

## **Widening Participation in Higher Education: support at the further education/higher education interface and its impact on the transition and progression of advanced GNVQ students – a research report**

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**ABSTRACT** This article aims to analyse and reflect upon the support offered to advanced GNVQ students in business, and leisure and tourism by college staff across seven further education colleges in the West Midlands conurbation. Specifically, the work offers a focus on elements of college support pertinent to the possible transition of these groups of students to undergraduate study in higher education. The elements of support studied are three-fold. First, strengths and weaknesses in the availability and usage of college support mechanisms aimed at facilitating course success for students are studied with respect to different student groups. Secondly, student concerns and attitudinal misconceptions are studied and related to the efficacy of college support advice. Finally, awareness of college support staff concerning the current culture and demands of undergraduate study is studied as a means to explore the information base used in advising and motivating their students. The study raises concern with respect to key skill support and its relationship to potential course success, and hence entry to higher education. It also suggests that college support staff need to be vigilant in ensuring a close relationship between the information, guidance and reassurance they provide, and identified student concerns. Finally, it indicates that some staff in further education tend to under-estimate the level of support available in higher education, and perceive significant and perhaps prohibitive differences in student skill requirement between the two sectors. These findings are discussed within the context of the need for additional networking and dialogue between colleagues in the two sectors.

### **Introduction**

Poor participation in post-compulsory learning in the United Kingdom has been identified as a major problem in establishing a culture of

continuing and life-long learning (Fryer, 1997). Governmental concern was heightened by the Dearing (1997) report, which did much to show significant under representation in higher education of some groups within the United Kingdom. A number of studies have attempted to elucidate likely barriers to participation with respect to under-represented or disenfranchised groups. For example, Marks (2000) suggests that universities need to be more active in enhancing links with local agencies if mature students are to overcome some of the barriers they perceive with regard to their entry to higher education. In another study conducted across the United Kingdom, Watt & Paterson (2000) found that barriers to access with respect to marginalised socio-economic groups, primarily fall under six headings:

- pre-entry guidance;
- qualification frameworks and transfers;
- structural barriers and flexibility;
- attitudinal barriers;
- student finance;
- institutional finance.

These authors suggest that the most pressing problems for widening access are associated with the following issues:

- the lack of pre-entry guidance if candidates come from non-traditional groups;
- some access routes, such as vocational training, are hampered by lack of transferability and prejudice in admissions criteria;
- physical access is limited;
- course timetables do not accommodate students who are employed;
- disadvantaged students may not be convinced that education will broaden their life chances;
- money is scarce both amongst students from lower income brackets and the institutions trying to serve them;
- links between institutions appear to be weak, hampering efforts to communicate good practices.

It is clear that urgent and strategic intervention is required by policy makers in order to surmount many of the barriers identified in this important survey. However, in the more immediate term, better communication and sensitive guidance should have a role to play in facilitating participation from individuals and groups who lack the confidence or information necessary to consider entry to higher education. It is likely that such groups and individuals would benefit greatly from support mechanisms to enable their transition to higher education. One group of students who, on a qualifications basis, have the potential to enter higher education, are those studying for the advanced general national vocational qualification (GNVQ). The engagement of this

group with their chosen 'career' route, as Hodgkinson (1998) and Hodgkinson et al (1996) point out, will be strongly influenced by their own personal dispositions, which in turn are part of their life histories and located in the social, economic and cultural context in which they, their families and their friends live. These same influences will also have a role to play should the young person choose to consider entry to higher education. The wide range of perceptions and needs within this group, therefore, should be addressed by using information which is most likely to have resonance with the group. The impact of guidance, information and communication support mechanisms would be enhanced if this were the case.

