSA research and the final response rate was low. The health and care sector has to respond to government legislation for much of its training requirements. Feedback from the survey informed the researchers that:

- Although organisations valued training and development they found it difficult to devote time and money to training. The situation can be exacerbated by the substantial reliance on volunteers and sessional workers in the workforce.
- Training plans existed but few organisations had a dedicated training officer.
- The levels of support for training varied but barriers to training were expressed as:
 - Funding issues including vagueness about costs of training and possible grants for learning/tuition
 - Lack of information about training and difficulty in registering people on the right course. Difficulties in understanding about the Level of the course
 - Travel and location of training
 - Difficulty in getting the right support for people on training courses
 - Cover difficulties for those on courses

The quality of training was important but it was generally felt that there were too many training providers in the field and some set up training businesses without sufficient knowledge. Often training providers were chosen because they were known or referred.

The Hi-LLN project was designed to consider the individual requirements of a group of public service organisations in order to determine the common areas of need, the areas with marginal differences and the unique areas. The education and training requirements were then matched against their existing provision, whether from accredited suppliers, current employer in-house provision or commercial suppliers. This then enabled an action plan to be developed to address the shortfalls, highlighting any priority areas and the cascading of good practice. The action plan developed the necessary education/higher skills provision to address the shortfall in the existing CPD and Foundation Degree provision, with an aim to commence delivery to pilot groups of students during 2010. The framework has been constructed such that it is self sustainable and open to development by the addition of other participating organisations.⁹⁷

Sussex LLN supported Benson⁹⁸ from the School of Service Management at the University of Brighton to look at Curriculum change for access in the service industries focussing on Foundation degree top ups to BA Honours. As with many other University departments, top up degrees are seen as a flexible, learner friendly solution to achieving an honour's degree. For a number of years, prior to the design of a top up validation the School of Service Management had recruited directly through UCAS into Level 6. However, unless Foundation degree students were directed through partnership arrangements to a Level 6 many students found the process was unclear. It was anticipated that the formalisation of a Level 6 process with its own independent UCAS code would:

- offer transparency for potential students into Level six
- recruit students from a wider audience - meeting with the university's agenda of widening participation
- reduce reliance on students recruited from partnerships
- increase and spread recruitment into a wider range of courses

⁹⁵ Dec 2008- interim

⁹⁶ Dec 2009 - completed

⁹⁷ For full report see : <http://www.hi-lln.co.uk/projects/projects.aspx?>

⁹⁸ Dr Angela Benson is based at the School of Service Management, University of Brighton. Her key role is Undergraduate Programme Leader with responsibility for 11 degrees across tourism, travel, hospitality, retail and events.

The design of the Top Up Degrees was seen to initiate a major change in the admissions criteria. In the past students entering Level 6 needed a merit profile and had to demonstrate success in a research methods module. The School of Service Management met with the relevant university staff, at length, and the admissions criteria was changed to enable students with 240 Foundation degree points direct entry into Top Up Awards at Level six with research methods no longer a prerequisite. However it was agreed that research skills necessary to underpin a dissertation⁹⁹ were still required. So that no students entering at Level six were disadvantaged students without previous research methods skills were identified by the admissions team through their UCAS forms, and confirmed when students arrived. Interestingly, all of the 13 students identified for research methods training would not have been eligible for entry to Level six under the previous admissions criteria. The intervention designed to guide students through the research methods curricula consisted of a three-hour workshop during induction week that consisted of an interactive session¹⁰⁰, a lecture and an introduction to online learning resources. This session was followed up with individual tutorial support and a further group tutorial after four weeks to monitor progress. The dissertation module ran alongside the research methods online learning and all students had to pass an online multi-choice question test.

Benson's report details the direct entry 2007/08 cohort via top ups to the university and follows the students to whom the research module applied. Students found the additional workload problematic and were not sure why they needed the research methods training until the dissertation module started when they saw the links and the necessity of the skills.

As a result of the research and the implementation of the module the university has now awarded 10 CATS points to the module so that the work is not seen as an additional burden. The students who need to do the unit now have 30 CATS points for an elective and not 40.

Benson's research analyses the success of students who took up the research module. Benson anticipates that, as Foundation degrees embed research methods into their courses, the research methods for Level 6 modules will become defunct. She additionally concluded that the formalisation of the top up courses gave transparency to the applicants.

Sussex LL commissioned research 'Staff development for the delivery of blended learning in a partnership programme' delivered by Viv Martin in partnership by Sussex Police.¹⁰¹ This research focussed on staff development issues around offering a blended learning programme which develops 300 new police officers each year through a Foundation certificate (Foundation Certificate in Policing in Partnership with Communities). The programme is designed by the Universities of Brighton, Sussex and Chichester, in partnership with Sussex Police. Research consisted of individual interviews and focus groups and aimed to address any staff development issues raised in delivery of the programme. The HE staff development programme set out to develop experienced police trainers to become student-centred associate lecturers, able to deliver a higher education (HE) learning experience through a blended learning approach. It was essential throughout the partnership for the trainers to be able to teach and support learners to achieve NVQ Levels 4 and 5 whilst accommodating the requirements of the academic framework as well as the professional occupational requirements. The aim was to ensure that those achieving the occupational standards whilst training to become police officers were also achieving academically and be able to succeed in gaining a Foundation certificate.

The programme needed to combine work based learning and college studies. The police trainers were concerned about supporting their learners to achieve HE standards as many themselves were not graduates. As the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) places onus for appropriately qualified staff¹⁰² on the partnership university it was decided that the police trainers should be working towards achieving a first degree themselves as well as spending a number of days each year on police duties.

The police trainers additionally attended training days where module assignments were developed alongside assessment criteria. Tutors were also able to standardise their interpretations about assessment and grading.

⁹⁹ Necessary for an Hons Degree top up

¹⁰⁰ See Benson and Blackman 2003 <http://alh.sagepub.com/cgi/content/short/4/1/39>

¹⁰¹ Viv Martin is a Principal Lecturer in Management in Brighton Business School at the University of Brighton. Her background is in adult education and further education (FE).

¹⁰² <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/default.asp>

They were also supported by academics with double marking and monitoring approaches. Student officers were supported by the teams they worked with in their placements and their tutors.

Learning was in the classroom, 'on the job' and e-learning. At the end of the 43 week long programme successful participants had completed a Foundation certificate and half the Level five credits required for a Foundation degree. Reflective accounts were used by students in the workplace and these were linked to supervisory meetings and contributed to accreditation. Workplace supervisors also received staff development for this enhanced role. Interestingly, when e-learning was introduced, the campus base staff received staff development time focussing on how to support students to study more independently and to prepare assignments that increasingly required research skills. The staff development was introduced because the campus staff were uncomfortable with a teaching approach that was not 1:1.

The full report can be found at http://creator.zoho.com/sussexlearningnetwork/copy-of-lln-research-database/view-embed/Research_Details_Form_View/ and makes interesting points from both sides of the learning provision about concerns about student centred learning and other issues that were addressed with staff development. Teaching materials were developed to help the police trainers in their work with students and these included templates for reflective learning.

*'The template for an account of reflective learning can be used to report on any incident, requiring the learner to describe the incident and then to write paragraphs about how they had interpreted it, what decisions they made, what actions they planned and took and what resulted from those actions. The final section requires the learner to state what they learnt from the results of their actions and what, if anything, they would do differently if they found themselves in a similar situation again.'*¹⁰³

A number of issues of partnership working with employers have been raised. These issues include:

- aligning HE frameworks with National Occupational Standards
- in the case of working with the police there were needs to comply with HE and Home Office quality assurance requirements
- developing staff from 'trainer' to 'HE lecturer'
- designing an HE learning experience that includes work-based development and assessment of practice alongside wide community involvement

An additional point for multi institute working was to ensure that students have a similar experience on each of the HE campuses. There was also emerging discourse about developing professional students in communities where they increasingly gain law-enforcement powers but it was recognised that these issues were no different from institutions developing other public services such as doctors, nurses and social workers.

Murphy and Taylor produced a reflective article based on diary entries for the Sussex LLN 'An industry perspective on standard setting and module delivery in equestrian courses at Plumpton College'. The article investigates the responses of first and second year Foundation Degree in Equine Studies students to an Equitation module. The module prepares riders and horses for competition work whilst providing personal development for students.