The present study is concerned with exploring potential barriers to accessing higher education, which may be based upon college support mechanisms within the fields of guidance, information and communication. It draws upon cohorts of final year advanced GNVQ students in business, and leisure and tourism drawn from seven further education colleges within the Black Country conurbation. The colleges serve a diverse social, cultural and economic catchment within the West Midlands, a region that is 4% below the National average for adults who have NVQ 4 or higher qualifications (Advantage West Midlands, 1999). The study aims to analyse potential barriers associated with three distinct, but interrelated areas of college support. First, an analysis of the availability and student usage of key elements of college support aimed at facilitating course success, a pre-requisite to higher education entry, is undertaken. Secondly, student concerns and attitudinal misconceptions are analysed as a means to reflect upon college support advice. Finally, awareness of college support staff concerning the current culture and demands of undergraduate study is analysed as a means to explore the information base used in advising and motivating their students.

### **The Study**

#### *Strengths and Weaknesses in Availability and Usage of College Support Mechanisms Aimed at Facilitating Course Success for Different Groups of Students*

A pre-piloted questionnaire, using a 1-5 Likert scale to show level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction, was completed by a sample of 85 final year advanced level GNVQ students following either business or leisure and tourism programmes operating within seven colleges within the further education sector. The sample was constructed to be representative of student experience and thus included a cross-section of abilities as indicated by college staff, approximately equal numbers of males and females and approximately equal numbers of students who described themselves as white or from other ethnic communities. Mature students

( $n = 7$ ) formed a minority within the total cohort, with the majority of students placed within the 17-19 age range. All students were at the point of making final decisions on whether to undertake a course in higher education or to seek paid employment or some other activity. With the assistance of college staff, a 100% return rate of the sample was achieved. In the first part of the study, the following groups were used to represent student experience and compare levels of support they had received:

- business students;
- leisure and tourism students;
- males;
- females;
- whites;
- other ethnic communities;
- mature students;
- students in the 17-19 age range.

The questionnaire put to the cohort was designed to elicit responses concerning:

- demographic data;
- support from subject lecturers;
- support from tutorial staff;
- resource availability;
- resource access;
- support availability with respect to the numeracy key skill;
- support availability with respect to the communication key skill;
- support availability with respect to the information technology key skill;
- support usage with respect to the numeracy key skill;
- support usage with respect to the communication key skill;
- support usage with respect to the information technology key skill;
- non-academic support (e.g. crèche-facilities).

Data emerging from completed questionnaires were analysed using a non-parametric Kruskal–Wallis test to seek any emerging trends. The level of significance was set at  $P$  being less than or equal to 0.05. In addition, all students were invited to a focus group interview (Anderson, 1997) as part of this phase of the investigation. Forty students were able to take part and were organised into groups of no less than six. This sub-cohort showed inclusion from all groups identified as representative of student experience in the first part of this study. They were presented with a series of open discussion questions to explore:

- Discussion question 1: methods of teaching experienced in further education;
- Discussion question 2: curriculum support experienced in further education;

Discussion question 3: use of information retrieval systems in further education;

Discussion question 4: elements of cross-college support in further education.

Student responses were recorded in writing and a NUD.IST grounded analysis was undertaken to identify key themes emerging from the focus groups.

*Analysis of Current Student Concerns and Attitudinal*

*Misconceptions as a Basis for Improvement to College Support Advice*

In this phase of the study, student perceptions of higher education were explored. The sub-cohort of 40 students described above was presented with a second series of open discussion questions to explore:

Discussion question 4: perspective of higher education;

Discussion question 5: perspective of independent learning and research.

Student responses were again recorded in writing and a NUD.IST grounded analysis undertaken to identify key themes emerging from the focus groups.

*Strengths and Weaknesses Associated with the Awareness of College*

*Staff of the Current Culture and Demands of Undergraduate Study in*

*Higher Education as a Basis for Advising and Motivating their Students*

In the final phase of the study, all participating college staff were invited to a focus group interview in order to explore their awareness of the current culture and demands of undergraduate study in higher education. Nineteen members of staff were able to take part and were organised into groups of no less than five. They were presented with a series of open discussion questions to explore:

Discussion question 6: perceptions of differences and similarities in curriculum between further education and higher education;

Discussion question 7: perceptions of differences and similarities in teaching, learning and assessment methods between further education and higher education;

Discussion question 8: perceptions of differences and similarities in resource availability to support learners between further education and higher education.