The Foundation Degree at Plumpton College includes work placement, industry experience and career development modules. Although students said that both the work related and college based learning was useful there was sometimes felt to be a gap between these experiences. With support from the SLN, it was decided to pilot two modules on the foundation degree that would be entirely delivered and assessed by an industry representative but taught within the college environment. The research took the form of diary entries from students as the lectures progressed.

Lectures were based on industry standards and philosophies. The discussion seminars gave students opportunities to discuss issues arising from their own riding experience outside the college. The diary entries show that the perceived gap between industry and college was being bridged by these modules. For example one entry talks about a visit to a teaching clinic given by an international trainer at the Teaching the Trainers of Tomorrow Trust (TTT) in Surrey.

¹⁰³ Quote from full report P3

'The aim of this visit was to see the application of principles and approaches discussed in the opening lecture in a different context (in other words, a world-renowned figure working with experienced riders to the highest Levels).'

Following the day students commented on how much they had been inspired and that they recognised much of what had been taught from previous work at Plumpton College. There were issues around how the various modules were delivered as part of the timetable and in some cases they were not seen as embedded as part of the course leading to patchy attendance. Course leaders decided, in future, to place industry related modules towards the end of a first year programme when students had more practical experience.

Assessment involved *'integrating industry standards firmly within the assessment exercise and providing feedback that combined use of both industry terms and educational vocabulary relating to learning outcomes and grading criteria.'*

Feedback from the students following assessment acknowledged that the modules linked the theoretical content of the HE course to the practical knowledge required by industry. The report concluded that the representation of industry in a college environment is vitally important to prepare learners for the application of their acquired knowledge.

Cultural Services was one of the priority sectors for the SWLLN. They supported the development of flexible Foundation Degrees for the sector and the first one was validated by the University of Plymouth for delivery by Truro College in Libraries, Museums and Archives. Discussions with the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, the Museums Association and the Society of Archivists took place to work out how the Fd could relate to their professional frameworks. The SWLLN worked with MOVE the eastern LLN to co-ordinate these discussions to ensure a 'joined up approach.'

The Curriculum and Progression strands of the South West Lifelong Learning Network (SWLLN) were heavily engaged with several key projects: research into the learning and training needs of parish councilors and clerks in Devon and Cornwall and the development of Foundation Degrees in Libraries, Museums and Archives; Information, Advice and Guidance and short courses in the areas of Emergency Response with options to combine into 60 credit university awards.

Within the lifetime of MOVE the LLN helped to fund an Access to HE Diploma in Popular Culture and Heritage, validated for delivery in the region.

In a response to skills gaps identified by research¹⁰⁴, SWLLN developed six new Access units in Heritage Studies with staff from Truro College. The units cover archaeology and heritage site management in Britain, researching family and community histories and museum studies and art validated by the Open College Network South West Region (OCNSWR) for delivery within their framework. Students who take these modules as part of Access to HE programmes will have the skills to go on to Foundation degrees or Bachelor of Arts degrees relating to heritage, history, archaeology and cultural services

Cheshire and Warrington LLN funded Foundation Degrees and degree modules in Adventure Sports Management Coaching and Sports and Fitness and Health.

Yorkshire and Humberside LLN funded a research project to research the potential demand and design for a Foundation Degree in Sports Therapy within Yorkshire and Humber. Sports therapy is an aspect of healthcare that is specifically concerned with the prevention of injury and the rehabilitation of the patient back to optimum Levels of functional, occupational and sport specific fitness regardless of age and ability. In 2009 the Health Professional Council anticipated that the government would soon require all Sports Therapists to hold a degree. At the time of writing, Sports Therapy is an unregulated body and anyone can set up a practice.

From the research the following were put forward as skills shortages in practitioners and proposed as a basis for the development of a Sports Therapy Foundation Degree:

¹⁰⁴<http://www.swlln.ac.uk/welcome-to-swlln/key-areas-of-activity/cvpdu-strand/cvpdu-projects/748-heritage-access-5h.htm>

- Business skills : Finance and marketing knowledge and understanding
- Anatomy
- Massage techniques
- Injury rehabilitation

Leap Ahead also developed a Foundation Degree in Sports¹⁰⁵ to support the delivery of the government's campaign to give every child the opportunity to participate in five hours of quality sports provision every week. The target group are volunteer and part time sports coaches.

Yorkshire and Humberside LLN looked at the potential for a Foundation Degree in Leisure Industry Management. As a result of research identified skills gaps in the sector were cited as:

- Work experience in the industry
- Interpersonal Skills/Customer Care
- Human Resource Management
- Marketing/Branding

Interpersonal skills, business strategy, the nature of the leisure industry, human resources, organisational behaviour, marketing, management and finance were suggested by employers as possible module titles for a foundation degree framework. These subjects mirrored other Foundation Degrees in the initial research.

One manager said: *'...it's ok having a sports science degree or whatever but they [applicants] don't really need that sort of thing.....its about organisational culture, finance and human resource management'*.¹⁰⁶

Other employability skills needed by employers but seen as lacking in graduates were:

- Soft skills eg: good communication skills and customer service
- an understanding of the industry and facilities
- management skills (which could be built into existing programmes)

These skills are important because most senior and supervisory roles are taken up by graduates in the industry.

In addition one senior manager said he would like to employ graduates with *'a good understanding of finance, funding, human resources and especially management skills....'*¹⁰⁷

The conclusion from this research was the few Foundation Degrees available did have modules that reflected the employers' views yet graduates in Leisure Industry Management did not seem to work in leisure centres.

Recommendations for Curriculum Development

- design courses for non traditional learners which are flexible in regards to entry requirements, delivery times and assessment methods.'
- when designing a curriculum acknowledge that transition issues including fear of returning to study and a perceived or actual lack of academic and/or IT skills.
- poor take into account the demands and timings of the course as the learners see it. If access to quality IT is needed recognise that this may need to be built into the timetable because of possible childcare difficulties.
- Modes of delivery to consider: such as short or long courses, weekend courses and blended learning making use of on campus work, work based learning and use of the institutions virtual learning environment.
- Support employer based trainers and teachers with staff development, buddy support and easy to use paperwork.
- Funding sources should be agreed, before work goes into bridging courses so that these courses are attractive to students because of the low cost.

¹⁰⁵ <http://www.leapahead.ac.uk/Documents/Impact%20Document%20-%20Employer%20Responsive%20Curriculum.pdf>

¹⁰⁶ <http://www.lifelonglearningnetworks.org.uk/documents/document648.doc>

¹⁰⁷ ibid

Conclusion:

This report has tried to capture the flavour of the LLN work and the author's hope that you will look further into these and other LLN research reports before further research is commissioned from HE funds on similar topics.

As the funding period for the Lifelong Learning Networks comes to a close teams have reviewed their impact on their learning communities and educational partnerships. The value of sustainability has been researched and many of the findings across the LLNs are similar. Higher Futures¹⁰⁸ identified that some partner HE/FE strategic and operational objectives had been addressed through LLN involvement. These included widening participation, increasing retention and progression, improving the student experience, employer engagement and partnership working.¹⁰⁹

Importantly unanticipated benefits included working with and establishing good working relationships with peers across the curriculum areas and support staff, continuing professional development for HE staff and raised awareness of Higher education amongst Careers and student support staff in FE. Opportunities to share good practice featured strongly in the Higher Futures evaluation report. The development and successful establishment of Foundation Degree were considered to be extremely valuable.¹¹⁰

MOVE reported that much of their funding had been spread over 47 projects to enable supported intervention and enhanced opportunities for progression. Bravenbor et al. although, concluded that there were still attitudes to be changed to achieve a lasting LLN legacy. In respect of supply led projects:

Some developments, although providing vocational progression opportunities continued to be largely supply led and it has been challenging to persuade some HEIs to engage constructively with Sector Skills Councils, for example in relation to the employer needs identified in Sector Skill agreements.¹¹¹

Bravenbor et al. also concluded that the inflexibility of some quality assurance processes in HEIs also inhibited innovative curriculum development but felt that this was also attributable to misunderstandings between employers and development teams about the processes involved. They recognised that 'cultural change is a long term task and further work will be required to embed approaches to quality assurance that support employer led innovation.'¹¹²

Difficulties in the future sustainability of many of these networks only stand to highlight why HEFCE invested funds in the Lifelong Learning Networks in the first place.

¹⁰⁸ Ritchie L and Lewis M http://extra.shu.ac.uk/higherfutures/docs/partner_survey_exec_summ.pdf

¹⁰⁹ ibid

¹¹⁰ ibid

¹¹¹ Opp cit 2 P26

¹¹² ibid