In addition, a written response to the discussion questions was received from each participating member of staff after the focus groups in order to allow additional time for reflection and discussion with other colleagues.

Using both focus group responses and written responses, a NUD.IST grounded analysis was again undertaken to identify emergent key themes.

## Results

### *Strengths and Weaknesses in Availability and Usage of College Support Mechanisms Aimed at Facilitating Course Success by Different Groups of Students*

Analysis of questionnaires using the Kruskal–Wallis test revealed only the following significant differences between groups.

#### *Support availability with respect to the communication key skill*

Business students are more satisfied than leisure and tourism students ( $P = 0.039$ ).

Other ethnic groups are more satisfied than whites ( $P = 0.046$ ).

Students in the 17-19 age group are more satisfied than mature students ( $P = 0.034$ ).

#### *Support availability with respect to the information technology key skill*

Business students are more satisfied than leisure and tourism students ( $P = 0.005$ ).

Other ethnic groups are more satisfied than whites ( $P = 0.006$ ).

#### *Support usage with respect to the communication key skill*

Other ethnic groups are more satisfied than whites ( $P = 0.047$ ).

#### *Support usage with respect to the information technology key skill*

Males are more satisfied than females ( $P = 0.036$ ).

Business students are more satisfied than leisure and tourism students ( $P = 0.004$ ).

Other ethnic groups are more satisfied than whites ( $P = 0.008$ ).

#### *Non-academic support (e.g. crèche-facilities)*

Females are more satisfied than males ( $P = 0.030$ ).

The above analysis highlights some significant differences in levels of satisfaction expressed by different groups of students with respect to their experience of support availability and usage. The analysis shows a trend of greater dissatisfaction on the part of white students with respect to key skill support availability and usage when compared to other ethnic groups. In addition, leisure and tourism students appear more dissatisfied than business studies students with respect to these elements of support. Although a perspective of contributory factors leading individual students to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction has not yet been developed in this study, the significant differences reported with respect to key skill support availability and usage is a cause for concern. Further exploration of issues pertaining to the equity and impact of key skill support with respect to these groups is required given that student outcomes in key skills have consequences for their likely course success, qualification grading and, hence, their opportunity to transfer to higher education.

NUD.IST analysis of responses to open discussion questions presented at student focus groups revealed the following emergent key themes:

*Themes emerging from discussion question 1:  
methods of teaching experienced in further education*

Compared with compulsory secondary education, a different style of teaching in the advanced GNVQ is apparent to students.

There is some negotiation of deadlines except for tests.

*Themes emerging from discussion question 2:  
curriculum support experienced in further education*

Extra classes can be put on to help catch-up.

Subject and personal tutors can help with assignments.

In some assignments students worry about being left on their own.

*Themes emerging from discussion question 3:  
use of information retrieval systems in further education*

The internet is being used increasingly as a source of information to support study.

*Themes emerging from discussion question 4:  
elements of cross-college support in further education*

No themes emerging.

This part of the analysis offers some further exploration of student statements of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with respect to support availability and usage as indicated by the Kruskal-Wallis test. Primary themes emerging from NUD.IST analysis indicate that negotiation of test deadlines, extra classes to help catch-up and tutor help with assignment work were identified as supportive. On the other hand, some students were troubled by the responsibility given to them for their own learning and task completion. Assuming that all groups of students have the same opportunity and the same innate predisposition to be critical, the disparity in satisfaction in key skill support availability and usage requires explanation. The supportive themes identified by NUD.IST have not removed disparity between groups with respect to key skills. Although not developed in this study, student concern about taking increased responsibility for learning and task completion may impact in key skill work more for some groups than others. For example, some groups may be less confident with the demands of key skill work as a result of their experience in secondary education. Results show that students in the 17-19 age group were more satisfied with support availability in communication than mature students. This latter group is less likely to have experienced communication as an identifiable curriculum component in their compulsory education. Differences in

levels of satisfaction between groups with respect to key skill support suggests that key skills advice needs to be more closely tailored to individuals as a means to overcome differing experiences. Exploration of student perceptions of key skill support undertaken at the level of individual colleges may further contribute to ensuring that support offered and used is well matched to student needs. For all groups, the present study shows the potential for additional investigation to help secure improvements in the application of support mechanisms to facilitate course success and hence the opportunity to transfer to higher education.

*Analysis of Current Student Concerns and Attitudinal  
Misconceptions as a Basis for Improvement of College Support Advice*

NUD.IST analysis of responses to open discussion questions presented at student focus groups revealed the following emergent key themes.

*Themes emerging from discussion question 5:  
perspective of higher education*

- High cost may be prohibitive to entry.
- Only for those that can afford it.
- Money worries, loans and debt.
- Moving away from home may be difficult.
- Meeting new people is exciting.
- Expectations of a good job afterwards.

*Themes emerging from discussion question 6:  
perspective of independent learning and research*

- Stressful workload.
- A long time commitment.
- Hard work.

Primary themes emerging from NUD.IST analysis indicate positive student perspectives of higher education concerning expected excitement at meeting new people and advantage in gaining a 'good' job, however, students also emphasised concerns about change, workload and money. Support staff in colleges need to be vigilant in their provision of information, guidance and reassurance with regard to identified student concerns. It is important that potential applicants are not deterred from considering transition to higher education on the basis of any ill-informed or negative perceptions they may hold. Exploration of student perspectives concerning higher education undertaken at the level of individual colleges may further contribute to ensuring that guidance, information and support offered is well matched to student needs. In addition, it is incumbent upon college staff responsible for offering guidance and information to students, to ensure that they are fully



conversant with the current culture and demands of undergraduate study so as to enhance the quality of support they offer.

*Strengths and Weaknesses Associated with the Awareness of College Staff of the Current Culture and Demands of Undergraduate Study in Higher Education as a Basis for Advising and Motivating their Students*

NUD.IST analysis of responses to open discussion questions presented at staff focus groups, along with written reports revealed the following emergent key themes:

*Themes emerging from discussion question 7:  
perceptions of differences and similarities in  
curriculum between further education and higher education*

There are far fewer opportunities for independent learning activities in further education and this is a weakness.

There are far fewer opportunities to engage in essay work, rather than report writing in further education and this is a weakness.

*Themes emerging from discussion question 8:  
perceptions of differences and similarities between  
teaching, learning and assessment methods  
between further education and higher education*

Both further and higher education aim to create self-motivated learners.

Both further and higher education aim to create independent learners.

Tutors in further education take the major responsibility for organising any student research activities.

Exam skills are under-developed in further education.

There is more spoon-feeding in further education.

Further education lecture content is primarily test-driven.

Students may lose concentration with large assignments should they transfer to higher education.

Much more reliance on students doing their own reading in higher education.

Much more use of published research in higher education.

Much more analysis is required in higher education.

Students in higher education need to manage their own time more.

If students do not meet deadlines in higher education they fail.

Assessment material is more varied in higher education.

More emphasis on written assignments in higher education.

*Themes emerging from discussion question 9:  
perceptions of differences and similarities in  
resource availability to support learners between  
further education and higher education*

Students in further education have unrealistic job and salary expectations on completing a degree.

Extensive help with assignments is offered in further education.

Less guidance is given in higher education.

More self-reliance is required in higher education.

Class sizes in higher education are larger.

A wide range of physical resources is available in higher education.

The internet is readily available in higher education.

Lack of tutorials in higher education will leave some students feeling 'at a loss'.

Primary themes emerging from NUD.IST analysis indicate that college staff tend to emphasise a perception of the importance of self-motivation and independent learning in higher education. They also perceive a gap between the two sectors with respect to the demands placed upon students in terms of essay writing, exam-taking and time management, and see this as being disadvantageous to their students. Emerging themes also suggest that college staff perceive that less guidance is given in higher education and that students may feel themselves 'at a loss'. In fact, it has now become commonplace for higher education to provide extensive support mechanisms, such as study skills advice, personal tutor guidance and academic counselling in order to address the needs of all students, including those from 'non-traditional' entry routes. There is a danger that college staff may underestimate the level of support now available for undergraduates in higher education and not transmit reassurance to their students. The perceived gulf between the two sectors needs to be closed if students are to more fully appreciate the support available to aid their transition to and progression in higher education.

### **Discussion**

The cultural inertia, lack of communication and lack of money identified as barriers to access by Watt & Paterson (2000) appear to have resonance with the present cohort of advanced GNVQ students in further education colleges. Analysis of completed student questionnaires using a Kruskal-Wallis test showed significant differences in satisfaction between different groups of students with respect to key skill support and usage. Given that success in key skills has consequences for overall qualification success and, hence, the opportunity to transfer to higher education, this study indicates the need for additional investigation concerning the

equity and impact of student key skill support. It is suggested that close monitoring and evaluation of availability, and usage of key skill support by all groups of students may assist some individuals to overcome the barrier of poor course performance and, hence, stimulate some additional participation in higher education. In focus groups, students expressed appreciation for the direct intervention by college staff in the management of their work and also expressed concern when they are 'left alone' in some assignments. The tensions emerging between 'spoon-feeding' and independence are expressed by staff in their own focus groups. If students become confirmed in a view that they are unable to work independently and equate this with an excluding condition from higher education, then a barrier to transition will be created. Not surprisingly, perceived cost and course difficulty feature highly among student perceptions of higher education. It is suggested that college staff need to be vigilant in challenging any student misconceptions of higher education by offering information, guidance and reassurance, which is directly related to identified student concerns. Staff in both further education and higher education have a role to play in reassuring students that appropriate study skills can be learned, and that a variety of modes of study are available in higher education and that these can accommodate a wide variety of personal circumstances. Addressing barriers that may be created out of student misconception is an important element in encouraging participation in higher education.

It is important that college staff are familiar with the current culture and demands of undergraduate study as a basis for advising and motivating their students. The study indicates that some college staff may tend to underestimate the level of support available in higher education and perceive significant, and perhaps prohibitive skill differences between the two sectors. It is incumbent upon higher education to inform colleagues in further education about the considerable student support services now available in higher education and particularly in those institutions with an espoused mission to widen participation. Many successful students in higher education benefit from study skill support, financial support, special needs support, and both subject and personal tutorial support. Without making this information available to staff and students in further education, staff in higher education may be acting as agents in the prevention of transition for some students. Colleagues in higher education must be willing to review support services in response to dialogue with colleagues in the further education sector. There is clearly a need for additional dialogue between staff from higher education and further education with regard to the skill gulf perceived by further education staff. Given that constructive dialogue is achieved, it is incumbent upon colleagues in further education to offer support where perceived or actual differences are acting as a barrier to transition for students.

Soon after the emergence of GNVQs, Curtis (1995) pointed out the importance of dialogue between further and higher education as a means to facilitate student transition. Although a range of factors may influence student performance following entry to higher education, Swailes et al (1998) offered some evidence to indicate that GNVQ students in business performed as well as A-level students during their first year of undergraduate study. Research undertaken by Smith (1998) shows that GNVQ students did not perceive a marked difference between teaching and learning methods in college and higher education. The work also showed that group work skills are enhanced by GNVQs, but lack the sophistication needed by the independent learner. This latter finding appears to concur with the skill gulf perceived by further education staff in the present study, and emphasises the need for networking and dialogue between sectors in order to support the notion of reassuring students and encouraging the widening of participation and subsequent good progress. A report by Williams (2000) suggests that GNVQ has made progress in establishing itself as a mode of entry to higher education. However, the report also comments on the negative perceptions held by some staff in higher education with regard to the preparation GNVQ provides with respect to critical thinking and formal examination skills.

In addition to further elucidating issues of equity and impact of key skill support for all groups of students, it is intended that the present work will be extended to engage significant additional dialogue between colleagues in further education and higher education who have been the subject of this study. This is particularly important given that the study has elucidated sources of potential weakness in student support at the further education/higher education interface, which stem from lack of dialogue between the two sectors. In particular, the impact changed mechanisms of guidance, information and communication at this interface and their effect in supporting student transition to higher education will be closely monitored, evaluated and reported.

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